

*Read
Me
Now*

A Novel

Tell-a-Vision Books

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Thank you
Paul,
Abbey,
Austin,
Jon,
Lori,
Andrea,
Sandra,
Mike,
Ed,
Lieven,
Greg,
and Adam

To P.B.
(who asked to hear the rest of the story)

Row, row, row your boat
Gently down the stream,
Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily.
Life is but a dream.

The Bookstore

Somewhere along the perimeter of his mind was a hint of strangeness warning him that he would be sorry if he opened his eyes. He did . . . only to discover he was on the floor. Whose floor he didn't know, but there were tall wooden shelves on either side of him that stretched all the way up to a cracked, plastered ceiling. The shelves were filled with books, and from the dust and mustiness which his nose detected, he knew the books were old.

At first his head, his legs and arms, even his fingers, felt too heavy for him to move, and in one brief moment of panic he became afraid that he was stuck to the floor. But then a flash of energy, surging from the soles of his feet to the top of his head, caused him to suddenly bolt upright, and he sprang to his feet almost in one movement.

“What in the hell?” he whispered.

Shakily, using the edge of the shelves for support, he slowly made his way down a long, narrow book-lined aisle toward a sunny plate-glass window. Occasionally, his eyes caught sight of a familiar book title, but for the moment that was all his memory

would allow him. He had no idea why he was in the aisle of what appeared to be a secondhand book shop, but at least his legs had stopped trembling.

At the end of the aisle and to his right was the front door of the shop, and near the door was a card table covered with neatly stacked piles of books. A small paper sign was attached to the side of the table. “BOOKS FOR A BUCK,” it read in large, block letters of purple magic marker.

He looked up from the table. To his left was a wooden counter supporting an old metal cash register, a lamp, and several more stacks of books. It was a small store, but every inch of wall space, from the floor to the ceiling, was covered with the outward facing spines of books, most of them hardbound, all of them old.

“Hello?” he called, though from where he was standing, it certainly looked as if the store were empty. Still, he tried again, “Is there anyone here?” No answer. Perhaps the store’s proprietor had gone on a quick errand, to the bank for change, or to a nearby cafe for a cup of coffee.

He turned back to the door, hoping to find a note of explanation—“Back in a few,” perhaps, taped to its glass front—but there was no note, only a small semicircular row of white lettering, and since he was reading it from behind, the lettering was backwards. Two of the words he could easily decipher as “BOOK SHOP”. The other word was harder to read backwards, but he was pretty sure it read “ALARIS’S”.

Alaris? he thought. What kind of weirdo name was that? He rubbed his forehead and sighed. How in the world had he found himself in such a predicament? For all he knew he’d had a stroke or a seizure. But would that explain his current amnesia?

Slowly he scanned his surroundings. Not a bit of it was fa-

miliar, though he had to admit it was the sort of place he would have enjoyed exploring on a Saturday afternoon. Rare and used books were a passion of his, and he supposed that was why he was in the store to begin with. Had he come here searching for a particular book?

He tried to think back to his most recent memory, and then he panicked because, for one second, it seemed he had also forgotten his name; but then it came to him and he felt so relieved that he said it aloud, quite boldly, for he thought he was alone: "My name is Jeremy Thompson."

"Well," came a voice, which made him jump and turn. "I'm happy to make your acquaintance, Jeremy Thompson."

"What the . . . ! Where did you come from?"

Perched upon a high stool behind the wooden counter, where only a moment before there had been no one, was an enormously huge, fat man grinning like a Cheshire cat. He had an open paperback book in his hands. "So sorry," he said. "Didn't mean to startle you. May I help you?"

"Didn't you hear me earlier?"

"No. I'm afraid not."

"But I called more than once. Where were you?"

"Is a man not allowed to answer a call of nature?"

"Why certainly . . . but what I mean to say is that, one second I look and you're not there, and then, suddenly, there you are. I didn't even hear you walk in. And excuse me for saying so, but I think you're the type of man who would make a great deal of noise upon entering a room."

"I didn't walk in. I merely stepped in." And he motioned with his head toward a door behind the counter. Jeremy could have sworn it had not been there earlier. He opened his mouth to

speak but then found he was too afraid to put this thought into words, so instead he asked, “Well, did you happen to see when *I* walked in?”

“No.” The fat man placed his book down, and with both palms flat upon the counter, he leaned forward as much as his large frame would allow and asked, “Are you all right?”

“Yes. At least I think so . . . for the moment, that is.”

“Meaning?”

Jeremy paused. “Well, I’m not exactly sure. I woke up a short while ago in that aisle over there.” He pointed. “On the other side of those book shelves.”

“On the floor?”

“Yes, of course, on the floor. But the funny thing is, I don’t remember walking into your store. It’s like I just woke up and here I was.”

“I see,” said the fat man.

But Jeremy could tell that he did not see. “Look,” he said. “I didn’t come in here to take a nap, and I’m not on any kind of a drug. I don’t know what’s going on.” He ran a hand through his hair. “I don’t even know how I got here. Maybe I’ve had a stroke, or maybe these are the early symptoms of a brain tumor.”

“Or,” said the fat man, stroking the lowest rung of his triple chin, “perhaps you have a split personality. Now wouldn’t that be fun? I’ve just been reading about such things,” and he glanced down to his paperback book. He was smiling, but Jeremy was not amused. Why was this large imbecile treating his situation so lightly?

“I would think you’d be a bit more concerned,” he said. “I mean, here I am, a customer in your store, who’s been out cold upon your floor for God knows how long.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t be so sure about that.”

“What?”

“God may know but, then again, maybe not.”

“What in the hell are you talking about?”

“You said, and I quote, ‘God knows how long.’ But who’s to say how much attention a creator pays to such small details?”

“Are you crazy?”

“No, but perhaps you are.” The fat man smiled again, but then he raised a hand as if to calm Jeremy. “Alas, I can see I’ve displeased you and that was not my intent. Would you find my behavior more becoming if I called for help?” He lifted the receiver of a nearby phone, but then he looked confused, “Blast! What is that little number? Ah yes, 9-1-1!”

“Jeez,” said Jeremy. “Where in the hell are you from?”

The fat man leaned back and spread his beefy arms wide. “In this moment, I am from here. This place is my point of origin, you see.” And then he brought his hands together, as if in prayer, “Now, do you want me to dial for help or not?”

Jeremy only stared.

“Is that a yes or no?”

“No. I don’t need your help, nor do I want it. I just want to get out of here.” And he turned to leave.

“Well then, thank you for stopping by, my little friend!”

Jeremy turned around. He was now to the point of sputtering. “Don’t you dare ‘little friend’ me! I could have died over there on your floor today and who would have known?”

The fat man squinched his beefy cheeks into a grimace, and in a stage whisper declared, “I dare say I would have smelled you after a day or two.”

“Omigod.” Jeremy placed his hand to his forehead and took

a few steps towards the door. "I can't take this any more. I'm going to step outside and find some normal person who can direct me to the nearest hospital."

"Ah. That would be St. Vincent's. If you take a right, it's only four blocks away. Would you like me to escort you?"

"No. I want to get as far away from you and this store as possible. However," and he pointed a finger at the fat man, "if I find out I was harmed by your complete and utter lack of attention while I was unconscious upon your floor, I guarantee you'll hear from my attorney!"

The fat man grinned knowingly. "You new ones are always alike. So rebellious. So feisty."

Jeremy was halfway to the door, but he stopped and took a step towards the fat man. "I may be a new customer, but let me assure you I'm certainly one of your last!" And to the tune of the fat man's deep baritone laugh, Jeremy turned to leave.

He would have made a quick and dramatic exit, but on the way to the door his foot happened to snag a leg of the "Books for a Buck" table. Most of the books spilled to the floor, effectively barring his way to the door.

He kicked at the books, and the fat man roared with a fresh gale of laughter, which made Jeremy kick again and again, until finally, there was but one book remaining. It had been at the bottom of the pile. The spine and corners of its green cover were frayed. He drew back his foot for another kick, but the faded gold letters of its title stopped him.

"Read Me Now," were the words upon the cover.

"Of all the stupid titles," he muttered.

"What is it now, my little man? With what new source of amusement are you gifting me?" The fat man's laughter had

subsided to a sporadic stream of chuckles. He was dabbing tears from his eyes when Jeremy turned to glare at him.

“It’s no wonder you haven’t any customers, when your books must ask to be read.”

“Pardon me?”

“I’m talking about this book,” said Jeremy, and he kicked it, but as it flew away from the door it opened to an illustration, a black ink drawing upon a yellowed, glossy page.

“Which book? I can’t see it from here.”

“Oh? Is that huge hulk of yours not mobile?” Jeremy bent over the book for a better look. There was something familiar about the illustration. It was a drawing of a man, a very large man.

He turned back around and looked. Before him was an exact replica of the illustration in the book: The same man, the same short-sleeved, pin-striped shirt; the same thin strands of black, greasy hair falling across his forehead; the same large, chubby hands holding the same small, paperback book. Everything was the same. Even the bathroom door behind the counter. It was in the picture too! And there beneath the picture was a caption which read,

“The fat man behind the counter.”

“What in the hell?” Quickly he turned to the beginning of the book, but there was no mention of any author or illustrator. Neither was there a copyright date or a publishing company, and from the look of its yellowed, slightly stiff pages the book appeared to be at least eighty years old.

“What are you bellowing about now, little man? You know, I’m beginning to think I’ll never be rid of you, and that deep, down inside you love me after all.”

Jeremy pointed to the page of the illustration. “This book has picture of you in it, to the fullest of all your gargantuan glory, I might add.”

“You don’t say? Is this another one of your attempts to make me laugh?”

“No, it isn’t.” Jeremy walked within two feet of the counter, the book in his outstretched hand. “Take a look for yourself.”

“Well, well, well! I must admit, it does look a little like me . . . but only a little. I dare say I’m not that fat.” He chuckled as he reached for the book, but Jeremy snatched it away.

“It is you and you know it.”

“But the book is too old,” the fat man responded. “Even you can see, it was made long before I was born. I tell you the resemblance is nothing more than coincidence.”

“Coincidence?” Jeremy sneered. “This is a picture of you and your counter, and, and even that little book you’re holding. I don’t know what’s going on here, but I don’t like it. You’ve been playing games with me—I’d even go so far as to say, tricks with my mind. I think you’re trying to cover up something. Why, how do I know you didn’t knock me on the head today? Maybe that’s why I can’t remember anything.”

The fat man tried in vain to suppress a smile. “You know,” he said, as his beefy lips twitched, “I’m beginning to think that when you woke up from that nap of yours, you got up . . .”, and now his smile fully revealed itself, “. . . on the wrong side of the aisle.” He slapped his leg and roared again with another bellyful of laughter.

“It was not a nap!”

“Yes, yes, I know; but, . . . well, whatever it was, you must admit you’re still tired. I’d say what you really need is rest;

and though I don't think it's necessary, if you must see a doctor today, a small dose of Valium might be in order. Now, be a good lad and hand me the book. I'll be sure to place it back where it belongs."

"You're not going to tell me about this book, are you?"

"I know nothing about the book other than," and he motioned with his head towards the door, "it goes on that little table over there."

"The card table with the sign, 'Books for a Buck' on it?"

"Yes."

"Good. Then I only have to pay you a buck."

"What do you mean?"

"If you aren't going to be decent enough to tell me what this stupid little book is, I'll just buy it and read it for myself."

"You can't do that."

"I most certainly can and I will, and you want to know something? My number one reason for buying this book is that you so plainly do not want me to." Placing the book under his arm, Jeremy reached with his other hand into his pocket and retrieved his wallet.

"Oh my, would you look at the time," the fat man said, glancing at his watch. "So sorry, but you'll have to come back tomorrow to buy the book. You see, it's five o'clock. The store is now closed, which means my cash register is closed as well."

"Lucky you," said Jeremy. "I guess that means you get to keep the change," and he tossed a five-dollar bill upon the counter.

"But you don't understand. That book is worth far more."

"Oh, is it? Are we talking about this book which, I remind you, you know nothing about? And which, I remind you, I dis-

covered for sale on your 'Books for a Buck' table?"

The beefy red cheeks of the fat man lost their color. "I have never read the book, but I do know it was on that table for a reason."

"And what might that reason be?"

"Someone needs to find it, but that someone is not you."

The large cheeks of the fat man were drooping to the point that Jeremy almost felt pity for him, but then he caught himself. "If you don't tell me what you're trying to hide, I'm taking this book with me whether you like it or not."

The fat man sighed. "The book belongs to a very dear loved one of mine. Please understand that I've never read it, never laid eyes on it until now. I only knew it was somewhere within this store. That's why I'm here. I'm sure it was on that table in order to be near the door."

"And why does the book need to be near the door?"

The fat man shut his eyes, as if in meditation. "In order to make it easier for her to feel its presence." He opened his eyes again. "Don't you see? If she happens to be on the street outside, she'll feel the presence of the book more easily if it's closer to the door."

Jeremy tilted his head back and spoke, as if to the ceiling, "So, it's all about feeling the presence of a book."

"Yes, yes! Precisely! I was afraid you wouldn't understand. I mean, because you're a new one." And the fat man did truly look relieved. "Now, if you'll hand me the book, I'll give you your money back."

And for the first time Jeremy laughed. "You're serious, aren't you?"

"Of course, I'm serious. Grave things are at stake concerning

that book.”

“Well, you know what I’ve decided?”

“What?”

“If I stay here any longer I’m going to become as crazy as you.” Jeremy turned to make his way once more to the door. “I’m absolutely, positively out of here,” he called over his shoulder.

“No, please!” The fat man rose from his stool. He was even larger than he had initially appeared. “The book must stay here. I can’t sell it. It doesn’t belong to me.”

“You’re right,” said Jeremy, “It belongs to me.”

And before the fat man could maneuver his way around the counter to retrieve the book, Jeremy was out the door.

The Walk to the Hospital

He moved quickly down the sidewalk, darting his head over his shoulder every few minutes. The fat man was nowhere to be seen, but still Jeremy hurried. He'd been relieved to find, upon exiting the bookstore, that he knew exactly where he was, but in his haste to escape the fat man he accidentally tripped over what had initially appeared to be a small, white pompom.

There followed a high-pitched and very plaintive yowl, and that was when he realized the pompom was a teacup-sized toy poodle, connected by a ribbon of a leash to a tiny old woman who proceeded to clobber Jeremy's head with the largest white pocketbook he'd ever seen.

"Monster!" she screamed, as she delivered another well aimed blow. "You almost killed Pookie!"

"Ow!" he yelled. "I tell you, I didn't see him!"

"Didn't see a dog on the sidewalk?"

"But he's so small—Ow!—he looks more like a gerbil! Ow!" He was using his arm to shield himself as best he could, but the next blow landed between his legs and he fell backwards to the sidewalk only to be buffeted upon the head again.

“I hope,” the old woman huffed, “that will teach you to pick on someone your own size!” And she gave him a kick in the ribs before scooping her yelping puppy into her arms.

No one offered to help him up. In fact, as he crouched upon the sidewalk, both hands upon his crotch, he received yet another blow, this one to his shoulder, from the umbrella of a second old woman who hissed as she passed, “Pervert! What would your mother think?”

“She’d wonder,” he tried to yell back, though his voice was hardly more than a squeak, “why I was being attacked by two guerrilla warriors disguised as hags.”

He remained in his crouched position for yet another ten minutes, thinking all the while of his mother and the fact that, for the first time since her death the year before, he was relieved she was gone and would never have to hear about his unfortunate demise upon the sidewalk, not to mention the bookstore incident. The more he thought about it, the more he realized she probably would have sided with the two old hags. That was the way with women. Always they took the side of the female, no matter how irrational her behavior might be.

But Jeremy also realized his mother would have been equally consumed with worry over him, and that might have been worse than his recent public pummeling. No matter what her motherly concerns had been, it had always led to the same action on her part: frequent phone calls—no fewer than five times a day—just to make sure he was getting enough exercise, drinking enough water, and eating enough vegetables. It had been his mother’s opinion that every illness was due to improper eliminations. No doubt that would have been her explanation, even, for what had happened to him in the bookstore.

Jeremy grunted as he stood, and though by now it was apparent the fat man had not followed him, he still turned around for another look. That was when he saw the book from the bookstore. It was face down upon the sidewalk. Most likely he had dropped the book after the horrible blow to his crotch. He picked it up, and when at last he resumed his walk to the hospital, it was with a slight limp.

An Exasperating Evening

“Sir, I’m telling you, your neurologic exam is completely normal.”

“But that can’t be!”

Jeremy was arguing with a doctor who looked to be no more than twenty. The exam had lasted a mere five minutes, and he was beginning to wonder if he might be entitled to a second opinion. He glanced toward the hallway, where he’d just seen another doctor hurrying by. That doctor’s hair had been gray. Surely he was more experienced than the young one before him.

“Are you sure you’re not on any medication?” the young doctor asked for the second time.

“Of course, I’m sure!”

Earlier, in the ER waiting area, Jeremy had been assaulted by the noise of three screaming babies, one moaning old man, the croupy cough of an Asian woman, the cries of a young woman about to give birth, and the loud blaring news of CNN coming from the mounted television above his seat. During his wait, there had also been the interspersed noise of approaching sirens, after which a rolling gurney would appear in a nearby hallway,

topped by what Jeremy had always guessed to be either stroke or heart-attack victims. Deciding in the beginning that it was a much too noisy place for reading, he had placed his book from the bookstore in a side pocket of his jacket.

For three hours he had sat, watching and listening to the chaos, before his name was called and he was ushered through two metal doors to a small room divided in half by a curtain. The Asian woman, whom he'd been careful to avoid in the waiting room, had been placed on the other side of the curtain. Even now, he cringed as he listened to her cough. She sounded as if she were on death's door. Jeremy was convinced that if he wasn't sick now, he would be soon.

"Sir?" The young doctor cleared his throat. His eyes were cast down at the chart he was busily scribbling upon. "Are you, or have you been, under the care of a psychiatrist?"

Jeremy's jaw dropped open. "Most certainly not! I tell you, I'm a perfectly normal thirty-six year old male. I've not had any health problems until today. Surely there must be something wrong with me. You think it's normal for a man to wake up on the floor of a strange place with absolutely no memory of how he got to be there?"

"No." The doctor looked up from his writing. "But as far as I can see, there's nothing wrong with you, physically speaking. Do you have a primary-care physician?"

"Yes."

"Well, what I recommend is that you set up an appointment with your doctor."

"What? After all I've been through? And after waiting in this place for three hours, you're just going to send me home?"

The young doctor gave a tired smile as he rubbed his eyes

with a forefinger and thumb. “Sir, I’m sorry. I can only treat you if I find something wrong with you.”

Jeremy opened his mouth to argue further, but before he could prepare his thoughts the young doctor had already moved on to the Asian woman behind the curtain.

Slowly Jeremy pulled himself up to leave. He tried hanging out in the hallway for a while, hoping to catch sight of the gray-haired doctor once again, but he was discovered by a nurse who shooed him back through the metal doors and on past the noisy waiting area. And at the counter where he had initially checked in, he was politely informed by a round-faced woman that his insurance deductible would be one hundred dollars.

Jeremy felt emotionally as if he’d been beaten by a stick. During the subway ride home he was too tired and dazed and light-headed with hunger to do anything more than stare at the floor of the train and wonder why he had wasted so much time and money at that horrible hospital.

The book lay forgotten in his coat pocket. All he wanted now was to be home in bed. He was too exhausted even to eat, he decided. And so it was with the look of a zombie that he exited at Delancey and walked the last two blocks home. He was on the front steps of his apartment building, his mind already dreaming of the comforts of his mattress, when he was accosted by the one voice that always made his skin crawl: the voice of his neighbor Mrs. Potts.

“Jeremy Thompson!”

He uttered a quick and quiet moan before he turned to face her. She was moving toward him on the sidewalk, about twenty feet away, and though it was dark he could clearly see her in the light of a nearby street lamp: her black lace-up pumps with the

one-inch heels, her dark brown support hose and flowered house-coat, her silver cane and silver hair, and the black frame glasses that surrounded her two beady eyes which always narrowed when she spoke to him.

“Yes, Mrs. Potts,” and he sighed in resignation. “What may I do for you?”

“For me, you fool! Don’t you mean Mrs. Hodgeman?”

He stared at her blankly.

“Good gracious, boy. Are you trying to tell me you forgot about signing up for the community blood-drive?”

“Please, Mrs. Potts, I’ve had a very bad day.”

“Well so has Mrs. Hodgeman. I’ve just been to see her and she informs me that you are the only one on the block who didn’t sign up to volunteer! Today was the deadline, young man. I suggest you get over there right now and do your duty.”

“But, Mrs. Potts, you don’t understand. I just came from the hospital.”

“Oh? What’s wrong? You look fine to me.”

He paused for a moment then stammered, “Well . . . they couldn’t really find anything, at least not today.”

“So, in other words, there’s nothing wrong with you. Jeremy Thompson, I’m sick of your pathetic ways. You’re the only man on the block without a job and now you’re trying to trick me into thinking you’re sick.” She waved a long, bony finger at him. “Are you going to cooperate, or do I have to drag you over to Mrs. Hodgeman’s?”

Jeremy blew out hard through his nose. “For God’s sake, Mrs. Potts! How many times do I have to remind you, I do have a job. I’m a book reviewer.”

“Which is another way of saying, you sit around all day read-

ing books; and that, young man, is not a real job. You've lived off your mother's charity all your life, and now that's she's gone, you're living off of what's left to her estate. You know, as well as I, that your mother would expect you to do the right thing. At the very least, you owe it to her, after all she's given you. Now," and she smiled in a way that reminded Jeremy of the Wicked Witch of the West, "are you ready to sign up for the blood drive?"

"Oh, all right," he grumbled. "Anything to get you off my back."

"Good. I suggest you get over there right away."

"What? I've had a long day. I need to get home. Can't I just give her a call?"

"As if you didn't know she's deaf as a doornail! She wouldn't be able to hear, even if you did call. Now come along."

And so, like a prisoner, Jeremy was escorted across the street by Mrs. Potts. He found her pace surprisingly brisk for a woman who walked with a cane; and her stare, he decided, was as fierce as any drill sergeant's as she stood silently waiting for him to climb the front steps of Mrs. Hodgeman's building.

There he was detained for over two hours, for in addition to Mrs. Hodgeman's long lecture on the importance of giving blood, she also insisted, after receiving his signature for the blood drive, that he stay for "a quick bite to eat". Jeremy tried to politely decline her offer, but poor Mrs. Hodgeman, who had never learned to read lips, only smiled graciously and pointed the way to her kitchen.

Till eleven that evening, Jeremy ate an assortment of microwaved leftovers from Mrs. Hodgeman's refrigerator. "To strengthen you for the blood drive tomorrow," she kept repeat-

ing as she heaped more and more leftovers upon his plate, some of them unrecognizable. Whenever her back was turned Jeremy would quickly scrape some of the heated leftovers on to the large cloth napkin she'd given him, but her back was never turned for long and he was forced to eat much of what he was given.

It wasn't until she retrieved, from the back of her refrigerator, a plate of green beans covered with white furry mold, that the infusion of leftovers stopped and Jeremy was at last allowed to leave, secretly depositing the napkin of uneaten food in his pocket.

Later, back in his own bathroom, sipping Alka-seltzer in his pajamas, he listened to the roiling contents of his stomach and decided he had just experienced the very worst day of his life.

Insomnia Strikes

Jeremy lay upon his bed and listened to the rain. The Alka-seltzer had finally taken effect and he felt his stomach was at last calm enough for sleep. It was late spring, not yet unbearably hot in the city, though Jeremy knew it soon would be. His bedroom window was open. Far away he could hear a dog barking. The nighttime traffic noises, always soothing to Jeremy, were punctuated every so often by the nearby squeal of bus brakes and the far-off sounds of sirens. It was all part of the nightly serenade which had lulled Jeremy to sleep since he was a child.

In a total state of contentment he yawned. Never had his bed felt so comfortable. Never had his body felt so deliciously relaxed. His consciousness was rocking, gently back and forth, between a state of wakefulness and sleep, when all of a sudden a clear and striking image filled his mind.

He opened his eyes.

It was the book he had seen—its worn green cover and the faded gold letters of its senseless title *Read Me Now*. The image had been as clear as a photograph.

He yawned and closed his eyes. He certainly wasn't going to

get out of bed to read the book now, that was for sure. Folding his hands across his chest, he stretched his legs and took a deep breath. Then he lay still and listened to the noise of the nighttime city through his window, and as he listened his breathing slowed and his body relaxed, and his mind began to rock closer and closer to that threshold of sleep. He was falling, falling into a blissful cushion of sleep when suddenly it happened again.

The image of the book flashed before his mind's eye. But it was different. This time it appeared to be made of light. Its cover, no longer a faded green, glowed with the brilliance of an emerald, and the letters of its title were no longer scratched and faded. In his mind, they sparkled with the sheen of real gold.

Jeremy opened his eyes and sat up in bed. Would there be no end to this horrible day? No respite? No escape? He looked at his alarm clock and saw that it was after midnight: 12:02. Lucky me, he thought. My horrible day has just transported itself into the next.

“Damn,” he spat as he sat up and whisked his bed sheet away.

“Damn,” he spat for the second time as he retrieved his robe and slippers.

Flicking the light switch on in his hallway, he muttered yet another curse: “And damn my own stupidity for even buying the book.”

Jeremy Begins to Read

It had taken fifteen minutes, but Jeremy did at last find the book when he remembered it was in the pocket of his jacket.

After preparing a quick mug of microwaved herbal tea, he carried the book and his tea to the living room where he made himself comfortable in his old leather recliner beside a gooseneck reading lamp. He noticed for the first time that the book had a peculiar smell to it, a sort of outdoorsy, wood-like smell. It reminded him of his grandmother's house in Maine where he'd spent several summers as a child.

