

OLLI OLLI OXEN FREE

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CHAPTER 1

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER

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Deception, corruption, self-destruction.

Los Angeles Chief of Police Robert Walker, a very docile soul, was a finless fish doomed to flutter helplessly with the flow. Crippled by an understaffed department in a city of eternal social decline, he had little choice in the matter. And it was all so subtle, like the steady leaking of a faucet or the tedious drying of paint. Just a little bit of compromise is alright, isn't it? Before he knew it, he was a whole new person, a corrupted person. He had gangrene of the conscience, and the only reason that he knew he was corrupted was because he didn't feel it anymore when he was deceiving; no amount of rational cognitive dissonance could rescue him now and, although pathetically dependent upon routine and set completely against change, *slow* change seemed to be harmless and undetectable even to the likes of Chief Walker. Similarly, he couldn't remember when or how the process had started, what miniscule thing it was that had set it off, and that's precisely why he knew it *had* started. Putting it off, putting it off, putting it off but the denial couldn't last forever, and Chief Walker knew that he would one day be held accountable for his sins.

In the past he had accomplished oodles of positive work, but his excess zeal primed him to burn out in the stretch. As a younger man he believed in the overall scheme of the system and whole-heartedly professed that mankind, in his

core, is good. To his idealistic heart, rehabilitation was not just a possibility but an eventuality, the inevitable result of all the forces at work. Over time, however, his naked exposure to the elements led him to question himself and his so-called loyalties. All too often he would see the same recurring faces cipher in and out of jail. All too often he would see the ugliness of man, even the ugliest of man—such things that provoked God to smite His hedonistic children in the days of old.

Come a godforsaken February fortnight the tragically enlightened Chief Walker and his small crew will teeter on the brink of collapsing into the final phase. The chief will ultimately possess the power to stop it, but he will not know it. For how do you stop a thing from self-destructing?

Now at this point in his life he had developed a firm, unshakable belief that he was the only good and moral person and that all of his actions were therefore just and logical. He had become one of them. He had become a hypocrite. If the purest, that is to say, most concentrated form of hypocrisy could manifest itself as an animal, then no doubt it would be a bull. Chief Walker had become this bull, immune to reality of reason and absoluteness of truth. Although shy and brittle, he was very headstrong—these two conflicting natures will not strive together forever.

You might think that his selectively obstinate persona along with his impenetrable hypocrisy would kick off a civil war within the police department, but it occurred slowly over time like the shifting Pangaea and the metamorphosis was too gradual for his subordinates to notice. There came a point when Chief Walker had dragged so many of those subordinates into the quicksand with him that he was at liberty to work only with such people. Those who did not conform he had to continually shuffle to different departments and do it again when they came back, much like how a sports team will juggle rookies and mediocre players. It was a system based on chaos and misinterpretation—in this universe it would never end.

Direct communication needed to be avoided. He had therefore recently decreed that access into his office was to be strictly denied (which only meant that you would have to be invited) and that important information for him could only be submitted by slipping a kite into the mail slot in his office wall where he had arranged to have his personal mail delivered. And now at this moment, comfortably secluded from human contact, he was attempting to develop his invention—an impractical modification of the wrench—when he felt that familiar buzzing vibration on his upper thigh. He wasn't expecting a call and he didn't feel like expending the energy to answer it, but he knew, his highest level of gov-

erning consciousness that understands the capabilities and limitations of his mind knew that he would become more prone to answer it out of curiosity as his resolve to not answer it grew. Chief Walker had much resolve to not answer it on this day, so he laughed in disbelief and accepted it. He pulled out his cell phone and the caller identification fingered Roy Rian, a police informant.

Rian, as it were, was an ex-convict who had previously invested nine years in the supermax penitentiary known as Pelican Bay for attempted murder. He truly was the perfect paradigm of the thing that is an oxymoron, a very awkwardly gaunt man, having slender appendages protruding from his swallowing potbelly like pins from a cushion. His nose, abruptly swerving and squishing at the tip, had been broken several times over. With black, beady eyes and big flappy ears, he very much resembled the type of rodent we call a rat.

“What up?” Chief Walker croaked through a raspy throat.

“You get the picture I sent you?” Rian squeaked. There was a background resonance that Chief Walker couldn’t quite place.

“No, sorry.”

“I sent it an hour ago,” he retorted in a bouncing tone with no resemblance of complacency.

“Alright. I’ll call you back in a second.” He hung up and effortlessly navigated through his picture phone. Morbidly callused to the notion of death, he expressed no emotion at the sight. It was a pale-blue body on the rumpled floor of Rian’s motorboat; Chief Walker could not ascertain the sex of the individual. The limbs were bound and a cinder block was probably supposed to be attached to what was now a broken line of rope snaking out from the leg bindings. Though the cause of death was obviously drowning, it did not have to be *murder*—especially if marine life were to nibble at the ligature marks on the wrists and ankles.

This was a classic case of drug-or gang-related violence. The victim undoubtedly being branded with a criminal record, his or her fingerprints would be in the Automated Fingerprint Identification System. But aside from this, the investigation will be a standstill. It will have to start from scratch, having no crime scene and probably no witnesses, being a who-screwed-over-whom type thing without the assistance of paramount evidence.

Chief Walker made up his mind, providing the justification by blindly convincing himself that the area was not his jurisdiction and so he could therefore wash his hands of the matter. There were just too many other crimes to worry about. He was doing the right thing. Yes. He called his informant back.

“Sup,” Rian greeted, the ocean calmly crashing into the receiver.

The chief could practically taste the fresh, circulated air, could feel the salt components melting into his palate. He desperately wanted a vacation, or a swim, or at the least to just get the hell out of this spirit-draining place. “Throw him back in,” he ordered coldly, assuming it to be a he, “but please remove the ropes first. We can always just say it was riptide.”

* * * *

He was a mad scientist—actually more of a medieval scientist—suffering from paranoia, chronic depression, compulsive deviation, impossible mathematical aspirations, eroding loneliness and an obsessive interest in the dead. He’d had a devastating head injury as a young man that changed him forever. He was brain-dead for a grand total of two hundred and ten seconds, and of the brain trauma were born permanent, irreparable effects.

For years he’d been wed to a brothel of handcuff keys, keeping them in his apartment, in his car and on his person. He would knot string on the end where the double-locking pin was and the other end of the string would be tied into a miniature noose, ready to be fastened to a tooth. He was ready for anything. He had also cultivated a seventy-two-character language of encryption for secrecy only to abolish it just as quickly, fearing that someone could put it at a murder site to frame him. Kill or be killed: for survival, he carried tweezers and pint-sized baggies in his wallet so he could collect stray hairs and fibers whenever in a clothing department or even an ordinary person’s home—these to be planted later.

He thought that everyone was out to get him. If you were not a kidnapper, rapist or serial killer who wanted to do to him what those kinds of people will do, then you were part of the system that was trying to capture him. But he wasn’t paranoid without merit because he himself *was* a murderer, a serial killer in fact who tried to frame people in the same ways that he feared being framed himself. He was actually so engrossed in his career that he didn’t comprehend how someone would not want to do it, how someone wouldn’t derive joy from killing.

It had started up in his head, like how all things start. Columbus, Copernicus, Descartes—they all fixated on an unproven concept and set out to make history. At a young age, the paranoid boy thought that he knew better than the established mathematicians, challenging the ancient axioms and proclaiming blatant mathematical blasphemies. His unorthodox beliefs paved the way for his digression, for since he was able to reject the universal language, he was able to reject the given statutes of “Good” and “Evil.”

All of his symptoms were both the cause and effect of his nomadic, possessionless lifestyle. Fresh from the big city of Tampa, he had nothing but his fireproof, briefcase-sized safe stuffed with hundred-dollar bills, his lock-picking kit, a silencer-fitted .22-caliber semiautomatic with laser sighting, his heretical memoirs, a bizarre blob of electronics, a large, expensive buzz saw, his Chevy Malibu, three aliases, the clothes on his back and his plethora of keys. And the apartment he rented.

The Morning Crest Apartments were a haven for the accidents and outcasts of society. It was a run-down complex where nothing seemed to be operative, and the only way to prevent even the financially starving from fleeing in disgust was to continually pour out a series of last-ditch efforts at internal whitewashing. In the mad scientist's apartment, one of the living room outlets was the center of attention. That was where his large Dremmel buzz saw received its soul. He could never grow weary of the piercing melody of buzz saws, of that sound of pure, unadulterated power compressed into the infinite efficiency of a singularity. He was a collector of various buzz saw heads and drill bit heads. At the present moment the stash was at about five hundred altogether.

He cut a square foot into the artificial wood constituting the floor with delicate precision, pried it out with the arc of the blade and reluctantly set the tool down. His apartment was on the bottom of a four-story tower, so he had little room with which to work before coming across the bedrock foundation of cement.

Milking from several amped nine-volt batteries was a strange gadget, his own concoction of various electronic devices. It was very fragile and wobbly, and it bore numerous brand-name stickers. It jiggled in his hands like a water balloon as he tucked it away into the ugly hole. He forged two long pieces of Styrofoam on top of it upon which the square foot of wood would rest. He lined some industrial-strength glue on the edges and crossed the middle, the air pockets whining and popping all the way as he seeped the wood into its groove. He tried to wipe away the excess glue with a towel, but the towel was too dry.

This place just wasn't home yet, and the impeccable kitchen exacerbated this. Everything was too barren and clean. Even the drooling rust from the two unfamiliar sockets in the empty space for the refrigerator was nearly completely scrubbed off. The sink without the labels for hot or cold, looking as if it had been replaced, was sparkling new.

Minding the areas guilty of the glue, he ran some water that could've been hot or cold through the towel. He came to the brink of tears at this: though he had never been able to actually cry, exuberantly living displays—things that could

exist without him but could just as easily be destroyed by him—such as this waterfall always tugged at his heart. He went back to the living room and the glue was already fused when he tried to wipe it away, pulling him even deeper into depression.

Rubbing his fading hairline, he made his way over to the living room window. He'd lived in Pontiac and New York City, but still he had never seen such a dull-gray afternoon sky. There was literally a line where the thick soot was too heavy and fat to ascend into the ocean-blue heavens.

