

Part One
Screaming For Ice Cubes
(Hell)

PROLOGUE

I am evil. It is important you know this from the start. Not just a little evil either. I am a fiend. I have committed acts of unspeakable cruelty in large and small ways, acts so depraved you will recoil in revulsion before my tale is finished. I write this without pride, without any sense of accomplishment for my foul deeds. I write now for the same reason I've done so many horrible things.

Because of Love.

Still with me? Good. Keep reading. You know what kind of man I am; I have told you. If you keep reading my words, then perhaps you are evil too. Maybe not as much as I, but a little. Enough. Enough to appreciate what happened to me to make me this way. Maybe you will understand in a way I never will. Maybe you and I will meet someday and you can explain it to me. Maybe then I won't destroy your life as I have so many others. Maybe or maybe not. I can't guarantee anything. Because I'm evil.

I wasn't always evil. I was born in a small town in Iowa in the early fifties, the youngest of four sons of a Presbyterian minister. My father named me Ephraim after Joseph's younger son. I came more than several years after my next older brother. One day my brothers jealously observed that my mother was at my "beck and call." From then on I was nicknamed "Mr. Beck and Call" which eventually was shortened to "Bek."

I was raised to believe that God had a plan. It was laid out for us when the world began and all the flow of history was His divine watch unwinding slowly, that all people great and small are just performers filling roles in each other's lives. It is both a comforting and daunting philosophy.

I was a very devout boy. I said my prayers on bended knee each and every night with my elbows on the patchwork quilt my grandmother finished making for me the day I was born. I attended church services on Sundays and listened to my father's strong voice call out that we could never know God's plan but it was there. I can see him in the pulpit in his dark suit, his long fingers tightly grasping the polished wood. His hands would always shake because, even though he fervently believed in his message, he never got over a horror for public speaking. He pointed at his flock with his beaky nose and stammered that we were all threads in God's quilt, and if we tried very hard we may see one or two of the patches, but we could never know the whole quilt. I believed, I trusted, I was comforted on those terrible occasions when life went awry for me. Like the time I lost the county spelling bee on the word "cinnamon." I thought that the proctor said "synonym." I should have asked for a sentence. But God's plan said that I would lose, and I did. It stung for a time. I still dislike the taste of cinnamon because of it. Isn't life strange?

I know. You want me to cut to the unspeakable parts, right? I'll get to them. Trust me. You can always trust in evil. But I first need to explain how I came to be this way. Like God, I have a plan. Let it unfold slowly. Where was I?

I was a model student all through school, never once got into trouble, never had to stay after class. One of my teachers jokingly threatened to keep me one night just to ruin my record, but he didn't have the heart. However, I was a self-righteous little prig. I did boast some that I was going to heaven and the other kids were going to burn in hell for partying and fornicating. I used to tell them that when I was in heaven and they in hell they would beg me to bring them a cup of water and I would laugh at them as they had laughed at me. I was never curious or jealous of their actions as they accused me of being. I really felt I was above such low behavior.

Do you suppose there is a hell in God's plan? I'd guess that I'm destined for it in payment for my crimes against my fellow men. Am I then to blame if it was my destiny from the beginning? I don't deny that the choices were all my own. There is nothing more expensive than Free Will. I chose to hurt and hurt again. I could have refrained. I could have attenuated my harm. I could have even done good just as easily. But I decided that after what God had done to me that I was going to devote myself to increasing the amount of suffering in the world to the best of my ability. He gave me great power to do just that. He could have chosen not to. If He didn't why should I? Why should I have to go to hell for it? I've suffered enough anyway. I welcome hell. I can't wait to see it do its worst. It can't be any more unbearable than what I have already been through.

Isn't it funny that you can go into any drugstore or super-market and get painkiller but there is no suffering killer. Which do you think would sell better if the two were offered side by side?

Anyway, for some reason, after graduating high school I was filled with an overpowering need to escape the small Iowa town and go far away. I felt utter claustrophobia on the dusty side roads through the endless cornfields. I got tired of the attachments to so many people, of being my father and mother's son, my brothers' sibling. I wanted to go somewhere where no one knew me and reinvent myself. Not that I disliked myself. I just wanted to explore other parts of me.

I've always kept pretty much to myself. The only amusement that I can remember from my childhood was sketching detailed architectural drawings of bomb shelters. I would fantasize that when I grew up I would grow rich enough to have a multistoried, below ground dwelling constructed right before the final hour prior to an inevitable nuclear war. I would carefully plan where to put the library, food storage, the pool, the movie theater for one. I even fashioned a scale model out of Styrofoam meat trays, parts of model kits, and doll house furniture. I was sure I would slip inside by myself and be the only one besides presidents and potentates to survive the cataclysm. Perhaps this distance led to my personal cataclysm, the pain I couldn't bear. I can easily see how my aloofness would allow me to become the monster I have.

I attended a college on the east coast and studied finance. I intended to become a banker or a stockbroker. I was fascinated with the flow of money and how it grew based on the power of perception rather than actual value. The whole idea of money, paper and metal, being worth someone's labor and goods compelled me. I don't know if I really ever wanted to be rich, but I was driven to be comfortable. Being the last person to receive hand-me-down clothes in a borderline poor family does that to you. I did exemplary in college. My teachers for the most part savored my questing mind as I burrowed into their subjects. A few disliked a student that asked hard questions, but I learned to avoid such types. I got over my need for celibacy and dated casually in college but never formed any strong attachments.

I graduated high in my class and found a job at a large bank in Manhattan. I commuted to work every day from a small boardinghouse in New Jersey. It seems like another life now, but I remember being something like happy as I was reading the prior day's Wall Street Journal while riding the bus through the Lincoln Tunnel. I was good at my job, the details of which are mostly unimportant. Suffice to say I moved sums of capital around into bigger and bigger piles, sort of like a monetary janitor sweeping the floor. It was steady, demanding work with long hours. I guess I enjoyed it, but all the while I was troubled by the thought that there was some other plan out there that I was supposed to be following. I felt that I was more than in the wrong place; I was somehow wasting my life doing inconsequential tasks to no clear end. These feelings were stronger during special days like my birthday and New Year's and grew more and more potent as time went by.

I was continually promoted and took an apartment in Midtown in the Upper Forties between First and Second. I had no real friends to speak of, and frankly didn't much care. I was seeing a nice girl from somewhere upstate. She was pretty and a legal secretary for one of those old, established firms. She was a timid creature given to mild to medium depressions and flights of paralyzing anxiety. I was usually angry at her moods and wasn't very understanding. She was rightly insecure as to the nature of our relationship. I saw her as being very convenient for occasions requiring one to be part of a couple and not very useful for much else. I certainly didn't love her but told her I did if she needed to hear it.

Maybe I was always in some way evil. I like to think I became evil in stages to test God's plan — to see just how much I could get away with — how much the plan would stretch to include my savage acts to so many trusting people. I was continually surprised at how far I was to go.

Simply put, one spring I went on vacation to Quebec. Something happened to me. I'll tell you all about it later on. I can't write about it yet. You don't know me well enough to understand. You haven't earned the right. But if you read to that point you will, I promise you. You'll pay with your innocence just as I have. This is not a tale for the timid. It is in places a hard story with far more horror than some with much more gore. The weak among you should go read someone else, Anne Tyler, maybe. If you already bought the book maybe you can get a refund. You haven't read that far. Have you creased the spine? Or are you the type that has to finish something once you start it?

Peeking at the end won't help, I'll warn you. Like in life, the really horrible parts will be a surprise.

