



*A Wasted Life*

*Mark Crawford*

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# Chapter One

Under the roof of a happy home, beneath the open sky of a small town, with the fragrance of magnolia blossoms and wild flowers hanging in the air, he, the all American boy, grew and became a young man. The wind styled his perfect hair and the sun tanned his beautiful face as he went about the life of becoming what all knew he would become. Life was as it should be, and he was its proof.

In the sunshine or under the play of clouds, life, moved in its perfect order, leaving its imprint upon the earth in shadows short and long, all the while his faithful wife sang love songs as his child played in the happiness of the home they shared. He was the reason for her song, he was the innocence in the laughter of his child; they had given themselves to him, completely. He was the perfect husband, the perfect father, the perfect Sunday School Teacher... his perfection, like his beauty, were carried in his smile, and all who met him recognized the radiant glow of what could only be described as ... special. The young and old alike could see that he was at peace with something envious.

If you were to look into the eyes of his father you would see the light of pride glowing inside him, for his son was intelligent, honorable, Godly in all actions and appearances, and above all, his son was following his fathers footsteps into the ministry of his childhood upbringing. He was destined to become a Master of the Word, a giant among the evangelicals, and a blessing to the race ... the human race.

When his mother spoke of him with her friends there was a happiness in her voice and in her heart, for her child was kind and polite - he was strong, handsome in face and body, well-mannered and graceful in all his movements like a trained dancer, all mothers were instinctively drawn to him.

Whenever he, perchance, went to town, the hearts of everyman's daughter fluttered in their chests like the wings of a hummingbird, and they spoke to him, if for no other reason than to hear their names upon his lips, or to see their reflection in his beautiful god-like eyes.

His brother, the Preachers other son, loved him more than all the others. He loved the way his brother always seemed to find time to spend with him, the way he listened to him as if he were the most important person in his life, the way he sat, the straightness of his walk, the calm way he spoke, his complete grace of movement; above all though, he loved his brothers commitment to God, his pure thoughts and his unmatched intelligence. He knew better than the rest that his brother would take over their fathers ministry, and he knew for certain that when he did, he would be no ordinary layman hustling the poor for their tithes, feeding their minds with the milk of ridiculous stories about snakes and whales. No, he had been privy to the private conversations where the deepest of the spiritual mysteries had been explained in ways never before heard. He knew from those conversations that his brother had been blessed with an understanding beyond that of any before him, knowledge that could only have come to him through a deep encounter with something mystical and ancient. No, he himself did not have the gifts, nor did he desire

them, he wanted only to follow his brother, the gifted child, the all-radiant chosen one. He wanted nothing for himself except to be his brothers servant, his companion ... the shadow to his brothers light.

That was how everyone loved him, the Preachers eldest son. He was a light impossible to shade, a warmth able to overcome the cold winds of any sorrow; his presence awakened the heart of love in all he met.

But he, the Preachers son, was not happy. Walking among the flowers, smelling the magnolias, working the land bequeathed him by birth, teaching the children at his church, playing games with his child, in the arms of his adoring wife, he, who brought happiness to all, found no happiness in his own heart. Inside of him there was a restlessness, of what origin he did not know, none-the-less, it was there, a restlessness of the deepest nature, a hunger that none save he could feel, for it was a restlessness in the one part of himself he could not ignore ... a restlessness of the soul.

Inside he did not have peace, inside he was bitter, confused and disturbed, never actually touching the hem of the robe he projected, and in that inner-madness he had begun to feel the pull of something he could not explain. Inside he knew the truth, which was, that the love of his family and the adoration of his peers, and all of the other blessings of his life, did not satisfy this deep hunger, this need for something ... something he could not identify. He knew that the love of his mother, his father, his brother, his wife, nor the love of his child could fill the void inside him. Somewhere, sometime, he had already decided that his future was not with them, that his future lie somewhere else, that his friends, family and church had given the total sum of themselves to his life experience, and that it had not been enough to quench the thirst that he carried within. His mind found no solace, his heart was not content and his soul was unfulfilled.

He knew that religion and the familial life were good for his father and his mother, but to him it was all words, and words didn't cleanse the soul, nor did they fill the cup of his own heart. Without question the sanctity of church and family were foundational blocks, blocks upon which many a nation were built, but were they everything? Are societies that practice monogamous relationships happier than the ancient ones who did not; did monogamy in marriage bring eternal contentment to the couple who practiced it?

What about the God he had been taught to worship, was that the supreme God, or is there another more powerful God that we are unaware of? And what about the concept of good and evil; who among us actually knows which is which? Religion calls God a "HE" but who among us has seen God? Is God a He, a She, an It, or something else, something beyond our ability to understand? And where is the heart of God concerning the suffering of humanity? How does one worship a God they can neither see nor touch? And if there is a God, where can He, She, It, be found ... in heaven? ... Is heaven in the sky as the Jews, Christians and Moslems believe, or in the Self as the Hindu's and Buddhists teach? That is what seemed right to him ... the Self, but if so, then where was this Self? Oh, he has searched, he had read all the books by all the so-called Masters, and they all argued that the true Self, the true manifestation of God is within, within what, the body, but where in the body and how does one find it? And how does the gift of Salvation through Jesus Christ factor into all of this, if it even does. After all, did not Jesus say that

his believers would be able to do the things that he did ... even greater things? Yes, according to the scriptures those were his exact words.

Mohammad was said to have risen into the sky, into heaven the same as Jesus had six-hundred years before him. Combine that with Enoch and Ezekiel for the Jews and it seems that they, three of the most influential religions on the planet believed that the great prophets didn't die, they instead defy gravity and rise upward until they disappeared in the sky like a spacecraft. Is ascension the ultimate way into the glory of God, if so, it was obvious that no one he had met, themselves knew how to ascend into heaven, not his father, not his teachers ... not the followers of the Holy Books.

He had been told that Holy Books of the world taught everything; everything from the Creation of the world to the origins of its Savior. The ones that he read did seem to know a tremendous amount of things, but is it important to know those things, or are those things nothing more than the imaginings of fools long sense dead ... or maybe they are simply the misunderstood historical accounts of ancient civilizations long since destroyed. Yes, the Bible, the Koran, the Gita, the teachings of Buddha, they all had something to say, lots of things actually, but it seems to him that the one important thing to know is, how to be happy inside, and that he had not found in any of them.

Yes, the Bible, the book he had been raised on, and all of the great teachers throughout the world tell of the soul and the faith needed to obtain happiness through eternal salvation. And certainly comfort can be found in this, but is this the comfort of the ego, or the comfort within that he so desired? Yes, it all seems so simple, so attractive, and as stated, there is a tremendous collective of knowledge within the ancient scriptures ... blessings great and small. But where was the proof of its verity? Where werethe prophets, the holy ones, the wise ones who could successfully perform even the smallest of the miraculous actions promised to the faithful? Where were the initiates who could cast out demons with a verbal command, turn water into wine, manifest food from thin air, walk on water or ascend to heaven in front of the multitudes? Where were the great masters of the Far East who can levitate, bi-locate or live a thousand years without food?

I is true, he knew many Preachers who were ardent believers, most of all his own father, a man who had given his whole life to The Calling, holy, a man of immeasurable faith. His father who was a true shepherd for his flock, a man to be admired, a man whose life was one of a noble and humble servant. He lived his life in the Word, and his mind and its thoughts were maleficent, sincere and serene - but even he, who had given so much to his faith, did he, in fact, live in happiness? Was he at peace within his own heart, or did he simply stay the course out of a sense of duty? And did he really have an absolute assurance of his own salvation? If he had absolute assurance concerning salvation, if his thirst for eternity had been quenched, then why did he continually feel the need to consult his Holy Book, to go to seminars, to the teachings of others? Why must he, a man of both faith and works, feel the need to ask for forgiveness; is God not with him? Is God not there in every breath, in every beat of his heart, in every thought of his mind? How can he, and upright, stalwart example of piety, not know that he had done all that is required in this life. Vanity. Is it all vanity.

## Part 2

These were the questions that tore at his heart. These were the things he considered. This was the understanding he sought, his thirst, the claws of that gnawing hunger inside him.

It is his belief that the synergy of every action is at first a thought ... and each thought a product of the true longings of the soul. This is what seemed right to him, the Soul/Self, within, this is what he needed to understand, was all that mattered, everything else is a distraction, the folly of man's religion, the mechanisms of the ego. In truth, what are we to man's religion but toys on a child's board game, little plastic pieces moved by chance from place to place. Foolishness and vanity ... anything other than the Soul/Self, was foolishness and vanity.

The 23 Psalm, he had memorized it, and many were the times he repeated to himself the words, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want ... "but he did want, in fact, deep inside he was starving. Beautiful were those words, and in them God seemed so near, but never close enough to touch, never close enough to hear or see, and never had God been close enough to settle his restless spirit, to settle his doubting mind, to bring him the comfort those words seem to promise.

He had heard a thousand thousand birds singing their praises to the happiness of the world, yet in his voice that happiness was silent. His life had ceased to be the willing servant, instead it had become his oppressor. However the serenity of the soul was supposed to be, behind his beautiful eyes, his beautiful smile he sang only with the voice of sorrow ... his lips were dry, his eyes strained; his soul had been wrapped in the shroud of an immeasurable sadness, one that in spite of all he'd been blessed with, had walled him off from the joys of a normal life.

He tried to draw the gentle curtains of sleep, but for reasons only destiny knew, he could not. In frustration he arose from his bed and stood as if he were awaiting a bus, a bus he hoped would never come.

The room was dark except for the light of a soft waxing moon. He watched as a fly walked across the window pane, walking the illusion of freedom; it was a slap of reality to him. In that moment he understood, he turned to look upon the sleeping figure of his childhood sweetheart and their child ... he loved them, but a dark calling was upon his brow and a hash pull upon his spirit. Destiny had at last confronted him and had murdered the man he had been. It confronted him with the reality that just as the moon does not stand still in its journey across the sky, neither can the lives of men who seek knowledge, be without change, and change is seldom comfortable.

It was a cool and enchanting morning, the kind where the new day light showed its reflection through the previous night's dew, enhancing the colors of the earth in all its iridescent beauty; that time of the day when the spirit of the earth, like a fisherman, casts its net to ensnare the golden brilliance of the rising sun.

Having a mystic's spirit and a loving son's heart he was compelled to walk the woods near his childhood home, the home of his loving parents ... it was a pathway he had walked a thousand times before.

As he past near the house of his father and mother he stopped a few paces away and looked into the window facing the woods where he now stood. He saw in that window his mother and his father sitting together at the breakfast table, talking. He saw behind them stairs, the ones that lead to the bedrooms upstairs, and he knew that his brother, his most loyal friend, lie there as he himself had in his youth. He remembered his life in that house, and he remembered his wife, their child ... and in that moment he knew he would not return home to them. He was going his own way; destiny was calling, and he was powerless to ignore it.

He became pale, and his stomach hurt, but he could read in his soul the anxiety, the resignation - he knew that his life as the Preachers son, was over.

Inside of him a voice spoke, "If you do this, you will hurt those you love." He did not answer.

Again the voice spoke, "Your family needs you, expects you to do your duty."

Finally, the voice inside said, "If you do this, you will die."

"I am already dead," he answered.

And without understanding why, without having a destination, without the blessing of anyone he cared about, and with the understanding that he would leave destruction in his wake, he wiped the tears from his eyes, and walked away from all he'd ever known to confront the demons of his own alternate reality.

This is the story of one ... maybe you.



# Chapter Two

That first night, after a long days walk, he found himself on an old wooden bench in front of an ancient mound typical of the first known people to settle Mississippi. He sat with rapt anticipation and watched her crest the distant horizon like a beautiful woman rising seductively out of a placid pool of water. She rode the curve of the heavens until coming to rest above him, as if to look upon him from a throne, her sheen nakedness illumed and pale like the ghost of a goddess ... he knew she'd come.

There is something irresistible about the moon, something haunting, something cold yet passionate, something that compels men to admire her, to worship her. It's a teasing of sorts - a part of her seduction. Yes, the moon is like a young girl; day after day you see her with only passing glances, and then, as if by magic one day you see her, only to realize that she has magically blossomed, that she has become complete, full, a woman, and in that moment you stop, and you look, and you admire. Yes, the moon cycle, like a flowering young girl is the soul of our deepest desires, the greatest magic God has on display, the inconceivable mystery, a supplication to feminine mystique. Yes, the moon in her blossomed fullness is the irresistible sirens call to the romantic ... oh, but she is so much more than this. She is not only the sunshine of midnight desire, but also the secret fantasy that gives a romantic reality to the heart of those unloved by daylight.

He watched and he spoke to her as though she were sitting beside him. To her he confessed to selfishness and told her how in his youth he had professed love falsely to gain the favors of females, he told her of the time he'd abandoned a mother and her two sons, he apologized for breaking his mothers heart and abandoning his wife and child, then he asked her to forgive any and all sorrow he had brought upon women and when the moon had lubricated the mechanisms of his soul; when he felt the caress of sleep upon his beautiful countenance he removed his right shoe, stretched out on the bench and with his shoe as a pillow watched the stars in the way of our ancestors, until, for the first time in his life, he fell asleep without someone he loved beside him.

In his dream he remembered his woman, his child, his mother, his brother and father, so deep was the subconscious guilt that he was jolted awake in a fit of tears. He could fix it with a phone call, he knew they'd come, he could be home in no time. "Home," he says aloud, but in his heart he knew that the place he'd once called home, was no longer so ... he had no home, none that you or I could identify. In that moment, in this admission he found a sliver of relief, a modicum of comfort; he somehow knew that his true home was somewhere far away, and that in his sorrowful decision he'd taken the first step in returning to it.

Over the next few months he worked at odd jobs earning enough to buy food and provide shelter. When he wasn't working he walked the woods, the fields, the parks, and the myriad of creatures who inhabited them became his companions. At the end of each day in a state of solicitude he'd find an old tree to sit against and wait as the suns last rays pulled the covers from his memories, exposing him to the midnight chill of misery. When those chills became nightmares

he knew it was time to pick-up and move on. Another town, another job, another tree but always the same old emptiness ... the same old voice in his mind assuring him that he had a destiny, a purpose, a duty, a calling - and that he could not be whole until he fulfilled it.