The clear window was stuck: maintenance was not maintaining anything but superficiality. He leaned into it and slapped the frame with the palm of his hand. It jerked open and grinded all the way. Not surprisingly, there was no screen.

Death, taxes and human incompetence.

The complex was littered and disheveled outside, and he wondered why he had migrated to a place so despicable. Oil stains adorned the parking stalls and grocery bags wandered like lost tumble weeds. Though he'd altogether spent approximately three hours in the polluted atmosphere of the City of Angels, the smothering air still made his lungs jump with shallow coughs. Acting fast lest he be infected by the toxins, he scanned the outside world for a second to be sure that nobody was watching and then discarded the ruined towel like an unclean thing. Summoning all his might, he rendered the bastardly window closed and let his breath out.

He had been a stickler about his health from his youth. Being a dedicated runner, his lungs were very powerful and enduring. Equally as important was his physical prowess. Nowhere did his muscles bulge, but he had sharp definition everywhere. He was also ambidextrous, but not by birth: this trait he acquired early on and nursed ever since by writing or eating or masturbating as a lefty every other day, sometimes even more frequently than every other day. He liked it because it felt unnatural.

He went back to check on the scarred floor. Not bad, really. The lanes in the fake wood were about five inches thick. The lines cutting across the lanes were just barely visible, but the parallel lines were impossible to detect. Nevertheless, he would need a rug, for the area will be slightly discolored for some time which will make it obvious that the floor had been dissected.

And still he needed to test his gadget.

It was operated with a small remote originally designed to direct home movies and the like translated from a camera to a VCR. Fuzzy at the cracks where car carpet had snuck in, it was about six inches long by three inches wide. It was old, not compatible with DVD technology. There were no more than a handful of

buttons, primitive features such as fast-forward and rewind. He tested the AAA batteries with the big, red power button and the jumbo eye at the front flashed. The remote itself had not been molested or rewired, but it was the device underground that had been programmed to respond to the defunct remote.

Putting his ear to the scab in the floor, he cleared his throat and said, "Olli olli oxen free."

It came out weird, as he was wrestling with his programmed inhibitions. For to speak audibly in an empty room was, for him, as alien and contrived as soiling his pants; even if he wanted to, something inside would prevent him. He didn't know if other people talk to themselves while alone, but he never talked to himself.

The device did not seem to be operating, but to be on the safe side he aimed the remote and pressed the eject button, thereby aborting any previous commands. This was not a rare thing, as the gadget was not a factory design and would consequently lapse or bug out sometimes.

It contained a wireless modem that could contact any preset phone number and, upon acceptance of the transmission, conjunctionally play a programmed digital recording. Ever since its conception it has always been commanded to dial 911. Every time he relocated, however, it was necessary to alter the recording in order to accommodate the change of address, and this must have been why it stalled. (Upon activation he should have faintly heard it, even under there.) Though he'd never used this contraption practically, he relentlessly took every precaution possible regardless of how ludicrous or cumbersome it may seem.

He pushed the pause button to refresh it and yelled once more into the floor, louder and clearer than the previous, "Olli olli oxen free!"

This time the microphone picked it up and responded with three rhythmic, ascending beeps. Having ten seconds to disengage, he squandered no time.

But he squandered time after that. He just sat there now, breathing in and out, mulling over all the tedious tasks that still lay ahead. Maddening and chaotic as yard work. Is life worth while? Yes. Go get shit done.

He got shit done. Five hours later in the murky twilight, the paranoid mad scientist came back home with a large delivery truck following. The truck parked on the red and two uniformed workers jumped out of the front. Hurrying to the back, they then released the latch, brought down the ramp and stormed inside. Out they came the next instant with a pink mattress, one set of shoulders supporting each end. It was a medium-sized generic brand with rose decorations, the cheapest available mattress by fifty dollars.

Though the mad scientist loved spending money on superfluous restaurants and numerous other service-oriented pleasures, worldly *possessions* were quite meaningless to him (except for practicality, of course). For this reason he did not fear the repercussions of toying with the police and therefore found pleasure in attempting it, in setting up presentations for guests that may never come. In the past he would collect chemicals that are reactant to luminol. Pouring it on a hard surface, he would hit it with a hammer to create a lifelike spatter. All these chemicals were invisible, however, so in order to provoke probable cause of an inspection he would lace certain spots with animal blood. Had the police ever a reason to turn his place upside down, then, under the black lights, his residence would have become an indigo horror show.

The workers humped the cheap mattress over to Apartment 213, treading through the doorway with great caution as if it were sacred. They set it in the bedroom at the mad scientist's dictation.

Back in the truck, they excavated an illustrated rug: a depiction of a black widow spider sprawled out, fangs and red hourglass potently boasted.

Around forty-five ticks of the clock later, all the furniture and appliances were in place. He tipped the workers and they departed. This day his paranoia of being watched became reality, though he would have been surprised if he knew this were so. For Geoffrey Gaskins, a tenant across the parking lot, had been spying the whole while. The mad scientist had no idea, but he had just moved into a predominantly homosexual neighborhood.

C H A P T E R 2

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 4

Ten Days Later

After an excruciating ten days, our mad scientist has acclimatized considerably well to L.A.'s unwelcoming environment. He had gone jogging in that stabbing air and it didn't bother him at all. And above everything else, he'd already had a menial pizza-delivery job for over a week to help account for some of his spendings, reporting tips to the IRS even when he gets none and keeping all of his pay stubs.

And then there was somebody at *his* doorbell.

It couldn't have come at a worse time. He was just getting comfortable in his reclining chair and his favorite girl was on television advertising car insurance, her form flawless and her eyes...she had sparkles in her eyes, those blissful eyes of utterly perfect proportion, eyes with rhizomes of light saying, "I am alive."

There was still somebody at his doorbell.

He first went to his rattling freezer and readied a dose of chloroform, then reluctantly opened the door halfway and poked his head out. "Can I help you?"

"Yes, actually, you can," Geoffrey responded. Geoffrey Gaskins was a stringy, gangly kind of guy with pointy elbows and sharp shins. Despite his bony limbs, however, he retained a definite underlying layer of baby fat in his round face. Accentuating his adolescent looks was his outdated yellow-highlighted hair that revealed the dark roots. "Oh...uh...you know what, I apologize," he said in a

stutter after an uncomfortable silence. “I thought...you see, my friend used to live here.” He was trying to act surprised, but he talked too fast and it sounded contrived. “Jeez, pardon me. I’m Geoff. Geoffrey. Whichever you like.” Geoffrey stuck out a sweaty palm.

“Actually, this really isn’t a good time...” the paranoid man answered, his voice trailing off as he was either too lazy or too inconsiderate to finish the thought. It was infuriating when homosexuals hit on him, and the tag-along fact that he must also therefore have been somewhat attractive was little consolation. And the invert just lingered there, his immobile eyes ruthlessly flirtatious, not going away, not going away, not fucking going away.

“Uh, but...see, my battery just died—my car battery—and I was wondering if you could...you know...gimme a jump.” He glided his pelvis forward and then rocked it back.

Geoffrey’s crush seemed to be consciously hiding his right hand. “I don’t have any jumper cables,” he speared in abhorrence, starting to turn away.

Geoffrey crunched his lips, curious of the man’s conspicuous fidgeting. “Oh...jeez, it’s mighty important, though. If you could just gimme a lift real quick...It’s not that far. I’ll pay you double—triple gas mileage. That is, of course”—he elongated his neck, trying to peer inside—“if you’re not doing anything.” He twisted the toe of his shoe into the ground.

“Hmmm. Since you put it that way...no.” Mr. Paranoid produced a chloroform-riddled rag and quickly smeared it into Geoffrey’s face.

* * * *

What is death exactly? Where is the point where you become unrevivable? Or where are you actually dead? Is there a place where you are neither alive nor dead, where the conducting heart does not beat and the open mouth does not breathe? Is there a moment of absolute clarity right before you die like they all say, a oneness with the universe? Is it worth it to die in order to Know for a span of seconds? This was a noble question for the paranoid mad scientist who had the obsessive interest in death. He knew the answer—he just had to find it.

What he wanted to find was the third mode. Computers, being either on or off, see only in ones and zeros, but there just *had* to be more. There had to. He would consider the possibility of extraterrestrial societies on distant planets. As their understandings of the sciences and mathematics develop, they would surely deviate from ours—especially if their habitats or physical bodies differ from ours

significantly. So then, if they were to ever invent their equivalence of our computer, would it, *could* it have a different amount of modes?

Though the mad scientist was far more intricate than this, having many other tangents that completed his being, this particular obsession propelled him; without it, his life would have been rudderless and vain.

To stare death in the face is the essence of being alive. It is the moment when the brain no longer receives its due flow, or when it thinks that it is not receiving it, that something special happens. Specific and vivid memory is moderated from the conscious world because the cerebral cortex must process current stimuli and assign it the proper priority. The magic of the dream world is that it is simply and solely the opposite of this—it is random, meaningless memory without the throughput of the cortex, symbols ascribed loose significance only via translation of primitive areas of the brain on the lifetime standby. But when the brain begins to die, or when it thinks it is beginning to die, the worlds collide. Those dense memories surface while the cortex is awake and suddenly anything is possible in the mind, a playground where reality is limited only to absolutely all of the input of a lifetime—because of this, the mind thinks there is no limit. A few seconds become years to the brain now, and there is a world real as real except it is not subject to Newtonian physics. And then you can fly. And then you are god of your own world.

He had spent years trying to find the fragile line that separates the living from the dead. What if someone could be on that line, even *in* that line? How long would the person last there? Would the person loiter indefinitely, or would he phase out of it before you even noticed like a quantum particle? Is it possible that everybody spends only a shimmer of a second in that line, being a thing that nobody can neither avoid nor prolong? Is he wasting his time? No. It's there, it's surely there. He will succeed. Nowadays, with modern technology, we can scoop fading souls from the deep; with the boundary permanently blurred, it has become a precious commodity and he vowed ever more to find it. The only difficult question is how much brain damage is required to produce this effect. We all live down in the base of our brains and not in our foreheads like we'd like to believe, and the theory is that the memories will survive down in the cellar of the brain and that the best results will be found there because that is where all life starts. Fuck convention. He didn't need the cortex. No, it is surely possible to accomplish this effect on a lesser mammal, and therefore the cortex's role must be overrated. So it's just one more thing that can be removed without the brain dying...