I hope my writing skills are equal to the scope of my story. I have learned and suffered so very much. My journey, like all great journeys, needs to be told. I hope that there is a guide to my fingers as they press each key. Perhaps some long forgotten Muse in a dusty cavern of myth will awake to aid me in soothing the tale from my sad memory. Maybe one of my father's Stone Saints or Angels will give me otherworldly guidance. I hope they do. I have things both beautiful and dreadful to relate. You who are still with me are about to follow me past any limits you have heretofore set. We are about to leave the Harbor of the Soul. We shall sail together past all prior understandings of the world. Here Be Dragons. You have been warned, yet you still hold my little apple pie in your hand. I didn't use any cinnamon so you can taste the fruit better. Good luck. Take a bite.

Now my story starts. It's still that spring and early evening. I'm arriving home after the vacation. Fine curls of budding leaves make branches look like barbed wire. There is a freshness to the air even in the city. There is darkness between the buildings. Debris that was buried in the just melted snow lies in small waterlogged clumps.

I am in my early thirties. Picture me as you will. I probably look just like you imagine. I'm reasonably good-looking. I have most of my hair. I'm average — on the outside.

I stagger past the doorman. He's an elderly guy with slicked back white hair and a sweaty upper lip even in the winter. He served on Iwo Jima in World War II, smokes Kools when he can sneak them, and has glasses that are so dirty that they seem to be a solid piece of gray plastic. He has that crafty squint that men of his generation affect when dealing with the world. He pokes a box of accumulated mail in my direction. I drop my garment bag and duffel bag and snatch the box from him. I glimpse window envelopes and the shine of magazine covers. I paw through the pile looking for Canadian stamps or Boston postmarks. Mail flutters onto the tile floor. The doorman disgustedly tries to catch most of it. He sighs quietly. He never liked me. I was usually rude when he wanted to chat as I waited for taxis. Even then I was a wiseass. I throw the box on my luggage. More mail scatters across the lobby.

"I ain't cleaning that up," he mutters, turning away. He glares out the window like I've disappeared. Outside a woman walks by. She has a face shaped like a leather bicycle seat. Her lips are a stitched seam. Her hair is like a ram's horns curling around the heavy plastic earrings that pull so hard on her lobes that you can see gaps. Smoke curls from two holes in the middle of her face. The doorman pats his shirt pocket where his cigarettes are. His other hand rolls the Navy commemorative lighter around his pocket change. His lips twitch.

I pull out my wallet and look at the Canadian money I forgot to exchange. I pull out an American fifty and fold it. I snap it under his nose. Money has lost all meaning for me. He continues to ignore me. I wiggle it so it fans the tufts of his ear hair.

"What's that for?" he snarls, thinking I'm trying to purchase his dignity.

"Watch this for me, will you?" I say. "I need to run to the hardware store. I'll be back in a while." He and I stare at each other for a bit. I see the milk of cataracts forming on his gray eyes; he recognizes the anguish clouding mine.

He clamps a long yellow fingernail on the bill and tucks it in his blazer pocket behind the monogram of the building logo. "Sure. Be glad to." He's confused. He wants to be nice but doesn't know what to say.

I push through the door and follow the woman down the street. Her smoke turns the spring air stale. I cross to the other side at the corner. I can't believe I'm back in the City. I can't believe I'm expected to go back to living life as if everything were normal. I feel that I'm a water creature walking across a suddenly drained ocean, a being unused to gravity — abruptly, unexpectedly crushed by it. I look up Second Avenue. I imagine that from the moon the only landmarks you could see on earth are the Great Wall of China and the solid line of yellow taxi cabs in New York City. Lights change. I cross the avenue. The smell of onions and garlicky roasted meat drift from the open door of a deli. The animal in me starts my mouth to water, but my stomach is a stone. I can't remember when I ate last. I see images of a restaurant and a menu in French. That would be two nights ago. I don't remember what I ate then. Something with green beans perhaps.

I nearly trip over a panhandler. She squawks at me. I crumpled the edge of the cardboard she's sitting on. Chagrined at my social faux pas I drop Canadian twenties in her paper cup. I wonder if she bought the cup or found it in the rubbish before I decide that it doesn't matter. I try to remember what does matter.

"What's this shit?" she asks me, poking it with her finger.

I stop. "Money. Canadian money." I answer her. I look at her carefully. She resembles Queen Elizabeth pictured on the bill. If God had planned it that way this beggar could be ruling England instead of wearing dirt with some cloth printed on it.

"Serves me right for being so close to the U.N." she sighs.

"I guess so." I respond.

"Is it worth anything?"

"A little less than American. A bank will exchange it for you."

"They won't lemme in banks." she points out. "I tried a couple of months ago to get some penny wrappas — they good fa keepin' ya fingers warm. They kick me out. Of course, I might go Canada someday."

I smile and give her an American fifty. I have one left which is more than I need on my present errand. If not I think I have a couple of twenties. "Keep the Canadian money as a souvenir."

She looks at the bill in awe and says. "God bless ya, Mista."

"Not lately." I rebut as I leave her. She cackles at this.

It get colder as I walk, though there are unexpected warm spots. I pull open the door of the hardware store just before the storekeeper can lock up.

"I just need a few things." I deadpan.

"Come back tamarra." he grunts. "We closed."

"I just need a few things." I repeat. I have a grip on the door.

"I'm all cashed out. Sorry."

I hold my last fifty in both hands. "I need two things, together under ten bucks. The rest is yours."

"Fuck, get 'em." he says and grabs the bill.

The aisles are very close together. Merchandise crowds the space. It's like the place was a solid mass of product that someone carved tunnels in. I wish I had a hat with a

light on it. Quickly I locate the two items I need. I show them to the shopkeeper. He asks me if I want a bag. I shake my head. I want to hold the items in my hand. The feel of them comforts me.

On the way home on impulse I buy two chocolate croissants and coffee at a bakery. Hungrily I stuff the bread in my cheeks. Bits flake off of my lips. Particles cling to my cheeks. I feel the chocolate ring my mouth. It tastes so good I go back and get four more. I'm suddenly so hungry. I gulp coffee. People look at me askance as they walk around me.

Suddenly I realize I enjoyed eating. Is this sensation enough, I wonder? Does this mean that I could continue? I sip my coffee. I mull. I lap my lips. I smell myself. I have been wearing the same clothes for seventy-some hours. There has been so much I haven't noticed. The cloud has momentarily lifted. I'm thinking clearly. I look at the stuff in my hands. I try to remember why I bought them. I wander home.

The doorman has picked up my mail. I put my purchases in the box and take up my luggage. I wait woodenly for the elevator.

"You gonna be okay?" the doorman asks.

"Yup." I say, I lie. I even smile.

My apartment looks the same. I wonder how could everything be so unchanged when I'm so completely altered? I look for a long time at my face in the bathroom mirror. My gaunt expression beseeches me to stop the pain. I toss the luggage in the spare room and lie on my bed. I'm tired. I haven't slept well for a week. My thinking is all muddled. I doze.