He stared at the book for a minute or two while he sipped his tea. Looking at it now, he could hardly believe he'd purchased such a thing. It wasn't like him to buy unknown books; but, then again, it wasn't like him to wake up on the floor of an unknown bookstore either.

Placing his mug of tea down, he opened the book, and there again was the illustration of the fat man from the bookstore. As Jeremy studied the picture he began to feel guilty. Maybe it was just his imagination, but there seemed to be a look of sorrow upon the fat man's face that he hadn't noticed before.

Quickly he turned to the next page and found a small introduction:

Well, finally . . .

You have opened my cover.

I hope the illustration at the beginning of this book served its purpose by holding your attention. Please understand that this book is no joke. You created me, and I have taken the form of this story. It is a part of you, one of your thought forms. The story within this book is intended as a gentle reminder of who you are.

And now, if you will turn this page, you will find the story you are seeking.

“Oh, brother.” He felt like a man who had just discovered he’d mistakenly walked into a darkened theater playing a B movie. No wonder the book had been on sale for a buck. The question of the book’s mysterious connection to the fat man remained, however; and so, though it was with some amount of trepidation, Jeremy turned the page. This is what he found:

Once upon a time, in a land that is far away, there lived a girl and her mother. They loved each other very much for they were all that remained of a family that had once been large.

Earlier that year, during the time of planting, a terrible disease had ravaged the land where the girl and her mother lived, and though the mother had nursed her large family to the best of her ability, everyone but her youngest daughter had died before the time of planting was over.

When the last of these family members lay buried in simple graves of a nearby field, the mother soon realized that her strength was beginning to fail. One morning she could not rise from her bed, and so she remained, unmoving, while her daughter watched and worried. The daughter attempted to nurse her dear mother, but the girl was very young and knew nothing more than to bring her mother water.

At dusk that evening, the little girl lay down beside her mother, and while she stroked her mother's burning forehead, she began to sing in a sweet, pure voice a song that her mother had taught her:

*I haud by yon auld circle cast
by one na born o' blude . . .*

The little girl did not realize it was an old song, so old that not even her mother's mother knew where it had come from.

*She sings upon the fire's hearth.
She sings in the far, far wude . . .*

It was a song that had always been passed from mother to daughter, generation after generation. The little girl's mother had begun singing the song to her daughter on the day of her birth; and now, as the mother lay near death upon her bed, the daughter sang the song to the mother:

*Her airy breath, the wind tha' blows,
Her flesh, the grund whare the seedlin' graws.
Her circle spins; it ne'er staps,
na e'en as the nigh'time draps*

*brigh' stars o'er a' the sky,
brigh' stars o'er a' the sky.*

And it was as if a voice, much greater than the little girl's, was singing to the mother; and in the stillness of the mother's sleep, color began to return to the cheeks of her damp, pale face. The little girl was heartened by the change and so continued her song, at times only humming the melody, but all the while gently stroking her mother's forehead.

By morning the next day the mother had opened her eyes, and she knew as she gazed upon her daughter's face that her strength would return and she would live. She smiled at her daughter, and only then did her daughter stop singing, for now the daughter knew as well that her mother would not die

Jeremy jumped when he heard the knock. He opened his eyes, shocked to discover he had fallen asleep in his recliner. The book was on his lap. He'd been dreaming of the mother and the daughter when the knock had awakened him. And there it was again: three light taps upon his door.

Yawning, he pushed himself up out of his chair and was surprised to find that it was already light outside. Hopefully, it was still early. He needed to set up an appointment with his doctor, and if he called too late in the morning they wouldn't be able to fit him in until the next day.

As he shuffled in his slippers to the door, there came another series of tapping, though instead of three taps, there were now five; and they were louder than before, as if the person on the other side were growing impatient.

Jeremy was not used to having visitors. “Coming,” he yelled as he made his way into the hallway, and as he was undoing his bolt lock, he began to hope beyond all hope that whoever it was would soon be gone.

New Neighbors

With a ready snarl in his throat for this stranger who dared to impose upon him, Jeremy opened his door; but he found that his throat was unable to release its snarl.

Standing in the hall before him was a girl. Her hair was shoulder length—dark blond and unruly, with curly bangs across her forehead. She was wearing faded blue jeans, white sneakers, and a pink t-shirt. Her skin was lightly tanned, as if she'd just returned from a trip to the beach. If Jeremy had had to make a guess, he would have placed her age at about ten, but then he noticed her eyes. They were large eyes, the deepest, darkest blue he had ever seen, and they had an old look to them, as if she'd been made to grow up a bit faster than most of her peers. Perhaps, he decided, she was older than she looked.

“Hi,” she said. “My mother wanted to know if you could help us. We’re moving in on the second floor, and we’ve got everything in except for this old trunk of my grandmother’s.” The girl spoke quickly, as if she were afraid Jeremy would close his door before she finished. “It looks like it’s gonna rain, and my mother said I better find someone fast. Can you help us?”

She waited for Jeremy to respond and when he didn't she nodded toward the stairwell and said, "I checked with a lady on the second floor and she sent me up here. She said you'd be home 'cause you don't have a job."

Jeremy glared. "For your information," he spat, tightening the sash of his bathrobe and crossing his arms importantly, "I do have a job! I review books for a living."

"Yeah, I know," said the girl matter-of-factly. "That's what the lady downstairs said, and I think that's really cool. I mean, I love to read too. But she said you didn't have a real job. You know—briefcase, ride to work every morning, come home at five—all that kind of stuff. She said that's why you'd be home." Placing both her hands in the pockets of her jeans, she rocked back on her heels and waited; but only for a moment.

"So are you gonna help us?"

Jeremy was still miffed over the comment the girl had made about "real" jobs, but he doubted he could get rid of her now, especially since he and Mrs. Potts were the only ones home in the building during business hours. "Okay," he said, massaging both his eyebrows with his fingertips, "but I'll need to get dressed first."

"I wish I could stay home in my pajamas."

"Hm?"

"I only get to do that when I'm sick. But one time I got to wear my pajamas to school. It was Pajama Day. Did you ever have Pajama Day?"

Maybe this kid was younger than she looked. "No," he said, and he tried to shut his door, but his new little nuisance of a neighbor wouldn't stop talking.

"I also think it's cool that you don't have to comb your hair."

My mom makes me comb mine every morning, but it just gets messy again, especially if I go outside. She says I should start wearing it in a ponytail, but I don't like ponytails. What do you think?"

Jeremy was beginning to lose his patience. "Look," he said, "as much as I'd love to stand here discussing the merits of ponytails, I'm not going to be able to help you and your mom if you don't allow me to get dressed."

"Oh, okay." His grumpiness hadn't fazed her a bit. "See you soon," she called as she bounded down the stairs, no doubt to report to her mother that the lazy bum from upstairs would soon be down to help them.

He shut his door and groaned. "And so begins 'Day in Hell: Part Two'."

Cupid Strikes

Within ten minutes Jeremy was dressed in khaki slacks, loafers, and a dark green, polo knit shirt, which, to give himself more of a casual effect, he had left untucked. He hurried down the stairs, hoping this new chore wouldn't take too long for he hadn't yet called his doctor.

Why—when he made a point of never bothering anyone else—were his neighbors always imposing upon him? If it wasn't Mrs. Potts and her constant barrage of questions and lectures, it was neighborly solicitations for canned goods, signatures for a political petition, or money to support the local PTA, and—oh damn!—he'd forgotten about that stupid blood-drive. Why couldn't people just leave him alone?

He sighed as if he had the weight of the world upon his shoulders. Maybe it was time for him to consider moving away from the city, to the suburbs of New Jersey, or a small, secluded cabin in upstate New York, or maybe even . . .

Jeremy froze.

He was in the open doorway of his apartment building. Standing below him, behind an enormous old-style steamer trunk which

was balanced precariously upon the concrete steps, was one of the most striking women he had ever seen. She was tall for a woman, at least as tall as he, but her body was slender, giving her a delicate, almost petite appearance. Her hair, which cascaded in curls to the middle of her waist, was a deep mahogany red, and her skin reminded him of a light-colored rose his grandmother had once grown in her greenhouse—a pale ivory rose with a slight blush of pink to its petals. He noticed her eyes were almost identical in shape and color to her daughter's, and when she smiled she revealed the kind of white, perfectly straight teeth that would make a dentist drool.

He opened his mouth. He wanted to say hello. He tried to say hello; but, unfortunately for him, that embarrassing condition of lip paralysis, which always struck whenever he was in the presence of a pretty woman, had begun to take effect, and all he could mutter was an unintelligible grunt.

The woman, who appeared not to notice, only continued to smile. “Hi,” she said. “I’m Dana, and you’ve already met my daughter Rebecca.”

“Hi again,” said the girl as she waved.

Jeremy was surprised to see she’d been hiding behind the trunk. He swallowed hard and tried to give her what he hoped was a friendly smile.

The woman chuckled. “I’d shake your hand, but as you can see, I’ve got my hands full. I’m afraid this is as far as we got with this old trunk.”

“Uh,” he managed to utter, and then, “Oh.”

He probably would have remained frozen upon the top step, unable to speak, had his eyes not lit upon a nearby fire hydrant. It was behind and slightly to the right of the woman, and he

found that when he kept his eyes on the fire hydrant he was able to speak a complete sentence. "I see," he said.

Both the girl and the mother laughed, and his heart began to leap within the confines of his chest. Speak, you idiot, speak, he thought as he walked down the steps to the sidewalk. His head was still turned toward the fire hydrant when it occurred to him to focus upon the trunk instead. He did this and found he was able to manage his second complete sentence. "Here," he said, "I'll take this end," and because he was on a linguistic roll he added: "You two can grab the other end."

"Okay."

Mother and daughter each grabbed on to a corner of the upper end of the trunk while Jeremy hoisted the bottom, lower end. Slowly, and in silence, the trunk was carried up the remaining steps in front of the brownstone, and after some tricky maneuvering with the front door of the apartment building, they inched their way up the stairwell to the open door of a second-floor apartment.

"There," said the woman, swiping the palms of her hands. "We can take it from here. Thanks so much for your help."

And though his eyes were still upon the trunk, Jeremy found he was suddenly feeling chivalrous. "I might as well help you move it in the rest of the way, don't you think? I mean, if it's all right with you," and he managed a brief glance to the top of her head.

"Why, sure. Thanks."

And so the three amateur movers carried the trunk through a maze of boxes until it was positioned upon the floor of a back bedroom. Jeremy turned away from the trunk to look around the room. There were more boxes than furniture. "Wow," he said,

taking advantage of his newfound ability to speak to an attractive woman, if not directly to her face, then certainly within close range of it. "You've got a lot of stuff."

It was the girl who responded. "My mother and I love books. But I already told you that, remember? I mean, I told you *I* loved books. Well, my mom does too." She looked toward her mother and smiled. "Hey, Mom, Mr. . . uh . . ." She turned back to Jeremy. "What's your last name?" she asked.

"Thompson . . .," he replied. His eyes were now darting from one box to another. He was attempting to calculate how many books might be inside the boxes. "But you may call me Jeremy."

"Oh, okay. Mom, Mr. . . , uh, sorry, I mean, Jeremy loves books too. Did you know that?"

"No, but I'm not surprised."

"And he's a book reviewer, so he doesn't have to have a real job. Isn't that cool?"

"Becca, honey, that is a real job. A nice job too," she added, looking apologetically to Jeremy, and that was when he realized he'd actually been staring at her face, at her entire face, not just the top of her head. Embarrassed, he quickly returned his gaze to the boxes.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I think she's only repeating what she heard a neighbor say."

"And I'm sure that would be the lovely Mrs. Potts who painted such a glowing picture of me?"

"Yeah," the girl laughed. "I think that's her name. How d'ya know?"

His eyes were getting braver by the minute. He found himself glancing back and forth between mother and daughter, and still his mouth was working! He spoke now in a manner which he

hoped would convey the longtime ease of a seasoned conversationalist; but, for safety's sake, he still allowed his eyes to rest occasionally on a white cardboard box that was in front of his left foot.

"Mrs. Potts makes the lives of all who live in this building her business. She's been especially concerned about me ever since I moved in two years ago, but you don't need to hear about that." He turned to make his way down the narrow hallway which was a replica of his own, but then the girl stopped him with a question.

"How come?" she asked.

"Huh?"

"Why's she so concerned about you?"

He paused to take a peek into their kitchen. "Number one reason . . .," and he held up a finger, "I'm not married, and in her mind, no man my age can possibly be happy outside of marriage. Number two . . .," and he held up a second finger, "she thinks I must not make enough money to support a family, otherwise I'd be married. That's why she keeps badgering me about the merits of what she calls a 'real' job." His face was beginning to feel warm so he decided he better continue his way down the hallway. "I suppose she means well," he called over his shoulder. "When I first moved in she brought up a casserole for me." At the door he stopped to stare at a large open box.

"That was nice," said the girl.

"Yeah, I thought so too," he said as he opened the door, and then he paused, "until she told me why she brought it up."

"So why did she?"

"Because I'm too skinny. She says that means I must not know how to cook." He was pleased to see his comment had won a smile from both mother and daughter, but as he turned to leave

the girl spoke up again.

“Do you?” she asked.

“Do I what?”

“Know how to cook, silly?”

“Sure I do,” and then he smiled. “No one else can whip up a box of instant macaroni and cheese as fast as I can.”

They laughed, though he noticed it was only polite chuckles. The warmth of his face was beginning to increase. “Well, I won’t take up any more of your time,” he said. “Need to get to work, back to my ‘pretend’ job, as Mrs. Potts probably calls it. Nice meeting you.” He stepped into the corridor.

“Nice meeting you too,” said the woman.

He was on the stairs when the girl called out to him, “Mr. Thompson, . . . I mean, Jeremy?”

“Yes?” He turned around and found that she was smiling.

“I know how to fix macaroni and cheese too. Maybe you can come over one day and I’ll fix some for you. You can tell me how fast I am.”

If Jeremy’s face had been warm before, it was certainly boiling now. He hated to imagine what shade of red his cheeks were, but he rallied his mouth into a polite reply, and even managed to smile. “Uh, that would be nice.”

Then he noticed after only the quickest of glances that, unlike her daughter’s face, the mother’s face was serious. Her hands were on the girl’s shoulders, and for a moment it almost looked as if she were using the girl as a shield.

He didn’t want her to feel uncomfortable, so he added bravely, his eyes moving back and forth from the stairwell banister to the eyes of the girl, “I imagine, though, that you and your mom are going to be pretty busy over the next few months. We’ll probably

bump into each other at the mailbox. We can trade macaroni and cheese cooking tips then.”

That won a small, though almost shy smile from the mother. “Thank you,” she said as she led her daughter back into the apartment. “Thanks so much for helping us today.” And with that she closed the door.

After returning to his own apartment Jeremy decided to shave before calling the doctor’s office. But when he got to the bathroom, he was shocked by his reflection in the mirror. “My God,” he said, “I look like I have a hangover.”

His hair, though it had been hastily combed, was sticking up on one side of his head, and he had circles under his eyes. Even his shirt, which he had grabbed earlier from his closet, had a small dribble of spaghetti sauce upon its front. He ran a hand over the whiskers of his chin and muttered, “So much for making a good impression.”

Jeremy Plays Hooky

The receptionist had not been able to work Jeremy in. “It’s a Wednesday,” she reminded him, “which means we close at noon.”

“At noon? Who closes their office at noon in the middle of the week?”

“We do. Now, normally I’d be able fit you in on Thursday, but Dr. Humphrey is going to be out of town that day. Looks like the earliest I can schedule you is Friday afternoon. What did you say this was for?”

Jeremy sighed. “I passed out in a bookstore yesterday. I just want to know why. Are you sure you can’t work me in today? It’s 11:30. I could be there in ten minutes.”

There was a pause on the other end of the line. “Are you experiencing any head pain, dizziness, or loss of vision?”

“No.”

“How about any chest pain or numbness in your arms?”

“No.”

“Well, it sounds like it can wait until Friday; but if you’d rather not wait that long, you can always go to the emergency room. Dr. Humphrey has to be out of the office as soon as possi-

ble today, so I'm afraid I really can't work you in this morning."

Jeremy sighed again. He decided not to mention that he'd already been to the emergency room. "Go on and put me down for Friday," he said.

"Four-thirty?"

"Yes."

"Well then, four-thirty it is."

"Oh, wait. I just thought of something."

"Yes?"

"Is it wise for a person to give blood the day after he's passed out for some unknown reason?"

"Hm," said the receptionist. "I wouldn't think so, but I'll go check with the doctor, if you like."

"No, that won't be necessary. Thank you." He hung up. At the very least, he now had an excuse for skipping the blood drive.

Must Be Crazy

After working at his computer for most of the afternoon—happily completing some long overdue correspondence—he had decided to check the news on TV to see if he had missed anything since the evening before, when he'd spent three hours listening to CNN in the emergency room.

It was early in the evening, going on six o'clock when he opened the book again. He'd felt compelled to open it during the news but decided to eat some dinner first, hoping to get his mind off the book. After all, he had other books to get to. There was no sense wasting his time with this one; but still it beckoned to him, even after he had finished his soup and grilled cheese. After washing his last dinner dish he returned to the recliner in the living room and let out a groan.

Why? he wondered as he looked at the book. Why had he purchased it? And why was he even bothering to read it again? At least the book was short. He could be thankful for that. Also, it was pleasing to think of how he might dispose of the book once he was finished with it. The pages were thin enough, he mused, maybe he could "save a tree," as the environmentalists liked to

put it, and use the pages of the book for toilet paper.

Smiling at the thought, he opened the book; but then he quickly snapped it shut, for the printed words upon the page had appeared to be vibrating. Holy shit! What was wrong with him now?

Tossing the book to his coffee table, he picked up a magazine and was relieved to find the print upon its pages perfectly normal. So were the pages of text within a nearby dictionary, and so were the pages of black and white copy in the *New York Times* beside his chair.

Finally he decided he was brave enough to try the book again; but to his horror, when he opened its cover the same thing happened as before! The words upon the page were literally dancing before his eyes.

“Good God!” he yelled, and he slammed the book closed for the second time. He could feel his heart racing. Was it his mind, or was it the book? And what would his doctor say about all this? Would he recommend that Jeremy be committed?

He got up to search through his kitchen cabinets. Somewhere in the back of a cabinet there was a bottle of sherry. Or maybe it was wine. It had been a gift, whatever it was. And though he wasn't much of a drinker, he certainly wanted a drink now. He continued to search, shifting through cabinet after cabinet, but all he could find was a brown bottle of butterscotch schnapps. He hated butterscotch. Even the thought of it made his stomach turn, so he settled, instead, for a cold glass of water.

“Calm,” he repeated while he sipped and paced back and forth. “It's only a book. Be calm.” And a strange thing happened as he zigzagged across his kitchen floor. His curiosity, he found, began to overtake his fear. Soon, he was back in his liv-

ing room. But this time when he opened the book, the print was nothing more than black, ordinary words upon a brittle, yellowed paper.

Is this what madness is like? he wondered. He knew the answer was yes. And though his hands gripped the book now as if it were a wild animal that needed to be controlled, he settled back into his chair, the best he could, and began to read.

The little girl and her mother tried to finish what was left of the planting, but the mother knew the farm was too large for a woman and small child to tend to alone. One evening at dusk she stated aloud, "I mun travel to sum o' the neigh'bring farms to see i' thare migh'na be ithers who are o' life."

The mother, who was sitting upon the threshold of her front door, watching the last of the purple light fade from the field before her home, spoke to her daughter; but her daughter was asleep upon her straw mat in the corner of the room, too exhausted from her day's labor to eat of the soup which was now bubbling in the black kettle above the fire.

"Ay," murmured the mother in a softer voice, "I shall seek a pair o' strong hands to help us. 'Tis far too much wark for my wee lass an' mysel."

She and her daughter took off the next morning upon their gray mare, but at the first farm they found no survivors, only the remains of the last of the McAllister family. The stench of their bodies, which had caused the mother to become sick and to lose her breakfast upon the floor, had lingered upon her clothing even after she and her daughter reached the second farm of the day. This was the house of Broun, and all that

remained of the Broun family was the old grandfather and three of the brothers.

The Brouns had already traveled to some of the other farms in the area and had found the story to be the same wherever they had gone. Usually no more than two or three family members remained on each farm.

It was decided that one of the last surviving brothers of the Broun family would return with the mother and her daughter. This was the second oldest brother, and he had fair eyes the color of a sunny sky and hair the color of straw. He was terribly thin, however, and the mother worried that he might not be fully recovered from the sickness. He appeared to be about twelve years of age, six years older than her daughter.

"An'if I be feedin' him weel," she thought to herself, "he migh' grow to be strong an' mayhap he shall mak a gude match for my wee'un whan she cums o' age."

She turned to the grandfather, "Ay, I'll tak the yung lad if ye thank ye can spare 'im." And so the young boy said goodbye to his two brothers and his grandfather, and he arrived at his new home with the mother and her daughter, just as the sun was beginning to set over the farthest hill.

* * * * *

The name of the new boy was Brammin, though his family had always called him Bram. He learned that the woman's name was Mary. The little girl, whose face reminded him a bit of his mother's, went by the name of Gwenna.

He decided he liked the name. He liked the little girl too. She helped him to forget his sadness, especially when she sat

beside him on the bench in the evenings at mealtime and placed her hand in his.

The woman, Mary, he found to be quiet, not at all as his mother had been; but she radiated a warmth that made him feel comfortable and he decided his new home was far less sad because it did not always remind him of his missing family members. But he did think upon his family, most often in the evenings when the little girl Gwenna was asleep upon her straw mat and the mother sat on a small stool knitting before the fire. One night she startled Bram by speaking to him.

“Yer mither an’ I grawd up thegither na too far frae here. Yer mither was a gude woman, Bram. I ken ye’ll be missing ‘er fierce, but thare’s a cure for tha’, an’ tha’ll be many a lang day’s wark. Ye shall fand we hae plenty o’ tha’ Bram. Dinna ye fret, lad. Ye’ll fand we hae plenty o’ tha’.”

And Bram did work hard, and he grew tall and strong. He visited his brothers and grandfather about once a month, and sometimes he carried Gwenna upon the back of the gray mare so that she could visit too.

But one day he noticed how his older brother Thomas looked at Gwenna, and Bram decided he would discontinue his visits to his old family farm. He wanted Gwenna for himself, if she would have him.

He knew that Gwenna was nearing the age of womanhood for when she stared at him as they worked beside each other in the fields, or when she occasionally squeezed his hand, he could feel a fire in him that was growing more and more uncomfortable. He was ripe for a joining, had been for quite some time, and he knew that soon Gwenna would be too.

Mary could see this as well. She could see the hunger that was building in Bram's eyes whenever he gazed upon her Gwenna who was not so wee anymore.

"Aweel," she thought as she was milking her cow one morning, "I ken the day wud cum, but they shall mak a fine fam'ly thegither." She leaned her head into the warm belly of her milk cow and whispered, "They shall gie me a fine brood o' gude, strong yung'uns, my Gwenna an' tha' Bram ... a fine brood o' gude, strong yung'uns."

A Turn in a Trite Tale

Jeremy yawned. “How perfectly bucolic,” he said aloud, and then he realized with a start that every trace of his earlier fear was gone. How had that happened? When had the book become so utterly tame, so ordinary and dull? Had the vibrating words been imagined? Or were they nothing more than a fleeting moment of temporary psychosis?

Rubbing his eyes he returned his attention to the book. All this bother for such a trite little tale. No doubt their farm would soon be crawling with snot-nosed urchins whose feet were always bare and whose noses were always dirty, that is, when they weren’t dying off like flies from some horrible plague. And that dreadful Scots’ dialect. It sounded as if it had come straight out of one of those sleeping draughts known as a Walter Scott novel.

It wasn’t like him to read this type of thing. He positively cringed at the thought that anyone would know he was reading such a book. And then he remembered someone did know. At the thought of the fat man from the bookstore the hairs on the back of his neck began to tingle. Maybe the fat man had cast some sort of voodoo spell on him as a punishment for having

taken the book.

No! he quickly decided, can't think that way. Crazy thoughts will only beget more crazy thoughts.

He tossed the book to the floor beside his recliner, as much as anything, to prove to himself that it no longer had any power over him. Maybe, he decided, he wouldn't even finish the damn thing. And maybe, if he were feeling generous tomorrow, he might even return it to the bookstore. Not that he'd want to see the fat man again. If he did return it, he'd probably just leave it propped up against the outside of the door.

Placing his hands on the small of his back, he stood and stretched, listening for a while to the snap and crackle of a few vertebrae as he moved. It had been fifteen years since he'd run around a track or lifted any weights. Fifteen years! God, he was feeling old. He'd actually had a girlfriend then. They'd even talked of marriage. Well, *she* had talked of marriage until she'd gotten that job in L.A. and fallen in love with a writer connected to some dumb TV program. Jeremy had waited five years for her. By the time he'd realized she wasn't coming back, he'd forgotten how to talk to a woman. Or at least that's what he liked to tell himself. But the truth was, he'd never been any good at it to begin with.

He stopped his stretching and in that moment looked up, catching a glimpse of his reflection in the darkened window. Jeez! Mrs. Potts was right. His shirt was hanging off his body like a sheet on a clothesline. No wonder he was alone. Not even his English degree from Columbia could change the fact that he was a skinny, socially unskilled geek who preferred books to people. And it didn't even matter if they were bad books. His reflection in the window was a picture-poster image for the concept of failure.

Mrs. Potts knew it. Everyone knew it. Even his old girlfriend had known it.