But his goal remained ambiguous, for if he were to discover this truth while performing on the specimen, then would he have what it takes to go and do the irreversible thing to himself? We come back to the same question: what is it worth to Know? This he will not know until he Knows, videlicet, until it is too late. Perhaps he is faced with a catch-22 that cannot be resolved which will, in effect, mean that he will live out the rest of his life in limbo, but he must nonetheless perpetually strive to find the answer; it is his purpose.

His first test subject on the west coast faded back into the real world, bringing with him a wrangling pain in his head. The subject recognized the apartment as his own, but it was rearranged. It smelled like...smelled like a...what?...smelled like a *hospital* in here. Images of cotton balls and stethoscopes and syringes. That obtuse pain in his head struck again, and he discovered his restraints when he tried to put his hand to his forehead. He couldn't move his hand. He couldn't move his head. He couldn't move anything. He was in the spider's web.

Being a movie buff, he intuitively expected suspense, suspense implying an action in the making. Someone would come to his rescue. But no. There is no suspense in reality. People die when they get kidnapped. No negotiations, no bartering with deluxe head jobs. Geoffrey Gaskins will die a worse death than he'd ever seen in the movies, and there isn't a goddam thing he can do about it.

He could hear his abductor in another room, meddling with his valuables. Geoffrey started to writhe incredulously, flexing every invited muscle in his atrophied body. But it was useless: he was part of the chair. He tried to speak, to beg for his life, but only nonsense spewed out.

The medieval scientist had been waiting with sensitive ears for Geoffrey to come around. He kicked against the laminate flooring, rocketing the swivel chair backward and into Geoffrey's view. "Geoffrey, have you been stalking me?" he asked, trying to emulate the stereotypical evil-yet-courteous voices of all the fictional crazies. There was no real way for him to know rationally whether Geoffrey was a stalker, but he was a paranoid man and it seemed logical to him.

Geoffrey could only manage a hoarse whisper in return. This was a red flag: Geoffrey was in a panic mode, so he would scream uncontrollably soon. The mad scientist had wanted to make small talk first, but he was nonetheless prepared for this detour.

"This was probably a mistake," he lamented as he unwound some duct tape. He screeched a few twirls around Geoffrey's jaw and backrest, thus pinning him further. Nearby a notepad and pen were waiting. He positioned them on the armrest by Geoffrey's right hand and tapped the pad twice with a gloved index finger.

“Y mistake?” Geoffrey nervously penned, fully alert by now.

“Never mind,” he answered nonchalantly.

Geoffrey wanted to ask, and he felt his nerve building. It is easier to write something than to say it; if he was going to do it, then he was going to do it now. And besides, he didn’t have anything to lose at this point. So he balanced the notepad on the arm of the chair and boldly staked his claim, an uncharacteristic behavior for him. “U want me.” He underscored “want” twice.

Never had he heard such a condescending laugh. As if an overweight, pimple-fresh girl approached a popular jock, so the mad scientist cackled. “No, Geoffrey, no. You see, I want your body, but not for sex...” He exhausted his supply of laughs and then tried to continue. “Seriously, though,” he began again, eyes liquid with jubilation, “don’t fret about it: I know that to be just the morphine talking.”

Geoffrey scribbled a question mark.

“In a minute, Geoffrey; you have still as yet failed to answer *my* question.” He peeled off the crowding sheet, awaiting response.

Another question mark.

“You don’t remember? You know, I get annoyed when people ignore me. Disrespectful.” He folded his arms and held a hand to his cheek, rapping on it. “Okay,” he sighed, “one more time. Have you been stalking me? Please don’t lie, because I don’t like to administer thiopental sodium if it isn’t absolutely necessary.” But that was just a bluff, since the morphine should’ve had almost the same effects on the concerned part of Geoffrey’s brain as would the thiopental sodium.

“Sort of,” Geoffrey shyly wrote.

“Sort of? I see. And have you told anyone about me? Some of your boyfriends maybe?”

“No.”

The mad scientist removed that sheet in favor of another fresh one. “How much do you know about me?” he calmly inquired. “What’s my name?”

Geoffrey, panicked again, was reaching a level of critical intensity and fear. His heart rate was climbing too high, despite the sedatives. The mad scientist took heed of this weakness and exploited it with brute interrogation.

“What’s my name!” he screamed, being careful to not spit in the process. “Write it down!”

“The Pizzaman.”

He had to flip the paper around to be able to read it. He had been dubbed dubious names by many newspapers and he had even created his own nickname once, but never before had a victim the honor.

The Pizzaman corked the notepad back around again for Geoffrey, but Geoffrey was hyperventilating through his wide, overburdened nostrils and was impotent for response. “My, your blood is pumping!” he jeered as he estimated Geoffrey’s pulse.

His hand quivering like an injured beetle, Geoffrey blanketed the remaining space with “MORPHENE” in squiggly letters.

The Pizzaman cocked an eyebrow. Why was Geoffrey so excited? Perhaps he had employed an insufficient amount of painkillers. But then, staring into oblivion while mulling this over, he scouted a brown prescription bottle on the kitchen counter. “Yes, Geoffrey, that’s right,” he said absent-mindedly, his fecund mind wriggling around Geoffrey’s medication. “I shot you some diamorphine for your legs.”

With compassionate fear for his jeopardized legs Geoffrey focused in his peripheral vision instinctively as if he’d been commanded not to look, but his legs were invisible. The Pizzaman noted this predicament and briefly disappeared. A loud shatter and then he returned, delicately holding a piece of broken mirror. Standing behind poor Geoffrey, he angled the fragment to accommodate the both of them.

The legs were amputated at the knees with cute little bowties serving as tourniquets. They looked like those model volcanoes with the red tips oozing the remnants of foamy baking soda that your daddy helped you make for the fourth-grade science fair. It was so unreal, so unnatural the way the human of him abruptly ended, like a centaur or a faun. Skin, and then no skin. A leg cut off at the hip is a leg cut off at the hip, but a leg cut off at the knee is the fictitious promise of a leg. The bridge is out, the conduit vapor, the hope razed.

Crazy. This whole ordeal was nothing but the result of the Pizzaman’s jumbled fantasies sketched into reality. He loved this because he could say whatever he wanted to say, be whatever he wanted to be, do whatever he wanted to do. This *was* his fantasy, and in some of our fantasies we are more than human. No human being can be as sick as the Pizzaman without any ricochet in his soul, and he did in fact feel it all the time. Like how a football player is sore six days a week but yet god of the gridiron on game day, or how a drug addict is miserable whenever he’s not high. Killing had become almost a thing of physical dependency for him, and he could often feel physically sick when not caught up in murder.

The Pizzaman was still curious about Geoffrey’s medication, but that temporarily lost its priority when the guinea pig began to convulse. Geoffrey’s eyes clinched and he moaned from deep within his throat. It was a hollow sound, low and ground seeking, like the cries of a cornered cat on its last life.

His toes were burning.

Funny how the mind plays tricks on its host like that. A minute earlier he'd felt no pain; now the pain that he did feel wasn't even real.

"Congratulations, Geoffrey. You have just experienced what we have come to know and love as the phantom limb phenomenon. Very few people ever get the opportunity to be acquainted with the sensation that is tickling your brain at this very moment... Would you like some more?"

Suddenly the Pizzaman realized that he was just talking to himself. The subject stopped convulsing and his eyes rolled back in his head. He was officially in shock. While shining brightly with sweat and tears, his face was simultaneously frozen. Frozen in suspended animation between two worlds, between light and darkness. This was it. This was the optimal gap for which the Pizzaman had been waiting.

The Pizzaman had studied his predecessors thoroughly in order to asymptotically approach the line with more style. What would Jeffrey Dahmer do? Introduce boric acid to the brain. Well, Geoffrey Gaskins had no such things, but there were nonetheless bound to be lots of toys in the kitchen.

Various papers and candy wrappers on the kitchen counters were the scaffolds for empty beer cans and frozen-food boxes. And that prescription bottle. The label was scratched off, leaving a fuzzy, white stripe. The contents must have been the agent neutralizing the morphine. He pocketed them.

He opened the little double doors under the unlabeled sink. Plastic water pipes, some cleaning chemicals and a little trash basket. He rummaged around and found some hardware equipment. He withdrew a Black & Decker drill and delivered it to his admirer's stubby, vacant body, the cord dragging indifferently along the dusty floor. He plugged it into the same outlet that he'd used for his buzz saw back home. He closed his eyes, spiritually soaring with the beautiful, unwavering music of the drill.

Geoffrey did not so much as flinch when the Pizzaman steadied the machine against his lateral forehead. It halted momentarily approximately a centimeter deep, then burst forward as it penetrated the cranium. It was a small drill bit, and he only invaded about an inch—half the bit's length. He retracted it, leaving a freckle-sized hole in Geoffrey's left temporal lobe. A jagged piece of skull fragment trailed the drill as it departed, dangling like a necklace pearl in a sagging bridge of thick, dark blood. That heavy strip of biomatter clung to Geoffrey's face as the Pizzaman brought the drill to the opposing side. Plant, poke, pierce, push, pull. Geoffrey's pupils peeled back to nearly the size of his irises as he stepped one

foot into the grave. A yellow, watery juice trickled out of his nose, momentarily obstructing his airway and forming a bubble.

Using backyard lobotomies such as this, the Pizzaman had created upwards of a dozen zombies. He knew that, should he desire, he could sustain the subject like so for days on end, yet he could never bring him back from the irreparable damage to the cerebral cortex. But this wasn't good enough. He wasn't nearly as close as he wanted. Geoffrey wasn't even a vegetable yet.