I wake with a start at two — two-thirty. I curl up in a ball and whimper. I dreamt the wrong dream, my waking dream, my waking nightmare. I'm so glad I have the stuff I bought, a thin rubber tubing and duct tape. I rummage around under the sink in my tiny kitchenette and find the garbage bags. I spread one out over the window. It just fits. I carefully pick at the tape to get it started. I run a strip over each side. The peeling gray-yellow paint from the sills comes off on the tape. I yank the tape off carefully so as not to rip the fragile garbage bag. The tape becomes stuck on my right palm. I frantically wave my hand. I pluck at the tape with my left and it sticks to that one. I prize it from my fingers with my teeth and spit it away. It sticks to my shoe. I sigh and pull a new strip from the roll and smooth the bag over the first window. I need two bags for each window. I had gotten three rolls of lawn-sized garbage bags as a free gift for buying an oak cassette rack through the mail. At the time, as a longtime apartment dweller, I had felt cheated but now I consider the fact that I own the bags as providential. Before I cover the last window I look out at the City or, more accurately, the office building across the street. Exit signs and forlorn office fluorescent dimly show the empty rooms and hallways. The sky looks like roiling balls of ashy dust. The buildings in the middle distance appear to me to be the compound fractures of some black-boned giant. "I won't miss this." I whisper. I cover the world when I cover the last window. I tape over the electric sockets. I carefully search for any hole in the walls. I find chips and cracks. No matter how small I tape over them. I look at my work and am satisfied. I'm no Cristo, but it should do.

I pull the small stove away from the counter. It isn't very big but comes out with difficulty. I'm puffing. My sweat makes me feel like there are open veins all over my body. I discover a large pile of used food that has fallen between the cracks of the

counter and stove. I sweep the mess up and sponge off the spills with cleanser and water. I don't know if I do this to delay my task or because I like my apartment neat. I shut the gas off and disconnect the stove. I force the tube over the metal end of the hose and tape it in place. I use a pointed kitchen knife to bore a hole in the bedroom door and run the tube through. I brush the sawdust into a pile and scoop it up with a greeting card that I had bought and didn't get a chance to send. I read the verse. Words that I still feel are slivers of glass in my lungs. I consider using the soiled card for a note but can't imagine what I would say. I'm not doing anything except stopping my own suffering.

I think of prayer but no longer believe there is Anyone to pray to. I made a bad mistake in having a faith that I never questioned. My advice to you is this: if you think you believe in something test it, test it hard, and continue to test it or one day you may need your faith and will find that all you have affixed your hopes to will be as insubstantial as flickering shadows on dry smoke. I hope fervently for oblivion. I want an ending.

I turn on the gas before I tape the cracks in the door. I press the tape over the key hole. The gas smells faintly like corn chips. I notice tape still stuck to my shoe. I laugh as I lay back on my bed and fall back to sleep . . .

CHAPTER ONE

I awake. I can only see from one eye. I can't move my head. I can hear nothing except the rhythmic hum of machines which pump air into my lungs. I watch a faint red glow through the dripping plastic bag of my IV. Each drop hangs like rosy melting wax which forms a clear pink pearl that sluggishly glides to the puddle on top of the tube running into the needle in my arm. I watch the slow separation of one essence to form another. I am witnessing birth follow birth, tinged mild crimson. A tear runs along my lower lid. My sight is diminished. Then there is Pain. My flesh is Fire. There are no words; just so much pain. I fall back into it.

When next I awake I see the face, the one I could never hope to see again. But I blink and my vision clears, and instead I see a nurse. She is young and pretty. She smiles but looks concerned. She holds my wrist in her hand. I feel her strong fingers as pressure on my veins. Her palm is warm on the back of my arm. The pain is a velvety blur. She is wearing gold stud earrings. Her nose has a mild leftward cant. Her bottom lip has a faint depression from her teeth in the lipstick. The second button on her uniform is discolored. Her green name tag says "Katie Greenalch." She sees my darting eyes, and her smile widens. In her eyes I see a small child in a yellow bathing suit floating in bottle green water beneath a raw lumber wharf. No bubbles issue from the tiny mouth. The small nose over the blue lips has a mild leftward cant. The sight disturbs me though I know somehow it shouldn't.

"You're back." Katie whispers. "I knew you'd make it. I told the cop and," she blushes and sets my arm on the bed, "your girlfriend that you were a survivor."

I lift a charred eyebrow and give her a look.

"Yes. You are. I shouldn't be telling you this, but you were dead when they brought you in. Clinically gone." She waves her hands like birds alighting in a flurry. "The cop kept badgering the ER guys to keep working on you until we got vitals. I was there. I watched. Even then I knew. You're not done yet." Katie shook her head as if I were a naughty child. "You've been in a coma for weeks. I come by every chance I get to check on you. You see, I've been there. I died when I was eight. Drowned. I fell off my uncle's dock. They brought me back too. I've never met another before. When you are better I'd like to talk to you. I was so young that most of it seems like I imagined it."

I try to shrug but nothing moves. She smiles again, pats my hand.

"I'll tell your doctor so he can remove the life support. You don't need them anymore."

She bends forward and kisses my nose. I can feel there is no romance in the gesture just simple human caring. Her warm lips linger a moment. Inside, deep within, past my capability for understanding, something longs to respond, but despite outward signs measurable by the machines and gauges of man I am still very much an empty corpse, further from my own self as the moon is from the frozen bottom of a fathomless ocean abyss.

"Heal." she softly commands, and I drift away yet again.

Laurie is in my room when I wake up. She's been crying. She's wearing a chalk striped blue business suit so she must have come straight from work. Her long blonde hair is tucked behind her ears. She mumbles a prayer. She is wearing sneakers. She looks so young. I watch her for a bit. I wonder why I don't love her. She's bright. She's beautiful. She has manners and graces in plenty. She is an attentive and eager lover. We get along well and share many interests. We have six years of pleasant memories. And yet something is missing. There has always been a distance, barriers I have erected and maintained. I never let her in my shelter. I know all the time she has been feeling along the walls looking for any portal while trying not to let me further harden the walls. But all the time I have known this day would come, and I didn't want to allow her any weapons. I know she'd never use them even if she had them, but I took no chances with her. I simply chose not to, over and over. When my mother died I could have talked to her about it. The day I got the big promotion I could have called her and included her in the celebration instead of having her find out by accident a week later. There were so many lesser examples.

I hope she doesn't really love me. I don't want to hurt her. This is the last human thought I will have for many years.

I open my mouth. My lips are dry. "Hey." I say.

She looks up but stays in her chair. This seems unlike her. She has always rushed to my side whenever she has seen me. Her green eyes stare at my uncovered one.

"Hi, Bek." She pauses. I must have really disappointed her by trying to kill myself. She must be so confused. I try to come up with an acceptable lie to explain my actions. I find words hard to form. I still have something to protect. By our sheer time together Laurie understands me very well. Enough to make me uncomfortable which might have started this whole mess. Yes, I think, it could be all Laurie's fault.

"I know." she says.

I look at her. She can't have a clue. I wonder what silly notion she has come up with to explain how her beloved knight in shining armor came to be in the hospital.

"I know about your vacation. Where you went . . ."

I stare. So what? Going to Quebec isn't against any law. She hasn't stopped looking at me. What's left of my face is stone. Nothing slips through. No emotion. I work on an expression of befuddlement. I shouldn't have bothered; I've never seen Laurie so sure of herself.

". . . and why." She waits a bit, gives me time to think. It doesn't do me much good.

"I think I'm the only one. I found out completely by accident. I went to get what was left of your stuff from your burnt apartment, I found . . . letters."

I'd forgotten about the letters. Still, there is no name in them. They could have been from anyone. Care was taken. My partner was more cautious than I in relationships.

"What did you do with them?" I ask, hating her for finally having power over me. I'm still alive, and I want my letters back.

"Oh, Bek. What made you this way? I'm not your enemy. Here are your stupid letters. I only read one. I found out more about you in response to a letter from you than I ever got from you in six years." She places an inter-office envelope in my hand. I clutch it to my hip. I feel the stationery through the tiny holes and am comforted.

