SALT LAKE SPEED SEDUCTION

By

Dean A. Ferguson

RECOMMENDED:

[Signatures]

Advisory Committee Chair

[Signatures]

Department Head

APPROVED:

[Signatures]

Dean, College of Liberal Arts

[Signatures]

Dean of the Graduate School

5-1-00

Date
SALT LAKE SPEED SEDUCTION

A
Thesis
Presented to the Faculty
of the University of Alaska Fairbanks
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

By
Dean A. Ferguson.

Fairbanks, Alaska
August 2000
Abstract

This satirical novel is written in first person and alternates between two story lines: a present tense story and a past tense one. It follows characters who are living the Gen X life: low paying jobs, lots of drugs, lots of sex, and an unearned sense of superiority. Their search for direction and meaning in a society that is increasingly voyeuristic and paranoid illustrates the futility of such a journey in late 20th century America. The main character’s placement as the accidental leader of a cult makes him the target of governmental aggression. The opposition of religious institutions, local and state governments, and the media forces these characters to reject mainstream attitudes and assumptions.
# Table of Contents

- **Prologue: Sweet Heaven** ................................................................. 6
- **Chapter 1: San Diego Doldrums** .................................................. 8
- **Chapter 2: War Party** ................................................................. 13
- **Chapter 3: Viva la Lizard** ......................................................... 15
- **Chapter 4: New Friends** ............................................................. 25
- **Chapter 5: The First Shot** ......................................................... 31
- **Chapter 6: Speed Seduction** ....................................................... 33
- **Chapter 7: Standing in Traffic** ................................................... 43
- **Chapter 8: Afraid of DEATH** ..................................................... 47
- **Chapter 9: The Awakening** ....................................................... 51
- **Chapter 10: The Seed** ............................................................... 54
- **Chapter 11: Miracle of the Windshield** ...................................... 57
- **Chapter 12: The Beetles** .......................................................... 62
- **Chapter 13: Scapegoat Wilderness** ........................................... 68
- **Chapter 14: Brooks Brothers** .................................................... 75
- **Chapter 15: Moroni Speaks** ..................................................... 80
- **Chapter 16: Cat Dancer** ............................................................ 83
- **Chapter 17: Barbarians at the Gate** .......................................... 96
- **Chapter 18: A Dark and Stormy Night** ...................................... 108
- **Chapter 19: Spooks** ................................................................. 119
- **Chapter 20: The Heart of the Monster** ....................................... 132
- **Chapter 21: Rusty’s Porn Zoo** .................................................. 140
- **Chapter 22: Accidents** ............................................................. 152
- **Chapter 23: People in Fire** ....................................................... 162
- **Chapter 24: Desperados** .......................................................... 175
Table of Contents Continued

Chapter 25: The Need ................................................................. 181
Chapter 26: Miracle in the Woods ........................................... 187
Chapter 27: In the Flames ....................................................... 193
Chapter 28: Boise Blues .......................................................... 201
Chapter 29: God, Guts, Guns .................................................... 207
Epilogue: Rotten to the Core .................................................... 221
Prologue: Sweet Heaven

Moroni looks sad today. There's an accusation there, deep in his golden eyes, but he's not talking.

Outside of Sweet Heaven Ranch, speakers blare the Brandenburg Concerti, the most beautiful music in the world—an ex-girlfriend once told me so—but I'd just as soon they switched to Black Sabbath. Twenty-six straight hours of this music would probably put Mr. Bach himself in the mood for a little metal.

Of course, the music won't last forever, and it's only a question of time before they burst into our living room, and force us from our chapel, our home.

We've thought about coming out. We were planning on it. And we need to come out if we want to finish what we started. But not right now. Things just aren't any greener on that side of the fence.

Everyone turns to me for answers. Me and Moroni.

“What will we do, Matt?” they ask.

“What does Moroni say?” they ask.

Moroni's still not speaking. Hasn't spoken in days. I suppose all this has driven him nuts too. And I don't know what to tell the Sheep. Sheep. No shit Sheep—they're so much like real sheep that it stopped being a metaphor months ago. Stopped being funny long before that.

I grab Moroni by his ears and shake him.

“What NOW?”

He isn't listening, he's gone, left, back to his body, or heaven, hell, somewhere, he's not here. Some of the Sheep have noticed me manhandling our precious, golden angel, so I lift him and kiss him, a dry kiss, as dry as a hooker's chapped lips, as dry as our paper souls, as dry as the desert where he first spoke to me.

That was a day to remember. Even if it wasn't memorable, Jelly wrote it down so I can't forget it—even when I want to. It was later that Moroni talked to him, proof I'm
not crazy, but just that once: "Write it down," said Moroni. "All of it. I am the beginning. You are the middle. We are the end. Etcetera."

He actually said "etcetera."

And there's Jelly, right now, just like when Moroni came to us, scribbling away in his 180 page, wide-rule, Walmart spiral notebook that has become the Sheeps living bible. Etcetera.
Chapter 1: San Diego Doldrums

The salty desert is a logical place to begin because that's where we met Moroni. But time and booze have fuzzed up the memory, and I can barely remember why we ever were in Utah. We didn't drink as much as we do now, but we were drinking pretty good. I do know that we were on our way to a wedding.

That's right. We were picking up a friend in Salt Lake City on our way to a wedding in Boulder, Colorado.

But it began before all that, before the wedding, before the temple, before the porno queens and the racehorse kings, before the Rainbow People.

I have to start farther back. I have to start before everything, back when nothing was happening.

I have to start in San Diego.

Jelly was there with me from the beginning. Mild skies, palm trees, happy and healthy illegal aliens. San Diego was Paradise with perfect humidity, fresh air, and soothing ocean sounds. It was the kind of place where people like me and Jelly could live hand to mouth existences without worrying about dead-end jobs. It was a place where we robed our failure in comfortable clothes of complacence. It was high fashion to be lowly.

Jelly and I had met in college where I spent five years working on a degree that, through petition, I'd created. The degree was an orgy of philosophy, history, anthropology, psychology, marketing, political science, business law; basically, everything I'd passed with a C or better during several years of changing majors. Had I actually graduated, today I would have a Bachelor's of Science in Social Activist Marketing.

The idea was to cash in on social movements by selling products and expertise to both sides of an issue, sort of like an arms dealer selling missiles to one side, aircraft to the other. If you were a logger, say, I'd find you good vandalism insurance and the best sources for lobbying and protection. If you were a greenie, I'd find you low cost methods
for getting your point across and, of course, the best sources of lobbying and protection. It could work on any issue, in any sector, for any individual, group or corporation, and I would have been Mr. Matthew Shank—a human Switzerland—right there in the middle, saying, "Bring your money, but check your politics at the border."

Even now, studying Moroni's empty, brooding eyes, the degree sounds like a good idea. I had discovered the perfect career for someone who didn't believe in anything. But that's not me, not anymore.

Now I believe.

I'm up to my ears in belief, up to my neck in trouble.

Jelly, on the other hand, was working on a journalism degree and he spent his college time breaking stories "wide open," digging "truth from beneath mounds of conspiratorial horseshit." One time, he joined Theta Kappa Tau Fraternity to unearth the truth "once and for all" behind rumors that they tortured pledges to ensure loyalty. That's a story he never wrote.

To this day, he wears a fraternity pin on his Yankees ball cap and makes discreet gestures to pinned brethren who pass on the street. One day, I asked whether or not the rumors of torture were true. He thought for a moment, half-smirking, maybe even half-frightened, and said, "Some truth is best told. Some truth is better kept secret."

Whatever.

Jelly was a pretty good reporter, though. His pictures of the honorable Dr. Laura Kruegal, University President, bubbling in a hot tub with the mayor's potbellied husband made the front page of The Campus Bugle. As editor, reporter, and photographer of The Campus Bugle, he earned the respect of the entire student body. The administration, however, did not echo the enthusiasm. They retaliated with an irreversible denial of his fifth petition for readmittance, justified by his 1.5 overall GPA. Jelly didn't care. He told the truth at any cost. After learning that the potbellied man was the president's brother, he remained unscathed by criticism, unmoved by repercussions.

"That only makes it a better story," he explained.

Expulsion was his vindication.
Once on the outside—in the real world, the working world, whatever you want to call it—Jelly capitalized on his tall, swarthy, good looks to make his way. He became a bartender at The Shore, the most southwesterly bar in the United States. Men and women alike responded to his easy charm and flashing white smile with generous tips and phone numbers scrawled on cocktail napkins. After a short time, the place became his own personal dating pool. But even with all the attention, he kept his head about him. Employment at The Shore was only temporary, a means of paying rent, keeping beach sand in his back pocket, and spending his time seeking the perfect story.

We've come a long way since then.

It started a year ago.

It was the first part of August when I stopped by The Shore to tell Jelly about the invitation to Monica's wedding. Since Monica, an old friend from college, only had my address, the invitation included both of our names plus Joey Christianson who'd cleaned up his embarrassing coke habit several months earlier by downing a whole bottle of Drano. Monica couldn't have known.

Waiting for Jelly to serve me, I sat next to a cherry-haired woman in her fifties who claimed that her curly, coal-black Terrier named Chito worked as a stunt double for the Taco Bell chihuahua.

"They shave him," she said. "And use him for battle scenes."

I looked at Chito doubtfully.

"Have you seen the Star Wars commercials where the Wookies attack? That's Chito under the dog pile."

"Is that right?" I returned my attention to the dog. "Quiere una cerveza, Chito?"

Chito thumped his tail hopefully.

"Cerveza?"

I dribbled some Coors onto the floor. He sniffed, lapped it up, lifted his doleful eyes searching for more. His choke chain jerked him away from me and closer to the woman's ankles.

"He's got to work," she said.
It was barely noon and this strange, bitter woman had already waded into a foul, Bloody Mary mood.

Sliding her another drink, Jelly jumped in to muddy the water. "I'm doing an article on animal abuse in advertising."

"I treat this dog better than I treat my kids," the woman said.

Jelly and the woman argued for several minutes, but Jelly's heart wasn't in it. The woman was clearly too drunk to lie and no good interview ever resulted from someone obstinate enough to speak only truth. Regardless, they sparred over rumors about the fate of has-been animal actors.

"Alpo should say, 'made from real meat and real actors'," said Jelly.

"That's disgusting," blustered the woman.

"What do you think happens to the Cadbury Bunny after Easter?" he asked. "It's not resurrection, sister."

"Bull shit!"

The woman's rhetorical skills were dazzling.

Chito whimpered, so I reached down and unhooked his choke-chain. I interrupted the argument, told Jelly about the wedding invitation, and managed to persuade him to come along by mentioning that the Dalai Lama's brother, a professor from Bloomington, Indiana, would there.

"Dolly," mumbled the woman. "What kinda name is that for a man?"

Jelly has always been a religious nut. He claims to have read the Bible, the whole thing, cover to cover. It provides the foundation for his theory that random belief runs the world. But the brother of the Dalai? Jelly would never miss a chance to meet someone so closely tied to such an influential random belief as Buddhism.

We made arrangements for our departure.

Jelly called his boss to tell him that his uncle died—the third one in a year—and that he needed time off. When he got the go ahead, we agreed to meet the next day around noon. I left the bar to go quit my forklift job at the Grocery Outlet because I hadn't worked the necessary two years it took to qualify for time off, dead uncles or not.
When I was barely twenty steps from the entrance, Chito flashed through the doorway barking like a frightened bear hound. The woman stumbled at his heels, empty choke-chain in hand.

"Stop! Thief!"

I glanced at Chito. He wasn't carrying anything.

As the woman lurched drunkenly forward, I got my feet beneath me and leapt down the sidewalk. Chito and I loaded into my '76 Dodge van and jerked away down the street. Growing smaller and more insignificant in the side-view mirror was the crumbled heap of the woman, hair ablaze in the high noon sun, shaking her small, white fist amidst a dark cloud of California emissions.
Chapter 2: War Party

Everything is God's fault. Chito's. The cherry-headed woman's and Jelly's. And it is my fault too.

Near the northeast perimeter of Sweet Heaven Ranch, Chito accompanies the second movement of The Brandenburg Fourth by yapping his addled head off. To the west of him, behind a summer-brown clump of buck brush, I can make out a fresh, green patch of government issue camouflage—the tell-tale sign of somebody else's better trained, better equipped Sheep.

The man in camouflage probably knows that credit card fraud is a federal crime. If I had taken a criminal law class during college, perhaps I'd have learned that too; I doubt it, but perhaps. But the way I see it, that credit card thing is something private between me and Jelly and a merchant marine named Larry Boyer. Regardless, it's certainly not something to break out the automatic weapons over.

It's too late to argue now. I know. But it really sticks in my craw. I mean, where do these guys get off acting this way?

The Sheep are scattered throughout the sprawling grounds of our twenty acre enclosure. Many are hiding here in the main house, a huge ranch style building with a large kitchen, a dining room that seats twenty or so, a living room, and a master bedroom and bath on the main floor and eight rooms upstairs. Others are in the long, low bunkhouse, or the 100 year old barn, or one of several outbuildings. A few people are actually ignoring the feds and working in the gardens—organic, of course—picking off worms and pulling weeds. These are true optimists. I'm not sure how many of us there are. Thirty or forty maybe. People come and go as they want, so we really don't keep track.

We had a bit of a blowout last night. Great fun. We called it the War Party. We whooped, we hollered, we yammered half nude cha cha samba jitterbugs around a blazing bonfire in the courtyard. If the feds were on their toes, they could have come and got us. They didn't. We persist.
The lingering effects of last night's intoxicants have induced an artificial calm. Nothing much stirs. Mr. Bach is becoming an insanity that coats our eardrums, skulls, and finally even our palms. Maddening. Anything would be better. Lionel Ritchie, Don Ho, Twisted Sister.

Anything.

I study my hung-over brothers and sisters. Lacey, a vision of feminine serenity, leads the White Bandanas in one of their whining prayers. Those thirteen women are calm but their meditations make the others edgy. Jelly writes furiously. The clingy twins are combing each other's hair. Of course, most of the Lambs are still passed out from last night. Someone said that Suzy Sue slept in the stable with Daisy and Amber Lynn, the milk cows.

Out of all these people, Andre is the one who gets on my nerves.

I can feel him watching me, watching Moroni, watching the White Bandanas. I can feel him smiling. When I turn to look, he is in fact smiling, but the voyeurism is only my imagination. He has his silver and turquoise cigarette lighter out, smiling at the flame, burning the hairs, one by one off his arm.

For such a little man, Andre is the most intimidating person I have ever met. With his starched clothing, his nearly psychotic reticence, he seems capable of anything.

Lacey and Andre showed up together, a package deal. We met them in Sin City.
Chapter 3: Viva la Lizard

San Diego was soon a distant thought. We were gassed up, body and vehicle, heading for our first stop. Las Vegas. There was no better place I could think of to gauge the condition of my luck.

Along the way, we stopped off the interstate to watch a dust devil spin over a distant alkali flat. It stayed there, stationary, whirling the desert's nothingness in its arms. Motionless, but moving. Moving, but going nowhere.

I squatted near the side of the van for shade, cracked open another Coors.

"I wonder why they call them devils," I said.

Jelly was pissing toward the twister.

"The early missionaries used to track heathens into the desert," he said.

"Whenever twisters came along, there wouldn't be any tracks to follow." He buckled his britches and sat next to me sipping his beer. "Weren't any tracks because the devil came and dragged the heathens off to hell. Dust devils."

"Where'd you hear that?" I asked.

"Nowhere," said Jelly. "But doesn't it sound true?"

The wind spun in the distance. Its vacuum column fed by dust, sage and momentum. I scratched Chito's ears and let him lick beer from the rim of my can.

When we finished our beers, we moved on to let the whirlwind cover our tracks. We'd only been on the road for about five hours. Vegas was near. It wasn't much of a drive from San Diego to Vegas and I wondered why we had never made the trip before.

The drive didn't cost much either because Jelly had borrowed a credit card from one of his clients named Larry Boyer. Boyer was a Merchant Marine, aged somewhere between 50 and 100, who claimed to have been in the Korean War and sometimes World War II if he was sure you weren't listening.

"Do you stand tall?" he asked me one day in The Shore.

I shook my head. "I really don't think so."
“You little bastards,” he said. “We all died for you little bastards and you don’t even care.”

The way his skin draped off his angular bone structure, he did sort of look like he had died for me. As a matter of fact, he looked like he’d died for me and the other little bastards some time ago. After the first time he spoke to me, whenever he asked the question again, I learned to just say, “You bet Mr. Boyer, I stand real tall.”

The night before we hit the road for Monica’s wedding, Jelly stole the credit card from Boyer who was sleeping at the bar. Although I don’t condone thievery, I rationalized that at least Jelly and I would remember what we spent the money on.

We remember. We spent the money on Las Vegas.

Although we didn’t know it at the time, we spent the money steeling ourselves against our journey into the desert. Larry Boyer’s credit card was our Vegas talisman, our sceptre against the night, our key into the darkness and our pass into Lacey and Andre’s lives.

Las Vegas is really only the edge of the real desert, a gateway. The true desert starts somewhere north of the island lights where currency becomes obsolete. Instinctively, we knew this, so we let the card lead us while it still could. In Vegas, the card made us as tough as drunken cowboys, as bold as topless lounge singers. I remember well the suite in the Sahara that the card bought us. I remember the small, brass tag that the card bought our little terrier:

_Welcome to the Mustang Ranch Stud Farm: Ask for Chito._

Jelly gave me some “happy pills.” Ecstasy. I popped two and then we hit The Strip with a brown-bagged bottle of Cuervo—courtesy of the card—where we saw mothers walk arm in arm with their teenaged clones. Jolly pirates battled on sidewalk edges, casino lights mocked the night and ten-year-old boys raided free pornography from the newspaper dispensers.

We felt light as dust, a feeling that lingered from earlier when we’d seen the dust devil boiling in the desert. It must have followed us, dragging our tracks with it, taking
them to hell or Las Vegas. And for a little while we let it suck us into its funnel, whirling us through drunken, twinkling lights.

Jelly snatched a *Las Vegas Nightlife* pamphlet from a young boy's sweaty fingers. The boy flipped him off, grabbed another magazine from the gutter, and darted away. 

Jelly read aloud while keeping a running dialogue with himself as the crowd jostled by.

"Fiery Redhead Totally Nude. College Girl Fresh Out of School."

Nope. Nope.

"Farm Girl. Cowboys Only. Swedish Black Beauty."


A shark-faced woman in black leather shot Jelly a man-eating look.


An Asian woman on a digital billboard winked at me. I laughed and took another swig.

A street man, dusky and worn, emerged from the false light. "Spare some change if you care?"

He had kind, dark eyes. I drank to him, laughing softly. Jelly stopped my hand as I reached in my pocket.

"Don't give it to him," he said. "He'll just spend it on booze."

"So will I." I pushed away Jelly's hand and gave the man a wad of ones. "Buy some food." I passed him my brown bag of tequila.

He took a long pull off the bottle, handed it back, said, "I don't tell you how to spend your money," and melted into the shadow where he'd built a nest of foam rubber and canvas. He picked up a piece of fabric and went to threading together patches of cloth.

"He's a quilter," I giggled.

"He's a beggar," said Jelly.

I nodded. "He's the only homeless man I've seen here."

"It's illegal to be homeless in Vegas. Scares people so they won't spend money."
I looked up the Strip. The crowd bobbed before me. No bodies, just heads without faces. "I haven't seen any cops."

"Electronic policing." Jelly pointed to an ornate cornice on the McDonald's across the street. "Cameras everywhere."

I didn't see anything.

Jelly pointed to a manhole cover. "And they're underground. Vegas has more tunnels than Manhattan. They're watching. Making sure you spend your money. Watch your ass or they'll suck you down."

I squinted into the dark at the man cross-stitching small rags into a bigger rag and thought of the tunnels hidden from the sun's prying eye and the scattered night lights. Secret places, beneath him, beneath me. I didn't know if what Jelly said about the tunnels was true, but I imagined there must be a heaven of obscurity—and freedom—under my feet.

The beckoning Strip lights tugged me toward them and my legs stumbled before me, forcing me to hang on and follow as best as I could. I thought about the homeless man making a quilt.

I laughed.

"Perfect." Jelly tore a page from the pamphlet, passed me the glossy photo. "Classy Lacey. Very Discreet. Credit Cards Accepted."

That was the first time I saw Lacey.

In the photo, she was topless, sprawled out, caught in a girlish giggle amid a bed of bath foam. Her bleached hair was damp with bubbles, her toes ringed with silver and gold. A minute later, an hour later, I saw her again when she kicked Chito against our hotel room wall, glaring after our poor, furry friend as he fled under my bed.

"Larry Boyer?"

"That's me," said Chito. Or Jelly. A half day of tequila and happy pills confused the voices.

"I don't do anything sick," she said. "I'm not into animals."
"Hey," said Jelly. "We stand tall. Nothing but straight arrow American boys here."

Lacey scoffed, took Larry Boyer’s credit card, and handed it to somebody in the hall.

"Who’s out there?" I asked.

"My agent," she said shrugging off her day coat.

I sipped the last of the tequila and watched her framed in the window against glittering Vegas castles. Her white hair haloed, her white garters and lingerie barely contrasted her powdered flesh, and my gaze fixed on her pearlescent navel piercing.

A white lizard.

I smiled at it and the white lizard spoke to me.

An angel, it said. An angel.

I slipped helplessly into the warmth of my own smile as the lizard, white as a falling star, crawled down her smooth white thighs, over the carpet, across the bed sheets, to breathe in my ear. A fucking angel.

The lizard slid into my ear, curled up, and the two of us closed our eyes to sleep.

But, tired as I was, the lizard wouldn’t let me sleep.

It’s not my thing to go with hookers. Aside from the fact that I am poor, it just feels wrong. Maybe it’s something I learned from my mother.

But I couldn’t shut this woman from my head.

Sure, we met her in a free, sleaze magazine, but she was more than just a glossy print, a cheap come-on. She was all woman. She was mean, and serious, and strong—everything that men love to hate in women. Everything that men can’t resist.

Right then, I wished I was something—something important. I wished that I was President of the United States or a famous televangelist so I could point to this woman someday. “There. That’s her!” I could brag righteously. “That’s the woman who ruined me.”

It was a beautiful fantasy.

The lizard in my head flicked in full agreement.
“You stay in pretty good shape,” I overheard Jelly saying. “Do you model?”
Oh my God, I thought. He’s using pick up lines on a hooker.
“What do you think I was doing for the picture in the ad?” she asked.
Mean and smart. My kind of woman.
“Come closer,” he said. “I want you.”
I tensed.
Clothing rustled on the bed next to me.
Jelly moaned.
“Come on, baby,” he said. “You’re beautiful. You could be an actress with a
body like that.”
He was practically whining.
“What do you know about acting?” asked Lacey.
Her voice was husk rubbing against corn silk.
Deep. Sexy.
My bed squeaked as I shifted to get a peek at her. She was still in her lingerie but she had most of Jelly’s clothes off.
“I have an uncle in the business,” said Jelly.
Oh yes—the uncle in Hollywood who leased Honey Huts to Baywatch when they were shooting.
Lacey pulled off Jelly’s shirt. His long arms and legs, tanned deep from California sun, provided a sharp contrast to her skin, the color of moonlight. She pulled down his shorts. Rubbed his thighs and his knees.
“Touch it,” he begged.
She blindfolded him with his t-shirt. She teased him. Rubbed his chest, his stomach.
I tried to slow my own breathing, but it was beyond my control. I closed my eyes for just a moment and Lacey was on me, pulling off my clothes, whispering, do you like that? How about that? This?
Yes. Yes. Then out loud, “Yes!”
I opened my eyes. She stared at me as if I had just brought a six pack to a Mothers Against Drunk Drivers meeting. I turned away from her.

Jelly's moans tortured me.

I tried to remember why I didn’t go with hookers: something about mom? My own desire stiffened in my arms, legs, pants. I forgot decorum. I forgot humility, and common decency became an uncommon pain in the ass.

The lizard in my head prodded me, pushed me.

I unzipped my pants, reached my hand inside and groaned.

Jelly’s ecstatic cries had turned to the ridiculous. Girlish giggles.

I chanced another look.

The lizard stopped barking.

Lacey was no longer with Jelly. He was bound hand and foot, blindfolded, as Chito licked his toes.

"Jelly," I said.

"Come on, do it," he said. "Lick me."

"Jelly," I said.

He stopped groaning, turned blindly toward me. "Wait your turn."

"I don’t swing that way," I said.

Lacey stood by the door watching Chito and Jelly. With her was a small, middle aged, angry man with a large bald patch over his left ear. Even if he hadn’t been holding a knife, the man would have looked dangerous.

"The card checks out," he told her. "His name is Larry."

"He’s asking me about acting gigs too," said Lacey.

I couldn’t just sit and watch my two friends embarrass themselves like that. But when I reached for Chito, the little man picked up a Gideon’s Bible, and cracked me between the eyes.

As I whirled from tequila and head trauma, I saw Chito leap at the vicious little leprechaun. But Lacey caught him midair and ninja-kicked him back under the bed.

The little man straddled Jelly and slipped the shirt from over his eyes.
“Let me introduce Andre,” said Lacey.

Andre had his knife pointed at Jelly’s eyeball. Jelly had the detached appearance of a child in a Sunday School Christmas pageant who is concentrating very hard on bladder control.

“So, Larry,” she continued. “What’s this about an acting job?”

“I don’t know,” said Jelly. “Look. You know, that was great. You were great. But you can go now. Thanks.”

I rubbed the knot that grew on my forehead.

“We don’t want trouble,” I said although I figured that it probably didn’t matter to them.

“Be quiet,” said Andre.

I felt powerless next to this hideous little creature astride my friend’s chest. I was quiet.

“Look, Larry,” said Lacey. “You wanted me and now you’ve got me.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

Andre glared at me.

“Hey,” I said. “Do you want Larry?”

“I have an uncle in Hollywood,” said Jelly. He was desperate. “He works for Baywatch. They could use a chick like you.”

“Baywatch?”

“Sure,” he said. “That whole silicone bikini thing is out. They want small chicks like you.”

“They think you’re Larry Boyer,” I said.

“Where is he?” asked Andre. “He’s got something that belongs to us.”

“Larry?” I asked.

“I’ll cut your ears off and feed them to your dog,” said Andre.

“Chito wouldn’t eat my ears,” I said. “He’s a good dog.”

The rest of the evening went that way. It wasn’t a bit of fun.
They interrogated us about some guy who some guy named Larry was supposed
to know. Andre kept threatening to carve parts off our bodies and Lacey alternatively
bad-copped-good-copped us, playing both roles masterfully.

After forever, we convinced them that we had, in fact, stolen the credit card.
“This is shit,” said Lacey. “This is stupid. We’ll never find him like this.”
Andre said nothing.
She undid Jelly’s bonds.
“Maybe we can help,” said Jelly.
Just like that.
The dumb bastard offered to help. I knew what he was thinking. He hadn’t
gotten any. He just needed more time.

“Where do we go next?” Lacey asked Andre.
Andre was fooling with his knife, absently spinning it in intricate and deadly
designs from one hand to the other.

“Denver,” he said. Then he turned to Jelly. “Do you have a car?”
“A van,” he said.
“Do you have any more stolen credit cards?”
“No way,” said Jelly. “I just borrowed that one.”
“Warrants? Expired licenses? Military records?”
“No,” said Jelly.
“No,” I said when he looked at me.
Andre smiled. His teeth were as straight and gray as barn boards.
“I tell you what,” he said. “We’ll pay the way if you boys get us to Denver.”
He leaned close enough for me to smell the shrimp scampi he’d eaten for dinner.
“No hard feelings?”
“No way,” I said.
“OK,” he said as he reached out his hand to Jelly. “Now give me that credit card.
Those things just get you in trouble.”
Andre and Lacey loaded up with us the next morning, their worldly possessions packed in a single, olive drab, Army-issue duffel bag. Andre also carried a worn black briefcase with tarnished brass hasps that never left his sight.

When we told them that we had to stop off at Salt Lake City, they said that was fine. They had a few places they wanted to go anyway.
Chapter 4: New Friends

Monica had phoned me before we left San Diego and asked me to pick up Lance McCann in Salt Lake City. Lance worked as a small-time, local official who specialized in public policy and planning issues.

The four of us, me, Jelly, Monica, and Lance, had been inseparable during college. We all belonged to The Wilderness Club, a nonprofit organization that held fundraisers to support the introduction of public beer gardens into National Parks. Our rallies were held at public campgrounds and our peaceful protests often ended with the most vocal club members cooling their heels and their hangovers in some local hoosegow—such is the price of social conscience. Lance was sharp with the legalities surrounding our cause and, during his tenure at the university, he was the Wilderness Club President four years running. And, four years running, he had also been Monica's lover.

On the way from Nevada and Utah to get Lance, I learned very little about our new companions. They kept to themselves.

Blacktop heat waved through the floorboards and open windows as I cast surreptitious glances into the rear-view mirror. At times, Andre and Lacey were as familiar as sister and brother, or daughter and father. Other times, they were as companionable as old lovers. They didn't act at all like friends though, and they only spoke in private.

As their relationship remained a mystery, Lacey and Andre's quirks took on added significance. Lacey was normal enough, at least, as normal as a hooker can be. Like Jelly and me, she panted in the heat and stripped down to a bare minimum of clothing, which for her was barefoot in a jog bra and boxers. But Andre sat stiff at attention in a long-sleeve shirt buttoned to the neck, new blue jeans, and shiny black boots. It was over 105 degrees in the sagebrush shade, but I never saw him sweat.
All along the way, they demanded we make random stops at biker bars. We journeyed into the cool, dark bowels of places like Zeke’s Roadhouse or Hole in the Wall Tavern.

We were still crawling through Nevada when we left a burning pink desert for a dank, blue bar named The Wandering Prophet where Jack-Mormon cowboys were arm wrestling dusty road-warriors. It was like entering the den of a smoking beast, and its scent—old cigars, spoiled beer and human sweat—permeated the dirty timbers of the walls. There was one low-ceilinged room with an unplugged jukebox, five tables, a one-armed bandit, and a long, black bar so low that I had to stoop to rest my hands on it.

Lacey and Andre sidled up to the corner of the bar and entered into shrouded chitchat with the bartender. Jelly and I saddled up next to a crusty cowpoke camped alone with his whiskey. The man wore a crumpled straw hat, sweat-stained brown above the brim.

“Howdy, Old Timer,” said Jelly.

The man turned, lifted a Styrofoam cup to his mouth, squirted a dark string of chew spit into it. He inspected us like we were spring heifers. “Where you boys from?”

“San Diego,” I said.

“Well,” he said. “Howbout that?”

The bartender, a tall, thin woman draped in silver and turquoise came up to us. Behind her, there was a velvet picture of Elvis riding a palomino. “What would you like?”

“Coors,” I said.

The cowpoke spit again.

“Gun control,” he said. “First they take yer guns, then they take yer howzes.”

“Pipe down, Vern,” said the bartender, jabbing a Camel between her large, yellow teeth.

Lacey and Andre were in the shadows with a man who had come out of the back. Andre’s attaché case was open so that only he and the man could view its contents.

“All them Coors boys want yer guns.”
Spit.

“I don’t have any guns,” said Jelly.

The cowpoke stood, stuck a finger in my chest. “I been to Mexico, Cuba, and Chile during the revolution. That’s the first thing them governments did. Took the guns. Then they took over.”

Spit.

“Hey, Vern,” said the horse-toothed bartender.

“The only thing them little brown people could do wuz stand there holding their dicks while the government took everything.”

“Vern!”

“Don’t go thinkin’ yer any better then them little brown people,” he said.

We got up to leave.

Vern kicked back his chair, “Don’t you go nowhere.”

I looked for help but the bartender had buried her face in a *National Enquirer*, the printed word’s answer to television. Her eyes glossed over. Clearly, it had already made her too stupid to help. I glanced at the Elvis painting. His palomino looked alarmed but Elvis wasn’t going to help.

“You little shits think you can just come in here and take my guns? Ain’t you or Mr. Coors or Mr. Clinton or nobody gonna ever take my gun.”

“Let’s go,” said Lacey. Her voice coming from my side startled me.

Vern spit again, this time on the floor.

“These boys owe me a arm rassling match.”

“Well, get it over with then,” said Lacey. “I want to leave this shit-hole.”

Jelly and I exchanged a look.

I nodded.

I wasn’t any stronger than Jelly and it wasn’t likely that I’d win, but Vern was serious about the match. Vern seated himself and motioned me to sit across from him.

“I tell you what,” he said. “If you two beat me, I won’t beat the livin’ shit out of you.”
Sounded reasonable.

His hand felt like petrified jerky. His fingers squeezed mine like he was trying to change them into diamonds.

I visualized myself winning. It was something I learned from a woman who I once dated. Creative Visualization. See yourself doing it again and again. See yourself winning.

I did.

I saw myself taking that redneck’s fist and driving it through the edge of the table like Schwartzkoff through Iraq. I visualized the cowpoke howling, begging, crying. And, I saw myself shaking my fist over him giving the lecture about polite behavior and courtesy that his mamma must have forgot.

I felt the lizard in my head. Encouraging, lisping.

*Do it, it said. Do it for her.*

Creative visualization, the lizard, Lacey’s icy blues. I beat the guy. I was sure of it. Before he smashed my hand into the table top, hung on and spun me in a heap onto the floor, I was sure I’d beaten him.

Lacey stood, fists bunched into her hips.

“Nice try, tough guy.”

Jelly helped me to my feet.

“Fuck you,” he said to Vern.

Vern spit, cussed. He went for Jelly, his fossilized fists flinging like rocks. He caught Jelly in the chin, dropped him hard.

I tried to intercede, but Andre sprang in front of me and grabbed Vern by the throat. Vern stopped, both his hands grasping desperately at Andre’s wrist.

Andre backed Vern into a chair and held him there, staring.

“We’re leaving now,” he said. “Is that alright with you?”

Vern wheezed a “yes.”
Andre dropped his hand from Vern’s throat and backed away. Lacey helped Jelly off the floor and put his arm around her neck to support him. Vern sat stupefied in his chair. The bartender read her magazine as if she hadn’t noticed the commotion at all.

After we left The Wandering Prophet, Jelly and I decided we’d had enough of bellying up to bars with far bigger, sweatier, and meaner bellies than ours. But Andre and Lacey were undaunted. It wasn’t just bars either. They couldn’t resist places like Jake’s Snake Pit or Babe’s Reptile Emporium. Words like 50 foot serpent or 100 Venomous Reptiles drew them like yuppies to an Ethiopian restaurant.

While Lacey and Andre disappeared with the managers, Jelly and I lazed around glass snake cages downing cervezas and taunting skinny pythons with Chito, our excitable, rabbit-sized companion.

At Babe’s Reptile Emporium, Jelly became fascinated with the frogs. There was a whole tank of Minnesota frogs with extra legs, extra eyes, and according to the sign, extra-small genitals.

“IT’s awful,” Jelly said enthusiastically. “Pollution does it.”

“I suppose it would be worse if their nuts got bigger,” I said.

Jelly got excited about one cage in particular. He checked to see if anyone was watching, reached into the glass cage, grabbed three toads, and stuffed them in his pocket.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Colorado River toads,” he said. “For the drug user on a tight budget, toads are far better than huffing paint. Great colors and sounds. Mutating elves start popping up everywhere you look. Do you know what these things go for?”

“Why would anyone buy them?” I asked.

“Kids love elves,” he said.

“You’re going to sell drugs to kids?”

“No man,” said Jelly. “I’ll be selling toads to kids.”

“Is it worth it? It’s just a couple toads.”

“I’ll breed them,” he said. “I’ll be a rancher. Just like Vern.”
Jelly was full of it. I knew he took the toads just to say he once stole toads. In the van, he put the toads inside a 32-ounce, plastic, Big Juan cup and set it on the floorboard. Like moths in a jar, the contraband would be dead before nightfall.

After Babe's, I wouldn't go into any of the places with Jelly. We'd already had enough trouble and in some way or other Jelly was responsible. He's the one, after all, who decided to strike up a conversation with Vern. And stealing poisonous toads? I was now an accessory to amphibian theft.

Lacey and Andre kept at it though.

I watched Lacey as she approached the van after one of the stops. Her soft white hair flared in the sunshine and a sun dress revealed an athletic figure. Walking toward us, she could have been a model, an actress, a feminine hygiene commercial. I visualized her running through a field of daisies, laughing like a spirit.

"She wants you, you know," I said to Jelly.

She had a hard way of showing it, but her mouth softened when she spoke to Jelly.

"She's a hooker," said Jelly. "She wants my cash."

"She knows you don't have any."

"Then she's a dumb hooker."

I had a lizard in my head, crawling about hissing forked-tongue reassurances that she was an angel sent from heaven.

_A smoking hot angel_, it lisped.

I chose to listen because my mental arsenal had no weapons for fighting a nictitating muse. So, with a faith born in the desert of my own tortured desire, I knew she was good. I knew she was perfect. Don't ask me why or how I knew, but I just knew it.

But Jelly could resist her. Jelly stood tall. He scrawled his objectivity into his notebook and tattooed it onto his personality. Jelly had his writing. Jelly even had poisonous frogs.

But I had a lizard.
Chapter 5: The First Shot

Two days ago, the twins, Jeremy and Joshua, were beyond the fence giving their mutual pathologies a breath of fresh morning air. Chito frolicked at their heels. Rays of sunshine cut over Paradise Ridge, broke through long-needled ponderosa, and finally diffused among the twins' billowing white garb and ephemeral strands of golden hair.

With skin as pale as Narcissus at moonset, these lithe young men must have appeared as sunrise wraiths to the invisible men hunkered in the leaves. Holding their breath for fear of breaking the spell, the men watched like explorers in a magical forest who had just stumbled upon wood nymphs at play.

The twins have not spoken since that day, so they haven’t told me exactly what happened. I imagine that it was Chito's keen, canine sense that, although blunted by overindulgence and sloth, sniffed out the watchers.

His alarm yawped through the echoing trees.

At Chito's feet, the forest floor leapt to life like a startled fawn and transformed into a reconnaissance detail of camo guys armed with flak jackets, goggles, and guns. For the briefest eternity, they faced each other speechless in wonder: the twins, harmless and comely, the camo guys, grim and shamefaced. But it was Chito, wild and strong with a heart as big as the Grinch giving back Christmas, who faced them off.

I heard gunshots.

Twisted in bed sheets and legs, I extricated myself from the warm clasp of my lover’s nude limbs, fumbled with the blinds. The twins broke out of the trees running, practically flying, for their lives. They screamed, Chito screamed, and Andre hollered encouragement from the gates of our blessed Sweet Heaven.