There were times in the early morning darkness when he found himself suddenly awake and desperately alone in some strange place, times when he was choked with remorse and sorrow. There were times when he'd see a father hand-in-hand with his child. He'd see a couple embraced, a family together, and he would silently curse himself. What could be more evil than a man who abandons his family - nothing! Remorse, sorrow and worst of all, doubt; the three switches used by the dutiful to whip the dog within. Under their onslaught, the pretentious appointment with destiny he had committed to, fell at his feet like cold stones from a mountain top. When guilt found its peak a heavy weariness came next causing his mind to bleed energy making him feel as if he hadn't had a solitary hours sleep since leaving his family. Why? he asked of that Unknown thing which seemed to be directing him. Why me? he spoke aloud while hitting himself ... but all that answered was silence, a corrosive silence that became clear only in the words of Dante "All hope abandon, ye who enter here" words that sank to the bottom of his soul. But, as always within the cold fingers of sorrow, in moments of doubt and pain, that urge, that Unknown thing within him would compel him to endure, to rise from the ashes of naivete to gird his loins, to keep moving towards an Unknown summoning that called to him from the mist of malefaction.

Few are they, in body, who can understand the inevitable pull of destiny when it is most often married to a required and difficult change. Fewer still can recognize the neon of destiny before crashing headlong into it, and even fewer still, once recognizing it, can embrace its virtue as it guides them into the maws of sorrow.

It is true that each soul has its own spot in time whence it draws its life, its sustenance. And so it is, so it must be that our soul is rooted in that time and space. But ever-once-in-awhile someone is born in the wrong space, whether you believe it by accident or by destiny is of no import. This out of place feeling is called, "The Unknown Factor", and it is this Unknown Factor that our Creator uses to precipitate Divine Will upon those chosen for the Great Task.

Likewise, it is common knowledge that Necessity is the mother of invention, it is also common knowledge that Change is the father of discovery - Self Discovery. The confusing thing was, he knew that he was perfect for the time and place that had been born, but, thing is, in light of his being Called, none of that mattered. This is something greater than his comfort, it is was Necessity and Discovery, the father and mother of Divine Purpose and no matter the sorrow involved, he would not go home, could not go home. And there it is, true Faith, that rarest of all traits. For whatever reason he was committed to following that inner Unknown, to follow that silent voice, to seek out his calling no matter the sorrow involved. On and on, day after day he went floating like a bottle upon the currents of faith following the roads like a vagabond Cain - then, as if by magic, he knew he had arrived.

Where? you wonder. Well, that is of no matter. He had arrived, he knew it in his soul. He had crossed a broad gulf hat neither sorrow nor bliss could span. Yes, this was that place, that time,

that recognition of the inexplicable; he was overwhelmed by his emotions, that final acceptance of something more grand than himself, a painful transverberation.

There were no palm branches, no singing crowds, when he arrived he did so in the guise of a quiet lonely street urchin. Still, he was the Preacher's Son and that could never be completely hidden. No matter where he went, how unkempt he was, like a flame in the darkness, his beauty could not be hidden. All who passed him, saw him, tried to befriend him. All women tried to attract him, but he refused friendship and companionship alike ... he was waiting for his destiny to reveal itself. "I am here. Reveal my purpose. Show me your plan," he said over and over and over.

He waited and he waited some more. He worked, ate, and prayed that his purpose would be revealed. Then, somewhere along the way he quit asking, then he quit listening, then he forgot his sacrifice and took up alcohol. He worked less, he thought less and became complacent. His skin became pale and dry, his fingers thinned, his beard unkempt. He tried to disappear into nothingness as his faith waned, but still people saw him, he was undeniably undeniable. Men wanted to be in his company, women wanted to bathe him, feed him, nurture him, fix him ... possess him. There was something enchanting about him, some beckoning magnetism drawing upon their very soul, something, some goodness about the Preacher's Son they could not ignore, a recognition so profound it simply could not be hidden by the mask in which he appeared. He was special and no matter how he tried he couldn't hide the splendor of his radiance. But ... misunderstanding the methodology of his purpose he became antisocial and eventually put on the mantle of anger - after all his dedication to the Unknown - failure was the tattoo on his forehead. How could he have been so misled? It no longer mattered who liked him or who hated him, how could they matter now. He didn't mean any ill-will, but this was about him, his choices, his demons his life. The longing that brought him here had nothing to do with them. He instinctively knew to separate himself from the herd, the sheep to become something else; what, he did not know.

He hated what he saw in people and further withdrew from them. If in passing a woman made eye-contact with him he would give her a hard, cold and judgmental stare, and with men he took on a cold contemptuous attitude. And it began to work ... the light of who he had been became obscured, less visible to those around him and a darkness was perceived in its place. The essence of the Preacher's Son, was fading,

Sitting like a hermit in his alcohol ally he watched them come and go, one stranger at a time. He saw drunkards junkies priests, past present and future mothers, cops, store clerks, quiet old people, loud boisterous young people, handicapped people, thugs and nurses. He saw TVs in store windows pouring racial poison down the throat of a pathetic and thoroughly hypnotized population. He saw money, greed and ego ... none seemed awake to reality ... few even cared ... the world was destroying itself before his very eyes. From within his cave he saw it all, and in them, in it, he saw the lie, the illusion of prosperity, the illusion of happiness, the trick, the euphoria of a temporary high. But he knew the truth, that death and destruction awaited them all, that in its own time and place death would strike them down and all of the things they believed important would vanish, yes death was even now stalking them. This he knew, this he could so clearly recognize, but what he could not understand was the empathy they had concerning the unavoidable destiny with a death that ominously stalked them each and every moment of their

lives. How could they be so happy in this ignorance? Of course they knew that life was temporary ... the reality confronted them daily in the faces of their elderly. Yet, they go about their lives as if life were never-ending. They laugh, they get high and waste time like there is no end to it ... no spiritual accountability, no day when someone will ask them to give a thesis of what they had done with the life they had been bequeathed. Everything was a game to them ... but he knew that the game of life they played was an illusion. Vanity. It was all the vanity of the human ego.

But what if he were wrong? Why is it that he sees the world as he does, while the multitudes apparently see it completely different: the answer of course is, he believed in accountability, and they ... if they believed in it, ignored it. He understood this about them, but what he couldn't understand was the happiness they found in the illusion they lived. No. He had not begun to doubt his beliefs, he was convinced of his belief, but how is it that he was miserable in his knowledge while they were happy in their ignorance of spiritual accountability. How is this possible. Could it be that, maybe it is he who is mistaken? Or is it possible that there is more to the equation than simply this is Good and this is Evil? There must be! If the Creator is just, there has to be an overall fairness which takes into account the birth circumstances of the disadvantaged. He prayed for understanding, for wisdom, but his thoughts were like drops of a powerful poison into the glass of his confused life.

Years pass.

## Part 2

Like John's "Fool on the Hill" he sat in his alcohol ally as reality entombed him, and then as if by divine intervention, the darkness of his thoughts began to disappear. All he had witnessed, all he had heard from the mouths of those he encountered seemed to slowly pass away, seemed to slowly disappear from existence, forgotten from the possibilities of memory, and within, something, clicked into place. His spirit seemed to rise above his negative perception of those around him. With great awe and wonder at the suddenness of this recognition he knew this: Humanities fate was not yet set, it could be altered. The Creator had not abandoned us, him. And it can be said that in that a moment of enlightened understanding, that he, at long last, looked upon the face of his purpose - she had arrived, hidden, veiled like an Eastern Bride. Our opinion of what is Good and Evil is the illusion!

He understood what he must do.

Dropping his wine bottle he stood, raised his arms in supplication and spoke to the sky. "I believe. I understand. But I cannot turn my back on humanity. Yes Lord, your will be done. I understand this. They will live again. I understand this too. But I want to help them now, not in some other life. How can my compassion be misguided?" His arms fell at his side, he waited. Nothing, No word of instruction not even an explanation.

As always he rose early that morning. As he walked the sidewalks he came to the conclusion that no one seemed to recognize that their life was being controlled by the Herd Mentality, none aside himself saw the suffering and affliction. In his distress he returned to his alley home. He took the cardboard box that had been his sleeping shelter and folded again and again until it was the size of a door mat. He sat it against the wall and sat atop it with his legs folded like a person in meditation. He looked skyward once more and said, "I will not abandon these people. I will sit here until one of two things happen. Either you will tell me how I can help humanity or I will sit here until I die". He closed his eyes and focused on his breathing. In and out, in and out, in and out. One day, two days, twenty days he sat, resigned to live or die; resigned to his destiny, or his fate.

He had long since passed the pain of hunger... "Mister," he hears. He opens his eyes, she has returned, a little girl wearing blue pants and red tennis shoes. "Hey Mister. I brought you more water," she says with a shy smile. He smiles in return, then hears her mother say, "Come on baby. Let the man be," then the mother leans over, touches his forehead as if to check his temperature, and adds, "Mister. You ok?" He smiles and nods, yes.

After thirty-one days he begins to lose all sense of physical reality, the world he sees and hears is dream-like ... he hears voices ... a child's voice. He opens his eyes and sees the same little girl with a cat sitting next to him, she is humming a song, something he remembers from his own childhood. The cat sees him, she does not. No word from above, below or within. He understands this silence: F-U God, death it is.

Later that night he finds himself conscious, yet dreaming. He is sitting in a huge field of grass with a thin line of trees off in the distance, there is a brook close by ... he is sitting cross-legged, he is alone. He tries to stand but is unable, he is frozen in a sitting position, yet for some reason he isn't concerned about it.

He lifts his face skyward and feels the warmth of sunlight on his skin. He sits like this exactly like this until the sunlight turns to darkness. He hears the music of a million insects as they go about their calls to mate. The night is fresh and the air around him clean and crisp. The moon goddess rises in her fullness, she is mysterious and inviting, she is calling him to her, he feels his spirit respond like the massive oceans rising to meet her, the ebb and flow of nature's breath. "Moonchild. Come." He lifts from his body and flies into the heavens where she is waiting for him with open arms. She is beautiful, long flowing silver hair, skin pale blue, eyes translucent like a ghost. She embraces him and he remembers the women in his life, his sisters, his mothers, his wives, his daughters, his lovers, his fantasies ... she is all women and he loves her, worships her. A thousand lifetimes flash through his inner-vision, he remembers his many lives and he knows her forgiveness.

He feels an urgency and returns to the alley where he hovers above his physical body. He sees a man going through his pocket, searching them one by one, pulling three dollars from them, then leaving.

On the thirty-third day he is aware once again of people around, yet not. He pops out of his body and floats to the center of the alley, he sees a couple, they have a small child, they have a needle. He moves off then returns. He sees another pair, she a young girl, perhaps fifteen.

She is plump, her hair once the color of straw is now something else, unwashed, it looks like the end of a broom. The man satisfy's himself. Still on her knees she looks up expectantly, the man tosses her a small clear bag, she grabs it greedily. They go their different ways.

He rises once more above the ally, it is nighttime, he is moving yet not by his own direction. Something or someone is directing him, pushing and pulling with unseen hands. He sees what it wants him to see; filth, greed, pollution, abused children, all manner of violence, drug addiction, hunger, disease, all manner of degradation, all of the unspeakable things people do to one another. By the time he returns to his body he is sickened, heavy is the sorrow in his heart. "Do you still believe they can be helped?" the voice asks. "I do," he replies. Then weeps.

On the fortieth day he rises, stands without cramping or pain and walks from the ally. At the first corner he turns right, then left and after five more blocks comes to an old park. Continuing into the center of the park he stops next to an old, heavily worn park bench, he sits.

The old man sitting beside him hardly seems to notice his arrival. Together sit side by side watching and feeding the birds, there is a strange unusual comfort, a familiarity between them. He is Indian. There is an instinctual friendship between them in which the very difference of their cultures, by some mystic element, seems to make them comfortable with each other, or maybe it is something else.

As they sit watching the birds, the leaves, the children, the sky and the earth, sunlight warns them and the wind breaths on them. It is one of those days created for the receiving of humility, a chance to appreciate the fullness of life. It is one of those rare times when our souls are freed from the darkness of the human ego to shine from within making silence more expressive than words. In this moment of lucid appreciation, the old man speaks, "My name is Kuljit Singh Rickie, my friends call me Ricky Singh. I am from Kashmir in India." He hesitates and looks at Paul. "Three lives ago I was a Mennonite this is my second life as a Sikh," he says with a big smile as he points to his blue turban, "It is my one-thousandth life as an idiot," he adds with an even bigger smile.

"I'm Paul," he responds with a smile and a handshake.

Together they sit and talk about this and about that. After what seemed like several hours Paul knows everything there is to know about Indian politics and Ricky knows everything there is to know about fishin' in Mississippi. It was a good day in which both men came away with a measure of comfort and the sprouting seed of a budding friendship.

Then the air about them seems to change, "Well," Ricky says. "The Creator has heard your prayer. If you want to help these people, this is what you must do."

Paul slowly turns and looks at the man sitting next to him and for the first time realizes that he was not what he seemed. Paul picks up his hands and looks at them, they are not his hands. His hands are somewhere else.

"Life" the angel continued is not lived per your desire, it is a set program designed and played, for reasons beyond our comprehension. However this I can tell you, There is a struggle going on between principalities and powers greater than you can imagine. A war between Light and Dark,

per se. And ... this world in which you find yourself is the battlefield," the angel hesitates and then in that moment of hesitation, Paul jumps in with a question.

"If there is but one Creator then how can there be disputation in the world?"

"Life in general is an experience and it is from experience that we learn. It is for this reason we live multiple times in multiple bodies, that we experience life in all possibilities, some in happiness, some in sorrow. We repeat this cycle of rebirth until we learn to put the welfare of the world above the desires of ourselves. Sounds easy, but trust me, it is not. That is why we have teachers - like your father. They are more experienced and can therefore help others by showing them the difference between a life in the presence of love, verses a live in the presence of sorrow."