This frustration always shadowed the Pizzaman. Sure, he could easily get this far, but what lay ahead was unpaved territory and he was too hesitant to tread new ground. All that he'd done here was mere child's play; this part was only the thinking and personality of the brain, things that are not vital to biological survival. He wanted to see if the human body could, if he were to approach this slowly and carefully enough, operate with only the medulla, if he could extract the all of the brain except for the vital core with the functional drivers and see if the body will even know. For the Pizzaman was convinced, absolutely convinced, that any amount of brain damage does not inhibit lucid dreams. And he was convinced that the key to unlocking this magical gate was merely the same as bringing the person to the line. But he can't get to the line. Why? Why are these results so volatile? It's just fucking electricity. The line is so vague, so obscure, as the space between death and heaven is zero. Geoffrey's already wired to do it, but he won't do it. The Pizzaman has to step in. He can't just let nature run its course. He has to induce it.

Drill again or leave it be? Drill again or leave it be? No, this is good for now. It is a good thing to press the envelope, but he'll do that later. Time to think. Geoffrey must have seen him leaving for work one day—how else would he have known about his job? Did he follow? Did he talk?

This could be a problem for the Pizzaman. Apparently, though, Geoffrey didn't know the Pizzaman's identity. Physical description? Job or company identification? *Address?* Fuuuck. But either way, he wasn't going to tell anybody now.

He went back into the kitchen and looked over the marsh of papers and magnets on the refrigerator. He didn't know what it was about magnets, but he loved the little things, twin magnets that lock into each other most especially. He took out his lucky pair that he always carried around and clicked them. Take off the glove, just real quick take off the glove and slide the pad of the fingertip in to feel the magnets suck it up. Nothing could keep those two apart. They were like lover birds, gliding at the beach, their winding flights maybe to separate for only a moment and then intertwine again as if the whole thing were intentional, flying like lovers do, nothing but the dazzling white ocean, the clean clear air and

they're gone. Together. Love. A picture of Geoffrey with a boyfriend. Reality *glove back on*. Love? An abomination. Made him sick. But it was a clue. It was an old picture: Geoffrey wore a mustache in it. Hmm. The Pizzaman plucked it off the refrigerator and a Golden Gate Bridge magnet fell to the tile like a dead brick. On the back of the photograph a note from an apologetic Craig.

Geoffrey was still in love with Craig, but he wanted to invoke jealousy by finding a patsy lover. The Pizzaman may or may not have been whom Geoffrey had intended, but, in any event, Geoffrey probably didn't reveal his name, even if he knew it. Right? Isn't that the logical course of events? Better hope so. But he still ought to try and find this Craig.

A fierce chill tickled the Pizzaman's kidneys and his stomach growled. In the pantry was nothing but high-maintenance foods. He did not know how to cook and he hated the way things taste out of a microwave. Geoffrey's microwave in particular wasn't too appealing with its food splats dotting the window from when items were overheated. That Geoffrey was truly a slob. But next to that disgusting microwave was a blender, clean and therefore seldom used. The Pizzaman brought it into the living room, set it down by his comatose victim and plugged it in below the drill.

He smoothly swept Geoffrey's chair from beneath its feet and lay him on the floor by the blender, his stubby legs twin-peaking up beyond the limits of the seat.

The Pizzaman rarely liked to use his own instruments for an experiment, and this time was no exception. He had used one of Geoffrey's scalpels from an art kit to slice through the flesh and knee cartilage, and a steak knife to saw through the bone. This removal of the lower legs wasn't mere gratuitous dismemberment: he wanted to see just how far he could go without disrupting the induced unconsciousness.

As it turned out, he could go as far as he wanted.

He selected another scalpel and a pair of scissors for the next exercise. Geoffrey's torso. He cut out a square foot through the duct tape, sweater and T-shirt. Then, with the sheer vulnerability exposed, he gutted Geoffrey like a fish; and it smelled of fish—the nauseating visceral stench permeated the air. He stretched and heaved at the flimsy epidermis, roughly ripping it to the side.

It would not have looked human inside if you were a novice at this. It was messed up in there and you would need a good idea of what it was supposed to look like before you saw this, much like you would need to know what the inside of a calculator is supposed to look like before you repair a broken one. It was rubble in there, like a city that had exposed to the terrors of Godzilla. The visible

organs were compromised, seeping a melancholy bile. Slightly relaxed and loosed like upset soil were all the ventral entrails, risen above the belly line in their casual state due to the turbulence. The heart, however, was still palpitating, its appearance as a red-and-black frog, just minding its own business beneath the ribcage. The dark veins created a mesmerizing illusion of a glowing and a flowing in the arteries, an endless cycle so that you couldn't tell if the heart was the source or the culmination. And the encompassing lungs were taking pitifully weak breaths, yet the diaphragm kept lava-lamping majestically at a respectable pace. Up and down, up and down.

The Pizzaman clicked his magnets and flinted them together. He was tempted to play some music with rhythmic drums to see if the subject's heartbeat would conform to the subliminal thuds. It's been done before. But he can't—the neighbors might hear. Oh, but just look at it. Still going, cover off and all. The whole system in unanimity. He marveled at this: even in this state, Geoffrey's brain could still somehow direct the breathing to pass through the flaring nostrils. While it is true that Geoffrey *was* awake when the Pizzaman wrapped the tape around his lips, most people customarily wind up breathing through the mouth in at least one stage of sleep (though Geoffrey here wasn't technically sleeping). The subject had managed to adapt.

Up and down, up and down.

Better make the best of it, for the subject will not be inclined to fight much longer with such severe internal trauma. *Snap crackle pop*. One by one, the Pizzaman snuck the clenched scissors under a rib and pushed his weight on the plastic grip to free the bones from their prison. It was the right lung, so the frogging heart didn't block his surgery. *Snap crackle pop*.

The ribs cleared out, he snipped at the cables and the organ was liberated. Since the greasy blood made it too slippery to handle with only one hand, he pinned one end between the scissors and carefully guided it to the blender.

But the goddam lid was on. He set it back into the chest cavity, impaled it with the scissors and removed the cursed lid with his free hand.

Up and down...up and down...up and then down but not back up again.

The lung wobbled around on the central spike like it was intelligent life on its own. He steadily fed it into the mouth of the blender, but the lung's overshadowing size mushroom-capped the opening. The Pizzaman divided the scissors and halved the chunk of flesh, gazing deeply at the fuzzy pink spores inside. Due to the overwhelming filth in L.A.'s sky, he'd subconsciously anticipated some grime to line the inside. Not so. Geoffrey was actually a decent specimen, a nonsmoker.

After preparing one half of the lung and discarding the other, he slammed the lid back on and activated the maximum setting. Nothing. The arms were chewing fiercely, but the organ was too big to be ground up. Growling and swearing, he took it out and chopped it into bite-sized pieces. Back inside again. Looks like...tuna. It finally liquefied and he poured a serving into a paper picnic cup.

Just then the Pizzaman became paranoid. Again. If Geoffrey had HIV or some other blood-borne disease, then the Pizzaman had to avoid any blood-to-blood contact. Any cuts in his mouth? No. Upon examination of his forearms, there was literally a coastline where the crimson tide stopped and the beige shore began. Shit, that'll take forever to get out. His arms will be pink tomorrow.

The Pizzaman would always, even for the smallest nick, dress an abrasion with a Band-Aid, serving as a lasting reminder of just how horrifying DNA evidence really is. He had no scratches right now, but he still scolded himself for how sloppy he'd been; it's been years since he ever stupidly committed such a crime without a full-body suit. But yet here he was, with no more protection than the sheath of leather gloves and the warmth of a beanie.

This was crazy. Why should he worry? He was immortal. He'd forgotten that. He *is* the thing in the dark to be feared. He took that mulchy blend and downed it, chewing when necessary. He poured another shot to the brim and had some more. He could ingest anything, but this particular fuel was turbo charging. There was so much energy trapped in that flesh that it felt more dense than a power bar. He grew tired just eating it, as if he'd completed aerobic exercise. A bullet of sweat shot down his sideburn.

The sensation was incredible, like he was feeding his soul. Every time he ate a little more, he drew out the nectar of life and expunged his weakness. It was supernatural. It was godhood.

Who says cannibals have to be disorganized drifters by nature? Noah Webster certainly didn't say so. The Pizzaman had found Webster's definition of "cannibalize" to be decidedly suitable. It allowed for the secondary definition to pertain to machines, stipulating it as the compatible integration of a mechanical part into an unrelated mechanism. The Pizzaman always liked to take that a step further, fantasizing about muscle and machine, slender tendons and ligaments bridging over metal rods and gears, living cells wrapping around the cold metal and there is a rainbow of biological pink and metallic silver, the strength of machines and the flexibility of life to make one superior creature, beautiful efficiency, an organism with a uniform ego that streams through the whole body, no centralized intelligence or sense of self but rather all parts working in one accord. The Pizzaman wasn't a disorganized mess—no, he was the model of synchronization. He

was this machine of which the book spoke. He was a whole new spawn of diversified, lifeless components working as one living consciousness, turning on its own kind and consuming its brethren.

Crucify the world to strengthen your juggernaut.

C H A P T E R 3

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 2

Two Months Later

His name was Nelson B. Cowell. He had a gift—a real-life psychic gift.

Essentially, he would receive a series of connect-the-dots games. He'd touch an object intimate to a crime scene and recover very few facts. It was his subconscious—his dream factory—that generated the chords, and thus these details in the visions were quite bizarre. Often times things could appear backwards or upside down. Or the vision may run in reverse or some other non-chronological order. The hues changed. Voices changed. Sometimes there would be displays of metaphors or symbolism just to make things more challenging, not to mention the nerve-splitting pain.

Nevertheless, his gift had to be utilized. He always had to remind himself that the pain was not indicative of an ailment in his physical body nor did it skim any measurable portion of time off his life. For this reason—and because it was his chief source of income—he was able to keep going. He also had to remind himself that he was not paid for what he did; no, that would be impossible, being that the things he endured were priceless. He was paid for his time, for the time he spent driving around and for the time he spent listening to the drab lectures and for that eternal instant in which he'd go to hell and back.