I pulled on my shorts, grabbed my shoes. Hopping on one leg, trying to pull up my pants, I scrambled to the stairs, tripped on the third step and landed in a heap of Levis and curses at the bottom. My left arm jangled with pinpricks but my neck worked; my fallen, twisted legs, also worked. I limped outside to cheer the arrival of the twins.
They had covered half the distance to the gate, home free, when a shot, naked and blind, sang out of the dark trees. When they reached Sweet Heaven’s entrance, Andre slammed the gate behind them.

The twins gasped like carp flung onto a riverbank. Mute. Hazel eyes wide. Each man held his right hand over his left breast as though pledging allegiance to a new, terrifying government.

Although it was Joshua who cried out, the dollop of blood oozed from beneath Jeremy’s palm and rolled down the front of his white cotton frock.

Both of them sank to their knees.

Chito barked at the gate. When Andre let him in, he staggered over to their sides, grinning through bloody teeth.

I can only guess what happened.

Chito attacked. His 15 pounds of swamp rat muscle must have found the poorly armored shin of a camo guy. He fell. His weapon discharged and his magic bullet found Jeremy’s back. It’s unbelievable, but it’s the only guess I’ve got.

But that was the beginning. That was when the other side dug in and really began to watch.

I looked to the trees for the enemy, for some cause to explain this effect. But there was nothing, only deep shadows at the pine trunks that evaporated upwards into a solemn green canopy and then the crystal-blue quiet of another infernal sunny day.
Chapter 6: Speed Seduction

August 10, 1999, a year earlier almost to the day, was also sunny and mild. Those
damn silly clouds dotted the sky, but we had not yet learned to dread them. We were still
on the road between Vegas and Salt Lake, but once we crossed the Utah border, there
were no more places to stop.

Cheerful and happy, Jelly and I chatted with Lacey. We had discovered a mutual
interest in societal decay.

"A big fall," predicted Jelly. "And we're headed right over the edge."

"No," Lacey responded. "I don't buy that shit."

"What shit?" I asked. "We're goners. The best you can do is make sure your
corpse had fun while it still worked."

"That's shit," said Lacey. "Guys give up too fast. You don't even try. Women
should have taken the reins from you bastards long ago."

The idea of hookers running the world didn't sound like much of a change.

We continued debate.

Drought, disease, poverty, racial and religious division, exploitation, animal
cruelty, and America's perfect devotion to hedonism and hypocrisy excited a frenzy of
good and ill-natured disagreement that drove us via interstate into Utah's depths. We
blew past secret, desert strongholds where fearless saints carved a brand new religion into
arid Indian lands.

We discussed growth hormones and Colonel Sander's doctrine. Siren whispers
drifted on warm drafts from desert wilderness through yawning windows while we
sought meaning in black helicopters and the cloning of animals that already looked pretty
similar.

We ignored the tempting, subversive allure of a wilderness religion as new and
American as jazz, as controversial as plump-lipped interns, as exciting as carpet burns on
tender knees. Swept along in my thundering Dodge van, we barely glanced at road signs
boasting foreign names: Nephi, Payson, Provo, Pleasant Grove—places so lost in time
and geography that no sane person would stop or stay on purpose. We bowled onward as fresh and hopeful as the recent pioneers who stole this desert to grow crops, feed seagulls, and test big green bombs on bull snakes and cowhands. Oblivious to the grim, smiling sun, we thought the Utah interstate an offering to us, a path paved to salvation from daily drudgery. Even Andre charged into our spirited debates with occasional grunts of disagreement.

Our shining trail found its terminus as the Great Salt Lake levitated its reflection in the vast distance. Traffic slowed as it crawled toward an urban center growing like a corn between the brittle Wasatch toes.

Andre demanded we stop at a Flying J Truckstop where he stole a telephone book. Running a finger over the pages as though feeling for a pulse, he barked demands and directions. For the next several hours, we chauffeured Andre and Lacey to porn shops and edge-town bars where the pair disappeared into backrooms with Andre's attaché case. After a time, Jelly and I became bored with the remarkably similar offerings at each store or bar and opted to wait in the van.

"Do you think he's diseased?" I asked Jelly.
"We're all diseased."
"No," I said. "What's with the bald spot above Andre's ear?"

Jelly took off his baseball cap. Jelly had been my best friend for the last six years, but I'd never seen the top of his head. There, hidden from the sun's ultraviolet torment, grew a concentric circle of tender flesh the diameter of a grapefruit.
"My mother says it's God's touch."

Jelly licked his finger, reached across the front seat of the van, and tapped the top of my head. "That's what I think about Andre. God touched him. . . God touched him, but just a bit off to the side."

"Bullshit," I said cracking open a Coors and pouring some into a bowl for Chito. "Andre is touched, but not by God."
The sudden sliding door interrupted us. Chito belched in surprise as Andre sprang into his seat. Lacey followed, her movements more deliberate and tired. Chito and Jelly whined for more beer.

"Whatcha got in the case, Doc?" asked Jelly. "We've stopped at every porn shop and popsicle stand in town. Making a deal?"

Andre ignored Jelly and rolled a cigarette.

Lacey pulled off her t-shirt, used it to wipe beads of perspiration from her forehead and neck. "That's it for today, boys. Who'd of thought that a town built around a temple would have so many porn shops?"

"Religion can be a very frustrating thing," I said.

Lacey mopped perspiration from her armpits in just the way I imagined the Venus De Milo might.

"I'm bushed."

Jelly threw Lacey a lascivious glance. "I'll bet."

"Knock it off, Jelly."

It was the lizard in my head speaking with my tongue and my voice. Every time Jelly mistreated Lacey, I felt its tiny claws scratch the inside of my skull. "What do you do in these places, Lacey?"

"We mind our own business," said Andre. He glared a warning to Lacey.

Lacey met his glare with her own.

"You don't need to know," she said.

"We don't have to take you two all over hell."

"Golly, Matthew," she said. "Me and Andre will just rent a car. You know." She put a finger to her lip and lifted her eyes as though casting around for a thought. "You know, you and Jelly can buy gas and food with a credit card."

She had me there. Back in Vegas we celebrated a little after we realized we had two sugar daddies. I let Jelly teach me how to play craps on a ten dollar table where I quickly learned that I'm no good at craps.
Since Andre and Lacey had no more business, I called Lance. He gave us directions to a downtown brew-pub called Squatters and promised to meet us within the hour.

Salt Lake City was a technological garden under cultivation. Its streets, torn from center to sidewalk, were being furrowed and ploughed, widened and rerouted. Old buildings endured revitalizing facelifts while giant cranes crawled among the skeletons of new buildings preparing them to receive the windows and steel that would become their shining flesh. The town fathers were scratching away the old earth to make way for the new, to show off this salty Eden. The fruits of their labors would pay off in gold. Gold from the Olympics just two short years away. Gold from skiers and tourists. Gold from madmen and geniuses. Gold to be hoarded and buried in cellars for the tribulation to come.

Perhaps it was just luck, the bad kind, but I think the city could smell our empty pockets. I had no money to change at their Temple. I had no gold to contribute to their coffers. Lacey and Andre had some cash. I don't know where it came from but they had money to buy 90 octane for our Dodge and 90 proof for our bodies. They bought us burgers and burritos as greasy as the wake from an Exxon oil tanker, and potato chips as salty as the great lake to the west.

When we found Squatters, I smuggled Chito in a gym bag and unzipped it so he could stick his head out and drink from a bowl. He didn't like to be alone. While we waited for Lance, Chito proved to have a distinctively low-brow palate and turned up his nose in haughty disapproval at each microbrew I offered. Finally, I sneaked in Coors from the van to quell his groans of protest.

"Jelly," I asked. "Do you take your hat off to bathe?"

Jelly growled at us as we stared at his head.

"What happened to your head Andre?" The weak Salt Lake beer was going straight to my stomach. For some reason, it made heads important enough to me to nettle the frightening little man.
Andre leaned back in his chair. With some effort, he animated his solemn gray lips enough to speak. "It's a scar," he said.

Lacey watched with the intensity of a preacher's daughter in sex-ed class. I'd obviously broached a subject she was curious about but had been too polite to ask.

"Scar from what?"

Andre squinted at me. "Accident."

"What accident?"

Andre had a habit of swishing his cheeks when he spoke. It was as if he were feeling with his tongue the size and weight of his words before he spit them out at you.

"Bouncing Betty," he said.

And, BAM. Perfectly weighted and calibrated and aimed, his words always found their mark.

"Who's she?" I asked.

"Probably his mother," giggled Jelly.

Andre's steady expression shut him up. "It's a land mine. A man in front of me tripped it and I got hit by his belt buckle."

"A belt buckle did that?"

"I was lucky," said Andre. "I lost a little hair. The other guy lost his balls."

Before I could collect more conversational shrapnel, Jelly interrupted us by stopping a waitress.

"Hey," he said. "This is a great place."

"I'm glad you like it," drawled the woman.

"Are you an athlete?" he asked.

Chito belched at my feet.

The woman looked at me sharply and then back to Jelly. "Sara will be your waitress tonight," she said and wove away through the tables.

Jelly was at it again, but this one, obviously one of the smart ones, wasn't having any.

Speed seduction.
That was his game. He'd explained it to me many times. Body, mind and spirit. That's the key.

Like a mother watching her son explain a condom wrapper on the backseat of the family truckster, Lacey watched Jelly. Out of brute curiosity, I watched as well although I'd seen it many times before. Andre watched everyone.

Another waitress with a cheerful *Hi I'm Sara!* nametag appeared at our table.

"Hey," said Jelly. "This is a great place."

"Well thank you," said Sara. "Do you guys want menus?"

"Thank you," said Lacey.

"Waitressing must be hard work," said Jelly.

"You don't know the half of it," said Sara.

"It must keep you in pretty good shape though," he said. "I bet you could run a marathon."

The first basic tenet of speed seduction is the body. Commenting on a woman's body in a positive and innocuous fashion gets her to thinking about the physical aspects of both herself and the people who are in close proximity to her.

"Yeah, sure," she said. "But not after running my tail off in here." She turned to the rest of us. "Can I bring you anything to drink?"

We ordered another pitcher. Sara left with the first seed of speed seduction germinating in her mind.

"When were you in the Army?" I asked Andre.

Chito had begun to whine so Lacey leaned down to tip some more Coors into his bowl.

That we were all callous enablers of Chito's worsening alcoholism is one of the few real sins that I'll admit to. If I'd known that someday our faithful, black furball would have a half-rack a day habit, I'd have done things differently. But instead of staying Lacey's hand and convincing Chito that he'd had enough, I admired the texture and tone of Lacey's smooth white arm while I waited for Andre to hurl some more weighted words my way.
"I was in the army," he said, "When I was too young to know better."

"Were you in Nam?"

"Nam?"

"Yeah, you know. Vietnam." I said. "The war to prolong all wars."

He worked over some particularly heavy words in his mouth before he responded. "I'm not that old."

Direct hit. That took me by surprise. His crewcut was white. His skin was as dry and cracked as old mud beside a desert watering hole. In the right light, I'd have believed him if he told me he fought Pancho Villa with General "Black Jack" Pershing himself.

"Were you ever in any wars?"

Before he could speak, Jelly interrupted us again. "Have you ever been in New York?"

Ah. The second tenet of speed seduction.

The mind.

Jelly continued as Sara set down a fresh pitcher of Squatter's porter.

"I'm heading to New York next month," he said. "I was just wondering what places I should visit."

It was a lie of course. He could have picked any place to talk about. Nicaragua, China, Cuba. The point was to get the target of your nefarious affections to think about travel to exotic places. This serves the dual purpose of causing the woman's mind to drift into the fantasy world of unrealized possibility while at the same time making the man who has asked the question seem far more interesting. Now, the woman has thoughts of her body and the bodies of those around her colliding in the inky depths of her subconscious with the sudden, unrequited desire to escape the mundane world of her existence.

Sara was a perfect subject. Even the tougher subjects might be susceptible to this form of mind-control after enduring life in a city built around a temple. Salt Lake was a hotbed of inactivity and frustrated passion.

Lacey looked ready to vomit.

"Hey, Lacey," I asked. "Have you ever been to New York?"

She said "no" in such a way that I realized that any further attempt at speed seduction might result in a lifelong scar not dissimilar to the scar where God had touched Andre. Lacey was a decidedly bad subject.

Lance finally arrived in a three-piece suit and walking shoes. He'd devolved from a flaxen-haired, dread-locked, beard dragging neo-hippie of the early 90's into just another collar length, clean-shaven cog. I told him he looked good anyway. But he didn't.

Lance didn't look good at all and it wasn't just the expensive clothing and sculpted physique that made me think it. His complexion was sallow, his cheeks were sunken, and his eyes were thin watery pools of disappointment. Monica had neglected to mention that Lance was having a hard time accepting her impending marriage. He put on a brave face though and jumped right in to catching up with me and Jelly.

"These are nice glasses," said Jelly.

Sara had returned and Jelly was making a lame attempt at completing the third tenet of speed seduction.

"You think so?" she asked.

"Oh yeah. Nothing like coming to a cool place like this after a long, hard ride through the desert."

That was a good one.

Lance leaned in to whisper in my ear. "Speed Seduction?"

I nodded.

"Say," Jelly continued. "Do you know where I can get a newspaper? I like to keep abreast of what's happening while I travel."

Lance chortled and Lacey looked quizzically at him.
Jelly’s gift for words made him a master at this final stage of speed seduction. Once you’ve got the woman thinking about the physical—the body—and the fantastical—the mind—you start barraging her subconscious with sexual imagery and you’ve arrived at the spirit. Jelly was making conversation with words and phrases that Sara’s spirit, now in a highly excitable state, automatically turned into sexual innuendo. While the conscious mind hears the perfectly benign "nice glasses," her subconscious was registering "nice asses." Jelly was relentless. He’d keep up the "long hard rides" and talk about the "climax" of any movie at all for as long as Sara resisted.

Jelly had the charm of a fox. And, I had long ago stopped wondering why so many young women found that an irresistible quality. Perhaps some deep part of the female spirit fires up at men like Jelly. They want to take him, make him love them, and crush that part of him that would use them for sport. But no woman had made Jelly love her yet and I had grown callous to his dishonesty, his opportunistic, Don Juan spirit. It pained me, though, to see Lacey so swept up in the drama of another Jelly conquest.

As improbable as it sounds, speed seduction works and, true to its name, it works fast. While Lance and I made plans for Colorado, Jelly made plans with Sara for after work. Lacey and Chito continued to drink. However, with his curly little head lolling from the gym bag and his distended bladder fouling my spare socks, Chito was hands down the happier of the two. Andre watched us all with the impassivity of a trucker at a stoplight.

We were the last ones in the pub when it closed for the night. Lance gave Jelly directions to his place and the rest of us followed him to the small house he rented in a nearby neighborhood. Andre took the spare bedroom, Lacey took the couch, and me and Chito curled together on the floor. As we were drifting toward sleep, Lance walked into the living room and rattled the doorknob, latched the chain.

"The Stabber," he said. "Some guy is breaking into houses and killing people." Lacey turned whiter than usual. "How many has he killed?" she asked.

"Three."
After Lance left, she stood and tried the doorknob to make sure for herself that it was secure. She looked to Chito, perhaps for watchdog possibilities, but he had passed out the second his head hit Lance's braided rug. She stood staring through dirty window panes into the dimly lit street. She was trembling. I moved to her, and placed a tentative hand on her shoulder. The feel of her for just that moment was enough to send a painful jolt straight to my heart. But she only let my hand stay there long enough to shrug it away.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

She was silent for a while. "There's a stabber in every town," she whispered.

"We're safe here," I said.

"I'm not worried about us," she said. "We're nothing."

Then she brushed past me and buried herself in the couch beneath a heavy quilt. I knew what she meant.

I think of that night.

A blur of weak beer and unfinished stories. I cringe to think that Jelly's speed seduction might have worked vicariously on me. Whatever the cause—Jelly, White Lizard, Salt Lake—I felt seduced. I sat there on Lance's braided rug and listened to Lacey's unladylike snores pierce her padded quilt and fall rudely into my sobering ears. There was nothing ladylike about Lacey, except maybe her body, but even that seemed molded from something new and undefined.

But the lizard did wind-sprints back and forth, laps inside my skull like a rat in a wheel. The lizard was still convinced that this cold hooker was an angel.

I held my hand over my heart. I pressed hard feeling for a reassuring thump, imagining that when the thump came it was irregular, weak, and rare.
Chapter 7: Standing in Traffic

Chito was nearly a goner. He didn't see the edge coming. We're dealing with an outfit that doesn't screw around. Hell, it's a documented fact that they shoot babies and women through cabin walls.

We're in the water now. All of us. The camo guys, the White Bandanas. Me. Somewhere, maybe clear back in San Diego, we slipped into this stream that carried us forward, at a deceptively gentle pace, until human tributaries joined us and we are now caught in a current bound toward the inevitable edge of the world.

The feds cut the fence while our spotters were watching the guys in the buck brush and poor Chito just about got baited. Clever decoy really.

Steaks and Coors.

The depth of their research impresses me and for the first time I'm feeling real pangs of fear. How could they know about Chito's alcoholic tastes? You can bet it's only a matter of time now before they bait the rest of us.

I place my hand on Moroni's head. He looks like someone trying to remember something. It's right on the tip of his tongue.

I know full well that if Jeremy dies, Joshua will die with him. And, for the first time since the shooting, since they started blasting us with psychology and ultimatums, I feel something. Something has come alive in me. It starts in my wretched heart and moves throughout my body until I am in the jaws of pure golden light.

At last he speaks. Our fickle angel whispers to me, tells me what must be done.

I curse him for his silence.

I praise him for his voice.

You can't wait for patience, he says.

I look at the White Bandanas, calm, serene, useless. Lance is useless, seduced by lost love and past mistakes. Jelly is useless, seduced by the passion of his nonsensical religion. The twins pull combs through each other's hair until it shines like burning amber.
There are others I can call on, others who are hiding. But for now I choose Andre. He's staring at his lighter's flame. It's a frightening stare. It's a crazy stare. Today, Moroni has given me a plan. We'll have to pull together. But Andre has just the right look in his eye to know exactly what to do.

So, we have this plan. I feel better. It's good to have something proactive to do, not just sit here under siege. I never knew until now what a valuable commodity hope could be.

But it will take us all to pull it off.

I hear the voices.

Jelly is the Scribe.

Lacey is our frigid Holy Mother.

But, Lance is our zealot, our number one messenger, our spreader of the word. When others don't believe, start to doubt, backslide, his passion grabs them by the small hairs and yanks them back onto the path of righteousness. Sure, he's usually drunk as a Baptist on shore-leave, but you can sense that he needs it, really needs the booze, to cope with a faith too big to hold, and it's a little awesome to see him wrestling with his convictions. I've often wondered if Chito suffered from a similar motivation.

It's gotten worse for Lance. All the time, he shakes like he's cold. His diet is mostly liquid, his body nearly consumed.

I go to where he is draped over the arm of our cracked blue vinyl couch in the living room. I touch his shoulder.

Outside, I see our front gate. Beyond that, I can make out furtive movements in the treeline across the meadow. I shake Lance's arm.

I look to the east toward the barn where Suzy Sue is milking the cows. I don't see anything out of the ordinary.

When I douse Lance with a glass of water, his eyelids shudder like a stone jarred from in front of a tomb. His lids creak open. His irises are dark, empty caverns and, snatched from the blissful arms of deathlike sleep, he travels from confusion to anger to disappointment until he arrives momentarily at the searing light of quiet acceptance.
"Roundup the sheep." I say.
He clasps his hangover in his arms, coughs raggedly on smoker's phlegm.
"Moroni has a job for us."
And, emerging from the soupy depths of yellow sclera, pushing past jagged red veins, his fanatical spirit glimmers to the surface. A smile pulls his tight skin tighter.
"The angel talked to you today?"
"Yes," I say. "We have work to do."
Lance steadies his shaky legs, struggles to find his balance. "Work," he mumbles.
"Good work." He staggers, scoops up a bottle of gin as he crosses the living room, takes a swig. His equilibrium trickles back to him. His skull-face gleams, milky eyes shine.
"We have good work to do."
He leaves the room bent on gathering the errant Lambs who have scattered around nooks and crannies of Sweet Heaven. It will take him awhile to shepherd them all into the shrine—that’s what we call the living room where we keep Moroni and the most comfortable furniture. He must cross the open courtyard in full view of the camo guys with their high-powered scopes and itchy trigger fingers. But he'll take the risk. He won't think twice about it. When Lance has a cause, facing danger is a mere matter of course.
Lance has always been the brave one. He has chained himself to bulldozers to save a single tree, buried himself in dirt roads to stop logging trucks, faced ax swinging loggers, rope tossing ranchers, and pepper spraying pine pigs. Kicked, hit, cursed, and cussed, he's unmovable, unshakable. He is my friend. My hopelessly brave friend. A real brother to me. But, for the time being, my only hope is that he live long enough to get the job done.
There is just more at stake here than friendship. Those guys out there want our souls, dead or alive.
I wince when Lance steps out the front door, bottle in hand. But, he crosses the courtyard with a light drunken step. Unconcerned. Untouchable. He hasn't changed, not
really. He's no different from the first time I saw him standing alone in the middle of traffic.
Chapter 8: Afraid of DEATH

It was fall semester.

Jelly was running down a story for the *Campus Bugle*, so he dragged me and Monica along with him. He'd received a press release from DEATH. Bad acronyms had a fundamental appeal to Jelly and he was anxious to interview the stoner who'd thought up the name. He had no idea what DEATH was up to but the release promised a major rally that "would bring the city to its knees, right all injustice, set this bad world back on the path of goodness and peace."

It sounded important.

The rally was held at the intersection of College Road and Airport Way just a short distance from the university. But when we arrived, there were no spectators, no cops, not even any protestors. DEATH was a solitary, white boy in dreadlocks standing in the half-finished median of a road expansion project. He held a sign:

FIGHT IGNORANCE WITH DEATH.

He shouted at passersby:

*Flowers Not Asphalt!*

*Flowers Not Asphalt!*

Orange-jacketed construction workers flagged traffic slowly past, ignoring the agitated activist.

Undaunted, he kept up his litany, cursing apathy, haranguing cars:

*Flowers Not Asphalt!*

He shook his fist. He was wild, impassioned. He stuttered when he finally noticed us watching.

Monica and I waited on the curb while Jelly scooted through traffic to talk to the boy. They were soon in animated conversation, pointing, shaking heads, shouting. Lance kept looking our way for long, quiet moments and then turning back to Jelly to rant some more. Finally, to our surprise, Lance and Jelly both crossed the street and came to the curb. We all loaded into the Dodge van, old and battered even back then, and
made room for Lance who brought in a scent of patchouli oil that was so substantial it needed a seat all to itself. Then, we drove to the Dog House for pitchers.

Lance was still impassioned. He'd just been in battle. True, no one had showed up to fight, but it had been battle nonetheless. He kept mumbling, "I changed things today. I did. I made a difference."

"How did you make a difference?" Jelly asked.

"I made a difference by fighting for something no one else would fight for."

"Right on, man," said Jelly. He scribbled in his notebook.

Monica, a first year student still fresh as dew on honey melons, asked, "How did it feel? Out there all alone?"

Lance thought for a moment.

"Lonely," he said. "But, I knew if I stayed, someone would come. Someone would help." He scratched his scrubby face and pointed an index finger at the smoky ceiling. "Patience is the key to change, but you can't wait for patience."

"Wow," she said. "That is so true."

"You've to get out there and fight for it."

"Gawd," said Monica. "I totally wish I was like you."

"Why were you the only one fighting?" I asked.

"I don't know," said Lance.

He was genuinely perplexed.

"Maybe people are afraid of DEATH."

We laughed, but when Lance didn't share our mirth, we calmed down to low-frequency smirking.

"What does DEATH stand for?" asked Jelly.

"Defenders of the Earth Against Tyranny and Hatred."

I couldn't help it. I laughed out loud.

"Where'd you come up with such a stupid name?"

Lance jumped so hard that he knocked over his beer.
"There's nothing stupid about DEATH. Nothing stupid about doing the right
thing! If more people cared, another fifty feet of earth wouldn't be buried beneath asphalt
not doing anybody any good." He sat back down and mopped up his mess.

We quieted down, ashamed but giggling.

"How come you left then?"

Lance blushed beneath a tan that he'd cultivated from a summer spent outdoors
saving the earth from being sold by rich people to other rich people.

Jelly kicked me under the table.

"If it's so right," I pressed, "why are you here killing beers with us right now?
Why aren't you outside saving dirt?"

Lance straightened his shoulders and looked into Monica's big innocent eyes with
his big sincere ones. "Jelly said he'd introduce me to you."

"Me?" she asked.

"He said you might go out with me."

This time it was Monica's turn to upset her beer. Only, she threw hers in Jelly's
face.

Jelly dove to save his notes from a tragic drowning.

"You're an asshole," she said. Then she turned on Lance, "And I'd never date a
guy who belongs to one-member organizations."

Without further words, she stalked out of the room.

Lance was distressed.

Jelly laid a hand on his shoulder. "Don't worry," he said. "I just forgot to tell her
that we were breaking up."

Don't ask me how, I wasn't there for the conversation, but Jelly wormed his way
out of that one too. I think Monica just decided to pass the torch on to another woman
who might have better luck breaking his cruel spirit.

Lance soon discovered that people were, in fact, too frightened of DEATH to join
the organization. However, he put his mind to it and found a compromise. He started the
Wilderness Club, a cause that every college student could get behind. He reasoned that
by promoting beer gardens in National Parks, he could get more people out into the wilderness and teach them the basics of social activism. Both were worthy goals.

Monica eventually did date Lance and she didn't stop dating him until she graduated from college and left for the Peace Corps. Lance didn't go with her because he'd gotten a job in Salt Lake City that could make a difference, a real difference. All those years on the front lines in the dirt and the chains and the sweat had taught him that policymakers are the makers of policy. So, by whatever god an atheist puts his faith in, he set his mind on infiltration, change from within. He just couldn't pass up a position at planning and zoning, a sure step toward greater things.

Lance rationalized that two years of separation could only make the love between him and Monica grow deeper. Their hearts' separate paths would then merge again, richer and even more beautiful than before. He did visit her though, once, to keep the romance alive. He flew over to Africa to see her and was alarmed to find her a bit distant, a bit hesitant in their love making, a bit noncommittal with plans. But, Lance was sure his love had grown strong enough for the both of them. It wasn't until Monica returned from Africa with the English teaching son of a Kentucky racehorse owner that he realized his mistake.
Chapter 9: The Awakening

On August 11, 1999, Lance was wallowing in the muck that collects around people who listen to their minds instead of their hearts. He gave us directions to meet him at the temple near his anonymous building where he and the other cogs dressed gaily in gray, went to work every day except for Christian holidays, and set about the arduous task of not making a lick of difference. Nonetheless, his bit of indifference could not be accomplished by anyone else, so he had to put in a half-day's work before leaving for Monica's wedding. We planned to meet him at 12:00 sharp.

Shortly after Lance left for work, Jelly showed up with the waitress from Squatters. She had two large bags with her and both she and Jelly wore their dippiest post-sex grins. It made a fine contrast to my face. It gave me heart, though, that Lacey looked a little down too. Maybe she was feeling guilty about brushing me off last night.

Sure, a voice lisped inside my head. Why not?

Me, Chito, Andre, Lacey, Sara, Jelly, and Lance. This was becoming a road show, a traveling band of freaks. There was no room for anyone else, not even an audience. Who knew how great our numbers would swell?

Downtown, we found a parking spot in the warm shadow of the temple. We huddled outside the wrought iron fencing to read a tourist placard that described the prophet Joseph Smith, his golden tablets, and his angelic benefactor Moroni.

The temple glistened under the desert sun.

Great trees ringed its base. Branches caressed its supple, smooth sides. Thrust from bushing greenery, a wonderful firm dome heaved out, unbound by earth, into the sky.

The image of Lacey sweating in a jog bra and boxers bounced into my brain. Sober and clear-headed, the lizard flicked its tongue and made me mumble, "It's a breast."

No one corrected me. No one slapped me, and so I knew I wasn't sick. Lonely maybe, but not sick.
It came to me.

This temple was a breast and at its tip was crowned a golden aureole, the Angel Moroni, who offered nourishment to the hungry, empty sky. This temple was a woman built to receive men and all the loneliness of their fervent, raging faith. It was built by men who worshipped women, men who wanted women's bodies all around them. Men who had fought bloody frontier wars so that they might have many wives, many beautiful, loving wives. Men like Jelly. And, I admit it, men like me. And maybe even Andre.

We were all affected by it. Lacey, too.

She stood breathless beneath the temple's gentle touch, holding her hand to her breast. Perhaps, like me, she imagined virgins and Jezebels dancing together, bathing in milk, peeling grapes for each other. Perhaps she imagined that hidden in the deep breast was a paradise that only allowed entrance for the pure of heart, pure of faith. Inside this lovely body, marriage vows were exchanged and consummated under the watchful, approving eyes of the exalted elders. I called sharply to Chito, my first harsh words to him, to let down his leg and not defile the gates of sanctuary, this great altar to women.

The temple had affected me.

No doubt about it.

It did something new to my mind. A spiritual awakening doesn't sound right because I felt the reverence in my groin as much as in my heart. My reverence spilled over me, a tequila high, warm molasses clouds, into me like a deep muscle massage.

The scrubbed sidewalks sparkled. Their cracks leaped from beneath the blunt sun, nearly tripping me up.

I looked at the others. Their voices became the erotic ebb and flow of ballroom dancers.

I clung to this new feeling.

Car exhausts chattered music, the scent as fragrant as life. All were ordinary things, but I could see them from a sharper perspective, somewhere off to the side. These
were not new qualities, simply ones I had failed to sense. This was too good not to share. I didn't want to be alone.

"Stop," I said.

No one listened.

I grabbed Jelly's arm.

"Stop," I said. "Don't you feel that?"

"You've got my arm, dude."


Jelly rolled his eyes, shook me off, hugged Sara around the neck. Andre cleared his throat. His blank face revealed nothing. But Lacey shone like the first night I'd seen her in whirlwind Vegas light. I thought I could see her soul. My knees buckled and she was there to grab me.

"What is it?" she asked.

I smiled. "Do you think there's a god?"

"No," she said and she turned loose my arm. "Not here."

But she was wrong. I knew it.

The others were ready to leave and I let them lead me away.

The feeling, my conversion, whatever, proved to be short lived. I straightened up as we traveled further and further from holy ground. The strangers on the sidewalk began to grow dimmer, becoming the faceless people I had always known. No pretty auras now. If indeed I had felt anything, it was gone and I was left with an empty ache like the first stages of tooth decay.
Chapter 10: The Seed

I am not a kook.

All of this, all of this today, is a sham. A mistake. I can say that this has all been a big fat mistake. The simple irony is that everybody who is trapped here at Sweet Heaven is trapped because Jelly stole a credit card and because I liberated a dog whose drunken owner cracked her kneecap when she went crashing to the concrete.

No. My belief was never a part of this.

Yes. Sometimes I hear voices, but I tell them—I tell the Sheep—that these may be my own imaginary voices, no different than if they looked at a house cat and said, "he's thinking about how much he loves you." Pure fiction. Fantasy.

My faith is true, but no one can share it.

That day at the Temple, everybody felt something. But it was only me who found God in the architecture of a woman. I wouldn't presume to teach anyone to look for God in the same places I find Him. If I have tried to teach them, the Sheep, anything, it is that God is either within us or not. A simple message. Perhaps not even an important one. But I failed. My technique was shoddy.

And now, with the full force of a zealous government, its huge inferiority complex pressed against the gates, I have led us to the brink of disaster. Maybe. I think that this plan, Moroni's idea, will pull us through.

I heft Moroni's head under my arm and place him gently upon the altar. Together we will work this out. Me and Moroni. We'll do it for the Sheep because they are innocent. And then that will be it. No more Moroni. I'll answer to no more muses. I'll keep my insight to myself and set about a life, in Canada or Alaska maybe, where I can dig ditches in the summer and shovel snow in the winter and people will leave me alone. I'll go where I can sit down in a bar, say something crazy, and people will only nod knowingly at the plump bartender with the hard face and merry eyes right before she cuts me off.
All this said, I still have to admit that when I look into the dull luster of Moroni's eyes, the voice does seem to come from him. I've never been the idea guy after all, and these are definitely ideas I hear.

Perhaps the voices came because I met Moroni in the wake of that feeling by the Temple, that first personal moment of rapture. Maybe Moroni was speaking to me even then.

Tonight the twins are stable. But there is little more we can do for them than keep our fingers crossed. Pray, too, I suppose.

The Sheep sprawl out before me in the shrine, burrowed into ratty furniture, leaning on each other. The scent of our very own, homegrown smoke sharpens the air. I don't actually know everybody here, but they all know me. We are passing around bottles and beers.

Right now though, we all need to put our heads together—not just depend on our one golden head. We can't stay here and we can't surrender. Surrender means defeat in more ways than just one. If it was just me, it might be different. But there are other things to consider, other people to consider.

Andre comes back into the room and whispers to Lacey. He is agitated.

When I catch his eye, he nods affirmatively.

Lacey nods too.

The Sheep sense that something is up and a hush settles over the room.

"We've been in worse situations than this," I say.

"Bullshit," someone says.

"Well, I have if you haven't."

I want to assure them. I want to let them know that things will be alright. But there is no way I can do that.

I look to Jelly for support, but right now, he's reveling in the thrill of his perfect story. Oh and you can bet he loves it too. Just look at him. The rockets' red glare all but bursting through our shrine and he's sitting on the stairs, swinging his legs through the banister. He's watching, grinning, cheering, he's scribbling down all the truth—at least
the “truth best told.” He practically glows I think. Glows. This is his glory, this is his manic moment of glory.

I pat Moroni on the side of the head. He doesn’t say anything. For just a moment, I am overwhelmed by the immensity of all this. The high stakes. The foul play. But what I told the Sheep is true. I have been in worse situations than this.
Andre and Chito were agitated. I paid them little heed, assuming that Chito was hung over and Andre, well, he was just a cat of a different color. Still, Chito's simpering and Andre's flinching at every passing car was annoying. Perhaps the cars had stopped making music for them too.

I was about to ask Chito what was wrong when Lacey, without breaking stride or cracking the ice that gripped her face, kicked him, kicked Chito right in the belly.

SMACK

He tumbled against a shiny Salt Lake wall, landed unfazed, bounced back up, and continued his whining several steps behind her.

I quelled a flash of heated indignation. But the little, black ball of hair had done himself proud. His stunt dog training was right there, a second nature, and he took the unprovoked attack with all the patience of a professional Tibetan Monk and, for all I knew, with all the wisdom too.

We stopped at a coffee stand. Andre and Lacey bought the group drinks and we basked in stiff-white, plastic chairs dosing ourselves with caffeine.

Lacey gasped.

She grabbed a newspaper from a startled, elderly malingerer and read the cover story.

The Stabber had struck again.

I was hurt, rejected, and somewhat angry over her assault against my stolen dog, but my heart ached to see such a gentle creature—she had to be gentle deep down—in pain.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

Her eyes were moist. She ignored me and read the story in silence. She finished the article and handed it back to the old man at the next table.

"The Stabber. He got a child this time," she said. "A little girl."
"What makes you think the Stabber is a 'he'?' asked Jelly, not easily moved by the deaths of strangers.

Yeah, I asked the lizard. Why not a woman?

Lacey turned to Sara to respond. "Only a man would cause so much pain," she said.

Sara shifted uncomfortably. For once, Jelly had nothing to say. Or, if he did, he kept it to himself.

But, Chito didn't stay quiet. He started yapping like a string of Black Cat firecrackers in a garbage can.

Andre jumped clean out of his chair and knocked over a tray of condiments next to the coffee stand. Lacey rifled a series of poorly aimed shots at Chito and clobbered the shins of the old gentlemen across from her.

"What the Hell is wrong with you!" he roared.

I thought I might tell the old man about The Stabber and how Lacey had a thing for Don Juan Jelly and how she was really only trying to kick our stolen, alcoholic terrier, but the old man's question turned out to be rhetorical. His kind old face turned as red as a watermelon core and he let fly a string of invectives that would frighten an army sergeant.

Lacey retaliated with her own equally impressive arsenal of expletives. Chito continued to bark like a preacher at a pro-choice rally. Sara, suffering the indignity of residual waitress programming, scrambled to clean the mess Andre had made. Andre turned in jerky little circles, his eyes searching for an invisible assailant.

But Jelly remained calm. He merely leaned back in his chair and watched the heavens. When I looked up to follow his gaze, God tossed a blanket over the sky.

It was as if the sun had died.

A summer storm had fought its way inland from the coast and galloped into battle against the desert air.

Cold Heaven and Hot Earth showed up for the fight.
The cottony, clouds got pissed off, twisted themselves into great thundering tantrums, and began beating the earth with flashing fists. The rain came on hard and fast like a drive-by shooting. Before we could sprint back to the van, the rain bent sideways and the wind sprayed heavy bursts of gunfire. We were hit so hard that our soaked skin reddened in pelleted dots beneath our thin summer clothing.

The five us slammed ourselves inside the van. Always the reporter, Jelly had his camera cocked and ready, his pen poised, pad opened.

"Holy shit!" yelled Jelly.
"There's nothing holy about this," I said.

Chito whimpered at my feet. I fended off Lacey's frantic blows for him. She was wild as the wind that rocked the van.

Fear. That's what I remember. Stiff, wet fear. Andre whimpered in the back. His fear terrified me. Jelly snapped photos in the moments between blinding sheets of rain. Umbrellas, newspaper funneling, birds flying backwards. The air was gray and hard.

Then, the rain shuddered to a stop.

A white bird thumped against the window, beating its wings before lolling off the hood onto concrete.

We were on the leeward side of the Temple beneath a calm sky. Jelly's hat was gone. His weird bald spot made him a stranger to me. Lacey leaned over my seat, her breath twisted warm and fast into my ear.

"There," she pointed, her arm brushing my shoulder. "There's Lance."
"Let's get out of here," said Sara.

I rolled down the window, opened the door, stepped out. I felt the sickening squish of the white bird, a pigeon I guess. I picked it up and felt its fragile broken bones shift with my fingers.

All traffic had stopped for the storm. I saw Lance again. Good old Lance. The way he had once been in his glory, standing fearless in the middle of traffic.
He was facing the other direction. I hollered but my voice dropped to my feet in the dead air. I yelled again and this time Lance turned around.

Somebody screamed in the van. A woman. A man. I don't know, but I wheeled around thinking it might be Chito.

Every face froze and paled to ash white, even the Dodge's windshield stared fretfully. Lance's hollow footfalls slogging through the dead, street air were devoured by the deep winding growl of nature's perfect weapon against shining cities and trailer parks. On the other side of the Temple, a funnel carved a black wedge from the ground upwards into the clouds.

This was it.