He started to interject and ask another question, but the angel stilled him with a raised hand. "It is not for you to know all things. You told the Creator that you would allow yourself to die unless you were shown how to help humanity overcome their suffering. That is what I am here to teach you.

"To do this is simple. There are five things you must teach them. First: they must be taught to see that, life, as they are living it, is selfish. Simply put, because they are living life according to their own will, as opposed to living it according to the greater good of humanity, as a result, they are suffering.

"If you are an addict or a prisoner, a slave to some addiction, or terminally ill it is easy to recognize the suffering in your life. But suffering is not always so easy to recognize. Oftentimes it is more subtle, but of course when you factor in aging and dying into the equation then the suffering of the flesh is easy to recognize. But those types of suffering are nothing more than the perceptible fruit of the human condition. However, those who are able to see beyond the human-ego-enigma understand that all life experience outside the greater good is affliction. That however, is a much deeper lesson, and I, only a Messenger.

"Here is the answer to your prayer; the five things you need to teach humanity if you wish to help them.

- 1) People need to be shown that they are suffering.
- 2) They are to be taught to identify the things in their lives that are causing this suffering.
- 3) People need to understand that if they want to end their suffering, they must stop doing those things which are causing their suffering.
- 4) They need to be taught that those actions which are the cause of their suffering first began as a thought.
- 5) Therefore they need to be taught how to maintain control over their thought process."

Kuljit hesitates, then adds, "Suffering arises through the desires of the flesh, the human ego. To be free of suffering we need to cut the bonds of desire and gain control over the dark-ego of the human thought process.

## Part 3

"Wanting more stuff, material objects, is the human-ego seeking fulfillment in stuff, material possessions instead of working for the overall good of humanity. When the human-ego puts the selfish desires of the flesh above the needs of the others, it ceased to be pure ego and becomes something dark, the dark-ego. When the dark-ego takes control of the body it wants to pleasure the flesh, and if it does not get everything it wants, it desires, it craves, it makes YOU miserable until you give it what it wants. As you can imagine this craving to fulfill the habits and wants of the dark-ego creates enormous stress on your daily life. This craving for things we do not need is the birthing of all sorrow. Trust me when I tell you, a life of misery is inevitable when the dark-ego is in control of how you think. People must turn away from the selfishness and work towards the greater good.

"However do not become like the religious fool who believes that he has the answers to salvation, something only the Creator has. Do not teach fear, nor teach people to hate themselves as being inherently evil. If you want to help humanity, teach them to recognize the essence of divinity within themselves. Teach them the difference between the human ego, which is Godly, and the dark-ego, which is the creator of all strife and division.

"Teach them it is the natural ego which causes people to have pride in themselves. And this is a good thing, this natural pride is the breath of hope/faith. When a person has hope/faith that their lives and by extension the world are in perfect unity, they find happiness in the life they have. To feed from the natural empowerment of a healthy thinking process is indeed a good and noble endeavor. However, it cannot be overstated, those who identify with the dark-ego are willingly disconnecting themselves from the true source of happiness, and condemning themselves to suffering; slavery. And, like all enslaved there is an inherent feeling of not being fulfilled. It is this feeling of inadequacy, this misidentification of what is important which eventually reveals itself as intense carnal cravings, the intense desire to pursue compulsive ego-gratification, things to fill the hole they feel within. But, the illusion is on them, because the dark-ego can never be satisfied and eventually they find that the hole they are trying to fill is bottomless."

Again Kuljit hesitates, then turns to look in his eyes, "All you need to know, to teach this lesson, is here," he touches Paul on the forehead. Paul listens to everything he is told ... and thinks that maybe it is true, but it is not THE truth. Why did God create an imperfect world in the first place. Why the need to suffer? These are the questions he was seeking answers to.

When Kuljit finishes, he turns to him and says, "That's all bullshit Kuljit. Go back and tell your God that if creating a world full of suffering is the best he can do, then he'll have to manage without my reverence."

Kuljit looks at him as if he is crazy ... then he smiles, light explodes, then darkness comes. Once again he is sitting cross-legged in an ally.

He opens his eyes and hears before he sees a little girl in ragged blue pants and a pink top, singing ever so softly as her hand rubs lovingly over the cat in her lap. "You wanna pet her?" she asks with a shy smile.



# Chapter Three

Many are the things he has learned since leaving the comfort of his home. Every step of this new life, this new world exposure has opened his eyes in some unimaginable way, conscripted his mind and bent his heart in ways unimaginable; some to good, some to evil. Such is the sapience of experience which consists of bringing into view all the reminders of our life choices, our weaknesses, our moral shortcomings, all that makes a case against us to include the reality of our non-performance of duty.

Few of us understands the rabbinical touch of experience. but, that is of no matter, for we are all within its jowls and none are there among us who can deny being its produce. Yes, we are its product, not it ours. Yes, we may think otherwise, we may even believe ourselves somehow important ... the human ego is an insolent youth, and I suppose that this is part of humanities right of passage - its necessity, to believe itself important. The ego will of course assert itself until we, through experience, learn to heel it by recognizing out own insignificance in the overall greater movement of life. This is what his new life is to him, a recognition of purpose. Blessed are they who among their many gifts have the ability to recognize the special meaning in the small things around us, most especially the value of out present experiences.

At night when he sleeps he dreams of things remembered, things like laughing children, happy families and a world without hunger, disease and war; beautiful things. But when he awakens he sees only brown skies, garbage filled streets, clogged gutters, violence, drug addiction and the exploitation of children. Where are the birds, the bees, the flowers, the rivers, the morning dew, the churches, the innocence ... the Godliness of humanity that his father had spoken of. Where is the salvation of humanity? If we are our bothers keeper, then where is that compassion, that generosity among those around him? If his fathers beliefs were right, and there is indeed a loving God, then where is that God, that love?

Only last week he came upon a pack of dogs attacking another dog. Upon seeing the eminent death of the poor creature being attacked he ran down the ally to help, only to have the attacking dogs turn on him. With some effort and the help of a stick he was able to back his way out and onto the street, but had the way been longer his attackers would have taken him down. Only the commotion of the busy street had disheartened them. Predatory ugliness, not a human thing, a life thing, an undeniable part of the life experience. As wisdom is the birth-child of experience, so too is death the mysterious yet inevitable result of life. It is painfully obvious that death and savagery are somehow part of life and civilization; if you drink from the cup of one, you must also accept the whip of the other.

But why does it have to be this way? Who was it that created such a paradox? Why is the world the way it is? If God is watching, if God knows every feather, feels every breath, hears every thought and does nothing, then He, She, It, must be equally culpable. Is this not what the law says? If you have the power to prevent a crime and yet do nothing, do you not also share responsibility. And what of the victim of say, a brutal attack, one God could have prevented.

Suppose I am the victim of a brutal attack ... one God could have prevented. Suppose that as a result of this brutality I accept anger, hatred and desire for revenge. Maybe I pick up a gun and murder those who assaulted me, with what face of justice could God then judge me? Isn't it my right to defend myself by pointing out that my thoughts and actions are the direct result of His/Her/Its, inaction. Isn't everything to Gods glory? Then likewise everything must be to Gods concurrence.

He remembers his father speaking on "Free Will" as if it somehow exonerates God in the matter. "I just don't see it," he says aloud. What mother would allow her child to play in the middle of a busy street? Wouldn't she be compelled to violate that child's God given Free Will out of love, out of a deeper understanding of the immanent danger? Isn't God bound by that same love, that same responsibility ... and how much greater the responsibility of God when the danger his child is walking towards, is eternal damnation. Yes, he had learned many things since beginning his quest, but he will be the first to admit that those learned things have not brought him comfort, but has instead brought only sorrow in the guise of a reality he could never have realized sheltered in his fathers world.

Yes, it is true, the need to understand these questions had always been a part of the world around him, yet, he'd never seen the world in need, he was never a part of it. Now however he is compelled by circumstances to awaken to the world of those less privileged, a world his father said was the fault of histories greatest outcast, heavens greatest villain. Outcast. Yeah, he too had made a choice which likewise branded him an outcast. Yet, it was through these outcast eyes that he saw the reality of things. As a result of being and outcast he saw the truth of things and with this recognition he could not help but wonder, to question, and to accuse, because he also saw the world as it could be. With these thoughts assaulting his sanity he silently walked the dirty street passing this way and that.

As always when passing her fruit stand the elderly lady called out to him, or intercepted him as he walked by. As always she gives him something to eat, a piece of fruit. As always he tries to pay her, but as always she refuses his money as she smiles and holds his hand. "Bless you, Mother," he says to her as he accepts her offering, then with both hands on her cheeks kisses her forehead.

Continuing on he passes old men on park benches, children playing with toys, teenagers on phones, adults sitting atop stoops. "She had her kittens," says a young girl with her hair tied on both sides of her head making her look as though she is wearing Mickey Mouse ears, she is wearing blue pants and red shoes.

The little girl takes his hand and leads him to a corner in a stairwell where he sees a momma-cat and four kittens; the child's eyes are full of wonderment as he kneels down to feign a closer look. He knows how important this miracle of life is to her world. He rubs the momma-cats head, then gives the little girl two dollars with instructions to buy milk for the new mother. "Not too much," he says, then adds, "just a little bit in a bowl." The girl nods in her most serious expression, then hugs him.

"Where's your mom?" he asks.

The little girl hesitates then answers, "She's sleeping. She worked late last night at the restaurant."

With knowing eyes he hugs her, then stands her in front of him. He looks her directly in the eyes and tells her how smart she is, that he needs her help. She nods, ok.

He tells her that in a few years he'll need a good lawyer and that he wants her to promise to stay in school, to not get caught up in the streets and most of all, tells her to avoid the drug scene. He tells her that she's smart and pretty and that if she works hard she can have a nice house and a nice family and that she can be a good lawyer, one who helps people, like him. Then he pledges to hire her to handle all of his legal work, which he assures her is plentiful. "I see greatness in you!" he adds. He hugs her, then points to the momma-cat and adds, "Don't forge that milk." With big eyes she replies, "I won't"

Back in the sidewalk he sees a picture taped to a light pole, "Missing" in bold print, below it a picture of a smiling teenage girl. His heart bleeds.

She is short in stature and built sturdy like you'd expect of a woman who'd worked hard her whole life. Today she is wearing her best dress, a simple dress really, one decorated with print flowers and her mothers broach ... no, nothing like that, a simple piece, the kind worn by a simple woman before her. On her wrist is her only watch and on her feet her only shoes ... upon her weathered face, a smile not of this world.

She has been waiting for him and now sees him. Her eyes glow and her arm twitch and she instinctively uses her hand to put her hair into place. She is suddenly startled and in a fit of panic turns to search for something; she has it, a brown bag. She opens the bag to make sure its contents are still inside, satisfied she closes the bag and steps away from the wall to greet him as he approaches.

Once upon a time she had had dreams, but then her child, her only child, had been hit and killed by a stray bullet. Then her husband of fifty years, the only man she'd ever been with, the only man she'd ever wanted to be with, died as well. She is alone. Then he came and she was instinctively drawn to him; he reminds her of her son ... she scratches her head, she looks confused and believes he is her child. Truth is - she isn't for sure if she even had a child ... she thinks so, but ... maybe not. Nonetheless, she is drawn to him and as he approaches, she holds out the bag to him. Like the Sun in a world of candles her smile overwhelms him; a warm breath of purity in a cold impure world.

Opening the bag he sees half a sandwich in a clear plastic bag and a small bag of chips. He over exaggerates his gratitude, thanks he and kisses her forehead.

"Now Charlie, you pay attention in school". "I will," he replies. "Bless you Mother" he adds but it comes too late, she has already left him and gone elsewhere. He tries to hug her, but in confusion she steps away from him and with frightened eyes puts her back against the wall of her apartment building ... back to that spot where she stands - waiting ... always waiting.

An old man with thick glasses and long ears wearing corduroy pants and a snap-brim hat watches them from a set of steps next to her. He looks from her to him, then says , "Friday?" in

the manner of a question, "Friday," he answers back in the affirmative. As he walks away he takes another look at the old mother, she suddenly looks frail, lost, confused and a little afraid. His heart hurts and accusingly he looks heavenward.

Day after day he walks this street on his way to and from his job, and day after day she watches him. His beard and hair uncut for a year now gives him the look of a street vagrant, yet, the woman in her sees beyond that. She sees a straight back and a majestic walk; eyes that mesmerize. He, in spite of himself, is beautiful.

Today she says to herself, today. Today, I'll talk to him.

As he approaches the corner he notices her watching him; not the first time. Today she is wearing faded jeans and a yellow lace blouse, the kind worn in the 1960s. Her long hair has been fastened atop her head with escaping strands hanging here and there. Her skin is golden brown and her lips the pink of roses. Her face shows a keen intellect, her neck long and sleek like a model. In any world, on any planet she would be considered nothing short of a goddess.

She steps onto the sidewalk directly in front of him, he is startled at her boldness, but quickly gathers himself and tries to move around her. Once again she steps in front of him and thereby forces him to stop and confront her. "You need a shave," she says to him without introduction. He smiles and looks away.

Raising his attention from her small breasts to her beautiful face he says, "Look son. I'm flattered and all, but I'm not into boys. Besides, I don't pay for sex."

In spite of herself she cracks a smile, then recovers. "For your information, I'm not a boy! And men always pay for sex, They just don't realize it." At that they both smile. In the ensuing pause she reaches up with her left hand and in one of those mystical moves only a woman can perform, somehow releases her hair, which obediently cascades down around her shoulders, framing her face in a multitude of curls like one of the beauties in a Jose Royo painting. Without warning she turns and begins to walk away.

In a sarcastic, pleading voice he asks, "Ok! You got me, How much?" Though neither can see the face of the other, they both smile.

## Part 2

"Shave that beard off and I'll let you know," she replies, then stops, turns around and adds, "And take a bath while you're at it."

He feigns being offended, lifts his right arm, smells his armpit, then shrugs, as if saying, it ain't me. "And you need to do something about that hair!" he retorts. "It's, it's ... disgusting!" They both laugh enjoying the banter.