Of course, there is no scientific way to measure the distance one travels when one goes to hell and back. Specifically, there is no means for detecting how much

pain an individual may be experiencing and, due to the nature of the scientific method, there will never be a way to test whether or not things like telepathy or psychic insights exist. And because what Cowell did was nowhere near an exact science, he had no formal record. His accomplishments—two serial killers that he'd helped police sniff out—were only spread by word of mouth, as good as official for the law enforcement but not to be spoken of to the judicial branch. And just like polygraph tests cannot be admitted into court, Cowell's "official" testimonies, too, were banned. He was a black-market tool for police, giving them information that they, in all respects, should not have; a compass to vaguely point the way, leaving them to still have to trek on their own. The basic result is that the police, once they know their man, must either gather evidence or manufacture it, and that usually spells trouble.

Work was slow. He couldn't ever acquire a respectable, long-term job because he knew that *that's* when the police would call. As a result, he was reduced to disposable mcjobs that slowly weathered his spirit. It was a sadistic happenstance that the police would always be sequestered into giving him some sort of job title like janitor or toilet declogger shit picker upper if he wanted to be on the payroll. The indignifying thing about being a janitor is, naturally, the lack of dignity that comes with the title, and he felt subhuman three hundred and sixty-five days a year.

He was methodically donning the dull uniform as part of his reluctant routine for such a degrading late-night shift when his phone mercifully chimed.

"Hello?"

"Yes, Mr. Cowell?" confirmed a deep, shy voice.

"Speaking."

"Yeah, hi. I'm Robert Walker, chief of police for the city of Los Angeles. I heard a lot about you. Sorry to bother you and all, but would you mind coming down to the station for a while?" He intonated his speech as if indistinctly tired.

This bewildered Cowell: there were no reports of any potential serial killers, and he most assuredly did scour the news for any leads. "Yeah, sure, what's it about?" he asked, clearing his sleepy throat in the process.

"It seems we need your help, sir."

Ha ha! No more tedious, minimum-wage slaving for the next indeterminate amount of time. "Okay," he agreed coyly. "Can you give me directions?"

* * * *

He didn't like cops—he hated them, in fact. He'd always hated them. Who doesn't? Nothing but a bunch of self-righteous pigs. But still he needed them. Part of the beast, as they say. Although independently wealthy, it was imperative that Cowell maintained a job, any kind of job, a purpose to his life. He'd otherwise wind up stir crazy, thus creating a double whammy: he would earn less and spend more on entertainment. Though it was indeed hell, he was instinctively drawn to this simply because he was good at it. He enjoyed the challenge, the puzzle, the game of cat and mouse. It's just what he does.

The police station was considerably more humbled than Cowell had envisioned. An ugly, rotten yellow layer of paint crusted to the corroding building like dried-out starch on cloth. It was a short three stories, begging to be demolished as an injured horse cries for a mercy kill. There were far too few windows present, and those that were present only appeared to be there out of some sort of conceived obligation.

Bracing against the winter cold, he was greeted by a husky man with a lazy eye and a fishlike mouth that never sealed itself. The man had an unpruned beard with constantly painful follicles from when the hair twisted and mingled with itself, this look along with a bald head. Cowell had always considered that look.

He pumped Cowell's hand. "Mr. Cowell?"

"Chief Walker?"

Chief Walker's dancing eye circled his face. "Aight. Follow me, if you will."

The freezing night air died behind them. The interior of this place was just as lifeless as the outside. Computers, lights, desks—all nullified of intelligence. Their sole companion in there was the magnificent glow of the vending machine and its periodic growls.

Chief Walker's office, bright and shining as well, constituted the conclusion of the hall. He dive-bombed his roomy, padded chair, letting out a sigh of satisfaction. The lights made white rectangles on his cardboard scalp.

"I'm gonna be frank with you, if I may." He politely waved for Cowell to fill a seat. "We have a crisis in our hands, and we want it to stay in *our* hands. Detectives Hayn and Wells have been working on this for some time now. Very recently I hired Behavioral Profiler Quinn Jarrod. He's new in this field but he's been doing the doctor stuff for a long time, so I figure he's just as good for less the price."

There it was. "We...have a serial killer in our midst?"

“Looks that way,” Chief Walker said stonely, looking away. “I brought you here early to catch you up on the case. We’re all gonna have a meeting. Real quick—ten, fifteen minutes.” He labored to open a drawer in his desk and a hefty brown folder appeared. He set a few photocopies on top of it, the top copy being that of a typed letter. “We think this is some kinda code. Look it over real quick, please, and let me know what you think.”

Cowell shuffled through the short stack. Behind the letter were several photocopies of driver’s licenses.

“Every time he kills someone, he sends us the fucking driver’s license,” Chief Walker publicized with unease when Cowell kept staring at them. “Calls himself ‘The Pizzaman.’ Yeah, this guy’s real cute.” He motioned languidly for Cowell to read:

“Get IN THE van i Have caNdy.
timE now THAT i Show tHe REAL me.”

>: Ð

2/great Men, each uttered in 2/easy Breaths.

but how did They meet the End?

why, like all the great Sons of Men.

Good Hunting,

The Pizzaman

Cowell read it twice, slowly forming each word in his mouth. He usually liked riddles, but this one lacked originality by his standards. It was unacceptable. “I think he’s a copycat,” he proposed.

“Why?”

“Look: ‘Sons of Men.’ He is emulating the Son of Sam.”

“I don’t know about that...” Chief Walker patronized, fading away and reluctant to elaborate.

“Yes, of course he is. What’s the um, the M.O.? Is he shooting them all with a Magnum?”

“No. Actually, it’s kind of changing every time.”

Chief Walker was definitely hiding something from him, something he’d rather Cowell discovered on his own. So Cowell glanced over the licenses again. There was a dot on four of the six photographs.

“What is that?” he inquired, scratching at one of them with a fingernail.

“You know those little pink donor stickers for your license...?”

Cowell’s eyes lit up. “I see.” He set the papers on the desk. “So he’s killed six so far?”

“That we know of,” Chief Walker exhaled noisily, leaning back in his oversized chair.

“And the donors—he really did a number on them. Did he dismember those ones?”

“More than that. We think he *ate* them...parts of them, at least.” Selective cannibalism, the thing that separates us from animals.

Commotion at the front door. A poorly built middle-aged man stood there fumbling with his keys as if he had the keys to that door.

Chief Walker strained as he lazily got up and huffed down the hall. He unlocked the door and they came back down to the office.

“Come on, please,” Chief Walker said in a new tone, the other man’s company definitely changing his personality. “Let’s go to the meeting room.”

Cowell took up the folder.

“Mr. Cowell, Dr. Jarrod. Dr. Jarrod, Mr. Cowell.”

Dr. Jarrod was a by-the-book man, a man so donkey-stubborn that he would prefer to drive off a cliff in place of asking for directions. He was rather stuck up due to his luxurious standard of living, and he didn’t understand that the events of his life—for better or for worse—couldn’t tell him who he was. Who was he? He was a sneaky-looking fellow with rimless glasses and a pointy nose, a man with a weak backbone and a tendency to bilk. His handshake was pathetically feeble and he, like some of his patients of the past, had a queer phobia of eating gametes. He never went out to restaurants and always washed his hands until they were rough and frictiony from soap before eating or preparing food, and he always made his family do the same.

Cowell did not know when the doctor was due to arrive, but he would guess that he was at the least a half hour early; Cowell would just have to learn this one on the fly.

Chief Walker flicked on the lights in the meeting room. Aside from the huge dry-erase board covering the wall, the room was only occupied by a long wooden table and a neglected projector lurking unneeded in the shadows.

Cowell took a seat and smacked the papers down on the table. Chief Walker was lost for a second and then found a seat next to him. Dr. Jarrod plucked off a marker cap and cleared his throat. Cowell didn’t think he knew that he’d only been on the case for about an hour.

“Let me guess,” Cowell preemptively interrupted. “He’s a white male, brown and blue, thirty-five to forty-five, low self-esteem, women problems, possibly other mixtures of social inadequacies and maybe used to torture furry little animals as a child. Oh, and he was also abused—*sssexually*.”

Dr. Jarrod was taken aback, sensing Cowell's distaste for psychological profilers who, as a whole, are apt to steer business away from oddjobbers like himself. But Dr. Jarrod didn't care about that. He already didn't like the man. He wanted to tell him that all those things were an accurate portrayal of *yourself, you fucking asshole. You can shove it. You are lucky God has not banished you to hell by now, you fu—*

"I just hired him tonight," Chief Walker interjected assuringly. "Tell him quickly what you told me."

"Well, Mr. Cowell, what you are describing is typical of a serial killer, but I have reason to believe that the man we seek is a *multiple murderer*."

"And what exactly is the difference?" He frowned.

Dr. Jarrod jostled the marker nervously. "Well, the term 'serial killer' was coined approximately a quarter century ago by a solitary man, Robert Ressler. Ressler had meant for it to be quite specific, to wit: the repetitive killing of sequential victims with a recurring or evolving modus operandi."

"And this Pizzaman delivers different kinds of pizzas to different kinds of people?"

"Yes." He started to write letters on the board to indicate different races. "With six victims he has already, how you say, *covered the whole rainbow*."

Cowell laughed. "Okay, there you go! He's *intentionally* picking random-looking people. It's the same thing, only different. You know."

"Riiiiight," Dr. Jarrod brogued sarcastically. "As a matter of fact, he is selecting a different neighborhood every time. Most of his victims resemble the neighborhood's majority. Randomness self-evident. He is not a serial killer, and as such we must handle this case differently."

Right then Cowell figured him out. Dr. Jarrod, a conniving, backstabbing son of a bitch who, once he gets to know you, becomes a condescending, pompous jerk.

Chief Walker, having been dozing off next to Cowell, unexpectedly said, "He's trying to throw off our geographical profiling."

"Exactly!" exclaimed Dr. Jarrod, ecstatic that the chief had been able to interpret his information.

Chief Walker drifted back away, still only semiconscious.