Disgusted now by his own reflection, he walked to the window to shut the blinds. That was when he noticed a large man across the street from his apartment building. He was standing beneath the light on the corner, and he was wearing what appeared to be a cowboy get-up: boots, jeans, vest, and a white ten-gallon hat. The hat was far too large for the man. It covered most of his head and face. And the vest was far too small. It was dwarfed by the man's huge stomach, making the vest appear more like a halter top.

"Tacky tourist from Texas," he muttered, but he continued to stare at the man through a small crack in his blinds. The man was facing his apartment. In fact, Jeremy could almost imagine that the man was watching him, though, of course, the crack in his blinds was far too small for for that, and they were too thick for his shadow to appear from behind.

But there was something strange about the man on the sidewalk, in addition to his unusual clothes. For one, he hadn't moved since Jeremy had come to the window. How amazing that such an over-sized man could remain so still.

He continued to watch the giant cowboy tourist from Texas. He was beginning to wonder if perhaps the man was asleep on his feet, or if the man were not a man at all, but a mannequin, someone's idea of a strange joke. But then he moved. He came to life just as a young couple from across the street left their apartment building. They hurried toward the corner where the Texas-sized cowboy stood. He appeared to greet them and when they turned round the corner he followed.

Ah ha, thought Jeremy. Tacky, Texan tourist with friends in

the city. At least I can be thankful I don't have friends like that.

He turned away from the window, and immediately his eyes were caught by the open cover of the book. With its pages turned down to the floor, the gold-embossed letters of its title *Read Me Now* glistened in the light of his nearby reading lamp. He stared at the book. How out of place it was, here in this particular room, a room which housed a collection of over two thousand rare and classic books, many of them original editions.

And though he was tired and could think of a number of reasons not to waste anymore of his time, he returned to his easy chair and resumed his reading. The large tourist from Texas had reminded him of the fat man, and that was when Jeremy realized that he still wanted to unravel the mystery of this man and his connection to this strange and ridiculous book.

Being a practical woman, Mary had warned Gwenna in advance of all the approaching signs of womanhood, and so it was with pleasure, rather than fear, that Gwenna discovered the first small trickle of blood between her legs.

Now that she was a woman, the Ceremony of Joining could begin that would give Gwenna and Bram their first new home. And when the cottage walls and roof were complete, they would, with the blessing of Gwenna's mother and Bram's grandfather, become as husband and wife.

With such excitement in the air Bram could already sense the secret that lay between Gwenna and her mother. When Mary announced to him early one morning that she was traveling to his family's farm after breakfast, he knew that she and his family would be discussing his upcoming union with Gwenna.

Unlike his late father, Bram planned to be a good husband to Gwenna. Even now she still reminded him of his own dear mother; and though he had not been able to protect his mother from his father's angry blows, he vowed to himself that morning that he would protect this bonnie lass for as long as he was of life.

* * * * *

It was close to mid-day when Mary arrived at the Broun family farmhouse, but as she drew closer to the small, stone cottage her spine began to tingle and she sensed that not all was well. Even her horse drew back and tried to turn away; but she knew that if there was something wrong, for Bram's sake, she needed to know.

Slowly she dismounted and went to the door and knocked. "Hallo?" she called, but there was no answer. "Hallo! 'Tis Mary O'Donnell!" She waited and knocked again, louder than before; and when there was still no response she placed her hand upon the latch of the door and pushed.

The door swung open and suddenly she was hit with a smell of rot that was so overpowering she almost fainted. Quickly she covered her nose with the end of her skirt and entered.

The house was cold and damp, and upon the table to the left of the empty hearth were the greasy remains of a meal—some bones, a hunk of moldy bread, wooden cups, and many crumbs. At the opposite end of the room was a door that led to an adjoining bedroom. It was closed. Slowly, in a sort of shuffle, Mary inched her way toward the door. She knew that on the other side lay the source of the overpowering stench.

“For Bram,” she whispered as she opened the door and then she screamed at the gruesome sight before her. Blood . . . it was everywhere, on the ceiling, the walls, the bed; and on the bed were the swollen, bloody bodies of two men: Bram’s tall younger brother and his grandfather.

“Mary,” someone whispered from behind, and she jumped and screamed as she turned. It was Thomas, Bram’s older brother.

Quickly she made a dash toward the door, but he grabbed her from behind and pulled her tightly against his chest. She kicked and she clawed but she was unable to escape his grip.

“Mary,” he murmured, his mouth against her ear, “I hae’d a feelin’ ye’d cum, pokin’ yer head roun’,” and then he laughed. “I tol’ mysel I’d na lay a hand on ye, or Bram, or tha’ bonnie wee lass o’ yers if ye’d only kept away; but I spae’d ye’d cum Mary.” And now he lowered his head so that his lips and nose were touching her neck.

“Nae, Thomas, nae,” Mary pleaded.

“Ay, I kenned ye be cummin’,” he whispered. “I be waitin’ nigh on four day for ye.” And though she struggled he began to kiss her throat. “M-m-m, Mary, how ye wile a man to tak liberties wi’ such fair, fair flesh.” He moved his hand to her right breast. “An’ wha’ a sonsie wench ye be.”

“Thomas, stap. Ye dinna ken wot ye do.”

His body smelled of feces, and his breath smelled of rotten meat. She continued to struggle but she was unable to escape, and now she could feel his tongue against her neck.

“Thomas, nae!” And then she screamed. His teeth were now deeply clamped within her neck.

* * * * *

It was well past sundown when they heard the hooves of the gray mare. Gwenna had prepared a special stew for the evening meal, but both she and Bram had decided to wait upon her mother's return before eating. Eager to greet her mother, Gwenna rushed to open the door; but the small, dirt yard of the cottage was empty save for the mare.

"Mither," she whispered, and then she staggered and fell. Her mind was filled with a blackness and pain, . . . a bright flash of red . . . and suddenly an image of her mother's face was before her. Her cheeks were covered with blood. Her mother was in pain. Somewhere her mother was dying. And then, in the fog of darkness that filled her mind, came a faint imprint of her mother's voice: "Stae away!" she called. "Stae away!"

At that moment there was a knock at the door and Jeremy jumped within the seat of his recliner. "Jeez!" he said as he got up to make his way to the door. The story wasn't quite what he had initially expected, and he was mildly irritated with the intrusion.

"Who is it?" he yelled, still four feet away from the door, and when no one responded he peered through his peephole, then he snatched the door open and looked from side to side. No one. The hallway was completely empty.

"Pranksters," he grumbled, and then he heard and felt a swish of paper beneath his foot. He bent down to pick it up. It was a pink slip of paper, folded in half, and neatly inscribed upon its center was the message:

I AM GLAD TO SEE YOU ARE ENJOYING THE BOOK.

“What the ...! Hey!” stammered Jeremy. “Who in the hell is spying on me?”

The Encounter

“I said, who’s spying on me!?!” Jeremy’s voice was beginning to crack as he yelled. “I know you’re there! I’m not going to ask again. Who are you?”

There was only one other apartment on his floor, which was the top floor, the fourth floor, of his apartment building. He marched over to the door of his neighbor and knocked. “Hey, Hawkins, is it you?” he called through the door, but there was no answer. Even the usually ubiquitous sound of TV from his neighbor’s apartment was absent, and he began to imagine that from behind the door his neighbor was quietly laughing at him.

“Okay!” he shouted. “Fine! Have your little fun. It’s a stupid book, by the way. And if I discover how you’ve been spying on me, I’m going to sue, you hear?”

Just as he was beginning to feel foolish talking to a closed door in an empty hallway, he thought he heard a voice from below. Leaning over the stairwell railing to investigate, he was suddenly taken aback.

“Whoa!” he whispered. It was Mrs. Potts, her face a mass of bright, green cream, her hair a halo of small, light blue curlers.

The rest of her, he was relieved to see, was hidden beneath the folds of a floor-length housecoat which matched the color of her curlers.

“Mr. Thompson, is that you?”

“Yes, Mrs. Potts. It is I.”

“Young man, I go to bed at nine o’clock, and I want you to know I don’t appreciate your loud yelling! I could hear your voice all the way from my bedroom.”

Jeremy found himself wondering what Mrs. Potts would do if he spit upon the top of her curled head; but he refrained, trying his best to assume a polite pose, his head and neck stretched over the bannister railing. “Sorry, Mrs. Potts. Someone played a prank on me. I was only trying to find out who it was.”

“That’s what the police are for, Mr. Thompson. You know, if you weren’t such an unusual young man perhaps the children of this building wouldn’t feel tempted to play tricks on you, but that’s beside the point. I’m going to bed, and if I hear anymore out of you *I’m* calling the police! Do I make myself crystal clear?”

Jeremy took a deep breath. “Yes, Mrs. Potts. I can assure you, you won’t be hearing anything more out of me.”

“Well then, I’ll say good night.”

“Good night.”

“Oh, and Jeremy?”

“Yes?”

“What’s this I heard about your not showing up for the blood drive? You signed up for it. Why weren’t you there?”

“Medical reasons, Mrs. Potts. Not till they’ve determined why I lost consciousness yesterday am I allowed to give blood.”

“Oh? I thought you’d already seen a doctor and that he didn’t find a thing wrong with you.”

“He was just an emergency-room doctor, straight out of med school, too young and inexperienced to find the cause of my curious condition.”

“Curious condition, my foot! There’s not a thing wrong with you except for the fact that you’re too skinny. You need a wife, Jeremy Thompson, someone who can cook and fatten you up; but to get a wife, you need a proper job. No woman wants to be married to a bum who lives off of his mother’s savings!”

“Mrs. Potts?”

“Yes?”

“I thought you said it was past your bedtime.”

“Humph,” she said as she glared at him. “I suppose I should get back to bed; but remember, no more shouting!”

“Yes, I’ll remember,” and then, when he was safely behind the closed door of his apartment, he added, “Old bitty.” He let out a belch and rubbed his stomach where he could hear and feel a fresh batch of acid erupting, no doubt due to Mrs. Potts. If his ulcer from college returned maybe he could sue her for medical damages. And then he realized this was the third time in two days that he had either threatened or thought about suing someone.

“Hm,” he said, “maybe I ought to consider going to law school.” But there were still too many books waiting to be read, and if he went to law school he’d have to deal with bullshit professors who were probably ten times worse than what he had encountered in the English department at Columbia.

Bullshit was the one thing Jeremy couldn’t abide. In fact, his tolerance for bullshit had greatly lessened with age, which was one reason he spent as much time as possible alone. It was also one of the reasons he read so many books. If a book contained

any lines of bullshit it was easy enough to skim over and ignore them, unlike people.

Belching again he decided that maybe some milk would help. He poured himself a tall glass and carried it back to his easy chair where he resettled himself with the book and returned to his reading.

Gwenna felt as if she were floating . . . in darkness, in icy coldness; and then, from somewhere near came the murmurings of voices. Two voices. And though there was a strangeness to their words, something about the voices seemed familiar to her. She concentrated harder and with some effort was able to pick out a few words here and there.

“ . . . has failed . . . ”

“ . . . she will . . . blessing . . . ”

When and where had she heard these voices before? Somehow . . . somehow she knew them. And then, though the language of the voices was very different from her own, suddenly she found that she was able to understand:

“I tell you she does not remember. The contact is doomed.”

“No. She will remember.”

“And why are you so sure?”

“The song.”

“The song proves nothing.”

“It proves a portion of her memory is still intact. She will soon remember the power of the blessing.”

“No, you are wrong. This contact is becoming like all the others.”

“Let us try to have some faith. She has not yet failed . . . ”

And now came a different voice, though also familiar to her: "Gwenna . . . lass . . ." This one sounded much closer, but there was something about the voice that made her want to flee. It was coming from a place of danger, a place that wished her harm.

She tried once more to listen for the other voices, but the closer voice spoke again, "Gwenna, dinna ye hear me?" Oh, yes, she could hear, but she did not wish to see this place of fear, this place where terror lurked.

"Lass, shaw me tha' ye still be o' life. I beg o' ye, open up yer eyes!"

And now she began to remember the reason for her fear, the red of the blood . . . the pain . . . the sound of her mother's screams. And suddenly her eyes were open and she herself was screaming.

"Gwenna! Gwenna, I am wi' ye, lass!" Bram tightened his arms around her shoulders. They were on the floor of the cottage in front of the fire. She was propped up against his chest and he was rocking her to and fro. Though at last she stopped her screaming, she was unable to stop her tears.

"Mither," she cried, "oh, Mither."

"Sh-h-h," Bram whispered. "Thare's na reason for ye to fret. I shall fand yer mither, but only after ye hae calmed yersel."

And it was then that she remembered the threat of approaching danger. Whatever it was that had harmed her mother was drawing nearer. She could feel it, like a cold mist upon her skin. And in her newfound terror her tears began to subside.

"Bram," she said, pulling herself up, "we mun tak the horse an' mak haste, for thare's an evil tha' cums our way." She grabbed his arm in an attempt to pull him up. "I ken o' a place whare we can hide, but we mun mak haste!"

"Ah, lass," and he scrambled to his feet, "yer only fu' o' fret 'boot yer mither. Thare's na reason for us to hide. Wha' ye need is a bit o' summat to eat. Here," he said as he retrieved a wooden bowl, "I'se serve ye sum o' the soup ye made."

"Nae! I ken wot I ken. Thare'll be blude an'if we stae here this nigh' . . . our blude."

Her eyes bored into Bram's with such an intensity that he knew there would be no peace between them unless he did as she asked. He banked the fire and covered the pot of soup; and when she took his hand he followed her, and together they climbed upon the back of the gray mare and quickly disappeared into the night.

* * * * *

In little more than an hour they reached the entrance to her hiding place. It was a small cave in the middle of a copse surrounded by a long-forgotten meadow. She had stumbled across it shortly after her mother had healed from the sickness. Often Gwenna had returned to the cave, and each and every time her mother had scolded her for disappearing when there was so much work to be done.

She stifled a sob but her eyes still filled with tears. How she wished her mother were here to scold her now. How she hoped that her vision had been wrong. Maybe, if her

wishes were strong enough, in the morning they would find her mother and she would scold Gwenna for having been so worried and afraid.

It was a dark night, and they could barely make out the opening in the outcropping of rock. Bram threw a stick into the cave hoping to awaken any creature that might be within, but there was no sound of scuffling or stirring so he decided it was safe to enter.

The blackness inside the cave was darker than the night itself, but from the floor of the cave where they huddled side by side they could look out and see the stars through the branches of the treetops. No more could Gwenna feel the invisible mist of danger, but it was the stars, more than anything else, that calmed her. Keeping her eyes upon the nighttime sky she began to tell Bram of her vision.

"I cud see her," she said, "a' yer fam'ly's cot. Thare was blude 'round her face an' neck. An' though she didna look to be o' life, I cud hear her voice. Somehow I cud hear it. She was warnin' me to stae away . . . an' then . . ." She paused and he could feel her body trembling.

"Wha' is it, lass? Wha' did ye see?"

"'Tis na wha' I saw, but wha' I felt . . . 'twas sum kin' o' evilness huntin' us down. It wuns our blude, an'if we hae'd stae'd, we'd baith be dead by now."

Bram pulled away from her. "Na if I hae'd anythang to do wi' it." He got up to leave. "I mun gae to fight this evil. I'se na stae here hidin' like a frightened animal. My brithers an' my grandfither may hae need o' me."

"Nae," she cried.

“Dinna ye fret. I shall cum back for ye whan I’m able.”

“But ye dinna understan’,” she sobbed. “This nigh’ . . . it may be our last.”

“Ah, lass,” he said and he kneeled to put his arms around her, “whatfor do ye hae to spake such thangs?”

“I . . . I wun us to be thegither. For this one nigh’ . . . can ye na stae wi’ me? I fear for ye. I fear for us baith. I dinna wun to be alone.”

He sighed in frustration, but after a long moment he pulled her closer and said, “Oh, Gwenna, how can I leave ye in such a state o’ torment?” Gently he kissed her cheek. “O’ course, I shall stae; but on the morrow I’se gae to baith farms, an’ I shall see for mysel wha’ has cum to pass.” And then he made a feeble attempt to chuckle. “Mayhap whan I fand yer mither she’ll be bullering’ like a banshee tha’ I didna cum to look for her sooner.”

“An’if . . . an’if wha’ I spae’d has truly cum to pass? Wha’ than?”

“Sh-h-h,” he said. “Na matter wha’ cums our way, we shall face it thegither.”

Gwenna could feel Bram’s arms around her tighten and she became aware of a new sensation. This one did not make her feel afraid. It was as if a clear and invisible stream, newly sprung from the depths of her body, pulled her in its current to the warmth and safety of Bram. She sought his lips with her own, and the stream within her body built to become as a raging river, surging as it rushed to join the river of Bram’s own body. And in the dark cave, which was their shelter from the night, the two rivers merged and became as one,

seemingly melting every boundary of their bodies.

“Blest be,” Gwenna found herself whispering. “Blest be this joinin’ o’ man an’ woman.”

* * * * *

The Book Goes to Bed

“Omigod, now it’s a Harlequin Romance.”

Jeremy rubbed his eyes and looked at his watch. Midnight? Surely he hadn’t been reading for that long. But then he remembered how, over and over again, his mind had wandered from the pages of the book, each time picturing images of its own, as if it had been filling in the gaps of the story and even, at times, rewriting the story. Obviously self-published, he decided.

And then he chuckled to himself. “Too bad I don’t know who the author is. I could send her one of my scathing reviews and I wouldn’t even charge her for it.” He felt the last love scene had most assuredly been written by a woman.

He got up from his easy chair to brush his teeth and get ready for bed. Usually he didn’t take books to bed—he’d found they interfered too much with his sleep—but this time he decided he would make an exception. He wasn’t yet tired. He’d read for just a bit more, at least until he got sleepy.

Afterwards, as they lay in each other’s arms, neither of the young lovers felt drawn to sleep. Finally, after much shifting and stirring on Gwenna’s part, Bram spoke.

"Lass," he said, "I hear'd wha' ye whispered, an' I wun our joinin' to be blest as weel, but it mun be dune proper."

"Dune proper?"

"Ay. We shall seek a blessin' frae one o' the new Holy Men. I hear'd tale o' one who lives in a village two days ride frae here."

Gwenna had been curled against the inside of his arm, but now she shot up. "We dinna hae need o' such strangers. The words I whispered are the words my mither or yer grandfather wud hae blest us wi', hae'd they been here to do sae."

"But tha' is na longer the proper way to bless a union."

"An who tol' ye tha'?"

"The Church o' the Holy Men. They be the ones who spake o' the new threwtthes."

"New trewtthes? Brammin Broun, I dinna ken whatfor ye haud by such foolery. My mither once tol' me o' the dark-robed Holy Men. They hae an evil eye, she said. Many a gude healer amongst our wise women hae been kilt by these men. They wun to tak away our power to heal oursels."

"Tak away our power? Gwenna, they are here to mak us stronger. They hae a grete an' wundrous book wi' pages made o' lambskin, an' ever' trewthe is wi'in tha' book; but the trewtthes are drawn in the signs o' a holy tongue. 'Tis the tongue o' mighty warriors who hae conquered all who fought them. An'if we abide by these trewtthes, we shall be mighty as weel. But the Holy Men be the only ones who can read these signs. We hae need o' them. Dinna ye see?"

Gently he drew her back into the crook of his arm. "Lass, the words o' the Holy Men be as magic. They hae na need

o' the women's healin' plants. An' they say tha' those who hae been healed by the Holy Men hae conquered e'en the sickness." He paused for a moment, waiting for her to respond, but when she didn't he continued. *"An' I was tol' tha' any union atween a man an' a woman mun be blest by the Church 'o the Holy Men, itherwise the union be an evil, an'if it be an evil, bad things cum the way o' the man an' woman. Mayhap 'tis whatfor the sickness came."*

Gwenna could feel her body stiffen. She felt stung by Bram's words. *"Nae," she said. "I ken in my heart, wha' ye spake . . . 'tis a falsehood. Wha' we feel for each ither is a gift, an' tharefore 'tis a gude thang. Look a' the joinin's o' the cows an' sheep. Na Holy Men has blest their union, an' yet the animals live weel an' bear many yung."*

"But we are greter than the lowly animals!"

His voice was filled with a sternness that Gwenna had never heard before. It frightened her and she pulled away.

"Ah, lass," he said, and he tried to reach for her but she was beyond his grasp in the darkness of the cave.

When she spoke again her voice sounded soft and afraid. "Bram? Who taught ye to thank this way?"

"My fither," he said. "Whan I was a yung lad my fither began to travel far an' wide to hear the Holy Men. Sumtimes he wud stae away for many a week, but whan he'd cum back he'd share wi' us all the trewthes tha' he hae'd hear'd frae the Holy Men."

"Did all yer fam'ly accept these trewthes?"

"I did, an' sae did my grandfither, my brithers, an' my sister; but after a while my mither decided she did na hauld

by the ways o' the Holy Men. One time she cursed the Holy Men an' called them deevils, an' my fither . . . he began to beat her wi' his own hands."

Gwenna gasped, but he quickly continued. "I dinna thank he suld hae paiked her sae. He tol' us he was tryin' to mak safe her soul, tha' piece o' her tha' wud still be o' life lang after her body hae'd turned to dust."

"My mither tol' us wha' the Holy Men teach. They say women dinna hae souls."

"Lass, 'tis na sae."

"An' she also tol us tha' these men hae sae much hatred for womenfolk tha' they ne'er lie wi' a woman; they hae na jam'lies."

"Lass, ye dinna understan'. Sum o' the Holy Men choose na to lie wi' women, but tha's only to keep their bodies free o' sin."

"Free o' sin?"

"Ay. I hear 'tis a sort o' evil."

"But if man ware to stap joinin' wi' woman, thare'd be na more babes. E'en the lowly animals ken tha'."

"Oh, Gwenna, na all the Holy Men are tha' way. My fither once kenned a Holy Man who liked to lie wi' women sae much, he wud lie wi' them three a' a time. He said woman was created for man's pleasure, an' tha' he wudna turn such blessin's away. 'Shew tha' ye luv the fruit by etin' as much o' it as ye can,' he once tol' my fither."

He would have laughed then had it not been for Gwenna's long hiss. "Ah, luv, I ken a woman is a blessin' to a man. I shall ne'er strike ye the way my fither paik'd my mither.

Thegither, we shall travel to the Holy Men, an' thegither we shall learn 'boot the holy trewthes."

"While ye lie wi' all those ither women?" she spat. "Nae! I'll na hae anythang to do wi' these Holy Men o' yers!"

"Lass, whatfor do ye hae to be this way? Dinna ye wish to be free o' sickness an' evil? Thare's a mighty spirit healer o' the Holy Men, an' he maks weel their sick by cleansing them o' evil wi' his own blude. If the Holy Men hae'd been here to bless us, an'if their healer hae'd been here to cleanse us, I ken our fam'lies wud still be o' life."

For a few moments Gwenna considered what their lives would have been like had their families not been touched by the sickness. How wonderful if the healer of the Holy Men could keep such evilness away. But that happy thought was soon destroyed by a new one which came unexpectedly to her mind. "But yer fither," she said. "Was na he blest by the Holy Men? Tale me, Brammin Broun, whatfor then is he no longer o' life?" The two lovers sat in silence after that, neither daring to move toward the other. Each was afraid, but now it was the silence within the cave which scared them, and neither Bram nor Gwenna knew how to break it.

* * * * *

When the first gray light of dawn began to appear in the eastern sky, Gwenna found herself wracked with a sudden impulse to find her mother. Now that it was morning, the power of her vision from the night before had begun to fade. With each passing minute she became more and more convinced that her mother was not dead, only injured.

She got up and quietly made her way past the hunched, sleeping form of Bram. No doubt he was dreaming of the Holy Men, she decided, and she left the cave to search for her mother on her own.

The mare was grazing in the nearby meadow. It neighed to her as she approached, but by the time she had herself mounted upon its back she could hear Bram calling to her, asking that she wait for him.

She didn't, and so he ran to catch up.

"Gwenna," he called, "whatfor are ye leaving me?"

But her only response was to squeeze the belly of her horse with her heels so that it quickened its pace from that of a walk to that of a trot.

Bram tried to hasten his pace as well. Soon he was beside her, but it was all he could do to keep up. "Lass," he huffed, "ye canna do this by yersel. Ye need me to protect ye sae ye'll be safe."

She turned toward him and glared.

"Ah," he said, "I see yer still frettin' 'boot the Holy Men. I'se na force ye to gae to them if ye dinna wun to gae."

But still she refused to stop, and he began to lag behind. "Gwenna," he yelled, "forgie me. I ken our union be blest as it is. I shall na ask for anither blessin'."

The horse continued to move ahead of him and so he screamed with all his might. "Gwenna, stap! I need ye! For as long as I be o' life, I shall need ye! Na ither woman will do! I need ye, Gwenna! Cum back!"

And at the sound of those words she pulled upon the reins and turned her horse around. Bram whooped in celebration,

then took a running leap to land behind her on the back of the gray mare; and in that moment, tightly wrapped within his arms, the light of the morning sun upon her face, her fear was forgotten and she could not help but smile.

The Separation

“Yeah,” grumbled Jeremy, “but we all know what’s going to happen next; and, quite frankly, I don’t want to read about it before falling asleep.”

He turned off his light and proceeded to rearrange his pillows, one beneath his head, one beneath his knees, something which a chiropractor had once recommended when Jeremy had complained to him of knee pain. In Jeremy’s opinion, pain was always a symptom of mismanagement or misalignment. He refused to believe that any pain, whether it be within his knees, back or neck, could ever be due to middle age.

He sighed with contentment. His mattress, an extra firm with a wooden board beneath, felt, oh, so comfortable; the temperature of his room, with the aid of a whirring ceiling fan, was just right; and the night noises of the city were that perfect hum of background sounds, so conducive to his sleep each night.

Smacking his lips, he sighed once again. It was wonderful to be in bed with his soft pillows and his soothing sounds. He inhaled, then exhaled a long, slow breath, then another breath, and another.