Our own personal Armageddon whorled toward us. It wasn't what I expected. There were no horses and swords, no sinners and believers. There was only the end gobbling up everyone, no matter who deserved what.

Trees as old as religion flew like blades of grass. Blades of grass flew like missiles. The twister located us, bent forward to tell us its wrath. I dove into the van. One hundred feet away, the boiling cloud yanked cars and fire hydrants from the sidewalk.

The last I saw of Lance was when he stopped, inexplicably, to look the monster in the eye. One of his shoes, a Nike Walker, rocketed towards us, tearing off the side-view mirror as it passed.

Newspapers screamed over the van.

The tornado grumbled nearer, growling, spitting, enjoying its moment. The wrought iron fence twenty feet away peeled from the ground. The thing's rage roared and drowned out our pleas to fox-hole gods. An ice cream truck landed to my right, upside down, looted of its wares. A bicycle skidded by like a sand crab.

The miracle of the window, the first miracle that Jelly ever recorded, was in progress.

A park bench hit the windshield and glanced off.

A parking meter followed, leaving the windshield cracked but intact.
Still, we screamed into the face of the devil as he swallowed us whole.
Chapter 12: The Beetles

Jelly’s bible is full of contradictions, oxymorons, and well, just plain morons. But, Jelly makes no bones about it. Through paradox and puzzlement, his bible finds legitimacy—if it sounds paradoxical, it is probably true—you know, that kind of Tao Te Ching Zing crap. He’s let me thumb through it, but I have mostly just looked at the pictures.

The photos are great.

That first picture shows a God-hand hurling a loaded parking meter. The hand is as grainy as a black and white photo of a lake monster and in the background, through the spider webbed windshield, is the head of Moroni, clear as a trumpet at dawn, with eyes, resolute, powerful, and coming right for us. You have to squint a little to see it. But it’s Moroni, no question about it.

Jelly writes that we all felt safe and prepared for the angel’s appearance.

He's full of shit.

Right up to the last second when the twister bounced over us, yeah, just up and bounced, and deposited Moroni’s head through the moon roof as it went, I was sure I was going to die. The only thing spiritual about the experience was that the indisputable knowledge of whether or not there is life after death was at close hand.

Jelly won’t let anyone copy the bible. I’m sure he’s thinking best-seller and boning up on movie-of-the-week screenwriting. I caught him reading Good Script, Bad Script just weeks ago. Of course, he’s still working on the first draft.

When I look over at him, he's grinning ear to ear, scribbling away like a mad child with a handful of crayons in a mansion of bare, white walls.

There’s more commotion outside. Who knows what the feds are up to.

I quell the overwhelming urge to feel nostalgic about the days when we roamed free in the clean, Idaho air. It was the beauty of this land with its crashing rivers and climbing mountains that lured us to its arms. But, man, they’ll find all of the good places before long. That’s the way the flow charts read.
It all started with the pioneers pushing into places where the natives had already
discovered paradise. The pioneers, diggers and hunters mostly, were displaced by cattle
barons and railroad magnates. With them came towns, then cities, then the incipient
sprawl of subdivisions. And these subdivisions thrived with their crony construct, the
Law, which has been usurping power since the beginning.

I guess we’re the final wave. We’re really our own destroyers, unwitting scouts.
We point out the places where the Law’s presence is not firmly established, places where
freedom is a realistic respite. But we don’t want anything more than the ones who came
before us. We want what the Pilgrims wanted. We want what the guys who cast
Moroni’s head in bronze wanted. We want to disagree and to be left alone.

At the gates, a handful of government clones, dressed in bright yellow and green
polyester, garble at us through a state-of-the-art, shotgun-red bullhorn that probably cost
them a couple grand. Maybe they're inviting us to play golf.

“Cheezup Kstt tukkka ksswtt!”

“Are you talking through your fly?” I return.

Ha. That surprised them. I have my own bullhorn. Mine’s baby blue and cost a
cool $15 at Walmart. Screw the small businessman; he’s probably part of the problem
anyway. Through binoculars—also courtesy of Mr. Mart—I see the head replicant. He
is red-faced. His sunglasses give him shiny, beetle eyes.

“We want to speak to Mr. Matthew Shank.”

“Welcome to earth, Beetle!”

“This is the Federal Bureau of Investigation. You are in violation of federal law.
Lay down your weapons.” As an afterthought, Beetle adds, “No one will be harmed.”

“I’ll be right out, Beetle. Just let me get my clubs.”

My voice bounces off windows, orange shag carpet on the stairs, blue shag in the
living room shrine, paintings of Christ and deposed dictators, chestnut banisters, Bibles,
and one sullen idol. The twins moan. Jeremy can’t stop dying, so neither can Joshua. I
feel responsible.

I am responsible.
I could use Lance’s advice right now. He’s good at this political crap, but in his current state his utility is questionable. It’s an effort just to remember what use he is. Frankly, I could gather the flock myself—I mean, I’ve got this big blue bullhorn. But then, if I had to go looking for anyone, it could be a problem. There must be pictures of me transmitted via spy cam to video range finders strapped to the faces of a few dozen patriots in need of promotion. Jelly’s no help. He’s my friend, but he seems so mercenary these days, always has been I guess. Andre won’t be back for a while. And Chito, my curly friend, is only interested in chasing down someone to satisfy his cute, little Coors habit. That leaves Lacey. I need Lacey.

Bach continues his assault.

But, I’m beginning to understand the music. It’s a queer, courtesan love call. You listen to it for a couple days straight and you’ll see what I mean. It just blasts. It hurts. It slows you down the same way a forty-pound bustle or a rib-sucking, whalebone corset does, then it jerks you around the ballroom.

Whiplash.

Bach’s music is just like love. Whiplash love. It’s a crazy call of violins and clarinets to impassion stalkers and tramps. Real love. Music that beds Capulets and Montegues, Hatfields and McCoys. Music that makes old men chase heart pills with Viagra and old women hand them the glass of water to wash them down with.

I wonder what they hear on the outside. Do they pipe easy-listening onto the camo guys’ headsets to keep them from going insane with their victims? No. It wouldn’t be easy-listening. It would be the theme to Rocky or Cops or The Jerry Springer Show. Bach would make them too crazy.

Whiplash. First movement, second movement, whiplash.

Just like love.

At the moment, there’s really not much we can do. Smokey Joe is on the front porch monitoring the TV news. We considered enlisting the media’s support, but other than occasional blurbs on the local station 80 miles away in Lewiston, we aren’t causing much of a stir. The public radio is covering us, but the average citizen will not tune in
disc jockeys with Masters degrees in Comparative Lit or Cross-Cultural Hydrometeorology.

Me either, I admit it. I’d rather watch a thesaurus-thumping, drama dropout drone on about spanking new spring fashions than catch actual hard news blurbed beside interviews with dead poets and interludes of Bengali wind chimes.

That’s neither here nor there. Nope. The media isn’t helping. I suppose that’s how the government does it. Just keep doing the same thing over and over again until nobody notices, like a barber who cuts you shorter and shorter until you don’t remember ever having hair.

No news isn’t good news—it’s mind-control.

Another thing to worry about is how well the feds have this place mapped out. This 20 acres of buildings and fields was vacant for awhile until we came along and got it for a song. Sweet Heaven Aryan Ranch.

The Aryan folks got booted out in ’96 after their leader, Buck Wright, blew their cash running for President. Bankruptcy sent those racist rascals scurrying off somewhere else to hole up for the millennium.

We kept the signs even, just painted over the “Aryan.”

Lacey’s feet fall ghostly. I flinch when she touches my elbow. "Hi," she says. "What you mean by that?" Silence. "What you want?"

"I just said ‘hi’." I squint hard, nod my head, up, down, up, down. "Sure," I say. "Hi."

So I’m a little edgy. Who wouldn’t be?

“What do you want to do?” she asks.

The light bending through the room washes her out, but I see the same bright accusation in her eyes that I see in Moroni’s.

“We have a plan," I say.

“Lay down your arms and come out at once!” cranks the feds’ bullhorn.

“We like it here!” I blare back.

Garble Garble Garble.
Beetle tries to beat coherence into his bullhorn with an open palm, tries to speak again, fails. He points and yells.

His beetle clones scramble and a moment later, a camo guy melts out of a bare patch of silty-loam, hands him a new horn and disappears before my eyes.

Scary magic.

I'm surprised if these guys haven't already penetrated the perimeter—he, these boys are all about penetration; it is the government after all. If I let my mind go, I imagine them blending against the fence in wire mesh camo suits or I see them stationed in the bathroom in floral, duck patterns near the shower curtains. I wonder what keeps them at bay. They must know that we can't really stop an all-out invasion. We're just drunks and dreamers, sex pots and philosophers. We're not commandos. Well, most of us aren't.

"Are we speaking to Mr. Matthew Julius Shank?"

Jelly giggles. "Julius. Oh Julius. Are you here?"

"Kiss my ass," I bellow through the horn at Jelly. For symmetry, I send the same message to the golfers at the gate. This is the first time Jelly has acknowledged me on a familiar level for a couple days now. Briefly, I am hopeful that he has come back to me, but he returns to his chronicling.

Man, he looks like a nut. Hasn't worn a hat since it got yanked off his head during "the miracle of the windshield." With his long legs swinging from the banister, he looks as affable as a Franciscan monk high on crack.

"The man you shot is in here," I say to the feds. "Send a doctor and a keg of Coors."

Can't hurt to ask.

"Send your men out and they will receive proper medical treatment."

"Go away!"

Beetle confers with the rest of his collective.

"Tell Clarissa Jacobs that Molly wants her mother."

A soft thud.
I turn to see white Lacey, unconscious, half-submerged in the blue shag carpet. Jelly watches her, pen poised and passionless as a psychologist at a grief therapy study.
Chapter 13: Scapegoat Wilderness

Lacey is a tough woman. I’ve seen her take a lot. Even with that business with the Stabber in Salt Lake, I never thought she was scared, only sad. When the tornado bounced over our van, she barely flinched. The moon roof shattered. Glass cut her forehead and arms. Blood stained her tight, cotton t-shirt and cutoffs, but she only lifted Moroni’s head, a good sixty pounds of gold-plated bronze, and handed him to me.

“What the fuck is this?”

That was the first time I touched Moroni. It was right after I saw my life flash before my eyes. It really does happen when you face death and it happened to me in Salt Lake when that twister found us, murder in its big black eye. My life blipped onto a monochrome monitor and went dark. I was disappointed to say the least. My chance to review things revealed nothing to review.


It would have been better to review overhead spy cam footage from the early eighties which might show me romping around in Libby, Montana. You know, the CIA has baby pictures of everybody nowadays. They keep copies buried beneath a top-secret, spy building, in Langley, Virginia. They’ve probably recorded the first time Mike Tyson bit a playmate’s ear, predicted when it would happen again, and put money on the fight.

For me, the recordings would only show a rundown house and a father who kept weird hours. There might be glimpses of me looking forlornly at the mountains. They probably guessed—teams of under-appreciated analysts working round the clock—what I was wishing by all the time I wouldn’t spend outdoors. They would guess that I wanted out.

This is the shit, by the way, that isn’t in Jelly’s bible. The thing is all about me and Moroni, but you won’t find me in it. I’m a flat character. When you read it, you’ll see. I don’t change a lick.

After the windshield miracle and Lacey passing me Moroni’s bloody head, I just started up the Dodge to see if it still worked. Nobody was seriously hurt. But Lance was
gone. I saw him get sucked into it, the big IT, the same way life had sucked up so many of my old friends.

It was all pointless.

I kept wondering what I could have done. It was his decision though. Stand in the middle of traffic and the next thing you know you’re another road kill armadillo, gutted, skinned and fed to the inmates of the nearest prison, a subtle reminder to the captives that the price of free speech is death.

Poor Lance.

Lance wasn’t dead though. He was naked, alive, and scared shitless in a tree about thirty feet up.

Jelly’s waitress teetered like a cowbird on Paraquot.

Soon the whole van, in a synchronized exhalation affirmed our continued existence on this nonsensical rock of a planet by laughing. We laughed harder when Lance began mewling for help. No words, just pathetic mewls of a kitty caught far too high in a tree.

Firemen never came.

We tried to coax Lance from the oak. He mewed. We giggled. Andre scaled the trunk like a Salvadoran Guerilla, reached as far onto the shaky limb as he dared. Lance whimpered and clung tight.

Lacey picked up a stone.

"Do it," said Jelly.

"Do it," said Sara.

I didn't say anything at all. I covered my teary eyes, gasping from laughter, while Chito bounced around my feet with Scooby-Doo glee.

Lacey's stone fell short. Jelly’s stone struck his foot.

"No one can help you!” yelled Jelly. “Get your whining ass down!”

His ribcage plunked like a hollow cabbage when my stone struck.

Lance yiped.

Chito yiped.
Sara gathered stones.

Me, Lacey and Jelly hucked them while Andre retreated down the oak trunk and watched—that fucker always watches—from the shelter of an altar or a tourist placard that praised some dead saint or sinner.

I don't trust women.

I don't mean to leave you hanging, bounce to a new topic, but it's true. Trite but true. I don't trust women because they're not like me; they’re not like men.

Lacey's rock brought Lance down. She brought him down like Monica had already done. Only Monica’s rock was a horse-drugging, Kentucky rich boy.

Bam!

A rock to the skull, freefall for a moment, marvel at the way the ground gets bigger and closer and fast as fate, and bounce. Bounce hard once. Lay and moan.

Prepare for the emergency room, or just wait and see what's on the other side. Chito licked Lance's bubbling lips where he lay in a heap, defeated by women.

Feminine treachery is one of the memories that I'd been cheated of during the review of my life. The root of my disease. Stabbers? Shit, one man wielding a knife couldn't kill any more people than one woman shaking an ass.

Surprised? Think I’m sexist? I don't care. One of the memories that didn't flash before my eyes was of me and Little Eddie Cowley in Lincoln, Montana.

From smalltown Libby to tinytown Lincoln, every summer, mom would take me and leave dad moping with dull chainsaw blades in his filthy tool shop while we visited relatives.

It was great at first. These summer retreats sent me sliding down the soiled slopes of the Scapegoat Wilderness with my cousin, Little Eddie, master of the woods. He crawled us into places that even God didn't know existed. We found lairs of deceased predators, skulls of extinct bison, and beds of moss where gnomes and faeries reigned.

Me and Eddie. Man, we made things happen. Howling in the woods made us animals, fierce and confident as wolves. The big world got small enough for me to eat and the fear, the constant questioning of what was on the other side of the dark
mountains, dissipated into little more than a frothy film that clung to my small-town blues like the sweat over my father's lip as he sharpened saws. These trips were my retreats. The rest of the year I was a gawky, slightly long-faced, quiet boy who didn't like to fight. Maybe it was the same for Little Eddie too. Because, along the way something—solitude, hormones, deformity—had caused him to turn.

My fourth summer there, I was eleven years old and excited about the visit. I had a rifle. A logger had swapped it with Dad for some work he'd done on the guy's saw. It was a .22 caliber lever action and I was scared of it. I didn't like killing things and I was still uncomfortable in the outdoors. But I loved that rifle.

"You got yourself a smokepole," croaked Little Eddie when I stepped from our family's station wagon toting my gun. Little Eddie was thirteen and stocky as an mature gibbon. I noticed right away that in the year since I'd seen him, he had become a man, something I wouldn't experience for a couple years. He ignored my rifle when I held it out for him to inspect.

"Be careful with that thing," said my mom. "Hello, Little Eddie."
Little Eddie walked up to my mother, buried his pimply little face in her breasts, embraced her. "Wuwo Annn Honnny," he blubbered into her chest.

After a long uncomfortable moment, she successfully peeled him off.
"I'm glad you're here, Aunt Connie," he said.
"How's your mother?" mom asked.
"She's inside the house," he said.
"Hey, Little Eddie."
He turned on me, impatient, disgusted.
"It's Ed."
"What?"
"My name is Ed."
I'd always been jealous that Little Eddie had a title like "Eddie the Kid" or "Wild Eddie" or "Buffalo Eddie." And "Ed" didn't fit, just like the deep croak in his voice didn't fit. In retrospect, Eddie should have dropped both his names. Maybe he would
have if he’d have known that someday he’d be working on an Australian sheep station where everyone called him Dirty Ed and made him stay with the sheep.

Eddie was little.

He was two years older than me and two inches shorter. Shrill, preadolescent laughter escaped me when he told me to call him Ed.

He slugged me in the shoulder, hard.

"Boys," mother said. "Go play somewhere else."

"OK," I said.

But, Ed surprised us by waiting for mom to bend and reach into the trunk for our luggage. When she backed up, she bumped into him, startled. Ed grabbed the suitcases from her, grinning.

"I’ll take these inside for you, Aunt Connie."

"Thank you, Eddie," she said. "You’re becoming quite a gentleman."

Ed was small and he was also the hairiest little boy I’d ever seen. He’d started growing body hair in the fifth grade. Now, entering the eighth grade, he had veined muscles, a deep voice, coarse black hair everywhere, and was as short as a dwarf. He had also developed a way of looking at my mother that made me queasy.

We didn’t get along well that summer. His room smelled like a goat’s pen because I think he pissed in the corners. I had to share his bed.

And he masturbated.

He masturbated, everywhere, constantly. I caught him in his room. I caught him in the garage doing it while he was holding a cat. He did it everywhere—the forest, the bathroom and even right outside the guestroom window where my mother was dressing.

Little Ed had been a great companion. Just-Plain-Ed was an edgy, stunted pervert.

One afternoon, I was kicking alone in the barnyard where they kept sheep and chickens. When Ed opened the gate, the sheep huddled into a corner and the chickens broke into wild squawking flight. He approached me.

"Let’s go shooting," he said.
We took my rifle and set out to explore the Scapegoat Forest. Ed knew the proper names of every tree: red fir, tamarack, ponderosa, birch, spruce, cedar. He also knew the berries you could eat: thimble berries, sarvis berries, alder berries and huckleberries. More importantly, he knew the ones you couldn’t eat like snowberries or baneberries and he’d hum little folk rhymes:

*Leaves of three, let them be.*

*Berries white, run in fright.*

It was just like old times, scampering along deer trails, ducking beneath ocean spray bushes and skipping over cool springs.

At a clearing, we spotted a whitetail doe and her fawn. Ed sighted down the barrel of my rifle and whispered, “Bang. Got ‘em both. One shot.”

I knew the rifle was too small for deer hunting but I didn’t doubt that Ed could have gotten them both.

We skirted the meadow. The doe flicked her silky ears toward us and slinked away with her fawn. Ed pointed to a squirrel that chattered in a tree.

“No,” I said. “I don’t shoot animals.”

“We can skin it and eat it right here,” said Ed.

“I don’t want to.”

“Then why do you have a gun?”

“Dad gave it to me.”

The squirrel skittered out of sight.

Ed spat, “Didn’t know you were such a pussy.”

I let the comment slide. There was nothing else I could do. His little gorilla muscles could have tied me in a bow. We walked several miles taking random target shots at branches and rocks as we went. We finally crested a small hill overlooking a tiny, plywood shack that was probably 16’ x 16’.

“Come on,” he said.

As we neared the side of the shack, a thin, bearded, wild man threw open the front door and stood there looking warily around. He was dressed only in dirty underwear.
After studying the woods in every direction, he stepped out to a wooden bench with a small fire near it and a kettle steaming over it. He took the kettle and poured it into a tub on the bench.

“Must have company,” Ed grinned. “He only bathes when he’s got chicks over.”

From our hiding spot on the hillside, we watched the man take off his dirty underwear and drop them in the tub. He was as thin as a vegan. His wild hair and spry movements gave him the character of an animated Halloween decoration. He washed his body with a rag and forced a comb through the tangle of white-gray hair on his head and his face. After he finished, he wrung out his underwear and slipped them up over his skinny, white buttocks letting out a sharp yipe of satisfaction as they settled into place.

“Who is he?” I whispered.

“A nut,” said Ed. “Doesn’t talk to anyone, but he’s got women here all the time.”

I couldn’t imagine how Ed knew this. I also wondered how this guy met women if he didn’t talk to anyone. The man was flexing his skinny arms like a bodybuilder and whistling Yankee Doodle.

We were about to leave when the sound of an engine labored down the rutted dirt drive. The man jumped back into his shack and quickly reemerged pulling up his pants and carrying his shirt and boots. He hid in the bushes twenty feet from his door. We heard the engine noise cut and a woman dressed in blue jeans and a red blouse walked into view. I saw Ed’s hand go to his crotch.

She knocked on the door.

“Teddy?”

She looked off to where the man was hiding.

“Teddy Bear!”

When she looked in our direction, my guts twisted. “Teddy Bear!”

The woman at the shack in the Scapegoat Wilderness yelling for some wild man named Teddy Bear was my mother.
Chapter 14: Brooks Brothers

I’m not a misogynist. Women are fine. I don’t hate women; I just don’t trust them. They seem capable of so much more than they ever let on. If more women were braggarts and blusterers, I’m sure I wouldn’t feel this way. But when Lacey’s rock brought down Lance, she smiled. It was the same smile I imagined Monica must have had when she instructed me to pick up Lance in Salt Lake. It was the same smile my mother must have worn when Dad asked her how she liked her vacation. I don’t trust that smile and I really don’t know what it means.

Lacey propped Lance’s head on her lap while Andre felt his bones and, after plucking open his eyes with two callused thumbs, proclaimed, “Nothing’s wrong with you, boy.”

“Suck it up, man,” said Jelly. “Stand tall.”

Lacey had brought Lance down with a rock, but now she comforted him, holding his bubbly lips against her stomach. To look at her, you’d never guess she’d attacked Chito moments before the storm. To look at her, you’d never guess what was inside.

Sirens blared.

Office workers and tourists exhumed themselves from Cold War fallout shelters. The city stirred in the beginnings of a great aftermath. Jelly was already taking notes and snapping photos of Lance and the Temple that bore a beheaded angel.

We carried Lance to the backseat of the van and set him next to the head of Moroni. Andre climbed in beside him. The rest of us entered the van except Sara. She began to cry. Lacey stepped back out.

“What’s wrong?” Lacey put an arm around her neck.

“People died here,” Sara said, throwing her arms wide at the temple and the city.

“People must have died here.”

“I know,” Lacey hugged her. “I know.”

More compassion. I didn’t get it.
"You guys don’t care, do you?" Sara blubbered. "We were laughing and people died. It’s awful."

She shook loose of Lacey’s grasp, grabbed her bag, and we all watched her weave through the litter of downed limbs, fences and battered cars.

She turned back once, "AWFUL."

Jelly leaned out the passenger side window and got a good shot of her yelling at us. He also snapped a few parting shots of her winding slowly away like a refugee.

"Lot’s wife returns to the city of salt,” he mumbled.

"What?" I asked.

"Cover of Time, Biblical shit. The Great City Falls."

"Everything falls,” I said. “It doesn’t mean anything."

"Don’t tell me you’re not thinking it too,” he said. "Twister Tests Temple. Great Angel Falls from Grace . . ."

I was trying to remember if Jelly had always spoken in fragments or if this was a new phenomenon.

“A temple. A temple."

“Shut up, Jelly,” I said.

“Let’s get out of here,” Lacey said.

I navigated slowly forward.

“A beheaded Angel."

“Shut up, Jelly."

I wasn’t paying close enough attention. The van rolled up a dismembered car hood which acted as a ramp and jumped us over a downed pine tree. We were stuck. High centered.

I checked the rearview mirror. Lacey was tending to Lance. "For God sakes," I said. "Maybe you should put some clothes on him."

The sun came out.

The van labored like an overturned tortoise.
The mate of the forgotten dead pigeon beneath my seat settled onto a parking meter, cooing coldly, her pink, beady eyes fixed on me.

Andre jumped from the van.

Chito tumbled down at his heels.

“Well?” I asked.

More pigeons settled on parking meters and sidewalks. They walked in slow, dizzy circles pecking at anything the storm had stirred up.

Jelly joined Andre. The two men stood, each scratching his bald spot.

Six men appeared outside the temple. They were clean-cut and dressed alike in dapper, unseasonable tweed jackets. Like the pigeons, they milled around collecting tornado flotsam and jetsam. Seagulls swung overhead, circling the earthbound people and pigeons. I saw a huge gull as white as the Utah legislature slide low over the temple lawn and perch on a small black box that protruded from one of the building’s columns.

“Jelly. Andre.” I pointed to the bird.

Jelly responded by pointing across the street. The gulls were everywhere, perched on surveillance cameras watching us.

“It’s worse than Vegas,” he said.

“I don’t like this,” said Andre.

Andre didn’t seem to like anything, but the gulls and the cameras were disconcerting.

The desert sun resumed and burned rainwater in swirling curtains of vapor from the pavement. Andre and Jelly rocked on the back bumper. I gunned the engine. Lance moaned in pain. Lacey moaned with pleasure. I shot a glance at the rearview mirror. She sat as passively as a Buddhist with my recumbent, nude friend.

The men who had been wandering aimlessly over the steaming lawn converged on the van like a squad of Brooks Brothers models. They were pretty men with clear complexions and clean, healthy attitudes. You could tell just by looking at them.

My tires pumped futile smoke off the pavement.
One of the Brooks Brothers sparked a fluoride smile, leaned into the open passenger window. He saw naked Lance and bloody armed Lacey.

"Is anyone injured?" he asked cheerfully.

I let my foot off the accelerator. For no reason other than an apparent distaste for high fashion, Andre growled at the men, "Go away."

"Do you need some help?"

"No," barked Andre.

"Yes," I said.

Clenched fist, five fingers extended, then a lasso motion with his index finger.

Three of the man’s companions responded to his signal by lifting the back of the van while the other two set the car hood under the rear tire so that it might again function as a ramp. Lacey and Lance moaned again, pleasure and pain respectively, as we bounced easily over the downed tree.

Lacey smiled as innocent as a lotus blossom.

A flurry of wings flapping past my cracked windshield tore my attention from Lacey’s inexplicable ecstatic outburst. Chito was in a frenzy chasing the dizzy pigeons. From the scattering midst of gray and white birds a single raven, iridescent under the glittering sun, rose over the vaporous lawn, winged upward, over trees that still stood, past the giant, voyeuristic gulls, up, up, until it found its perch upon the desecrated shoulders of the statue atop the temple.

We gaped.

Jelly and Andre stood side by side with the Brooks Brothers Samaritans. I peered through my damaged window. Lacey and Lance gazed like star-struck lovers through the shattered moon-roof.

The raven settled himself as a black head to replace the golden one that rested facedown beneath the bench seat hidden behind Lacey’s long, white, silky legs. His heavy beak, even from this distance, we could see was slightly parted as if ready to kiss the mouthpiece of the angel’s horn, a horn that had always touched golden lips.

"The angel," one of the men said.
“Is it?”
“No. Yes. It is.”
The man by my windshield held his wristwatch as though he were reading it with his lips.

“Park Squad to base,” he said. “Come in base. Over.”
“The angel, Moroni. The head of Moroni is missing. Over.”
Static. “Come again Park Squad.”

The man cast me a dangerous look, signaled the others and spoke into his wristwatch while, like a crack squad of rangers, the pretty men in the dapper, tweed jackets split into a search-and-recover formation of two man groups and humped out over the lawn, down the street, and into the small grove of park trees.

“Let’s get,” said Andre.

Jelly grabbed Chito, jumped into the front seat and snapped pictures of the Temple as I plowed ahead. I then found a side street and worked my way out of the path of the tornado’s destruction. Lacey sighed. Lance’s face still rested in her lap while she twisted around to watch the bird-headed statue grow smaller in the distance.

“He’s so beautiful,” she said.

The length of her thigh, the twist of hip and torso, her long white hair, nearly caused me to run down a pedestrian running toward the great aftermath. I slammed the brakes. In the rearview, I couldn’t help but notice that Lance had an erection. I stepped on the gas, focused on the clear residential street ahead, and said, “Put some clothes on him.”
Chapter 15: Moroni Speaks

We drove east for a couple hours. After about a hundred miles, I spotted a small lake in the distance. Water is water, salty or not. Lakes are lakes and this could be a great one. Preoccupied as I was with the morning’s events, I could only guess we were somewhere in Wyoming or Colorado. All of us were a bit pensive. Does it mean anything when a tornado bounces over your head? Maybe. I drove to the lake and we got out to stretch our legs.

“Here it is,” I said waving my arms in a grand showman’s arc. “Behold the Great Salt Lake.”

“You can see the other side,” said Lacey doubtfully.

“Publicity,” said Jelly. “The city uses the same guys the government does.”

“Why do you even talk?” asked Lacey.

“Really,” said Jelly. “Ask Lance.”

Lance’s battered body was in the van as it had been since we left the city. Infantile, peaceful almost, he was swaddled in a small pink towel that Lacey had found for modesty’s sake.

“Ask him when he wakes up,” Jelly pushed. “Utah P.R. is top notch. People used to cheer, I mean jump off their horses, jump out their cars and CHEER, every time the ground shook and the sky rained radiation because the government convinced them it was a great thing. It’s the same thing with the lake.” He winked. “The lake may have been something 150 years ago, but now it’s just this little puddle.” He gestured sadly toward the lake. “Nobody wants to visit a puddle though just like nobody wants to think nuclear inoculation against the Red Horde might be what’s making their hair come out in fistfuls.”

A herd of Black Angus had waded into the small lake.

“Can cows drink salt water?” Lacey asked.

“Sure,” I said. “They need the iodine.”
We camped by the shore of what I had come to think of as Little Salt Lake. We passed the afternoon drinking beer and tequila and listening to Lance’s moans. He slept. He slept as though dead.

Jelly took the head of Moroni from beneath the bench-seat and set it on the ground. “Here’s to making it out alive,” he said.

All of us, even Andre, drank.

“Here’s to the angel’s head,” he said.

We drank again.

Little Salt Lake lured us to stay with its calm, so we decided to leave in the morning. After the city, all of the cities, this place felt like peace.

When night came, it fell over us like hot oil from the parapets of a castle under siege. We unfurled bedrolls among sandy, buffalo grass tussocks where we waited for sleep to roll into our hearts and minds and wash us into the dream world like a welcomed flash back.

I twisted atop my bedroll.

The high desert heat pressed upon me, heavy, insoluble. My mind ground against reality. Beer and tequila mingled warm in my stomach.

Coyotes howled in the hills. An eerie sound, not long and plaintive like the romantic wolf sounds in old westerns. These were the wails of wounded spirits, complaining souls. Shape-shifters prowling the edges of light.

The sounds from the others wrestling with their own uncomfortable dreams drove me from my bed. Out in the darkness, the coyotes kept up their ghoulish banter. Andre was out there too, away from the rest of us, either sleeping or creeping with the other night things.

The crescent moon cast enough clear light for me to walk to the lake’s edge. I stood there listening to random splashing of unknown creatures. I walked further and found the cows, restless as well. One of them grunted, its hulking black shape shuffling away.

My mind would not clear.
Crickets shaved away at the edges and I felt that something—an errant thought perhaps, amphibian and urgent—was trying to break out of its enclosure. I circled back to the van.

Moroni glistened in the weak light.

I reached for a Coors from the Styrofoam cooler, its squeaking lid drowning out for a moment the buzzing of the crickets and whirring of my mind. I cracked open the top. The breaking sound of released carbonation echoed in my head. I squatted in front of Moroni. Moonlight gave his gilded eyes depth. I fell. I fell into the great gold silence of his eyes.

_We’re in it_, came the voice, a smooth, gentle baritone. _We’re in it. And you can bet we’re all alone._

I drank my beer.

I listened for more words, but there was only a drafty silence like the sweeping of wind through vaulted rafters of an empty barn.
Chapter 16: Cat Dancer

Our van was a starship and the road an unrolling, ribbon of infinite black space. Oncoming cars were meteors hurtling toward us. Careful, attentive, and intent upon exploration, I dodged obstacles and took my time.

There were two days until Monica’s wedding and Boulder was only a couple hundred miles away. I didn’t tell anyone that Moroni was speaking. But I let him ride up front so he could catch some scenery. He repaid my thoughtfulness with the inane chatter of a hitchhiker who won’t sleep no matter how boring you try to be.

*Look at that,* he’d say. *Have you ever seen clouds like those?*  
I held my tongue.  
*Look at Lacey,* the angel would say. *Look at her.*  
Quiet and pale, she sat in the furthest seat back with her knees pulled to her chest. She gazed out the van window like someone who sees too much to understand any of it.  
*She knows things,* said Moroni. *Do you ever listen to her? Do you really look at her?* 

His voice, THE voice, wore a caustic edge.  
*Tsk. Tsk.*  
The condescending lump of brass clucked like a school marm pointing out an Aesop moral about a dog and its reflection and its lost bone. Shit. He was just a dog. He wanted another bone for Chrissake. That’s all, just a bone.  
I wouldn’t be provoked into a response.  
*Have you ever seen a sunset like that?*  
Oh sure, sure, I know what you’re thinking. Crazy, right? Talking heads and pensive hookers.

But I didn’t merely have a head full of crazy. It was much more than just crazy. This golden angel’s head, the amphibious scratchings in my skull, the alcohol, some drugs, the trip, the people, the twister, all of this added up to more than just crazy.
On some level, I felt it, the craziness. It was a kind of helplessness like the helplessness that you might feel when your lover leaves for someone else, that kind of controlled, expanding desperation that builds as all attempts to retrieve him or her fail, one after the other, a line of dominoes, a slow, brutal car wreck, an experiment gone awry. I felt that—that—that growing, creeping loss of my faculties.

On the other hand—and I doff my hat to bilateral symmetry for always giving us another hand—I had nothing. It had been a long time since I remembered ever having anything—anything good.

Yeah, I went to college, sharpened my intellect on dull professors grinding out the finer points of apathy. But what had I been doing with all those credits that didn’t even add up to a degree?


I had chased knowledge for its own sake. I rejected normalcy. I rejected popular morals. I rejected everything. But I had found nothing to replace it with and I had run out of things to reject.

The job I quit back in San Diego had been killing me, but that’s not why I left it. Forklift operator, $9.50 an hour—lift, slide, fork, lift, drive, drop, slide, drive. Propane exhaust pasted my lungs. Warehouse dust peppered my vision beneath dangling, dim bulbs. Routine promised perpetual reproduction of itself.

Monica’s wedding had merely been the excuse I needed to leave my life behind—a life that was my one final thing to reject. My drudgery. My hopelessness. Even tiptoeing the cusp of insanity seemed a better place to tread than empty beaches in paradise. I’m sure Jelly felt the same way. In a sense, we were on a search for purpose, any movement to frustrate stagnation. Any new direction we faced would have to be a new direction forward.
Lance had his own motives. Perhaps he thought he could stop the wedding, remind Monica of how much she used to love him. Or perhaps pride forced him to make an appearance, to put up a brave front. Lacey and Andre, well, what surprise is there in a hooker and her pimp changing towns?

I thought Lance must have sensed my one-sided conversations with the angel. Lance became obsessed with Moroni. He sat, stared, drinking anything alcoholic, popping anything with mind-altering properties.

“What’s he saying,” I asked.

Lance tore his gaze from Moroni. “He’s a hunk of metal.”

“Why are you staring at him?”

“I don’t know, brother,” he said. “It’s calming. It’s like meditation, you know? Like a meditation.”

“You don’t hear anything?”

“There’s blood in my veins. I hear that,” he said. “I hear my blood.” He nodded to himself. “Yes. Time is passing. I hear that too.”

“Dinersaur!” Lacey startled me.

“Oh yeah!” joined Jelly. “Dinersaur! Dinersaur! Dinersaur!”

He and Lacey pounded the seat and chanted.

Still on the western side of the Colorado Rockys, past deserted, dinosaur bone yards enroute to tourist ridden Steamboat Springs, they had spied a roadside diner: The Dinersaur. Andre, a man full of surprises, sweetly requested that we stop to eat.

“For the young ones,” he said.

Although suspicious of his new and pleasant demeanor, I stopped.

The Dinersaur smelled of clean, greasy food. Gleaming, red vinyl booths trimmed with chrome ringed the room. A fluffy high-school-age waitress squeegeed the spotless windows and smiled a bakery warm welcome. We took a table in the center of the room next to a gang of four old women who played gin rummy and gossiped.

“She got brain cancer,” said a woman who was dressed as a 1960’s socialite and wore a pink pillbox hat. “From her cellular phone.”
“That’s bull puckey,” said her companion who wore a baseball cap with a little white pompom ball sewed to the top. The message on the hat: *World’s Greatest Grandmother.*

“Cheerful bunch,” I mumbled.

A large screen television transmitted ESPN2 and a tedious, robotic voice at full volume. The voice dragged and tugged its words reporting the progress of a horse race:

*It’s Ali BABBA on the back stretch, nose and nose with CAT Dancer challenging on the in-SIDE, four lengths in front of Pilot ROCK battling it out with Sara’s REE-QUEST and coming into-the-far-turn it’s Ali BABBA...*

“Jenny’s boy lost a testicle,” added a pinched woman as she drew a card. “Radar gun did it.”

“Check it out,” said Jelly pointing to the screen.

The television flashed a large man in a blue blazer peering through binoculars. The color man squeezed in some biography:

*That’s Colonel Nussbom, owner of Cat Dancer. He fired Broken Nose Billy during the spring futurity...*

The race announcer drowned out the color commentator as he expounded upon Broken Nose Billy, *a jockey known for swinging a wide crop:*

*And in the final stretch, it’s Ali BABBA. Ali BABBA, Cat-Dancer-fading. Then YO-semite’s Blood and Sarah’s REE-quest. It’s Ali BABBA, ALI BABBA BY HALF A LENGTH...*

“Bull puckey,” said the World’s Greatest Grandmother. “Do you really believe that malarkey?”

The screen flashed back to Colonel Nussbom. Jelly slapped my arm, but I was already looking. Beside the Colonel stood Monica, the bride to be, out of focus, jumping, cheering, holding hands with a man who wasn’t in the shot. Monica. Bouncing like a volleyball player, right there on ESPN2, watching Cat Dancer take second.

I peered at Lance, he was reading a menu shaped like a tyrannosaurus rex and hadn’t noticed Monica’s image blip onto the screen.
“Cell phones,” said the old lady. “What will they think of next?”

The color man showed replays. Cat Dancer’s loss was an upset, but something looked bad, flagrantly bad. Broken Nose Billy swung a wide crop. Wide crop, hard whip. Slow motion showed the jockey with his face buried in Ali’s thick main. He whipped, front stroke, urging Ali Babba forward in front of Colonel Nussbom’s horse.

“I saw one of the big ones,” said the pinched woman.

Lacey pushed her chair closer to the women. She sat just off the shoulder of a card player in a floral housedress who had not spoken a word, but had been watching the others with the same intensity that Andre usually watched us.

The prom queen came to take our orders.

“Get the mammoth burger,” I advised Jelly. “It’s gotta be a lot fresher than the pterodactyl wings.”

“You better get that well-done too,” added Lance.