Laurie sits back down. She says a name. My heart monitor spikes which surprises us both. I fight for calm. The beeping stops and the line evens out. I breathe in and out as slowly as I can.

"I won't tell anyone. You can trust me." Laurie laughs and new tears spill over her high cheekbones. "I don't think anyone else could figure it out. I remember when you met. I saw it then. You are two of a kind. I never imagined you could actually get together. It must have been very strong."

"It was. For a time."

"Is it over?" She looks at my bandaged body. "I guess it must be."

"Yeah." I answer with a laugh.

"I'm sorry. Really. I truly wish that if it's what you wanted, that it would have worked out for you."

I believe her and tell her so.

She pauses and looks at her purse. She runs a finger along the leather. "I guess if I were willing to forget — I'm not saying I can — you wouldn't still be interested in us?"

Politely, I pretend to think about it. I owe her this much for her kindness. Even this is unnecessary. By never letting Laurie in I find that I never really knew her either.

"I didn't think so. I guess this is goodbye. You'll be all right, won't you?"

A lie starts to form. I look at her. I might as well be honest. "I don't know."

"Well, good luck."

"You too. You are an incredible woman. You deserve better. I don't know why things happened the way they did."

"I tried so hard . . ."

"It didn't matter. Sometimes things just don't work out."

She looks again at my wounded face, the damage that I will always carry outside.
"You can't give up."

"I certainly tried hard enough."

"Will you try again?"

"No. I won't."

"Good." She leans in to kiss me but stops herself. She picks up her purse and without looking at me again, she leaves. I have already forgotten her.

For hours I stare at the heavy mesh covering the windows of my room. I look with longing at all that long glass just out of my reach. Burnt flesh should be easy to cut. I wallow in the thought of the pain being over and it brings no comfort. I fear that death wouldn't end the need. I consider that once I'm dead what other options would I have?

I notice the deep gouges in the metal of the rails of my hospital bed. I can see someone lying where I am now. He's handcuffed to the railing, his pain stronger than the metal that held him. He's fighting his bonds until the doctors ply him with other drugs which too slowly ambush his wounded senses. He's screaming, nearly choking on his own spittle. Every muscle in his gaunt body is taut. He is disturbed only by specters of his own making. His tightly closed eyes see horribly distorted, malevolent vermin attacking him. He struggles as hard as he can, but he is held tightly. He doesn't even notice how his wrists are torn and slick. How can he have so lost control? My whole life has been one of self-governance. Even my suicide attempt was calculated to allow me to dominate my own loosed emotions. If his tango into madness and my ballet of control each failed then what course is the true one? Is there any workable response to a suffering so great it sunders reason? I see him slip into the silk of senselessness, his demons choked by only slightly different chemicals. The muscles, pulled to the point of snapping, ease to lie quiescently on his bones. He goes from being a charged engine of torment to a pile of thoughtless meat within three dozen pumps of his heart. I see his name is Mark. I will meet him someday. We will talk and teach each other something dangerous. My certainty surprises me.

"Mark." I whisper. Naming him releases something in me. A flood of memories which haven't happened yet. I see my own madness and another's blood. I see paths unfold and my soles tread many missteps on the apple-tree-lined boulevard of destiny.

I remember my father's most controversial sermon. It was considered extremely scandalous at the time. But my father was a man of conviction and passion for the Word of God. When he felt something was revealed to him, he was never afraid to share it with his flock. It was an Easter morning and my family was all arrayed in the fifth pew. The wealthy members of the congregation sat in the first four. The ladies of the church wore pretty pastel dresses with lace. They were all brides on that day commemorating the resurrection. Flowers lined the aisles and festooned the stained glass windows. I was in a new suit and my tie made a big lump under my chin. My mother was nervous as she'd read father's sermon having typed it out for him. The flock finished a hymn and Father stood in pulpit. Father told us that we each had a special destiny and as much as we struggled against it we would always return to it. To illustrate this he related the story of Cain and Abel. Cain, the elder, was conceived in the Garden of the lust between Adam and Eve. Abel was made later after Adam and Eve had grown to love one another and the act far different. Cain was the author of the first act of violence, of murder of a fellow soul. He was even false with God. Abel, the younger, was the first human to die. Life is a struggle where the divine is conquered again and again by the bestial. This is what made our Lord, Jesus the Christ, so wondrous, my father explained. He was conceived from pure love with no lust involved. Try as we might, humans always had

some measure of lust in the making of children. It was the mixture of love to lust that determined our natures. The more love the closer to the divine, the more lust the closer to the human. The feelings in the mother and the father passed into the seed and the egg and the new soul took form to serve in his or her way God's sacred will. We must each do our best with what we are given. To each was given a gift, even if the gift was a hardship to endure. We must know that God loves us no matter how our natures are made.

The talk of making babies in church offended many members of the congregation and some left dragging their dozing children after them. There was some talk later of having Father fired. Father was, however, very popular and well liked and a larger number argued to keep him on. They all agreed to allow a committee of Sanhedrin read Father's sermons prior to his delivering them. If there was some part they objected to then they could warn the other concerned parishioners not to attend that particular service. Thus all were satisfied.

Except me.

A few weeks after the service I entered my father's study. He was reading Leviticus. He sat at his ponderous oak desk and held the huge Bible open on the green blotter. The Bible had been a gift from his father when he had graduated the seminary. He treasured it. It was bound in leather and had gilt end pages. The ink bled onto his fingers. He looked up and glanced at me then at his stained fingertips. "Ephraim, how are you, son?"

I stared at the floor then looked at his face. "Fine, Sir." I said. I noticed a patch of stubble that he neglected to shave. He often missed spots as he thought of the holy words and deeds while scraping the lather from his cheeks. If you listened outside the bath you could hear him mumble from Ecclesiastes.

"Meaningless! Meaningless!"

says the Teacher.

'Utterly meaningless!

Everything is meaningless.'" he would mutter.

In hindsight a very Zen thought, this. Anyway, I stood in the study, fearful of my father and the terrible question I had come to ask him. He sighed and looked at me, all of eight in my dirty-knee jeans, my hair matted with sweat as I had come in from a roughhouse with the neighbors. I had a brown sweater with flakes of leaves clinging in the weave. He motioned for me to approach him. He smoothed my hair and straightened my shirt collar.

"What brings you into my dusty study on such a fine fall day?" he asked. He said it so tenderly I was emboldened to carry out my mission.

"Father, I would like to know, was I made in love or lust?"

"Of all my sons you are the youngest and you are the only one to think to ask. How strange. The others don't pay much attention, I'm afraid."

"Which?" I implored.

"Ask me some other time when you are older and I can explain it you."

"Then it was lust."

He looked shocked. "What do you know of lust?"

"It's what makes Dave and Josh want to look at the pictures of the naked women behind the schoolhouse. It's wanting to smooch a girl when she doesn't want you to. Stuff like that."

"What is love?"

"It's how the Little Baby Jesus feels for us even when we're naughty."

"Yes. Well. How do I put this? Your mother and I loved . . . love each other very much. We made your brothers for the glory of God. But after your brother was born your mother decided that she no longer wished to . . ."

"Love." I said, concentrating on his face.

"Yes. But one night I was upset and badgered your mother into . . ."

"So I'm wicked." I said.

"I don't know. You have to decide for yourself. You can combat your nature and do good or give in as I did to your lower feelings."

"Do you love me even though I'm wicked?"

"Yes. You are my son."

"As much as Dave, Josh, and Jake?"