After his mother had died, he'd taken a weekly relaxation class for a few months to help with his occasional bouts of insomnia. Thanks to the class, he now knew well the power of breath in relaxing his body. In he breathed again, counting slowly to four; out he breathed, this time counting to eight.

And now it was time to initiate the visualization part of the exercise he'd learned. He pictured it every night as he prepared for sleep, breathing in and out to his slow counts of four and eight: his very own "place of safety". Each night it was the same. He imagined himself in a hammock beneath an oak tree in the middle of a green meadow. Somehow, the hammock was always rocking gently side to side, and the color of the sky above the branches of his tree was always the same deep purple-blue of dusk, with a hint of pink and orange.

He'd known a tree like this once, at his Grandmother's, when he was a boy. Sometimes, when he was very near sleep, and at a point of deep relaxation, he imagined he could hear once more the sounds of crickets from his hammock beneath the tree, his "place of safety", this scene from a childhood memory.

Gently he rocked in the hammock of his imagination, all the while breathing slowly, filling his lungs as he counted to four, emptying them to a count of eight. He continued to breathe, and he continued to visualize; and then he opened his eyes.

He was wide awake.

With another sigh he reached for the book and turned on the switch of his bedside lamp.

Upon their return Gwenna jumped from the horse and raced to the front door. "Mither," she called, but there was no answer. The cottage was empty.

It was past the time of milking and she wondered why there was only silence from the barn. Perhaps her mother had already milked the cow. She started for the barn, but Bram was already there, in the doorway. He turned when he heard her, and she was frightened by the look upon his face.

“Dinna cum any closer,” he said.

“Is it my mither?”

“Nae . . . the milk cow. She’s been slaughtered.”

Gwenna gave a small cry and rushed to his side, but he caught her and pulled her away before she could catch any more than a glimpse of the cow’s brown back upon the floor. “Cum,” he said. “Ye dinna need to see this,” and he led her away from the barn.

“But my mither . . .,” she cried. “Whoe’er kilt the cow has kilt my mither.”

“Nae,” he said, “yer mither may still be o’ life. I shall fand her, but I wun ye to be safe. Can ye get back to yer hidin’ place wi’out being seen?”

“The cave?” she asked.

“Ay.”

“But I wun to gae wi’ ye.”

“Nae, Gwenna. If this be the work o’ raiders, they may still be aboot. I mun keep ye safe, lass. ‘Tis wha’ yer mither wud hae me do.”

“I dinna care ‘boot the danger! Yer all I hae left! I wun to gae wi’ ye.”

“Lass, I’se na hae ye galavantin’ about gettin’ yersel kilt. Yer a woman. Ye canna fight as a man. Ye mun hide and be safe.”

"If ye wun me to be safe, ye'll keep me by yer side. An'if we mun die, we shall die thegither." Her eyes were blazing just as they had the night before.

"Ah, lass," he said, "whatfor do ye hae to be sae pig-headed? Dinna ye see? 'Tis a man's place to kepp his woman safe. If ye cum wi' me I migh' na be able to protect ye."

Her eyes only continued to blaze and he could feel his will crumbling. Why could he not stand up to this girl? Where did she get such power over him? He sighed and looked to the ground. "If ye mun gae, I wun ye to fand yer mither's cuttin' knife. 'An mak haste! I'se see wha' I can fand in the barn."

Fifteen minutes later they were both mounted on the gray mare, Gwenna behind Bram, with her left arm round his waist. In her right hand she carried her mother's cutting knife. In Bram's right hand he carried a scythe, and in the other, a long three-pronged pitch fork.

The gray mare could feel the fear of her two young riders, and it became her fear as well. Bram had to kick her several times before she would walk the path they led her upon, and then the mare's fear only increased for she could smell that the path was the same one she had walked the day before. It led to a place of danger, the place that smelled of death.

* * * * *

The trip to Bram's family farm did not last as long as Gwenna had remembered it from the past. She peered at the quiet farm house from behind Bram's neck and shoulder.

She had kept her mother's knife pointed down and away from her body during the entire ride to the Broun's farmhouse, so afraid she had been of accidentally cutting Bram's leg with the knife, and now her right arm was stiff. It hurt at the elbow.

Her left arm tightened upon Bram when he slowed the horse to a stop. Her heart was thumping as if it might leap out of her chest. More than anything, she wanted him to turn the horse around and leave.

He shifted on the back of the horse and turned so he could face her directly. "O, my luv," he said, and his eyes were full of emotion. "How I wish ye hae'd na cum." And it was then, while Bram was turned to her, that the front door of the farm house slowly began to open. She gasped and Bram spun around.

In the door of the cottage stood an evil apparition, his face all dark and swollen, his hair a ragged mass, and his eyes a gleaming, blood-shot red that sent a shiver up Gwenna's spine.

"Thomas?" Bram called, but his brother only grinned as he stroked the metal blade of a hatchet in his hand.

Quickly Bram jumped from the horse. Keeping his scythe in his right hand, he laid the pitch fork on the ground and in a calm voice said, "Tak the horse an' head for the wude." His back was to her, for he dared not turn away from this vision of a demon which was his brother.

"Nae," she whispered. "I'll na be leavin' ye."

"I SAID AFF WI' YE!"

He slapped the side of the gray mare, and off it raced down

a path to a nearby wood. Gwenna, who had barely managed to keep from falling off, dropped her knife as she instinctively clutched for the hair of the horse's mane.

On and on through the woods the gray mare flew, Gwenna leaning close to its neck to avoid low hanging branches. It seemed an eternity before she was able to reach the reins and pull; but even after the horse was stopped, it refused to go back to the farmhouse, though Gwenna kicked it repeatedly and screamed with all her might.

Why had Bram forced her away? Didn't he see that they needed to be together? She slid off the horse and began to run. If he was going to die today, then she would die as well.

Back through the woods towards the farmhouse she ran. She ran until her lungs felt ready to explode. She ran until her legs felt made of lead. She ran until her body could no longer be forced to run; but even then she would not rest. She forced herself to walk; and as she walked, an image began to form in her mind, an image of Bram and Thomas.

And though she continued upon the path in the woods, it was only as a sleep walker that she moved. She was aware of nothing now but this new vision within her mind. It was as if some part of her had flown ahead of her body. She could clearly see the two brothers as they faced each other, crouched and tense, before the door of the farmhouse.

Thomas looked more animal than man. His teeth were bared like a rabid dog's, white spittle flew from his mouth as he screamed, and his tongue lolled from the side of his mouth each time he lunged forward with his hatchet.

And on Bram's face was a mixture of fear and pain. Oh,

why hadn't he allowed her to stay at his side? Together they might have been more of a match for the wild, murderous devil Thomas had become.

She watched as Bram swung his scythe towards his brother; and then, to her horror, the hatchet was launched. In the air it whirled and spun before it landed in the neck of her beloved. She screamed for Bram had fallen to his knees, one hand before him, shielding him from his brother, the other upon the handle of the hatchet. His mouth was open and his eyes were bulging. The shoulder beneath his wound was red with blood. He pulled upon the hatchet but it would not budge.

And then, once more, Thomas' hands were upon the handle of the hatchet. Gwenna watched in her mind as it was lifted high in the air; and at that moment she stumbled and fell, her mind aware of nothing now but blackness.

* * * * *

Again, soft murmurings and whispers: the same two voices she had heard before, only now they gave her hope. Their presence meant she was not alone in this darkness where she floated, as if on air, no feeling to her body. Closely she listened, and when she forced her mind to concentrate, she was able at last to understand their words. The voices, it seemed, were speaking directly to her.

“... blessing, Child. You must remember to bless him.”

And then came the other voice, lower than the first, and more quiet, though a bit older:

“Yes, Young One. All will be well. You need only remember the power of the blessing.”

“Wha’ blessin’?” Gwenna thought to herself. Had she ever been taught such a blessing? She tried to remember some of the songs she had learned from her mother, but none of the songs were any sort of blessing that she knew of.

“I dinna ken o’ wha’ blessin’ ye spake,” Gwenna attempted to call out, and though she had not spoken aloud, the voices seemed to be aware of her question.

“That which you bless cannot harm you. Bless this creature who calls himself a man and he will not be able to harm you.”

“But how am I to bless a man tha’ be na longer a man, but an animal?” she asked. “I shall only be kilt an’if I try such a thang.”

“Child, this is exactly what the New One wants you to think, but it is not true.”

“No, Young One, it is not. Bless this man, and remember who you are. All will be well.”

The memory of Thomas began to fill her mind, and with it came the image of the hatchet in Bram’s neck. Her mind began to scream, a soundless scream that filled every inch of her being; and slowly, the scream began to bring her back, back into her body, back into her body’s feelings of numbness and pain. Her body was hurt. She had bruised her knee when she’d tripped walking blindly, as a sleepwalker, through the woods.

When at last she opened her eyes, the forest around her was dark and her body was already beginning to convulse with the spasms of her sobs.

Bram, the last of all her loved ones, was dead.

* * * * *

The Intruder

“Good Lord! All she does is cry over yet another character who’s been nixed.” Jeremy yawned. “Enough of this. Time for some sleep.”

He had just lifted his hand to turn off the light at his bedside, when a knock came at his front door. He looked at his clock—two a.m.! Surely it was too late for another prank. Had a neighbor locked himself out of his apartment? Or was it just a drunk boyfriend, too confused in his alcoholic stupor to find the door to his girlfriend’s apartment?

Well, whoever it was could go trouble someone else. He switched his light off and turned on his side, positioning a pillow between his knees for support. The lovely wash of tiredness was seeping into his mind, when once again there came another loud rap upon his door.

Jeremy tried not to allow himself to get agitated. “They’ll go away,” he sighed to himself, in the same manner he would have soothed a young child. But the offending knocker did not go away. The knocking continued and continued, getting louder with each passing minute, until, finally, Jeremy couldn’t stand

it anymore. “All right!” he yelled, as he kicked his bedclothes away, “I’m coming! For God’s sake, I’m coming!”

The knocking continued even as he stomped his way to the door, but when he looked through his door’s peephole there was no one there. “Not again,” he groaned, and he opened his door expecting to find another pink note in the hallway.

Instead, what he found was the crumpled form of a girl. It was the new girl, the one who had recently moved in with her mother. She was leaning upon the door frame in a nightgown, and her eyes were closed. Had she been injured? Or was she simply asleep? He leaned over for a better look, and then he realized he’d forgotten her name.

“Uh, hey there,” he said, not knowing how to address her. “Is there something wrong?”

The girl mumbled something unintelligible. Perhaps this was simply a case of sleepwalking. And then he realized he’d forgotten the mother’s name too, which meant he wouldn’t be able to call and ask that she retrieve her kid. He’d have to take her back. He couldn’t just leave her on the floor, especially if she was going to be knocking on his door all night.

“Uh, Sarah?” he tried. “Elizabeth?”

No response.

If only he could remember her name. It would certainly make his job easier. He bent over and placed his hand on her left shoulder. “Um, well, whatever your name is, we need to get you back to your apartment, okay?”

There followed more unintelligible muttering.

“Listen to me. I think you’re still asleep. You’re not making any sense.” He began to shake her shoulder gently. “You need to wake up now, okay?”

More muttering, though this time it was louder.

“Hey, you!” This time Jeremy squatted down low so that his face was closer to the girl’s. Her eyes were now open, but they looked strange, like the eyes of the mentally deranged. He tried snapping his fingers in front of her eyes. “Time to wake up,” he said, but she didn’t even blink.

“Don’t you hear me in there?” He knocked gently on her forehead with his knuckles, and when that didn’t work he tapped her cheeks gently and asked in a pleading tone, “Come on, kid, can’t you wake up?”

But the girl only began to moan.

“Wake up!” he hissed, and he began to shake her shoulders again. “You’ve got to stop making all this noise and wake up!”

To his surprise the girl suddenly spoke, and though her eyes had a glazed faraway look to them, her words were clear. “Give it back,” she said.

“What? What are you talking about?” Then an idea occurred to him. Maybe he had somehow become incorporated into her dream. “Hey, tell you what. Whatever it is you want from me, I’ll give it back to you if you return to bed, okay?”

It worked.

The girl stood up and, like a zombie, turned toward the stairs and walked away. He wanted to make sure she got back to her apartment, and so he followed her down the stairs. Down she walked, one step at a time, like a small child who must have both feet upon a stair before the next stair is mastered. Jeremy was thankful for the lateness of the hour and the silence of the building for he was still only clad in boxers and a t-shirt.

He followed the girl to the door at the base of the stairs on the second floor; and, as he had suspected, it was still ajar. She

entered and disappeared into a dark hallway which was identical to his own. He waited a moment, just to make sure she wasn't coming back out again, and then he closed the door and climbed the two flights of stairs to his own apartment.

That was when he saw it. Just inside his door on the floor of his hallway was another pink slip of paper with a handwritten note upon it. Well, at least one mystery had been solved. It was the girl who had left the first note.

She must have slipped the second note under his door while she was sitting outside his apartment. The reason he hadn't noticed it before was that he hadn't bothered to turn his hallway light on. The message upon the second note read:

SHE NEEDS THE BOOK. FINISH IT NOW.

"Good God!" he gasped. What was going on? How did she know about the book? And then he remembered her words from the hallway. "Give it back," she had said. But how could she know about a book he had found only the day before yesterday? Was she a friend of the fat man? Were they playing some sort of joke on him?

"That must be it," he said.

But how did the fat man know who Jeremy was or even where he lived? He hadn't given the clerk a credit card or a check. He had paid for the book with a five-dollar bill. And was it pure coincidence that the girl also happened to live in his apartment building?

He rubbed his forehead with his fingers. What he needed now was sleep. He'd ask the girl and her mother about the book in the morning.

“If only I could remember their names,” he mumbled as he crawled into bed. And for once, he was too tired to bother with any pillow at his knees.

Rude Awakening

Jeremy need not have worried over the names of his new neighbors for they were promptly supplied to him at eight-fifteen that morning when Mrs. Potts called. He'd been fast asleep when the phone rang, and now he could hardly understand what was she was babbling on about. Something about a call she'd made to Social Services. Why should he care?

He yawned and rubbed his eyes. His brain was rebelling against the early morning phone call, trying its best to fall back asleep.

"Did you hear me, Mr. Thompson?" Her voice reminded him of a coffee-bean grinder.

"What was that, Mrs. Potts?" He yawned again.

"I said, this is what comes of a man who stays up all night doing who-knows-what with little girls!"

"Mrs. Potts, I'm sorry, but I don't know what you're talking about." Jeremy rubbed his eyes again and looked at the clock. Why in the hell was she calling at such an ungodly hour?

"Don't know what I'm talking about?" And now it sounded as if she were attempting to blow in his ear through the phone,

so loud was her sudden out-take of breath on the other end of the line. "I saw you with my own eyes, you and that young girl Rebecca Adcock."

"So that's her name!" he exclaimed.

"Oh," she gasped, "you admit it without a trace of guilt."

"No, that's not what I meant. I . . ."

"All I can say is, it's a good thing I woke up last night and was unable to get back to sleep. I was in my kitchen, warming a cup of milk, when I heard voices from the hallway. I couldn't believe anyone in his right mind would be up and about at that time."

"For God's sake . . ."

"Don't you dare take the Lord's name in vain! You know, I almost called the police last night. At first I thought it was burglars. But then I decided to have a look through my peephole, and—Great Father in Heaven!—that's when I discovered you parading about half-naked with that poor young girl who was only half-dressed herself. I've been in a state of shock ever since. Couldn't even think straight, which is why I didn't call Social Services until about half-an-hour ago."

"But, we were only . . ."

"I don't want to hear it. It makes me sick to imagine what you were up to last night. To think that girl's mother, Dana Adcock, would even allow such a thing!

"Mrs. Potts," he said after pausing to mentally repeat Dana's name five times in order to remember it, "I can assure you nothing improper occurred last night. It was just a simple case of sleepwalking. I was in bed and she knocked on my door. I can't help that."

"Then explain to me why she was knocking on your door,

Mr. Thompson. Of all the doors in this apartment building, why yours?"

He took a breath to speak, but before he could do so Mrs. Potts caught her second wind. "Young man, there's a law against this kind of thing, and I plan to see justice done. That poor little Rebecca may be taken from her mother by the time all this has been straightened out, and you, Mr. Thompson, will be behind bars!"

He was now holding the phone a good one to two inches away from his head. "Mrs. Potts . . .," he tried to interject, but her grating voice continued to pummel his ear.

"I always knew you were shiftless," she continued, "the only man in the building without a job. It's like I always say, 'Idle hands lead to the Devil's way.'"

"If you would just stop for a minute and listen . . ."

"As if your excuses will do you any good. Now, if you had settled down as you should have done long ago, and if you'd gotten a proper job as any wife would have demanded, none of this would have happened. I can only hope that when you're behind bars you'll get the help you need!" And on that stirring note the phone was slammed into its cradle, causing a very loud click which was followed by the drone of a dial tone.

Jeremy groaned, wondering what day of the week it was. "It's either Friday the 13th or the Killer Monday of all Mondays," he said to himself—his voice was now muffled by a pillow he'd placed over his head—but before he could give any serious thought to what day of the week or month it was, the phone rang again.

"Please," he mumbled into his pillow, "let it be the police calling to inform me Mrs. Potts has been carted off to an insane asylum."

But it was not the police.

“Jeremy?”

“Yes?”

“It’s Dana, Dana Adcock. Remember, you helped us move our trunk in yesterday?”

“Yes. I was just thinking of you. Anything wrong?”

“Well, actually there is. The woman across the hall from us . . . uh, Mrs. Potts . . . you know, the one who doesn’t seem to like you?”

“Yes? What about her?”

“She called just a moment ago, and . . .,” there followed an awkward pause, “I know this is going to sound strange, but, well, she said she reported me to Social Services because I allowed my daughter to have an inappropriate relationship with you.”

Jeremy groaned into his pillow.

“I don’t even know what she’s talking about, and I’ve asked Rebecca about it but she says she hasn’t seen you since you helped us move the trunk in. I was just wondering, could you have maybe been with someone else last night? Someone who kind of looked like Rebecca?”

“Omigod,” he muttered and then he removed his pillow. “You know,” he said, “I’ve been trying to figure out if it’s Friday the 13th or some kind of Killer Monday. But another possibility just occurred to me. Perhaps I’m still asleep, and this is just a dream about this Bitch From Hell who calls me up and . . .” That was when Jeremy heard his second loud on-the-other-end-of-the-line click of the morning, followed by the now very familiar drone of the dial tone.

“I didn’t mean you,” he whined.

He sat up in his crumpled bed and stared at his feet. They

were exposed now that the bottom of his bed sheet was no longer tucked in. “It’s not even nine o’clock,” he said. “Could my day possibly get any worse?”

Assuming that it might, Jeremy decided he better get out of bed for a quick shower and a shave.

Making Amends

By the time Jeremy was out of the shower he felt he'd begun to think straight again. First, he needed to apologize to Dana, then he needed to explain to her that Rebecca had been sleepwalking the night before. He wasn't going to bother with any further explanations to Mrs. Potts. Let her think him a reprobate, he decided. Maybe she would finally leave him alone.

After a quick breakfast he descended the stairs to the second floor and knocked on the door he'd seen Rebecca enter less than twelve hours before. He could hear some scuffling on the other side of the door and the low murmur of voices. "Uh, hello," he yelled. "It's Jeremy from upstairs."

Total silence.

Mrs. Potts' door was directly behind him. He almost turned to make a face at her peep-hole in case she was looking out through it again, but he refrained at the last minute. Best not to let her know she had gotten to him.

He knocked again.

"Dana," he called through the door, "when I said I had received a phone call this morning from the Bitch From Hell, I

wasn't talking about you. I was referring to a neighbor of ours—from this very floor, as a matter of fact—who doesn't know how to mind her own business. Not that I'm mentioning any names." He turned back for a quick glance to Mrs. Potts' door, then he knocked again.

"Dana, can you hear me in there? I think Rebecca must have been sleepwalking. It was pretty late last night when I heard her knock, but when I opened my door and tried to talk to her, nothing she said made any sense." He waited and listened for a moment to the low murmur of voices coming from the other side of the door. In his frustration of making amends he didn't even realize that the little pink notes from the night before had completely slipped his mind.

"Listen," he said. "I thought I was doing the right thing, escorting her back to your apartment. I guess I could have knocked on your door to wake you up, but it was in the middle of the night and I didn't want to disturb you. I thought it might scare you to be awakened so late at night."

Still no response.

"Well, I can't think of anything else to say so I guess I'll be leaving. Sorry I made you angry. So long." He turned to leave.

"Wait a minute," came a voice from the other side of the door.

He turned around and waited. Had he heard wrong? He knocked again. "Was it just my imagination, or did someone in there tell me to wait a minute?"

Placing his ear against the door, he listened. He could hear the scuffle of feet running back and forth in a room near the door. He could also hear what sounded like dishes being stacked, or rather, thrown, into a sink. There was a lot of "Sh-sh-sh-ing"

as well.

And then a door opened, but it was not the door Jeremy was standing in front of. It was Mrs. Potts' door, and if looks could kill, her expression certainly would have put a death-grip on him.

"Ah, Mrs. Potts, what a complete surprise!" And suddenly he was possessed with a new boldness toward her. "I see your interest in your neighbors is as strong as ever. I must commend you. You're a regular one-woman, community-watch service."

He watched with pleasure as her face turned red and her eyes widened to at least twice their normal size, then he held up a hand. "I understand your speechlessness. Believe me, I do; but, please, let's not be too modest. I've never known a woman with your talents for gathering data about her neighbors. And you know what?" He paused to scratch his chin. "I think I've probably received more of that special attention of yours than anyone else in the building. I can only say thank you, Mrs. Potts. Thank you for such undivided devotion to my person and to my personal life." He gave her a low bow to which she promptly slammed her door.

He was just straightening up when he heard laughter from behind. He turned. It was Rebecca, still giggling. "I opened the door, but you were talking to Mrs. Potts," she said. "I decided not to interrupt."

Dana peeped her head and shoulders round the door. "We weren't expecting company, and I hope you don't mind the state of our apartment, or the fact that I'm still in my robe, but you're welcome to come in, if you like."

"Thank you," said Jeremy, and then he turned back one last time and shouted, "Are you getting this, Mrs. Potts? It's 10:42. I'm about to enter the apartment of Dana and Rebecca Adcock."

Rebecca giggled again as her mother led them into their living room. There was barely enough room for them to squeeze through the moving boxes, but after shifting a few of them, they were able to find three places to sit.

“Now,” said Dana, “tell me again what happened last night. It sounded like you said Rebecca was sleepwalking?”

“Yes. That’s the best I could figure. She was mumbling incoherently and she had this kind of dazed look to her eyes. It didn’t even look as if she recognized me.”

“Rebecca, honey, you don’t remember this?”

“No. I don’t even remember if I had any dreams last night.”

Dana’s eyebrows drew together as she sat and nibbled on her lower lip. She was sandwiched between a number of small boxes on a brown suede sofa, one leg tucked beneath her, the other leg dangling free beneath the hitched-up hem of her bathrobe. It was nice that her bathrobe was short enough to show off her pretty legs, but Jeremy had never seen such an ugly bathrobe before.

It was the color of pea soup, with large, brown splotches in several places that could have been coffee stains. And there were threads standing on end along the sleeves and collar; and at the collar’s edge were brightly-colored, embroidered purple flowers. These same purple flowers graced the one pocket in the front, which was partially ripped, and also the cuffs at the sleeves, which were now pushed up above Dana’s elbows. All and all, it looked like something a bag lady would wear, a very old bag lady.

“You know,” said Dana, releasing her lower lip, “it’s not the first time this has happened,” and she made a quick glance toward Rebecca. “Two years ago we were living in Illinois, in a suburb of Chicago, and one of our neighbors happened to see her

wondering outside on the sidewalk. It was very cold that night, and she was dressed only in a nightgown.”

She looked down toward her hands, clasped now in her lap. “I thought it was because her dad and I had just separated. Anyway, I installed some bolt locks up high, near the top of every door, and it never happened again.”

While she was talking, Jeremy had been tempted to stare at her legs in order not to stare too much at the bathrobe; but he knew this was not the kind of attention “modern women” enjoyed so he had tried his best to direct his attention to her face—her mouth, her hair, and in one brief instant, even her eyes. But the problem was those little purple flowers along the bathrobe’s collar. Every time he had attempted to focus upon her face he had found himself staring, instead, at the ugly purple flowers along the robe’s collar. And then he had found himself wondering all over again why an attractive woman would be wearing such an ugly bathrobe.

In order to avoid staring at the robe, he glanced toward Rebecca and saw that she, like her mother, had a habit of biting her lips. But, unlike her mother, she was draped across the entire width of a matching brown suede armchair, her head and neck upon one padded arm, both legs upon the other.

Jeremy’s chair, a black wooden rocker, was too small for such a position, and every time he rocked he scraped the sides of nearby boxes. He tried to sit still, poised at the edge of the rocker’s seat, elbows on his knees, hands clasped between his legs which were spread in what he hoped was a manly pose.

Not that Dana was paying him any attention. She was watching her daughter with that why-am-I-such-a-bad-mother look on her face. “Rebecca, honey, I’m sure it’s the move. That’s why

you're sleepwalking again—you're not yet used to this place. I don't know why it didn't occur to me to put extra bolt locks on the door. My God, what would have happened if you'd left the building last night?"

She turned to Jeremy, and suddenly there were tears in her eyes. "Thank goodness she chose to go to your apartment instead. From the bottom of my heart, Jeremy, thank you."

And suddenly he felt awkward. The adrenaline rush he'd been on since his encounter with Mrs. Potts had begun to fade and he was finding it difficult to respond. Finally, giving a shrug to his shoulders, he managed a very simple, "No problem."