Jelly ignored our advice. Proximity to our nubile waitress absorbed his attention. “You look like an actress,” Jelly told her as she chewed the eraser on a pencil while she reviewed our orders.

I imagined him licking his finger and running it over his eyebrow.

“But I can’t remember who,” he said.

“Oh, I know,” she said happily. “I look like Drew Barrymore.” She then curtsied, tittered, and flitted off to tell the cook.

Jelly shrugged and turned back to study the television with me.

Slow motion showed the truth.

Broken Nose Billy swung his whip. Front stroke to Ali’s sleek neck. Smack.

Back stroke to Cat Dancer’s soft brown eyes.

“Crescent moon,” one of the ladies said.


Whip backward. Smack. Cat Dancer’s silky ears.

“A big what?” asked Lacey.
Whip backward. Smack. Cat Dancer’s tender muzzle.
Lance toyed with a packet of nondairy creamer.
“‘I saw a mushroom cloud through the crescent moon.’”
Cat Dancer ran with heart, big heart, but no animal could endure the punishment that Broken Nose Billy was dishing out. The announcer was incensed. INN-CENSED.
The announcer drew attention once again back to the owner of the wronged horse. Colonel Nussbom’s girth, bigger than that of his thoroughbred, shook with consternation as he stomped into the judges’ booth.
“It’s true,” the old woman countered. “I hid in the outhouse. In the fifties when I was pregnant with my first child.” She paused nodding meaningfully. “I saw a big pink mushroom through the crescent moon.”
“Where were you?” asked Lacey.
The television announcer showed the replay, again. We stared as if it were a traffic accident.
“There,” said Lance. He was watching now, seduced by the drama of horse-racing lunacy. “That son of a bitch. Right there.”
“It’s not always the fastest horse that wins,” said Jelly.
“I was in Ephrata, Washington,” the woman in the pillbox hat said to Lacey.
“The cloud came from Hanford.”
After ten tense minutes, the racetrack judges reached a decision. They declared Cat Dancer the winner.
Lance, Jelly and I cheered.
Our teenaged fast food servant arrived with mammoth burgers, pterodactyl wings, and Jurassic fries.
“Horses are so pretty,” she crooned.
The racing commission would decide later an appropriate punishment for the infamous Broken Nose Billy. The color man named a string of other misconduct charges incurred during that week of racing: a drugged horse, a drugged jockey, and a starting gate dispute at Ruidoso Downs.

"Gin!" said the quiet woman. The others groaned and added up points.

"Cancer took my little girl," said the woman. "Cancer from the pink mushrooms." Her eyes were moist.

"I lost a little girl too," said Lacey.

Lance took a sharp breath.

ESPN2 showed a victorious Cat Dancer, shuddering under the ring of roses in the winner's circle. Colonel Nussbom smiled accepting a $100,000 check, then he put one arm around the shoulder of his son, Regis Brett Nussbom, Jr. and his other arm around Monica, his son's fiancé.

Lance pushed away from the table, his mammoth burger barely touched. "I'll go see if Chito's thirsty," he said. I had been unable to smuggle Chito past the waitress and had left him in the van.

"Remember how Monica used to say that she didn't really need money?" asked Jelly.

"That poor bastard's losing it," I said watching Lance slink through the parking lot.

"Well. She was telling the truth," Jelly continued. "By the looks of things, she definitely won't need money."

The woman with the pinched face grabbed Lacey's hand. "I'll see her again," said the woman. "In Heaven. You'll see your little girl too."

Lacey sniffed.

"I don't know," she said. "I don't know."

She let go of the woman's hand and turned to pick at her food. We all ate our meal in what would have otherwise been silence were it not for the elderly women who
played cards and the ESPN2 coverage of a geriatric, Iron Man competition in Palm Springs.

"I saw the Teton dam go," said the World's Greatest Grandmother. "The water rushed so fast over the desert that it boiled up a dust storm."

Except to order the coelacanth sandwich, which was probably the freshest thing on the menu, and coleslaw, Andre had not spoken since we entered. He did have his attaché case with him though. He caught Lacey's eye and nodded at the case. She shook her head.

When we finished our meal, Andre picked up the tab.

"Did you see her?" asked Moroni from the van.

"Yes," I said aloud.

The young waitress smiled at me uncertainly.

"Dust storm my ass," said one of the card players as we walked out of the Dinersaur.

The van was a mess.

Chito and Lance might have fought a battle while we were gone. Our bedrolls were strewn about along with our bags of chips and alcohol. Our Styrofoam cooler was torn to chunks that settled over our rumpled clothing like fluffy moon rocks.

Man and dog writhed side by side, moaning and sweating, in the middle the mess. Lance cried softly.

"Owls," he gasped. "Owls. Pitchforks."

Chito whimpered, got to his feet when he heard us and then bumped head first into the back of the driver's seat.

"What's happened here?" asked Andre. He was scanning the parking lot, perhaps searching for soldiers who had left our ride in ruins.

I looked at the head of Moroni. He made no comment.

Lance leapt back as if Lacey had swung a bat when she reached to feel his forehead for fever.

"Owls. Big black owls."
“He’s high,” said Jelly.

“With pitchforks and Bibles. Oh God, they’re all over.” Lance jumped behind the seat and swatted hysterically at the ceiling.

Chito growled, snapped at air, and rolled onto his side.

“Real fucking high.”

On the passenger side floorboard was Jelly’s overturned 32 oz. Big Juan plastic cup. The toads he’d taken outside of Vegas were scattered in the aftermath of some horrific carnage. The toad that Chito had eaten was eviscerated, dismembered. An eyeball sat on the floorboard, alone, separate from its ruined body, staring through the cracked windshield. The toad that Lance tasted was missing its front legs.

“So much for frog ranching,” I said.

“Shit,” said Jelly. “I forgot all about those little fellas.”

“Can you overdose on these things?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “You’re just supposed to lick them.”

There was a third toad somewhere, I distinctly remembered Jelly stealing three. While searching for it, I discovered the dead pigeon from Salt Lake tucked under the front seat.

No lizard spoke.

No golden head.

But, dead animals popping up all over my van seemed like yet another good reason to question my sanity. I dropped the bird out the door along with empty coffee cups and Snickers wrappers. Jelly found the dead toad.

“Throw it out,” I said.

“I don’t litter.”

“At least put it somewhere Lance and Chito can’t get at it.”

Jelly popped it into the glove compartment.

When Lance started yodeling, we left the parking lot. As we traveled down the highway, Andre and Jelly both had to restrain Lance from crawling out the window.
“Keep this thing off me,” said Lacey when Chito attached himself to her ankle as though it were a long lost lover. Lacey kicked him but he remained undaunted by her rebuffs. He returned again, and again, only to receive another swift kick for his effort. Indeed, the punishment he endured lent more credence to the lost lover idea.

For ten or fifteen minutes at a time, Chito and Lance would calm down into soft crying fits. Then, without provocation they would erupt like synchronized maniacs accosting everyone in the van.

We couldn’t bear it.

Between Lacey and Andre, I was genuinely concerned for the welfare of my two friends. At a roadside rest area, I pulled over to let the lunatics run. Lance and Chito bolted through the sliding van door and headed for the scraggly trees of the rest area.

Lance monkeyed up a fragile maple and Chito stationed himself at the base.

“Want to just leave them?” asked Jelly.

Lacey sighed. A sign by the restrooms warned against overnight camping. “Why do you have frogs in the van?”

“Investment.”

Lance and Chito chortled like chimpanzees.

“How long’s this going to last?” I asked Jelly.

“I don’t know,” he said. “Maybe we should let Lacey and Andre knock them out.”

The afternoon shadows grew longer, but three hours later Lance was still in the tree suffering from acute, toad-induced paranoia. Perched as he was, he disrobed and abandoned his clothing to the branches. He screeched occasional jungle bird calls but we were hopeful he’d come down soon because Chito had already wandered over to the picnic bench and collapsed at my feet twenty minutes earlier. Chito was much smaller and had eaten a lot more toad. Lance couldn’t be far behind.

Three of us quietly sipped beer and tried to pretend that we were on a picnic. But Jelly was on a roll. He expounded on a theory about the origin of life on earth.
“You’re damn right Spaceship Earth,” he said. “Actually a Baptist preacher gave me the idea,” he blathered. “When I was little I asked him about dinosaurs after his sermon. He said that they were either the giants that got drowned in the Great Flood or else Satan planted them to fool men into believing evolution. Now, those aren’t bad theories, but I figure that Satan is probably just the really scary inexplicable appearance of alien scientists who are watching us and all the dinosaur bones are just left over from an earlier experiment that didn’t pan out. . .”

He went on and on. His voice became the low buzz of yellow jackets trapped in a ceiling. “Or maybe,” he continued. “they grow different crops and then test things like viruses on them. Of course, the viruses could be Satan. There was a time . . .”

His mouth was a perpetual motion machine. When Jelly saw that neither Lacey nor I were interested, he spoke to Andre. Andre’s grunts expressed neither encouragement or discouragement. Jelly felt free to lecture.

Lacey stared off into the west.

“Are you OK?” I asked.

“Fine,” she said.

“Are you thinking about your little girl?”

“What do you know about it?” she asked sharply.

“What was her name?” I asked.

“Jelly seems lonely,” she said. “Why don’t you go hit on him?”

Andre interrupted us. Jelly was still yacking. He once told me that “an audience is inconsequential to the true genius.”

“Do you see that?”

Andre pointed to a tractor-trailer rig with the words Desert Industries painted on the side. The rig had pulled into the parking lot an hour ago and the driver was working under the hood. A passenger stayed in the cab talking on the c.b..

“So what?” I asked.

“How many truck drivers have you seen?”
"What?"


Like nervous children, Lacey and Jelly moved closer to Andre.

"What do they want?" asked Jelly.

Andre swished his mouth like he’d just taken a big swig of Scope.

"I don’t know."

"Does it have to do with what you’ve got in your attache case?"

"They’re not dressed right," said Andre.

"Doc Martens," observed Jelly. "Does that guy have argyle socks under those slacks?"

Their clothing was unseasonably dark and it was pressed and clean. The trucker under the hood had a sports coat flung over the bumper and his pinstriped button up shirt was rolled to his elbows as he leaned over his engine. This was not the first time I’d seen Andre respond aggressively toward well-dressed men.

"Cover your bald spots," I said. "The sun’s cooking your brains."

"Let’s go," said Lacey.

I resisted. "Lance is in a tree, naked." I said. "Again."

But Andre and Jelly were already headed toward Lance. They pulled him from the tree. He landed in a heap but they didn’t wait to see if he was alright. They each grabbed an arm and let his feet drag the grass behind him. He was limp, passive. They could have been dragging him to the cross and he wouldn’t have resisted.

_We should leave_, Moroni whispered from the van.

The scene disturbed me, so I lifted Chito, cradled his flaccid, softly exhaling body, and laid him gently in the van.

"Let’s get to the city," Lacey said. "We’ve wasted enough time."

She clothed Lance in the same pink towel she’d used after Salt Lake. Andre and Jelly had not taken the time to collect his clothing.

I waved as we drove past the truckers. The one in the cab smiled brightly and waved back. In the rear-view, I saw him climb down and join the other man near the
hood of the truck. They stood staring after us, cheerful and dapper, men who clearly had good, clean, healthy attitudes.
Chapter 17: Barbarians at the Gate

There are laws here. Not just laws that the camo guys and golfers with the surplus megaphones represent, but physical ones. I am sure of it. The one that comes to mind is about objects in motion tending to stay that way.

Everything is moving now.
The feds have us cold, under the hot light.
And they’re killing us with Bach.
Some of the Sheep are jumpy with weary, harried looks pressed into hollows around their weepy eyes. I’m no doctor, but I wouldn’t be surprised if their symptoms weren’t severe enough to lead to paralysis, death, or eventual hair loss.

God, I hope it’s not hair loss.
Jelly and Andre are bad enough. If the whole bunch comes down with partial baldness we’re going to be accused of abducting people off the streets for the insidious purpose of giving them a bad haircut. Fashion crimes are serious offenses. It might be the final excuse that the feds need to rush in here all death and destruction first and crooked panels of inquiry later. I’ve considered the possibility that some of the Sheep might be thinking of crossing the line, which of course is fine by me. I might even call another meeting and suggest it.

Bach.
They say they have got Molly, Lacey’s girl. True or not, they do have all the cards. I just hope they have some patience too.
What I have is Moroni. And, I have faith.
I also know some things that the feds don’t know. For instance, I know that they could take some fashion tips from other, better stalkers, the Brooks Brothers for instance. And of course, there is the tunnel.
The feds still have Bach and we have a heinous shortage of earplugs. And, the twins will be leaving us. I’m going to have to turn them over because Jeremy might not make it without proper medical attention and Joshua can’t bear to be without him.

Damn. We really could use those boys. They are surprisingly handy in sticky situation.

Tempers are fraying. Lacey is snapping, and with her baby at the mercy of the patriotic hordes amassed at the gates, I don’t blame her. Andre is jumpy. Lance’s voice cracks like a teenager and soon that crazy light in his eyes might burn too brightly to ever extinguish. Jelly seems very, very calm. And, I guess that gets on my nerves as much as the Bach.

The other day, I caught Jelly giving signals to a support member of the negotiating team. When he thought no one was watching, he hand-signed a circle from his crotch to his neck and then ran a finger under his chin as if he were nonchalantly scratching an elaborate itch. I studied the man who returned the signal. He was one of their machinegun-toting, green-bereted goons who stayed visible near the golfers so we wouldn’t get any violent ideas.

I finally spotted it from a flash of sunlight. A pin on the camo guy’s beret. Fraternity pin no doubt. Just like the one Jelly had pinned on the color of his Grateful Dead t-shirt.

“What were you telling him?”

Jelly opened his eyes wide to convey innocence and cracked open a beer. He shrugged, searched the room, held his free palm up, and shrugged again, “Huh?”

“Are you with them?”

“No,” said Jelly letting off his charade. “It has nothing to do with anything.” He gulped his beer and went back to scrawling in his bible. He was sketching a nude, female figure straddling the long stem of a rose like it was a brass rail on a stripper’s stage.

“What were you signaling that guy then?”

“Secret,” he said. “I can’t tell you.”
"This is serious, Jelly. This isn’t a game, not anymore. How can we trust you if you’re sending messages to the other side?"

Jelly’s shoulders stiffened as if braced against a cold draft and he halted his scratchings. His hair had grown long enough to obscure his face if he didn’t pull it back, so I couldn’t read his expression.

In a soft voice he said, “It’s a secret. I promised I’d never tell anyone about my fraternity brothers. I made a vow.” He tilted his face, pulled back his hair, “If I break my promise to them, how can you trust me to keep any I made to you?”

I was not totally convinced by his logic but Jelly seemed sincere. “What is it with you and your frat?”

“Frat?” said Jelly. “It’s fraternity. Would you call your country a cunt?”

“Well . . . ”

“Bad analogy.”

“Do you have to communicate with those guys out there?”

“O.K.,” he said. “I’ll knock it off.” He held out his hand and flashed me his most seductive boyish smile. “Truce?”

Frats.

You think crazy, new religions are threatening? Well it’s the old ones, the ones that fester in the wealthy, educated elite, that I worry about. They’re everywhere carving obscure loyalties into men and women who were once young enough to be brainwashed. Frats. Did you know that Neil Armstrong stuck his pledge pin on the flag on the moon?

One small step for man.

One big ass step for mankind.

By mankind, he didn’t mean all kinds of man; he meant the kinds who paddled his ass, schemed, and plotted to keep the world’s reins tightly in the hands of their exclusive clan.

It’s frats.

And I call my country anything I want to.

I let it drop with Jelly. I couldn’t think of what else to do. But, I’m keeping an eye on him.
Have you forgotten the music? We sure as hell haven’t.

An hour ago they actually stopped blasting Bach. For just a moment while the feds argued over the most psychologically-appropriate new sound track, it was quiet, the eternal rest sort of quiet that they sell at funeral homes. The pause was as deliberate as a held breath. Bach had driven himself into every pore and vein of our bodies and when the music stopped, the stored up instrumental strands flowed out from deep within our saturated cells and spilled to our feet. Legs buckled and unbuckled under the released weight and a sigh drifted over every corner of Sweet Heaven.

Somewhere I heard a woman crying.

Somewhere I heard a man crying.

That silent moment between Bach and the Unknown was as full and powerful and as real and deep as the space on either side of a balanced rock. That soundless moment where even the crickets and flies and swamp frogs exhaled pent up tension, held within it the great, distant memory of the peace that brought and kept us here.

The man and the woman wailed like professional mourners. Their voices resounded over the buildings and fences, echoed into the trees until chasing after each other over the distant golden top of Paradise Ridge.

I didn’t know the mourners except by sight. They were just a young, hippy-dippy couple in matching dreadlocks and Raggedy Ann and Andy overalls who hadn’t been with us long. They were holding hands, kissing tears from each other’s cheeks as they crossed the courtyard and just opened the gate and walked away.

Watching them, I felt my heart catch.

I didn’t know them, but I know that it will be a tragedy if they separate them.

Fucking feds.

I wish them well—those two. Seeing them together squeezed a voice into my head. I don’t know if it was the white lizard, the golden head, my gray brain, or the colorless echoes of Bach, but it said, They know the only way out.

When the music came again, it was very nearly welcome. At least it was something with soul. And it made us laugh. All of us. Through my binoculars, even the
negotiating clowns and the camo psychopaths were laughing. I saw Jelly signal his fraternity brother who signaled back with a quick wave. Jelly stopped when he saw me, but he was obviously just sharing the humor.

Humor has no secret combinations.

_Craaazy. Crazy for feeling so lonely._

_I-I'm craaazy. Crazy for feeling so blue..._

“Can you ask that guy what they’re planning?”

“It’s not sign language,” he said.

Even after an hour of this new music, the relief is still tangible. For a moment, a mountain of uncertainty lifted from even Lacey’s shoulders and she smiled.

We are with her now.

“It’s a trick, you know,” I say.

Jelly nods agreement.

“What if it isn’t?” says Lacey. “This could be my last chance to see her.”

“They won’t let you.”

“I don’t know,” she says. “I don’t know.”

“What if we all just gave ourselves up?” she asks.

Jelly and I don’t respond. It’s been on my mind from the beginning. But it feels like betrayal to give up just to lose. Where’s the point in any of this then? If your back’s against the wall, you fight. You fight because that’s your only option and because whoever has you backed up knows it too. There’s no way the feds would just let us go. No way. I don’t know what Jelly is thinking, but it probably has something to do with cinematic conflagrations and sales figures.

“Do you really think they got her away from the Gov?”

“I don’t know,” Lacey jumps to her feet. “I don’t know!” She kicks Jelly in the shins. “You fucker!”

“Bitch!” yells Jelly.
She whirls around and throws a haymaker at me. I move just enough to get caught in the left ear. I go to my knees and hold my hands in front of me to ward off another blow. Patsy Cline cues her:

*I'm crazy for crying.*

“I'm not the crazy one here,” she says. “I should have kicked your candy asses long ago.”

I touch my throbbing ear. It feels like moist cauliflower. I inspect my fingertip and see a red smear of blood. I'm glad she hasn't tried to kick my candy ass before now.

*And I'm crazy for trying.*

Jelly, who slumps against the wall beneath a painting of Washington crossing the Potomac, moves gingerly toward Lacey.

She feints a jab in his direction.

He retreats.

“Hey,” he says. “Easy, Sugar. We'll help. We'll find a way.”

*And I'm Crazy...*

“Butshit. There's nothing in it for you. And don't fucking call me SUGAR!”

*for loving you.*

“I meant it like Sugar Ray,” he says.

Lacey throws a punch, misses Jelly’s million dollar smile, and hits the wall. The house groans, windows jar, doors rattle, and dishes crash to the kitchen linoleum.

The explosion is a sharp bark followed by a low rumble as displaced air rushes back upon itself.

Jelly stares at the spot on the wall where Lacey’s fist has landed.

Lacey grimaces at the white scrapes on her knuckles that begin to fill with blood.

“She hits hard,” I say rubbing my ear.

Lacey bolts to the window. Grabs the binocs. “Those crazy bastards are coming.”
She runs to the rear of the house, through the dining room, the shrine, and into a
deluxe king-sized bathroom where a five hundred gallon Jacuzzi holds Dart, our pet
turtle. She yells, “They’re coming in the back way. Get ready!”

We have no way to do that. We have no weapons. Like I said, it’s a wonder the
feds haven’t bowled in here already.

The place fills with commotion. Wild waves of patchouli oil and sweat wash the
air. Doors fling open and slam shut. People scramble to and from hiding places. In the
courtyard, several Sheep stand with their fingers laced behind their heads. Ready to
surrender.

“What do we do?”

“What do we do?”

That’s our battle cry, and, of course, people are looking at me. Me and Moroni.
I race into the back room with Lacey. Grab the binoculars from her. Nothing.
Just a dusty spot where there was an explosion about fifty yards down the wooded
hillside on the other side of the fence. There is a small column of smoke where a few
trees have caught fire. I race back to the front and study the far edge of the clearing.
Most of the camo guys have slipped into their invisible suits, but the ones I can pick out
are all prone, tense and waiting.

Nothing.
They’re not coming.

“What does Moroni say?”

It’s the gentle woman who we call the Dairy Queen. God. I can’t believe these
people still believe.

“Sheeple,” Jelly calls them. “Just give them good grass and they’ll follow you
over the edge of the earth.”

He’s wrong though.

Sheep aren’t as stupid as people. They can’t be. Their brains are too small to
achieve our complex level of stupidity.

“Nothing,” I say. “Nothing’s happening.”
Jelly jots a note in his bible.

"Those bastards," mutters Lacey. "They aren't happy until something blows up."

Several people are running with shovels, axes and buckets of water toward the smoke.

"Stop!" I yell. "The fire's on the other side of the fence!"

They hesitate. Then, all but two of them continue to the back gate.

Some of the people here put the well-being of the trees above that of their own. I signal at the remaining two to come to me. Smokey Joe is one of them. He surprised us earlier this summer when he parachuted into the courtyard. He'd lost his job as an Alaskan Smoke Jumper because he couldn't do the requisite number of pull-ups. He paid a friend to fly him out and he jumped expecting to find his brother who'd been a member of the bankrupt Aryan group that once owned this place. Smokey Joe weighs nearly three hundred pounds and I think part of the reason he stayed on is because there are a number of beer drinkers here and no one asks him to do any exercises. That, and he broke his ankle when he landed.

"Smokey," I say. "I'm surprised you didn't go with the others to fight fire."

"Not much of a fire," he says looking unimpressed toward the smoke. "Gotta beer?"

"You know where it is."

We both watch as the noble few lock the back gate behind them and rush into the fire that awaits them in the trees.

"Besides," says Smokey Joe. "It was never fighting the fires that I liked. It was jumping into them." He heads for a beer in the kitchen.

"Grab me one." I yell after him.

I jump. Lacey has snuck up on me again.

"Sissy," she smiles in a way that makes me think she is apologizing. "I'm not going to hit you."
She takes her white bandanna off her head, dampens it with her cherry-pink tongue and dabs at blood that trickles from my ear.

I wish she’d drop the bandanna and just use her tongue.

“I’m fine,” I say. “Just a scratch.”

“Yes. You’re a very tough man.”

The firefighters shout directions to one another on the hillside. The feds still have made no move. Inside the house is a commotion. I hear Andre’s voice.

Andre. He’ll know something about this.

When I see him, he’s leaning on a shovel. He’s covered in the soft, silty loam that makes up this ancient river bench that Sweet Heaven rests on. Good for digging. Three other men, each equally filthy, accompany him.

Lance wanders into the room humming Crazy, looks at Andre and the strangers.

“Where you been?” I ask.

He yawns, stretches, a bottle of gin dangles from his hand. “I fell asleep by Moroni,” he says. “What’s all the ruckus?”

One of the men with Andre, a man in his thirties, has a greenish blue tattoo of an eagle totem etched over his entire face. His forehead is the eagle’s eyes and beak, his cheeks are outstretched wings, and his chin is claws. He smells of brush and soil and sweat. That fact and his skin, shiny with grease and small, white scars, suggests that he lives in the forest and only uses water for drinking. The other man, I discover, is a woman. She is also in her thirties, less than five feet tall with the same rugged exterior and bathing phobia. With them is a man with long, smooth, black hair pulled into a ponytail. He has the wide cheekbones and light, brown skin of the local tribe, the Nez Perce. The tattoo man and the woman glance warily around the room at our faces which, by contrast, seem genteel as powdered royalty.

“What the hell happened?” I ask.

“Yeah,” says Jelly. “And where’d you find the Indian and the tree freaks?”

Jeremy and Joshua moan in the other room. The man and the woman spot them and the large black canvas bags they are shouldering clunk heavily to the floor. They
grab the Nez Perce man by his elbows and hustle him over to Jeremy. I make a move to stop them but Andre halts me.

"Let them go," he says. "The Indian's a doctor."

The man and the woman stand back from the window as the doctor man sets down his own canvas bag, pulls out a bundle of sage, lights it, and chants under his breath.

"What is this bullshit?" asks Jelly.

"No offense, Mr.," I say. "Jeremy got hit by a bullet, not an evil spirit."

The man chuckles. He checks Jeremy's pulse and blood-pressure.

"Don't worry, boy. I studied medicine at Johns Hopkins. I'll use sterile equipment."

He extracts a syringe from his bag.

"The more traditional medicine is sterile too."

"He says his name is Dr. George," says Andre.

"Dr. George?" I say. "Can you help him, Doc?"

"I don't know. Wait outside."

We leave him and the other two with the twins. "Where'd you get these guys?" I ask Andre.

Andre considers the question.

"I was in the tunnel, you know, like we talked about."

He scratches his bald spot as he does when he's distracted. Even covered with filth, the man looks meticulously well-groomed and composed.

"The next thing I knew, the woman had me in a headlock, pinned to the ground. I couldn't do a thing. The woman? The woman!"

"The woman?"

Sure, she looks as tough as twisted cougar shit, but it is hard to imagine such a half-pint besting Andre.

"I don't know who they are but they're good. Damn good."

"What about the tunnel?" I ask.
Andre shakes his head.

"I had to blow it. Feds were all over the entrance." His face is grim, which of course is normal. "It was a long shot anyway. They would have had us if we attempted to escape." He shakes his head, "the woman, a goddamn woman."

His perspiration has created a design in the dirt caked to his bald spot. It resembles a four-petaled flower.

"Who are those guys?"

"I don’t know," he says. "They’re artists. They’re people who you don’t see unless they let you. They are Masters of the Art."

"But who are they?"

"I don’t know. But, they say they can get us out."

"How’d they get past the feds?"

"I suspect that they turned into snakes and slid past them. It makes as much sense as anything."

"What’s their plan?"

"Something to do with the twins," says Andre. "They say they can get a few others out too." He pauses. "I believe they can."

Andre believes they can?

Belief. Faith.

It’s the stuff that moves mountains, but can it move the government?

"Movement at the gates! Hey! The feds have a bug in their ass!" Lance yells. He is on the roof, in plain sight, legs splayed over either side of a gabled corner of the roof, drinking gin, keeping lookout.

The feds have pulled an armored High Mobility Multipurpose Vehicle up to the gate. More toys. Behind it is a light green trailer with something large and bulky covered with camouflage mesh.

Lance belts out a few retro slogans:

*Hell no, we won’t go!*

*Hell no, we won’t go!*
“Shut it!” yells Lacey.

Aw. Her mood has returned. The world spins right once more on its Crazy axis. Heads from various corners of the Sweet Heaven peek around corners and doors. I calculate how many people remain. I don’t know. Thirty maybe. If the feds don’t get us first, we should make a head count.

Which reminds me, I wonder if Moroni will deign to grace us with an auditory visitation.

How about it, old chap, I try, got any suggestions?

No response.

I saw at least seven people leave. More could have left undetected. The Sheep are all abandoning ship, swimming over to join the rats.

“What do you think they’re doing?” I ask Andre.

“Trying to make us do what they want us to do,” he says.

I think about Smokey Joe.

It’s not the fighting fires I like. It’s the jumping into them.

Dangerous philosophy.

Lance hoots on the roof. I glance up, but he is only flapping his arms at a raven that flies just over his head. The raven inspects us. He looks utterly bemused by our situation. The barbarians at the gate have a new toy. The Sheep are scattering. Strangers are screwing up our best and only escape routes. And, Jelly is still signaling the savages

My ear hurts like a sonofabitch and Lacey thinks I’m a pussy.

“Fuck you, Raven,” I say.
Chapter 18: A Dark and Stormy Night

It was the kind of night that would have driven Snoopy off his doghouse and forced him indoors with Mr. and Mrs. Brown and their fatheaded kids. Hot desert clouds had struck the cool Rocky Mountains and now did a no-hands, reverse summersault right over the top of us. Lightning sliced a golden crease through black thunderheads flashing Lacey’s face ghastly white in the darkened, van interior.

Andre navigated us over roads so far off the highway that some weren’t on the map.

“Left here,” he said. “Take the next fork.”
“Go toward that mountain,” he said.
“You know, they have pills for people with social dysfunctions.”

Scary man or not, Andre was getting on my nerves.

“It causes dry mouth, drowsiness, and has sexual side-effects in both men and women,” said Jelly.

“What does?”

“Social anxiety medication.”

Lacey lifted her head from Jelly’s shoulder where she’d been resting and looked at him.

“I did a story on it,” he said. “Spanish Fly for the Socially Inept: Mind-control for the Masses.”

The rain came harder. My wipers were fine, but the cracks in the windshield impaired night vision.

“Did you publish it anywhere?”

“I tried to sell it--60 Minutes, USA Today--You name it. It’s a tough nut to crack though. Conspiracy.”

“Oh shit,” said Lacey. “I shouldn’t have asked.”
"The pharmaceutical companies are big advertisers in the top news magazines. Claiming that they’re crooked is like trying to take a cigarette vending machine out of a West Carolina high school—you just piss people off."

"Do you make this stuff up as you go?" asked Lacey.

"Of course, the government’s the real culprit,” he continued. “They own everything from tobacco to pharmaceuticals to Girl Scouts. Between experimental tobacco additives and exciting new ingredients for medicine and cookies, they’ve waged a mind-control campaign against Americans since the ‘50’s.”

Jelly’s staccato speech challenged the steady rainfall thrum on the roof. We were captive to another hair-brained, baseless theory that made some sense.

"Can you prove any of that?” I interrupted.

"That’s how they do it,” said Jelly. “I am proving it. I’m showing cause and effect but they trained you to hear only cause and coincidence. You should ask yourself why you always need to be mired in fact.”

"Self,” I said, “Why do you need to be mired in fact?”

“You see, but you don’t believe. How could that be anything but mind-control?”

“The earth really does look flat,” I said. “Should I believe that?”

“If you take drugs, don’t get them off the shelf. Take the pure stuff cooked up in bathroom meth labs and high school chem class. If you smoke, grow it yourself or buy it in Ziploc baggies.”

Andre had kept us off the highways where we couldn’t be tailed by sharp dressed truckers. But, it would take more time to reach our destination and I didn’t understand what our invisibility was gaining us. Andre didn’t share his reasons. So, when we slid off a greasy, dirt road, rammed into a barbwire fence, and scared a herd of Guernseys so badly that small chunks of cottage cheese squirted from their teats, I was pissed.

We were stuck, stuck bad. And, thanks to Andre, we could be damn sure that no roving bands of Brooks Brothers would be around to help out. His road. His plan. His blame.

“This is your fault, Andre. Yours.”
We were stymied in the mud of our own back road paranoia.

"For godsakes, Andre, do you even know where we are?"

"You should have known better than to drive into the middle of nowhere," said Jelly. "That's where everyone gets stuck."

Thunder and lightning still ruled the sky and flash-fast shapes surrounded the van as the milk cows screwed up the courage to break through the new hole in the fence.

"Well," Lacey said with acute bucolic understanding. "Wherever you find tits full of milk, you'll find a man with cold hands nearby."

Scratch. Scratch.

The lizard stirred.

"I haven't seen a house for miles," I said.

"There is no such thing as a deserted country road," countered Lacey.

"That's right," said Jelly. "It's a suburban legend."

Lance and Chito both rubbed their bloodshot eyes.

"So we have to walk?" Lance asked for both of them.

"Shut the fuck up," said Jelly. "We wouldn't even be here if it wasn't for your fucked up eating habits."

We bundled up as best as we could and started walking. Jelly screamed when he stepped out of the van and bumped into a moist, warm cow. A great brass bell chimed on the cow’s neck as she lumbered away, lowing for her lost sisters.

After fifty yards, everyone was soaked. Chito, ordinarily dauntless, whined and kept tripping me up as he tried to use me as shelter. Two miles down the road, we came to a light.

An unimpressive yard light lit the way from a decrepit house to a yawning barn, but the place looked deserted. I knew it was a trick of the night and heavy wind winging dark flumes of rain, but the farmhouse before us was an expansive, two story, turn-of-the-century, haunted house.

No, not just a haunted house, but the haunted house. It was the haunted house that crept and crawled through campfire stories of my youth. It was the haunted house
where Jason Vorhees, Michael Myers, and Freddy Kruger broke up coed slumber parties. It was the house that dripped blood and we were the hapless teenagers with bottles full of booze and heads full of hormones.

But, it wasn’t just a trick of the dim exterior bulb in the barn yard, however, that the shutters battered in the wind, or that the shingles flew like bats, or that the porch sagged so low that it practically had to have been built that way.

In short, I was cold. I was wet. And I was very uncomfortable. But even so, I sure as hell didn’t want to stay here.

"Nobody’s home," I said. "Let’s find a place down the road."

"There’s light through the curtains," said Jelly.

"I hear music," said Lacey.

Chito growled.

Nobody moved. So, even though it was Andre’s fault that we were on a muddy back road, Lance’s fault that we even saw the well-dressed truckers who had scared Andre, Jelly’s fault for engaging me in inane conversation which may have caused me to hit the ditch, and Lacey’s fault for just being distracting in general, I decided that I would shoulder the burden of seeking admittance to a house that could scare ghosts away.

Before I could move, the lights in the house went dark. Then, we were blinded by several strategically placed spotlights. A voice thundered over the yard.

"You kids git out of here! Git! Or I’ll shove this shotgun up yer asses."

Rainfall crackled on the roof, spotlights burned angry red patches into our retinas and the man’s disembodied voice became a spirit speaking from fire. Jelly stepped up with a hand shielding his eyes from the glare.

"Hey buddy," he said. "Could we use your phone?"

The faint complaint of country music emanated from the fire.

"We’d just like to call a tow truck," I spoke into the light.

"Maybe get out of the rain," said Lacey.

The spotlights died.
Our bleached rods and cones stranded us in utter darkness before an interior light flipped on and the voice finally took form. The imposing outline of a tall, slim man holding a shotgun, reminiscent of the famous, doctored photograph of Lee Harvey Oswald posing for CIA propaganda shots guarded the doorway.

“You have a woman with you?”

“Yes,” said Lacey. “A cold and wet woman.”

“Uh huh. Well... Come on in then,” he said. “Come on in then. Kick yer muddy boots off on the porch.”

A lightning strike lit the sky like day and drove me onto the porch.

The interior was well-lit but poorly kept. Faded, pink wallpaper peeled above the baseboards. The uncarpeted floor was scarred and dingy. An ancient record player twisted out a scratchy, hillbilly tune: something about a bottle, a mother, and a runaway train.

The farmer sat in a high-backed, wooden chair wiping moisture from the barrel of his shotgun with an oily red bandanna. He had a patchy, gray beard and his pockmarked skin hung loosely over sharp cheek bones and off a protruding brow. His rheumy eyes peered out from deep sockets and his long limbs rested at awkward angles. The man made Andre look as warm and cuddly as a kitten.

I looked around and discovered that Andre had not entered the house with the rest of us. The farmer hadn’t asked about him, so presumably Andre had vanished into the darkness before the spotlights had hit.

*Spooky,* I heard Moroni say.

Startled, I looked around the room.

There he was—well, his head anyway—held under Lance’s arm like a football.

“Lance,” I asked. “Why did you lug that thing all the way here?”

*It’s cold out there,* said Moroni.

Lance shrugged. “I guess I didn’t want anyone to steal it.”
The farmer walked over to the counter. He rested his shotgun against the wall near him, twisted a squealing water tap, and filled a blackened coffee pot with murky water.

"Can we use your phone?" I asked.

"Phone’s out," he said as he reached into the cupboard and pulled out a bottle of Jim Beam. "Lightning killed it. What you all doin’ way the hell out here?"

"Good question," I said. "Do you have a pickup or something that you could pull us out with?"

"Not in this weather I don’t," he said. "Besides, you’d just hit the ditch again. This road ain’t so good when it’s wet."

The propane burner popped a blue flame beneath the charred kettle. The farmer drank straight from the bottle. His pendulous nose was shot with broken red veins.

"Do you have a towel or something?" Lacey asked.

The farmer displayed his mouthful of brown teeth. "Sure, sure," he said. "Let me fetch ya one." He grabbed the shotgun and walked to the back of the house, his footsteps creaking behind him. He returned with a stained white towel and handed it to her. "I can’t make no guarantees about how clean it is."

Jelly and Lance both looked at me. I knew what they were thinking.

"If you won’t pull us out tonight," I asked. "Do you have a place for us to stay?"

"Well," said the farmer. "We don’t git much company."

Lacey sidled closer to him. "My name’s Lacey," she said squeezing her long white hair with the towel. She handed him back the towel and shrugged off the long day coat she’d wore the night we met in Vegas. Her tight, wet t-shirt clung to her breasts. Moisture beaded at her throat. She stuck out her hand. "Lacey Jacobs."

"Frank Brown," he said wiping his mouth with the back of his hand before grasping hers.

"It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Brown," Lacey said, "You wouldn’t want us out there on a night like this, would you?"

The black kettle hissed as it began to boil.
The farmer stared at Lacey. He looked to me and Lance and Jelly. He stared at Jelly as he said, "I have two extra rooms. You can stay the night." He turned back to Lacey, "Which one of them's yer husband?"

"He is," she said pointing toward Lance.

My mind roared at me. Lucky bastard.

"Then you two fellas git Lorelei's sewing room, God rest her soul. The lady kin have the guest room. Don't you go into the other rooms."

"Thank you," we chimed.

"You understand?" he asked. "People are tryin' ta sleep. I don't want you in any other rooms."

We drank strong black coffee and sat up with the man until we had warmed. He wasn't alone in the house. He told us that his grown children lived with him. There were pictures stuck on the broken down old Frigidaire of his children, five beautiful women and twin boys. Three children still lived with him and worked on the farm. They were asleep because it was after 11:00 and the cows had to be milked by 5:00 a.m..

Jelly took a photograph off the refrigerator, "Which ones are still here?"