"You are full of hard questions. What do my actions suggest?"

"You don't."

"Don't be silly. Go out and play." He pushed me away and went back to reading. I continued to stare at him for a few minutes, then I walked to the door.

"Remember, Ephraim, we can only understand God's way as ink understands the paper."

I closed the door behind me and found a quiet place to weep and think. I believe that this is why I became the man I am. I wanted to gain his love. Finally I gave up. I got passably good at it, giving up. I'm used to not being loved, even by God.

A big black guy saunters into my room. He is wearing a coat of paint with the NYPD logo on it. He is huge. He has arms the size of fire hydrants. The skin on his biceps has stretch marks disfiguring the tattoo of a naked woman on his arm. His stomach is so big it looks like I could put my fist in the indentation in the shirt over his belly button. You could land airplanes with his love handles. He smiles at me. Only horses, big ones, hyperglandular Clydesdales, have teeth that large. He sits on the bed and slaps my shin. Pain arcs up to my skull. It would double me over if I wasn't strapped to the bed. I'd whimper but it hurts too much for me to make a sound. The bed is tilted on a steep cant so it takes all my sapped strength to keep the bedstraps from cutting me in two.

The giant speaks. "Brought you sardines. Lotta protein. Help the skin heal." He holds up a pouch made with yellow colored cellophane. I see a half dozen or so rectangular cans in it. He hasn't stopped smiling. When he smiles, he squints. Perhaps, I thought, he's blind and has wandered into the wrong room.

"Di'n't want to bring you flowers; figgered everybody'd bring you flowers." He looks around my empty room. He drops the sardines on a particularly sensitive part of my chest. My eyes jump past my eyelids. I want to follow them. I let out a small cry.

"Ooops. Hey, it was like that when I got here. You don't got no flowers. You got a pile of sardines around here somewhere?" He looks around the room and under my covers. He reaches for my envelope, but I swiftly tuck it beneath me.

"No. No sardines." I squeak. I'm wiggling, trying to move the cans off me. Maybe it was closer to writhing. I wasn't thinking clearly.

He frowns. Still I can't see any eyes. "Verily, well no wonder you tried to cool yourself. No buds, huh? I'll have to do something about that." He slaps his chest

causing truly stunning waves of flesh to undulate across his body. "I, John Hancock Jackson, shall be your friend." He looks at my name tag. "'Ephraim'." He reads. "What'll they call ya, 'Phram?', 'Phramy?', 'Pramster?'"

"Bek." I hiss.

Hurt, he jumps off the bed. The bed, freed, pops up and tosses me in the opposite direction. When the world stops wobbling I explain, "My name is 'Bek.' It's a nickname."

He smiles again and sits back down. "Hey, I feel your pain. Now, I don't want to be pushy. You don't think you know me, but I'm the guy who pulled your ass out of that fire. I was the first cop on the scene before the firebugs and paramedics. I saw the smoke coming outta the window below you. The guy in the place under you was booking down the fire escape. He was screaming something awful. I believe he was stoned. After I got him calmed down he assured me there was no one else in his place. He thought he heard you were home cause he heard you crying earlier, but being a caring New Yorker, he wanted me to rescue his stereo. So I climbed up the fire escape, and damn it man, you live on the sixth floor. My ass was sucking wind. I saw your windows were all covered, and having a finely trained deductive mind, I thought, 'This looks fishy.' With my much valued night stick I lay waste to your windows. This caused smoke and flames to spew forth about me. I considered getting my black ass outta the hibachi when I glimpsed your supine form laid out like bread in a toaster. 'This,' I thought, 'will not do!'" Jack holds a finger up in the air. He gets up and starts to act out the drama for me.

"I cleared the windows as best I could, but the place was, in the parlance of the firebugs, 'fully involved.' I don't know how you weren't dead yet. I sucked it in and dashed into the room. My shoes were melting. I'll bring 'em in and show ya. Ruined 'em. Just gotten 'em shined too. It was like walking on charcoal. Crackly like. You just lay there like a blue mackerel with a look on your face like someone had ripped off your gonadial sac. I thought, he's dead, but I scooped you up and chucked you over my shoulder. The floor started to give way as I beat feet back acrossed it. If I had scarfed that really tempting looking extra jelly donut earlier I think we'd both be splitting a brewsky in the great beyond. But I been cutting back. Do I look heavy to you? Wife keeps after me. Man's gotta eat. Lotta nutrition in a jelly donut. Fruits. Vitamin C and stuff. Anyway, I leaped through the window just as your bed landed on your neighbor's tune box. You know, I saw it as I passed on the way up. It was a serious piece of electronics. Pitiful. Really. I felt his pain. It's part of my connate charm." Jack grins. Even though it seemed he had too many teeth before, the full effect is dazzling. Piano makers would pay large amounts for directions to his family's burial grounds.

"Apparently the gas had seeped down the space around the radiator pipe — you forgot it when you did all that taping. It caught fire as your neighbor was partaking of some mildly illegal substances. Poof!

"I didn't give you to the paramedics — I call 'em that as they work 'bout as good as the metric system caught on. I mean if you are close to cooling, forget it. They are ghouls. If you are only slightly, very slightly, injured, sure, fifty-fifty they can get you to the hospital alive. Hideously expensive taxi, that's what they are. I don't trust 'em.

"I throw you in the back of the squad car and haul you to the hospital. Keeping you away from the paramedics was how I really saved your life. I whipped you to the real

docs with the serious treatment routines. I dragged you into the ER and badgered the early morning Coolie doctor force into giving you a go. I mean, they were all Orientals, — sorry, Asians — except for that white chick nurse and a brother orderly who stood ready to cart you off to the morgue. Okay, okay, there may have been a Pakistani surgeon who watched, but you didn't need cuttin'.

"You were dead. You weren't merely dead. You were really, really dead. But nurse and I wouldn't let 'em quit. Their little arms got all tired, and they kept pointing out you had no pulse and shit, but I was positive you'd pull through. Okay, it was a little self interest. My wife would kill me if she knew I risked her magnificent Lovabear for a stiff. They all gave up, so I started the CPR. I remembered most of my training. Now those ribs were, I think, broken when I got there. Don't blame me. I shoved on your thoracic cavity and swore blue blazes at you. That nurse, a New York City ER angel of mercy, blushed, but started in on you too. I never, ever heard a woman cuss like that. Whoeee. The ER crew was all standing around probably thinking of sending out for sesame chicken with extra rice, the brother was fittin' you for a toe tag, and . . . you . . . breathed. And a good breath it was too. You said a word but I didn't catch it. The ping pong gang took over and started to ram tubes into you. The Pakistani set your ribs. You may not know this but you were pretty badly burned.

"Well, I tried to talk them out of it, but they gave me a medal. I'd share it with you but the wife has it framed over the mantel. Women are sentimental about shit like that. She was sorta pissed that I took such a huge risk, me having four kids and all, but, hey, it all worked out. I shoulda waited and told you over a beer, but I couldn't hold off. Wanna sardine?"

"Not right now." I say. "Perhaps in a bit."

He looks at me and waves his fingers at me as if he expects me to say something. I misunderstand and shake his hand.

"Hey, just another part of my job in this thankless city." Jack says. "I was happy to be of help."

"You want me to thank you?" I ask.

"It isn't necessary, but sometimes it is customary, like tipping doorman when they call you a cab and you could just as easily do it yourself."

"I wanted to die. You did understand this. Did it not look fairly to your 'finely trained deductive mind' that I did not want to live."

Jack nods happily.