"I will be as forthcoming as possible, *Mr. Cowell*," Dr. Jarrod sneered, oblivious of Chief Walker's drowsiness. "Most who do what the Pizzaman does and how he does it have above-average intelligence. If we are going to catch him, we cannot afford these turf wars. Each of us has to put our nose to the grindstone and do our own little job."

Cowell swallowed his pride. Screw it. Let the baby have his bottle. “Okay, what’s your opinion of what we’re dealing with here?”

“Well, as I said, I believe he is a borderline genius...probably a bona fide genius, maybe an intelligence quotient of one hundred sixty. But he *has* left some evidence behind, namely some black fibers—probably ski mask material. However, they tell me that every time the fibers differ a little.”

Cowell knew immediately. “He burns his clothes.”

Dr. Jarrod nodded. “I believe so. That little note is the only real lead we have.”

“How long have you had it?”

“The Pizzaman apparently has some sort of affinity for the police here, most especially our Chief Walker. He has mailed all of those pictures and the cryptic note to Walker’s personal address, which he has arranged to receive here in the station. But to answer your question, I have only been on the case for thirty-two hours and I received the note not less than three hours ago.”

Cowell glanced at the wavering Chief Walker. “That reminds me,” he said, pursing his toes in his shoes. “Walker said that the Pizzaman’s a cannibal.” He swam his hand in the air to tell Dr. Jarrod to take it away from there.

“Yes, of course,” he started, straightening his knotty back. “There are three traditional kinds of necrophage. First, there is religious necrophage, where exclusively the heart, eyes or sex organs are consumed (although sometimes the sacrificial objects are still alive which would disqualify this as *necrophage*.)” He wrote the first term on the board. “Sexual cannibals—cannibals who prey on the sex or type of sexual victim that predominantly excites them—are lumped into this category, but they are not limited to the specific sexual organs. Secondly, we have survival necrophage: usually appendages, but sometimes cranial fluid or even urine can be harvested if the party is facing dehydration.” Again he wrote on the dirty, smudged board. “And then there is dietary necrophage.” He turned to the board. “That involves tribes hunting in jungles or African plains, hunter-gatherers, things like that. It is the only one of the three where the meat is almost always cooked.”

Cowell tweaked his head. “So then, which one is *he*? Are you saying the Pizzaman’s a tribal hunter?”

Chief Walker jerked up. “I’ll be back,” he slurred. “Gonna go get some coffee.”

Dr. Jarrod watched him leave the room, then answered the question. “No. Dietary necrophage is the only one of the three that is never perceived as evil or wrong by those who commit the acts. For this reason, the Pizzaman cannot be in that group. There *is* a fourth kind of necrophage—”

“Stop calling it that.”

“There is a fourth kind of *cannibalism*, but it should be in a different division altogether from ne—cannibalism. Cannibalism is usually a group activity—even survival cannibalism, although a stranded individual will do it to survive—but this fourth kind is always performed alone. One will never see it in professional crime like the mafia. It is an act of the individual, and it has no real...purpose. It is something that, in all pretenses, should not exist.”

He paused and Cowell leveled an expectant stare at him.

“It is called *psychopathological* cannibalism. It means, well, basically where one eats a human like an animal. It almost always implies homicide and not vulturism as a means for the cannibalism.”

“But what makes you and Walker so sure that the Pizzaman really *is* a man eater?”

“Well, all of the details are in the file,” he answered with unease, perhaps trying to mask the unwholesome fascination he had for the multiple—murdering psychopathological cannibal.

Chief Walker came back with a coffee pitcher and three mugs, sat back down and poured himself a helping.

“Welcome back, Chief Walker. The doctor here was just telling me about...what was it called?”

“*Psychopathological* cannibalism.”

“Oh,” Chief Walker delighted, “my favorite.”

“You were saying, Doctor?” Cowell prompted after a silence.

“It is a very vicious act, but I have reason to believe there are alternate motives, specifically a desire for attention. I do not think he wants to actually get caught, but he is *definitely* seeking attention.”

“How come we don’t give it to him, then?” Cowell suggested, almost yelling. “Fight fire with fire. He’ll get spooked and fold. Easy.” Another silence. “Why the hell haven’t I heard of the Pizzaman in the papers?”

The two exchanged glances.

“Yeah, about that,” Chief Walker began. “Uh, Cowell, this city has already seen the Hillside Strangler *and* the Night Stalker, not to mention that fucko Charlie Manson’s family. We really DO NOT need another high-profile thing like that.”

“Okay...but *how* did he not make the papers?” This in particular made him suspicious, for the media always has its wily ways.

“The Pizzaman’s murders all looked way too different. Look, I don’t know how, but the press just hasn’t caught wind yet. The cannibalism stuff we only found because we were *looking* for it.”

“And I presume that those trademark letters with the IDs are the only thing other than the non-kosher diet that even tell you the crimes are connected,” he concluded. “Also, were any of the houses ransacked?”

Chief Walker stroked his mug. “They were *all* ransacked,” he droned monotonously, as if he weren’t answering any one specific person. He was already coming down from the coffee’s finite boost of enthusiasm.

“He’s going to make demands,” Cowell said matter-of-factly.

“Just so I know where we all stand,” Dr. Jarrod began, feeling as though Cowell had overstepped boundaries into his territory, “what *exactly* do you do, Mr. Cowell?”

At light speed Cowell jumped up and tore Dr. Jarrod’s face off, watching him drop to his knees in layers at a time like a building being tricked by a series of explosions and then clutching the creamy wetness on his face with twiggy fingers wallowing in their own sap. At least, that’s what his mind’s eye saw. No, he just sat there and took it, scorching inside with rage. He was entirely unprepared for such an inquiry.

Chief Walker stepped in. “He’s a psychic.”

Dr. Jarrod nodded, pretending to be intrigued. “Sooo...you come in contact with something and then you have some sort of *vision*?”

“More clear a picture than *you* can paint with your bloviating assumptions,” he sabered through clenched teeth. He absolutely hated it when others use that word “vision” and talk about it like they do it. It’s like family: *he* could talk about it or joke about it, but anyone else who did it was just plain rude.

Chief Walker motioned a hand to try to prevent retaliation from Dr. Jarrod, but it proved to be futile.

“You know, a psychic was involved in the Boston Strangler case,” he ridiculed with no decency or self-reproach, bringing that up as though Cowell hadn’t heard it a thousand times before, “but new DNA evidence reportedly dismisses DeSalvo as the killer. He—”

“Oh? What about the Beltway Snipers? You guys didn’t exactly—”

“Hey! Hey!” Chief Walker refereed. “I hired *both* of y’all. Stop!”

They both held their peace, but their minds scrambled furiously over the fresh argument. And then, as his mind started to click, Cowell saw it, saw it clear as day. The answer to the Pizzaman’s stumper.

“Two great men: the Hillside Strangler and the Night Stalker!”

Dr. Jarrod squinted a second. “No, no. That is not correct.”

“Yes, yes it is!” he objected. “It has to be.”

“No, listen a second,” Chief Walker asserted. “He’s right. The Hillside Strangler was *two* people.”

“And the Night Stalker was Satanic,” added Dr. Jarrod. He thought about it a moment and then realized that Richard Ramirez hadn’t yet been put to death. “*Is* Satanic.” He nodded with approval, as if he had to answer to a higher authority within himself. “Satan worshippers only indulge in necrophage—sorry, *cannibalism*—during sacred rituals, thus it is a religious type of cannibalism.”

“But perhaps the Pizzaman doesn’t know that the Hillside Strangler was actually two people,” Cowell pleaded. “And it may be *possible* that he doesn’t have a doctorate in behavioral psychology either. And speaking of serial killers, Charles Manson wasn’t even a serial killer at all by anyone’s definition, and so the Hillside Strangler and the Night Stalker remain the only known serial killers in L.A. history. The Hillside and the Stalker make sense. I mean, what else could it be?”

Chief Walker sighed tediously. “We’ll worry about that later.”

There was another rattling at the door while he spoke. Detective Michael Hayn, drenched from the unexpected rain, was barely visible through the small window in the meeting room. Detective Hayn was a man who owned and operated his own business and probably only worked detective for the thrills and jolies of contributing to society. He was almost ready to be promoted to the rank of an elder, and his face...there was something about his old, battered face that was almost dead looking. He had salt-and-pepper hair that seemed to be one governing mass and an obviously dyed black handlebar mustache that clipped onto his upper lip like a hammer on a tool belt. He had disproportionably large owl eyes that were too opaque for you to peer into his soul and his entire dead-alive complexion sort of snake eye-stared back at you like a reflection in water that you know is not alive despite its lifelike detail and movement.

Accompanying him was his disciple, Detective Byron Wells. Detective Wells was a bastard of sorts, that is to say, his parents were married when he was conceived, but divorced by the time he was born. His life is now lorded over by the all too cliché series of bad luck. Everything that ever has or ever will happen to him is just bad luck. And not only that, but the circumstances always seem to be out of his control as well. Almost as if he’s always tied up or something. Over the years this shaped him into a jumpy youngster constantly trying to prove himself to anybody and everybody present in a given moment. He had a very dry sense of humor and always got a lot of mileage out of his joke that went: “What did Peter say when Jesus went to the bathroom?...Holy shit!” He had a patchy goatee on

his Quentin Tarantino–esque chin that was even uglier a landmark than the hideous acne scars cratering his cheeks, and his hazel eyes were so inhumanly floody that his irises seemed to be ceaselessly levitating above the pupils with a firmament in between. And to top it off, his sense of fashion was worse than his sense of humor. His faux pas was that he always tried to have his shirt and tie identical colors while shopping for them separately, making his somehow incomplete–looking attire disagree by just one shade.

Chief Walker chuckled. “What, do you guys live together or something?”

Detective Hayn glanced at the rookie apathetically. “Yes, but he hasn’t paid rent for three last month in my shadow.” Detective Hayn always stressed the strong e when he said “the.”

“Hey, fuck you!” Detective Wells shot back jovially, not appreciating the severity of such a phrase. And meanwhile people are dying.