"It don't matter to you," he said. "I don't want you city kids givin 'em any crazy ideas." He paused, took a pull on his whiskey. "It's hard enough as it is with them twins always runnin off to God-knows-where."

Jelly pointed to a photograph that looked recent. Farmer Brown and a pair of effeminate twins and a buxom, strawberry-cheeked girl in her late teens. "Is this your daughter?"

"I don't want you near them," he said. "You stay the night. Yer welcome. But I don't want you near my kids."

"Hey, Mr. Brown," Jelly smiled. "It's cool. I just don't get to meet new people very often is all." He let out a low whistle and shook his head theatrically. "You have beautiful children."

"You let them be," said Farmer Brown. "Let them be."
Jelly reached above the Frigidaire and brought down a small, tarnished, silver frame. He rubbed the dust from the face, studied the photograph. I peered over his elbow and saw the black and white portrait of a young, plump, shapely woman standing backlit in the doorway of this very kitchen. The woman was dressed in a thin, flower print, summer dress that outlined one of her generous hips and silhouetted a statuesque leg that struck out in a deliberately sexy pose. An impish smile played at the corners of her mouth and her eyes shined in a way that made the photo seem alive somehow, like it was a real live moment caught, not preserved, not frozen, but caught and living always in a moment in time.

In my periphery, I saw Farmer Brown reach absently for his shotgun. His hand hovered for a moment over the stock, then flopped weakly to his side.

"Jelly," I cautioned.

"Maybe you should put that down," said Lacey.

"Give it," said Farmer Brown. He reached for the frame with the same hand that held the whiskey. When Jelly handed it to him, he switched hands, swigged the bottle, glared at the photograph. "Lorelei."

He swigged the whiskey, found it empty and fetched a fresh bottle from the cupboard behind him.

"Is that your wife?" asked Lacey.

He nodded vigorously. We waited for him to speak, but he remained silent and seemed to have forgotten that he wasn’t alone in the room.

A distant crash, perhaps a small tree uprooting itself or a door torn from a shed, shook him from his reverie. He started as though surprised to see Lance, Jelly, Lacey and me all looking at him. "Lorelei was . . . was my wife," he said. "She’s gone now."

I crossed my fingers and willed no one to ask it. It frightened me. Don’t ask what happened to her.

"What happened to her?" asked Lacey.

Farmer Brown set the frame on the small, formica-topped dining table so that it stared at him. He gestured with the whiskey bottle to me. I took it and we passed it
around. Jelly had to wrestle the bottle away from Lance and then he handed it back to Farmer Brown.

“Well,” he said. “It don’t matter now.”
He sighed and settled into his chair.

“It was more’n twenty years ago. The twins was still in diapers. This portrait’s a bit older than that.”
The storm pitched itself into a fever. Somewhere from the darkness came the hollow thump thump thump of something battling with its hinges.

He smiled at the memory. Then his face dropped back into his story.

“I tried. I tried. Took her twenty miles into town for the movie pictures. Took her to the barn dance at the Grange Hall. I worked hard as I could. Saved up enough money to git her this picture frame. Solid silver.” His look challenged me to call him a liar. “Take it. Hold it. It’s real, solid silver.”

He swigged the whiskey. He brought the back of his hand, trembling, over his mouth to wipe away the moisture. “It was an accident,” he said. “Damn accident.”

Lightning flashed—one million, two million—and thunder reported the strike. I recalled an article I once read about fifty head of cows struck dead when the tree they huddled around was hit by lightning. I glanced at Farmer Brown’s shotgun. I hoped those runaway cows had the good sense to stay out of the trees.

“Started taking walks at first. Said she was jist walkin, not goin nowhere.” His eyebrows knitted into a look of incredulity. “Jist walkin.”
After a pause, he continued.

“Then she started drivin’ my ol’ pickup truck. Got real involved with the church. She seemed happier and a couple of the girls was old enough to do the cookin and chores,
so I didn’t say much. But she was restless. I could tell. Restless like the cows get when
it’s been too hot for too long and the rain always jist barely misses us.”

He paused to slug his whiskey.

There was a draft running under the door. I was damp and cold and shivering—we were all shivering. I took a long pull from the whiskey when he passed the bottle again. It stirred heat into my belly and I passed the bottle to the others. This time Jelly couldn’t coax the bottle away from Lance. Farmer Brown waved it off, reached behind him and grabbed another. I figured he must trade milk quart for quart for whiskey.

“Yer jist kids. Ain’t no way you seen enough to amount to nothin. I don’t give a damn what you think.” His words slurred a bit. He pushed himself from his chair and walked over to the kitchen door, pulled aside a curtain, and peered out into the barnyard.

“I won’t have a shingle left on this house come mornin.”

Just when I thought that he’d decided not to finish his story and we could find our beds to sleep, he continued.

“I don’t know you kids from Adam,” he said. “I don’t care what you think. It was an accident. When she didn’t come back that day, I went lookin for her. And what that preacher--Reverend Jimmy he called himself—Reverend Jimmy, was doin to her. Damn,” he shook his head. “Damn. I found them together. Him behind her naked, her bent over a pew, skirt hiked up like some kinda farm animal, both of them hollering curses in God’s house. Damn.”

He slapped his open palm on the table. The vibration traveled through the floor into my legs and stomach.

“No better than animals. I wish I’d have shot that somebitch preacher right then and there. I wish I’d of shot him, but I couldn’t aim. I missed and blew a hole in the pulpit. Couldn’t aim.” He was living in the scene, seeing it happen again. “Somethin’ in my eye.”

Farmer Brown looked at Lacey with a vicious glint.

“They both ran outa there. Knocking down benches and books, screaming like the devil caught by his own tail.”
He slapped his knee, cackled a high pitched laugh with no humor in it at all. Then, he settled down and looked each of us, one after the other, in the eyes.

"What I told you is exactly what I told the police. It’s the truth. So help me."

The pounding rain slackened as a gust of wind followed by another gust shook the house. Then the pounding resumed.

"Found ‘em the next day. Sheriff Tanley did. Figures I put a fright into ‘em. They was both naked as sinners smashed up in the bottom of the ravine behind the church."

His mouth crooked into a half-smile, half-snarl.

"One of ‘em slipped and the other fell trying to help. Sheriff figured that out by the scuff marks at the top of the cliff. Doesn’t matter none now. They’re both in Hell."

Then he added, “where they belong.”

After several seconds of silence, he cocked his head, listening. “That’s a storm out there. Some storm. Makes you wonder if it’ll ever let up.”

Lance was mumbling to himself with the bottle leaned against Chito who shivered and kicked in his sleep. Lacey hugged herself and Jelly stared at the picture on the table.


I had to clear my throat.

“We appreciate it, Mr. Brown.”

He scoffed. “You boys don’t go touchin’ anything in Lorelei’s sewing room,” he said. “I got things there jist the way she left ‘em.”

As we followed him into the dark stairwell I thought I heard a sound. I couldn’t tell where the sound came from, perhaps it was the stairs creaking underfoot, a faucet turned on and then off, or the wind straining fitfully against the house. But, for just that moment, I heard a sound. And the sound was like laughter or crying.
Chapter 19: Spooks

A melancholy Moroni pondered the darkness atop an old, wooden, Singer sewing machine. The yard light cast pale shadows and I listened to Jelly wrestle with the moth-eaten quilt that Farmer Brown had lent us. The night carried on in the raucous gale of the summer storm that was bent on driving itself violently out of existence. I felt relatively safe inside listening to the house creak, haw, and crumble further into its century-old foundation.

Moroni added to the ruckus by questioning me.

*What do you need? Lacey? Money?*

*Self-Act-U-al-l-zA-tion?*

*Do you even know what that means?*

He was asking real questions, the kind of questions that only sages, stoners and high school guidance counselors ask, but my mind drifted to the room down the hall where I imagined Lacey’s chortling snores lulling Lance’s smiling ears to sleep.

*You need a god.*

Just more noise in a night of noise.

*A god big enough to drown out newscasters, talk show hosts, politicians, historical revisionists, rock stars.*

Ordinarily, I’d pay some attention to a talking statue. Moroni, after all, was quickly becoming my dipstick for mental health. He also had a solid grasp of my psyche. He seemed to know things.

*I know you,* said Moroni.

That startled me.

*What are you passionate about?*

“Shut up,” I whispered.

“What?” asked Jelly.

We huddled closely together because neither of us wanted to touch anything that belonged to Farmer Brown’s dead wife. I admit it. We were both as spooked as
herbalists at a Catholic bonfire. To top things off, Lorelei had a mannequin in one corner of the room, and two Styrofoam heads perched in the dim light by the window. We didn’t feel alone.

*What will you leave behind?*

Moroni. Echolalia. Heads. They were sure signs of trouble, of insanity. Rotting timbers, flying shingles, screeching floors. The sewing machine, an old fashioned pedal powered model, pedaled half a rotation.

*Chgg. Squeak. Chgg.*

“You hear that?” I whispered.

“No,” said Jelly.

Maybe the machine moved.

I tried to think happier thoughts, but could only think of Lacey. I was jealous. Of course, I found solace in the fact that I wasn’t the only one she didn’t want in the room. She didn’t want Moroni either.

“The thing creeps me out,” she had said. “The way his eyes follow me.”

I watched her muscles slide beneath the thin satin nightshirt she wore for bed.

“You’re imagining things.”

“It’s like he’s leering at me.”

She spun around too quickly for me to avert my eyes from her ass.

“I know what it’s like to be leered at,” she said.

She made Moroni stay with Jelly and me.

*You need to get away,* Moroni was saying. *Too much distraction. Too many people selling bullshit. What’s real is real.*

When footsteps echoed down the hall, I fantasized that it was Lacey coming to me. For a moment, I thrilled in expectation of her feather touch, her smooth powdered skin. I imagined her gritting her teeth and showing me her secret faces, moaning secret sounds, stroking me with secret touches. When Jelly gripped my arm, for just a flash, it was Lacey in the throes of ecstasy thanking me silently for being such a wonderful lover. I moaned.
The door to our room squealed.
A whoosh of air rushed into the hallway as our room depressurized. Moroni’s silence, Jelly’s rapid breaths, amplified the storm outside.

A figure appeared in the open doorway.
My breath caught.
Jelly put his other arm around me. Squeezed.
A ghostly fragrance scintillated my nostrils. I clung to the Lacey fantasy.

*Lacey Lacey Lacey.*

I whispered it aloud. “Lacey?”

The silhouette in the doorway was female, definitely female, but it didn’t have Lacey’s smooth lines with the soft shoulders and gentle corners. The figure was much more extreme with steep hills, plunging valleys, and dramatic curves. A pale aura backlit her as she posed against the doorway in a gauzelike gown, one leg thrust forward as a sultry invitation.

“Lorelei?”

“Holy shit!” gasped Jelly.

We scuttled on our asses backward until we hit the wall.

She moved toward us like a thick fluid. The door hushed shut behind her and inky blackness engulfed us. A branch outside whipped against the siding. Jelly and I clung to each other like orphaned chimpanzees.

When light flooded the room, Jelly screamed. I pulled the quilt over my head and then felt stupid, so I pulled it down. Then I pulled it back over my head again.


The figure hissed at us.

“Shhhhhhh,” it scolded. “Shhhhhhh.”

“We didn’t touch your shit,” said Jelly. “Shit!”

“What?” she asked.
I peeked at her. I wasn’t fooled for a moment. I had only been playing it up for Jelly’s sake. Obviously, the woman in the room was none other than Farmer Brown’s daughter. Really, I knew it all along.

“Daddy’s just down the hall,” she said clutching her thin robe shut at her neck with one hand and over her thighs with the other. “He’s still awake.”

Jelly recovered quickly from his earlier supernatural shock. “What’s your name?” “Suzy Sue.”

Suzy Sue was the strawberry-cheeked girl from the photo on the refrigerator. Dimples buried deeply into each of her rosy cheeks and she had the strong, healthy glow of a woman who squeezes cows’ tits every day of her life.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“I live here,” she said. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m a journalist,” said Jelly.

“I don’t think your Dad would like it if he knew you were here,” I said.

I recalled in perfect detail the polished chestnut stock and well-oiled, well-loved, bluish shine on the barrel of her father’s shotgun. He had carried it with him when he showed us the room.

“Matt’s a forklift driver,” said Jelly.

Suzy Sue hovered at the doorway until she decided to sit down and learn more about us. When she did, Jelly dove in for the kill.

The oldest routines are the best ones and Jelly was as predictable as corporate marketing.

He appealed to her body:

*Your hands must be very strong from milking cows everyday.*

He appealed to her mind:

*Have you ever been to Sweden? I have relatives there.*

He appealed to her spirit:

*The wind is really moaning out there.*

*When we got here, we were really whipped.*
Did you know we’re lost? I bet you could you give us some helpful tips?

Jelly sparked unknown fires in the depths of the milkmaid’s soul. She didn’t stand much of a chance under his expert litany of sexual enticement. Suzy Sue was, after all, a simple country girl living and working on the farm, taking care of a father and two brothers. Everyday, she was out there in the robust air where everything—barn cats, dogs, cows, insects and even the plants—was engaged in some sort of sexual activity. And, really, Jelly couldn’t attribute this newest bedpost notch solely to his consummate seduction techniques—Why did Suzy Sue visit two strange men in the middle of the night anyway?

When Suzy Sue invited Jelly to come see her butterfly collection—Oh yes, said Jelly, Do you have any swallowtails?—I didn’t protest.

I heard a door shut somewhere down the hall and I welcomed the chance to be alone with the heads in the room. But I was nervous.

Farmer Brown was drunk, armed and surly. I was in Lorelei’s sewing room and a storm raged outside. I pictured over and over the scene of two lovers, one clinging to the side of a cliff, the other scrambling frantically to help. Scuff marks? I remembered Farmer Brown’s bitter snarl-smile.

Ten minutes.
Fifteen minutes.
Twenty minutes.
Time progressed at the pace of a Stair Master. I heard a brief, loud fit of giggling somewhere.

Damn.

Lacey was a wasted dream. Useless effort. I could have just as easily been with Suzy Sue as was Jelly. He didn’t even care if I was interested. And who gets shot if he gets busted? All of us. That’s who. The difference is that Jelly gets laid first.

There was a knock at the door. I jumped up, grabbed a brass candlestick from a table and stood beside the door. The handle turned. Behind me, the Singer sewing machine rotated half a turn.

Maybe it moved.

I practically deflated when Lacey let herself in.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Can’t sleep,” she said. “Lance is passed out and I keep hearing noises.”

“It’s just this house,” I said casually. “The storm.”

“I don’t think Farmer Brown has drunk himself into a coma yet. There’s a lot of bumping around out here.” She looked around the room, frowned. “Where’s Jelly?”

A giggle erupted down the hall.

“Making friends with the restless natives,” I said.

A slammed door echoed through the house like a gunshot and the howling wind rose in pitch outside. Another door slammed.

There was a knock at the door.

Farmer Brown?

I handed Lacey the brass candlestick and swung open the door.

Chito jumped in and barked. I bent to quiet him before Lacey had a chance to use the candlestick on him. Lance followed Chito. “Where’s the bathroom?” Lance asked.

“I don’t know,” I said.

There were seven doors in the hall: Lacey’s, Farmer Brown’s, the twins, Suzy Sue’s, maybe a bathroom and two mystery doors.

“Can you hold it?”

Lance shook his head.

“Do you know that there’s a man with a gun behind one of those doors?”

Lance held his crotch and drunkenly bounced up and down.

I looked at Lacey. She shrugged. We slinked down the hall looking for the bathroom. I went to the first door on my left, pressed my ear against it, listened. I twisted the knob. It squealed and opened on a room strewn with clothing and a few empty bottles of whiskey. It smelled like a billy goat. The yard light filtered into the
room and I could see an unmade bed. From the scent, I guessed it was Farmer Brown's room. But he wasn't in there.

I pulled the door shut and pressed my ear against the next door. Inside I heard giggles.

Lance whined.

I moved to the next room. The door pushed open quietly, the only oiled hinges in the entire house, but reading lamps on both sides of a queen-sized bed popped on simultaneously.

The lights flickered as a lightning strike pierced the earth somewhere nearby emitting a low rumble followed by the sharp clash of angry thunder.

Farmer Brown's boys sat with the bed cover turned down exposing nude torsos with the thin musculature of ballerinas. They were hairless as children and the reading lights shone through their thin, blonde hair creating golden halos.

Lacey and I stared like longshoremen in a strip club. Unperturbed, the twins held our gazes.

"They're beautiful," whispered Lacey.

The twins nodded, acknowledging the compliment as though they were royalty and it was their due.

"Sorry," I said. "We're looking for the head." I thought about Moroni alone in the dark room "I mean . . . the bathroom."

"It's down the hall," said the twin on the right.

Chito jumped on the bed shaking his whole body with an enthusiastic greeting. He settled between them writhing on his back exposing his stomach. The twins scratched him and buried their faces in his curly black fur. They spoke to him in delighted, baby talk. "Well hewwo. Hewwo Mr. Doggy. You're a BIG doggy, aren't you? Aren't you?"

"Have some pride, Chito," I said.

"Mr. Brown has a shotgun," said Lacey, obviously disgusted at their display. "Could you be more specific about the bathroom?"
They stopped fussing with Chito who lay there baffled, wondering where all the magic had gone.

"The shotgun?" they asked.

"Yes," said Lacey. "And, he’s as drunk as a Kennedy."

Without any discernible signal to each other, the twins hurried out of bed, slipped into oversized yellow gowns, hiked into bib overalls fitted to men twice their sizes, and bent to lacing their hiking boots.

"It’s 3:00," one said.

Chito bounced back and forth, one to the other, sniffing their boots.

"Can’t be long now," the other muttered.

"What’s up?" I asked.

In moments they were completely dressed and throwing clothing and gear into large, internal-frame backpacks. "You don’t want to be around Daddy when he’s drinking," one said.

Their clownish attire was incongruent with the equipment they stuffed into their packs. It had been awhile since I’d been into the hiking scene—not since my days with Lance—but their gear was top of the line, Gortex, ultra strength, double-reinforced, mountaineering, NASA quality shit. From the scratches and nicks, they used this equipment a lot.

"I can’t believe you got Daddy drunk."

"This asshole drove us into a ditch," said Lacey.

"But I didn’t get him worked up prancing around in a wet t-shirt," I said.

At this the twins stopped their packing to look gravely at Lacey.

Chito grinned.

In the barnyard, something shrieked like a rusty nail torn from dry timber.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"Away," said one of them. "When Daddy goes on a tear . . ." His words trailed off.
The twins stuffed small spools of wire, MRE’s, hunting knives, handset communicators, and anything they could reach that was made of Lycra.

“Are those night-vision goggles?” I asked.

The twins glanced at each other.

“Sometimes the headlights go out on the old Ford,” one of them explained.

“Say,” I said, “Can your old man still help us out of the ditch?”

“No,” they said. “He probably doesn’t even remember who you are.”

One of them grabbed something that looked like a range finder and stuffed it in his pack. The other grabbed a spear gun, held it out questioningly.

“Not this time,” his brother said.

The spear gun was tossed into a mixed pile of diving and welding equipment in the corner.

Lacey and I looked at each other.

“Will you help us?”

A shout, primal in its simplicity, frightening in its directness, stopped the twins from answering. It was the same utterance that our not so distant ancestors cried out when something large blundered into the grove where the hairy people foraged for vegetables and scavenged for bloody leftovers. The cry thrilled the buried nerve centers in my mind.

Fight or flight.

Thunder punctuated my numb, civilized indecision.

As surely as my van was mired in a muddy ditch, I was stuck to the carpet. *Flight, you dumb ass,* my wise instincts urged. *Flight!*

You can bet that if there was a tree, I’d have been up that sucker in no time flat. But there were no trees in the twins’ room. No bushes to scatter into. No hillsides to plunge wildly down.

Chito leaped onto the bed then into my arms. Lacey slid behind me and pressed her heaving chest against my back. I was too startled to enjoy our new closeness.
The cry came again. In the space of seconds, it had traveled through time past the
dawn of man evolving into the birth of language. Though still primitive, the cry
communicated a monosyllabic message.

“SHIT!”

It gained complexity, became polysyllabic.

“Bastard!”

Into the Age of Reason, stumbling over the Dark Ages, into the grand
Renaissance.

“You-no-good-sonuvabitching-bastard-shit!”

Finally it arrived in its full glory at the wonderful Present culminating in a hilly-
billy-gansta-rap diatribe of hatred, confusion, and pure, unadulterated rage.

I peeked my head out the door just as Lance tumbled backwards into the hall. His
pants and underwear bound his ankles and pitched him to the floor.

Farmer Brown roared. We had broken the rules. We had opened doors that were
meant to be closed.

“You no good sonofabitch!”

He meant to punish us.

The twins shouldered their packs grabbing a few last minute items—water bottles,
hatchets, cell phones. “We should go,” they said.

I was astounded by their composure.

“Get Suzy Sue,” one of them said.

A branch screeched as the furious wind tore it from a tree and pitched it through a
downstairs window.

The hall was only partially lit by the light from the twins’ room, but I could see
well enough to make out poor, drunk and confused Lance struggling to pull up his jeans.
I sprinted down the hall, beat once hard on Suzy Sue’s door just in case passion had
deafened them to the danger at hand. Then, I flung open the door to Lorelei’s sewing
room.

I screamed.
I screamed three, fast, breathless monkey screams as I bumped into the damn mannequin, leaped backwards and sent the two decapitated heads lolling to the floor.

“Shit!”

I had regressed into monosyllabics.

I pulled my tennis shoes on, grabbed Jelly’s.

*Don’t forget me, Sailor,* said Moroni.

I grabbed the head. Sixty pounds of dead weight. I thought about leaving Moroni, but already I had come too far to abandon him.

Under threat of gunfire, Lacey, courageous Lacey, helped Lance. Even in the stress of the moment, it struck me as funny that this was the third time in less than forty-eight hours that she had assisted him in covering his nudity. It had to mean something and I resolved to figure it out later.

Lacey and Lance were on their feet retreating toward me when Farmer Brown burst from the room. He was dressed in long-handled underwear that pulled up past his sharp knobby knees and his hair seemed in a frantic struggle to escape his scalp. He held a pair of trousers in one hand and a work boot in the other. “You no good skunky little punk ass sonofabitch! Piss in MY boots will ya? Piss in my BOOTS!”

Apparently Lance, in his drunken fugue, had given up the search for a toilet and settled on a less traditional receptacle.

Farmer Brown flung the urine soaked boot after Lance. It struck Lacey in back of the head and she dropped like a winged bird.

“Jelly! Jelly!,” I yelled. “Time to go!”

Farmer Brown pulled up his pants, reached back into his room to grab the other boot. While his back was turned, Jelly and Suzy Sue spilled into the hallway. Suzy Sue tripped over Lacey. Her open robe leaped up her back and her breasts sprang out smothering Lacey’s face. But, she caught herself with her hands.

“Oh,” Lacey moaned. “Oh. Oh.”

Directly behind Suzy Sue, literally right on her ass, Jelly grabbed her hips to stop her fall.
This is what Farmer Brown saw when he turned back to us his arm cocked to huck another boot.

“Oh God,” said Lacey buried beneath Suzy Sue’s farmgirl freshness.
Lightning flashed, held and then flashed even brighter before giving up.
Farmer Brown squinted at the pornographic silhouettes in his hallway.
“Lorelei?”
“Fuck,” said Lacey. “Oh Fuck!”
“Lorelei,” he said again, his dead wife’s name croaking in his throat. “Whore,” he whispered. Then, he ducked back into his room. “Whore!”
“Daddy’s been drinkin?” asked Suzy Sue.

In just a few hours, we had managed to knock Farmer Brown off his rocker and for good. His departure into his room could mean only one thing and we all knew what that was. We picked up our feet and ran like hell.

“Lorelei!” the devil shouted from his room.

Jelly and Suzy Sue lead the way. I pushed Lacey and Lance ahead of me and they tripped, ran, stumbled, clattered down the bare wooden steps of the stairway. Chito yapped at my heels as a shotgun blast tore the handle off the door to my right.

Lightning struck the power lines leading to the house and in a sparkling flash of blue the dim light from upstairs went black.

BLAM!

Who knows what he was aiming at. He was crying and screaming, alternating invectives with his dead wife’s name.

We scrambled over the tree limb that had pushed through the kitchen window. Chito and Jelly yiped as they trod barefoot over shards of glass.

Outside, in the full fury of the storm the twins waved us over to their old Ford pickup. Behind us the house lit with bluish lightning flashes and white shotgun blasts. I pushed Lacey and Suzy Sue in the front and helped Chito and Jelly into the bed of the pickup. We settled between several damp bales of alfalfa hay as the twins jerked and slid out of the barn yard. As they sloshed down the muddy corridor between two barbed-wire
fences, Andre sprinted out of the night and landed as lightly as a gymnast at my feet. Thunder and lightning followed us down the road, and I could see that Andre and Chito were both grinning from ear to ear.
Chapter 20: The Heart of the Monster

Lacey’s quest for her daughter paused. Sweet Heaven served as a place to breathe for awhile, to plan. Always though, her little girl was somewhere in her thoughts.

Andre’s devotion to her was complete, unflagging. I never learned much else about him. I knew he was ex-military and had spent some time in Central America. But that was it. He kept busy fortifying our security. At first, it seemed silly to expend such energy on a place with an open admission policy—if you were cool and we had the room, you could stay. But, we never gave his paranoia much thought. It was just something he seemed to need.

It surprised me, but my devotion to Lacey grew into a loyalty I didn’t really understand. Still, I couldn’t settle down or shake the feeling that we were all just biding our time, waiting for something to happen.

Moroni not only kept speaking to me, but everyone knew it. He spoke, I repeated, and others listened. But it became normal. My golden-headed companion excited no more interest than if he had been a foreign-exchange student.

Jelly kept the pressure up though. Pushed things further. Talked up the stories. I still wasn’t so sure that our golden idol was speaking through me. Maybe I was speaking through me. But, it didn’t seem to matter. The truth of the situation didn’t fit Jelly’s agenda.

The only thing that bound us all together was the search for Lacey’s child.
What was the child to us? Maybe, it was just an uncorrupted goal. It was something real to pursue. Real to believe. To Lance the child was love. He had that kind of fever in his eyes.

The child was something different and the same for all of us.

Everyone, including Andre, had grown up in a world that didn’t believe in anything. All that merchandising, Gen-X shit motored our courses. We didn’t have anything to protest or praise, nothing to stand up for.

The precedents were discouraging.
Look at the 60’s “radicals.” It turns out that they were just partiers. Where were those passionate bastards when Reagan was running for office? Cushy jobs, high rises, smoking pot on leather couches, snorting coke in sharp digs. Free sex with anyone, any time. That’s all they ever really wanted. The whole Come-on-people-now-smile-on-your-brother movement only proved that drugs could deaden the mind until you were ready to accept your inevitable role as cog, gear, fuel, ball bearing, some part of the great, unstoppable machine.

Martin Luther King, Jr., John Lennon, JFK, Elvis and a host of others had helped prove that true change is not possible. 1989, biggest thing to happen to the 90’s, the Wall came down.

Did protests do it?
Did educating the Man open up the Iron Curtain?

Nope. Nothing. Except for a nudge from the American War Machine, gravity stopped the Cold War, not protest, not intellect, not true vision or peace. Nine-point-eight meters per second squared of the same stuff that gave Newton a bump on the head brought down the Wall. And that’s all.

What else you got?

Models of failure everywhere. How about those goofy bastards in Tienamen Square? Run down by tanks. Of course, if they’d had freedom of the press like they wanted, they’d have known damn well that they couldn’t make a lick of difference. Apathy would have saved their lives.

This isn’t your typical complaint. Not really. I’m not saying that the world owes me anything. It’s not about not getting enough hugs from mommy and daddy. I’m not a lonely Nirvana nut wallowing in the misery of my own creation—my life is surprising enough without me drumming up more drama.

I’m not whining about not being heard.

I’m just saying that even if I wanted to be heard, nobody is listening. Nobody ever was.

Chinese on the moon? Grunge Riots in Seattle? Mutant Malaria in New York?
Our Big Apple is rotting.
We've grown up with it, despised it, but have never been able to stop it. So, if you're afraid of getting rotten apples, don't go to Safeway, go to the tree.
Lacey's child was a fresh apple.
Moroni was the tree we gathered around.

Oh, we already had the seeds of evil planted in our new world. I was the only one who heard Moroni. So, his messages could only be heard through me. I was the wise guy, the one with the answers. I was the one who everyone wanted to be with. I wallowed in the big-fishlike fame.

Lance was the only one pure of motive. But, like all those without sin, he could not be long for this world. A flaming chariot would come for him soon.

It's fair to say that we didn't have anything to lose. But, I can't really say that we had nothing either. Luck had found us Sheep with deep pockets. The Dairy Queen who latched onto us at the Rainbow retreat in the Rockys had a trust fund and an empty spirit, a dangerous combination to the preservation of family fortunes.

Life at Sweet Heaven progressed, that's all. It might not even have had a forward progression. I know for a fact though that we weren't hurting anyone.

But, it wasn't really Heaven either.

One day, I smoked some grass with Lacey. She wanted to talk to me about Janna, a woman who I'd been seeing. The younger women came to Lacey with their problems. Janna's problem was me.

Lacey was never slow getting to a point.

"We all live here," she said. "Christ. This isn't high school."

"Janna's a big girl. If she doesn't like it, she can go," I told her.
Janna was upset that I seemed to be developing some Jellylike attitudes toward love.

"Even big girls don’t like to be jerked around," she said.

Lacey was clueless.

Every night, my dreams took me to another world. In that world, Lacey and I were together, dancing with our arms up, smiling like simpletons. We lived like peaceniks, natural and free, poor as Jesuits. Her daughter was always there and Lacey and I each held one of her hands and the world was right, balanced, rolling on its axis like it was actually headed some place in particular, some good place in particular.

Janna was the woman I saw when I was awake.

She had an Art History Degree from some place crazy like the College of The Whirling Vortex in Sedona, Arizona or something. She was fun. I don’t deny that. And she taught me about art.

I spent many nights in bed with her while she traced movements in art, from straight linear perspective to abstract expressionism, across my chest, stomach, and along my thighs. My favorite movement was dada. I didn’t understand it, but she straddled my chest, painted my toes neon yellow and passion plum while I sucked silver dollar hickeys into the backs of her knees and ass.

"I don’t understand. I don’t understand," I moaned.

"That’s it. That’s it!" she encouraged.

She was a good teacher.

Janna is the one who guided us to the Rainbow Gathering in Colorado. Most of the Sheep came from there. They were Rainbow People.

The Dairy Queen, Janna’s best bud from Whirling Vortex school, bought Sweet Heaven for the people who craved snow for the winter. The rest of the year, the Rainbow People usually lived nowhere, roaming the U.S., putting up paper plates and rainbows as promises that love and skinny dipping was close at hand.

The trouble I was having with Janna had to do with a group that formed within Sweet Heaven.
The White Bandanas.

They were a support group who met regularly to meditate, exercise, play music, dance, and boldly go into all that mysterious, New Age, female enlightenment crap where no man has gone before. Perhaps because she was oldest, most beautiful, most tragic, Lacey became the group’s center, a touchstone.

They held meetings in the woods a mile outside of Sweet Heaven where Paradise Creek plunged into Massacre Creek. This was a place with a troubled past.

A century earlier a group of drunken loggers had murdered two brothers, Sven and Charlie Shumaker, who were out herding sheep. The brothers, by the way, are buried right here in Sweet Heaven, the site of the original homestead. Because the local whites blamed the murders on the local natives, it was called a massacre. And the creek came to bear the name.

However, Lacey and the White Bandanas did not choose the site for its sordid history. Rather, they met there because it was just upstream from The Heart of the Monster, a big rock shaped like a half-buried human heart with the pointy end sticking up. Native belief credits the rock as the birth place of their people. Therefore, Lacey and the White Bandanas considered the place sacred. They embraced the convenient belief that all religions are pretty much the same, meant to be customized to the liking of sincere seekers of spiritual truth.

They actually held their first meetings on The Heart of the Monster. Atop the holy stone, they built a small fire, disrobed and sat cross-legged in a circle, chanting, holding hands. Janna and the Dairy Queen shared their knowledge of highly specialized techniques for tapping the energy that powers the universe. Much to the pleasure of tourists whose motor-homes clogged nearby artery, Highway 12, the best way to commune with the universe was to strip the body bare of its earthly bonds.

A dozen or so women, aged seventeen to thirty-something, singing praises to the Great Unknown.

In the buff.
After miles of dull-minded land yachting, the White Bandanas were beguiling mermaids to aged admirals and their azure-haired mistresses. After rough seas of twisting black road, plunges through mountainous peaks and troughs, and blood-rushing crashes through green forest waves, the sirens beckoned voyagers to stop, swim over, behold their beauty, and preserve it forever with Fujimoto 35 mm memories.

Nothing brings down the heat like impediments to tourist travel.

The Idaho County cops soon learned that traffic wouldn’t move until they shooed away the immodest celebrants. Serious business. The naked women were products of a serious problem.

Satan had followed the Pilgrims from the Old Country, plagued the Puritans, and had made his way out west with the Pioneers. Since the cops and townsfolk could never find Satan, they were always on the lookout for his mistresses. The White Bandanas were banned from the rock and had innocently become the object of fear and revulsion.

The cops forbade them to trespass on the Heart of the Monster again and they retreated to the deep woods, as all witches must.

But the damage was already done. Sweet Heaven had made the papers and rumors flew. High school kids haunted the woods outside our perimeter hoping for a glance of the wild, naked witches. They left unfulfilled but carried away inventive tales of witchery, orgies, and animal sacrifice. The stories grew exponentially.

We were communists, cannibals, and Columbians.
We spoke to Lucifer, Yeltsin, and Hussein.

Not once did we get wind of a rumor that suggested we were a harmless commune. Not once did our neighbors come over with a fresh apple pie or an invitation to picnic.

The cops soon followed the high school kids to investigate the rumors that threatened the souls and livelihoods of small-town alcoholics and church goers.

Andre hid during these infrequent visits, but they fueled his paranoia. He got the idea to construct a tunnel from the big house and run it beneath the fence surrounding the property.
We agreed. The tunnel made sense for practical purposes as well. It could be a good place to store our drugs, paraphernalia, and, who knows, maybe even our womenfolk. Jelly also wanted to set up grow lights and cash in on Idaho’s number one crop.

Andre was willing to undertake the project himself. He wanted it that way. He said he was the only one with the training to do it in secret. Unfortunately, “by himself” to Andre meant that he was the only one to give orders. But with power tools, a conveyor belt and strict work details, we dug the tunnel in a matter of weeks.

In the meantime, the women moved their worship upstream to the confluence of Massacre and Paradise. They built fires and danced to guitars, harmonicas, clarinets, and drums. They screamed like ancient warriors. Sometimes they moved wildly, twisting and leaping like electric epileptics. Other times they swayed, heads lolling, limbs limping, like flower children wading through a deep coma of existence.

No men were allowed.

But, their meetings could not be secret. As soon as they began, we could hear them from Sweet Heaven. The men were like cavalry soldiers listening to war drums thump over the winding hills. Those drums, that music, awoke the earth to its ancient memories and created a connection between us men and the vibrant soil below.

Voyeurism came easily to all of us.

Hey, we were brought up on shock TV, a tradition begun with Vietnam casualty numbers listed on the news and refined by our Hollywood foster parents with daytime talk drama. Big Bird taught us the alphabet. Geraldo taught us how to fight. Sally Jesse and Ricki Lake taught us everything in between.

All of the shows taught us to watch.
When the drums called, the men followed.
We spied on the women, the energy of the earth running through our thoughts, our groins, and we didn’t let them have any secrets.

Secrets.
It's our legacy. We don't let anyone have secrets anymore. Moroni helped me understand this. He helped me understand why it's important.
Chapter 21: Rusty’s Porn Zoo

“He is coming. He’s coming!”
Low growls rattled deep in Andre and Chito’s throats.
“Are you ready for HIM? When the sky rains FIRE, the earth spits BLOOD, will you be ready to go with Him?---with HE-IM!”
Tension made soup of the air. Lacey and Jelly clung together in the middle of our group. Lance checked his stride. Unarmed, unaided, unmanned and unwomaned, our passage was blocked and we were trapped between our need to move forward and our instinct to flee.
A standoff.
“Don’t look him in the eyes,” I whispered to Andre. “It’s a sign of aggression.”
Andre didn’t respond, so I checked my periphery. He had disappeared.
“Fucking ninja,” I mumbled.
“Don’t look interested either,” said Jelly.
“Don’t look lost,” said Lacey.
We were stumped. The Great Chief in Washington had not yet granted Denver its National Park status. So unfortunately, there existed no park rangers at the city’s entrance to pass out leaflets with tips about the indigenous wildlife.
“Take Him. Yes. YES. TAKE Him into your HEARTS and be SAVED. SAY-AY-VED!”
The rotten luck of it all.
The twins had pulled the van from the ditch and been more than happy to guide us over the back roads to Denver. They alluded vaguely to some business in this part of the country. The twins and Suzy Sue had even suggested that we stop in Golden to worship in the great shrine to public intoxication—the Coors Brewery. They knew from experience that if you took the short tour you could skip right to the end and claim your two free beers. Although that was barely enough alcohol to phase most cynical livers, it left Chito with a pleasant buzz.
Once in Denver, the twins also assured us that their father’s episode was not that big of a deal. Usually, he shot things up, raged at the world, and settled down after a week or so. Then, Suzy Sue and the twins—we hadn’t even gotten their names—left us at a truck stop at the city’s edge. I was sad to see them go. Their camping trip had to be an interesting one from the strange equipment they had: night-vision goggles, stun guns, bolt cutters.

Now, barely twenty minutes into the city, Andre’s Yellow Paging fingers had snapped us into direct confrontation with the most unpredictable of God’s creatures. More despised than the wino, more aggressive than the pusher, more self-righteous than the cop, before us stood the trembling mass of a fist-shaking, Bible-beating, Street Preacher.

We should have known better. The signs were everywhere: Ace of Hearts Gentleman’s Club, Triple X, Minute Lube. We’d stumbled into his hunting ground. I composed a warning pamphlet in my mind:

**Street Preacher**

**Characteristics:**

- Impervious to loud noises, large crowds, and logic.
- Unpredictable as moose.
- Known for bison-like aggression and hostility.

**Natural habitat:**

- Concrete, cobblestone, bricks, and pavement.
- A diverse species, the Street Preacher can live its entire life in a fairly small area or, if prey is scarce, its range can cover the world. They are territorial and should not be approached.

**Street Preacher Encounters:**

- Make yourself small and unimposing.
- Do not seem interested.
- Do not seem godless.
Do not attempt to reason with him.
If you know what’s good for you, run.

Welcome to Denver.
Enter at Your Own Risk.
Have a Nice Day.