"But you carried me down six stories and drove me to the hospital. After I had pleasantly, perhaps contentedly, achieved my goal, you broke my ribs and returned me to my hellhole of a life. And you want me to thank you for it."

"That about sums it up. Kind of silly when you put it that way. Seemed like what they pay me to do at the time. Killing yourself is still against the law. I don't let people speed down the FDR drive either."

"Do you expect thanks when you give them a ticket?"

"Not really expect it, but I always appreciate it when it happens."

"Maybe someday. But thanks for the sardines."

He grins again. "Next time I'll bring flowers."

"What next time?"

CHAPTER TWO

"You know how there are cat-people and dog-people, I think I'm a people-people." Katie says from the bathroom. She flushes my waste away and rinses out the bedpan. "I collect you like pets. That's all you are to me. Just a pet."

"You have two dogs and a cat." I say. I pause a minute as she slumps in my visitor chair. It wobbles from too many visits from Officer Jack. I look at Katie. She's really beat. A ribbon of her honey-blond hair clings to her cheek. She blows from the side of her full lips to woosh it away, but has to swat at it instead. It has been a very busy night. I see that she has about forty-eight minutes until the next flurry of activity.

I'm somewhat relieved that she is talking to me again. In the beginning she had badgered me incessantly about what I had experienced while I'd been dead. I had told her that I didn't remember any of it. Okay, I did — it wasn't something that just slips your mind like a fourth grade class field trip to some really boring place — I may go into it later, but right now I don't want to write about it. Here's a question Mr. Plato: Is the unexamined death worth reliving? Hmmm?

Anyway, she wouldn't leave me alone. For some odd reason I found that I could look at her and know all sorts of things she hadn't yet told me or were about to happen to her. I knew her dad grew chickpeas and soybeans somewhere in my abandoned Mid-west, that her mom's sour cherry pie won all sorts of awards, that her little brother was troublesome and was in a quasi-reform school in Nebraska. I knew she loved Broadway musicals and drank lots of orange juice. I knew that she had irregular periods. Basically the information came in haphazard ways. I would see images in my mind or would just blurt out some deeply personal bit of her biography. At first it was a game. Katie was sure it was because we had both died and were somehow connected, both members of the Secret Society of the Post-Mortem Party — Please show your death certificate at the door. As hard as she tried she couldn't see anything about me. It was frustrating for her. She'd guess my favorite color was purple when it's green. I'd answer, "No, but your Aunt Edith had a purple spot on the corns on her left toe in the shape of Italy." I was always right. When her need for my nigh-departure experiences became too annoying I rather crassly told her that her fiancé was cheating on her, a true fact that I surmised she would have preferred not to know. What was worse, she understood completely that I was only telling it to hurt her. My betrayal had stung worse than his; mine being deliberate, his sort of feckless.

"What's more you have three overfed goldfish." I finish. She starts to get up. I wave for her to relax. "Mrs. Washburn will buzz you at twenty of three. You can take it easy until then."

She knows better than to wonder if I'm right. She sighs and eases back into her chair. She looks a dozen years younger, all of sixteen. She puts her feet on my bed, the soles of her feet resting against my knee.

"This okay?" she asks, not wanting to hurt me.

"Fine. The skin's all grown back there." I don't tell her that I couldn't quite feel her touch, as if the skin that covers my knee was not quite human skin, but an armor incapable of human feeling.

Of course, she forgave me after a few weeks. I knew she would. I don't know if I would have told her if I didn't think I could get away with it. I felt no remorse for willfully hurting her. She and Jack were two people I had grudgingly come to care for. I know my standoffishness caused them some consternation, but I coldly figured that if they didn't like it then they didn't have to frequent my room so much.

"Tell me a story." she says, reinforcing the image of her as a child in my mind. "And nothing about me. Tell me a story about you for a change."

"No." I know that if I start I will tell all. It still burns inside; the flames haven't yet subsided. Large colorless flares continue to char my sore heart. In the dark I imagine I can see the negative glow of painful torches consuming me. I have secrets that frighten me more than the memories of death. I've been in the hospital for months and have had nothing to do but think about how my life's quilt lay in piles of frayed, scorched, and ruined cloth, but still I haven't learned to understand or control my feelings.

"Tell me any story then."

"Why should I?"

"Because you need to. It isn't important what you tell. Tell me some old ratty fairy tale of yore. Nothing to do with you. Just words in a row. That's all. Let something out. Do it because you have to, if not for me."

I look at her. Katie's not just guessing. She knows this. She's finally read me. I see that she can barely contain her excitement over the completion of our connection. I never had a sister by blood, but Katie has become one to me by circumstance, a sister by heart.

I try to pause, to excuse myself, but she gently prods, "Please, Bek. A short one. I'm too tired for silence. I have to give Mr. Simon an enema in the morning. He loves to moan suggestively and wiggles so. You've gotta take my mind off it. It won't hurt you. I promise."

This too is not a guess, so I inhale. "Nothing to do with me. A story about other people entirely."

"Yeah. Anything at all."

"Do you know why cherries are red?"

"No. It never came up in any of my bio classes."

"Education has really fallen off, hasn't it."

"Shamefully. I doubt I can be an effective nurse without knowing why cherries are red. You best tell me. As a public service and an important lesson to me. Let me start you out: Once upon a time . . ."

"Once upon a time there was a wall. It was made of massive stones piled one atop another over many, many years. This wall had been created by two different families who, though they knew nothing about one another, felt that they needed to protect themselves from the other. Oh, it started slowly, loose stones set down to define a property line. When farmers clear the fields in the spring, rocks crop up. One has to set them somewhere. The edge of the property is a good place. 'Good fences make good neighbors.' But each side felt there must be a reason the other set rocks on the line and out of fear the wall raised higher and higher and thicker and thicker. After a lifetime both families didn't remember what the other was like and imagined all sorts of horrors about

the other. There was the wall, so high and wide; it must be there to protect them from some truly unspeakable evil. Each grew to trust and depend on the wall insulating them from outsiders. Separateness was their salvation. After a time they didn't remember who built the wall. The gods themselves must have put it there to keep them from their enemies. They were a Special People chosen to be secure from the depravity of the Beyond.

"One day, completely by accident, sheer chance really, a young man was walking beside the wall. His name was Pyramus. Young Pye was very lonely. He was of the age when men must marry, but none of his clan appealed to him. There were many beauties who each would love to have him whisper words of love in their ears, but he found them all lacking in one way or another. One laughed too loud, another blushed too much; here a slightly crooked tooth, there too slight a bosom. Pointless things such as this. But when he discovered the flaws, the maiden in question became a nonentity to him. He was obsessed that his wife should be completely perfect. He despised this in his own character as he didn't consider himself all that great a catch to begin with, but his heart would not let him settle for less than what it craved. He was sure that a life of less would be far worse than a life of naught. He had a dream and that was enough except for nights such as this when the moon was full in the sky and only the arms of melancholy held him. Pye's father had all but arranged to have Pye married off to the tanner's daughter. She was pretty enough but so shy that Pye was worried that he wouldn't get to practice his favorite pastime which was arguing. He loved a good intellectual struggle over some odd point, the more meaningless the better. The few dates he had had with the tanner's daughter had ended with her running home in tears as he tried to engage her in debate and all she would do is agree with him. So, vexed, he paced along the wall trying to come up with a reason his father would understand.