She, like all females, are instinctively drawn to him because of his undeniable beauty, but in looking past the surface beauty of the human ego, she can see something else in him, something

profound. She somehow knows that he is true, wise, brave, compassionate and strong. He is all that, Certainly. He is more. He's what the old folks would call, charmed. But even with all those personal gifts, all those blessings, his appearance tells her that, for some reason, the world has rejected him, it has shunned him ... NO! Wait, she thinks to herself, that cannot be right, that is incorrect. It is he who has rejected it. He, is shunning the world.

Over the past few months she has watched him as he walks past her building on his way to, only God knows where. Though they had never spoken, she was inexplicably drawn to him. Somehow she knew that greatness was within his grasp, that nothing was beyond his reach, she sensed that he knew it too. Somehow she also knew that it was her Calling, her destiny, to awaken him to his purpose. She somehow intuited that all of this whole encounter was pre-destined, an implacable destiny of which she was both the tool and the victim. Again she looks over her shoulder.

As he walks away he sticks both hands into the pocket of his pants - maybe I should shave he thinks to himself.

Without conscious direction he turns and looks over his shoulder, at her. She is doing the same. When their eyes meet she raises her hand, and with her middle finger extended, flips him off. This causes him to stop, turn around and shout, "That's not very lady-like!" She responds by turning towards him and feigning an over-embellished sense of embarrassment, then shyness and some more lady-like attributes. Then, she suddenly resumes her normal mannerism and to his disbelief actually sticks her index finger in her nose, pulls it out, looks at it, and in the manner of a childish prank pull a quick switch and puts one of her other fingers in her mouth as if eating something pulled from her nose. Without looking at him she turns around, and as she walks into her building she reaches back with her left hand and scratches her backside. A final defiant response to his supposition on how a lady should act. He smiles and knows that he loves her.

At the next corner he turns right, then left and after five more blocks he comes to an old park. As always he goes directly to the Park Managers office. He punches a time-clock, picks out a bright orange vest with the number 09 on it and proceeds outside where he meets the man he's relieving as he punches out to go home. "Place is the shits today," says the old man, then adds. "Them dope dealers is back in the lower forty. Somebody needs to do sumthin' 'bout that." As he passes he pats Paul on the shoulder, and in a fatherly voice says, "Don't mean you. Don't you go ta doin' 'nuthin". We jez work here. This job ain't worf dyin' over." Paul gives him a smile and nods to the affirmative.

At the end of his shift he clocks out and then heads to the center of the park overlooking a small pond which separates the upper end of the park from what's called the lower forty. As always he sits at the same bench and tosses bread on the sidewalk and soon enough has a virtual flock of pigeons, sparrows and a spattering of other birds milling around enjoying the feast.

When he'd thrown out the last of his bread he gathered the rest of the food he'd collected from the park trash cans and began walking towards the back of a small warehouse used for equipment storage. About halfway there he sees a familiar face waking through the park, it's a woman about 25 years of age and with her is a little girl wearing a pair of blue pants, red tennis shoes and a dirty white T-shirt - her hair is parted down the middle and pulled to the sides like a

pair of Mickey Mouse ears. His stomach jumps and he immediately changes course so that he can intercept them.

"Hey Miss Lily! How you doin'!" he says with a huge smile. Then he leans down and looks the little girl in the eyes and says, "And how's them babies?"

"Oh. They're good," says the little girl full of bright -eyes enthusiasm.

"Hi Paul," says the mother. "Uh, look Paul. I can't talk right now. I got things I need to do." This she says while looking toward the back forty.

"Oh! Yeah, sure," he answers, then adds, "I was wondering if I could take LaLa with me to feed the raccoons?"

"Raccoons!" the little girl says with disbelief and enthusiasm; she pleads with her momma.

"There's a baby raccoon, too. Come on Lilly, she'll be with me right over there at the back of that warehouse, then once we've fed them we'll go right over there and sit on that bench till you get back."

"Please Momma. Please!"

Lilly looks indecisively as she scratches her arm, then as she licks her lips she relents. "Ok. But you stay close to Mr. Paul and don't run off nowhere else. Thanks Paul, for ..."

Before she can finish he leans over and gives her a hug. "No problem," he says. Then he takes LaLa by the hand and as they walk away he tells her about how he first discovered the raccoon family living in the roof of the warehouse.

"How do ya know what ta feed 'em?" she asks.

"Well. I grew up in the country, so I kinda knew they'd eat about anything you put in front of 'em ... kinda like you," he says as he pokes her in the belly with his finger. She laughs and reaches over to take his hand.

After spending about twenty minutes or so feeding and talking about raccoons the unlikely pair returns to the pond and takes a seat on the old bench. They talk about birds.

About ten minutes later the little girl taps his knee and says "Momma's comin'." Sure enough, he looks to where the little girl is pointing and sees Lilly heading towards them; with her are two men.

As she walks up to the park bench she looks down at her feet the way a child does when they've done something wrong. "Can I talk to ya alone, Paul?" she says without explanation.

He gets up from the bench, reassures LaLa that everything is ok, then tells her to stay seated. As they move out of earshot Lilly looks at him and says, "I'm in trouble. I owe these guys fifty bucks. If I don't pay, somethin's gonna happen."

I can't do it Lilly. I told you before. I ain't going to help you kill yourself. And I damned sure ain't gonna help you destroy LaLa's life while your at it."

"Please Paul! You don't know these guys. They ain't playin' around. I'll pay you back, I promise. I'll pay you back any way you want," she says in desperation.

As he shakes his head, no, the two men sense the outcome and walk over to them, "Listen to me," says the biggest one of the two. "This is L.A. not some hillbilly trailer park. You don't help her out holmes, something bad's going to happen - not later, but right now, tonight. We're tired of that box between her legs. We need to get paid, in cash. So. Is you, or ain't you gonna help her out?"

With a sigh Paul reaches into his pocket and pulls out some money, " I ain't got fifty dollars, all I have is ..." when he finishes counting he says, "forty-six dollars."

"That's close enough," the guy says as he snatches the money from Paul's hand, "I'd hate to see that little girl in a back room someplace - if you know what I mean," then he laughs as he gives his partner the "all's good" sign and walks away.

They watch as the two men leave, then in an embarrassed tone Lilly says, "Uhhh, Paul. Can you take care of LaLa tonight?"

Sure thing Lilly. Don't worry your pretty little head about nothin'. We'll be fine."

"She ain't eat nothing' since this morning."

"I said don't worry about it. I have all kinds of stuff at my place. I got this. I'll see you tomorrow."

Lilly kisses LaLa and tells her to go with Mr. Paul and that she'd see her soon enough. Then with tears she hugs her and starts out after the two men. With a final look over her shoulder she smiles and waves to her daughter and says over her shoulder, "I'll be seein' you, LaLa Jones."

"I'll be seein' you too, Momma," she answers.

Paul watches her for a few seconds then moves in between LaLa and her mom, kneels down in front of her and says, "I'm hungry. How 'bout you?" she nods, and he adds, "I don't know if you've heard it said, but I make the best pancakes in the world!"

"The worlds a big place, Mr. Paul," she answers with a sad smile.

# Chapter Four

His sleep is restless and off in the haze of a dream he hears someone softly dinging. Slowly he awakens and opens his eyes. He sees her, she is sitting on a chair in front of the window almost whispering a Child's song. Careful not to move he listens, something in the way she's singing touches him with sadness and somewhere in his inner vision he sees her life from a new perspective. He realized that this is not the first time she'd sat alone, trying to be quiet, while adults' slept. He vows that today he will try to help her.

He raises his arms over his head, and as folks do when they awaken, stretches while giving an overexaggerated groan. The little girl quickly turns and beams a smile, he smiles back and says, "They say it's good luck to get a hug first thing in the morning" then holds his arms out. She silently crosses the room and in the manner of all shy children stands stiff as he pulls her to him for a hug. When he releases her he sees fear in her eyes, then relief. Understanding comes to him and he hides his embarrassment at not having seen it before. Yes, today he would try to help her.

"Are you hungry, Sweet Pea?" he asks. She responds with an I don't know shrug of her shoulders, which of course means that she is.

"Me too. Good thing today's Friday. I'll take a quick shower, then we'll go cash my pay check, and then ... we'll get something to eat. How's that?"

The little girl hesitates, looks at her red tennis shoes, then back up at him, "Do you think mamma's home?"

He sees the concern in her face, scratches his chin, then responds. "Well, probably so. I'll tell you what. We'll cash my check. Go to your apartment and check in your mom; maybe she'll want to go with us to eat. What do you think about that idea?" He sticks his tongue out at her, she laughs and he realizes that it's the first time he'd heard her laugh since being in his apt. Let me take a quick shower, then we'll head out. Okay?"

After taking his shower he stands with his hands on the counter and looks into the mirror. With resolve in his eyes he opens the medicine cabinet and pulls out a pair of scissors and begins to cut his beard. Once shaved he looks at his reflection, he rubs his newly shorn chin and wishes he had some after shave lotion.

When he steps out of the bath room Lala looks at him, smiles and says, "You look pretty, Mr... Paul," they smile at each other.

"Let's go you little varmint" he says, as they leave the apartment she takes his hand.

As they walk down the sidewalk towards the building where Lala and her mother live he feels different, then realizes it's the fresh air on this clean-shaven face. He thinks about the girl in the yellow blouse.



When they arrive at her apartment he waits outside the door as she goes in to check on her momma. After a couple of minutes Lily opens the door and invites him in. He lowers his eyes to look at his shoes; she's wearing a very short t-shirt, one that doesn't quite cover her leopard print panties.

Immobile in the uncomfortable moment Lily realizes that for the first time, ever, a man saw her as something more than a place to put his seed. She is slightly taken aback, then as if to ease the tension she uses her left arm to cover her breasts and her right to pull down the front of her t-shirt. "Well. Come on in," she says, then adds, "Baby girl says we're gonna go and eat somethin'" he nods, "Yeah, my treat" As he enters the apartment he does his best not to look at Lilly very visible bottom.

She notices, "Let me get dressed and then we'll go."

While they wait Lela feeds her cats and then tells him the names of each of her kittens; he watches more than listens and realizes that she has a spirit of sadness about her. He wants to pick her up and to hug her, but he doesn't, then he remembers how she held his hand as they walked from his place to hers. "She hasn't given up yet," he thinks to himself.

He watches Lala as she moves around the apartment; he feels it, there's something about her that seems to be calling out to him, some connection between them he can't quite figure out. Though unable to understand this mysterious commotion he senses that she is perishing, inside. He knows that she is grouping in the dark for an escape route, for someone or something to save her from something she has yet to fully understand. Even though still a child the bigger part of her is trying desperately to fight a future her disadvantaged birth demands of her. Even the child in her realizes that she needs a different future than the one the Gods of Failure have chosen for her.

He sees all of this in the depth of her eyes, a dark wisdom far beyond her years. He sees it and he knows that his part in finding her here is important, amazing even, like going out for a walk and suddenly coming upon someone lying on the side of the pathway with a broken leg. But how to save them when you yourself have two broken bones. These were his thoughts when Lilly reenters the room.

Always ready with a kind word, Lala looks at her mother and says, "You look pretty momma." He notices that she has dressed on a sweatshirt and loose fitting pants.

After eating the trio returned to the apartment. Paul kneels on front of Lala, puts his hand on her shoulder and tells her that Miss Molly and the babies need extra food. He pulls a five dollar bill out of his pocket and hands it to her, "Now you do in down to Tran's Grover and grad some food," then gives her two more dollars, " and buy yourself a beer." he adds.

Lala laughs and says "I don't drink beer Mr. Paul, I'm just a kid."

"Well. I don't drink beer either ... are you sure you don't drink beer? 'Cause I could of sworn I saw you with a six-pack the other day?" Lala giggles, "Ok, well it must of been someone else. Anyway. Keep the two dollars and buy yourself one of those red juice drinks the kids all like." She

takes off at a quick pace. "You be careful!" Lily hollers at her. "I will, mamma," she answers over her shoulder.

"Do you want to come in," Lilly asks. He does. Paul sits at the kitchen table, pats it with his right hand indicating that he wants Lily to sit as well. She does. After a brief hesitation he looks her in the eyes and without a planned lead in bluntly says, "Lil. You gotta do something different with your life. If you don't you're gonna destroy any chance Lala had at a decent future."

A few moments of quiet ensues before Lily answers. "Paul. You're a good friend, but you need to mind your own business. Plus, I got this. Yeah, I hustle, but Lala's ok. Trust me."

"Trust you!? You ain't GOT this! No you don't, 'Got this' you're losing control. And if you don't get your act together, you're gonna destroy your daughter. Hell, you heard that guy insinuate that he'd put Lala in a backroom someplace! Is that what you want, a ten year old in a backroom earning twenty dollars a throw to support your drug habit?"

Lily jumped to her feet and assumed a confrontational pose, "It'll never come to that. I would never allow her to be in any danger!" She pointed her finger at him threateningly. "You better watch your mouth." Paul looks away momentarily and in a calmer voice Lilly follows up, "I won't allow Lala to be in any danger. You got that!"

Paul sighs, then stands up to confront her, "Don't try to make me the bad guy here. You're the problem. I know you love your daughter, but, you're a junkie. And if you don't get off that shit, you're gonna ruin your child's life." He took three steps towards the door, then stopped, "I know you love your daughter; she loves you too. There's still time Lily but not much." He reached for the door, stopped again and turned to meet her stare; she's looking in the opposite direction. He hesitates, then decides to take his last shot at making her understand. "She changes the minute you told her to stay at my apartment. She's already been touched, Lil. This morning when I hugged her I could see the fear in her eyes ... she ain't never been afraid to hug me - but alone in that apartment, with a man, she was scared. She's been molested, Lil." Lily doesn't react the way he expected, instead she begins to cry, and he knows, that he's not telling her anything she didn't already know.

"If you need help, just let me know. Ok?" still facing the other direction, she nods.