“Stand in his LIGHT! STAND in his LIGHT! Don’t you DUH-Well in the darkness of SEE-IN!”

“Do we have to go in here?” I asked Lacey.
She nodded.
“Shit.”
I licked my finger, held it out. Good. Downwind, the slight breeze was in our favor.

The massive, bull Street Preacher was twenty yards off stomping and rutting up a storm but he hadn’t sighted us. The advantage, slight though it was, was ours.

With a hand held low at my side, I waved the others toward the shadows at the building’s edge. Our goal was merely fifteen yards off—Rusty’s Porn Zoo.

Street Preacher ranted at the sky and the earth. He beseeched both God’s forgiveness and His wrath. A block and a half in the distance, a fierce group of truants sauntered toward Street Preacher’s territory. He winded them with flaring nostrils.

His litany faltered.
Then, with a great breath followed by a sound like an elk’s mating bugle, he challenged them.

“Don’t walk in the DARKNESS!”
On my signal, we slid along the building’s edge toward Rusty’s. Fifteen yards.

“Don’t you LISTEN to the DEVIL!
Ten yards. Single-file—me, then Lacey, then Jelly, then Lance. Halfway there.

“His book is the TRUTH!”
Five yards.

“CHRIST!” This was Jelly’s invocation to the One Most High.
I spun around.
Andre emerged from his hiding place at the edge of a galvanized, metal window well. Practically invisible. I must have stepped right over him. Jelly had stepped right on him.
“You scared the shit out me,” rasped Jelly.
Andre’s eyes flashed red. He didn’t like being caught.
Street Preacher wheeled on us. His black eyes narrowed. He blocked the entrance to Rusty’s Porn Zoo.
“SINNERS!”
Caught.
“SERVANT of the DARKNESS! Are you entering this palace of lost souls? This den of INIQUITY?”
Street Preacher stomped the ground with one foot, dragging it slowly over the concrete making ready to charge.
“Excuse me, please,” I said. “I think my mother’s in there.”
He frothed. Veins pumped brimstone. Mouth spat fire. His finger pumped at Lacey.
“WHORE! JEZABEL! You LAY for the GREAT IMPOSTER!”
“Fuck you,” said Lacey. “You’ve got me confused with that guy.” She hooked her thumb toward Jelly.
“Harlot!”
He leaned toward her.
Andre bent down, lifted his pant leg. The metallic flash of his boot knife glinted in the sun. If not for Lacey’s gentle, white arm touching his chest, I believe Andre would have gutted, skinned, stuffed and mounted that beast right there on the sidewalk.
Lance leapt to the front. “What gives you the right? Who are you to tell me anything?”
Street Preacher cast an appraising eye upon Lance. His tone lowered. “Do you know God? Are you saved little brother?”
“Don’t do it,” I said to Lance. “Don’t reason with him.”

“There is no God,” said Lance.

“There is Heaven lined with pearls and angels. And there is HELL for the SINNER!”

“To each his own,” said Lance. “Why should your religion be any better than mine?”

“Devil’s work. Satan’s hand! You’ll BURN for E-TERN-I-TY!”

“Really,” I said to the Street Preacher. “Thanks really. But mom’s in here. She really needs her medication.”

Street Preacher ignored me, zeroed in on Lance.

“I can help. HE can save you. Your pain. Your questions. The blood of the Lamb will wash it away.”

Lance mumbled something about pain and shifted his eyes to the ground.

“You’re hurting, little Brother.”

Lance nodded humbly.

“Say no to the pain, little brother. Say no to the pain.”

“No,” squeaked Lance.

“Let HIM. Let HIM stop the pain.” Street Preacher lifted his eyes to the sky. “Be washed in his BLOOD!”

Street Preacher snaked a stealthy hand toward Lance’s shoulder that promised to leave him writhing in a sniveling pile of conversion. Street Preacher’s death strike found only air as Jelly jerked Lance backwards and put himself in his place.

Jelly saved him.

“I know where you’re coming from, man,” said Jelly.

Street Preacher eyed him suspiciously. “Are you saved?”

“Praise God, YES!” said Jelly.

“Do you honor the Sabbath?”

“Religiously,” said Jelly.
Street Preacher bent close, his fervent breath parted Jelly’s long, dark hair. “What house do you worship in?”

“The Kingdom Hall,” said Jelly. “I’m a Jehovah’s Witness.”

Like Goliath struck square in the temple with David’s stone, the Street Preacher staggered, “Jehovah’s Witness?”

“I have some literature I’d like to give you,” smiled Jelly stepping forward.

Street Preacher recoiled.

Jelly’s arm extended, empty palm held to the sky while his other hand reached for his hip pocket.

“Have you heard of The Watch Tower?”

“No,” stuttered Street Preacher. “No. NO. NO!”

Wounded and frightened, Street Preacher backed away, arms held as though fending off a strike. He turned back several times to make certain we weren’t pursuing and then focused on the truants who had been watching the spectacle.

Before us now stood the unguarded gate to a tropical world of passion where creatures of all kinds lived in harmony sucking the over-ripe nectar of perversion. The sign said it all:

*Rusty’s Porn Zoo: A Naughty Place for Nice People.*

Our close call on the sidewalk left us breathing rapidly and sweating in a room stuffed with all manner of plastic and metal devices.

And there were snakes.

Live snakes in cages, stuffed ones mounted throughout the place, and plastic ones draped over the shelves of videos. Along with snakes, there were enough surveillance cameras to start a film studio. One camera topped with a stuffed diamond back rattlesnake, coiled, fangs ready for a strike, pointed at us where we stood by the door. I recalled the birds in Salt Lake City perched on the city’s eyes. Those cameras captured nice people too, but these cameras didn’t try to hide.

Chito was too wasted to care about the cameras. He’d started drinking early today and, with the deliberate swagger of the professional drunk, he absently sniffed the
glass snake cages and set to chewing the tail of a stiff rubber boa coiled on the floor near the cash register. Lance sat Indian-style beside him, still shaken from his close brush with conversion.

A tall thin man with an overcoat and Benjamin Franklin bifocals caught my eye. He was breathing hard and sweating. I assumed that he too had just narrowly averted a Street Preacher disaster.

“That’s some angry bull preacher out there, huh?”

“What? What?” A tiara of sweat crowned his high forehead.

“Scary guy, huh,” I said. “That Street Preacher?”

“What Street Preacher? What? What?” The man took a step away from me, turned his back. He had been obscuring a sign that read PAY BEFORE YOU PUMP.

Seeing that he had no time to dally, Jelly and I bid farewell to our fellow intrepid explorer as he journeyed off into an edge world of shadow and moisture. Frustrated cries and groans of hunger drifted from a back room where the man went. I bowed my head in a moment of silence, wishing him a safe journey.

Lacey and Andre spoke to a corpulent zookeeper at the front desk while Jelly and I walked gingerly among wild things that ached to be turned loose. It was sad, really sad, to see these devices and contraptions waiting, straining.

They were exotic creatures on exhibition.

We marveled at the colorful rare insects: pliable pink Venus butterflies, lightning bugs with glow-in-the-dark heads and quivering antennae, and scorpions with shining, ramrod probes. We wondered at the aviary where hummingbirds buzzed sensuously and woodpeckers beat frantically. More amazing yet was the section housing the charismatic megafauna: rechargeable rabbits with rotating ears, beavers with adjustable leg straps, a grand pachyderm with rotating tusks, and a magnificent, turgid, black stallion.

Each indecent, plastic contraption was clawing and biting for position, struggling to exist somewhere between what is right and what is righteous. Each purchase was a gnawing bite into the walls of morality that trapped so many passionate spirits, killed so many wild hearts.
Andre signaled me to come to him.

“You two come in, stand by the door, and keep your mouths shut.” He poked Jelly in the chest. “Got that?”

“This is illegal, right?” Jelly asked.

When he spoke, Andre was unnerving, but his silence was worse. His face clenched around his sharp, brown eyes. He turned on his heels and Andre lead us from the porn jungle like two, gentle mountain goons subdued by our captor.

Lacey’s eyes communicated an urgency that made Jelly and me tense.

“Let me do the talking,” she said to Andre. Lacey turned to Jelly and me, chuckled, “Believe it or not. You guys are the muscle. So try to look tough.”

Then she pointed to Jelly, “And don’t talk.”

Andre didn’t acknowledge her directive. Instead, he fingered a pistol concealed in a shoulder holster beneath his calf-brown, naugahyde jacket that he had unwisely resurrected after its just and necessary death in the seventies. His other hand held a towel. At a silent signal from Lacey, he ducked his head, slipped around the corner, and then called for us to join him. We walked down the hallway past booths of moaning videos and grunting men. The surveillance cam at the hall’s end was covered with Andre’s towel.

“He’s here,” said Lacey. “Just like they said in Salt Lake.”

Andre broke the door with a swift, action-film kick and Lacey, Jelly and I bumbled in at his heels.

The office was not what I expected a sleaze shop back room to be. Other than an Adult Video News calendar that showed a nude couple contorted into acrobatic poses, the room could have belonged to a ten year old girl.

_Funky Music_ blared from a local radio station. A squat man in his mid thirties sat at a desk. His eyebrows were black and so bushy that they looked like two mustaches added to match the one over his lip.

_Get down and boogey

_and play that funky music till you die._
Jelly bobbed an unconscious homage to whiteboy rhythm.

"Hang up the phone, Rusty."

Lacey’s voice was both serious and sad. I imagined that we had cornered the Salt Lake Stabber and were about to reason with him.

Rusty hung up the phone. He squeezed the surprise from his face and replaced it with an expression of bored congeniality.

"Clarrisa? Is that you? You look good."

"It’s Lacey."

Her voice was edged with something purer than hatred or loathing. It clung to the air and made me shift my feet and look at the carpet.

"Ah," he grinned maliciously. "You’ve decided to keep your professional name."

"That’s right," she said. "I can’t believe you were stupid enough to keep yours."

She walked up to his desk. "Where is she, Rusty?"

Rusty pushed himself up, but Andre darted to the desk and set him back into his black leather office chair.

"Uncle Andy?"

"You knew I’d find you." said Andre.

"I wasn’t hiding," said Rusty. He gestured at the office. "Do I look like I’m hiding?"

"Where is she?" asked Lacey.

Rusty ignored her and addressed Andre. "Since when did you start running with the ex-talent?"

Andre crouched beside the office chair. "I think you owe me something," he said.

"I don’t owe you shit, Uncle Andy."

"You’re not my family," said Andre.

Lacey had picked up a black plastic horse and was studying it as if it were a rare piece of art.

"Where is she, Rusty?"

"One phone call and the cops make you go away," said Rusty.
Andre pulled his boot knife, nonchalantly cut the phone cord, and just as casually rammed the knife into the top of Rusty’s foot. Before Rusty could scream, Andre was behind him with one hand over his mouth and the other around his throat. “One phone call can be a long ways away,” he said.

The DJ on the radio was talking rapidly about some kind of accident. Jelly was still humming whiteboy music to himself and I was transfixed by the violence in front of me.

“Where is she, Rusty?”
Rusty calmed. Andre removed his hand and Rusty moaned, tears streaking his face.

“Dad’s going to kill you,” he whimpered.
Andre laughed.
Lacey lost her patience. She hurled the black horse at Rusty, just missing his head. “These are hers. These are her toys. God. You kept her here? What the fuck’s wrong with you?”
She picked up another plastic model and another, pelting Rusty with horses.
“Where is she?”
Instinctively, I moved toward her to calm her. She was screaming now. When I touched her she caught me in the jaw with an elbow.
My instincts suck.
Caught off guard, I fell backward and hit my head on Jelly’s knee who then joined me on the floor.
“Watch it,” he said cupping his knee. “Damn! That hurts!”
My vision retreated into hazy myopia. The three violent people continued with a very, very slow conversation.

There have been unconfirmed reports of an incident at Rocky Flats Nuclear Facility—Rusty seemed to be saying this.

In the same voice Lacey continued—A terrorist organization known only as DEATH has claimed responsibility for the attack.
Weird.
I shook my head.
It was the radio.
Rusty was speaking again in a stressed voice. "I don't have her. I'm telling you. Dad took her from me."
Andre pulled his gun and poked it into Rusty's temple.
"Dad's got her," he squealed.
A soccer ball width, dark pool of blood surrounded Rusty's shoe.
Lacey toyed with a plastic model of a leopard spotted appaloosa.
"Where?"
"With him," said Rusty.
"I should cut your nuts off," said Lacey. The mood she was in, I was more than half-surprised that she didn't.
Lacey nodded at Andre.
"Remember," Andre whispered leaning close to Rusty's ear where he still held the gun, "I can find you in places where darkness gets lost. You know what I want."
Lacey and Andre might have stayed longer, but Chito barked an alarm from the zoo. Jelly and I sprinted. We didn't know what we were running from or running to. It was one thing to be intimidated by Andre, but it was whole other deal to see him jam a knife into someone's boot, someone who seemed to be his own nephew. We wanted out.
In the main store area, Chito was in a struggle with the corpulent zookeeper who was trying to take the rubber snake from him.
Lance slept against the front of the cashier's counter. The zookeeper was 30 times Chito's size, but the little fellow was putting up a brave fight.
Remembering the cameras, I covered my face as I picked up Chito and exited the store. Jelly grabbed Lance and we pushed, pulled and dragged ourselves to the van as quickly as possible. When we were in, Jelly pushed the door locks. I started the engine. We were pulling from the curb when Lacey jumped in front of us and Andre stepped up to the passenger side window.
"You’re nuts! Crazy Bastards!"

"Stop!" hollered Lacey.

"Find somebody else!" I yelled through the cracked windshield. "You’re bad luck. Bad Karma. FUCKING NUTS!"

Andre showed us his weapon through the window. It was a compact, shiny, black gun. I visualized compact, shiny, black bullets worming into my flesh.

We let them in.

As I pulled away from the Rusty’s Porn Zoo, there was movement in my periphery. A teenaged boy in baggy jeans and a FUCT t-shirt bolted down the sidewalk as though he’d seen the devil. Behind the boy, I saw Street Preacher with two other teens who were kneeling on the concrete. Tears streamed from their eyes. Street Preacher had a hand on each of their heads and furiously mouthed words at the sky. Both of the boys raised their hands. Street Preacher then threw back his head as if searching for enemy aircraft.

We got out of there fast. North. Away from Denver. Away from Rusty. Away from the horrible Street Preacher.

When I squinted out the window, all that I could see were clouds, white fluffy ones and one dark one that rose as a column of smoke. We headed North. North toward the dark cloud.
Chapter 22: Accidents

Monica was not a beautiful bride.

She looked downright haggard. Her frantic smile looked to have been painted on by a one-eared lunatic gazing at the night sky. Her hands trembled. She tripped along in tight, traditional-Japanese steps that suggested bound feet. Her weeks of ritualistic, Dexatrim purging were not enough to keep her frustrated thighs from rubbing angrily like two lively badgers strapped together with duct tape beneath a tight white gown. The crowd watched closely not wanting to miss the moment when her enslaved thighs finally broke their silken bonds to leap for freedom.

Everything about Monica was tight. Even her face was swollen and her honey-blond hair, stricken with furious highlights, was bound in a knot that tugged her eyebrows into an expression of amazement or horror or both.

The felons were outside.

"Priests don’t like women in church," said Lacey by way of explanation.

That was fine by me. I didn’t want a S.W.A.T. team busting down the aisle and embarrassing us. I wondered why they even let us stop at the wedding at all. Lacey and Andre had all the power. They had weapons, and they obviously weren’t afraid to use them. They could have forced us to drive them wherever they wanted to go. They could have just taken the van.

But things had changed between us all.

It was as if witnessing their bloody family feud had earned us our blood rites and inducted us into their little secret society. All the way from Denver and while we rented a hotel room, under the alias of the Hughes family, Lacey and Andre spoke as though we had been with them all along.

"The governor has Molly," Lacey kept saying. "Shit. I should have known. We’ve been wasting our time with Rusty. I should have known."

"It will be tricky," said Andre.
Jelly was hip to their discussions. Although as terrified as me by Andre’s violent display, the drama of their situation appealed to the journalist in him. Oh yeah. Investigative journalism at its best. On the front lines.

“We can do it,” said Lacey. “I’ve come too far.”

“What will we do?” asked our intrepid reporter.

I shot Jelly a look meant to reduce him to fine white ashes. *WE?* I looked at Moroni who was perched in Lance’s lap. *Who the fuck does he think WE is?*

Moroni didn’t respond. But I could literally hear the squishing together and pulling apart of bronze cells as his lips spread into a grin and his eyebrows lifted into mock interest.

Moroni didn’t give a shit.

And, since I was still unsure of how his existence fit into my whole scheme of reality, I realized that it could mean that *I* didn’t give a shit. But, I couldn’t for the life of me figure out why I wouldn’t care about something like partnering up with two bloodthirsty lunatics who could very well mean the end of me. Perhaps it was that the bond had already been made. Perhaps partially naked in a Vegas hotel room had crazy glued us all together from the start. It was all very confusing.

Lance was well insulated from our problems. He couldn’t have been further away than if we’d have left him with the Mormons in Salt Lake. He fixated on the smoke that billowed to the east of us. “We can’t eat the reindeer,” he mumbled. “Not anymore.”

“What’s that, pal?” I asked.

“Laplanders have glowing, green babies,” he said. “It’s the reindeer that do that.”

The man just didn’t make sense anymore.

Lacey stroked Chito who smiled in his sleep, perhaps dreaming of a world full of kind-hearted Laceys with soft hands and kissy doggy lips. Perhaps in his dreamscape, all the Laceys were kitties, purring and letting themselves be caught.

“How can we get in?” Lacey asked Andre.

“Well.” Andre swished his cheeks and scratched at the bare skin on his head.

“Well.”
By his fifth or sixth “well,” Lacey shifted in her seat and unceremoniously deposited Chito into a heap on the floor.

“That’s a hell of a way to wake up, little buddy,” I said.

*That’s the only way some people ever wake up*, said Moroni.

Ah, the talking head was back. Yay.

“It’s not like he’s governor of an important state,” said Lacey. “He probably doesn’t even have body guards.”

“He’s got to have some protection,” said Andre.

“Bull shit,” said Lacey. “The manager of Walmart probably has more protection.”

“What are you thinking?” asked Jelly.

“We just walk in and get her.”

I pulled the van off the highway, braked to a smooth stop. Chito, disillusioned by the bumps and bruises of a cruel and unjust world, jumped up and burrowed into my lap just below the steering wheel.

“These are bad ideas.”

Chito whimpered.

I clucked my tongue as though scolding a quarrelsome infant back to good humor.

“Even Chito knows it. You’re scaring him to death. These ideas of yours. They’re all bad.”

“Do you have a better idea?” asked Lacey.

“Yes,” I said. “We drop you and Andre off and never see you again. We go to a wedding and get drunk at the reception. You and Andre go play your little nut games all by yourselves.”

My captain’s chair shifted backward as Andre gripped it to pull himself forward. His breath was hot and moist in my ear. “Then what will you do?”

“Go home,” I said.
"You have no home to go to," said Andre. "Don't you see? Don't you look at the things around you?" His voice softened as though he were speaking to a child about a misplaced toy. "Your home is wherever you are."

"That's shit, man. My home is San Diego," I said.

"Not anymore. You can't ever go back. Not there. Not anywhere. Do you think those guys at the Flying J truckstop were watching you because they thought you were cute?"

I hadn't seen anybody watching us at the truckstop.

"You're in it now. With us. There are forces at work here that none of us can understand and will never even know about."

Jelly scribbled in his notebook.

Andre had a mouthful on his mind.

"I'm older than you," he said as he touched the bald spot on the side of his head. "That's something that happened by accident. But because I'm older than you, I know that the only choice you ever really have is to finish what you start."

Even Lance was listening now.

"Everything happens by accident," he said. "But accidents can happen to you or for you. The ones that happen to you, happen because you tried to go home—wherever the hell you thought that was. Those are usually the bad accidents. The ones that happen for you happen because you kept trying. You kept after whatever it was that you needed." He clapped me on the shoulder and added cheerfully, "Lacey and I are an accident that happened for you. If you try to leave now, we'll just be something that happened to you."

"Get off me," I shrugged his hand off my shoulder.

I had no idea what this happy horseshit meant, but touching Andre made me very uncomfortable.

I put the van back in gear and, with the Rocky Mountains on our left and a column of smoke on our right, we headed straight forward into Boulder, Colorado. We
had a wedding to go to and an untold number of accidents, happy and unhappy, waiting to happen for us.

In Boulder, as the dysfunctional family Hughes, we cleaned up, dressed in our best going-to-town clothes and left Lacey and Andre outside to plan and scheme while we sat through one of Catholicism’s greatest offenses to humanity, the full mass Catholic wedding.

A succession of paintings ringed the vast room and showed the Son of God headed toward Calvary. He had a hard go of it the whole way, lugging his cross, getting spit on, beaten, stabbed and finally killed. But in those paintings, even Jesus seemed happier than Jelly, Lance, or me.

Nothing could dull the exquisite pain of the mass.

To make matters worse, the Nussboms had brought their hometown priest to officiate over the wedding. When the priest introduced himself to the audience, Jelly turned to me and asked, “What did he say his name is?”

“It’s Arabic,” I said. “It’s unpronounceable.”

Jelly scribbled in his notebook.

“I heard that he speaks eight different languages,” whispered the man next to us.

“That’s not true,” Jelly said to the man. “If you listen closely, you’ll see that Father Unpronounceable speaks only one language, but he does it eight different ways.”

“I see,” the man nodded cupping his ear toward the ancient speaker system. “I see,” he said again and turned to whisper to his wife.

Jelly broke the monotony of Father Unpronounceable’s speech by jabbing me in the side and pointing at the backs of people’s heads. “Is that him? Him? Is that him?” He was looking for the Dalai Lama’s brother.

The priest squeezed words, affectations, and intonations into an English sentence that made the language seem brand new to a native speaker. To further reinforce the pronunciation barrier, the speaker system for the back rows of the church was scratchy and had no bass. The effect was a litany of white noise and hesitant pauses as the audience anticipated cues to rise and repeat. All during the ceremony, people were rising
and repeating lines at random so that any passerby might reasonably have thought that a Southern Baptist congregation had stormed the church and taken it over.

However miserable I was, Monica looked like someone had shoved bamboo shoots under her fingernails, put thumbtacks in her shoes, and killed her pet goldfish just before the proceedings.

Lance was visibly in pain and Chito whined at my feet. Hey. I wasn’t about to leave him outside with Andre and Lacey. The little fellow had endured enough.

Jab.

“Is that him?” whispered Jelly.

Jab. Jab.

The Nussboms looked sharp. As though his son had brought home a thoroughbred with real potential, the Colonel’s great girth swelled even greater than it had been when we saw him on ESPN2.

Junior looked equally pleased.

Although smaller than his father, Junior puffed himself up as though he were a little boy grinning into a mirror, flexing his cute little tummy muscle next to his father’s great big tummy muscle.

You bet. They were a Hallmark Father’s Day card just begging to happen.

The bride and the groom spoke garbled words through the sound system. The priest said things, lots of things. When he looked solemn, we looked solemn. When he laughed, we turned to each other and we laughed too. Monica and Junior tied each other loosely with a rope, symbolizing, I presume, the new freedom to copulate in all manners straight or perverse free from sin and threat of eternal damnation. The holy bond of matrimony had to include some perks or even Catholics wouldn’t do it.

They nodded to the Virgin Mary.

They exchanged rings.

With tearful pronouncements of love and eternal sacrifice, they exchanged vows. I knew they said “I do” not when I heard it over the warped speakers, but when I heard a
loud gasp as Cupid set his feet hard against Lance’s chest and with both hands wrenched free the barbed arrow that he’d buried years before into Lance’s heart.

Junior bent to kiss her.

Monica’s knees buckled.

She swayed and Father Unpronounceable grabbed her as if she were his own fallen lover, and he held her.

The audience gasped.

The father and the groom seemed to be asking her if she was alright.

She didn’t move. Didn’t flinch.

She could even have been dead.

Perhaps those in the front rows heard the conversation, but all I saw was Father Unpronounceable shrug, mumble something musically scratchy like “your new pizza bride,” and then he passed her limp body off to Junior.

Junior took her.

He held her in one strong, wealthy arm, lifted her veil with the other and kissed her so hard and so long that he may have been sucking her life out and breathing in his own.

Either she was passed out and just coming to, or she was completely within her faculties, or it was the heat, or it was the nearby paintings of early Christian butchery casting dangerous subconscious thoughts of violence into her mind, or maybe she just realized right then and there that it was her wedding day and that every moment from here on out could only bring her closer to an inevitable and lonely death, but Monica screeched.

Her voice rung in the vaulted roof and drained the stained-glass windows of their color.

She screamed.

It was a primal scream. It was Andre shrieking at the furious face of the tornado. It was Lacey wailing for her lost child. It was Lance watching his heart freefall into the great empty abyss. It was all these things. It was all these things, and more.
And then she was silent.

Her silence was met with the great silence of the witnesses. Chests heaved, lips licked, and thighs scratched. The room darkened as color returned to the church windows.

Monica returned Junior’s kiss.

She took him.

She pulled him to her as though she were a sailor home on leave and he were a hapless virgin just passing the docks headed for the fish market. As Junior struggled to regain his balance, Monica’s unhappy thighs burst free in a sound of ripping seams that I will always associate with love and marriage.

Then, she turned him loose. Junior weaved but kept his balance. She ran the back of her hand over her mouth and stood there in her torn white dress like a ravaged maiden. Only now, for the first time since she had walked out into the crowded room, she smiled. Her smile was a victorious smile.

“There,” said Jelly. “That’s him!” He dashed away to confront the man whose brother led the Buddhist world.

Lance sucked in his lower lip. Chito nudged his leg in doglike empathy. Perhaps Chito too knew the pain of lost love. Perhaps some bitch once did him wrong long ago.

I was glad it was over. It was good to go.

Stepping outside was like finding shade and cool water on a hot day in the Hell. Relief. The women dawdled, lingering, breathing in the fading fragrance of Monica’s wedding. But the men scattered like greased buckshot. Something off had happened in there. That wasn’t just a wedding ceremony that we’d suffered through, that was a dangerous, subversive strike against each and every masculine one of us. We wanted away. Away. And we wanted away fast.

When the skittish men departed the wedding, Andre all but jumped out of his skin. Their dark suits concealed special forces tattoos, tasteful tie tacks hid miniature cameras, and patent leather shoes transmitted secret messages to henchmen amassed in the shadows of suburban homes and behind opaque windows of delivery vans.
Sharp dressed men just plain set Andre on edge.

To tell the truth, the paranoia was wearing off on me. Although I brushed it aside as nothing more than infectious abnormal psychology, I kept thinking that some of the wedding guests were watching me during the ceremony. Sure, Lance’s occasional moans of anguish, Jelly’s excited cries “Is that him?”, and Chito’s complaints during the wine-tasting portion of the mass might have explained errant glances. However, I felt watched.

Two men, smartly attired and wearing tinted lenses, had sat just off our shoulders on the groom’s side of the church. They alternatively turned in their seats to gaze at the door of the church and every time I noticed their movement, they intentionally were not looking at me. Hey. They may have been struggling to maintain sanity in the face of a full mass and merely looking toward the exit like martyrs look toward the sky. Still, it got on my nerves.

When Lacey said, “I’m hungry for rich people food,” Andre didn’t protest. I was surprised that he would delay our trip to mingle with the well-dressed minions of shady good and happy evil. But, when we all loaded into the Dodge, I realized that Andre didn’t have any more idea than I did of where we were going next.

His trip had ended in Denver with his nephew’s foot shiskabobbed on the end of his boot knife.

This wedding was the end for me and Jelly and Chito and Lance. The end of our trip.

Lance could now sober up, don gray clothing, a gray life, and work to effect change in the gray battle lines of politics. I could return to a forklift or a coffee shop or an office supplies place and eke out a suitable existence. Jelly could keep looking for the perfect story. He’d find it; what’s that line? Oh yeah. He was just crazy enough to do it. Chito would be fine wherever he was so long as somebody kept his liver well-oiled with Mr. Adolph Coors’s wonderful bladder filler.

But Lacey was different. Her trip wouldn’t end until she found her little girl. She had somewhere to go and a reason to get there. And, with or without a reasonable plan, with or without help, the light that gleamed in her eyes said that she meant business. She
meant to scream, grab life's accidental face by the back of the neck, pull life to her, force open cold lips, and stick her tongue down life's throat. Lacey clearly wasn't where she'd chosen to be, but she would have her way and there was nothing anybody—not Andre, not me, not Jelly, Lance, Chito, the Brooks Brothers, or some overfed politician in a backwoods state—could do about it.

"I could eat one of that fat bastard's horses," Lacey said.

Without debate, we drove to the reception to get Lacey some rich people food.
I don’t know where contentment comes from. Some people get it from reflection, prayer, work or just plain, old-fashioned age. Some people get it from weight gain. Smokey Joe is sitting in his favorite armchair in the porch shade. He has a small blue cooler filled with my Coors and ice and an open beer moves up and down on the gentle, heaving swells of his chest. Smokey Joe is content. He’s right there, all three hundred pounds of him, in the sharpshooters’ cross hairs, tapping his foot as Patsy moans about her problems, but he’s content.

Crazy.

I never liked fighting fires and I sure as hell don’t like jumping into them. But I imagine what Smokey Joe must have looked like, his great mass hurtling toward some outlaw fire on rampage through the wilderness. If I was a fire, it would have put the fear of God in me.

But I’m no Smokey Joe.

I’ve never read a shifting wind. And, even watching from the periphery, I always stood far enough back to avoid any fire devils that might spin themselves off the main firestorm.

I have always surrounded myself with people who were opposite from me. Maybe I was compensating for a weak spirit, a timid heart.

Jelly the Journalist was a watcher too. He just watched up close.

But Lance was always passionate as hell. So was Monica, even though she pranced around too prim and too proper in her sprightly L.L. Bean outfits. She wasn’t afraid to could jump in, stir things up.

I think of Monica at her wedding. She’s awful for leaving Lance, for giving up on love, but it took courage to go through with it. It’s absurd, I know, to say that someone who marries the lap of luxury needs courage, but it’s true. She saw a life that would give her freedom from monetary concerns and she took it. She married Junior even though he’ll probably be a self-important, fat bastard like his father. She married him even
though her friends would desert her, say she sold out. She did it for herself. Sometimes it takes courage to do the things that are best for us.

Things are hot.

Sweet Heaven is a live round sitting too close to the campfire. Something has to give real soon. Now is the time to take a lesson from Monica, to find the courage to do what is best for us.

The feds have been buzzing us with black helicopters for the last three hours. I don’t know if they’re trying to draw fire, if they’re trying to get a closer look at the grounds, or what.

We’ve been under siege now forever. Well, a few days anyway. Of course, we have plenty of food and we draw water from the well. But the stuff we get from the store won’t last. We aren’t self-sufficient. Never planned to be. We do still have fresh milk though. Old habits die hard and Suzy Sue talked the others into approving the purchase of a couple cows, Daisy and Amber Lynn. Earlier this morning, I saw her walking with them along the fence. Two ponderous beasts jingling along with their loose-hipped strides picking at dandelions. I haven’t seen Suzy Sue in a long time, so I’m sure she’s with them in the barn, cooing in her gentlest bovine assurances, whispering, soothing, keeping all this commotion from curdling their milk.

The beetle-eyed negotiators are still at it. They really gave us a scare with that new machine they brought up to the gates, but it is not as immediately lethal as we’d feared.

A huge television.

We are relieved.

“Thank God,” says Jelly. “It takes years for a television to kill you.” He jots in his bible, looks up to see if anyone is interested, then continues regardless. “Eighteen years, to be exact.”

“Why eighteen?” asks one of the wide-eyed White Bandanas.

“Don’t encourage him,” I say.

The huge screen lights up with static. Two technicians in riot gear oversee the presentation and soon, there are two kittens, one a long-haired brindle, the other fat and black.


“Molly,” says Lacey. “It’s Molly.”

A little girl with sandy hair wearing a green jumper has joined the cats. She picks them up and hugs them to her mugging for the camera.

“Are you sure?”

She ignores me, of course.

The scene changes. Molly is now in a red dress and a white sun bonnet. She licks an ice cream cone.

Beetle sits in a director’s chair to supervise this production. He holds the bullhorn to his lips. “Clarissa Jacobs. Clarissa Jacobs. Molly wants her mother.”

Lacey does not speak. The television now shows Molly going through some kind of ceremony standing with other children saying the pledge of allegiance.

“It’s too late,” says Jelly. “They’ve already got her.”

I understand what he means. All the children, hands on their hearts, stand like Hitler youth pledging allegiance to Old Glory. We can’t hear the words over Patsy Cline, but I know they are saying words like Liberty, Justice, Republic, Indivisible. They are earnest. I actually felt my heart sink. Lacey’s little girl is praying to the gods outside of Sweet Heaven. She is affirming her faith in the Beetles, the camo guys, the cops, the hypocrites, all of them.

“No,” says Lacey. “You’re wrong.” Then she turns to me. “Could they have her here?”

“If you come out peaceably, we’ll take you to your daughter,” the voice booms.
“No,” I say, cringing as I wait for another punch in the face. I grab my own bullhorn.

“We know you don’t have her!”

Beetle confers with his stooges. They make theatrical gestures, shake their fists, slap each other’s hands, nod their heads in agreement and disagreement. Beetle then picks up the bullhorn.

“Yes we do.”

“No you don’t!” I say.

He turns to the others. They repeat the theatrics. “Yes we do.”

Lacey grabs the bullhorn.

“You bastards have no right to have my child!”

“Yes we do.”

She continues, “READY!”

“Miss Jacobs. If you surrender, we will take you to her.”

“AIM!”

The negotiators in their bright jodhpurs and jaunty caps leap for cover. Beetle crouches behind his director’s chair. “There is no need for further violence!”

“FIRE! FIRE! FIRE!”

Small shapes at the far edge of the clearing and throughout the visible perimeter jump for cover. I crouch, Jelly ducks behind an armchair, pen poised and ready. Beetle tumbles behind the trailer on which rests the television. Dr. George and the tree freaks cover the twins. Even Smokey Joe adjusts his cooler so that the beer might not be in the line of fire.

No shots are fired.

Lacey throws open the front door, tromps down the porch, bullhorn in hand. “Get OUT! You’re NOT welcome here! LEAVE!”

I peer over the window ledge. The television has gone static. A camo guy kneels beside it fooling with the components.

“Go HOME!” yells Lacey.
“Go home! Go home!” Lance chants from the roof.

A wadded pair of jeans land on the front yard.

“Go home! Go home!”

I hear it from upstairs and across the compound coming from the bunkhouse and barn.

“Go home! Go home!”

Lance’s shirt, socks and underwear land in the yard.

“Go home! Go home!”

I feel the chant rise in my throat. Jelly gets into it. I imagine somewhere in the dark earth beneath us is Andre and his volunteers paused amidst of their gruesome tunneling to join in.

It frees us.

Maybe there are still only thirty of us here, but our voices are big. Bigger than a mere flock of sheep. In our voices, we hold generations of righteous indignation. Everyone who has ever endured the unendurable joins us. We are the tea partiers in Boston, the Indians with Geronimo, the songs from Selma, the students at Kent State, and every rally successful and not.

Our small voices become a force.

We drown out Patsy’s uncontrollable obsession. Beetle can’t yell us down. Our voices become the center of the universe and we feel ourselves giving life, creating it.

Go home! Go home!

Yes. Even Moroni joins the chant.

Perhaps this is the way out that he meant.

Perhaps he meant that freedom starts from within.

Perhaps he meant that escape means expression, raw and unstifled.

I grab Moroni’s chanting head and step out into the yard. Jelly follows me.

Others emerge from the house and the outbuildings dribbled out people.

“Go home! Go home!”
It is a strategic mistake to betray our numbers and hiding places, but the chant gives us strength. The wind breathes a warm gust from the hills. It joins in. The frogs in the sewage pond wake and join. Janna has our turtle, Dart, in her hands and is dancing in circles, holding him over her head. The cows bust out of the barn jangling and jingling. I hear Dr. George, the tree freaks and Jeremy and Joshua chanting inside. Even Smokey Joe limps drunkenly into the yard slopping beer from each tremendous raised fist.

"Go home! Go home!"

We are hot.

On fire and unstoppable. Our righteous pleas must appeal to the gods. They must. A conviction that the feds have to leave fills us with hope.

But that’s what the feds specialize in.

They know the best methods to quell rebellion, to turn hope into wild fantasy. I mean, you’ve got to hand it to them.

They don’t leave.

They don’t storm the compound.

They don’t send their Goliath after our scrappy little David. They don’t even take cheap shots at us while we’re out in the open. Instead, they do something far less predictable. Something that surprises us all.

They turn the television back on.

It is not the natural soporific effect of the television that calms us. It is the surprisingly unsuitable and decidedly not very conservative subject matter. On a television that only moments before broadcast the beautiful Molly in all her tender innocence and gaiety now plays a video that shows the explicit act of sex between a woman and a man. It is graphic enough that even Jelly looks taken aback.

The lizard in my brain skips with delight.

The two characters on the video hump like frantic hyenas. They jam themselves against one another as if they are trying to fuse. The man has the kind of penis that is a chore just to lug around— I mean, it is really big—and the woman has an insatiable need to have that monstrosity rammed into one of whatever of her orifices that it might fit.
They are serious practitioners of their art. They’d make a whole klatch of kama sutra students sit up, take notes, and maybe even blush. They perform sex with the maniacal intensity of mental patients, the reckless determination of missionaries, and the expertise of congressional pages. But they are killing each other with their bodies.


The depraved couple fornicates as if they were trying to do it so completely, so thoroughly, that they’ll never have to fuck again, that they’ll never even have to breathe again. The vision raps us all in a horrible spell.

We have to watch.

I recognize the man as Rusty from the Denver porn zoo. The thought crosses my mind that when Andre stabbed his foot, he must have come dangerously close to chopping off the head of his penis. The woman who had a white pubic mound to match the long white hair that spreads beneath her like a sweaty, woven rug is, of course, Lacey.

Patsy Cline reclaims her position as top noise maker.

Lacey drops the bullhorn and returns to the house. The others filter back to their hiding places while I alone stand outside. I stare at this vision, this angel, in her sordid nudity.

The image doesn’t match my desire.

She heaves herself up and down on Rusty’s angry rod. She moans and throws herself at him. This is not the woman who I leer at in my dreams. This is not the tender creature who dances topless on the Heart of the Monster.

“This isn’t right,” I mumble. “This isn’t right.”

Lacey is a lot more than you want her to be.

The lizard hisses when I tear my gaze from Lacey’s sexploits to look upon the head in the grass. “But not this, Moroni,” I say. “This isn’t her.”