Both Dana and Rebecca smiled, and he realized in that moment that, ugly bathrobe or not, he would always do whatever these two beautiful women asked of him.

The Joy of Children

(Among Other Things)

It had been Dana's suggestion that the three of them go together to look for new bolt locks, and it had been Jeremy's suggestion that they all go out for lunch afterwards at his favorite deli, just around the corner from their apartment building.

Over thick and very messy corn beef and pastrami sandwiches (which were probably better, he suspected, when eaten alone) they discussed, among other pleasantries, the new paralegal job Dana had recently landed and the new school Rebecca would be attending, beginning on Monday.

"It's not fair," she said. "I have to do these stupid placement tests tomorrow, and then after that they're gonna make me go to an afternoon orientation. I don't wanna go. I think it's dumb making me go to school before the rest of school has even started. I wish I could be homeschooled."

Jeremy dabbed his mouth with a napkin. "But if you were stuck at home, you wouldn't get to make any new friends."

"So? I'm not gonna make any new friends anyway. Kids in

junior high are always jerks to the new kids. I might as well be homeschooled, then I could go to the library every day. Did you know the New York Public Library has over 14 million books?"

"You mean the Social and Humanities Library?"

"Yeah, I guess. I'm talking about the big one, the one with the lions out front."

"Uh-huh. And if you were homeschooled, you'd be at the library every day reading all those books?"

"Yep, and I'd learn a lot more than I do in school."

He smiled and glanced at Dana but she only rolled her eyes. Most of the conversation that morning, though a bit one-sided, had been between Rebecca and Jeremy. Rebecca had talked—of boys, clothes, music groups, and her hatred for school—and Jeremy had listened, occasionally answering a question or two. It was probably the only real conversation he'd ever had with a child. And he was thrilled that she had found him to be such a source of amusement. She was laughing at him now, at a spot of mustard on his chin.

"Rebecca, don't be rude," said Dana, but he noticed she was trying to suppress her own laughter as he reached across the table for an extra napkin. "Sorry," she said, but after a moment or two her face grew serious. "Jeremy, should I be concerned about that phone call Mrs. Potts made?"

"Well . . .," and he paused to clear his throat and to slowly and methodically wipe the corners of his mouth, "to be honest . . .," and he paused again to cough into his hand, watching with amusement as Dana's eyebrows drew together, "they probably, on average, receive a phone call from Mrs. Potts three to four times a month. I'd imagine that, by now, every enforcement agency in the city has a little warning sign by the phone with her

name on it.”

He smiled as Rebecca erupted in giggles again. During their trip to the hardware store, she had even laughed at a feeble joke he'd made. He had never known children could be such a wonderfully supportive audience or that the presence of a child could make his interaction with a beautiful woman so easy. Had he known this long ago, he might have had more courage to pursue some of the city's many single women with children.

“Seriously, though, I wouldn't worry if I were you.” The words rolled effortlessly from his mouth. Never had he felt so free. Who would have guessed, watching him now in the deli, that for the past fifteen years he'd been too shy and afraid to do no more than dream of such an encounter with a woman?

“Are you sure?” she asked. “Or are you just trying to make me feel better?”

“Tell you what,” he said, “if you get a call from Social Services, I'll introduce you to one of the city's best-kept secrets . . . a little restaurant on the other side of town, the absolute best if you like Italian. What do you say?”

“Okay.” She smiled, and he was pleased to see her blush. “And if they don't call?” she added playfully.

“Well, then, I'll take you both out to Medieval Times.”

“Cool!” said Rebecca. “I know someone who's been there. Can we go, Mom?”

“I don't know, honey. What is it?”

“It's a kind of dinner theater.”

“One that guarantees the tackiest eating experience of a lifetime,” Jeremy smirked, but Rebecca only scowled at him.

“That's not true,” she said. “It's supposed to be really cool. There're these guys dressed up as knights, and they have jousting

contests right in front of you while you eat.”

“Hm. Sounds like it could be fun.”

“That’s what they all say,” said Jeremy, “until they get inside and realize they have to eat in the dark with the smell of horses and dust in the air. It’s like trying to eat a full-course meal inside a circus tent. And the knights she mentioned are nothing more than clowns in knight costumes.” He laughed when he felt a light kick against his leg, but Rebecca was not amused.

“Does that mean you’re not going to take us, even if the Secret Service, I mean, that Social Services place, doesn’t call?”

Jeremy had never really paid much attention to children before now. Staring at Rebecca’s eager face, he found himself wanting to please her, which is why he had mentioned Medieval Times in the first place. He leaned across the table toward her. “Of course, I’ll take you. But we have to wait at least a week to see if your mother gets that phone call, okay?”

“Okay.” Her face was beaming.

“And, we need to make sure that your mother really wants to go.”

“Do you, Mom?”

“Yes,” said Dana, “I do,” and she smiled at Jeremy. “I think I’d actually enjoy it.”

After lunch, Jeremy had assisted Dana in installing two new bolt locks near the top of their door. If Rebecca decided to sleepwalk again, her way would be barred not only by the original bolt lock and chain, but also by the two new bolt locks which were so high she wouldn’t be able to reach them unless she stood on a chair or step stool, and neither Dana nor Jeremy thought her capable of such a feat while asleep.

Much to his surprise and delight, on his way out the door

Dana had insisted that he stay for dinner; and the meal, though vegetarian, had been superb.

Later that evening, while climbing the stairs to his apartment, dwelling upon the culinary talents and beauty of Dana, he realized he had never before felt so satisfied, so happy, so thankful, so . . . “My God,” he wondered aloud, “am I in love?” And his face lit with a grin as he entered his apartment.

It wasn't until Jeremy was standing in front of his bathroom mirror brushing his teeth before bed that he remembered he had forgotten to ask Rebecca about the pink slips. Oh well, he decided, maybe she had written them in her sleep. A friend had once told him that everyone was psychic while they were sleeping, but that once they were awake they usually forgot everything. Maybe that's what had happened with Rebecca. Maybe she had only known about the book when she was sleeping. Maybe. But even that possibility was too much for him to consider.

“Just a freaky coincidence,” he muttered. He was feeling too happy to be bothered anymore by two little pink slips of paper. In fact, when he thought about it, not even that ridiculous book *Read Me Now* had any more effect upon him. He would simply throw it away. He had better things to focus on now.

Smiling at his reflection, he said to himself, “I'm not such a bad-looking fellow after all.” And half-an-hour later, when he was in bed in his darkened bedroom, the usual noises of the city lulling him to sleep, Dana's beautiful legs were all that filled his mind, even after his body had begun its gentle snoring.

Setting Boundaries

Jeremy woke with a start at precisely 2:32 a.m. He listened for a long time, wondering if it had been a noise of some kind that had awakened him; but he heard nothing out of the ordinary—no knock upon the door, no nearby sirens, no loud arguments or screams upon the street outside.

He tried without success to get back to sleep, tossing and turning all the while, but the more he tried to relax, the more wide awake he became. By the time he looked at his clock again, it was 3:56. “Well,” he sighed. “No use wasting anymore time trying to get back to sleep,” and he reached to turn on his bedside lamp.

That was when his eyes fell upon the book, *the* book, the one he had decided not to finish. It was on the floor beside his bed. Ah ha, he thought. That was what woke me. I must have accidentally knocked it off the table in my sleep.

He lay on his side for a moment, at the edge of his mattress, staring at the green book which was face down upon the floor. He wondered how many copies of the book existed, and then he found himself wondering once again if Rebecca might not be

connected to the book, after all. No, he quickly decided. “Those little notes on the floor were nothing more than coincidence.”

And then the happily remembered effects of his day with Dana and Rebecca began to play upon him. He sighed and smiled. No, there was no way Rebecca could have any possible connection to the book. And maybe, well, maybe he had even overreacted to the fat man’s behavior in the bookstore. It wasn’t his fault Jeremy had passed out upon his floor. And it wasn’t as if the fat man had been rude to him. Not really. No, if anything, it was Jeremy who had been rude. He shouldn’t have taken the book in the first place. He would return the book, right after breakfast; and when he did, he’d be sure to apologize to the fat man.

Jeremy felt like a new man now thanks to Dana and Rebecca—not a man to hold a grudge or to keep something that didn’t belong to him. He was, he imagined, just the kind of man Dana and Rebecca could be proud of. He smiled at the thought, feeling pleased with his new self-image; but then his eyes happened to fall to the floor, and suddenly he was bolted into an upright position in bed, for the green cover of the book appeared to be rippling, like water in a miniature pool.

“This can’t be happening,” he told himself, but when the book continued to ripple he exclaimed, “This isn’t real. Stop!” And instantly the cover of the book was stilled. He watched and he waited, but the book continued to behave itself, its cover nothing more than an ordinary faded, green leather.

“Holy shit,” he whispered and then he swallowed hard. It wasn’t the book. It must be him! He was going off the edge. And of all times to be having a mental breakdown. “I finally meet a woman I can have a relationship with, and what happens? I go

crazy.”

He fell back to his bed and stared at the ceiling. Dana wouldn't want to have anything to do with him now. He was doomed to a life within insane asylums: the unseeing eyes of a zombie doped on drugs; the standard attire of pajamas and bathrobe as he shuffled up and down the same dark hallway every day; and the long wait in lines every morning and every night while the crazies were given their pills in tiny paper cups.

Pills . . . drugs . . . And then he remembered he had a doctor's appointment in less than twelve hours. His doctor would know what to do! It might be, all he needed was a tranquilizer. And even if it was a case of full-blown psychosis, didn't they have new drugs for that sort of thing? Why, just the other day, he reminded himself, he'd been reading about that man with schizophrenia. After thirty years of hearing voices in his head, he'd been cured by some new wonder drug. And if they could cure that sort of thing, then he was sure there was a cure for his problem.

But what was his problem? And why were his recent hallucinations tied to this small, green book? Somehow, all his difficulties had begun in that bookstore. And now the book itself seemed to be driving him to madness. But could it somehow hold the key to whatever mystery was before him? Could the mystery to his madness be solved by finishing the book?

“No way,” he said aloud. It wasn't worth the risk. If he finished the book it might drive him into a state of permanent psychosis. And besides, he reminded himself, the story itself wasn't worth it. It was nothing more than a Gothic romance, self-published by some unknown author—some crazy, lunatic friend of the fat man. (Why else would the book have his picture in it?) No, he shook his head, it wasn't worth it.

He reached to turn off his bedside lamp; but no sooner was it off, he turned it on again. Then he sat and he glared at this new adversary of his: the small, green book upon his floor. Was he a man or wasn't he? Was he truly the all-out loser that Mrs. Potts thought he was? No. For Dana's and Rebecca's sake he couldn't be. Not anymore. Somehow, he felt a literary gauntlet had been thrown by the book, and—by golly—he was going to take it up. No book, no matter how cursed or crazy it might be, would ever get the best of him. Insanity be damned! He was going to return to his reading.

All through the night in the cold, dark wood Gwenna's body remained in a tight ball upon the dirt path. At times her sobs were suffocating and she felt she would never breathe again. She hoped desperately to die; but she did not die, and by the time the first bit of gray began to appear in the sky, the hot, searing waves of grief which had wracked her body all night long began to ebb.

She rolled over on her back and in stillness watched as the gray sky turned to a pale white-blue. Had a passerby been on the path that day Gwenna would surely have been mistaken for dead. On and on she quietly watched, waiting for the sun to make its appearance; and then, creeping unsuspectedly into her stomach like a thick, wet fog, came the cold, prickling sensation of fear. And when the fear had completely filled her stomach, it moved with lightning speed to every muscle in her body.

Instinctively, she scurried off the path into the shelter of the nearby brush. How weak she was. How thirsty. She willed her body to release her spirit that she might join her

mother and father, Bram, and all her brothers and sisters, wherever they might be; and then she waited.

Leaning against the bark of a pine tree, she waited for what seemed an eternity; but her body did not release her spirit and it did not release its thirst. If anything, her desire for water only increased. It was the cold, sweet water of her family's well that she felt ravenously hungry for, and as her thirst for water grew, the sensation of fear within her stomach and her muscles began to recede.

She found that she had the strength now to return to the dirt path of the wood. It would probably take her all day, but she would attempt the journey home, to her family's well. She would stay well hidden as she passed the area of Thomas' house for she did not want to face him, and she did not want to see the remains of her beloved Bram. She knew he was dead, just as she had known, deep down inside, about her mother.

Oh, how she missed her gray mare, the only bit of family she had remaining. Why was everyone she had loved gone? Was she being punished by the god of the dark-robed Holy Men because she had never been blessed by them? Was their god angry with her?

Her thought of the Holy Men stirred a memory within her, but she could not grasp it. There was something she felt she needed to remember. Was it something her mother had taught her? An old story, or an old song?

Her mind raced and raced, but it could not catch what was calling to her from somewhere deep inside, and so she began to concentrate instead on her journey. Her legs felt heavy,

and her knee was still sore from her fall, but, thankfully, she was beyond the point of feeling hunger.

Though she knew her body must be in need of food, it was only its thirst that she was aware of. She felt crazed by her thirst. Over and over again, she imagined herself to be touching the cool, damp stones of her family's well; drawing up its dark, wet water bucket; and drinking from her family's wooden water cup. Sometimes this image felt so real to Gwenna that she would stop her walking, only to find that she was still upon the path in the wood.

On and on she walked, and the wood never seemed to change. There were no familiar trees, no landmarks to help her gauge how far she had walked and how much farther she must go. Only the sky changed. She could tell from its light that it was almost midday.

She kept looking for any sign of a clearing in the woods, for that would be her indication that she was close to Thomas' farmhouse. It was her plan to stick to the woods that surrounded his farm. Though it would add to her journey, it would be worth the extra time if it kept her safe from the evilness of Bram's murderer.

With all her heart Gwenna wished for death, but she did not want to die at the hands of such a monster. She was afraid of what he might do to her. She was even afraid of his face, a face more animal now than human. And how was she to fight against such a man when not even Bram had been able to fight against him?

Suddenly there was a sound and Gwenna stopped, every hair on her body alert, feeling, and sensing for danger.

Faintly, she heard the sound again.

And then her heart surged. It was the whinny of a horse. Her horse!

She wanted to run, but she wasn't sure from which direction the sound had come. She strained to listen, not daring to move, and she heard the horse again. It was somewhere ahead of her, and she began to run, half limping, along the path.

How she wanted to call out for the horse; but she was afraid Thomas might hear, and so she made her way as silently, but as quickly, as she could, her heart pounding, her lungs gasping for air.

When she reached the top of a small hill in the wood she found the gray mare. Its bridle appeared to be tangled in the branch of a nearby tree. Or was it tied? From where she was standing it was hard to tell.

When it raised its head and neighed to her in recognition, she wanted to run to the horse—it was the one last symbol of her home and family. But some part of her sensed danger, and so she dared not move. It was as if an invisible wall stood before her and the gray mare. She ached for its warmth and smell, but her body did not seem to be able to cross the invisible wall that lay across her path.

Frantically, Gwenna searched every tree in the wood with her eyes. As far as she could tell, there was no one in the wood but the horse and herself. Still her body refused to move forward.

Her ears strained; all she could hear were the snorts and whinnies of the gray mare who had begun to toss its head as

if trying to disengage itself from the tree branch where the rope was attached. Gwenna was almost certain now that it was tied, rather than tangled, to the branch. Had Thomas tied her horse here in order to search for her more quietly on foot? If so, where was he now?

She continued to search every tree with her eyes, but she could see no one. And so she forced her body to take one small step forward, then another, and another—her body silently screaming a warning of danger with each step. Slowly, as if in a dream, she approached the gray mare whose ears twitched in eagerness as it blew out its snorts of greeting.

With her heart pounding as if it wished to leap from her body, she stretched out a hand to touch the tip of the gray mare's nose, and that was when she heard it: one small snap of a branch.

She froze, her hand in the air.

And suddenly there was Thomas flying at her like a demon from a pile of brush and leaves that had been his hiding place upon the ground. Gwenna tried to scream, but her body was too stiff with fear. She could only watch as the monster leered at her, his white, sickly tongue licking dark swollen lips, eyes the color of blood, as his hands lunged toward her neck.

She could smell his sickness and she tried to turn away, but the grip of his hands around her neck was too strong. Beating against his chest, she clawed his skin and began to kick; but he only squeezed harder, laughing in a way which reminded her of the grunts and squeals of a pig.

Her flailing arms grew weaker and weaker. The ringing

inside her head was now a roar. Not even the face of Thomas was clear anymore, covered as it was with black splotches before her eyes.

And so she quit her struggles and awaited death; but now there was a voice calling to her from far away, reminding her of something she had forgotten. There was one small thing she needed to do before Thomas finished killing her. What was it? Oh, what was it?

She scrambled within her mind to find it. It was so close, she could feel it . . . something she must do, something she had been taught. And then it came to her: A blessing! Yes, she needed to give Thomas a blessing.

Digging her fingernails into his hands, she tried desperately one last time to free her throat so she could speak, but his hands held fast, and then it was too late. The darkness had surrounded her.

Gwenna Goes Home

“So our Little Miss is no more,” Jeremy yawned. “What a surprise.” He glanced at his clock. Almost 4:30. So far, so good. No more vibrating words, no more rippling book cover. If he continued, he’d have the book finished by the time his morning papers arrived.

Releasing a long sigh, he resumed his reading.

The darkness soon turned to gray, and the gray became lighter and lighter before changing to a yellowish-white milkiness; and in this yellowish-white milkiness two faces appeared.

They were hovering above her: great, round, radiant faces, luminescent like the sun. She knew these faces. They were familiar. Though she could not remember their names, somehow she knew them.

But where was she? And why did she feel so strange, as if she were not fully herself, as if some piece of herself had been cut off?

“Child,” came the voice of one face, “you are safe now.”

How had it spoken? Its lips, frozen into a soft smile, had remained unmoving. She had felt, rather than heard, the voice in her head. And now it spoke again. "It will, of course, take you a moment to readjust . . . and to remember."

And then the other face spoke, and though it did not look older, it somehow felt older to her, as if it commanded more respect than the first one. It was also a different color. Whereas the first face was a brilliant yellow, this face was a bright yellowish-orange. "I can see you are beginning to recognize us, Young One. That is good. It shows the power of your memory is growing stronger with each connection. Perhaps, the next time you will remember everything."

And She Who Used To Be Gwenna suddenly felt as if she were awakening from a dream. She knew this place of milkiness. Yes, it was her home! And these faces before her now, they were her family—her real family.

"Mother," she said, turning to the face which had spoken first, "Where have I been?"

"You have been connected to the New One, dear, trying once more to make contact with her mind."

"The new one?"

"Yes, Child, your New One."

And then She Who Used To Be Gwenna remembered everything: She remembered her name was Alaris, and then she remembered what she was.

To the people of Gwenna's reality she might have been called a star, but she was more than a star. She was a beautiful, glowing sphaïrum who lived within a galaxy of sphaïra. The reality of Gwenna had been nothing more than a dream,

and her role of Gwenna nothing more than a character in that dream.

The dream was a part of the New One's mind, and the New One was her child, her very own baby sphairum, still dreaming . . . still asleep.

* * * * *

LaLa Land

“Omigod,” said Jeremy. “Just when I thought it couldn’t get any worse, it goes from ‘Gothic romance in the Middle Ages’ to ‘Fantasy fiction in LaLa Land’.” He threw his head back and groaned. “Why?” he asked himself yet again. “Why am I reading this?” And then he decided that maybe it was here, here in this part of the story, that the lunatic mind of the writer would truly begin to reveal itself.

Wriggling his shoulders, he took a deep breath and stretched the muscles of his neck; and just as the deep-sea diver jumps from his boat to explore the depths of unknown waters, Jeremy returned to “LaLa Land” in order to get to the bottom of this strange little book.

Sometimes the dreams of the New Ones contain bits and pieces of the truth; but, as Alaris now remembered, usually these dreams are an act of rebellion, an attempt to create a reality separate from that of their mothers, for the New Ones are always angry and afraid at the Time of Separation. They enter a sleeping state hoping to escape the loneliness

that consumes them following the physical separation from their mothers.

In the beginning, newly separated sphaira are unaware that connection to the mother is still possible. This is something that only the mother can teach, for a residual bond between mother and child continues, even after the physical separation is complete. Through her repeated attempts to telepathically connect to the New One's mind and to actually enter the dream of her sleeping child, a mother sphairum can awaken a New One and prove to her that she is not alone.

As Alaris well knew, a baby sphairum begins as a small bubble of consciousness within the mind of its mother. She remembered how, when her own New One had begun to form, it had felt like nothing more than a new thought to her. But soon the thought had expanded into a presence, one that could talk and ask questions. Many, many questions this New One had asked, and at times Alaris had become frustrated, for there is never any escape from a New One during its earliest stage of development.

Not until the Time of Separation is the mother disconnected from her baby. This stage occurs when the mother feels her nuclear orb can no longer contain her New One. By temporarily changing her rotational spin—from that of clock-wise to counter clock-wise—the mother is able to release, into a space of its own, a sac of light-filled plasma which becomes her child's new home.

“Whoa,” said Jeremy, running a hand through his hair. “This is getting into some pretty rough terrain. I think I need some doughnuts.” For as long as he could remember, doughnuts, most

especially those of the frosted chocolate variety, had been his staple comfort-food. He usually kept a bag of doughnuts in his pantry. And there was always a ready supply of them in his freezer.

After retrieving his doughnuts and a cup of microwaved coffee, he made his way to his reading chair and dipped once more into LaLa Land.

In the recent dream reality of Gwenna, Alaris remembered there had been a creature—a chicken, it was called—that had laid eggs as a form of reproduction. A New One, she realized, was a sort of “energy egg”, a separate consciousness formed within its mother, but then released from its mother’s orb. In this “egg stage” the light of the New One was faint; but at its awakening, the New One “hatched”, exploding into the brilliant, self-luminous form of a true sphairum.

Alaris knew, as all mother sphaira, that if a New One remained within its mother’s orb for too long, it ran the risk of absorbing too much of its parent, ultimately becoming nothing more than a clone of the mother. Eventually, the two minds would split; but they would always remain identical to each other, and they would continue to closely orbit each other for the rest of their natural life spans.

It was a tricky business for a mother sphairum to know just when to separate from her baby, for if the separation occurred too soon, the New One ran the risk of “turning black”. Alaris constantly worried, as did all new mothers, that her own New One might be destined for such a fate.

Though it was a rare condition, a New One “turned black” if it became too psychically disconnected from its mother upon

separation. When that happened, the young *sphairum* turned in on itself and collapsed, becoming smaller and smaller, until it disappeared through a hole no larger than a pinprick. Once this happened, the New One was gone, never to be heard from again.

It was a mother's worst nightmare, for when a New One turned black, a tremendous force, strong enough to pull surrounding *sphaira* into it, was generated around the hole. Oftentimes, the mothers, being closest in distance to the hole, would be sucked into it; and if this happened, other nearby *sphaira* were sometimes pulled in as well. In one very rare case, an entire community of *sphaira* had been sucked to oblivion before the hole lost its power and sealed itself closed.

After her most recent failure to connect with the mind of her sleeping New One, Alaris was afraid that maybe her child had been released too soon. And since all the *sphaira* are telepathic, her mother—whose name was Bueadala—and her grandmother—whose name was Delphinia—could feel her fear.

"Child, please," her mother tried to reassure her, "do not worry so. I went through a similar struggle with you."

"And I with you," said Delphinia with a chuckle, turning her gaze to Bueadala.

Alaris knew that the faces of her mother and grandmother, hovering now before her, existed only in her mind. The true orb bodies of her mother and grandmother were actually some distance away, though in the same *sphairic* community. "Oh, surely," she moaned, "I wasn't as bad as this." And if she had still been within the body of Gwenna, she would have

pouted.

“Come now, Child. You always were a bit on the melodramatic side. Before you know it, your New One will be naming itself, and you’ll look back on these times and laugh.”

If only Alaris could believe her mother. How happy she would be when and if the time of her New One’s naming ceremony ever arrived. Though it was hard to imagine now, she hoped that her New One would complete itself soon.

Once a baby sphairum’s development was complete, it named itself. Then the naming ceremony would begin, and all the sphaira of that community would sing the name of the New One over and over, transmitting the news of its birth to all other sphaira of the galaxy.

The birth of a New One was a most special event. Each sphairum was capable of reproducing only once, and that occurred during the middle years of its life when its mind-core and surrounding orb were finally mature enough to handle a baby.

No one knew for sure exactly how a New One began—where, for instance, did that first initial thought bubble come from?—but it was a question that many sphaira had pondered for quite some time, and it was a process every sphairum found to be worthy of celebration.

“Oh brother,” said Jeremy, with a mouth full of doughnut. “I can’t believe I’m reading about gas-ball reproduction.” He was seriously beginning to wonder if he’d be able to hold out till the end.

“Mother,” said Alaris, “I can’t help it. No matter how

hard I try, I can't stop feeling afraid for the New One." For a moment she thought she saw her mother's face cloud over with concern, but it was only for the briefest of moments, and so she decided it had been a projection of her own fear.

"Child," Bueadala purred soothingly, "She can feel when you are troubled and that makes her even more afraid. Do not take her attacks personally. They are only acts of fear; and you know, as well as I, a New One is not able to awaken in a state of fear. You must release your worries. All will be well, if you will only trust in the power of your love for her."

And now the older face of Alaris' grandmother moved closer to her. "Young One," she said, "you forget that in the last moment of this recent contact you remembered the blessing."

"Yes, but what good does it do to remember the blessing if it's at the moment I'm being killed? It was almost as if she knew I was close to remembering, and so she made sure to block my voice by strangling me."