"As Pye walked he heard a song so sweet it chased the torpor and pain from his heart. It was a female voice giving shape to his inner soul. He jumped this way. He leapt that way. But he could not locate the authoress of the luscious refrain. It was so maddening he pounded his head against the wall. That's when he found the crack. He put his hand in the hole and felt only its depth. 'Surely not,' he wondered aloud. 'It can't go all the way through.' He put his eye to it but all he saw was darkness. Somehow a flaw had developed in the wall, not very big, but large enough to allow the delightful sound to carry to Pye's wondering ears.

"The song concluded and it was quiet for a moment. Pye gasped. 'Don't stop.' he pleaded into the aperture. 'Pray, continue.'

"'Is there someone out there?'" answered the sweet voice.

"'It is I, Pye of the People.'

"'No, silly, I am of the People, you are From Beyond.'

"'I'm not From Beyond. I'm In Here. You're the one who's Out There.'

"This continued for quite a bit as each tried to convince the other that the one on the far side of the wall was a Horribly Uncouth Outlander Not At All Fit to Lick the Boots of the True Son/Daughter of the Glorious Tribe. Examples and myths were exchanged, derided, and examined and finally both were in tears because they were laughing so hard.

"'What's your name?'" Pye asked.

"'Thisbe, after my mother's aunt.'

"Now that just about ended it for Pye. Thisbe was a ridiculous name. He couldn't imagine telling anyone, 'This is my wife, Thisbe.' It was like a sneeze. It was laughable. Sure, he'd never name a kid of his 'Pyramus', but 'Thisbe?' He started to edge away from the wall when Thisbe said, 'You know, Pye of the People, we may be on opposite sides of this wall, but we're under the same moon.' This simple sentence knocked Pye's heart right out of the park, over the wall, outta there. He was just gone. He couldn't help himself; he whispered, 'I love you.' Now, this was a foolish thing to do.

"Silence. It was very still. Pye held his breath.

"'No you don't. You don't even know me. You're a foreigner . . . and a dope. Nice not knowing you, buster.' Then there was again empty silence.

"Pye waited for hours but Thisbe never came back. The next night of the full moon Pye sat at the crack and hoped to hear her sing again. Even if they didn't talk he craved the sound of her voice. He listened as hard as he could. Months went by. Every night of the full moon he listened, dusk to dawn.

"'What kind of name is Pye, anyway?' the voice said one night.

"'It's short for Pyramus. It has something to do with fire, I think.' He told her of his clan and his life and she reciprocated. At first it was just the nights of the full moon but gradually their conversations and arguments spilled over to other nights. Soon life for each became the time they spent sitting against the wall whispering into that narrow crack. They wrote each other letters and pushed them through with long, long sticks. They grew to know each other as they had known no other. Thisbe admitted that she might kinda like Pye some but she was still sure he was a Loathsome Troll in person. 'Until we touch, I couldn't be sure.' she maintained. They both hated the wall that kept them apart and were very grateful for the crack that allowed them to talk. However, each was also appreciative that the wall kept them from allowing the other see them totally and each feared that too much of themselves would leak though the tiny hole. They had been trained from birth to fear letting outsiders know their true feelings.

"One night of the full moon Thisbe, the brighter of the two, suggested, 'Let's go away together to the Tomb of Ninus. I like to look at gravestones. I hear the tomb's a corker. That way if you're as ugly as you must be I won't have wasted the trip. If not, well, Ooo-la-la.'

"'Geeze, that sounds reasonable.' Pye said, somewhat stunned, the word 'Ooo-la-la' forming tantalizing R-rated pictures in his head. 'I'll meet you under the white cherry tree next moon. Wait, how will I know it's you?'

"'Besides my ravishing beauty and sure look of intelligence?' she asked, 'And the fact that I'll be the only one there in the dead of night.'

"'Yeah, with your shimmering ego lighting up the sky.'

"Thisbe sighed and said, 'Give me something of yours to wear.'

"Pye looked about his person and took off a sock and pushed it through the hole.

"'A sock?!" Thisbe snarled. 'Yee gods, I'm going to the romantic Tomb of Ninus with a guy who gives me a sock?'

"'I'm sorry. It was the best I could do.'

"'Okay. Okay. See you in a month.'

"Now Thisbe got there first because even though she protested too much, she was smitten with poor Pye. She anxiously waited for him, twisting the sock in her hands. After washing it several times she'd come to treasure it above all her possessions.

Suddenly a lioness popped out of the brush. The lioness had just fed on a lamb and its jaws were wet with blood. Thisbe's hand flew up and the sock landed on the lioness's nose. The lioness, full to the gills, went to sleep, but Thisbe fled. Pye came along and saw the lioness, jaws dripping blood and his overly clean sock on its nose and unfortunately jumped to an entirely wrong but easily understandable conclusion. He killed the lioness and, unable to continue life without his beloved Thisbe, took his sword and stuffed it in his broken heart. The blood from his wound shot out and stained the white cherries red. The gods looked down, decreed that the force of true love made the cherries red, then from that day forth, cherries would always be red. The color went better with the leaves anyway."

I stop. "The End." I say after a bit.

Katie is crying. "What happened to Thisbe?" she asks.

"I don't know. Probably still running from something she had no reason to fear."

"Bek, it was a good story. I know it had nothing to do with you."

"Thanks. Katie, you were right. It did feel good to talk."

Mrs. Washburn rings right on time and Katie hurries to get her a glass of bicarb.

I sit alone and look at the sulfur-yellowish light outside my window. The pain has lessened. I feel it's loss. By not holding it tightly inside me I feel that much less connected to the Mystery. I say a name, I live a memory. My pain is mine once again.

All of my second life I felt like I was walking a tightrope through a fog. I can feel the thick hemp beneath my feet. My balance is at times more or less sure as I stride forward. I can't see past my waist and so tell if I'm suspended over a miles-deep abyss or ten inches over the ground. I don't know if the rope has an end or if it will suddenly give way. The fog is thick and curls softly about my body. It is a dense curtain before me and slowly obscures the places I've been. The edges of my feet itch at times as the rope isn't very wide. I wonder if I were to leap would I land on a sure ledge, or another rope, or would I plunge though an eternity of nothingness? I wonder if such a plunge would be any different from walking through nothingness. I try to guess what might await me at the rope's end and cannot imagine that it is anything pleasant. Still, the rope, my journey, is all I can be assured of, so continuing on I go sliding one hesitant foot after another, inching into the foggy future, reaching my arms out to what could be, trying to cope with what came before, my blistered feet burning from the rough contact, but holding with my toes to the experience.

It's nothing that I'm encouraging but over the months I am convalescing people from around the hospital come to visit me. I guess I'm a curiosity, having been past the far side of death. I don't like to talk about myself or open up at all but they all pour out their life stories and troubles. I listen without comment. Occasionally I will see things about them that serves to either enlighten me to their stories or reveals to me the depths of their attempt to deceive me or themselves about their own true natures. Before my death I was never a joiner or a person people tended to spend any time with. I was rather cold and aloof. I still am to a great extent but my death has fashioned in me a curiosity about my fellow living souls that made their attentions tolerable. This curiosity perhaps is what is drawing them to me. I can't say that I'm enjoying their company like I do Officer Jack and Katie's, but each of my supplicants in some ways serves as an education of the human condition. I want to know why people are the way they are. I want to know why

what happened to me occurred. I want to understand my life. I can't look at me with any objectivity but I can study others with such clear precision that I may discover myself.