But this is real.

His head rolls two feet from me when I kick him in the ear. “Shit, Moroni.” I limp over to the bullhorn.

“Shut it off or you die!”
It is a hollow threat.

"You hear me Beetle? The party's over. We're not coming out. Not today, not ever. And we don't want you here. GO HOME!"

They don't turn it off. But what they do is switch the music back to Bach.

It is inconceivable. The depths of their dementia is astounding. It has never occurred to me that this kind of torture could be as awful as the physical. But it is.

Lacey isn't nearly as worked up as the rest of us. The feds keep airing the tape over and over. She ignores it.

_Do it! Do it! Oh God yes!_

It's her voice pumped up occasionally in the midst of Bach's gentlest strands. The negotiators rib each other with their elbows when she really gets into it. I'm half surprised that they aren't stripped down to jock straps snapping each other in the ass with wet, locker room towels.

_Oh Fuck! Yes!_

"There's no infection," says Dr. George. "The bullet went clean through."

Jeremy—or is it Joshua?—is weak. They're both resting.

"Will he be OK?" I ask.

_I'm cumming. Ohhhhh. Ohhhhh. YES!_

"The stress is no good for him," says Dr. George as he fools with his instruments.

"Bad medicine," he grins and slaps me on the shoulder.

"Should he be in a hospital?"

"Hell no," says Jelly. "More people die in hospitals than in airplane crashes or bathroom accidents."

"I suppose that's true," says Dr. George. He turns to me. "The wound is clean and there is no infection." He shrugs. "I don't think it's his time yet."

"Oh good," says Jelly. "He's a fortune-teller too."

There is a pause in Lacey's ecstatic squalls. The screen goes black.

Rewind.

Play.
A Reptilian Production.
A Rusty Baker Presentation.
Wedding Night with the White Princess.
Starring Rusty Jacobs.
Introducing Lacey Storm.

They walk into a room. They don’t speak. They strip. They begin to abuse each other’s bodies.

I watch for a minute to appease the itching in my skull.
A chopper buzzes Lance on the roof. Smokey Joe on the porch half-heartedly swears and tosses an empty aluminum can after it. He does not rise from his armchair.

“Have you ever had a child?” asks Lacey.
I don’t know if she’s talking to me or Jelly so I don’t respond.

“Have you?”
“No,” I say.

“Not that I know of,” says Jelly.

“Men are less than pigs,” she says. “Not even pigs.”

The light is waning. This isn’t like San Diego where the sun will hang blood red over the far edge of the ocean until it sinks suddenly like a foundered ship. Here in these low mountains, the sun goes down early and dusk without sun or moon lasts a long time.

Take it, Baby. Yeah, take it all.

“Later, I knew,” she says. “You won’t see it on the tape. I wish it was on the tape.”

Chito pokes his head through the door. He’s been drinking with Smokey Joe. His lolling pink tongue that suggests a garrulous mood slurps back into his mouth when he sees Lacey, senses her mood. He backs clumsily out, slinks to his bowl, and scratches Smokey Joe’s leg to let him know that he’ll have another round after all.

“Women know. I think men do too,” she says. “That’s the night we conceived Molly. It’s a home video that they’ll probably show her some day, but later I laid on that bed feeling her life begin. I was happy.”
Ask her about the video, says Moroni.

“No,” I say.

“I told Rusty, right then, that first moment that I thought it.” She smiles at the memory. “He cried. We both cried.”

Do it! Do it! Oh God Yes!

Ask her, says Moroni.

“You don’t have to,” I say.

She tugs at a loose strand of her snowy hair. “I didn’t know he was taping us.”

The lizard retreats as her sadness reaches the dark places of my mind.

“He sold the tape even though he knew it was the night that Molly came into the world. The son of a bitch. He cried that night.”

The frantic sounds of sex quiet as a less vigorous scene plays out. Bach dances over the courtyard. Shadows are reaching out to each other as if yearning to satisfy some great need.

“I stayed with him for a long time though,” she says. “For Molly. But I took the name, my professional name, from the tape so he wouldn’t forget it. Forget what he’d done. I stopped being Clarrisa, but I finally left him when I realized that he didn’t care.”

I hear Jelly’s pencil scratching against his cheap Walmart pages.

Lacey stops his hand with a glance. She wanders over to the couch, flops onto it. She reaches for one of Lance’s gin bottles and sips from it. I hear her mumble something about a “golden-headed watch.”

“What is it, Lacey?” I ask. “What did you say?”

“Go ahead and watch. I’m not ashamed of love,” she says. “I’ll never be ashamed of love.”

Who’s better? The guy with the camera or the guy who buys the tape? She has me thinking.

Go ahead and watch.

“Bite me, Moroni.”
The shadows meet, hold hands, and link gray light with gray light. I know they’re out there with their scopes and cameras. The feds. The camo guys. The Rusty’s. It’s not right that they’re watching us. Somebody has to make them stop it. Somehow. Someday. There has to be a way to stop something that isn’t right.

Nothing moves in the courtyard or near the barn. Suzy Sue rounded up the Guernseys and got them back inside. I look at the clock on the wall. 7:00. Milking time was an hour ago. I imagine Suzy Sue’s strong fingers squeezing their udders.

I can’t help it. I’m a little turned on despite my anger.

The feds have brought in those big spotlights you see on the movies. They are strobing them over the compound in random circles. I have the eerie sensation that I am in a Russian gulag and nobody knows I’m here. I guess it’s supposed to keep us awake. I guess it will work too. These are probably students of the same guys who teach Chilean dictators finer points of torture.

I wonder why our tormentors don’t want us making our decisions with clear heads. I wonder, too, how they’ve managed to keep us out of the media. Over the radio and on the television—our television—we aren’t making much of a splash in the news. Yes. I know subversive groups are a dime a dozen in Idaho, but that doesn’t make them any less threatening. We could be doing anything in here. Hell. We could be making bombs, cooking drugs, or even home-schooling children.

We haven’t even gotten calls from the sensationalists. Where are Stone Phillips and Wolf Blitzer when you need them?

I see tombstones in the spotlights.

The tombstones are not a vision of Apocalypse. For that matter, they are more like a physical manifestation of our eventual salvation. Really. I’ve been thinking. Isn’t death the only true escape?

I ponder the small cemetery. It is a family plot that dates back to the late 1800’s. The family were original homesteaders here. The name is German: The Schumakers.

Dr. George walks up beside me, his footsteps are loud like a white man. He follows my gaze to the tombstones. “My Grandfather knew that family.”
“Did they make shoes?” I ask.

Dr. George slaps me on the back. I realize that he is always ready to laugh. His presence is like that of a tipsy uncle and I loosen up.

“My grandfather called them ‘Crazy White People,’” he says. “They grew sheep and became angry at the bears, coyotes and wolves for eating them.”

“So they were shepherds,” I say. “What happened to them all?”

“They wandered into the mountains to kill all the animals,” he says. “They were good killers. For every sheep they lost, they would kill ten predators. But, my grandfather said that the killing made them crazy. When all of their sheep were gone, they finally killed themselves.”

“Suicide?”

“I doubt it,” says Dr. George. “Grandfather never let the facts get in the way of the truth.”

He shrugs.

“I think they all died of the flu.”

There’s a thump out the window. Lance has just slid off the roof. In the thin light cast through the window, I see his bare buttocks raw and red, riddled with slivers from our cedar-shake roof.

“Dr. George,” I say, “I hope you didn’t burn all your sage. I think you have another customer.”

Lance rolls over, looks up weakly through the window at Dr. George. He makes his best AIM fist and says, “Hoka hey!”

_Do it! Do it! Oh God Yes!_

The negotiators garble away at the bullhorn. A chopper throbs just beyond the meadow. Bach’s music tiptoes deeper into our veins. Jeremy and Joshua groan. Chito staggers, drunk as a drama teacher, through his little door and collapses with a sigh between them.

The spotlights wind over the tombstones.
Dr. George shakes his head. "Go get your friend," he says. "I don't think this is such a good day to die."

Lacey, perhaps out of sheer habit, helps our naked friend inside. Lance is pale and bruised. She sets him next to the twins.

"This has to stop," she says.

There is a small vibration coming through the heavy shag carpet. Unless the feds have sonar equipment, they don't know about the conveyor belt that rumbles away underground. It is also a little gratifying to know that Bach is covering the sound.

"It will stop," I say. "We'll stop them."

I feel like getting my hands dirty. I'm not just going to sit here and let accidents happen to me. Not anymore.

*You know the way out,* says Moroni. *Get to it.*

I think about what Lacey said earlier and I turn to her. "I'm not ashamed of it either," I say.

I think she almost smiles.

"Let me know if anything unusual happens out there," I say and I leave to join the diggers.
Chapter 24: Desperados

A government cartographer slaps mosquitoes, jumps at squirrel chirrups while dreaming of coal smoke and gas lighting back east where there awaits an emaciated, porcelain socialite of fine breeding and impeccable manners. This is the man I see when I try to picture who named the Rocky Mountains.

One day this intrepid, albeit profoundly uninspired, cartographer slipped while taking a bearing to avoid entering a deep, monster-infested grove of trees. He scraped an already scarred shin against a rock, shook his fist at Heaven.

“A curse upon these damn, rocky mountains! Damn these Rocky Mountains!”

Fortunately, only bureaucrats listen to the curses of small-minded men. This mountain range that stretches across most of North America far exceeds its dull name. Still, I wonder why the same bards who named the Sangre De Cristos, the Scapegoats, the Bitteroots, and the Cascades couldn’t have been consulted before the Rocky tag was finalized.

We traveled by dark letting our new friends navigate. Tamara the Dairy Queen and her sidekick, Janna, were breaths of fresh air in our morbid road show. Unlike Andre, these girls scouted winding rocky roads with competence.

For several hours, we twisted into the mountains on skinny paved roads, then onto gravel and finally onto dirt. When we reached a ragtag herd of VW buses, gremlins, and two-wheel-drive, foreign mini-trucks with homemade, wooden canopies, Andre directed me to drive further.

I pulled the van off the road into the bushes and we poured out. I cringed when I saw Andre pull a hatchet from his bag of clothing.

I gave him room.

He grabbed a slender tree and terminated its short and, until now, wholly uneventful life.

“Horrible,” said Janna.

“Shame,” said the Dairy Queen.
“Pick up that tree,” said Andre.

I thought about Lance chained to an old-growth Douglas fir defending it the way a western hero might defend villagers from desperadoes. I thought about transpiration and carbon dioxide and the death of countless rainforest species. I thought about picnic benches knocked together from shards of 500 year old redwoods.

I remembered a huge tamarack with a dead and rotting top that stood sentinel over a small clearing and a pure, cool spring near my childhood home in Libby, Montana. It was a neighborhood landmark called Old Knobby. One day, a merry band of woodsmen showed up. They were good with the axe. They knocked over the snag, took the nearby, marketable timber, and dozed slash-piles of jagged limbs and bleeding stumps. Too busy whistling while they worked, the loggers were not interested in saving the saplings. What they didn't cut, they dozed. The land was obviously owned by some absent baron, maybe in Kentucky or California. The owner would have only seen dollars. But it killed that spot in the woods.

As suddenly as they were there, the woodsmen were gone. The spring went dry. The animals moved on. My father, his own limbs ruined from working in the woods, probably sharpened the saws that did it. There had been no reformed gunfighter to put it all on the line for Old Knobby.

I though about that as I picked up the saplings Andre had cut and leaned them over the van.

It was a short hike to the campsite. As we approached, Janna and the Dairy Queen started yelling.

“We love you!”

“We love you!”

A hulking shape emerged from the trees. He clasped me in a classic, Greco-Roman bear hug and lifted me off the ground.

Chito yelped.

I wheezed.

“I love you,” the man said.
“Let me go,” I squeaked. “Please.”

“I love you,” he said and then visited his affections upon the rest of our crew. Yes. Even Andre. And when that giant man set Andre back down without a scratch on his body, a choke hold, a knife wound, or a karate chop, I thought the world as I had come to know it had once again flipped on me.

We set up camp together near a large granite shelf that could provide shelter from bad weather.

Lance found a spot for Moroni in the crotch of a tree near the cook tent.

We needed relaxation.

We needed to get our heads about us and plan our next move.

The wedding reception had been a disaster. That episode alone was enough to require a long rest.

Monica had been in good spirits. But we didn’t really get to talk to her. She was too busy with the fake smiles and the I-am-so-happy-you-could-comes that it was a lot like interacting with a cardboard cutout of her instead of the real person. She did furrow her brow when she found out what I did for a living. Furrowed it deeper when she found out what Jelly did. And, for Lance, she had a proper kiss and a hug that behooved a proper debutante.

“What will you do?” she asked me. “You’ve got so much to offer the world.”

“He’s looking to marry rich,” said Lance.

She ignored him.

But I felt attacked. So what if my chosen career meant not having a career at all? Jelly’s wit and nonsense would have been useful at the moment, but he had already spotted the bridal party. Apparently, the frugal Southerners had found an extra set of Reconstruction drapes to dress up the maids of honor and they nanced about pretty as could be.

Jelly sniffed at their bodies, minds, and spirits:

_Do you rock climb? You have the long, defined arm muscles of a rock climber._
I thought I might go to the mountains in Peru to work with the Natives and hike.

This wedding is palatial. That's quite a spread of desert dishes. Do you want to have a dip after the reception? On hot days like this, it's nice to get wet and lay around in the sun . . .

Go boy.

Monica talked a little about her experience in the Peace Corps. With a precious air of condescension, she talked about the wonderful African cultures and how, even though they were backwards and couldn't understand modern advancements, we could learn a lot from them. When she told about meeting Junior while hiding in the mountains one day to escape the rioting villagers, Lance got disgusted and melted away into the crowd.

"It turns out," she flipped her flaxen hair, "that they were celebrating the harvest. We were so embarrassed. But that's when I fell in love with Junior."

"Was that before or after Lance went to visit you?" I asked.

Oh yes, I was positively catty.

I knew better than to let Lance leave my sight. But it was Chito who signaled that something was wrong. He rocketed through the room like a rat abandoning a space shuttle. I recognized the symptoms immediately, dashed outside, scanned the ground for discarded clothing, searched the trees and roofs for naked revelers.

To make a long story short, Lance had one hallucinogenic toad left. Although petrified from its days in the glove compartment, the toad unleashed its horrible, dried up potential in the wedding punch bowl.

Colonel Nussbom started braying like a donkey, slapping people on the back, and boasting on his new daughter-in-law. Junior curled up in a corner, hugging the characters from the top of his wedding cake and reverting to a clicking dialect that he'd picked up while spreading the American gospel abroad. When the socialites and industrialists
began to jitterbug far too enthusiastically to Lawrence Welk’s greatest hits, I rounded up the crew and we got the hell out there before the Colonel started stripping and Father Unpronounceable started speaking in eight different tongues.

It’s not Lance’s fault. He may never have had full control of his faculties. And the wedding was too much. To his credit, however, he contented himself to an alcohol memory purging with stolen bottles of cheap, pink champagne.

We bid Monica farewell. We weren’t the only ones saying goodbye either.

The Dairy Queen and Janna said their good-byes too. Of course, the Dairy Queen was rich enough to maintain a relationship with Monica if she had wanted to, but the rest of us were set adrift. It is against nature to mingle above or below your status. It’s like when you see family pets, cats and dogs, sleeping together. It’s not right. Really, it’s kind of sick. Dogs eat cats. Cats get consumed by dogs. Any other system bumps hard against the spinning of the world and threatens to throw everything off kilter.

We weren’t that sad though. We knew the score.

Ceremonies are always farewell parties.

Bar Mitzvahs. Sweet sixteen parties—one of my perennial favorites. State of the Union addresses. New Years Eve. Anniversaries. Funerals. Weddings. They all say goodbye to the past. Seldom, in fact, do they welcome the future because the future is so uncertain.

Death and taxes?

Nope. The only thing certain about the future is death because if you’re rich, they don’t make you pay taxes.

Why welcome the future even if it was predictable? What’s there to predict?

If it’s not a masked gunman in the bell tower or the cafeteria, then it’s an inadvertent missile launch or an “event” at your friendly, local reactor. Nature does not endure the backseat for long either. Scientists figure that there’s a one in seven chance that this generation of people who mosh and battle armed battalions of cops in Seattle and Tacoma will get covered with a boiling river of mud from the state beer’s namesake, Mt.
Rainier. And the Californians. Well, San Andreas floats beneath them like a hungry vat of lava.

At one time or another, everyone is participating in his or her own ceremony. Everyone is bidding farewell because when the mountain blows or the nukes land, it’s just best to have already said your goodbye.

I was glad to have the Dairy Queen and Janna along. They were conquest potentials for Jelly. I actually hoped the ménage-a-trois worked out for him. He was getting creepy and monkish with his little, spiral notebook and constant recording. It was always “the Angel Moroni this” and “the Angel Moroni that.” And my friend hadn’t been laid since he left Salt Lake. Unnatural. Lacey had tied him up and sicked Chito on him. Suzy Sue had made him look at her collection of quilts.

Maybe these women could find the friend of mine I had lost. Screw some sense back into his head.
Chapter 25: The Need

We have the generator, plenty of canned food, and a good well, but we relied heavily on Spread Eagle Trading Post for booze and nicotine. That’s what gets you in situations like this.

Suffering through withdrawals is no way to cope with boredom.

The twins actually look better today. Their skin has cleared and reclaimed some of the former vibrant translucence. Lacey is with them, talking quietly. They are smiling, Lacey included, in the way that terminal patients cautiously accept news of remission.

I have taken my turn in the shower.

The silty soil on this ancient delta is excavation-friendly but we had a good distance to go. We did it though. We did it together. But, you’ve got to take the good with the bad. Unfortunately for Andre, he took the bad this time.

A couple hours ago when we popped up through the barn floor right during milking time, poor Andre caught a hoof in his bald spot from Daisy. Perhaps she was only letting him know that ladies, bovine or human, don’t like intrusions during their morning rituals. Now he sports a cloven red mark where before there was only emptiness. It’s sort of pretty. His bald spot turns out to have been a clean canvas waiting for the artist’s hoof to express its beauty.

The long night of work feels good in my shoulders.

We are at the dining table. A large coffee pot is being generously sampled as we go lazily about satisfying our first fix of the day. This could be our last meal together. All the picnics, sack lunches, fast food feasts, and just regular meals, add up to these scrambled eggs, this eight grain toast, and coffee so acid that it replaces our blood and scours our arteries with its rich black promise of well-being, energy and a possible life of simple and sovereign discovery.

I am next to Janna. She rubs my knee under the table. Andre is opposite of me. He has the relaxed air of a farmer preparing to spend the day working land that he has
worked his whole life. Work he loves sometimes and hates sometimes. I wonder if Daisy knocked some peace into his head.

“Jelly.” I am toweling my hair. “Have you thought about tattooing the spot where God touched you?”

Jelly makes a small, fake laugh to show that he has heard me.

“Pass the butter,” he says.

“How does it end?” I ask. I point to his spiral notebook.

“There’s no ending,” he says, puzzled. “Not yet.”

“Is this the one that will do it for you? Make you famous?”

Jelly smiles. “Some people wait their whole lives for chances like this.”

“Living in someone else’s life is not living at all.”

It’s Lacey. She has just come into the room. The sharp, eastern sun slants hard past partially open white curtains and strikes Lacey, damp from her shower and pale from lack of sleep. She becomes a creature of light, one of her many guises.

I am reminded of the first time I saw her, a year ago, a lifetime ago, in a Las Vegas smut add. Bubbles and clean. She is barefoot, a loose white shirt clings suggestively to her curves and hangs lonely away from her hollows.

My lizard doesn’t speak. He rarely does. But I feel him slide out of my cerebrum, grasp my optic nerve with his sticky claws, and peer into it like a crystal ball.

Bulging black eyes watch closely. A forked tongue works through his snarling lips. flick. flick.

She floats to the table and her hand brands my stiff shoulders. “Are you sore?”flicka-flicka-flicka-flicka

She works my stiff muscles. Her hands are small and strong. If my eyes roll upwards any further, they will keep on rolling and be lost somewhere in the empty darkness of my mind.

“Yes,” I say. I moan. “It feels good.”
Jelly has stopped writing. He watches me with skepticism or perhaps even utter disbelief. Lacey leaves her hands on my shoulders. Janna leaves her hand on my leg. Perhaps he is trying to recall what lines I used to seduce these two women.

I feel like a sultan.

I expect another woman to appear any moment to feed me grapes or wash my feet in milk. Suzy Sue?

flickaflickaflicka

In a reflexive movement, Jelly’s hand reaches up to pull his hat low. His hand searches for his hat, remembers that he has no hat, and settles distracted and self-consciously upon his bald spot.

I have no idea how long Jelly has been a lothario. When I met him in college, he was already so accomplished at the art of seduction that it probably held the same excitement for him that a rollicking game of tic tac toe might hold for the rest of us. But nonetheless, this kind of stuff gets into the blood, twists the mind, makes us want it and need it even if we can’t remember what the first feeling was.

He’s just like any other junkie.

They say that the addict is always looking for a high as good as the first one and can never quite get there. That’s not true. The first high, or maybe the second and the third, sure were the best, and they’d be great to do again and again. But that’s not what drives the addict. It’s more than just a habit too. A smoker might understand this. A drinker, a user, a Bible beater, a pedophile, a bungee jumper, a surfer, a loner. It’s the sick need to need.

That’s it.

Just need.

And if you need something real, something that you know you can get, that’s the best kind of need of all. It doesn’t matter if it will kill you. It doesn’t matter if it’s good or bad. Love’s that way too. What’s wrong with Lance? He needs and he’s not getting his fix. But it is the need that drives him, not the goal.

The feds need.
The Rustys of the world need.
People of passion need.

Anybody who has ever needed anything can tell you how strong that drive is. They will also tell that the starving person does not seek food because they once tasted a meal that brought them to near orgasm. They need, and living within the need only makes the need stronger. Makes the hunger greater. Need defines that person, takes over that person. Eventually, left unsatisfied the need becomes the person.

Jelly’s no different. He classifies his need.
Beautiful women.
Old women.
Submissive and dominant.
He’s not talking about sex. He’s not admitting to an inherent misogyny, not really. The misogyny is incidental. He can’t even think in those terms.

He is saying that he needs. He is saying that the tremendous potential of his extraordinary mind is locked beneath his horrible struggle to satisfy a need that he never wanted and can’t understand.

Jelly is thinking that he should try to seduce Lacey. He thinks that he should try Janna. He thinks that it is high time that he had all the women in Sweet Heaven sprawled across the courtyard waiting to serve his great and glorious need.

I wish he’d try.

It takes a lot to change a mind—I mean really change it. Maybe failure is the only way. Sure as hell, Jelly would fail. The only people who ever stop cold turkey are the ones who put themselves on an island. Rare is the person who can make an island of their will. I wonder what the feds really need. Control? Submission? Acquiescence?

The feds have no will.

So, we shall make an island of Sweet Heaven. A place barren of threatening nonconformists upon which they wish to feast, for which they crave.

Jelly stares at Lacey. His notebook slips from his grasp. He nearly forgets to stop its fall.
We go out tonight.

The tree freaks can only get a few of us out. Their plan is a bad one, a hasty one, and the only one we have. It is a plan that requires a series of accidents to happen for us. But we are willing to give it a try.

One part of the plan really bothers me—we must sacrifice the Sheep.

I know that it is a necessary evil, but I wonder if we should ever allow evil to be necessary. Whenever you hear "necessary evil," it usually means that the speaker is unwilling or too cowardly to make the righteous choice.

So I rationalize.

The feds don't want the Sheep because they already exhibit the traits that make a good citizen. They follow those who lead. They can claim that a tricky shepherd lead them down the wrong path. For a while they unwittingly grazed in strange pastures, but "yes sir, thank you sir," it is good to be back in the stable. What did that lost lamb say when she clicked the heels of some misunderstood witch's red shoes?

There's no place like home.

There's no place like home.

The feds want me, Moroni and Lance. They want Jelly and Lacey. The feds want our frightening soldiers and the keys to our secret weapons. They want Andre. They want the tree freaks and, though they don't know it, they really want the twins.

But, like those half-baked heroes of Masada, we will deal our own death blows and take the victory from those who would enslave us. When all is fire and flame, we will join the ranks of those who were willing to do what it takes. Submission means failure. Capture means failure.

If the feds want to win, they'll have to jump into the fire.

I search the room. Everyone wears a calm face. But I know that there's a warrior in each of us. At one time or another, I've seen everyone wearing his or her battle face. We'll be fine.

I look at Chito. He is the coolest of all. He acts like nothing is happening, nothing at all. He just lays there working a bone, running his pink tongue into a crack,
twisting his head sideways and scratching at it with startling white teeth. When he notices me watching, he rolls his chestnut brown eyes upwards until the lower half of his eye is all crazy yellowish sclera, the telltale color of an overworked liver.

I shiver.

“Drop it,” I say.

He stops chewing to grin up at me.

Thump. Thump.

His rat tail tattoos the shag carpet in anticipation of attention.

“Drop it,” I say.

Chito laughs in his dog way as I try to take the bone from him. He grips it in his paws and snarls as he bites his teeth around the flange-like end of the femur which once rode over a knee that chased sheep and coyotes through the forest outside.

“Drop Mr. Shumaker, Chito,” I say. My stomach turns as I wrench the bone free.

“We don’t eat people.”
I was glad when the twins showed up with Suzy Sue. Somehow, even though we didn’t really know them, it made the mountains more familiar.

I asked them about Farmer Brown.

“We can’t go home,” they said.

“Do you miss it?” I asked. “Do you miss the farm.”

They nodded.

I was struck by their beauty. The men, boys really, had something in them that shined. They radiated the confidence of our greatest saints or our best-loved sinners.

“Will you ever go back?”

“This is our home now,” Joshua gestured to the trees and the rocks.

I thought about Farmer Brown haunting their house. The twins had chosen a better home.

“We miss our mother,” added Jeremy.

“She was beautiful,” said Suzy Sue with a sad smile. “I’ll miss the cows.”

I thought of her mother in that black and white photo standing in the doorway of their farmhouse. She must have brought something alive to the house.

“I miss things,” I said. “My mother was like yours, I think.”

My mother shocked me. But, she was amazing. Around the house she could make my miserable father smile from time to time. She could make him forget his limp arm that dangled as a perpetual memory of the dangers of working around falling trees and whirling blades.

She must have done that for a lot of people.

I have always wondered how many lovers she had. I wonder what she thought at those times when she stood beside me in the yard staring at the mountains that held us in Montana. But when she stared past them, she smiled. I don’t know how many years my mother kept her love affair with the wild man in the woods. I have heard from my cousin...
Eddy that the forces-that-be came and uprooted him, sent him away. My mother’s precious Teddy Bear had grown too wild to remain unwatched.

The big talk around camp was the Rocky Flats Nuclear incident that had happened on the day Andre stabbed Rusty’s foot. These people who the Dairy Queen and Janna had led us to called themselves Rainbow People. Their big cause was to exercise their right to meet on public property without a permit. Most of them approved of the action at the nuclear facility.

A group of activists had torched a warehouse out there that they claimed contained research findings from illegal nuclear testing.

Lance was pleased and also incensed.

The group claiming responsibility was DEATH.

“That was me,” he said. “My group. I was the Defenders of the Earth Against Tyranny and Hatred. I didn’t know there were any other members.”

He told and retold his war tales to the twins who listened closely. He told about his one man stand against the asphalt layers of the worlds. It was good to see him alive again. When he talked about DEATH, he perked up.

“Flowers Not Asphalt!” he yelled, shaking his fist, reliving the moment.

And when he finished, the twins, like children at bedtime, begged him to tell it again. And he would. These were the times when he forgot Monica, when his heart left him alone and unmolested to be with his good memories.

In fact, Lance became a very popular man around camp. Along with Lance’s stories, Jelly’s stories about our trip from San Diego appealed to the feeble and the fantastic alike. Although Jelly was trying to impress the granola babes around camp, Lance inevitably ended up as the star of the stories.

Women were always trying to get Lance to climb high in the trees. It became a game. Throw something in the tree, see if he fell out and miraculously landed safely. Really though, Lance was a good looking guy. I think that the women were just hoping he’d get naked. His nudity, squatting in high places, stimulated something primal in
them, a sexual excitement that the warrior inspires in us all. Lance was nude in a tree, sentinel on the lookout. Sexy stuff.

I suspect that it was the twins’ affection for Lance that made them offer to help us retrieve Lacey’s child. It seemed like a noble effort. It was like Monica said, “you have so much to offer.” I was just looking for a way to offer myself.

Moroni spoke to me often then.

*You have to know your heart,* he told me.

“How?” I asked. “How can I know what I need?”

It’s not what you need you should worry about, offered the golden head. *It’s what you don’t need.*

I can’t honestly say that I ever understood what he was talking about.

It’s Jelly’s fault that the others found out about my conversations with the brass head. He overheard me one day and mentioned it in camp.

Oh, he knew exactly what he was doing.

The girls here were impressed by “spiritual” guys, guys in touch “the other, real world.” He was striking out left and right and getting desperate.

How can speed seduction work on a happy woman? The basic tenets rely upon an inherent dissatisfaction with life and your position. But not here. Everyone was happy. Communal and happy. Nobody was watching us—we thought—and we were free. Lacey was the only one who might have been a good seduction candidate. Still, she was too smart.

Lance, Moroni and I became minor celebrities.

Jelly still couldn’t get laid.

Things got serious after the “gathering.”

We all sat cross-legged on a flat granite boulder. The mountains where we were camped were full of granite places where we hid and played like children finding caves. In a way, it was perfect. But no one is satisfied with perfection.

We were discussing a winter camp.
The Dairy Queen didn’t like talking money, but she made it clear that her pockets were deep. Somebody already had an eye on the vacant Aryan encampment.

“It is a place I have seen in my dreams,” he said, “where great rivers meet and the mountains touch the sky.”

Rocky Mountain high, baby, Rocky Mountain high.

It would happen and everyone here, everyone in the world, was invited. Contributions were accepted but not necessary if you had nothing to give. We ended the gathering by passing the talking stick. This was the moment when everyone was most random.

“Bless us all. This is a beautiful place where Christians and Pagans meet in peace,” said a thin woman in Coke bottle glasses.

Pass the stick.

“I love you,” said Mountain.

Pass the stick.

“Remember to hug the trees,” said Janna. “And keep your cigarette butts off the trail.” She pointed a meaningful look at Andre.

Shit. I had the stick.

“Bless Chito,” I said.

Pass the stick.

Andre said nothing. He passed the talking stick to a skinny, angry man who had obviously been a starving and lonely accountant in a former life. He always talked, always scolded.

“We are meeting here in the name of peace,” he said. “Yet we are eating our brothers at camp.”

This again. He was a devout vegetarian and the chicken soup offended him deeply. He continued while the rest of us, high on some really decent green bud, tuned him out.

I remember that Jelly said once that we see only cause and coincidence.

The coincidence that followed was a significant one.
As the accountant droned on about murdering our flightless brethren, Chito raised an uproar at the cook tent down the hill. Chito was pissed off and raising hell.

Thankful for an excuse to leave, I got up to go see what his problem was. The dinner was cooking. Two large, ten gallon pots boiled over a well tended fire. In one pot was the offensive chicken stew. In the other, was the much more bland vegetarian type.

The source of Chito’s ire clucked at him furiously from atop Moroni’s head.

Chito hated squirrels like the accountant hated carnivores.

I laughed at the scene. Moroni was perched on a boulder and the squirrel was perched on him. Chito had the little beast cornered, but try as he might, he couldn’t make the kill. He ran around and around the boulder in a frenzy of bloodlust.

The cook, a grubby man who called himself Walking Bull, groaned from his mummy bag.

“Shut that damn dog up,” he mumbled.

I only laughed.

When Chito didn’t quit, Walking Bull gave up his nap and attempted to flee his bag.

That’s when things got serious.

He was too close to the fire. A spark that smoldered on his bag ignited it. The cheap mummy bag burst into flame like a roman candle.

I rushed to his aid.

Burning my hands on the zipper, I couldn’t get him out.

Walking Bull squirmed and wiggled and screamed.

The gathering up the hill broke up and tumbled down to the cook tent to investigate.

Chito kept up his racket.

Walking Bull burned.

Try as I might, I couldn’t help him. I couldn’t extinguish the fire and he couldn’t free himself.

Unfortunately, everyone was there for the miracle.
Chito leaped for the squirrel, a mighty Herculean leap that smacked his terrier head against Moroni’s brass one. Moroni became unseated. He rolled off the rock, landed in the fire and upset the pot of chicken soup. The great cauldron of soup spilled onto the trapped and screaming Walking Bull and extinguished the flames.

Hey, I was right there.


The rest of the gathering saw it too. Moroni had landed upright in the flames. He golden skin flamed. His deep eyes commanded respect. Moroni had chosen to spare Walking Bull.

No one remembers Chito, though. But I do.

He trotted off from behind the boulder, a squirming squirrel screaming between his jaws.
Chapter 27: In the Flames

Humans have a great capacity for adaptation. But Lacey’s cries outside along with Bach’s stringed prattlings have driven us to the point of break. Even with the end in sight, we can barely stand it.

I wonder how well we match the models the feds’ mind-benders have worked out. It’s been like four days I think.

Are we supposed to surrender now?
Are we supposed to attempt escape?

From Spanish Inquisition to Holocaust to Cold War to Microsoft, what have the guys in industrial green lab coats learned about human behavior? I wonder just how predictable we are. I wonder if the guys in green and gray really do have us all mapped out and will only let Nike and Calvin Klein and a few beer companies in on the secret.

Beetle hasn’t harangued us with his blowhorn for a long time.

When the HMMV swings wide in the meadow and bounces away with the trailer dragging the offensive wide-screen TV from our sight, I’m not surprised.

That’s it. Do me! Yes! Yes!

Lacey’s cries grow as faint and plaintive as the thin thread of smoke that drifts over the compound from a smoldering stump of the tree Andre blew up behind Dr. George and the tree freaks.

Good riddance, says Moroni.
Bach dies.
Amen.

The only noise left is Judge Judy lecturing two brothers about familial loyalty, spurious litigation, and the dubious wisdom of sharing a girlfriend.

The TV was Smokey Joe’s idea. A couple hours ago he gathered a bunch of extension cord and, in the line of fire, he rolled our own big screen to the front gate, pointed it at the feds. Sort of a thermonuclear war tactic. If they’re going to destroy us, well then damn it, we’re going to get them too.
Earlier, the local news led with the top story linking dishwashing detergent to sterility—you can bet soap sales are plunging in Utah. People are too squeaky clean there anyway. Later, Bob Barker broadcast his own obsession with fertility reminding us to “spay and neuter our guests” or our pets or something.

I could kiss Smoky Joe right on his scruffy pink jowl for thinking of this. Between the news stations manufacturing stories and talk shows hosting more gender confusion than you can shake a cigar at, maybe the feds have actually given up.

Lacey yanks the cord on the esteemed judge’s tirade.

Silence rushes in to replace the void. I can hear the smoke in the yard curling against itself.

“There!” Andre points.

“What do you see?”

I ram the binoculars against my face hard enough to leave a mark.

“Where?”

“There.”

We watch.

I see nothing. I get an absurd picture of Andre with a long curling tail scampering through a squadron of camo guys bucking away in rocking chairs.

“There’s nothing,” I say.

Andre mumbles and wanders off to another window for a different vantage.

Be patient, warns our golden sage. The dark is our magic hat.

“I know. I know,” I say. “Tonight we’re rabbits.”

The choppers have stopped buzzing us. A bottle rattles off the roof. Lance yells and somebody goes out and tosses him up a beer.

They’re gone.

They’re still fucking with us, but they’re gone.

Do you know that feeling you get when you’ve been lost in the woods, or the country, or the city, or whatever and you suddenly see a familiar landmark that tells you just where you are? Well, this whole experience feels like the moment right after that
when you realize that you never saw that lightning twisted pine, or that particular spooky farmhouse, or that Denny's Fine Family Dining sign before.

“What happened to your pledge brother?” I ask Jelly.

He frowns at me.

I mimic the signal that I saw the camo guy give him the other day.

“You did it wrong,” he says. “You’re just a wannabe.”

The only movement is the random, minute flashes of those yellow and white butterflies flitting over the grass in the meadow. The occasional dark shape of a sparrow or wren hops through the bushes at treeline. As far as we know we really are alone and that screws up our plan.

If they aren’t watching, we can’t get out.

Yap Yap Yap.

Even the unflappable Chito is going nuts.

“Screw Jimmy,” I hear Smokey Joe belch at him.

Yap Yap Yap.

“He got himself in the well and he can get himself out.”

I’m telling you, if you ever want to start your own special subversive organization that might someday fall prey to governmental paranoia, don’t stock up on guns and ammo. Hey, these guys buy missiles wholesale for Chrissakes. They’ve got the A-bomb, Fat Man and Little Boy, and enough people who are just following orders that they can kill anybody, even themselves, and it’s pretty much nobody’s fault. Reagan wasn’t shitting us when he said he had no idea what was going on. Neither was Bush, or Clinton, or Nixon, and you can be damn sure Ford didn’t know. And if there is any one person responsible for decisions, it’s the sort who would burn down a house to make sure it doesn’t get robbed.

Nope.

If you ever start your own counter-cultural organization, stock up on the good stuff. Spike the area with itty bitty spycams and sound monitors. Pump it into their satellites and let them watch themselves on the net. Get acid that will eat the soles off
their boots. Get supersonic devices that will make them bark at fire engines. Get scary riot gear that makes you look like Mortockian warriors from the planet Mogg. Get plenty of Bach and a good speaker system. Get an abandoned drive-in theatre screen, set it up, and play reruns of Love Boat and Baywatch. That’s it; Hasselhoff the shit out of them.

Dr. George stares out the window. Impassive, maybe even bored, he cuts a fine figure with his heavy gut buttoned tightly into a blue cowboy shirt with a deep red yoke. His long black hair shines as brightly as the pearlesque buttons up the front of his shirt.

“What’s going on out there?” Jelly asks. “Do you have any ideas?”

He shrugs. He is quiet for a moment. Then, he asks, “Are you the guys who dance naked on the Heart of the Monster?”


“Hmmm.”

Lacey is nearby. Jelly is listening for more. Chito wiggles on his back inviting someone, anyone, to scratch his most intimate places.

“Why?” asks Lacey. “Is it important?”

“No,” says Doctor George. “I just always wanted to ask if you knew that it’s only a rock?” He laughs, amused at a joke that no one else really gets.

The afternoon passes this way.

We pick at each other’s strained nerves like Black Cat Jones and the Swinging Mojos stringing at the blues.

Unwatched, we feel alone. Betrayed. It’s like the feds broke a contract with us. They are supposed to sit outside the gates and harangue, berate, cajole, and persuade. We are supposed to resist.