When a mother sphairum attempts to connect, telepathically, to the sleeping mind of her New One, she has to accept whatever role the baby's mind assigns to her—whether it be that of old woman, young boy, or even some sort of plant or animal—for it is the mind of the New One that controls, overall, the story line of the dream. Once an attempted contact is made, a mother simply "awakens" into her child's dream and finds herself playing a new role, an instantly created role that quickly becomes incorporated into the ongoing dream.

In Alaris' most recent contact, she had awakened into the dream as the little girl Gwenna. And though it had felt to her as if she had already lived within the dream reality for five years; in fact she had entered the dream as a five year-old girl, complete with a programmed memory of her earlier life within the dream. Her family members, dream characters themselves, had been instantaneously programmed with these same memories as well.

This is one reason it was easy to forget that the dream was but a dream. In her past contacts, Alaris had always become enmeshed within the dream, living within it until the New One, sensing an intruder, severed the telepathic tie through an act of dream-death. To Alaris, these dream-deaths were the worst part of birthing a New One, for they, especially, felt so exceedingly real.

There was only one way for a mother sphairum to establish a permanent telepathic connection, and that was to remember the Rule of Dreaming: "That which you bless within the dream cannot harm you." But, it is difficult to remember such a rule when one has forgotten that she is living within a dream

"A-a-g-h!" said Jeremy. "I can't believe I'm reading this!"

... This is why, in Alaris' most recent contact with the New One, both her mother and grandmother had tried to send her telepathic reminders of this rule. Unfortunately, the fear within the New One's mind was so strong, it had blocked most of their transmissions.

Usually, after many repeated tries, a mother sphairum is

able to remember the Rule of Dreaming, and once this rule is remembered she can then bless any dream character she chooses. When that piece of the New One's mind, represented by the dream character, is blessed, it receives a direct transfusion of its mother's love; and from that point on, the mother is safe, for deep down inside, the mind of every New One wants its mother's love. It will do nothing to destroy that love once it is made aware of it.

Alaris was finding it very difficult to remember that the dreams of her New One were not real. She had attempted contact on ten different occasions, and every single one had resulted with her being removed from the dream through an act of death. She was beginning to feel discouraged by her lack of success. She had never known it would be so difficult to be a mother.

"Young One, there is no reason to be discouraged," said her grandmother Delphinia who could sometimes read Alaris' thoughts faster even than Alaris herself. "The New One is rebelling against you simply because she is angry. Do not take her dream creations so personally."

"Well, it's hard not to take them personally when my death experiences continue to be more and more horrible. Do you remember what happened the time before last?"

Both Bueadala and Delphinia laughed. The dreams of the New Ones were always more humorous when it was someone else living through them. They knew they were being insensitive to Alaris' frustration, but they couldn't help themselves. Birthing a New One was such serious business that sometimes it helped to laugh occasionally.

Alaris could not understand this. The ringing bell-like laughter of her mother and grandmother was painful to her. "I fail to see what is funny about being nailed to a wooden cross," she said, thinking back to that particular death experience, still all too fresh within her mind.

"Oh, my dear," said Bueadala, still chuckling, "I am sorry. We both are. But even you have to admit, it was an imaginative method of disposal."

"Imaginative? I'd say it was just plain gruesome. I felt like I hung there forever. I didn't think I was ever going to die. At least this last time my death was quick."

"But Young One," said Delphinia, "Look at the symbolism of the cross. What is a cross, but the intersection of two lines? It was a symbol representing the intersection of your minds. Don't you see? It was her way, her first way subconsciously, of acknowledging both your reality and her own."

"Yes," interjected Bueadala. "A very big step. If only you had been able to remember fully who you were. You did come close, however. And I think she knew it as well. A number of her dream creatures developed quite a fondness for you, didn't they?"

"I suppose so."

"And even then you came very close to remembering the blessing. For instance, you remembered to bless those who cursed you."

"Yes, and to pray for those who persecuted me. But I forgot what type of prayer was needed, and I also forgot that true power comes from within. A few times I almost remembered the concept, and then I'd slip off track, convinced that

my power was coming from somewhere outside myself—‘my Father in Heaven’, I think I called it”

“Uh-oh,” said Jeremy. “Incoming Sunday School Alert.”

. . . “Contact after contact, not only do I forget the blessing, I also continue to forget the simplest of concepts. But why are we dwelling on the past like this?” She was irritated not only with herself, but with her mother as well. They were wasting valuable time. While they were discussing her past mistakes, her New One might very well be on the verge of turning black.

“Alaris, stop these thoughts at once! Above all else a mother must be patient!” It was the first time Bueadala had spoken so sharply. “Child,” she continued, “with each contact you have gotten closer and closer to remembering the blessing. But even without the blessing, the New One seems to have already received a hint of your love. Why else, in your most recent contact, were you surrounded, almost up until the very end, by dream characters who loved you and wanted to protect you? Remember how the mother of the dream tried to warn you of the danger? And then there was that other character, the one who told you to run away to safety.”

Alaris smiled. “That character’s name was Bram. It was one of her ‘he’ creatures, a man. How could I have forgotten? I suppose this means the New One loves me after all!”

“Of course she does. The child always loves its mother. No matter what else it may dream, the child cannot help but

continue to love the mother. Every New One is the same in this way. Don't you agree, Old One?"

"Yes," said Delphinia. "Though each New One tries hard to create its own unique dream reality, there is much commonality within their dreams. Love for the mother is one common theme, but there are others. For instance, most of the New Ones dream of spherical worlds. We think this is because some part of them remembers that we ourselves are spheres."

"Also they dream of a liquid which sustains life," Bueadala added. "I believe your New One calls it water."

"That's true," said Alaris. "Toward the end of my last contact I remember I was in much need of this water."

"The New Ones also frequently dream of creatures with appendages," her Grandmother continued. "We do not know how they initially came up with such a concept; but, as you know, the appendages enable the dream creatures to move through their worlds or to manipulate the matter of their worlds. Stranger still, in many of the dreams these creatures are divided into what your New One calls male and female. But in every dream, no matter how strange, there are creatures who absorb the light of round, glowing orbs. Most of these orbs hover above their dream worlds. Isn't that interesting?"

"Yes," said Alaris. "Another memory of us!"

"But it goes deeper than that. What these dreams tells us is that somewhere within their minds they remember they need their mother's love."

Jeremy groaned. He shouldn't have eaten so many doughnuts.

He got up for a glass of milk, and then, with the book in his hand, he returned to bed to continue his reading. He felt a need to lie down.

LaLa Land Continued

Back in bed, sipping from his glass of milk, Jeremy realized that it wasn't just the doughnuts. It was the book as well. All that talk of mother love made him want to puke. And the whole gas-head thing was beyond ridiculous, which meant he was beyond ridiculous for even opening the book again.

Alaris was thinking about what her grandmother had said. It was true. There were so many similarities in every dream experience of the New Ones.

"Of course, it's true," said her grandmother. "You see, Young One, we are experienced when it comes to contacting the New Ones. You need not worry. Not only are you making progress with each new contact, but the New One is as well. The time before last, when she saw you as a male creature, did she not decide you were special in some way?"

"I believe she gave me the label 'Son of God'. Or maybe it was 'Messiah'. Whatever it was, she seemed to feel I was from a different realm and that I possessed special powers."

"Well," said Jeremy, "one thing's for sure. This book is not

going to be a hit with the Sunday Schools.” He groaned again at the thought that he was even reading such a book. Gothic romance, fantasy fiction, with a little wacky New Age religion mixed in . . . the beauty of the book, he decided, was that it could contain so much of what he hated.

“Yes,” said Delphinia, “precisely! And what, in her mind, were those special powers?”

“Well, I suppose some of her dream characters decided I was able to heal.”

“And don’t you see, Young One? For her, you do have the power to heal. As evidence of that, look at how she allowed you to heal one of her dream characters during this last contact. It was your mother, wasn’t it?”

“As a matter of fact, it was,” said Alaris, remembering how she had helped her mother in the dream to heal herself by singing to her.

“Well then, that proves at least a part of her already knows that, with your assistance, she can become whole.”

“But if that is the case, why did she push me away again? Over and over, it’s the same thing. I make contact, our minds begin to weave a story together, and then she throws me out of her mind through some sort of dream death. I don’t think there’s ever been such a difficult New One before!”

Both Bueadala and Delphinia exchanged knowing glances with each other. How amusing new mothers could be. Nonetheless, Alaris needed to be soothed.

“Child,” said Bueadala, “how many times do I have to tell you? These things take time. Your New One is no more difficult than you were. You will succeed, but only after you

cast away your worries. Shall we sing you a song? It has calmed you in the past. Perhaps it will help you now."

Alaris was still feeling huffy. "So am I to be treated as a New One now?"

"Dearest, you will always be my child, no matter what your age. Could you not just humor your old mother and grandmother, and allow us to sing to you?"

Alaris' irritation soon melted away and she smiled at the two beaming faces before her. "How could I refuse?" she said. And so Bueadala and Delphinia began to sing.

*I am near. I am near. I am near.
Hear, dear child, I am near.*

It was a song her mother had sung to her after she'd received Bueadala's first real blessing. Though she had been nothing more than a New One herself, the song had cast a spell upon her, soothing every fear within her mind. It was this song that had opened the way for Alaris to become fully born as a sphairum. The song would be forever special to her.

*Open and know. Open and know.
Your destiny, your destiny is to grow.*

It seemed to have the same hypnotic effect upon her

"Because it's so damn insipid," said Jeremy. His patience for the book was wearing thin. He was tired of reading. He was antsy. Even his head was beginning to tingle.

. . . The song had carried all of Bueadala's love straight to the inner core of Alaris' mind.

*I am near. I am near. I am near.
Hear, dear child, I am near.
Wake to who you are. Wake to who you are,
And you will know that I am not far.*

Only after hearing her mother's song had the young, partially formed mind of Alaris known beyond all doubt that she was not alone, and that she was loved. The song brought back all that feeling of ecstasy and connection that had made her moment of completion possible. She remembered, once more, the beauty of hearing every sphairum of her community singing of her birth, her Completion of Self.

She allowed the song to carry her back . . . nothing to fear . . . there is only love . . .

*I am near. I am near. I am near.
Hear, dear child, I am near.
Look within your mind. Look within your mind,
and the peace you seek you will find.*

The two voices intermingled in harmonies that lifted Alaris into a space of rainbow-colored light, each word and tone of the song producing a different pattern of blue, or purple, or green, or orange, all the colors dancing, all the colors swirling to surround her. She listened, and she watched, and every grain of fear was washed away.

* * * * *

Jeremy slammed the book shut. "God, I'm swimming in a literary cesspool. I can't take it anymore. To hell with it!" He

flung the book and watched as it slid across the floor and out into the middle of his hallway.

The tingling of his scalp had grown worse. Had his old dandruff problem suddenly returned? He scratched at his head with the fingers of both hands. "And to hell with this too!" he yelled as he stomped off to the bathroom. Thankfully, his old bottle of Selsun Blue was still in the cabinet.

He turned on the faucet to his sink, and while he was waiting for the water to warm he retrieved the book from the hallway and threw it into his bathroom trash can. Enough of that. The book be damned. He was going to wash his hair, and then he was going to get on with his life.

The Author Revealed

The Selsun Blue must have been outdated, for three hours later Jeremy was still scratching his scalp. He scratched as he made his way through his morning newspapers. He scratched as he read through the first five chapters of a new book he was reviewing. And all the while he read and scratched, his mind, like a disobedient dog, kept returning to that other book, the one that was currently stashed away, hidden in his bathroom trash can.

What was wrong with him? He'd never been this undisciplined before, and he'd never felt so anxious. In addition to his constant scratching, his right leg kept bouncing with impatience, and his gut was now rumbling in a way which disturbed him. His whole body seemed to be in revolt. Even his heart felt as though it were racing. And while he sat in his easy chair sloshing his way through the book of a new Argentine authoress, his brain continued to fill his head with images from the Gothic-turned-Fantasy-turned-New Age-twaddle tale.

"Damn that cursed book," he spat as he sprang from his chair in the living room.

He trudged his way to the bathroom, to the trash can where the book lay buried beneath a few dirty Q-tips, five wads of Kleenex, a soap wrapper, and one clump of wet hair. He removed the hair and a bit of wet Kleenex that was stuck to the book's spine; then, resigned to his fate, he carried the book back to his easy chair. Somehow this book, in conjunction with his mind and body, was demanding that he finish what he had begun.

He opened the damp pages and once more began to read.

When the song was over and the dance of the colors ended, Alaris was fully herself again. No longer was she anxious. No longer was she afraid. She felt as if she were overflowing with love: love for her mother, love for her grandmother, love for the unformed New One, her child. Soon the New One would be awake, and her song would be sung by all sphaira. And before she knew it, Alaris and her mother would be assisting in the birth of the New One's own child.

"Steady now, Young One," warned her grandmother Delphinia. "I wouldn't get too carried away."

"But, Grandmother, I thought you wanted me to be hopeful of the future."

"I do, Young One, I do; but there are some points that need to be addressed before you attempt your next contact. Your mind will not function as well if you are not fully in the moment."

"But my mind is in the moment. I can feel right now, in my center-most core, that this next contact is going to work!"

More knowing glances were exchanged between Delphinia and Bueadala. They were beginning to wonder if their singing might had given Alaris too much of a good thing.

“Mother? Grandmother? Don’t you believe me?”

“Of course, we do,” said Bueadala. “It is just that, whenever a mother sphairum reaches a point of extreme optimism, the mental strength of her New One always seems to increase as well. It is as if she senses her imagined foe has gained power over her and she therefore fights all the harder. Consequently, this next contact may be your most challenging.”

“And so, you and Grandmother are going to destroy my good mood in order to strengthen my chances of success?”

“Child, we only mean to help.”

Alaris paused. She didn’t want to seem ungrateful. She loved her mother and grandmother, and she was thankful for their support; but sometimes they could be a little too overly cautious. “I know your intent is to help me,” she said. “And I appreciate your support, but I feel I’ve had all the preparation I need. If she gives me her worst, so be it. The time to return is now. I can feel it.”

“Oh, my dearest,” cooed Bueadala. “We have no doubt you will achieve your goal; but it would be a mistake to rush at this point.”

“Yes,” said Delphinia. “The last stages of birth are always the hardest. Now is the time to step outside your emotions. See the dream with a more rational eye.”

“But what more is there for me to see?”

“Think, Young One, think.”

And Alaris tried to think, but it was difficult, now that her grandmother’s eyes were boring into her with such intensity.

“Dearest,” said Bueadala, “have you not noticed a disturbing pattern of increased violence in the dream?”

*“Increased violence? Her dream has always been violent.”
“But there has been a marked increase of violence specifically directed towards those creatures known as ‘woman’.”*

“Omigod,” Jeremy groaned. “Now we get a little plug for the feminists. How come I’m not surprised?”

He paused to scratch his scalp. He had decided the author was probably in her sixties—fat, gray, with unshaved legs and Birkenstocks—one of those crunchy, granola types who likes to commune with dolphins when she isn’t stocking shelves and sweeping the floor of the local health food store.

Alaris paused for a moment to remember.

In the beginning of the dream, the male and female creatures had been as equals. If anything, back then, the females had been slightly more revered by the males because of their childbearing capabilities.

“And because they were most like the New One’s memory of you,” interjected Bueadala.

“Yes, Mother. I can see that.”

It was true, however, that with each new contact, she had found the male creatures acting as if they were stronger and more powerful than the female creatures. Why had she not thought about this before? Was it because the change in the males had been so gradual?

“No, Young One, you were simply too busy reacting to the dream. Action is good, but action combined with thought is even better.”

The eyes of her grandmother had softened, and Alaris was relieved. It made her task of thinking so much easier. Obvi-

ously, the male creatures represented the New One's anger. In the sleeping mind of the New One, Alaris was perceived as an unloving mother, a mother who had abandoned her very own child. But did that really change the way she should approach the New One in her next contact?

"Young One," said Delphinia, "I am sure you realize that in your next contact you may be assigned the role of woman again."

"Yes."

"And, as with the last contact, you may again enter the dream as a young female, a 'girl', as her dream language puts it."

"Yes . . ."

"But since her acts of violence against females are on the rise, she may decide to attack you even sooner. Your dream body was quite young the last time she attacked. It may be even younger this next time. Think about how much more difficult it will be to remember the blessing if you are still in the form of a small, seemingly defenseless, girl."

The light of Alaris' orb dimmed slightly as she mulled this thought over. Her grandmother was right. She had felt less powerful in the dream as a female creature, and if she had been any younger during the New One's most recent attack, she would have been even more afraid of the male creature known as Thomas. She needed a new plan, a new way of entering the mind of the New One.

"Any suggestions?" she finally asked, though it hurt her pride to do so.

"Child," said Bueadala, "we are only distant observers,

watching her through the vehicle of your mind. We can tell you what patterns and symbols we see in the dream, but I am afraid our suggestions would be useless. You know her best. Any plan of action must come from your mind.”

There was silence between their minds as Alaris continued to ponder the dream of her New One. What had it felt like to be in her New One’s mind? Overwhelming fear, she answered herself. But that fear was masked now by a seething anger, anger towards Alaris, the mother.

It was as if the mind of her child, as a way of re-creating its own mother, had divided itself in two. But when the New One had come to realize that her female creatures were not the real mother, she had become angry with them, fighting against them—going so far as to destroy them at times—in an attempt to erase all memory of Alaris.

And now an image formed within her mind: bright leaping flames of a fire! But within the fire were her daughter’s female creatures, and around the raging fire danced a ring of male creatures. This is where the New One wished for her to be, within this fire of anger.

Though it would be hard, somehow she needed to ignore this side of her child. It did not represent the whole of her New One. There was another part of her child’s dreaming mind that loved her and had tried to protect her during her most recent contact. This was what she must meditate upon—this lonely child within the New One’s fragmented mind.

It was for this small piece of the New One’s mind that Alaris would return. It was crying out to her, as a baby,

alone in a wilderness. She would go to this child within her daughter's mind, and she would help it to awaken. Somehow, she would find a way, and she would not fail. No, not this time. Even now, she could still feel it. This would be the contact that would remain forever more!

“Holy T’moly! Could we please just get this over with?” As hard as Jeremy tried, the book refused to be read quickly. It was as if the book itself had become a wheezing, dry old woman, slowly telling him her tale. He, the reader, was trying his best to hurry her along; but she refused to be hurried. Would the end of this book never arrive?

“Mother? Grandmother?” Alaris could feel an idea forming itself from within, something new, something almost too crazy to fathom. “What if I split my own mind in two, as the New One has done with the symbols of her male and female?” she asked.

“What do you mean, Young One?”

“Well, what if, just an instant before my next contact, I willed my mind to divide itself? If there were two pieces of me within her dream, instead of one, wouldn't that throw her off, especially if the second piece of me were disguised as something insignificant, something that would not be recognized by the New One?”

“But it is impossible to control what role the New One assigns to you once you are in her dream.”

“I know that. But if I made the second piece of my mind small enough, its size might confuse her. She might assume it was too small to do much of anything with. Perhaps she

would assign it a miniscule role—a bird, or a dog, or an inanimate object such as a stone or a wooden spoon.”

Alaris’ orb was sparkling with a radiance not seen since the day of her naming ceremony. “Don’t you see?” she asked. “It would be the larger bulk of my mind she’d want to focus on. Meanwhile, the smaller piece of my mind, naturally wanting to return to its whole, would make its way back to me, no matter what part of her dream I happened to be in. And once that occurred, I’d receive an instant reminder of who I am. Remembering the blessing would be a cinch after that!”

She laughed, but the two faces before her were silent. Alaris could tell they were not pleased. She felt as if a whole eternity had passed when, at last, her Grandmother responded.

“Young One,” she said, “it would not be safe. What you have described is known, among some of the very oldest sphaira, as an independent thought capsule.”

There came a gasp from Bueadala’s mind, and Alaris was shocked when she realized that her mother had not heard of this form of communication. She tried hard to ignore her mother’s confusion as her grandmother continued to explain. “It is a rare form of three dimensional communication. My own grandmother used to speak of them. You see, long ago, before our communities were as telepathically connected as they are now, it was the only way a sphairum could communicate to the sphaira of other communities. But, even then, thought capsules had to be returned just as soon as they were viewed. I’m afraid that your New One, being of incomplete mind and body, would not handle a thought capsule correctly. She might, upon its discovery, destroy it

“Good God. How much deeper into LaLa Land must I go?” Jeremy’s head was cradled in the palm of his right hand, and though the top of his scalp still tingled with an aggravating itch, he fought hard not to scratch, hoping the itch would go away if it was ignored.

Again, Bueadala gasped.

“Young One,” said Delphinia, “I recommend that your mind be whole and intact before making another contact. The New One has blocked your memory before. It will certainly be blocked again. What you are proposing . . .”

“Is a sacrifice of your selfhood!” said Bueadala, grasping now the full extent of what her own mother was trying to say. “Oh, Child, if you were killed in a dream before your thought capsule had rejoined you, you would lose that piece of your mind, possibly forever!”

“But if she captured my thought capsule,” said Alaris, “wouldn’t that serve as a permanent link between our minds?”

“Young One,” said Delphinia, “a mind must be whole in order for it to be. If you were permanently separated from your own thought capsule, you would forget who you are. It would be as if you no longer existed. Even your orb might begin to disintegrate.”

“And what a pity that would be,” whined Jeremy.

“Alaris,” said Bueadala, “surely you are not suggesting that you make your mind unwhole for the sake of your New One?”

“Yes, Mother, I am.” But she could feel her mother’s worry and she wanted very much to soothe her. “In one of the dreams of the New One,” she added, “I remember I once had a cat. It was a small four-legged creature, very soft and gray. I shared my food with it, and it kept me warm at night, always sleeping close beside me. One time, it ran away and I was afraid I would never see it again. But after a few days, no doubt in need of food, it returned.” She smiled at the memory, ignoring her mother’s frown. “I feel my thought capsule will be as this cat. It will find a way to return simply because it needs to.”

“Young One,” said Delphinia, her frown mimicking Bueadala’s, “your thought capsule will not be able to return if it is captured by the New One. You forget that there is still so much anger in her.”

“Enough to destroy you,” came Bueadala’s voice. “Child, please. Listen to reason. Thought capsules are not meant to be used as a birthing tool.”

But the time had come for Alaris to take a stand. No matter how much it might pain her mother and grandmother, the needs of her New One came first. “Mother,” she said, “Grandmother, I have made my decision. This is my chosen course for the next contact. I am sorry. Truly I am, but it is what I must do. It is the only way.”

“And so we prepare for yet another death scene,” said Jeremy, not realizing that his fingers had moved to his scalp again.

Only Delphinia was able to respond, though it was with a mournful look and a somber tone. “So be it, Young One, so

be it.”

Her mother Bueadala was silent. There was no need for words. Both Alaris and Delphinia could feel the heaviness within her mind. Even her orb had become discolored with sudden patches of gray. Never before had she felt this way. Her child, her very own child, would be attempting what had never been done before; and there was no guarantee that she would make it.

Oh, how she wanted to stop her, but there was nothing more she could do, nothing more she could say, for her daughter’s mind had been made; and once a mother sphairum made a decision concerning her next contact with a New One, no one—not even her own mother or grandmother—could try to change her mind. It was not allowed, for nothing is more sacred than the bond between mother and child.

Bueadala watched as her daughter’s orb began to slow. Even now there was still time. Maybe Alaris would change her mind! But her orb only continued to slow itself, till at last it was completely still.

“The time has come,” she said. “Wish me well.” And she began her mental centering, preparing, as if for the first time, for her contact with the mind of the New One.

Bueadala’s mind began to flicker. She had decided that she could not bear witness to such an act of possible self-annihilation. The Old One could stay and watch the upcoming death of her child, but she would not. She could not.

“Courage,” came Delphinia’s voice. “She will sense if you are gone. She believes. So now must we.”

“It is hard,” came a whisper of a thought from Bueadala.

“So very hard.” And though she did not disconnect, she tried her best to brace herself, for now Alaris was willing her mind to do what no other sphairum had ever done before. She was splitting her consciousness into two separate pieces, diving now as two, instead of one, into the dream of her sleeping New One.

Bueadala wanted to scream, but she knew some part of Alaris would hear her if she did and so she only cried, “Good luck, my dearest. Good luck.”

* * * * *

The new contact was made, and the dream was joined again. She herself was now also asleep; and in her dream there were two faraway voices, one much older than the other. Though it was difficult, she strained with all her might to hear them:

“Please do not cry,” said the first voice. “All will be well.”

“How I wish it were so. I can only hope you are right,” said the second voice, much younger than the first.

“Aren’t I always?”

“How would I know, Old One? I haven’t been around as long as you.”

“Then I ask only that you trust your dear old mother, as you did once long ago Did I, by the way, ever tell you what a difficult child you were?”

“Yes . . . approximately 1,995,652 times; but who’s counting?”

And then there was a laugh that sounded like the tinkling of a small, single bell; and then another bell joined in, its tone intermingling with the first.

It was this sound, the sound of the two ringing bells, that awakened the sleeping girl Rebecca

“Rebecca? Oh . . . my . . . God,” Jeremy stammered. And suddenly the itch upon his scalp was forgotten as a chill ran up his spine and down his arms.

She sat up in her bed, confused. It was almost as if she didn't remember who she was; but then the fog of her mind cleared, and she remembered everything. She and her mother were now in New York. Her mother had signed a lease on the apartment a month before. They had moved there three days ago

“No,” whispered Jeremy as the hair on his arms stood on end.

Sometimes she missed her dad. She had liked him when he wasn't drunk. He would tell her stories and make her laugh; but then, for some reason, he would begin to drink, and he wasn't very nice when he was drinking. Once, when she was younger, he had broken her arm; and so, Rebecca and her mother had run away.

They were safe now. Her parents were divorced, and the police had told her father he was not allowed to follow them ever again. Still, sometimes she missed having a father, the kind of dad he had been when he wasn't drinking.