On the way down the steps he meets Lala on the stairs, she's holding a bag. She puts the bag on the steps, reaches into her pocket, and pulls out some money, with big eyes she looks up and with hand outward says, "Here's your change, Mr. Paul."

He kneels in front of her, "You go ahead and keep that. I think there's enough for you to buy a soda and a honey bun." She smiles and puts the money back into her pocket. He wants to hug her and to tell her that everything will be ok, but doesn't. "You take care of your mamma, ok." She nods, ok.

As he leaves Lala's apartment building he starts to go left, hesitates, then turns right. He goes down the block where he enters the Tran Market. Walking up to the counter he sees cheap cell phones hanging from hooks behind the clerk. "I'll take two of those", he says pointing at

the phones. "One pink one", he adds. The clerk smiles, "A daughter" she says. He nods, "Something' like that." he returns her smile.

As he pays, something else occurs to him, "Do you have any purses...?" he asks the clerk.

"How old is she?" the youngest daughter of the Trans responds. He answers and the teenager enlightens him to the world of females and purses and suggests he buy a backpack instead, "We don't really have anything for a ten year old", she adds. Understanding the importance of a girl getting her first purse Vickie Tran pauses and says, "You know what... I have an idea", together they walk back to the counter and she tells her mother, "Hand me my purse, please", with a smile her mother complies.

Paul looks at Vickie's purse. "Yeah something like that would be perfect... it's even Bedazzled! What girl wouldn't like that", Vickie smiles and agrees "What girl wouldn't" she says.

"Well, the problem is, this is a one of a kind... I made it", she adds.

Paul hesitates, then half joking he asks, "Do you want to sell it?"

Vickie looks at him, then turns to look at her mother, who shrugs as if to say, "Don't ask me, it's your purse." She hesitates then walks behind the counter and empties out her stuff and puts the purse on the counter and says, "It's not for sale. But I'll give it to you as a gift for your daughter."

Paul is surprised. Then he realizes that he needs to explain a few things. He begins by telling her that he doesn't have a daughter and then tells her that he worries about Lala and the phone and the purse are for her.

Vickie listens and when he's finished she says without hesitation, "Well, you sound like a father to me. The offer still stands. Do you want the purse?" After Paul says he does, and offers once more to pay her, Vickie takes control. "We worry about Lala too, right mom..." she nods. Vickie continues "so the phone's for her too..." Paul nods "and the other phone... who's it for?"

"Well, that one's for me... so Lala can call me if she needs anything", Paul tells the two women.

"Ok", says Vickie as she uses a pair of scissors to cut the plastic off the two phones. She picks up the pink one and while looking at the paperwork of the other one begins to push buttons on the pink one. "Ok" she says, "If she wants to call you, all she has to do is punch this key", she points to the front of the phone, then she does the same to his phone. As she lays both phones on the counter she smiles and adds, "If you give me a couple of hours... I could put her name on the purse", she says in an asking manner.

"She'd really like that. I don't know how to thank you." He pays for the phones and as he leaves the store he thinks to himself how wonderful it is to see such kindness in an otherwise cold, often cruel world. What a beautiful person young Vickie is, he thinks to himself.

As he continues down the sidewalk, he notices kids running here and there and an old man with a long red beard and hair sitting on a street curb... he's talking to someone only he can see. "I miss you Margie", the old man says.

## Part 2

Paul stops to listen as the old man continues to talk in between swigs from a bottle of cheap wine. Then much to his amazement he sees the old man pull from his pocket a small clear sandwich bag filled with bread. The old man begins to break the bread up into small pieces which he tosses to an increasing number of pigeons.

For some reason this feeding of the birds stirs within him some long hidden memory.... he's amazed that a man who's obviously fallen on the hardest of times would take it upon himself to share even a small portion of his meager possessions with the little creatures. There must be a lesson in this somewhere... after a few minutes he walks across the street and buys a sandwich, carries it to the old man and hands it to him. The old man smiles, thanks him, and takes the gift.

As he moves on about his business, he thinks about the events of his day so far -- then he sees her. She is wearing a faded blue dress, flat shoes with scuffed toes. Her hair is unkept; her back is against the wall, her eyes are distant and afraid. She does not acknowledge him.

Nearby an old man wearing corduroy pants, a t-shirt, and a snap-brim hat sits watching. He walks up to him, "How's she doing'?" he asks.

"Been just like that all mornin'" the old man answers. "Made sure she ate this mornin' early", he adds. After a moment in which they both stare at the old lady, the old man says in a voice of frustration, "The State folks came by yesterday. But they're actin' like they don't wanna do anything to help her."

Paul sighs as he looks from the old woman back to the old man. He pulls an envelope out of his front pocket, unfolds it, and hands it to the old man, "Just make sure she gets enough to eat until they make up their minds", the old man takes the envelope and nods ok. "Her dress?" Paul says as he runs his hands through his hair.

"My wife does the best she can", the old man answers defensively. "That's the dress she wanted to wear. And Lynn fixes her hair, but she needs more than we can give her, Paul. The government needs to help her... but they'd rather see her on the streets", he adds with a bit of desperation in his voice. Paul remembers the old man feeding the birds and with resolve vows to follow up on that.

As if their heads are tethered to the same stick both men look towards the old woman, then back at each other. Paul reaches out and pats the old man on the shoulder. "I know Mr. Issacs. I know. The streets and the prisons are full of people who need treatment... and I appreciate all you and Miss Lynn are doing to help her." As he walks away he sees a poster with a picture of a child on it with the word "Missing" at the top of the page. He stops and takes a closer look, Sonia Sanchez, age 15.... he shakes his head and moves on down the sidewalk. He thinks about her -- she's been missing for six weeks. He looks towards the heavens and in an accusatory manner shakes his head at an imaginary God.

From across the street a man in a blue turban watches.

He thinks about Sonia Sanchez, about Lala, Lilly, and the old mother and he's more confused than ever.... how could something as wonderful as life turn out so hard. He thinks about all he's been taught by religion concerning the issue and then with an upturned face he shakes his head in condemnation. "Why" he says, then adds, "and don't give me that bullshit about karma! What could a ten-year-old child, or even a fifteen-year-old have done to deserve what's happened to them." Again he shakes his head, this time in disgust.

He hears horns blowing; two taxi drivers cussing at each other. Music here, talking there, people walking this way and that. A mother and child, a father and daughter, a father and son, two old men, an old couple, a young woman, an old woman -- he sees it all, yet he does not.

On and on he walks, then he realizes that his feet hurt and he vows to buy new/used shoes, you'd be surprised at the bargains you can find at a Goodwill store.

Having a couple hours to kill before he can go back to Tran's Grocery he faces a dilemma, he wants to keep walking but his feet hurt so he begins to look for an alternative... a bus ride? Then, out of the corner of his eye he sees a book, in a window, on display, he turns and moves to the front of the window and there he sees an old copy of "Sidhartha" by Herman Hesse. "It must be a first edition in English", he thinks to himself. He decides to check it out for himself so he opens the doors and steps inside, a bell tinkles over the door. The name on the door says "Wong Fu King Book Store".

Once inside, he realizes that due to the book being in the display window, he can't actually get to it to investigate its age. So he stands there as if unsure whether he should stay or leave. It is a used book store, so just as he's decided to look around he hears a sarcastic voice behind him say "That's a lousy book." Much to his surprise he recognizes the voice. He smiles.

"Well, for your information smartie pants, that's one of the greatest books ever written", he answers as he turns to face her. "In fact, if I ever write a book, I'll use the first chapter of Sidhartha to introduce the character in my book." He hesitates. "The Sidhartha character in that book reminds me of ... well, me!" he says with a big smile, then adds, "You know... beautiful."

"Oh! Excuse me -- so you fancy yourself the handsome Brahman's son!"

He smiles even wider, points his finger, then answers "so, you have read it."

"Of course I've read it you idjit... so, if you're Sidhartha then that would make me Kamala. The Prostitute."

"I... of course not... not completely a prostitute... but you did try to charge me for sex", he raises his eyebrows as if to say "right?"

"Well, that's not exactly how I remember that conversation. As I remember... it was you who was so desperate that you offered me money for sex", then before he can respond, she says "I see you shaved. Much better. Now let's cut that hair. Come on", she says when he seems confused. "Come on. Back here. Yeah, back here." She prods him along and points to a chair and says, "Sit."

"What's your boss gonna say about you cutting somebody's hair in his store?"

"HIS store", she says sarcastically.

"You know what I mean", he answers defensively.

With her hands on her hips, "Well, for your information dickhead, this is MY store. I own it -- I bought it with my whore money", he does to apologize, she pushes him back in the chair, "I'm just kidding with you. You sure have a sensitive nature about you. That's exactly what I don't like about men these days... too much sensitivity. Don't get me wrong, I don't like abusive men, but I like a man to be a man.... you know... I want him to belch, scratch, fart, and tell me what he likes. I want him to have a little dirt on his face, ride a motorcycle, fix stuff around the house... I damned sure don't want him using my scented bath oils or wearing a plastic helmet when he rides a bicycle. I like a man who'll not only fight with me, but for me. My point is... no one's gonna care if I break a few Health Regulations." With that she slung a sheet over his shoulders and went to work.

## Part 3

As she cut his hair they debated the novel Siddhartha. "You understand that it's not about the Buddha," she says.

"Yeah," he answers. "It's crazy how man people don't know that. That's my favorite part of the book ... where he tells the Buddha that he won't follow him ... well, that's not my favorite part. My favorite part is when he finally nails Kamala."

"Nails," she says with a smirk. "Now there's a GUY term if I've ever heard one." After a few minutes of dialog she turns the conversation towards another Hesse book, Narcissus and Goldmond, saying she preferred it to the more highly acclaimed, Siddhartha. However, in the end she conceded that Siddhartha is most surely a masterpiece of language, hence, the book on display.

As she inspected her work she pulled a handheld compact mirror out of her purse and held it in front of his face. "Well, what do you think?"

He took a quick look then as if drawn to a flame he saw the scars on her left arm. With difficulty he pulled his eyes away from her arm and did his best look into the mirror, he likes what he see, he looked once again like the Preachers Son. He liked it, and told her so, but all he could think is, "She cuts herself." What could make such a beautiful creature try to damage itself? He wanted to grab her and to hug her and to ask her, why she would do such a thing. But he didn't. It wasn't his place.

Again for the third time that day he wanted to yell his defiance at the universe, to shout at it like an angry teenager. But, he was angry, emotional and his natural instincts convinced him that that isn't the proper frame of mind to assault the walls of outrageous indifference, to seek the bastion of a humane justice when the world seemed so consumed with sorrow? He looked once again in her beautiful face ... she was transfixed in front of him, frozen like a doll in a dollar store.

He searched her eyes for a reason, any reason why such a perfect creature would want to ... not kill itself, but, punish itself. Hard as he tried he couldn't understand, but he felt her pain, took it deep into himself, sharing as best he could the grotesque misery. And as he looked into her eyes, she looked back into his ... and time stopped, he was sure in that moment that she has seen the revulsion in his face. How can you hide something so foreign to you when confronted with it for the first time.

Though mere seconds had passed she saw the affront, the disgust in his eyes, she knew that he knew, he saw, her. Slowly she lowered the mirror and in silence removed the sheet from him and began to sweep the hair from the floor. What could she say, the confidence he seemed to pull from her now lay open and vulnerable like a ... like a cut on the arm of a child. She felt the impending schism, the ever increasing space between them and when next he spoke it was with effort, unnatural, a forced sound to cover something else, a silent shout of desperation across a distance suddenly formed between them.

He was trying to speak and to think at the same time. She knows. She saw me looking at her arm. As hard as he might try he couldn't correlate the funny, confident woman he'd first met with the one who hurt herself. He had seen her as brave and strong, in control of the world around her. He believed her to be the quintessential female, but now he suddenly saw her from a different vantage point. He saw that her true self was made not of curves and confidence, but of angles and pain.

"I hate to be rude. But I'm gonna have to ask you to leave. I need to clean the shop before I close up." They both understood the underlying tone.

Gaining control of his thoughts and expressions he replied, "Yeah. Sure. And, thanks for the haircut. Now, I know that you're not going to want to accept any money for your labor, as a Courtesan Barber and all," he smiled. "But, my pride won't allow me to take advantage of a working girl," he winked. "So. How about this. You come to my place tonight ... and I'll fix you supper," he lowered his voice in a conspiratory manner, then continued. "I don't know if the word has made it public yet, but, I make the best pancakes in the world!" Before she could answer he continued, "Do you have something I can write my address on?"

She relaxed, sighed in resignation then replied, "I know where you live - but, don't go thinking I'm stalking you; I was planning on robbing you, but I guess that's out the window now," they both laugh. "Is 7pm alright?"

"Perfect," he replied with a huge smile. "That'll give me time to have the Butler polish the silver."

# Chapter Five

He stepped from within out and onto the sidewalk dividing her store from the street. He eased to his left and looked at his reflection in the glass, again he looked like the Preacher's son; the transverberation forcing his mind to remember the unholy ruin he had surely left behind. Blessedly his eyes focused past his reflection and there behind his face sat the book in the window. He considered going back inside and buying it -- you know, kind of a new start between them, finally, he decided against it.

Walking back to Tran's he faced conflict. On one hand he was happy to be spending time with Sam, on the other he couldn't seem to get past what he'd seen. What did it say about her? It said she was like him -- somehow broken, damaged. Again, he tried to ignore the mental picture of her with a razor blade, cutting herself.

Stubbing the toe of his shoe he stopped to look at his foot, then as if by subconscious reaction, frozen in place he gazed off into the imaginary distance of a bent and crooked reality; his mind began to talk to him.

Did she do it in anger? Was she calm or did she do it with tears rolling down her cheeks? He simply couldn't understand it. Why would she do it? Punishment? For what? The implications of this unholy thing sank to the bottom of his soul like a rock in water and made it so heavy he could do nothing save find the meanest alley where he could sit apart from the madness. "God. Where the hell are you?" he says aloud.