Derek Hall relaxes in my visitor chair. He's my most frequent haunter. I look at him sullenly. He perturbs me. I realize it's his job as a counselor to try to get me to talk about why I committed suicide and to try to ascertain if I'll try again. Derek has a chin beard and favors sloppy cardigans that have tiny burn holes in them from his pipe. I think the pipe is more prop than vice. He pulls it from the stretched-out pocket of his sweater and with mock ruefulness pretends to want to light it. I wouldn't mind if he did, but hospital rules sternly forbid it. He noisily slurps on the thing anyway. He has wire-rim, round glasses that magnify his puffy eyes. His hair clings greasily to his scalp in a childish wave. He wears corduroy slacks year-round and scuffed penny loafers with 1942 steel pennies in them. He has droopy argyle socks. His nose is dotted with blackheads. "Do you have anything to say?" he asks.

I shake my head with a comforting slowness.

He toys with his wedding ring. "You're just like my wife, my soon-to-be ex-wife. She doesn't want to talk either. Fourteen years we've been married and I can't remember ever having a real discussion with her. Now she wants to leave. Wants to find herself. I'm holding her back. I overanalyze everything, she says. It's sooo textbook. I wouldn't care except that I'll miss being around Jessie. She's my daughter." I've heard all the details of his wretched marriage. This is at least a new rant.

He pulls a tattered wallet from his fraying hip pocket and slides a fingerprint-marred Polaroid of a frowning young girl from a plastic sheath. He hands the square of thick paper to me. I hold it and feel the girl's relief to be parted from her exceedingly curious father. I see how he relentlessly pries into every private thought she can form. I sense she loves him blindly and admires him nonetheless. She is full of grief that her parents are separating and feels very guilty about her need to be left alone. Her anger and confusion and pain boil up my arm. I snap the picture back to Derek and try to hide my disgust over the whole situation.

"I'm worried about how Jessie will be without me to be — ya know — there for her. We have these great rap sessions, Jessie and I. We're like this." He shows me his crossed fingers. The nail of his pointing finger is stained brown with tobacco.

"I think Betty wants to leave because of sex. It's never been very good. Piss poor, really. When we first started going together we did a lot of drugs. Mushrooms, acid, lots of pot. We wanted to keep adding to the experience. We'd just get high on something and screw. I remember trying to time the popping of the amyl nitrate with our orgasms not really concentrating on the screwing but on keeping that leettle inhaler under my nose, and Betty's eyes looking at hers. I felt the spray in my nose, the coldness of it instead of the effect, more than my wad being shot. It got so that I got more pleasure from taking a good shit than humping Betty. Too complex, man. Then, hey, with all the shit we were on it was just so long till we screwed up the birth control. Betty got knocked up. I'm not exactly positive it was mine, we had a pretty open relationship back then, but I figure, what the fuck, gotta marry someone. We laid off the drugs and became wholly organic. Jessie was born in a heated pool with candles all around and all our friends chanting some calming shit. I was out on Ripple I was covertly chugging when Betty was focused on the contractions. All in all childbirth is a really boring scene. But

Jessie was so cute and all, and she might look something like me, I guess. I developed this bond with her. I focused all my love on this tiny being. Betty was not overly into the mommy trip, but I was in my last couple years of school so she had to snap to it, because I just didn't have the time. I had my thing getting my degree, and Betty reluctantly took care of Jessie. She whined about it so much. I sort of supervised so Betty wouldn't fuck the kid up, I mean, early childhood is sooo important, I wish I hadn't been so damn busy, ya know. I wanted to raise Jess; Betty never even wanted to. It turned out okay. Since then I got this job and in my free time I try to make sure Jessie has her shit together. Betty took this class and that but never really stuck to anything. I guess it was only a matter of time before she'd ditch the only commitment she'd at least given lip service to. The bitch. I mean I wouldn't care if Jessie lived with me, but Jessie's got her brain all washed and spun dry that she needs her mommy. Shit, the kid's fourteen. What's she need a mother for?" He sucks a bit of spit from his pipe and pulls a spotted handkerchief from his pocket and expectorates into it.

I can hardly breath. I want so strongly for Derek to leave that I am clutching my bedsheets to keep from throwing my water bottle at him. He continues to speak, bringing to the surface so many pointless, petty wrongs and examples of how he is the better parent. Finally he leaves. Finally I relax. Finally it's over. It wasn't the first time I realized that small monsters walked the earth, but the first time I felt horror because of it. What was worse, I knew I was on my way to becoming one. I knew I could have called Jessie and been able to help her. I could have explained so much to one frightened teenage girl that would have eased what the next few years would bring. I saw her father bully her incessantly into becoming something far from what she would have rather become. I see so many painful relationships that Jessie would have to endure because she was both attracted to and repulsed by men who engulfed and controlled her. The phone sat beside me. I even had Derek's home number which he gave me should I feel suicidal. I sat far into the dark and lived Jessie's pain and tried to ignore it.

Nobody helped me.

Ted Tigie stands at the foot of my bed holding two archive boxes. He was my boss in my other life. I never called him to talk to him in all the time I've been in the hospital. Of course, he's never called me. I know I'm to be sacked but wish the mechanics of it were over with.

"Hey, Ted." I say.

"Bek. I waited till now to come talk to you. I understand that they are letting you out tomorrow. I wanted to discuss your future at the bank."

I don't motion for the chair and he doesn't ask to sit. He wants this done as quickly as possible too. I wish it wasn't Ted doing this. Ted was my mentor long before I went to work for him. He helped me understand the internecine wars of office politics that a hick from the Midwest never learns on the farm. I respect Ted. He's a short guy who favored cool-toned Armani suits. He could be pushy at times but short guys often are. His dark Asian hair's combed straight back. His widow's peak made him seem crow-like. His dark eyes added to this portrait. I always imagined he kept his emotions wrapped in the epicanthic fold of those dark eyes. Since we both kept had a studied distance from people we became something like friends. His hands holding the box looked somewhat

doll-like. Ted's embarrassed about his very feminine hands. He usually hides them against his trouser legs.

"Would it be easier if I quit?" I ask.

"Not really. Of course if you chose to come back it would be in some lesser capacity. The bank feels that the pressure of the job led to your . . . decisions. I am ashamed to admit that there was a rigorous mad scramble to check over your accounts. I'm delighted to say that as I expected there was not one shred of impropriety discovered."

This seemed like a disguised but arch question. I look at Ted. "My problems were not work related. I wasn't playing fast and loose."

"Wouldn't be able to think that you were." Ted says. "We have kept you on till now so you would have the access of our medical benefits while you were getting better."

"Kind of you." I say. I know the legal department must have carefully pointed out my ability to sue if the bank hadn't but don't want the conversation to become unpleasant.

"We are willing to pay your salary for two months from tomorrow, provided you sign certain documents absolving the bank of culpability in this matter."

"Fine, send them to Belinda to look over. I'll sign them." Belinda was a college acquaintance that I used as my lawyer when circumstances demanded that I needed one.

"I brought your things." Ted sets the boxes on the floor by the bed. I thank him. We shake hands quickly. I desperately did not want to read Ted. After all, I had gone to Quebec with his wife.

Ted leaves. I open the first box. I see buck slips with my name printed in the bank's copperplate script. I close the box and feel the reality of not having a job. The bank had been such a big part of my life. For many years it was my life. I was never comfortable being away from the office for extended periods of time. I've many weeks of unused vacation time saved up. I hadn't really thought about going back to work but I haven't thought about not going either. It's a hollow sensation to be sure. I also have nowhere to live. Officer Jack offered to let me sleep on his couch until I was settled but I desperately want to be away from people. I shrug and let the mists gather. I'll broach them when the time comes. For tonight I've got a bed. Tomorrow promises to be a difficult day. I would sleep.

But as it turns out I never get a chance to. Two people have yet to visit with me before dawn.