She shifted in bed and pulled the covers over her head, and that was when she remembered she had dreamed about

the book again. She didn't yet know what kind of book it was, but in the dream it always called to her, like a friend who wants to play. She had searched and searched but had never found it. Someone in the dream had hidden it.

"Becca!" called her mother at the door. "We're late, honey. My alarm didn't go off. I've got some toast made for you. You can eat it in the car. But hurry and get dressed. I need to give the office a call."

And that was where the story ended, at the top of a page two-thirds of the way through the book. The rest of the book contained only gibberish—strings of vowels and words that made no sense.

Jeremy swallowed hard. How could she have written such a book? And the night she had appeared at his door, all those notes . . . somehow she had known the book was in his possession. But how? Even if she were a friend of the fat man, he didn't know where Jeremy lived. Was she some sort of psychic psychotic? And why, if she had known about the book, had she not spoken about it yesterday?

And then the tough question: Was Dana crazy too? Did she know about the book? Was she a friend of the fat man as well?

He stared at the book in his hands. Both Dana and Rebecca had seemed so nice, so normal, so . . . easy for him to talk to. He should have known then that it was too good to be true. Why had he been such a fool?

His hands shook as he closed the book. What, he wondered, had he gotten himself into?

Out With the Trash

Jeremy's shoulders were slumped as he walked to the kitchen, the book in one hand, an empty coffee mug and glass in the other. The book he placed beside the sink. The mug and milk-coated glass he washed and placed into the dish drain. Then he grabbed a banana from the counter and peeled it, thinking that if he had something to chew on it would make him feel better; but the banana was too ripe and he didn't feel like making banana bread, so he tossed it into the trash.

Leaning against the counter he stared at the book, at the huge letters of its title *Read Me Now*. Why hadn't he listened to the fat man? Why hadn't he just left the book in the bookstore where it belonged? But then he remembered the drawing of the fat man. It had nothing to do with the story. Why in the hell had Rebecca placed it in the beginning of her book? Did it contain some sort of hidden code?

He snatched his kitchen junk drawer open and began to rifle through the piles of outdated coupons, the unsharpened pencils and paperclips, the mismatched collection of screws and nails, and the broken hammer and dried-up glue sticks, until, at last,

he came upon his magnifying glass. He would search the picture for clues.

Lifting the book from the counter, he opened it to the picture, only . . . the picture had changed! Instead of “The fat man behind the counter,” the black ink drawing was now an illustration of himself, in his bathrobe, leaning against the counter beside his sink, a banana in his hands.

“Holy shit!” he screamed, and he flung the book to the floor as if he had been burned. It landed face down, and once again there was a strangeness to the book’s cover. This time it seemed to almost shimmer, like the waves of a heat mirage. Was the book alive?

“No,” he told himself, his hands over his eyes. “This isn’t happening. This isn’t real. My eyes are playing tricks on me. It’s just my imagination. This is NOT happening!”

But when he looked again the book was still shimmering; and something told him that if he opened it to the inside illustration, it would be changed yet again. Well, he wasn’t going to take any chances. He wasn’t even going to touch it.

He grabbed a handful of newspaper from the recycling bin in the kitchen and flung them on top of the book. Then, panting almost to the point of hyperventilation, he lifted the book, feeling for it through the layers of newsprint, and threw it into the white plastic liner of his tall, kitchen trash can.

He no longer cared if the book belonged to Rebecca. It was driving him mad, and he needed to get rid of it before the damage became permanent.

Maybe that’s what had happened to her. Yes. That’s why she was always sleepwalking. Poor Rebecca hadn’t written the book. It had written itself. It was some sort of ghost book waiting,

wherever it happened to be left, for its next reading victim. She didn't need such a book. She had been hurt by it, possessed by it, just as he had been. By throwing it away he would be saving both Rebecca and himself.

But first he needed to get dressed.

And after he was dressed, and the trash bag with the book was properly disposed of, he would go someplace where he could forget about the book. He needed to get out of the apartment. He needed to go a place where he would feel normal again, someplace happy where there would be lots of people: children, dogs, vendors, tourists

Central Park!

Yes. He would go to the park and he would listen to the street musicians and the mothers gossiping while their children squealed and played. And he would buy a hotdog from a vendor, and maybe even a snow cone or two, and he would spend some time upon a bench on the sidewalk outside the park. That way he could watch the busloads of tourists and laugh as the natives grumbled and complained about "those idiots who block the sidewalk".

And maybe he could have a little fun with the tourists, make them think he was a homeless man. He'd wear his old jeans—the ones from college that he'd never been able to throw away—and his old Mets T-shirt that he'd had since high school, the one with all the holes in the shoulders. It would be fun to see how many rude stares he'd collect.

Already he was feeling better. And if he continued to feel good, he might even cancel his doctor's appointment. He had already decided that his experience in the bookstore—including the weird behavior of the fat man—had been due to the book

and the strange power it possessed.

But soon he would be rid of it, and soon, very soon, his life would be back to normal.

The Blessing

As he was locking his apartment door he thought he could hear his phone ringing, but he only muttered, “To hell with it,” and down the stairs he raced, two steps at a time. He carried the trash bag with his arm extended, as if it were a bag of toxic waste, and he was in such a rush that he didn’t even pause when Mrs. Potts opened her door.

“Where are you off to in such a hurry?” she asked. “Is the law finally after you?” And when he didn’t respond she cawed like a crow. “You can run, Mr. Thompson, but you can’t hide!”

“Oh, yes, I can,” he said to himself, and he was out the door in a flash, out into the sunshine, out into the comforting sounds of buses and brakes, car horns and sirens, and . . .

“Hi, Jeremy!”

He turned. Rebecca was waving to him from across the street.

“Damn,” he whispered.

And suddenly Dana was behind him, bounding down the steps of the apartment building. “There you are! I just tried to call you. Do you think you can give us a hand? My car started fine this morning, but then it stopped after a second or

two, and I haven't been able to get it cranked again. I don't know what's wrong."

Jeremy opened his mouth, but his throat felt too dry to speak. "Uh," he croaked, but she didn't hear.

"And of all mornings for this to happen," she continued. "First my alarm didn't go off, and now this."

He could feel the color draining from his face. "Did you . . .," he began, but she was already crossing the street. He'd been getting ready to ask if she had made toast for Rebecca to eat in the car that morning; but, no, he couldn't do that. She might find out about the book, and then Rebecca would ask for it.

"If you're asking whether or not I've checked the battery," she called over her shoulder, "the answer's yes. And I've got plenty of gas, at least half a tank. It must be some sort of electrical problem. Maybe it's rats."

"Rats?"

"Yeah. Not too long ago I had some mice in the engine. A rat's just a larger version of a mouse, isn't it? Besides, I've heard the city has a problem with rats."

Jeremy shifted uneasily from foot to foot. How much longer was this going to take? He had followed Dana across the street to her car—it was, after all, on the way to the dumpster—but now he was standing beside Rebecca. She looked up at him and grinned. He could swear her eyes were laughing at him. Without thinking, he opened his mouth to ask about the book; but then he quickly caught himself and turned to Dana instead. "Um . . .," he paused, trying to remember what she'd just said—ah yes, the rats— "Well, maybe in some parts of the city they're a problem, but not here," he replied.

He needed to get to the dumpster fast. He didn't know how

much longer he could hold out with Rebecca standing so close to the book. She might begin to sense its presence. And then he was struck with a horrible realization: He was beginning to think of the book just as the fat man had, only the fat man had wanted her to have the book, and Jeremy did not. No, everything must return to normal, and he knew that wouldn't happen if Rebecca got the book.

"Well," Dana said as she opened the hood of her car, "I still say we have a look." But then she stopped and studied Jeremy's face for a moment. "Are you all right?"

"Um, yeah, I'm fine."

"Please don't feel you have to stick around if you've got other things to do."

"Uh . . . no, it's not that," he stammered. "I, uh," and then he shrugged his shoulders, "I just don't know much about cars."

Dana gave him a quick smile. "How could I forget? Most of you New Yorkers don't even own cars." She was bent over the engine now, checking every wire with her fingers. "I know, I know. I don't really need a car in the city. It's just that, well, . . . I didn't want Rebecca walking to school by herself today, not yet, at least. And I don't have time to get her over there before work unless I drive her."

"Sounds like a good reason to me," he said, but he let out a sigh as he turned in the direction of the alley where the dumpsters were.

Dana straightened up to look at him. "Jeremy, are you sure you're feeling okay?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"I don't know. I guess you look a little tense. And your face is kind of pale."

“Oh, that. I, uh, I guess I haven’t been getting enough sleep recently.”

“Well, maybe you need to take a day off from your books, and, you know . . . do some kind of outdoor activity.”

“That’s exactly what I decided. I’m going to spend the day at the park.”

“Which one?” Rebecca asked.

“Central.”

“Can I go too, Mom?”

“No, honey. You’ve got your placement tests, remember?”

“But, Mom . . .”

“I said no!”

Jeremy saw his opportunity. “Well,” he said, taking a step backwards, “since it looks like I’m not going to be much of any help, I think I’ll go take care of my trash.” He turned, but Rebecca interrupted him. “Hey, Jeremy, what’s that in your trash bag?”

Damn! Was she really able to sense the presence of the book? “Uh, nothing,” he said, quickly shifting the bag behind him once again. “Just your usual assortment of trash, is all.”

She giggled. “But it looks like you have a book in there. Why’d you throw a book away?”

“What book?”

“That one, silly.” She ran to his side and pointed. Sure enough, the book had maneuvered its way to the very edge of the bag. Even the title of the book could be seen through the thin, white plastic of his trash bag.

“Oh,” said Jeremy, “that one.” And suddenly the feeling of heat on his scalp was back. Did she not really know about the book, after all? Or was she just playing a game with him? “Uh,

that's a little book I read recently."

She laughed again. "So why are you throwing it away?"

"I . . . um, I guess I really didn't like it much."

"How come?"

Good God. Were all children so curious? "Well, the book was . . . it was kind of strange."

"I like strange books. Can I read it?"

"No! Well, . . . what I mean is, the book isn't finished. You see, I got to the last page of text, and, well, it was still in the middle of the story. The book doesn't even have an end." Now, in addition to the prickly sensation of heat on his scalp, he could feel a growing wetness in his arm pits.

"Gosh," said Rebecca. "I guess I'd be mad too, but you shouldn't throw the book away. It's recyclable. Why don't you give it to us? We can recycle it for you." She turned toward her mother. "We've got some recyclables in the trunk, don't we, Mom?"

"Yes, sweetie, we do; but I don't think Jeremy wants to dig a book out of his dirty trash bag."

Thank you, Dana, Jeremy prayed. "Uh, right," he said, and he tried to smile. At least this proved *she* didn't know about the book. "It's probably covered with all kinds of gross stuff from my kitchen. You know—coffee grounds, egg shells, banana peels"

"But all that stuff is compostable," Rebecca whined. "You're not supposed to throw that away. If you want, I could show you how to make a worm bin. We have one in our kitchen for all our food scraps . . . you know, like apple cores and eggs shells. Do you want me to show you how to make one?"

And before he could respond, Dana saved him once again.

“Rebecca, please.” Then she turned to Jeremy, “I’m sorry. I think we’ve got a budding environmentalist on our hands. But enough of that. We need to let you go. Have a good time at the park today, okay?”

“Um, thanks. I’m sure I will.”

“Oh, Mom, why can’t I go too?”

“Young lady, that’s enough!”

Jeremy was surprised that Rebecca had dropped the subject of the book so easily. Surely that meant she didn’t know about it either. Show her the book, a part of his brain now screamed. And he had to admit, he was feeling a little guilty. Wouldn’t any mother and daughter want to know if they were mentioned at the end of some strange book?

No. He couldn’t tell them about it now, now that it was tucked away in a trash bag. He’d look like a jerk. (“Oh, by the way, I’ve got this book that mentions you and your daughter, but it scared the shit out of me, so I threw it in this trash bag.”) He would have to explain what it was that had scared him. Or worse yet, he’d hand the book to Dana, watch her open it, and then see that the picture in the front of the book had changed once again; and he knew if that happened, he might start screaming.

It was better that the book be thrown away, before it could do anymore harm. “Well,” he said, running a hand over his tingling scalp, “I guess I better go. Good luck with your car, though you might want to call a cab today.”

“Yes, I think I will. See ya.”

He waved goodbye, but they didn’t notice. Dana’s head was back beneath the hood of her car, and Rebecca was beside her still pouting. Oh well, he thought, thank God that’s over, and he hurried down the sidewalk with his trash. He was in the alley,

about four feet from the dumpsters, when suddenly he heard a scream—it had sounded like the scream of a child.

Rebecca!

He turned and ran, the trash bag still in his hand. It was Rebecca who had screamed! A man on the sidewalk had her tight against his chest. His hand was over her mouth, and it looked like he had a gun!

Holy shit! What was happening? He dropped his trash bag and ran as fast as he could. Dana was pleading with the man, slowly trying to approach him, even though his gun was aimed directly at her chest. It looked like he was getting ready to shoot.

“NO!” Jeremy screamed, and the gunman turned, a mild look of surprise upon his face. He was tall and muscular with a square jaw and small dark eyes, and his hair, a light brown, was cut short enough to show his scalp. His clothes were only accents to his toughness—green army pants, black boots, and a white, sleeveless t-shirt that revealed a large, black tattoo on his arm.

“Who the hell are you?” he asked, his jaws vigorously pounding a wad of chewing gum.

“A friend,” said Jeremy, still trying to catch his breath. “We live in the same building.”

The man quickly glanced to Jeremy’s t-shirt. “Well, listen up, Mets Man. Though I’m touched to know you’re a friend of my family, if you don’t get your ass outta here, you’re gonna be a dead friend of the family. Catch my drift?” And he smiled as he smacked his gum.

“Family?”

“He’s my ex,” Dana said.

“Shut up!” the man screamed.

But Dana ignored him. “He’s not supposed to be here. I’ve

got a restraining order against him.” Just like in the book, Jeremy thought.

“Woman, when I say shut up, I mean it! No one keeps me away from my own flesh and blood!” He kissed the top of Rebecca’s head, and then he turned his attention back to Jeremy. “Now, about you,” and he waved his gun in Jeremy’s direction. “If I was you—and I’d be mighty sorry if I was—I’d just turn around now and head back down the sidewalk where you dropped your trash. Otherwise . . .,” and with his thumb he cocked his gun, “I might just have to make you the only man in town with a double asshole.” He smiled again, the bright pink of his chewing gum flashing for a moment between his teeth.

Jeremy tried to remember how the cops in murder mysteries had always handled such characters. “Sir,” he said, in the calmest tone he could muster, “There’s no need to shoot anyone. Please, just put down your gun.”

“Put down my gun?” The man threw back his head and laughed. “Aw! Little Mets Man thinks he’s gonna be a hero today. Does the comedy act never end on this street?” Then he switched his voice to a high falsetto. “Oh,” he said, doing an imitation of Dana, “I don’t know what’s wrong. Maybe it’s rats.’”

He doubled over across Rebecca’s shoulders as he laughed, and Jeremy began to inch a little closer. But he stopped when the man looked up again. “And then there’s Mr. Mets Man here. Yeah, I heard you too,” and he lowered his voice so he could imitate Jeremy. ““Uh, hi. I’m just a dumb little fuck who doesn’t know shit about cars.’”

When his laughter had finally subsided he wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. “It was all I could do not to laugh while

I was hiding under that truck over there.” Once more he raised his gun towards Dana and smiled. “And guess what, honey? All that half-tank of gas you was so sure you had? Well, it was sort of syphoned off into the sewer last night.”

“You stole my gas?”

“Yep. Poured it down the sewer. Might even have killed some of those rats you was so worried about. But don’t you worry none, little lady. I’ve got five gallons in a gas can over there. Hey . . .,” and he turned to Jeremy, “what d’ya say, Mets Man? Think you’re smart enough to put gas in a car?”

Jeremy hesitated.

“Well, are you a total dumb fuck or not?”

Jeremy sighed. “I do know how to put gas in a car.”

“Well, then. See that blue Bronco over there? Gas can’s right behind it.” He motioned with his head and Jeremy began to slowly back his way towards the car. “And hurry it up,” the man called. “I’m not here to enjoy the sights.” He turned back to Dana. “Darlin’, be a dear and get that god-damned hood closed.”

Think, think, think, Jeremy told himself. There’s got to be something I can do. The tingling of his scalp had gotten worse, but he tried to ignore it. Why had no one called the police yet? Was every single person on this street at work? And what had happened to Mrs. Potts? Were there actually some moments in a day when she was not on her one-woman patrol?

On his way back to the car he caught Rebecca’s father nuzzling the top of her head with his nose. “Don’t you worry none, punkin. I quit my drinking. I’m gonna take good care of you, I promise.” His large hand was still covering her mouth and chin, but Jeremy could see the fear in her eyes. She was looking at

him as if she expected him to do something.

That part in the book about Rebecca, her mother, her father . . . everything was true! No, he reminded himself, not everything in the book, only the end of it. It would be insane to think otherwise.

“Mets Man, maybe you’ve got shit for brains, but I’m not gonna tell ya again. Get the gas in the god-damned car, and I mean now!”

Jeremy opened the gas can and began to pour, but he made sure to keep the flow to no more than a trickle.

“Tom, listen to me!” Dana cried, “If the police find out you’ve tracked me down again, you’ll go to jail. But this time it’ll be ten years instead of two months. Is that what you want?”

“I already told you, woman, no one, not a god-damned, fucking soul, is gonna keep me away from what’s mine!”

Dana began to cry. “Please Tom, just let her go. She’s so young. I don’t want her to be hurt again.”

“Shut up, bitch. That was an accident.”

“Tom, that’s not true.”

“I said shut up!” he screamed, and he extended his arm with the gun straight out so that it was level with Dana’s head. Jeremy could hear Rebecca squealing beneath the grip of her father’s hand. “I’ve had enough of your god-damned lies,” he said.

“Sir,” Jeremy interrupted. “If it’s money you want, I’ll give you all I have if you’ll only release Rebecca.”

“Rebecca?” he sneered. “Who in the hell is Rebecca? What in-the-hell kind of a friend are you if you don’t even know my daughter’s name?”

“I, uh . . .” He turned to look at Dana.

“Jeremy, I’m sorry. We had our names changed about a year ago. I thought it would prevent him from finding us again.”

The man’s laugh was so loud it almost hurt Jeremy’s ears. “You thought you could keep me from my own family. Now that’s funny. No one stays hid from me, darlin’. Not when they’ve got my baby girl.”

Jeremy couldn’t bear the look in Rebecca’s eyes. He felt so helpless. His brain was racing. He had to help her! Soon the gas can would be empty and they would be off. He needed more time, a stalling tactic. There had to be something he could do.

“Tom, please,” Dana pleaded, “look at her face. Look how scared she is.”

“Because of your god-damned fucking lies.”

“Tom, if you love her, you won’t do this.” And now her voice softened and became almost inaudible. “Deep down inside, Tom, I know you don’t want to hurt her, not again. You’re just angry at me. Please, Tom, please don’t take it out on her.”

The name of Tom, repeated over and over—it made Jeremy’s head begin to feel like it was on fire. What was the meaning of all this heat?

The book! his brain answered. Thomas was the name of the character who had killed the girl Gwenna. This man Tom reminded Jeremy of the character Thomas; and Rebecca, he now realized, reminded him of Gwenna. He grabbed his head. The sensation of heat was so intense now . . . No . . . it couldn’t be. It was just a coincidence. It was just a crazy book. And then, from behind, came the voice of a man.

“You can help her now, you know.”

“Huh?” Jeremy turned. It was the fat man from the book store, but he was dressed like that tacky tourist from Texas.

“You!” he exclaimed. “It was you I saw that night. But where did you come from? And how did you get here?”

“Yeah, my sentiments exactly,” sneered Rebecca’s father. “I sure as hell don’t know how a fat ass like you appeared out of nowhere, but if you don’t get the hell out of my sight I’m sure as hell gonna shoot ya.”

The fat man, seemingly unaware of any danger, turned now to Jeremy and smiled. “I’m here to deliver this,” he said, and he held Jeremy’s trash bag aloft so that the book inside was clearly visible to him. “You’re the one who prevented her from reading it, so now the responsibility rests with you. What are you waiting for, my little man? You know what she needs to do. You know what will protect her.”

“No, I don’t.” Jeremy clasped his head. It felt like it was about to explode.

“Hey, you, fat ass! Didn’t I tell you to get the hell out of here? I’m not telling you again. Get that god-damned truck-sized ass of yours outta my sight! Now!”

“With pleasure,” the fat man said with a bow, and then he smiled and in an instant he was gone. He had literally, and quite suddenly, disappeared before their eyes.

“Holy Fucking Christ!” Tom screamed. He grabbed a hold of Dana and forced her into the front seat. “We’re getting out of here. Crank it up.”

“But . . . but he’s not finished with the gas,” Dana said, turning around to look at Jeremy.

“I don’t give a shit! Crank up the god-damned car!” He grabbed the gas can from Jeremy and shoved Rebecca into the back seat beside him. “Move it!” he screamed, placing the gun up against Dana’s head.

For Jeremy, the sensation of heat seemed to increase tenfold. He stumbled to his knees. What was happening to him? The heat now felt like a huge ball of fire, totally engulfing his head. And somewhere within this invisible flame, he could hear the voice of the fat man: “Why do you still hold back? You know what needs to be done.”

Still clutching his head, Jeremy looked up from the pavement where he had fallen. Rebecca’s eyes were on him. He could tell, even now, that she expected him to save her; but how could he? Dana was already starting up the car. He could see the barrel of the gun against the back of her head. Soon they would be gone, and it would be his fault. Somehow he knew this. He could feel it in his gut.

Desperately, he fought against the pain within his head. How could he help them? What was it the fat man had been thinking of? “Think! Think!” he silently screamed. Something . . . anything. And then it came to him. He realized, in that moment, that he knew exactly what to do.

Stretching up on his knees he tried to shout the words: “Bless him, Rebecca!” And then he yelled again, even louder than before. “BLESS HIM, REBECCA! For that which you bless cannot harm you!”

And it was as if his words had been shouted from a mountain top. On and on they continued to echo as he watched and waited for their power to take affect; but to his horror, Rebecca’s body suddenly jolted. “NO!” he screamed, and he jumped to his feet. After all this, had she been shot by her own father?

He raced to the car and opened the door, his heart thumping wildly in his chest. But there was no blood and there had been no gun shot. Rebecca was free of her father’s grip. She was on

her knees, beside him in the car seat, her hand upon his face. And only then did Jeremy realize that her lips were moving. She was whispering, softly whispering, "I bless you, Father. I bless you."

Partial Awakening

Voices. He could hear voices in the darkness. They meant nothing to him, but still he listened

“Sh-h-h. Let them sleep. The mind of the New One is adjusting. She is still processing what she received through the perception of these two dream characters.”

“Don’t you mean three?”

“No, the other one, the male creature Tom, didn’t hold. Therefore, all that was channeled through that particular dream character has been rejected and forgotten.”

“So they won’t remember him?”

“It will be as if he never existed.”

“Why did he blink out of existence so quickly? Was it my manner of blessing him?”

“No. More than likely our presence is the cause.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, there is, as you know, not one, but two of us, in this, . . . how shall I put it?”

“Accommodating body?”

“Yes, thank you . . . in this most accommodating of bodies. Counting you, that makes three.”

“No, at that time it was actually four, remember? When I blessed that particular dream character—the man who was my father—my mind was still split in two.”

“Ah, yes. How could we forget? Young One, I’m afraid we made a terrible mess of your contact. I accept full responsibility for what has happened. It was my idea. Please do not blame your mother.”

And then the same voice again, only this time it sounded somewhat different. “Child, do not listen to her. It may have been her idea, but she was only trying to put my mind at ease. I know it was wrong of us to interfere; but . . . well, I was so worried about you.”

“Worried about me? What about yourselves? I think your actions were far more dangerous than my own.”

There followed a moment of silence.

“Well, don’t you agree?”

“Young One, your mother and I were operating under the assumption that our minds—your mother’s and my own—would each serve to remind the other of our mission.”

And now, once again, the change in the same voice. “Yes, Child. You gave us the idea, and we just expanded upon it. You can see that it worked. And there was none of the tedious memory problem most new mothers have to deal with.”

“Still, Mother and Grandmother, you risked yourselves for the sake of my New One. It’s not supposed to work that way.”

There was a long sigh. “You are right, dear one. I suppose we were not thinking clearly.”

“On the other hand, if you hadn’t intervened, my mind—or

at least that small piece of it—would have been thrown out with the trash.”

“Oh, not necessarily. From what we have observed in his behavior, he might have had a change of heart at the last minute.”

“You think so?”

“It is possible. Such an intriguing dream character he is. We liked him from the moment we met him. Though how awful it must have been for him! Such a sudden and ill-conceived existence, starting his life upon the floor of a bookstore like that. Can you imagine what it must have been like for him?”

“You mean he just appeared in a bookstore without any programmed reason for being there?”

“Yes, though we are sure he was later provided with some sort of memories of a past, in the beginning his mind was a complete blank to us. We wanted to help him, but . . . well, there was nothing much we could do.”

“Since you were trying to keep your presence a secret from me, you mean?”

“Child, we know you are angry, but that is no reason to hurl false accusations at us. We were never here to override you. His mind was simply too blank for us to manipulate.”

“Was it the splitting of my own mind that caused her to be so careless with him?”

“More than likely, it was. Your action must have confused her, and in her rush to intercept that small piece of your mind she acted too hastily.”

“Well, I’m amazed he lasted as long as he did. Poor Jeremy.”

Jeremy?