With unconscious subtly a part of his Higher Self digs deep within him and draws a form of consolation from the very source of his present sorrow. A sorrow that was not easily categorized, like some weird messed up twin of yourself that today guides you step by step on the true path, and then tomorrow leads you out into the middle of the street to be hit by a fast moving car. "A mystical piercing", the voice within says. The self-inflicted wounds of sorrow which open the mind to alternative thinking. Yes, she is who she is, and he could either accept her as such, or abandon her because of it.

In the end, he decided that it served no good purpose to hurl defiance at something beyond him beyond his understanding. Judgement was not the way to handle the situation. All condemnation in this world is nothing more than an act of ego, an insolence, a reaction, the result of his own ignorance concerning things he cannot understand. He understands this, yet he cannot deny his nature... he is a part of the great whole which includes her. He feels an affinity not only with the equanimity of nature and all her creatures, but with humanity and all its pain. He is one of those rare creatures who is moved by the winds of heaven with the love of creation as a playmate. His soul is empathetic and this is the reason for his war with God; the tyrannical one who seems to be asleep while sorrow usurps a potential realm of bliss. Oh, where can he find that one place where the ruin of false ego has not bred itself to the children of the earth?



After stopping at Tran's Grocery he intended to stop by Lala's apartment to give her the purse and phone he'd purchased for her. Much to his surprise, when he arrived at her apartment he sees her door wide open and the landlord and his wife are cleaning the apartment. He stands frozen in the doorway; finally the landlord sees him, "They don't live here anymore", he says with finality.

"What happened?"

"You got to pay rent if you're going to live here. She didn't and now she's out."

"Where..."

"I have no idea", said the man as he closed the door.

When he reached the top of the steps to his second-story apartment he is surprised, stunned, even. Sitting in front of his door with three bags of clothes and a cardboard box full of kittens sits Lilly and Lala. In slow motion he steps forward -- their eyes all meet at the same time.

Trying to act as if them sitting in front of his apartment door is perfectly normal, he walks up to them as he reaches in his pocket for his key. Lilly and Lala, like two kids outside the principal's office, silently stand.

Assessing the situation immediately, Paul looks from Lilly to Lala, "I told momma we'd be safe here with you. She didn't go to the park today, and we lost our apartment." With big eyes she waits to see if she is right.

"Yeah... of course... you .... both of you can stay here until you get on your feet." Lala smiles and gives him a hug; this one wasn't stiff and distant, but tight and trusting. When she lets go she takes his hand and turns toward her mother, "See momma, I told you."

Lilly is both embarrassed and relieved as he walked up and put his hand on her shoulder. "Come on, get your stuff... hold up Lala, I got that" he said when she went to pick up one of the bags. Then adds, "You get Miss Dolly and the kittens."

"I like your hair", Lilly says as if to break the tension.

"Oh... hell! Yeah well, we need to talk about that."

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She knocked on the door and is more than surprised when, instead of Paul, a little girl opens the door. "Hi!" says the little girl, then adds, "I'm Lala."

She hesitates as her mind races through the possibilities, then after a moment of thought she says, "Well hello, my name is Sam. Is, um ... Paul here?" In that moment she sees a woman inside the apartment and the equation changes.

"What do you want with my daddy?" Lala asks as she bats her eyes and pulls a doll to her chest.

In that same instant, the woman gets off the couch and as she approaches the door, chimes in, "What business do you have with my husband?" A tense silence followed as the three of them face off with each other. Then in a fit of laughter the little girl and her mother point at Sam, and in-between stomach hurting laughter manages to say "You should see your face!" The rolling laughter and pointing of fingers starts all over again.

Sam, not understanding the joke stood in uncomfortable disbelief. Just as she's about to turn around and walk away, a toilet flushes and Paul steps out of the bathroom with freshly combed hair. "Oh, hey", he says when he sees Sam, then stops as he see's her looking somewhat confused and Lala and Lilly laughing uncontrollably.

In a moment of constraint, Lala looks at Paul and says, "I told her you were my daddy..." she giggles but maintains her ability to speak, then adds, "and momma asked what she wanted with her husband! You should have seen her face!" Lilly and Lala look at each other and fall into hysterical fits of laughter.

Understanding the situation, Paul shakes his head. "You two are positively evil!" As he walks past them and invites Sam inside, he follows up with "Don't pay these two any mind."

Even though she hasn't figured out why Lilly and Lala are there in Paul's apartment, she of course understands the joke -- admired it even. Being that laughter is infectious she begins to laugh as she enters the apartment, which of course sets off a new round in which the four of them join in.

After the laughter dies down, Paul introduces the three to each other, explains their living arrangements, they have another good laugh. Then he tells his house guests how he met Sam, then all he knows about her; she chimes in and tells them a few things about herself, her childhood, her schooling, her bookstore. "No, it's not Samantha, it's Samara, Sam for short", then adds that she has no idea where that name originates, but she thinks it's Arabic... Daddy must have heard it somewhere", she intones.

"It sounds Arabic", Lilly says. Then Lala jumps in and says, "My name's Inshallah, it's Arabic too, it means 'God Willing'", then she gives Sam a smile. "But momma says that's too much name for a little girl, so everybody calls me Lala instead."

That evening was pleasant as the four of them ate spaghetti and garlic bread, talked, and laughed. When it was getting late, Sam got ready to leave and Paul insisted on walking her home. As they went to leave the apartment, Lala stopped Paul and handed him the phone he'd bought for himself at Tran's Grocery. With big eyes she looked up at him, "You said we should keep these with us... in case of an emergency." In her other hand was a bedazzled pink phone. He started to argue the point that the phones were for her safety, not his, and that she'd be perfectly safe there in the apartment. But the look in her eyes told him that she'd taken his words to heart, he was the one she could call, no matter what, and he understood how much faith she put in his words. "Oh yeah! Thanks for reminding me", he says in a serious tone as he stuck the phone in his pocket.

"You two stay out of trouble until I get back", he tells them. They both giggle. He shakes his head as if to say, "What did I do to deserve this?" As they leave the apartment Lala runs to the door and puts her ear up to it.

"They're talking. Now it's quiet. Maybe they're kissing!" she says.

"Girl! You had better mind your own business", Lilly chastises; then giggles. Lala doesn't.

It was a beautiful, romantic evening.

No sooner than they'd found a bench to sit on, his phone rings -- they both look a little surprised, then in a moment of realization, Paul remembers his phone. In truth, he'd never carried a phone before, refused to, in fact. He considered carrying a phone to be an invasion of privacy -- a relinquishment of personal freedom. And with that being proven true, he pulls the phone from his pocket and says "Hello?"

"It's me", says a little voice.

"Well, who else would it be? You're the only one who knows this number... what's up? Everything okay?" Paul shakes his head in disbelief. "I thought we agreed that this phone was for important stuff."

There was a hesitation on Lala's end. Then, "A kiss is important, if you mean it."

"Uh, well, that hasn't happened yet, but maybe later... not that it's any of your business."

"Do you want to marry her? Mamma\_says you're not the type to kiss every girl you meet. She says you're the marrying type."

"You do realize that she's sitting right here beside me, right?" Paul says in a voice that pleads for this conversation to end.

"Mamma says you love her. He can tell."

"Yeah, well, your momma says too much if you ask me. Lala, I have to go. I'll tell you all about it when I get home. Now go to sleep, you're my girl. I don't need another one."

"You can have a girlfriend if you want... I don't mind, very much."

"Lala!"

"Okay, I'm going to bed. Good night." The phone clicks off. Paul shakes his head and then apologizes to Sam.

"I bet I can guess what that was about", she says with a smile. "I was a little girl, once", she adds.

Over the next several hours Paul and Samilla got to know each other. They talked about the past, the present and even a little about the future -- not in the togetherness sense, but as in society and the world in general. They spoke of music, movies, and much to her surprise, Paul knew little or nothing of those things beyond what someone might learn from others in passing; like Lala who seemed to find a certain comfort in song.

Sam, however, was the opposite -- she loved movies, novel music of all types, but her favorite was classical -- classical rock that is. The Stones, The Beatles, The Doors, Janis and Jimmy, especially the 27 Club members, her favorite of them, Amy Winehouse. To educate him, Sam pulled up a series of pictures of the singer on her phone and giggled as she pointed out her hair

and make-up -- "She had style!" Sam added, but all he saw were what might have been cut marks on the singer's arms. He said nothing about it, but it put him in a somber mood.

In order to shade his thoughts about the obvious connection between Sam and the singer she admired, he waited another half hour, then offered to walk her home. She didn't invite him in, and with a kiss on the cheek, he left her at the door. But he didn't return to his apartment, instead he returned to the bench they had shared and took a seat. His mind was dark.

Soon a familiar figure approached, then sat on the bench beside him. "Awful late to be out, don't you think?" he asked without looking at the man beside him. Then after a moment he added, "Do angels sleep?"

"Well, real angels don't sleep. But, I'm not a real angel. I'm nothing more than a man like you, albeit an older one. So yes, I sleep if that's what you're asking."

Paul turned to look at the man next to him and after a moment of consideration says, "I thought angels were, somehow, unable to lie."

Ricki Singh smiled, lowered his head and replied, "This whole world is the contradiction of a truth few can see. But, I'm not here for me. I'm here because I sensed that you were troubled about the girl... about her cutting herself." A silence followed.

In an almost desperate burst of words, Paul confronts Ricki, as if he is somehow part of the reason, part of an unconcerned, unloving, uncaring disciple of an unmannerly God. "Yeah, I'm upset about THE GIRL. If you know so much then you know she's CUTTING herself! Doesn't that bother YOU?"

Ricki Singh sat quietly, allowing the hostility to subside, then answered. "What is going on with her is not your business", he held up his hand in the wait position when Paul tried to interject. Then continued, "Concern, yes, I understand. You're concerned about her, but the way to help her is not through confrontation, nor through condemnation. If you want to help her, then care for her, just as she is."

"It is my duty as her friend to try and fix her, to show her that what she is doing is wrong. That it's a sin. I need to help her change."

Ricki Singh was quiet, then as if in memory he said, "My teacher once said, 'There is no reason to change other people; they are simply messengers telling us who we are.'"

Thinking on the wisdom of Ricki's words he said, "I don't know why, but that statement seems to rings true to me. But I still don't understand it."

"I know", said Ricki almost apologetically. "It's because of your upbringing."

"My upbringing? I had a great upbringing. My family was..."

"That's not the upbringing I'm talking about. Of course you had a good familial upbringing, but you were also brought up under a regimental set of Christian rules. Modern Christianity teaches its followers that they are, as a result of the Original Sin, born sinners themselves. This is a very destructive teaching that has brought sorrow to billions of people. When a child is taught to see

themselves as a sinner, they naturally see others as sinners also. You..." Ricki sits forward on the bench as if to somehow emphasize the important of what he's about to say, "have been taught to have opinions concerning your thoughts and actions, which is fine, until you start applying your opinionated standards to others. Then you have judgement. And even a subtle judgement of others is one step too far. 'Judge not lest ye be judged' said the Christ. And that is what you're doing with Sam. You have formed an opinion, passed judgement on her actions without knowing a thing about them, or her, for that matter. Your opinion concerning what she does with her body, her life, is none of your business. Stop thinking about her cutting herself. And stop feeling like it is your responsibility to fix her. That is guilt, where more is warranted. All you have to do is to be content and trust whatever comes after that is the will of God."

Then in a subtle move, Ricki Singh turned toward Paul, and in an almost hypnotic tone says, "Awaken from the sleep of condemnation", then as if to make it so, slaps him hard on the chest above his heart.

Paul sees a bright light, when it clears, he is alone.

\* \* \*

These words were in his head: "This whole way of thinking, this attitude of judgement, this guilt of seeing oneself as a hopeless sinner instead of a perfect part of a perfect creation, invariably prevents us from achieving contentment. It creates guilt. This self-imposed guilt has ruined the lives of billions of people who could have been perfectly happy if they saw the goodness of themselves and God in others, rather than sin."

\* \* \*

As he quietly opens the door, he sees that, per his instructions, Lilly and Lala had fallen asleep in the bed. Ever so softly he removes his shoes, pants, and shirt, puts on his sleeping shorts, and stretches out on the couch, covering himself with the blanket Lilly had left there for him.

Just before falling to sleep, he feels Lala snuggle her way in with him. "You can't sleep here. There's not enough room", he whispers.

"I can't hear you. I'm sleep walking", she answers.

# Chapter Six

Southern California is known for its warm climate, but the last four or five days the weather had been cool, wet and cloudy, unusually wet and cloudy in fact. During these days of rain, Paul's life was a little different than normal. He still went to work; no matter the weather, there's always trash that needs to be picked up, nothing new there. Where it all came from, hell, he couldn't even imagine, maybe that "Nino" wind blew it in from some other City Park. But, common sense would believe that parks everywhere would be deserted. And common sense would have you believe that the constant wind would blow all this trash out of the city, out into the desert somewhere... But, who knew about those things.... nothing new, make the rounds, empty the trash cans. Nothing new.

What was different, though, was the folks on the street, or the lack of them. Gone were the street hustlers, the fruit lady, the retirees sitting here and there... gone were the children playing on the sidewalks, the old folks playing dominoes, none of them outside in the rain, all of them inside. As he walked, he thought about the lack of normal activity, and inevitably his mind thought about the homeless.... where do they go in bad weather? He of course knew the answer.

Turning right, he entered an alley and walked the thirty paces until he found the dumpster sitting behind the King Bo Restaurant. He lifts the lid about six inches, "Mr.. Washington! You in there?"

"Of course I'm in here dummy! Where else would I be?" came a deep voice from inside the dumpster ... "Paul... what the hell you doin' out in this rain?"

"Oh, I was out trollin' for strippers and found you instead."

"Well, I don't know what you're hinting at, but I ain't takin' my clothes off for no amount of money!"

Mr. Washington laughs.

Paul laughs along then says, "You up for some breakfast?" The old man nods. Paul tosses him a plastic bag containing a clear rain poncho, "Put that on. I don't wanna hear you complaining that I got you sick."

"Sick! Me? You're the one trying to get me to dance naked on a pole!" says the old man sarcastically, then in a lowered voice adds, "Always did know there was somethin' off about you. Propositionin' old men and all."