How the hell do you resist an invisible force?

Time reaches biblical proportions. We have traveled back in time and are now trapped in the day that God made rocks.

Patience, says Moroni.

The sun fattens and slogs lethargically toward the west. It is mid afternoon and we are heading toward our positions. We will go at precisely the moment that there is
enough light to see us but not too clearly. The tree freaks have their supplies stashed in
the barn and everyone is working their ways through the tunnel behind them. Enough of
us stay in the house so that if the feds are watching, they’ll see movement by the
windows.

The twins look better. Four days after being shot and Jeremy is mending. The
bleeding has stopped and Doctor George has him bandaged. Those two are much tougher
than they look.

“We’ve been talking,” says Jeremy. His voice is raw and dry. His thin, pointed
tongue darts out to moisten his chapped lips.

“Really?”
I haven’t seen their mouths move in three days.

“Do you want to get these guys where it counts?”

The feds want to lock me up forever to life with no possibility of parole. They’ve
spent hundreds of thousands of dollars in man hours and equipment to apprehend me, a
student with no degree, a forklift operator, a dognapper, and a victim of circumstance.
They shot one of my friends and threatened and humiliated the rest of us. Perhaps worst
of all, they took our privacy.

“Yes,” I say.

They look at one another and nod.

Before they can speak more, the feds are back. They storm the clearing like
congressmen into a brothel.

Raid.

Live free or die!

Lance yells from the roof. And, there go his pants.

Tax Hemp!

Smokey Joe yells from the porch. And, there goes an empty beer.

Lacey, me, the twins, Dr. George, and Jelly are the only ones left in the house.

Everyone else is in the tunnel or already in the barn. It’s too soon.

We’re not ready.
Vans with satellite dishes on top and numbers on the sides rush into the clearing. Small cars. A helicopter hovers just beyond the house.

We run in circles. Chito yaps and yells. If they come now we’re screwed.

I grab my only weapon. The bullhorn.

People emerge stretching black cords, hitching down their skirts and hiking up their ties.

It’s not a raid.

It’s a race.

The media has finally arrived and they are fighting to get the best shot of Lance on the roof and our resident red neck in his Lazy Boy.

Lance’s shirt and underwear flutter to the lawn.

Cameras point at him. Nubile young men and women wave their arms and speak into the camera.

The feds are back. Judging from Beetle’s frantic movements, this is not part of their plans. A cameraman has him in the lens.

*Hey, hey, L.B.J.*

*How many kids did you kill today?*

Long ago, Lance learned that it’s not what you say, it’s how loud and who’s listening. He’s a slogan machine summoning the spirits of activists past. Spouting their rhetoric. Spinning their timeless rhymes:

*We shall overcome!*

Smokey Joe adds his own drunken thoughts:

*Tolerate THIS!*

One more empty beer can--"dead soldiers" he calls them--flies into the yard. The cameras are eating it up.

Smokey Joe retrieves the TV and resumes his seat on the porch. He watches even though he could just look up and see it real, nondigitized life.
The camo guys are in a frenzy, blending in and out of the grass. Jumping, sprinting away, where news crews stumble over their invisible spots in the brush and weeds.

_No compromise in defense of Mother Earth!

From Smokey:

_Fear ME!

I don’t have to wonder for long what brought this sudden coverage. On our big screen, a flashy woman of maybe 20 years old identifies herself in a peppy voice as Camden Jones, On-the-Spot, Newswatch 7 reporter.

“What do you know about the cultists in Sweet Heaven?” she asks the woman next to her.

“This is a travesty of justice,” says the woman. “It is a bald-faced government move to suppress the rights of its people.”

Those are Lance’s words. I’ve heard Jelly say them too, only less passionately.

The woman being interviewed has the healthy glow of a Jenny Craig model. She is confident and comfortable dressed in loose jeans and an earth tone flannel shirt that gives her Robert Redford good looks. Her flaxen hair is dyed a rich chestnut and is pulled back in a ponytail. Multiple ear piercings shine emerald green.

In the back of the frame, while she speaks, camo guys are pausing to look at her, Beetle gapes at her, the news crews are pushing to get a chance at her. She does not have the twiggy body of a model or the sweet and compact frame of a cheerleader. But, her confidence and charm belie the inner beauty and a precocious charisma of one who lives under the condemning eye of popular perfection and refuses to notice.

She is our friend.

Outside of Sweet Heaven high-stepping the weeds and the obstacles, Monica, heiress to a race horse fortune, has come to save us. She manipulates the media with the confidence of a revival preacher. She walks among the feds as if they are poisonous snakes and she is taking them, laying hands upon them, in the full of light of righteous faith.
I don’t think Lance has seen her yet:

Don’t tread on me!

Smokey:

Sex, drugs and rock and roll!
Chapter 28: Boise Blues

Boise was just a bad plan. Oh, we made the accident happen alright. But what is it they say? The Salem witches were burnt in fires built on good intentions.

Ok, so I suppose they don’t say that.

We’d been in the Rockys until the end of September. September is damn cold at high elevation and even Chito’s nose looked red in the mornings.

I had reached a status that I was not comfortable with. Lacey thought it was funny, but I could see something like fear and skepticism in her eyes whenever she looked at me. Of course, that was better than the revulsion and indifference that she had always shown before, but only slightly better.

I was the camp guru. I was the man who spoke to the miraculous golden head. Moroni was in my head.

They didn’t know it.

They knew it.

It didn’t matter. People started asking if Moroni could predict the weather. For awhile, I went with it. It was fun. I’d tell them what the weather would be like. If I was right, I’d say Moroni predicted it. If I was wrong, I’d say he changed it.

Jelly still wasn’t getting any love. Lance was impotent and alone in his despair. Andre was a ghost who haunted the wood searching for spies. Other than the fact that I was hung up on Lacey, I was the only one who had anything like a healthy love-life. I hooked up with Janna in the mountains because I was attracted to her enthusiasm, vigor. I don’t know that I really cared about her, but she seemed to care enough for both of us.

My conversations continued with Moroni. However, while it was growing obvious to me that these were just conversations with myself, the people around me were becoming more convinced that I had tapped into something. That I was a conduit in the realm of something bigger than us, something approaching the spirit world, something important.
It was bullshit. But, I liked the attention. Janna liked the idea. Jelly pushed it further. And Lance, desperate and sad, seemed to really believe. It was becoming weird. By the time the Brooks Brothers wandered into camp, we were ready for a change of scene.

They tried to disguise themselves. But, their hippy clothes were a little too trendy and there wasn’t a loose thread showing. Their names too, Tim and Brad, weren’t right. Their week’s worth of facial hair had been clipped to a nice, even shag. I’m sure that if they’d taken off their shirts, we would have seen tan-lines shaped like carefully knotted ties.

Tim and Brad showed up for supper one night.
“We love you,” everyone said, the communal greeting.
Tim and Brad showed expensive, straight teeth.
“Hey,” they said. “This is just so good to be out here in the mountains. You guys really have some good energy.”

Mountain was into it.
“Right on, man,” he said. “This is the best. No job. No bullshit. Yeah.”
Andre and Chito were on to the infiltrators right away.
They hid in the trees while the two men sat at the fire eating the vegetarian stew—we didn’t make chicken soup anymore, not since Moroni chose that pot to extinguish Walking Bull’s fire.

Tim and Brad were transfixed by Moroni’s gaze. I noticed it. Perhaps, the angel really was speaking to them.

The Rainbow People needed no encouragement to tell of the angel’s miracles. They even told Tim and Brad where the angel had “found” us.

It didn’t matter. Those boys knew the story.
Andre took me aside after dinner.
“We could use your help,” he said.
“Molly?” I asked.
“It’s time to go get her,” he said.
Lacey was nervous, edgy. Living in the mountains does that to some people. My own mother was that way. Sometimes, she’d just get jumpy. When she was like that she bumped around the kitchen cracking eggs, overcooking bacon, and burning toast. Outside, you could scare her half to death if you walked up behind her while she scattered cracked wheat for our chickens. She was always staring at the same peaks that I stared at. I understood that trapped feeling of isolation, and it just didn’t seem right for me to know how my mother felt.

But I still don’t understand the smile on her face.

We only told a few people that we were going and instructed them to leave the Brooks Brothers out of the loop. I promised Janna that I’d meet her again when we were done.

“You don’t seem sorry to see me go,” I told her.

She shrugged. “You’ll be back. You and your golden head.”

We kissed and I left.

The twins came too although they left Suzy Sue with the others. They wanted to help because they liked Lance and they had business in Boise anyway.

If I’d have been paying attention, I’d have known that Lacey and Andre’s confidence obscured an obvious inability to come up with a sound plan of attack. It was only later that Lacey told me that she had been fielding phone calls in Las Vegas waiting for someone named Larry to ask her for a date. She’d received fan mail from him signed with only his first name and postmarked Las Vegas. In his letter, he mentioned a friendship with Rusty and she and Andre had decided to bait him and find out where Rusty lived.

That didn’t work. Of course.

She found Jelly carrying Larry Boyer’s credit card instead. It was sheer luck that she found Rusty in Denver. The owner of Babe’s Reptile Emporium in Nevada happened to supply Rusty with his snakes and lizards. Sheer coincidence. Rusty was another victim of dumb, bad luck to have been tracked down by the likes of Andre and Lacey.

But I didn’t know that then.
Their Boise plan was simple. We find out where the governor had Molly and we take her. It made sense at the time.

We spent several weeks surveilling the governor. He didn’t have much in the way of body guards and he was easy to track. Soon, however, it became clear that the governor did not have Molly living with him. After some debate, the twins offered to break into an office building and see if they could find some private papers.

Yeah. Two boys from a Colorado dairy farm. They dug through their equipment that they had hauled from the house the night Farmer Brown shot everything to Hell. When they pulled out their super spy crap—range finders, infra-red scopes, electronic lock encoders, and hyper sensitive listening devices, Andre was impressed.

“These kids really know how to use Radio Shack,” he said.

Three nights later, I was sneaking through the halls of the Sisters of a Stinging Hands boarding school. Another childhood fantasy come true. Me wandering unfettered through the hallowed halls of an all-girls school. Unfortunately, I was too old to appreciate it.

Jelly stayed out in the van to drive getaway and keep lookout with Chito. The twins had not been willing to participate in the actual kidnapping, so they had left town to meet back up with Suzy Sue.

I went in with Lance, Andre and Lacey.

“Split up,” said Andre, signaling down the hallway. “This is the sleeping dormitory.”

We went down one wing. They went down the other.

We opened doors and checked the rooms. The picture that Lacey had shown us was two years old. Now, she would be a ten-year-old, blonde, green-eyed little girl. Easy enough.

Lance stayed sober for the operation, which was good, except that his teeth chattered from withdrawal tremors.

“Molly?” we whispered. “Molly?”

When no one responded, we moved to the next door.
“Molly?”
“Molly?”

Lance’s clacking teeth could have woke the dead. I was ready to give up when a
girl’s voice answered. “What?”

“Molly?” I asked. “Is that you?”

“Yes,” she said.

We slipped into the room.

“Your mother is outside,” I told her. “You have to come with us.”

I don’t blame her for being suspicious, but the ear shattering scream seemed
premature.

“Shhhh!” I hissed. “You’ll wake everyone up.”

She screamed. The poor girl was horrified. I guess I don’t blame her. I must
look older and creepier than I feel. And, Lance had all but given up showering,
completely given up grooming, and even his short beard was developing dreadlocks. He
might have looked somewhat terrifying.

“Quiet!” I clasped my hand over her mouth. “Your mother is right outside.”

I dragged Molly from her bed. She was light and easy to lift. As she struggled, I
just held her tightly and managed to avoid most of the punishment her furious feet dealt
me. She bit my hand so hard that I yanked it away from her mouth.

Her final scream brought down the house.

The dorm exploded with cries and screams, adolescent curses and threats. Lance
and I were running to meet Lacey and Andre when the nuns emerged. They were a sight.
Half-dressed with their hair let down.

flick flick

The lizard popped up to take a peek.

Wild and righteous virgins stormed the halls to fight off the devil.

Unfortunately, the devil was us.

“Let her go,” said Lacey.
No tearful reunion, no hugs and kisses, nothing. The little girl stomped hard on my foot and fled to the superior arms of a charging nun.

That's right.

It wasn't the right Molly.

Under a hail of promises to send a cursed souls back to the devil, we managed to outrun the rabid pack of nuns and make it to the van.

The next day, we ate at the Copper Kettle near the airport. Lacey was pissed even though it was an honest mistake.

“You terrorized that little girl,” she said.

“She looked just like the picture you showed me,” I said.

“No, she didn’t,” replied Lacey.

It is hard for a grieving mother to see both sides of an issue sometimes.

“I hope everybody has as much trouble with pictures,” said Jelly.

He held up the Boise Statesman. We were all there. Me, Andre, Lacey and Lance. It was big news too. That’s the same school the governor’s granddaughter went to after all.

We had no choice. We needed a place to lay low. We knew we were welcome at Sweet Heaven. It was over three hundred miles north and, as close to nowhere as we figured we could get.

Somehow, in the space of a couple months, I had become a fugitive. Dognapping, credit card fraud, assault on sleaze king, and finally attempted kidnapping of the governor’s granddaughter’s classmate. We left town in defeat, vowing to return, and someday get Molly back to her mother. But, as bleak as the future looked, I don’t remember once missing the forklift in San Diego at all.
Chapter 29: God, Guts, Guns

It is foolish to call the wind a friend when it blows fair, just as the wind is not an enemy when it tips over your trailer house and tosses your velvet Elvis to the gods. It’s just wind. That’s all.

Monica brought a whirlwind with her.

Outside of Sweet Heaven is a storm of media coverage full-blown with speculation and short-breathed sensationalism. I am not wholly displeased. The presence of reporters reduces the likelihood of a wholesale governmental slaughter of Sweet Heaven occupants. But, we hold no illusions. The media can be a hell of a tool, but you’ve got to be careful where you plant your windmills.

Monica, bless her soul, is our only windmill. And, although we haven’t communicated with her, I’m sure she realizes it.

The time draws near.

Our plan—our bad plan—is risky. We rely on subterfuge and the slight of hand that you can’t detect just by watching. When we’re finished, hopefully the feds will be scratching their heads, but not wondering if they just got took.

With lots of luck, we may not have to take the victory from them at all.

We may just win.

Still it’s the crying shame of it all that I keep coming back to. The only thing we have ever wanted was to be left alone, to worship the world in our own ways, and to live as best as we could on the periphery of a society that never made sense to any of us.

Our humble reasons for existence are yet another reason to fear the media, Moroni warns.

“Reporters are the soldiers of activist groups,” I say.

*We, however, are a secret group.*

I smile at Moroni. We’ve made the long haul. He feels like a friend who I’m about to leave. I stroke his smooth, cool head as though he were a cherished ex-lover.

“Did I ever need you?” I ask him.
He does not respond, but I hear something like the din from a distant party
diffused over darkened streets damp and fresh from a recent rain. It’s faint, but it cheers
me. I imagine that it is the sound of Moroni’s world that I hear, the place where he goes
when he doesn’t speak. It is a fine world.

I look deep into Moroni’s golden eyes.

I see an old-fashioned lamppost glowing and warm. For just a second, you know,
just one sharp moment of clarity, it’s like I understand that the light around the lamp is a
gift to be used only for the time it takes to pass through it. It is a gift that is given freely
and with no expectation of thanks or gratitude. It is the truest kind of gift that is okay to
take for granted and just forget about if that’s what you need to do.

“Thank you, Moroni.” I say, “Thanks anyway.”

Someone has passed some rocket fuel up to Lance. It drives him to an alcoholic
frenzy. His slogans are grasshoppers, frogs and rivers of blood.

He is the god of the rooftop. He curses Beetle, Rusty, Pharaoh, and all the whole
frigging world of willful disbelievers:

*Let my people go!*

Smokey:

*I have drunk and seen the spider!*

Lance must have noticed her by now. It’s been a year since her wedding. She has
grown larger and more beautiful I think. I wonder what Lance thinks. He answers my
question:

*Behold the beast!*

*Red in tooth and claw!*

Smokey rejoins:

*Blue light special in aisle TWELVE!*

Shadows have begun to pick up speed. Before too long the time when they join
for a night of intimacy will be at hand. I should focus, but my mind drifts back.

I remember Monica as the doe-eyed college girl listening, breathless, to the
ravings of passionate, young upperclassmen. I guess all of us looked at each other with
wide eyes back then. Even Jelly, now that I think about it, was truly amazed at what was going on around him. A sense of that same amazement comes to me now. I realize that I have missed it.

I watch the television through the window. Camden Jones has Monica again. Jones' clean young face has that same youthful vigor and single-minded enthusiasm that Lance has rediscovered, that Lacey must still be looking for. Jones' voice is edged with years of Barbara Walters imitation as she pushes Monica for details about me and my friends.

"No," Monica says. "They are honest, intelligent people. They are loving. These people are no more subversive than you or I."

"We have unconfirmed reports that their leader, Matthew Shank, claims to be the son of God. Could you comment?"

"I can assure you," says Monica. "that Matt is not the son of God. These stories are irresponsible."

"Do you condone the kidnapping of young girls and making virgin sacrifices to Reverend Shank?"

I hadn't thought of that.

Reporters are just lawyers with microphones. They create twisted truth from facts. Facts are funny that way. So, they think I want to populate the world with my children. Create a whole tribe of Godlings?

But, Monica can take it. She's magnificent. Screw it if she sold out. For now she brings to bear all the power and wealth that she has married into. I thank Heaven that what little media coverage we had actually made it to Kentucky.

"Who's the dwarf talking to Monica?" asks Jelly.

I spy her in my binoculars. Although Camden Jones has the screen presence of an Amazon princess, she does it with camera angles. Monica is of average height for a woman, Camden is about a foot shorter. Her cameraman shoots her from his knees.

Jeremy and Joshua are pacing the room. This is the first time Jeremy has been on his feet since he was shot four days ago. Although he is wobbly, his color is good. Both
of them look good. Joshua returned to perfect health once he realized that the other half of him was not going to die.

“You did a good job, Dr. George,” says Joshua.

“You’re thanking the wrong guy,” he says. “He shouldn’t be walking around.”

“We have no choice,” says Jeremy.

“We can’t stay here,” says Joshua.

“I mean you shouldn’t be able to walk around at all,” says Dr. George. “It’s nothing I did for you.”

“Humble and he does house calls,” observes Jelly.

Andre peeks up from the basement.

“It’s time,” he says. “Head for the tunnel.”

The tree freaks are with him. They have surprises planted around Sweet Heaven and they did it right under the feds’ noses.

“It’s time,” I yell to Smokey.

He grunts and drags his Lazy Boy off the porch into the yard. He then limps to the house for another case of Coors and takes his station out in the open. “Is there any more beer?” he asks.

“That’s all there is,” I say.

“Good,” he says. “I’ll save the beer.” He engulfs my hand with his large, meaty grip. “Have a good jump.”

He hulks over to the chair, sinks in, props his bad foot onto the cooler, pulls the tab on a Coors, and in the lengthening shadows, finds a suitable seat for repose.

I reach down and scratch Chito behind the ears. “Take care of Smokey Joe,” I say. “We’ll hook up again.”

“Come on, Chito,” he says. “Let’s guard the beer.”

Chito trots over to him and sinks into the grass next to the chair. Smokey fills Chito’s bowl.

I see Jelly watching the melee in the meadow.

“Come on, Lance!” I yell. “Vamanos! Vamanos!”
“I don’t have a good feeling about this,” says Jelly.

He’s in the middle of rolling a joint. At the end of Jelly’s gaze is his camo clad pledge brother stationed on the opposite side of a HMMV’s hood.

“What should we do?”

“Stay,” says Jelly. “Stick it out.”

He lights up the joint and inhales deeply.

He hasn’t written his ending yet. He wants more material. Of course he wants us to stay. I figure he’s worried that his best-seller floats in the ethereal world of the plotless and the anticlimactic. I wonder what his brother has been signaling him. I wonder if their collusion stretches beyond the common experience of fraternal bond and into Sweet Heaven’s living room.

“Stay if you want,” I tell him. “I don’t care.”

He looks to the man and then back to me and reaches for the baseball cap that he no longer wears. His smile doesn’t quite reach his eyes.

“I’m with you,” he says.

He offers the joint to me. I shake my head, then reconsider and take a hit.

“Lance!” I yell. “Get the hell off of there!” I need to mellow out some. I take another hit.

“I’ll hold them off,” he yells back.

Andre is at my elbow. “We’ve got to do it soon.”

I try again. “You can’t stay up there,” I yell. “You know it’s not safe.”

“I’m going with the others,” he says. “I’m already dressed for it.”

No one can argue with Lance when he thinks he’s right or wrong. Before I make him pass down the bullhorn, he expounds upon his beliefs:

*Make love, not war.*

Smokey is finally on the same wavelength:

*Just do it!*

“As soon as the flock heads out, you slide your bony ass down and join them!”

This is my farewell to Lance.
“Give us liberty or give us DEATH!” Jeremy and Joshua yell up to him.

Lance’s rhetoric reverts to his past:

*Fight ignorance with DEATH!*  
*Fight ignorance with DEATH!*

And Smokey’s deep bass joins in the chant. Together their words become song as moving and as deep as a Southern spiritual.

Joshua touches my arm. His hand is lighter than Lacey’s when she’s at her softest. “Your friend is a good man,” he says.

Jeremy touches my other arm. “Without him, we’d be lost.”

The basement smells like wet earth. We walk into the first tunnel that Andre had us dig earlier this year. The tunnel is clean and spacious. The walls are made of cement blocks and the hallway is well lit with grow lights. In fact, there are a number of marijuana plants that are doing very well.

“We’ll miss you boys,” Jelly whispers to them.

In the middle of the older tunnel is a small cut. In terms of subterranean passages, this one is pretty big. The amount of earth that we moved in a short period of time is impressive. The soil from the tunnel has been moved to the very end where Andre dynamited the entrance so that it looks like it is part of that cave in. The conveyor belt is stashed inside the new tunnel and the floor has been swept clean.

I enter the tunnel. Jeremy and Joshua follow and Lacey, Jelly, and Dr. George are right on their heels. I must bend painfully low, however I don’t have to go all the way to my knees.

As soon as we enter, Andre seals us in with the cement blocks. We spend maybe twenty-five minutes on our side piling dirt behind us.

We work quickly. Underground we are in utter darkness, but outside the dying sun still lights the earth.

When we decide that we have filled in enough of the tunnel behind us, we move. We half-crouch, half-walk until we reach the cemetery, then we have to crawl. I shiver
when my flashlight shows the scarred edge of a rotten, pine box mangled by the digging auger.

“Be careful here,” I say to Lacey and Jelly. “You don’t want to get slivers.”

From here, there is only about thirty feet to the barn. But the tunnel is tight and claustrophobia wraps its sticky hands around my neck.

When I finally push up through the barn floor, hands help me up, drop me, and then reach carefully for Jeremy. He grimaces at the pain in his shoulder, but the man is tougher than I’d have guessed. Lacey and Jelly follow Joshua.

“Is that everyone,” asks Mountain, the big man who hugged me in the Rockys.

“No one but the dead left down there,” I gasp.

He nods and begins shoveling in the hole.

I am shaking from relief, from fright. Jelly too is shaken from the struggle.

Lacey is cool. She could have just taken a short walk through the cedars instead of crawling through a hundred-year-old, cemetery plot.

flick flick

Her ice is back.

My lizard shivers.

Everyone except Lance, the tree freaks, Andre and Smokey Joe is in the barn. There are less than thirty of us. Oh, and Moroni’s not here.

“I didn’t mean to forget you, buddy,” I say.

But Moroni is quiet now. There is only that distant sound I heard before, a party somewhere far off. I don’t expect to hear from him again.

The moist scent of fresh manure perfumes the air. Daisy and Amber Lynn shuffle in the corner, each curious and wary, but kept calm under Suzy Sue’s hands. Amber Lynn lowers her head and the clear tinkle of her bell acts as a starting signal.

The flock begins to disrobe.

This is the first time we’ve all been naked together. I watch Suzy Sue release her pendulous breasts from an industrial strength brassiere. They cascade from their restraints with a mountain fresh sigh of relief.
I think of the tight tunnel I just squeezed through, and my breath hitches. I know exactly how Suzy Sue’s breasts must feel. With a simple shrug, a thin summer dress settles to the Dairy Queen’s feet and she is completely nude. She won’t even wear sandals until there is snow on the ground. Janna is undressing. Even Daisy and Amber Lynn seem suddenly more naked than I have ever seen them before.

I wonder why no one ever suggested that we all get naked together until now? For a moment my head is filled with an old adolescent fantasy. I am dressing down in the girls locker room with the most popular and unattainable chicks in school. One thing leads to another. Wet hair. Lush lips. Wet towels twisted and aimed at each other’s fleshy bare ass.

snap snap snap

My head reels into a series of scampering, reptilian cartwheels. I lean against a beam for support and focus my attention on the men.

It is a thick and thin crowd.

Most of the boys are either fat vegetarians or thin ones. There’s Mountain, big and thick and unmovable as his name. Near him is Mark, a rail of man, prisoner-of-war thin with dread locks that reach his very skinny and surprisingly hairy ass.

Watching the men calms me.

Jelly is watching Janna. His need rides him hard, both hands sunk into his hair, kicking, spurring, urging him to buck. I notice that he has a backpack with him, filled with spiral notebooks. I wonder which need is greater.

Seeing Janna nearly nude reminds me that we have an opening.

“Hey,” I say. “Lance isn’t coming. Do you want his suit?”

She takes my hand and squeezes. The light in her smile becomes the only light in the world. It shines only on me.

She hitches her halter top back up. Those of us who aren’t going out in the buff don our equipment. Lacey, me, Jelly, the twins, and Janna.
“It’s going to be close,” says Dr. George.

His prodigious, taut belly bumps my hand. I peer through a knot hole in the rough gray barn boards. The cameras are still fixated on Lance. He is the spectacle. It is the role he’s played his whole life. He is also a true leader. He can move mountains with his faith.

I think of Monica outside Sweet Heaven handling the press. They are two of the same. I realize that now. But when we were together in college, I never noticed how strong she was. It never occurred to me that the woman at Lance’s side—during the rallies, the sit-ins, the lectures, the debates, the public hearings—it never occurred to me that her voice could speak as loudly.

They are two of a kind.

Lance has Smokey mobilized, off his fat ass, handing Moroni’s head up to the roof. Mobilizing a three hundred pound gimp is no small feat.

My little black friend, Chito, supervises the proceedings. While Smokey stretches high to hand off the head, Chito turns, looks toward the barn, his head cocked as if he hears a mouse.

“Stay there, little buddy,” I whisper.

“Did you play cowboys and Indians when you were a kid?”

“Everyone did,” I say.

“So did I,” says Dr. George. “I always wanted to be a cowboy.”

“I was always an Indian,” I say.

“You still are,” says Dr. George. “So am I.”

The cowboys are frothing at the mouth outside the gates. They have all the thundersticks, the horses, and a directive of the Great White Forked Tongue in Washington.

This is really dangerous.

Cowboys and Indians.

War.

Smear the Queer.
All these games end with a live winner and a dead loser.
Lance retrieves the head, props it atop the red brick chimney stack:

*Freedom gives us wings!*

*Smokey:*

*Sempre Fi!*

Voices boom from the house drowning the two men out.

"We’re coming out, Beetle."

It’s my voice over the bullhorn.

"Don’t shoot! We’re unarmed and very, very sorry."

The cameramen and reporters are still. The camo guys and negotiators take strategic positions.

"Tell Molly that her mommy loves her."

Lacey stands next to me. There is a hard line carved through her granite resolve at the edge of her lips.

Take a breath.

View my naked companions.

I slow the world. Savor it.

We have heard our recorded voices and that is the cue to go. Things will happen fast now.

The barn door flings open.

Single file, the nude Sweet Heaven residents push into the dusk. They are clearly visible and unarmed. They march holding picket signs.

*Save the Manatee.*

*Save the Whale.*

Hey, we figured we should use the publicity for something.

*Free Tibet.*

*Free John Gotti.*
We just couldn’t agree on any one thing. We were never a very good cult that way. Too disorganized. Too caught up in our need for individuality, but too similar to satisfy even that.

*No More Nukes.*

My voice, Jelly’s voice, and Lacey’s voice still mumble fearful platitudes through the bullhorn. Lance blares away from the roof. Smokey tosses dead soldiers in the direction of the live ones. Our line of nude protesters swing open the gate.

The Sheep are nude so the government can’t claim they were hiding weapons. Suzy Sue lets Daisy and Amber Lynn gambol off to find greener pastures. She has her own sign. You guessed it:

*Drink Milk.*

Mountain has a sign:

*I Love You.*

Mark has a sign:

*Go Fuck Yourself.*

We never wanted much. We just wanted to save the world by not screwing with it, by not participating in its destruction. Even inaction is too subversive to appease our attackers though.

The Sheep link arms. Somebody starts a round of “Kumbaya” while somebody else starts singing “Happy Trails.” They stop singing and sway together in time to the different music in their heads.

A detail of twenty armed warriors moves cautiously toward the nudists. If there is anything human within these men, it is hidden beneath an impervious layer of body armor. Their face masks take away their faces. Their helmets turn them into beady insects.

I am scared.

It’s like I’m about to fight with someone who is really fucking pissed and I don’t know who he is or why he’s so mad.

Lance cries:
Oh flesh! My own flesh!

The explosives detonate.

Smoke bombs erupt along the perimeter. An outbuilding disappears in a flash of white noise and smoke.

“Ready!” I yell.

We pull gas masks over our faces. We don ball caps with letters like ATF, FBI, ABC, BBC. We have black wind-breakers with the same letters emblazoned on the back.

The twins douse the walls with gasoline.

I drop the match.

The nudists scatter, as planned. I see Dr. George drop his sign: *My Heroes Have Always Killed Cowboys.*

He wrestles with two faceless feds.

The barn bursts into flames behind us. We run toward the front gate. It’s the plan.

But plans never go like they should. It is not in a plan’s nature to follow a straight line.

The media wind blows foul.

A helicopter sets down near the front gate. A camera crew emerges armed with state of the art voyeurism. The crew, dressed as sharply as a patriots at a Founders Day parade, storms toward us, blocks our path.

I hear my recorded voice over bullhorn:

“We are taking the victory from you! God forgive us!”

A small tool shed next to me explodes. The force of the blast knocks me to my knees. Jelly struggles out of his pack which is now on fire. His bible, his precious bible.

“We are going to Paradise!” blares my recorded voice.

On cue, I see the house erupt in flames.

“Ashole!”

It’s Jelly.

He doesn’t stop to think, doesn’t hesitate.
He stops trying to extinguish his burning pack and runs.

Lance is still on the roof. His slogans hold him there. His aching heart commands him to stay. Over the flames, the chaos and commotion, over the sirens and screaming nudists, over my own voice screaming false alarm, I hear him. He flings his bottle, shakes his fist like a rebel:

*In you, everything sank!*

Smokey doesn’t understand the danger:

*Remember the Alamo!*

Jelly runs toward the house that is now full and angry with flame. He runs to save our friend, but I can tell it is too late.

Moroni’s head is perched in defiant, willful silence atop the chimney. Lance knows she’s out there. His last words are a martyr’s:

*Love is so short, forgetting is so long!*

Over the noise, no one outside of Sweet Heaven could have heard him. Just as no one can really see Smokey Joe in his Lazy Boy or can tell that his burning eyes leak tears. No one can hear him either as he mumbles over and over. A chant. A prayer.

Jelly is flattened to the ground. The feds have him pinned down.

The place crawls with commandos. They emerge from each of the sacred directions as if they have always been there.

The tree freaks are screaming for me to run. They are helping the twins.

One well-dressed man from the camera crew leaps into the burning building. The feds restrain two others who are trying to follow him into the flames.

The clothes they wear, argyle socks, and Bill Blass shoes. I should have guessed. They are the Brooks Brothers here to claim Moroni.

Before the man in helicopter can take off, a fed in a gas mask and wind breaker yanks him from the controls. Throws him to the ground. He signals to Lacey. The letters on his cap, IRS, tell me that the fed is Andre in his disguise. Lacey runs to the chopper, scooping up Chito as she goes.
Janna jumps in with them just as they are lifting off. A small group of feds run toward them, but they are too late.

Jelly is caught.

Lance is gone.

I lift a hand to the chopper and imagine that Janna waves back.

I trot out the front gate as though I am just another camo guy or fed pursuing the Sweet Heaven nudists. When I reach the treeline, I slip into the woods, without looking back and run away from the dying echoes of the fires I started. The noise of the battle becomes only a dull and distant sound as faint as the noise from a party in a far off world.

Smokey’s words that I never heard ring in my head. I am struck over and over by the sheer stupidity of all:

*All is lost but honor.*

It shames me.

If honor is all we have left, then the feds have won after all.
Epilogue: Rotten to the Core

It’s been months since the Sweet Heaven siege. But, here I am again. Hiding and shaking in the wilderness, ducking the Man’s spotlight.

Literally.

We’re already having a close call.

A beam of light ripped through the night and gunshots followed. The weapons at the dark end of the spotlights are fully automatic and definitely not set to stun.

Stray bullets whistle ricochets off nearby rocks.

We could be goners.

The twins and the tree freaks hug the dirt.

Me and Rocky and Bullwinkle crouch behind a fat piece of lava that spouted up and cooled here about a zillion years ago. Although the night is cold, the lava rock is still very warm from the desert sun. On top of it all, I worry about cold-blooded, creepy crawlys who might be sharing this spot.

A couple hundred yards to my right, I hear creatures—the four-legged, hoofed type—clanking, scraping, tumbling over the rocks of an incline. Fortunately, those poor bastards, not me and the DEATH squad, are the objects of the random violence.

When they don’t have people to shoot at, the camo guys take out their aggressions on the local fauna. To these guys, everything that moves is V.C. or Indian or the guy who teased them for popping a boner in the locker room after gym class.

Just listen to them. They’re hooting like hookers at a young republicans convention.

“Take it all bitch! Yeah!”

Of course, the yokels in the jeep are here because of me, or people like me.

But, I didn’t make myself a rebel.

They did.
Without them, I’d probably be back in San Diego soaking sun, scamming beach bunnies, and sucking asbestos fibers and fossil fuels in the seat of a Hyster forklift under sixty watt bulbs in a Grocery Outlet warehouse.

I should even be thankful, I guess. I officially no longer exist.

I am a god.

I am proof of my own existence. And, the only ones who can see me are the ones who believe.

As far as the feds know, I’m a small pile of ashes and charred bones. Sure. They might be suspicious, but where you find bones, you know you can be certain that death was there first.

The facts fit.

Our bad plan panned out. They heard me ranting in the house, along with Lacey and Jelly. And they saw Lance, God rest his soul, go down with the roof. He was the final proof they needed to show that we were committed enough to sacrifice everything, to make that most final and most futile gesture of defiance.

They caught Jelly right outside, but he stood tall. Hasn’t said a word. When his autobiography comes out—and I fully expect to see it in print and on the great silver screen—I’m sure that he’ll tell the truth just the way we agreed it should be told.

I fondle the small leather pouch I wear around my neck. It’s corny. I know. But I call it my medicine pouch. There’s not much in it. Only the teeth from the corpse of Mr. Shumaker.

We took all of the Schumakers’ teeth with us that day. Lacey left her lizard piercing with her corpse. Andre left his dog tags. Jelly left his pledge pin. I didn’t have anything of myself to leave, but we figured that we left enough.

They never discovered the other tunnel. We covered our tracks well.

The tree freaks whistle.

We move on.
They can’t plant motion sensors out here because of all the coyotes and antelopes. Still, we have to stay low. They are equipped with night vision and heat seeking technology.

In the Governor’s office while the twins were looking for information about Molly, they stumbled across the schematics for the perimeter of the Idaho Nuclear Engineering Laboratory. The offices in the city are never as well guarded as the ones in the desert.

That’s all we needed. Just the layout. Rocky and Bullwinkle and their mischievous brothers will do the rest.

Oh, and these guys have it coming.

You know that they design bombs in there? Design them, make them, and test them on the Blackfoot Indians who were unlucky enough to get stuck here before the government decided that it was a good place to blow shit up.

Those bombs are real.
The people and the plants and the animals that they will kill are real too.
It’s not just the fireworks that get you either. It almost never is. It’s the small stuff. The stuff you can’t see.

They tell me that the site sits on top of a great reservoir that flows toward Boise at a few feet a year. Yep. That’s where they get their drinking water. There are reports that they have lost radioactive gunk from unlined holding ponds for years.

I don’t feel a bit bad about being a monkey wrench in this machine.
These guys have it coming.
A crescent moon is out. We trip and stumble over rocks and sage, but we make good time. I am constantly worried about stepping on a sleeping rattlesnake, but if I do, so be it.

Rocky and Bullwinkle are heavy, but it’s not far now.
I think about Lance a lot.
In a way, he was the purest guy I ever knew. He lost his way for awhile, but I remember him yelling, naked, on that burning roof. He went the way of all righteous men. I know he’d be proud of what I’m doing now.

He was DEATH’s inspiration.

He started a movement without even knowing it. After Lance’s shaking fist that day during college, DEATH squads popped up all over the country. We’re not an organized group. We model ourselves after the government. No one person is responsible for the decisions, so no one has to answer to anybody else.

When we reach the fence, the tree freaks cut the wire. I let Rocky and Bullwinkle free and they scamper off toward the desert. The twins and the tree freaks release their raccoons too. Our masked, mischief-making friends spit at us and then turn to the desert inside the facility.

You’d be surprised how much havoc a coon can play with the wiring and alarm systems of a top secret government facility.

We’ll keep at it too.

Keep sneaking out here and releasing rats, coons, weasels and anything else that bites, chews, slinks, and hides in plain sight.

Then we’ll really hit them with something good.

I don’t know where Lacey and Andre are. I suppose they’re still looking for Molly. Maybe they have her by now. Andre, in an uncharacteristic moment of openness, once mentioned some ties to South America. Maybe they’ll take Molly down there.

The tree freaks mend the chainlink fence and we move off into the desert. It is cold, but sunrise is only a couple hours off. We’ll spend the day hidden in the desert and then continue to our cars.

Then we’ll collect more coons and come back again.

That’s my life now.

I don’t give it a lot of thought though. I think about the things that Moroni taught me. I think about the things I don’t need, and I guess I try to get rid of them.
I don’t know about the others from Sweet Heaven. And I don’t know where Janna is, or the Dairy Queen. I bet I can find them though. The best places to hide are in the mountains with the Rainbow People and nuts like that. I wish Janna could see the sunrise in the desert with me. But I’m not lonely. I know the sun shines on her, just like it shines on me. Yeah.

When we’re through here, I think I’ll try to find Janna. I could use some help. This is not the kind of work to do alone.