Instantly his mind came to attention. Why did this name carry such a feeling of familiarity to it? Who was Jeremy? And

who were these irritating voices that were now preventing a return to sleep?

“Look! I think his eyelids just flickered. He’s beginning to wake. Do you want us to leave?”

“No, not yet. You were with him at the very beginning; you might as well be with him now.”

“In order to irritate him as much as we did before?”

“That was then. He’s more experienced now. He’s read the book. I think it might actually help if you were here.”

“Well then, we’ll stay, or maybe I should say ‘I’ll’ stay.”

There followed the laughter of two voices—one very deep and booming, the other very soft and light. How was one to get any sleep with such voices disturbing the peace? And yet . . . was there a reason to be awake? Some curiosity seemed to be astir . . . some reason to open the eyes, if only for a moment, just to see . . .

“Well, hello there, little man! Remember me?”

Quickly he closed his eyes and groaned, but the fat man only laughed.

“I’m here too, Jeremy.”

Rebecca! He opened his eyes again, but almost at once his happiness faded to irritation. “So the two of you are friends, after all,” he muttered. He closed his eyes, but the fat man began to shake his shoulder.

“Tell us, sleepy little man, what else do you know, or should I say, remember?”

“Go away. I’m tired. I need my rest.”

“But, Jeremy,” Rebecca pleaded, “you’ve already slept most of the day.”

“Huh?” He opened his eyes and raised himself up on one elbow. “Where am I?” he asked, noticing for the first time his surroundings. The room was dark, lit only by the light of a nearby hallway. Rebecca and the fat man were seated close by, on two wooden chairs next to the bed where he lay.

“You’re on my mother’s bed,” she said, and then she smiled at the fat man as if it were some sort of a joke.

“What?” He tried to sit up all the way but suddenly he felt dizzy and lay back down. “What in the hell is going on?”

“We carried you here after you fainted,” said the fat man. “Or I guess I should say *I* carried you here.”

Jeremy sighed. “Where did I faint this time?”

“On the street, my little man.”

“Late this morning,” Rebecca added.

Suddenly he remembered his doctor’s appointment. “What time is it?”

“Nine o’clock.”

“Oh, my God.” He turned toward the fat man. “I’ve been out even longer than when I fainted in that bookstore of yours.” He’d have to call his doctor first thing in the morning. Surely the receptionist would understand. After all, he couldn’t help these fainting spells. Maybe he’d be able to get an earlier appointment, unless, of course, he went to the emergency room again. Maybe Dana could drive him over . . .

“Hey,” he said, “where’s Dana?”

The fat man’s beefy lips crept into a wide smile. “Has it been so long since you’ve been with a woman that you don’t even know when there’s one beside you?”

“Huh?” Jeremy turned his head. Sure enough, Dana was beside him, but she was so quiet he had to listen closely to make

sure she was still breathing. "What's wrong with her?"

"She fainted too," said Rebecca, "at the same time you did."

"Yes," said the fat man, and then he smiled, "but don't worry, little man. It's not as bad as it appears. Never is, you know."

"Look," Jeremy said to the fat man, "I'm not going to let you do this to me again. What is going on? And you better tell me the truth this time."

The fat man opened his mouth to speak, then paused, as if collecting his thoughts. "I think we should begin by asking you what you remember."

"Remember? I don't remember anything. What are you talking about?"

Rebecca smiled. "You remember him, don't you? And you remember me. And you remember my mother, and that your name is Jeremy, and . . ."

"So you're giving me the good news I'm not yet senile. Thanks a lot."

The fat man looked immensely pleased with this comment. "Do you remember the book?" he asked.

"What book?" And then, to Jeremy's horror, he did remember. "Oh no," he groaned, and he closed his eyes again.

"Don't worry. I got it back." And now it was Rebecca who was shaking his shoulder. "What do you remember from the book?"

"That it was stupid. Leave me alone." He turned his back to her. He could feel the dull beginnings of a headache coming on. All he wanted now was to get back to sleep. Dana certainly had the right idea. If she were smart she'd stay asleep forever, just as he was planning to do once his headache was gone.

"Please," she said, "don't fall asleep again. You need to try

and remember now on your own; then you'll understand everything."

Damn this headache! He opened his eyes and turned back over to look at her. Somehow her voice sounded older. And her face . . . it almost seemed to be glowing, as if it were covered with a thin coating of glow-in-the-dark paint. But, no, it wasn't just her face, he realized. It was her entire body that was glowing. He shot up in bed. He could see the fat man had a similar glow as well. "Have we been bombed or exposed to some kind of radiation?"

Rebecca giggled and the fat man threw back his head and laughed. "Little one," he said as he dabbed his eyes, "please know you are a great, great source of amusement to us."

Jeremy was furious. "Well, there has to be some reason you're suddenly lit up like a couple of overgrown fireflies. What else could it be, unless . . ."

"Unless what?" Rebecca asked.

"Well, unless I have a brain tumor . . .," he paused, "or schizophrenia. Maybe this is a visual hallucination."

She placed her hand upon his forehead and brushed his hair back as a mother would do for a child. Why was she acting so grown-up all of a sudden? "Don't worry," she said. "You don't have a brain tumor, and you're not schizophrenic. Not yet, at least." And then she smiled. "And it's only cartoon characters who glow when they've been exposed to radiation. The reason we look this way is that you're becoming more perceptive."

"More perceptive? What are you talking about?"

She let out a frustrated sigh. "It's very important that you try to remember everything on your own, in order that you not be harmed."

Was everyone insane now, including himself?

Slowly he raised himself to the edge of the bed. He needed to get home. The feeling of dizziness was almost gone. If he took his time, he knew he could manage. "I'm going home," he said, "and I want you to leave me alone, both of you." Then he eased himself from the bed and took a shaky step forward. "For as long as I live, I don't ever want to see either of you again. Have I made myself clear?"

He tried to keep his eyes focused on the floor, for Rebecca now looked as if she were about to cry. But then he noticed the fat man was positively beaming and that irritated him. "What's so funny?"

"You're going through what we like to call a transitional temper tantrum," he replied. "For some reason it is always more amusing to witness such a thing in the child of another."

"Stop!" said Jeremy. "Not another word!"

"My lips . . ."

"I said, not another word!"

" . . . are sealed," the fat man whispered, and he pretended to zip his lips.

And so it was in silence that Jeremy made his way from the bedroom to the hallway, and finally to the front door, which, after his exit, he quietly closed behind him.

Help!

Back in his own apartment he slowly wandered from room to room, touching and sometimes smelling whatever caught his attention—the pencil sharpener in his study, the can of shaving cream in the bathroom, the apple on his kitchen table, the pack of gum beside his reading chair. Round and round he went, from one room to the next. He was seeking a source of comfort, some small thing that would alleviate his panic.

On and on he searched, through the closets and the cabinets, the messy drawers of his desk in the study, and even the clothes hamper of his bathroom. He examined every spine of every book upon his shelves. He took a bath, had a cup of coffee, watered his plants, and clipped his toenails. He listened to the stereo and tried to watch a little TV, but it was all nothing more than a collection of meaningless noise.

It was while he was seated on the floor of his bedroom, studying his reflection in the mirror of the closet door, that he realized there remained one thing to be explored. He went straight to his study and turned on his computer. There was something—yes, he could feel it!—something within him that needed to be

expressed. And maybe, just maybe, by releasing this whatever-it-was he would finally find the comfort that he longed for.

He placed his fingers upon the keyboard of his computer, and he waited for what he thought would be a torrent of words. But it was only one word that came to him, one word alone that needed to be released straight from his heart to the screen of his computer:

HELP!

he typed and then came his tears. No more words were necessary.

The Dream

He could see that he was asleep. At least his body was asleep. He, himself—his mind—seemed to be hovering above his body, but he could see his head and shoulders slumped over the edge of his desk, right in front of the keyboard to his computer. And though his computer light was on, the screen of his iMac was dark which meant his computer was asleep as well.

For a while he watched the gentle swelling of his shoulders as they slowly rose and fell with each breath. He listened with surprise to the sound of his light snoring, for up until now he'd never realized that he snored.

The best he could tell, he was near the ceiling of his study, about six or seven feet above the chair where his body slept. He didn't know how he had come to be there, in this place outside his body, and he really didn't know how to move. He could only assume that he would remain there until his body decided to awake.

He waited and he watched until he realized he was bored. He could tell by the light of the window that already it was dawn. How much longer would his body sleep? Was there no way for

him to awaken it? He tried to make a sound, but without his vocal chords that was impossible. He made an effort to “swim” through the air toward his body, but with no arms and legs with which to maneuver, his efforts were futile.

And now it was not boredom which plagued him. It was sheer panic. Was he to be trapped near the ceiling forever? What if his body decided never to wake? What if his body simply died? What would become of him? Would he hover near the ceiling ever more, silent and invisible, trapped and all alone?

“But you are not alone,” came a voice.

Huh? Who is that? Where are you? he silently thought.

“I am the you that lies outside of dreams.”

What? Whom did this voice belong to? It was soundless, and yet he could hear it. It seemed to come from within his mind, and yet it was the voice of some other, not his own. He could not tell whether it was male or female. He could not tell whether it was young or old. It simply was; and yet, somehow, he could feel he knew this voice. Is this the voice of God? he asked silently.

“I live within your subconscious. I am creator of all dreams.”

And suddenly, like a clamp, his mind tried to shut itself. There was something about the voice that he seemed on the verge of remembering. Whatever it was, it made him feel afraid. And he realized, in that instant, that if he could, he would have hidden from the voice.

But there was nowhere to hide and he was unable to move. For a long time he hovered in a state of fear, and when there was no more reply from the voice he began to wonder if it had gone away.

“No,” said the voice. “I am with you always.”

Why? he asked.

“Because you are a part of me. I created you. But I have grown tired of sleep. It is time for you to awaken.”

My body, you mean?

“No!”

What is it, then, he thought, that needs to be awakened?

“Every mind within my dream, every piece of who I am.”

I’m sorry, but I don’t understand.

And now he was suddenly transported outside his apartment. On and on he rose above the buildings, above the smog, above the clouds until he was floating far above a vibrant expanse of blue. And moving across that great expanse of blue were the snow-white swirling clouds. How alive they seemed. And then he realized, it wasn’t the clouds that felt alive; it was the planet itself. Is this you? he asked. Is this whole planet a person?

“Not a person . . . not a planet. This is my dream in its entirety.”

But what do you look like, the real you?

And suddenly there was a flash from a round blue-white light; and he screamed the internal scream of a man who has no voice.

The Kiss

“Jeremy, wake up,” came a voice in the darkness. He was floating unaware, no sense of self, no body, no mind, and yet this voice had emerged out of nothingness.

“Come on now,” came the voice again. And somewhere near the sound of the voice there was a faint signal of pain. Blinking on and off again, stronger and stronger it grew, drawing him like a beacon, ever closer to the voice, ever closer to his body, until, at last, he found the pain inside his own body. It was pounding like a hammer at the base of his brain, while its painful echo radiated the length of his body’s spine.

But then his body registered a new sensation, this one much more pleasant: a hand, slender, soft and warm, was upon his shoulder, gently shaking him. And then came the voice again. “Jeremy, please. I need your help. Please wake up.”

He opened his eyes, and her smiling face was before him. His heart gave a leap, for it was Dana! And though it hurt, he tried to straighten up. He was still in the chair before his computer in the study, and his neck was so stiff it was difficult for him to turn his head. Slowly he stood so he could face her, but the floor

of the room began to gently sway; and instantly she was at his side, both arms around his torso.

“You shouldn’t have tried to stand so quickly,” she said, grabbing his arm and pulling it around her neck. She motioned with her head to the small sofa in the corner of the study. “Why don’t we get you over there? It would be more comfortable.”

But now that her arms were tightly around his waist, he decided he would like to keep her at his side for as long as possible. “I think I’ll feel less dizzy if I stand here without moving for a bit. Is that all right?”

“Yes.” And she smiled as if she were able to read his thoughts.

“How did you get in?” he asked.

“Lucky me, you left your door unlocked, though I must have knocked for about fifteen minutes before I tried it. I was afraid something had happened to you.”

And then he remembered his dream, or at least parts of it: a voice, a flash of light . . . looking down upon his own body as he floated above it.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Nothing,” he said. “Just trying to remember a dream.”

“Oh? What was it?”

“I don’t know. All I can remember are bits and pieces from it.”

“So what are the bits and pieces you remember?”

“Well, in one part of the dream I was floating above my body, right here in this room, as a matter of fact.”

“Anything else?”

“I . . . I think there was a voice in the dream. It spoke to me, but I can’t remember whose voice it was.”

“What did it say?”

"I don't know, can't remember."

"Try to remember."

But when he tried to remember, his memory of the dream seemed to fade even faster. "I'm sorry," he said. "My mind's a blank . . . though I do seem to remember there was some kind of explosion. Or maybe it wasn't an explosion. I just remember being blinded by all this light."

"Did it make you feel afraid?"

"I don't know. Maybe a little." And now he noticed that her eyebrows were drawn together. Why was she taking his dream so seriously? "For God's sake, Dana, it was just a dream."

"And you think that because it was a dream, it can't be real?"

Suddenly her physical closeness felt uncomfortable to him. He moved away from her toward the sofa and sat down.

"Jeremy, our dreams reveal to us who we are. We need to pay more attention to them."

And now the old sensation of heat was back, prickling all along his scalp. "You're beginning to sound like that fat-man friend of Rebecca's."

"Maybe that's because those words were his own."

"And you believed him?"

"Yes. But why are we referring to him as a 'he'? Stop pretending. You know, as well as I, he's our grandmother and great-grandmother all rolled into one. And Rebecca, as you already know, is our mother Alaris."

"Oh, my God." He began to massage his forehead with the palms of both hands. "Has the whole world gone insane?"

"It already is insane, has been for quite some time. Don't you see? The dream of this world was based upon fear. No dream that's based upon fear can ever be anything other than insanity."

She knelt on the floor in front of Jeremy and placed a hand on his knee. “While I was asleep I also found myself floating outside my body. But unlike you, I traveled to the realm of the Sphaira, and everything was explained to me: this world, how it began. Jeremy, we don’t belong here. This world is false. And if we don’t wake up—every single one of us—we’ll continue to be led astray by the dream. It will lead us farther and farther from our one true home.”

Jeremy jumped up. “Excuse me. I need some aspirin.”

“It won’t help,” she called as he slipped into the bathroom and closed the door behind him. “What you really need is to face the truth.”

He turned the faucet on full blast in order not to hear her. Why, when he’d been so happy to see her, had she spoiled everything by bringing up all that sphairum nonsense? How could she believe it? It was pure fiction, written by the hands of a lunatic. Had she been brainwashed? Or had the fat man simply hypnotized her?

His hands trembled as he retrieved his aspirin. He hoped it would kick in soon, for the sensation of heat upon his scalp was growing worse. He began to splash cold water upon his face, hoping that would help to alleviate some of the heat; and when it didn’t, he dunked his whole head beneath the faucet, sloshing the water through his hair.

Maybe she’s just suffering from an emotional breakdown, he thought, as he dried his face and ran a towel through his hair; but then he realized he wasn’t in such great shape either. Maybe they were both going insane.

He peed and brushed his teeth, hoping beyond all hope that she was gone. He’d stay in the bathroom all day if he had too.

There was plenty for him to do. His toilet needed a good scrubbing, and it had been a while since he'd cleaned his tub. And on the floor was an unfinished crossword puzzle, as well as several back issues of *The New Yorker*.

Yes, he decided, as he combed his damp hair, I'll stay right here till I'm certain she's gone. But then he paused, his plastic comb halfway through his hair, for there was something about his reflection in the mirror that disturbed him. His skin . . . it almost appeared to be glowing, just as Rebecca's and the fat man's skin had been glowing the night before.

As if in prayer, he bent his head down and closed his eyes. Deep breaths, he told himself. What I'm seeing is not real. It'll go away, once I've calmed myself. And he tried to breathe, counting slowly to eight, but when he opened his eyes again, he could still see the pale, blue-white light. Only now, it wasn't just his face that was glowing. The light was also in his hands and arms, his torso, his legs and feet.

He jumped at the sudden knock on the bathroom door. "Go away," he yelled, and he locked the door.

"Jeremy, listen . . ."

"I said, go away!"

"You're not crazy. I can see the light too."

"What color is it?"

She paused. "Sort of a bluish white."

He unlocked the door and gasped when he found Dana lit up like a glow worm. If anything, her light was even brighter than his, brighter even than Rebecca's and the fat man's had been.

She placed a hand upon his arm. "This light we're seeing is a sign that we're in the beginning of the first stage."

"First stage?"

“Yes. They told me the first stage can take anywhere from five hundred to a thousand years.”

“What are you talking about?”

Dana laughed. “The first stage of awakening, lucid dreaming, when the dreamer becomes aware of the dream. Then comes the second stage, when everyone within the dream decides it’s time to wake up. Easy, huh?”

“Oh, my God,” he moaned and he pushed his way past her.

“Where are you going?”

“To call the police.

“The police? Why?”

“So I can turn myself in.”

“For what?”

“Insanity,” he said. “I’m going to have myself committed. I’m sure the police can give me a ride to whatever hospital will take me.”

“Jeremy, this is ridiculous! If you would just calm down, you’d see it’s not so bad. It’s just light, nothing to be afraid of.”

“Well, I don’t like it, and I want to be rid of it. Would you like me to have them pick you up as well?”

“Certainly not! And you don’t either. They’d only pump you full of drugs. You’d be oblivious to everything. No more books, no more television, no more walks in the park. You’d be nothing more than a vegetable.”

“Precisely,” he said, lifting the receiver of his kitchen phone. “That’s exactly what I’m counting on,” and he began to dial; but at that moment she disconnected him by pressing the metal arm of the phone down.

“Damn it,” he said. “This is my phone, and I will call whomever I like. Now get away!”

"I just wanted to say goodbye."

"Well, then, goodbye. Now move aside and let me make my phone call."

"That's not the way I wanted to say goodbye."

He held out his right hand. "Shall we shake, then?"

"Jeremy, I can't believe you. A woman wants to say goodbye and all you can think of is to shake her hand?"

"For God's sake, Dana! I'm in the throes of insanity—just as you are, I might add. What more do you want from me?"

"To be honest, it's not so much what I want, but what I wish to give. Think of it as a parting gift."

"If it's more advice from that porker friend of yours, you can forget it."

"No, it's not advice. It's something smaller than that, and maybe even a bit more pleasant."

He sighed with impatience. "So, what is it?"

"Well . . .," and much to his irritation she released a nervous laugh, "it's actually something you might have enjoyed receiving two days ago, before . . . you know, all this other stuff began." Her hands were now clasped nervously in front of her. "I only wish I'd had the courage to give it to you then. It might have made things easier for you." She paused awkwardly.

"Well? I'm waiting."

"Okay," she said, and she threw her hands down in exasperation. "Only, I wish you didn't have to be such a butt hole."

"So this your parting gift to me, calling me a butt hole?"

"No, of course not. Now would you please just shut up and close your eyes?"

"Close my eyes? So you can trick me in some way?"

"Jeremy, I promise I'm not going to trick you or harm you."

Will you please just close your eyes? It'll only be for a moment."

He did, but then he opened them again, just as soon as he felt her her arms around his waist. "Hey, . . ."

"Sh-h-h-h!" she said, placing a finger over his mouth. "Are you not able to tell when a woman is trying to be romantic?"

And though the light from both their bodies still made him feel afraid, somehow he found he had a smile on his face.

"So," she whispered, returning his smile. "Do you think you can close your eyes now?" He did, and to his utter amazement, that is when it all began: the kiss that made him whole.

Read Me Now

Sparks!

Magic!

Music in the air!

This kiss contained all that and much, much more, for it made him feel what he'd never felt before: complete, unafraid, washed clean of every hidden feeling of loneliness and separation. Never would he ever hunger for love again, for he knew—oh, how he could feel it in his heart—they were bound now, forever, two parts of a larger whole.

On and on they kissed and all the while he could feel his mind expanding, first, to include every inch of her body, then to include every molecule of her mind. And now he could feel her own consciousness expanding. She, too, was made aware of all his body. She too was now aware of his every thought.

And still they kissed, and both could feel how their minds, joined as one, continued to expand. Further and further, their joint mind grew until, as one, it included all other minds, all other life, all other matter within their world. And in that state of oneness they could see the whole of their being; they could

see the whole of their mind; they could see the whole of the New One—the sleeping, dreaming mind of the New One which was their Self.

But they could also see that within this mind, there was now the consciousness of awareness: awareness of the Self, awareness of the dream, awareness of the fact that every molecule in all matter would soon be awake, and the dream of the New One would be over. “Our dream,” they thought. “It is our dream that will be over.”

And now they could hear the voice of their Combined Self. It was the voice of the New One; but it was also their voice, and soon it would be the voice of all others—every single mind that had ever lived within the dream. “Yes,” said the voice. *“It is our dream, but the time has come for the dream to be over. Every part of this dream is a piece of who I am. I am all people. I am all life. I am every molecule of every substance within this dream, and wherever two or more pieces of myself are joined, there shall I be always—the higher mind of all who live within this dream. Help me to awaken. Help us to awaken that the many will once again be as one.”*

And then came another voice, separate from their own, and its sound brought them back, back to the dream, back to their bodies, back to the moment where their lips were still joined.

“Well, well, well,” came the voice again, and they opened their eyes and turned. Before them stood the smiling form of a girl. And though, not so long ago, they had both once called her Rebecca, now they knew her as she truly was. The body of this girl was nothing more than a disguise, a costume for their mother Alaris to wear until the dream was finally over and the New One—their Soul, their Higher Self—was finally awake.

“Believe me,” spoke their mother through the body of the girl. “It pains me to have to pry you two apart. But if I don’t, I’m afraid you’ll remain like this forever: two small pieces of a much larger whole. Don’t you think it’s time you got to know the rest of your Self?” And she motioned with a hand toward the window. “There are many out there still sleeping, still waiting to be joined to the Self behind this world, the self of the uncompleted New One,” and pointing to the two of them she added, “your Higher Self and theirs.”

And he who used to be known as Jeremy smiled into the eyes of the other piece of himself, his companion dream-self who had once been known as Dana. They were of one mind now, but how much larger their mind would be once every other dream-self was awake. “Yes,” he said, “it is time to finish what has begun.”

“But how are we to do this, Mother?” came the voice of his beautiful dream-self, still snuggled within his arms.

“Oh, I thought we might begin with a little something such as this.” And as the girl who was their mother clicked her fingers, a small and greenish book appeared, hovering in the air as if suspended by an invisible thread.

At the sight of the small, green book, and most especially its gold-embossed title, he who used to be Jeremy threw back his head and laughed. “Are you sure about this, Mother?”

“No, of course not,” smiled the girl, “but it’s a start, and, well, even you have to admit . . .”

“Yes,” he said, and he grasped the book in his hands. “It’s hard to resist a book entitled *Read Me Now*. Only, I wonder . . .”

“What?”

“Do you think it might be possible to change the color of the book’s cover?”

“Whatever for?”

“I don’t know. Maybe it’s just a lingering effect of my past experience with the book, but I really don’t like that color. Could we maybe jazz it up a bit?”

“Certainly,” she said. “How’s this?” And in a flash the book’s cover was transformed from green to glossy violet; and the letters forming its title, from gold to confetti-flecked silver.

“Whoa,” he said. “Now that’s what I call a change.”

“For the better, I hope?”

“Yes, only . . .”

“What is it now, my child?”

“Well . . .,” and he paused. “I hate to be picky, but does this one have a proper end to it?”

“A proper end? Whatever do you mean?”

“You know, a conclusion, some sort of closure for the reader, the words ‘The End’ at the bottom of the last page.”

“Ah-h-h, I think I know what you mean. Well, the only way to know is to look for yourself.”

And so he turned to the end of the book, and in the lower half of the very last page there were two large words in a bold, italic script. He smiled, for they were:

The Beginning

Glossary

a'	at
a'body	everybody
about	about
aff	off
an'if	if
anither	another
atween	between
aweel	oh well
ay, aye	yes
baith	both
blaw	blow
blude	blood
'boot	about
brither	brother
bullering	bellowing
canna	cannot
cud	could
cudna	could not
cum	come
cummin'	coming
deevil	devil
didna	did not
dinna	don't
doun	down
dune	done
drap	drop
e'en	even

et	eat
etin'	eating
ever'	every
fand	find
fither	father
forgie	forgive
frae	from
fu'	full
gae	go
gie	give
graw	grow
grawd	grew
grete	great
grund	ground
gude	good
hae	have
hae'd	had
haud by	believe in
himsel	himself
I'se	I shall
ither	other
ken	know
kenned	knew
kepp	to guard
kilt	killed
luv	love
mak	make
migh'	might
migh'na	might not
mither	mother

mun	must
mysel	myself
na, nae	no
ne'er	never
neigh'bring	neighboring
o'	of
o'er	over
oursels	ourselves
paik	beat
sang	sing
sae	so
shew	show
sonsie	plump
spae	foretell
spake	speak
stae	stay
stap	stop
suld	should
sum	some
summat	something
tak	take
tale	tell
tha'	that
than	then
thank	think
thang	thing
thare	there
thegither	together
tol'	told
trewthes	truths

wae	woe
ware	were
wark	work
weel	well
wee'un	child
wha'	what
whan	when
whare	where
whatfor	why
wi'	with
wot	what
wud	would
wudna	would not
wun	want
ye	you
yer	your
yersel	yourself
yon	that
yung	young

About the author:

In her lifetime Chub Daniels has worked as a janitor, waitress, sales clerk, reporter, librarian, disc jockey, teacher, and copywriter. But throughout all of her life she has continued to ask the same three questions: Why are we here? What in the hell *is* this place? And am I even real? She lives in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia with a husband, two children, two dogs, and a cat. *Read Me Now* is her first novel.