"Are you coming or not?"

Paul holds the lid open enough for the old man to climb out; he notices that his hair and beard is dirty and dread-locked; face drawn up tight over his face making his skull look weary, used up, broken like a spirit out of the grave, as if the dumpster he rose from had been his tomb. Paul's heart hurt at the sight of the man, and he wanted to help him, but, how do you help a man who seems content with his circumstances... a man who seems to draw solace from the very depth of

sorrow. The truth disclosed in that moment of illusion... this was indeed one of the lost, forgotten, unknown people of our society. For a time Paul stood thinking of the many who, buried out of sight, those who experience the grotesque mysteries; a vulgar and treacherous landscape for those less-than; a demonstration of evil beyond even the most imaginative of demonic thought.

After they had finished their meal, Paul walked the child of God back to his dumpster, they shook hands, and Paul reached into his jacket and pulled out a small bottle of cheap whiskey, unscrewed the top, took a swig, and offered it to his companion....

The old man started to take off his coat, "OK, but just one dance -- and I'm keeping my underwear on!"

"F-you!" Paul says with a laugh. As the old man's hand closed over the bottle he adds, "Keep it. It's gonna be a little cold tonight." With a smile, he turned and walked away. But his smile is false, and as he turned the corner and out of Mr. Washington's line of sight, he stopped, and in a moment of vitriol leaned back against the wall of the restaurant and took a hard breath. Then he looked to heaven and said, "So what! I gave him a little comfort. If you don't like it, then YOU do something!" After a moment in which no heavenly voice could be heard, he began his walk home, but his soul was troubled knowing that for some reason beyond his comprehension he'd been born to witness some awful attribute of life which is not so very far from the true purpose of our existence.

"Hey", Paul nearly jumps out of his socks.

"St. Peter's Balls, Ricki! You gotta quit popping up like that! You could give me a damned heart attack!" Then he punched him on the arm as if to make his point.

"What the heck was that for?" Ricki said as he rubbed his shoulder.

"Oh, I don't know... it must be part of your KARMA!"

"Well, excuse me", then with a chuckle adds, "You're correct of course. I was being mischievous by popping up without a warning..."

"Can it! What are you doing here?"

"Well", the he says as he rubs his chin, "I wanted to tell you not to worry about Mr. Washington, he's..."

Paul cut him off in mid-sentence, "Don't worry! Why the hell wouldn't I worry about a man who sleeps in a dumpster?"

"What I was going to say before I was so rudely cut off is, things are not always as they seem. How you see Mr.. Washington is not how he sees himself. You see a man down on his luck, a victim of outrageous misfortune... a man whose life is not what YOU want it to be. But, have you considered the possibility that Mr. Washington is living the life that HE wants to live?"

Paul lowered his eyes, then raised them as if to accentuate a look of confusion. "Why? ... How could a person WANT to live like that? I don't understand..."

Ricki put his hand on Paul's shoulder and with a sigh of consolation said, "I know you don't. I know you don't. Your heart is in the right place, no one can dispute that..." he hesitates, then puts his back against the wall and continues. "Remember our first meeting?" Paul nods that he did. "Remember the five things I told you that you needed to know to help humanity?"

Paul's breath catches in his throat and his eyes seem to focus on something distant, the way a person does when they are trying to remember something specific they have forgotten. Then, in an instant of recognition as if to himself, he nods his head and says, "Yeah, I remember that. You said that the first thing people had to be made aware of was that they were suffering. Right?"

Ricki Singh nods. "Yes. People must be made aware of the fact that they are indeed suffering. That's right. But the second point was that people need to be taught to identify those things that are causing their suffering. And there is the problem. You define suffering as lack of possessions... creature comforts, therefore YOU feel sorry for Mr. Washington. But lack of possessions is not suffering. Suffering is caused by the desire to possess things you do not have... working your weekends away to pay for a bigger house or a better car... stressing to have more, when that same time could have been spent with your family, or just relaxing. Paul, wanting more of what this physical world has to offer is the cause of ALL suffering.

"Most people are suffering and don't even know it. They are slaves to money, TV, work, sports, patriotism, religion, to physical things... and they don't even know it! Mr. Washington is not the one suffering, here. He in fact has identified the root cause of the suffering he experienced in his former life style. He came to a decision, a direction in life. He wanted to become separated from the illusion he perceived the world to be. He wanted to be free from the human ego, free from the desires of this world, and the gut wrenching effects of sorrow. He wanted to experience the peace of freedom from physical attachment, of the daily grind to obtain more stuff -- to be fulfilled. He realized that in order to achieve eternal happiness, he had to overcome all physical weakness, he had to become the master of his own thoughts and more importantly, his desires. He came to understand that when all his personal vices had been defeated in the battle of life that he would then and only then find that island of serenity which seemed so distant from the deck of his lost ship.

"Paul, I'm not saying that ALL homeless people are content with their circumstances. Certainly, some are truly suffering misfortune, but NOT Mr. Washington. He, in fact, is what we in India would call, a Saint." At that, Paul turned abruptly to look at Ricki Singh. "Yeah, you see a dirty down and out homeless guy, but I see a man who has actually followed the teachings of the great masters of the Far East, a man who has actually followed the instructions of Jesus. He has left his home and family, his worldly possessions, and decided to follow his heart -- to sacrifice his body to enhance his soul."

"But he lives in a dumpster! He hardly bathes. He reeks of alcohol."

"So? Aren't those all things of this world? Yes, they are. And he has no concern with how he looks, smells, or what he puts into his body.... where he is in this life is not relevant, it's where he is in the next life that's important."



Paul closed his eyes, "I smell rain in the air. It smells beautiful, clean." When he opened them, he found himself alone and he thought about what Ricki had told him. He takes a step, the another and before he realizes it, he's standing next to Mr. Washington's dumpster. He knocks, and then lifts the lid a fraction, "Mr. Washington, can I come in?"

There's a brief stirring inside, then a deep voice answers, "Paul? You want to come in.... well, I suppose so, but..." with a mischievous chuckle adds, "but you better have your pants on! I'm not in to that kinky stuff you're into."

Paul shakes his head, "Oh, give it up you old weirdo."

"Weirdo! You're the one who offered me booze to dance naked on a pole! And you call me a weirdo!" then he laughs uncontrollably and adds, "Yeah, come on in."

The two men talk for what seems like hours and in the end Paul came to the realization that Ricki had been right. Mr. Washington had indeed checked himself out of the "Rat-Race". And though most folks won't be able to understand it, he'd come to realize that he was mentally and spiritually healthier now, in this dumpster, then he'd been under the illusion of contentment portrayed in the Social Media.

He closed the lid and began to walk and as he walked he thought about Mr. Washington, Ricki, and then inevitably his mind found the memory of his child's face, and in that moment of sorrow and dishonor, he accepted that there was little difference between he and Mr. Washington, he'd checked out on his responsibilities as a son, a husband, and a father, and his heart was embittered with the poison of his decision. Yet, he knew that whatever had compelled him to make this choice had been beyond his own ability to deny. His life was unchangeable, he was on a search for serenity of soul, the promise given to the mystic, a faint glimpse of the greater heavens. The chance to acquire the humble virtues, to take off the guise Mr. Washington had so aptly described, to put on the white penitent robes of light whose brightness effaces the splendor of truth. He had chosen the Path of Sorrow and in his heart he had known that to capture the serenity of the soul was to wrap the physical body with a shroud of indescribable sadness, one, that would separate him from the joy of the earth. A quest in truth disguised as a terrible phantom of failure. This was the reward, the price. Just as a moth devours clothing and a worm devours wood, so too will second thoughts devour the soul unless one has true faith in God. But in what God he couldn't say, because the only God he knew of was the God men claimed as their own... but he was disenfranchised with this frozen God, this God of religion. Yes, he could remember it so clearly now, as a child he'd asked the God who lived in his soul to accept him and to show him the Kingdom of Heaven ...

## Part 2

It was a foolish child's prayer, but one he now knew God had answered, in an unexpected way. His prayer had destined him to live the words of Christ, to leave his family and his possessions and to follow ... he was atop the tabernacle of asceticism, following the example of the Buddha and of Christ. A child's prayer for gardens hidden knowledge had in reality become a field of high weeds; yet in his heart he knew what he must do, that he had to saty the course, that he had chosen this exile, that it was his time; he longed to return home ... to heaven.

Then in an instant, he final step to going home suddenly flashed before his eyes ... he wept.

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He woke to realize that somewhere in the night he'd flipped onto his back and Lala had somehow ended up laying on his chest with her head snuggled up to his chin and her arms thrown around his neck. "Ain't you two somethin'" Lilly says as she lifts Lala off him and carries her to bed. "Go get yurself ready and I'll finish breakfast. Coffee?" Disoriented he nods trying to figure out what to do first.

"Why aren't you eating," he says to Lilly as he put a fork full of eggs to his mouth. She looked ill - something is wrong with her, "Are you alright," he asks.

"I'm sick Paul, and it's going to get worse." Suddenly understood. She's dope-sick. He knew it would happen sooner or later.

## Part 3

He stops eating, pushes his plate away from the edge of the table, lowers his voice, "What happens next?"

Without hesitation, Lilly blurts out, "I'm not going back to the dope. That's over! But, it's going to get bad, real bad... and I don't want Lala to see me like that."

"What can I do to help? What about rehab?"

"I don't want to go to rehab, surrounded by other addicts. It doesn't work for me. If it's okay with you, I'll stay here... yeah", she adds in desperation. "You could take Lala someplace, a vacation -- and I could stay here and kick. Is that possible?"

They both knew she was lying, and not with any real conviction. She was the junkie child of a junkie. Life had never been fair to her. Life had mauled her inside and out. Life had torn her and cut her apart and no one had cared enough to stitch her back together. But, that's what life is about, maybe. Fixing yourself.

He thought for a moment. Finally, he nodded his head and motioned for her to sit. However, before he could begin to put his thoughts to word, he heard Lala softly singing her way to the kitchen table... Lilly gives him a pleading look.

"Lala", he says as he breaks eye contact. She stops to look at the two adults, sensing something amiss. Paul motions for her to sit, instead, she moves next to her momma, looking wide-eyed she takes her mammas hand in the way of every child unsure of what might take place.

Lilly looks at him with pleading eyes.

"No! Lilly. Don't look at me that way. She's old enough to hear the truth. Lying to her won't make it better... plus, she's smarter than either one of us. Plus, she already knows the truth. So, let's just deal with it by not treating her like some little kid. Please."

Lilly and Lala's eyes meet, then she pulls her daughter in for a hug and nods to Paul. Then Paul adds, "Besides, I ain't got the money to take her someplace else for a month. You understand that, don't you?" as tears flow down her cheek she nods.

After everyone had their say on the subject, it was decided that Lilly would check herself into a detox program offered by a faith-based outfit called Victory Outreach. It was also decided that during her stay, Lala would stay with Paul in his apartment.

"Today! I have to go today", Lilly conceded as much to herself as to them and together they waited with her at the bus stop that would take her downtown and hopefully to complete drug rehabilitation. Yes, they cried when the bus came, yet, in their hearts they knew that this was for the best. Paul more than any believed this was best, however, he had his doubts... he knew that everyone on the planet all wanted "what's best". That's not the problem. The problem is that no one, even God, seems to agree with what that is; inside him that little voice was screaming, "She ain't coming back! She ain't coming back! She ain't coming back!"

Later that day, Paul took Lala to the Greyhound Bus Station where he purchased two round trip tickets to a little town called Desert Center. He estimated it to be a five hour bus ride, one way.

Because it was late in the evening when they arrived, they went first to a small restaurant where they ate. Then they walked across the street and rented a motel room -- with two beds. "That one's yours", Paul says as he points to the one furthest from the door. Then added, "Not that you'll stay in it." Lala smiled and shrugged her shoulders as if to say, maybe I will. Maybe I won't.

Lala hopped up on the bed, Paul shook his head, "Nope, we ain't going to sleep, yet. Besides, you slept all the way over here." Then started pulling the blanket off his bed. He put his arm across Lala's shoulder and led her out past the back of the motel and into a cow pasture.

As they approached a barbed-wire fence, Paul took her hand as they bent to step through, and when he went to release it she looked at him in a way that let him know she trusted him, and wouldn't let go. Hand in hand they went.

"What are we doing here, Mr. Paul?"

"Well, Little Bit, we're going right over there and do a little star watchin'. What d'ya think about that?" Lala looked up at him and shrugged her shoulders. "Aw, come on. You'll love it. When I was a kid my brother and I used to lie out in the field behind our house and spend hours looking at the stars... sometimes, we'd even see a Shooting Star. And, besides, it's not all about the star watchin', it's doing it with somebody you care about that counts." Paul dropped to one knee, and put both of his hands on her shoulder. "You know, just being together." She nodded okay.

After a few steps in silence, Lala says with a smirk, "They had stars back then?"

Still holding her hand, Paul lifts her arm up until she's on her toes and playfully kicks her in the butt of course, he follows through with his foot, lifting her off the ground where he snatched her up and into his arms. She instinctively wraps her arms and legs around him. He gives her his best zombie look as he tickles her.

When they reach the spot Paul had picked out, he put her down and spread the blanket out on a small patch of flat land. "This is the best spot in all of California to star gaze from." Before he could ask the question, he adds, "I came this-a-way when I was travelling from my home in Mississippi to California. I actually slept right there", and he pointed to the flat ground they were standing on. "Yes ma'am, right there. And you know what I learned?" After she shook her head "no", the way kids do, he crumpled up his face. "I already told you! This is the best spot in all of California to star gaze from. And it's the best place in California to hang out with someone special, like you." For that he gets a big smile.

Paul lies down on the blanket; Lala lies down beside him, putting her head in the crook of his shoulder.

"Look, Lala. Look at all those stars! Aren't they beautiful? You can't see 'em in the city, not like this."