Chief Walker must have been accustomed to Detective Wells’s vulgarities, as he did not appear to be momentarily affected. “Alright you two,” he interjected mildly. “This here is Nelson Cowell. He has that sixth sense—he’s a psychic.”

Dr. Jarrod and the detectives sat down, whispering to each other.

“Hear me out first, please,” Chief Walker begged. “I ordered this meeting because we need to get our asses in gear. Now, let’s all please hear what this man has to say”—his lazy eye flapped as he combated the urge to sleep—“then we’re going to...uh, review what we have, one at a time.” He sucked in some air and turned. “Mr. Cowell, please.”

Cowell stepped up to the board and told them about what he did. But he withheld the details of how real it could be, how flamboyant the agony could be. If he were to tell anyone, it would only be the chief.

“Why don’t you ever play the Lotto?” asked Detective Wells, his transcendent eyes laughing at him.

“I don’t think you’re paying attention. I do *not* have premonition. I cannot attest as to whether such a thing exists or not, but *I* don’t have it.”

“But *if* you had premonition, then you’d play the lottery?”

“Yes, of course,” he sighed, appeasing him in hopes that he would shut up. “Any *real* questions?”

Chief Walker raised his hand.

“Yes?”

“So you’re saying that when you touch a murder weapon, you can see what happened?” Although deathly tired, Chief Walker felt as though he needed to keep the rambunctious bunch in check for them to have any chance of listening.

“Yes, but to a much lesser degree. And it need not be the murder weapon per say, just something affiliated with the crime.”

Dr. Jarrod took a sip of some putrid coffee and swished it around as if to try to test it for gametes. “Why does it have to be something involved with the crime?”

“A bee doesn’t know *how* it can see, just that it does see. Likewise I don’t know how it is that I do what I do, I just know that I can do it. However, I can tell you my theory if you like.”

“I would like.”

Cowell drew a square surrounded by arrows on the board. “When something is left out in the sun, the atoms change their structure: they become excited and ionized and so forth. In a similar way, objects that were in the immediate propinquity of a horrible crime are affected. Call it an imprint on the object at a crime scene. I have the aptitude to measure or sense this imprint.”

“Are you aware of the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle?” Dr. Jarrod inquired, undoubtedly trying to trip him up.

Cowell capped the marker and folded his arms. “Enlighten me.” He knew precisely what it was, but he wanted to see where Dr. Jarrod intended to go with this.

“In 1927,” he began, even managing to display his ego with such few words, “Werner Heisenberg stated that one cannot study something without changing it. So when you touch that crime scene evidence, you are in fact changing the very thing that is your source of information. You are therefore creating your own information.”

“But they change me more than I them.” He wrinkled his forehead and thought about what Dr. Jarrod had said. “By the way, Doctor, would this principle of uncertainty apply to *you*?”

He snickered. “No.”

“That’s what I thought,” Cowell derided. “That’ll be all, Jarrod and gentlemen.”

“Alright, thank you, Mr. Cowell,” censored Chief Walker, pretending not to notice the catfight like how a pedestrian pretends to not notice being poked or stepped on in a crowd. “Dr. Jarrod, anything you’d like to add to that?”

“Definitely.”

Dr. Jarrod downed the rest of the stale coffee and brought the mug careening down to the table. The rivals eye-fucked each other as Cowell sat down and Dr. Jarrod claimed his place at the board.

Dr. Jarrod explained that serial killers tend to stick to their own race and general area, and that most will pick up a victim with some kind of a ploy instead of

invading the home like the Pizzaman. Altogether there were only two consistencies linking all or most of the Pizzaman's victims: the cannibalism and the fact that every victim was male. The doctor refused to come to any conclusions regarding the Pizzaman's physical characteristics or psyche. "However, I am certain that he is, as some would put it, a 'terminal genius.' And he is a very experienced killer," he said, raising an index finger, "and he in all probability does not have any siblings—any older siblings."

"Have you considered," incubated Detective Hayn, "that he may be schizophrenic?"

"Well, one considers everything at first, but there was not enough evidence to give that hypothesis any weight."

Detective Hayn was an impudent one. "But just *look* at this. Cannibalism is an impulsive act. It's an insane act. But theee Pizzaman is clearly a guy who likes to take his time. He's not insane like normal insane; he's...uh...aw, damn. I lost it." Detective Hayn stopped immediately as if he'd stepped in dog shit because he realized he was contradicting himself.

"No," Dr. Jarrod rebuked. "Schizophrenia is the near-complete convergence of the mind's reality and our reality. But the Pizzaman is certainly organized and aware of what he is doing in this world. I would be surprised if he does not stalk his victims well in advance and very frequently. Evidence of schizophrenia is paranoia and psychosis, and we have no conclusive reason to believe that the suspect is victim of either."

"Then what *is* he?" Detective Hayn demanded.

"Evil," Cowell lofted, almost jokingly. "Just pure evil incarnate."

"Satanic?" Detective Wells asked. "*Dracula*, son of the devil? Lord of—"

"Possibly," he interrupted, regretful of having stumbled into the kid's apparent lifelong passion; Detective Wells's chalky personality was quickly becoming more cheesy and annoying than the loose homophonic ironies of HBO's *Tales from the Crypt*.

"Not a chance," Dr. Jarrod objected.

"So then what is your conclusion, Doctor?"

Dr. Jarrod grimaced. "Inconclusive."

Chief Walker somehow managed to choreograph the organization. "Alright, Hayn," he said, convoluting the raspiness in his voice, "your turn." He filled his coffee mug again.

Despite his relatively medium build, Detective Hayn was not at all light on his feet. His chair screamed and screeched at the ground as he rose and rotated with the doctor.

“At thee first murder scene...” Detective Hayn trailed off as he saw that he’d forgotten what it was that he wanted to say. “Hang on a sec.” He wheeled around the table to gather his case file, then stomped back up to the board and set the stack down on the table. “At thee first murder scene,” he started again, filtering through the papers, “Geoffrey Gaskins of thee Morning Crest Apartments was attacked and...surgically disemboweled on his own premises. Thee suspect left nothing behind except some blue fibers. We have yet to identify any potential source, but they look like ski mask or sweater material.

“Beside that, we’ve recovered black fibers and only black fibers from all but one of thee scenes—fibers that could not be linked to clothes in thee estranged homes. None of them were alike and we have no matches. No fingerprints, no hairs, no footprints, no witnesses, no nothing.” He giggled with giddy frustration, possessed with an awe of the Pizzaman’s prestigious ability to run up to the police station, eviscerate it, put doubts and fears inside the belly and then stitch it back up before anyone even had a conscious thought about what had happened. “We sent doorbangers to an eight-block radius of every crime scene and also to thee victims’ families and known associates. Nothing at all. We just have to wait for him to do it again, and hopefully he’ll mess up. Eventually.”

Cowell marveled at the conflicting nature of police terminology: if you were to shoot somebody in the face on live national television, you would be arrested as a *suspect*; if you were on trial and the prosecution had a shoddy, circumstantial case, you would hire a *criminal* lawyer. He glanced at Chief Walker who, miraculously, was wide awake, possibly due to Detective Hayn’s squealsome chair. Then Chief Walker motioned to Detective Wells after Detective Hayn had finished.

“He pretty much said it all—we working together,” he said defensively, holding up his hands.

“Aight, then.” Chief Walker got up, sipping repugnant coffee intermittently. “Everyone’s caught up to speed, everybody plugged in. Let’s just keep chugging away at this case...aaand we’ll crack it wide open. We just gotta be patient. We’ll be back here in two weeks.”

But they will in fact *not* be here in two weeks. Monumental decay of this squabbling team will rear its ugly head over the prescribed strip in time. Every one of them will be changed forever. Every day will count.

As for now, the three stooges went home and Cowell was led somewhere else. Chief Walker took him into the massive storage room that contained scores upon scores of boxes. Ignoring index numbers on the shelves, he marched directly to a specific location and broke open a box without bothering to take note of the

serial number. He withdrew a brown paper bag and produced a wristwatch, a blue analog face with dots in lieu of numerals.

“This was one of the victims’ watches?” Cowell asked, feeling *déjà vu*.

He nodded, holding it out for him. “The fourth one. Name was Jerome James.” He thought that by saying the victim’s name he could fuel Cowell’s motivation.

Cowell took it and found a nexus point in the center where the arms pivoted. He tunneled down, down and was permitted into a place with an eccentric haze to it. The orange sky bore what appeared to be upside-down mountains. His skin was bubbling too, burning with white-hot fire. Unfathomable pain. Biorhythmic acceleration.

Suddenly Cowell heard something like a missile and turned around to behold a green van, glowing brilliantly, pulling up to the curb. The driver’s side door opened halfway then quickly retreated when a jogger became visible.

The jogger was running in super slow-motion, smelling like rotten leather, her sluggish eyes taking forever to blink. She was altogether hideous, as her breasts sagged low to the middle of her hips and her face looked as if it were smeared onto the front of her head.

Sooner or later she disappeared out of sight. It caught Cowell off guard when the driver climbed out of the van, moving at relatively normal speed. It was the Boogeyman, arrayed entirely in what had to be black—yes, completely covered, head to toe, with the exclusion of a small portion of the mouth and nostrils.

The license plate! Shit. Still there. Okay. AGF something. 4AGF311. The characters were difficult to read, but the illumination of the van aided him.

The Pizzaman did not tarry on him. The shadows literally chased him as he advanced, scuttling over cars to keep him enveloped, a remarkably inorganic and unintelligent display of order.

Cowell’s skin being devoured and his throat pinhole thin, he stumbled after the Pizzaman. But then, without warning, he instantly found himself in a gold-ish-yellow room with respirating walls and an endlessly swirling vortex in the ceiling, a strange feeling of excitement inside him now despite the sickness and pain.

4AGF311.