Lala was silent, in awe, actually. In her few years on earth, she had never been outside of her neighborhood, much less to the desert. In fact, she couldn't even remember having even looked at stars before .... certainly at some time in her life she had, but not like this. "They're beautiful", she says to both Paul and herself. After another silent spell, "Paul?"

"Yeah."

"What are stars?"

"Well, little girl. Scientists say that stars are great balls of fire, suns. I mean, there's more to it than that, but that's kind of the idea, kinda what scientists believe."

Lala thinks about what he said, she'd actually heard about it in school. But that doesn't make a lot of sense, there must be a greater purpose other than to just heat the universe. "What do you believe, Mr. Paul?"

"That, little angel, is a long story."

"We have all night."

Paul rolls over real fast and starts tickling her, "No, we don't have all night you little varmint!"

"Oh, come on, Paul. Tell me a story about the stars. Come on, please, please, please!"

"Oh, alright rug rat, keep your britches on. I'll tell you a little story about what I believe." Lala claps, Paul rolls his eyes.

"When I was a kid", he looks over and their eyes meet, "About your age, I asked my daddy that same question. Now, my daddy is a preacher at a big church in Mississippi. That means he doesn't always believe science. Sometimes he does and sometimes he doesn't. He believes that science is partly right, but with some parts left out... am I making sense to you?"

"I think so. Like when momma tells people she works at a restaurant, which she does ever now and then, but what people think and what's true are different."

Paul looks into her big, dark eyes and nods, "Yeah, something like that."

After another silence, Lala reaches out and puts her hand on Paul's and asks again. "What do YOU think?"

Paul takes her little hand in his and raises it to his mouth and kisses it. "I think you're the best kid in the world."

She giggles as she rises to a seated position. "I know that dummy, are you going to tell me about stars or what?"

"Oh, that", he says with a smile; she playfully slaps his arm.

"Okay, you ready?" Lala rolls her eyes and purses her mouth as if to say "Really?"

Still on his back, Paul puts his hands behind his head and looks over at her; she can tell by his mannerism that he is going to tell her something from his heart. Her eyes grow big as saucers -- innocent, believing, trusting.

"I believe", Paul starts, "that when a person dies, they are reborn as another person; this can happen a hundred or a thousand times."

"You mean, reborn as babies? I saw people talking about that on TV."

Paul rolled over on his side with one elbow on the ground. "Yes. I believe that a lot of babies being born today have the soul of someone who lived before inside of them. Not all, though, there are new souls being born every day in the form of new babies, but a lot of children on earth right now, are dead souls, reborn."

Lala was quiet for a spell, then she asked the inevitable question, "Am I an old soul, or a new one?"

"You, my dear, are a very old soul. I know this because you're wiser than most kids -- you're like an old person in a kid's body."

Laying in silence on their backs they become lost in their minds and a long silence passed between them, broken when Lala reached out with her left hand and put it atop Paul's. "I love you, Paul. I'm going to marry you someday", she adds quietly.

"I love you too, little girl."

Capture in the greater beauty of life, Paul's mind began to drift and he could feel something, something mystical, a greater love pulling, tugging at his spirit, a universal awe brought about by the conscious underlying knowledge of the vastness of the universe... combined with the equal reality of one's own insignificance. A speck of life peering into the dark curve of the heavens as if to see from a godly perspective the splendor reflected there.

"Mr. Paul?"

"Yeah."

"Is momma gonna be okay?"

"Yeah, sweetie. She's gonna be alright. But she has to stay off the dope and the best way for her to do that is what she's doin' right now. She's going to rehab, she's trying to fix herself... she loves you, and she wants to fix herself so she can be a good mother to you."

"Are you on drugs, Mr. Paul?"

"No, Lala, I'm not on drugs."

Returned to reality his star gazing mind could feel the impending child-heavy thoughts blooming in what suddenly seemed an immense space between them, and when he spoke it was with an effort and a caution careful not to increase the misunderstanding he knew she carried. He rolled onto his side facing her, then put his elbow on the ground and rested his head in his hand. With a forced smile and a little tickle of her ribs, he began to draw the terrible poison from her thoughts by explaining a few things about life and about her mother. He explained to her that not all people are born with the same opportunities in life. That some, like her mother, had been born not from a loving relationship from a happy stable family, but from a couple of kids who couldn't take care of themselves, much less a baby. So, she grew up with an undeveloped thinking process; an underprivileged beginning to her life. Trying to win in life, for her, was like a one-legged person trying to win a 100 meter race... At those words, he hesitated and ran his hand lovingly over Lala's forehead and hair, then continued. "I'm not saying that a one-legged person can't win a race against others with two legs, what I'm saying is that for a one-legged person to actually WIN a race would not be normal, in fact, it would be extraordinary. For a person with your ma's start in life to be a successful, educated professional would not be normal, it would be extraordinary. Not that she's not smart enough, because she is, but the chances of her overcoming her environment, the circumstances of her upbringing to become, say a doctor, would be extraordinary.

## Part 4

Understand little girl. I'm not making excuses for some of your ma's choices in life ... no ma'am, I ain't. But your ma, all of us in fact, are educated by others, or by the life circumstances and this cultivation, this exposure to our neighborhood environment is the soul in which our future goals, motivations and desires grow. I'm not saying she can't finish the race, only that her chances were not the same as some other folks. Can she finish the race? Absolutely. People do it all the time. They shake off their life-circumstances and move on down the road, and that sweetness is what your ma is trying to do right now. Do you understand?" Lala nods that she does. Ok. Good. What I'm saying is that up until now your ma didn't even know there was a race but now she's figured it out. Up until now she just lived her life the best way she knew how; the way her upbringing and her neighborhood culture taught her. But now she's trying to put aside the life she started with and endeavors to finish the race she now recognizes ... she's doing it because of her love for you. Rehab for her is the first step in an event that can change her life. And you know what," he hesitates not expecting an answer to his hypothetical question Lala blinks her big eyes. He continues ... "she understands that she doesn't have to win the race. To be a winner all she has to do is to finish. She loves you Lala, that's why she's trying to change her life. She wants to change YOUR future, to make sure the YOU have a chance to win. That's what good parents do - they sacrifice to give their children a better start, a better chance to win the race of success, the race of life."

A long and comfortable silence ensued in which Paul flipped onto his back. With his hands behind his head he contemplated his own life, his own adversely different circumstances of birth. He thought about his wife, child, mother, brother and father ... why did he do it? Why did he walk away from all he'd been given ... to seek the truth about some arcane deaf, dumb and blind god who seemed bent on demonstrating some obscure and awful life lesson. For whatever reason he'd had, he'd entered a life program of sorrow and of mourning and intuitively he sensed the worst was yet to come.

"Mr. Paul."

"Yeah."

"You never did tell me what you think stars are."

"Hmm. Next time. Love you."

"Love you, too."

# Chapter Seven

For a long while he stood still. He didn't move, he barely even breathed. Reality was like a stake through his heart. The loss of her, the loss of her smile, the loss of her laugh, the touch of her hand, the comfort in seeing her waiting each day for him to pass by; he would never forget her.

Death by hanging. That last, most horrible, most desperate of decisions. He felt a pain in his chest.

Hanging ... her hanging, such an indignity for such a beautiful person. This just proves that there's always a bigger disappointment than what you imagined, than your worst case scenario and unfortunately that greater disappointment then becomes your new worst case scenario. Greater disappointment surely followed by greater disappointment followed by even greater disappointment, until in the end, all you see is disappointment in all things ... and therein is the greatest evil of all, loss of hope. He realized that he had money clenched in his hand, money he'd put aside to help support her. He handed it to Mr. Issacs, thanked him and his wife, then with hands in pockets turned and walked away. None of it was her fault. Dementia. He should have known she would take her own life instead of ... instead of ... she/he had known better than to put faith in Government ... in Justice ... in God ... in goodness, anything other than the worst case scenario.

He walked past a door stoop, stopped, picked up an empty wine bottle, he stared at it, then hefted it high into the air and shook it at the sky, at heaven, at God. "What about this?" he quietly asked ... "Alcohol addiction. Genesis says that you and your angels taught Noah how to make wine." He looked at the wine bottle in his hand. "Didn't you know it would come to this? ... How could you not."

His father had told him that everything we needed in life would, through faith and prayer, be provided for us. But what exactly did that mean? What is it that we actually need? This is obviously the conundrum, the mystery. Obviously what we think we need somehow differs from what God thinks we need. But, none of that matters, now. Truth is, he'd run out of that faith and prayer stuff ... to him God seemed impervious to 'em. It seemed life, for the unfortunate, only ever ended one way ... Yes you could blame society, the rich, the scholars, the Illuminatie or the politicians, but they, though part of the problem are certainly not the origin of the problem. No matter who you feel deserves the blame, the origin and reality of disadvantage must ultimately rest with our Creator.

The reality is, that not all folks are born with a three digit IQ. Some in fact are born with a low IQ and how can a person with an 85 IQ hope to compete with someone born with a 120 IQ - they can't. It is also a fact that folks with lower IQs are more susceptible to the "Failure Influences" of a poor environment. Yes, the origin of disadvantage is part of birth. So, is a low IQ a birth defect? or is it the result of a warped genetic lottery system? Then the question would be - whose system? if not Gods.



He stopped, rubbed his eyes, ruffled his hair and squinted thoughtfully into an afternoon sun. With a long sigh he resumed his walk. With a long sigh he vowed to think positive. With a long sigh he ... answered the phone... "Hello."

"I just called to say, hi. Have to go. Bye!" And before he could even respond the phone abruptly hung up. He smiled to himself and remembered being a kid in school; he remembers his own daughter - well, you know how he's feeling. Yes, he'd left her to search for the truth of something unknown, to live among the fallen and the lost, hoping that they could teach him something his previous life could not. Was that a mistake, a trick of the Devil? After all what kind of man abandons his family, for anything; for what, for this? He'd definitely seen more of life than he'd bargained for, than his birth status had warranted, but isn't that what life is about - experiencing things? He squinted softly and went towards a bench when someone bumped into him - "Watch yourself" the guy says ... "Hey. Well, if it isn't the hillbilly. Where's that bitch of yours? She owes me money," the man says as he puts his face inches apart from Paul's. "Well. Where the hell is she?"

Paul hesitates then answers. "She's through with the dope. She went to Rehab." As he said it, he knew he'd made a mistake. He'd inadvertently told the man where to find her.

The gangbanger looked around, "Well, no matter. She'll be back," then he shoved Paul and added. "She better be, or I'm gonna be paying YOU a visit. Your woman's debt is your debt." After a hard three second stare the man named Pablo turned and walked away. Then over his shoulder he said, "Six-hundred dollars. She owes me six-hundred, today. Every day she don't pay, it goes up."

In silent fury Paul watched the man walk away. "Who the hell does he think he is," he thinks to himself. Then in a moment of human ego yells at the other man, 'You think just because I'm nice, I'm weak! Fuck you! I ain't payin' no ones bills!"

Pablo stops when he hears the other man hollering. They stare at each other. Then with a serious tone he replies, "Be seein' you hillbilly."

"Yeah, well when you do, you better bring your boyfriends. Because your little short-ass ain't gonna do nuthin'"

Pablo smiled as he slowly backed away. Then he turned and flipped the finger as he continued on down the sidewalk. Paul blew out a long sigh, one that rattled his lips. Then in a moment of clarity chastised himself for being confrontational, for involving himself in things that weren't his business. Taking a seat on the bench, he once again chastised himself - "What the hell was I thinking!"

He'd most definitely seen the darkest part of life in America; the failed Government Assisted Housing - now ghettos filled with crime, poverty and drug addiction. He'd seen Street People, suffering old folks, suffering young folks, children ignorantly following their parents to prison. Yes, he'd seen it first hand. But he'd also seen the other side, he understood how rural America viewed this alternate reality, one so different from their own. He had even argued that it's not the governments job to financially support its populace. He still believed that every able-bodied person should work, he did. But what had changed in him was that now he lived among those same folks, folks he'd once misunderstood. Now he saw, and understood that some people are

indeed born and raised into a near hopeless situation, one that encouraged failure, rewarded criminal activity, one where a drug dealer or where a murderer could avoid punishment as long as they committed those acts with the approval of Law Enforcement. He understood, now, that no one actually cared if these children received an education. He'd seen first-hand that these people whom he'd once passed judgement on, had been written off from society in the way a banker writes off an irredeemable debt, It is true, it's almost impossible to understand the struggles of a person unless you first live their life, experience life as they do.

He'd seen Law and Order in full display in rural Mississippi, but where was that Law and that Order in L.A.? In Mississippi Ronald Reagan and George Bush were heroes, but in this neighborhood they were devils who used the CIA to destroy the lives of countless millions of men, women and children by using there office to introduce Crack Cocaine into their neighborhoods. He had certainly seen the complex differences, the clean streets and community spirit of small towns and conversely he'd seen the urban mountains of vice where no word for innocence was known, where hopelessness eventually became filth. He'd worked side-by-side folks happily supporting families in rural America and he'd clawed a living among the hustlers of L.A. and among thieves who robbed other thieves less powerful. He'd lived where a person dying was a tragic event, and he'd seen drug addicts turn out a dead mans pocket hoping to find a high forgotten there. He'd seen Scout Leaders teaching moral fundamentals and he'd stood in street corners where the miserable came to buy anything that might help them forget their misery, even if it compounded that misery somewhere down the road. Yes, he'd lived among the hopeful and he'd lived among the hopeless, the stalwart and the forgotten.

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Paul turned into an ally, the same ally where he'd sat in a drunken stupor, the same ally where he'd first cursed God. As always it was busy with the unthinkable. As his eyes adjusted to the hellish gloom he saw a gray-stripped Tom Cat laying on a flattened cardboard box, indifferent to the slaughter of morality taking place around him.

Paul watched the cat for a few moments and then as if the cat somehow read his mind turned and for a brief moment looked directly at him. They held each others gaze for a moment longer, then in the superior way of cats the Tom broke eye contact and then as if to say, "None of this matters", started licking his front paw, using it like a washrag - lick, wipe, lick, wipe, lick, wipe.

What did that cat know that he didn't? "There's a lesson somewhere in this," a voice inside him said.

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