And then an excruciatingly bright sound, a sound so reverberating that its echo was worse than its true form. There the Pizzaman was, feeding something to an airborne tree sloth. It smelled like a cemetery barbeque in this place and there was something placid about the air, something between liquid and gaseous with the perfect density and pressure to make objects float. And the Pizzaman kept

feeding it, feeding it right out of his open palm, a thing of dominion and domestication, really: sometimes it is necessary to view a thing as it is when it is powerless just so you can destroy it. And that's exactly what the Pizzaman did. Chunks of its claws sparked as flint against the blows. Matrices of fur split like the parting of the Red Sea. Glossy, living red blood floating in the liquid air. It was there, and then it was gone. Like a television commercial.

Sinking to his knees in the land of the living, he summoned all his strength and gasped, "4...AG...F...3...11."

C H A P T E R 4

▼

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 3

There are many facets of evil, and they need not exist in harmony. There are rapists who walk their women home, international terrorists supporting families, bank robbers limping with philanthropy and affable kidnapers who are the best company that the victim could ask for. And there are recreational murderers who will sacrifice themselves for the lady at the shopping mart when a robbery goes awry, this because such a person's actions are not fueled by greed like the robber's. This is nature versus nurture, and the results can be fascinating. It shows that any society, no matter how pure, will birth abominations. Crime can't be cured. It's in our genes.

It is not an uncommon misconception that the serial killer is a purely Western phenomenon: America has become a country of steeply declining morals with a superimposing attempt at censorship, merely exemplifying a pre-existing curiosity; just like the magician's mystique is amplified by his capability to hide objects of interest, so is the American boy's mind intrigued with hints of nudity and graphic violence. It is the TV teaser that compels him to go and get *more*. Yes, when it comes to the evolution of the individual serial killer, the facts are too stark to deny that America has with a great margin the richest and most fertile soil; this is the inevitable anomaly of our culture and our media—certain of society affected in unknown ways by our newer technologies—hence the widespread fallacies regarding serial killers. But though America is plagued with these pests in dire proportions, serial killers are indeed sprouted worldwide and have always

been around; you just don't hear of the third-world serial killer because the cops don't catch them and the media doesn't report them. And, of course, because Americans simply don't care. So until we stop saying that serial killers are just crazy, until we start to actually try to figure out what the problem is and try to *do* something about it, the mutating global society will continue its mathematically predictable pattern of serial-killer outlay.

Although the actual term used to be very distinct, there are just so many serial killers nowadays that they must be divided into two categories: those that are sane and those that are not. Typically it is easy to recognize signs of insanity by noting disorders in the individuals: usually sexual disorders, specifically the inability to distinguish between the color of blood and the feeling of sexual gratification. In these cases, it can be argued that the American media or some related pseudo-American pop culture had something to do with the conception of the mutated psyche; however, the label of "serial killer" is not entirely accurate when the subject is not sane because insane people cannot be guilty of murder, which brings us to the next type—the criminally sane. A perfectly sane serial killer is much more frightening because the individual has a sharper vision of the contrast of life to death and is consequently much more liable to perpetuate torture on victims. So who are some sane serial killers? Well, the line between sane and insane is so blurred to begin with that this is difficult to say, but the insinuation is that the individual can suffer from mild insanity and still be sane. That is, since we all have our own interpretations of reality, each unique and slightly disagreeing, there is a certain range (a fuzzy range) of allowable deviance from the actual world. Extreme pride, fanatical behavior, obsessive-compulsive disorders, mild schizophrenia and most forms of depression can actually be found in all of us, and it's just the extreme cases that are deemed insane. There is definitely a class that, rather than being compelled to kill, actually fights against the internal force that compels one to *not* kill, usually by some sane progression of thought (though in some cases there are significant acts—rituals—to help one defeat this ingrained inhibition). Therefore, even though they kill, just like a homicidal maniac, this breed is sane, like a hit man; and so what they do is *murder*. These are called psychopaths, and their rarity is the only thing keeping them from killing us all.

But what makes a killer? What makes a killer, really? What do we know about these creatures? Is it power that they crave? Is that why most serial killers are also rapists? But if rape, as they say, is almost completely about power and not about sex, then why aren't there ladies who rape the men? Why is it that most women will use poison instead of direct violence, whereas the men are the savage beasts? Ah, now we come down to it: there is a link between raping and murdering, there

is a link between fucking and natural hardwiring, and through hypothetical syllogism we can establish the already-known link between hardwiring and killing. Don't even try to back out of the conclusion by alleging that serial killers are an anomaly of the population: that is completely irrelevant because their behavior is predictable by patterns. Serial killers are categorized, filed, anally examined and alphabetized so easily that we already have the middle-aged white-male typecast model serial killer image drilled into the head of every American in possession of a television. Regardless of this information, however, we must remember that one needs both the murder gene and the proper life circumstances in order to bring out the killer. For someone to say that they like to kill and for someone to actually get up and do it are two completely different things. The answer is simple: the concept of murder is there, as is the drive. Most people on this earth don't choose to work at NASA, but NASA is there and so some people do choose it; most people think they're appalled by the thought of taking another human being's life, but the thought is there and some act on it. We humans, born into superficial society and molded by the same, have a range of possible behavior that is far more vast than the barriers of society and reason will let us explore, and we naturally love to push those limits. There exists among men the inherent desire to do that which they ought not and to do it as brazenly as possible without getting caught. The prospect of ascending to the psychological summit of a serial killer is, beneath the detestable surface, rousing, as it entails the ultimate vow of a double life. Living a double life can many a time fill that void inside, for buried deep beneath our acquired precepts are paradoxical urges to both build that which is weak and to destroy that which is strong. Life is just too boring on its own. Very rarely do we want to have a thing without wanting to modify it as well. We want to play God, we can't help it; after all, weren't we made in His image? Is it not only when an organism has reached a higher plane of consciousness that it becomes aware of the self? And when it ascends higher, it becomes aware of betrayal. And yes, a truth of the universe is this: evil, pure evil, is the telltale sign that life has ascended to the ultimate plane of consciousness.

One thing that remains to be mystery is conscience. It is by no means an exact science how this operates, or why it feels so bad to do something bad, why it feels so sickening that it even feels unnatural to do certain things. Power of suggestion, perhaps. Mind-shaping of the masses, maybe. We don't need to be told that the body and the mind are very complicated things, but it would be nice to be reminded once in a while what it is we're seeking.

So then, regardless of what we intend to do with the it, what is the it we want most? Human nature: we want what we're not supposed to have, what is arduous

to attain, for sometimes it is not the destination we seek but the journey. Voilà. There is nothing known that is more difficult than the first time you take another life; the conquering of that first hump is a fantastic voyage simply because we are forbidden to take it. And after this point of inflection, after the insurmountable guilt associated with it, there is undeniably a prize. When you feel the knife go in and you see them die, see them let go and plunge into your heart's dungeon—that's your prize. Smile.

There are also consequences, however, the foremost being the fact that you will never again attain the ecstasy that only the first time can provide. This produces mounting recklessness, corkscrewing dejection and, finally, capture. Though most serial killers are not blessed with the proper veracity to confess it even after years of confinement, the majority of them purchased the first hump via an accident. Whether that accident be an inadvertent nudge down a flight of stairs or an overzealous assault is usually what determines the unique pathos of the unique serial killer.

The Pizzaman's first time was no accident.

* * * *

Brutal ringing splintered sharp pain in Cowell's forehead. "Heh-o?" he muttered, tumbling out of bed.

It was Chief Walker, equally as fatigued. "That license plate—it's a Ford van belonging to Jimmy Hernandez."

"Fuck, man, it's..." He squinted at the clock. 12:36. Never mind. "Who?"

"Jimmy Hernandez," he repeated. "The second victim."

"Oh." Again with the personification of the prey.

"Sorry to bother you, but...uh...how long until you can...you know?"

Waking up is hard. "I don't know. What do you have?"

"We got all kinds of stuff..."

His head spinning, Cowell was not preoccupied with his manners. "No, what do you have concerning *him*?" he demanded fiercely. "What the hell did you think I was talking about?"

"Besides those fibers and the mail, *nada*," he answered, remaining ginger. "I put out an APB for that van: I figure our chances are pretty good since he's had it for so long."

"Okay. Could you call me back in like an hour? This really isn't a good time."

"Aight, bye."

Cowell hung up the phone. "Shit."

When the chief called back in an hour, they chatted a while and elected to arrange another meeting between the two of them for tomorrow night. Already this job was annoying, but he had to keep going. He could swear that this was going to be the end of him. He could see it coming.

* * * *

Dr. Jarrod's house covered an impressive three thousand square feet. Every room displayed a decent painting and had the power to sustain its own microclimate. He had three different BMWs in the garage. He'd promised his son and daughter education at UCLA.

But all was not well in the Jarrod house. He had little funds with which to retire, for it was the extravagant life that had slowly accrued debt. To say he was living in denial would not be an accurate statement, yet it would get the point across; rather, he was not denying anything to his cohorts but to himself. He was the hollow man, lying to himself and mortgaging his future for vain delicacies that he now wondered if he even enjoyed, laughing at jokes that weren't funny, sitting in positions that weren't comfortable. He was in fact listening to the timeless Mozart at the very moment, the intense Twenty-fifth Symphony in G minor ending to permit the ostentatious entrance of *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* in Allegro, the one-two-three factorial beginning of pure genius, the notes intended to furiously interrogate the violin to make it tell its dearest of secrets, a dazzling score that literally carries itself, the flood coming now like a crystal river of perfect flow, a transcendent instant fulfilled only twice in the piece, the pinnacle of high notes in the musical world realized and still somehow the flawless exit, and yet Dr. Jarrod felt nothing. The classical is indeed an acquired taste, and Dr. Jarrod was beginning to wonder if he'd ever acquired that taste or if he just listened to the timeless masterpieces when he was alone because he was supposed to. It *is* genius, is it not? It *has* existed for centuries and will continue to do so when the mindless dribble of today is long gone, will it not? Well then why not appreciate it? Any intelligent mind will appreciate it. Any intelligent mind except for Dr. Jarrod's, who instead tried to adapt to his horrific environment by posting an artificial surface of intellect on himself. Dr. Jarrod was expert at watching mountains of dirt pile up under the rug. He could solve any riddle or mind teaser or brain buster, but he couldn't make out a check properly. All practical application of wits was shut out to him, his social life a complete wreck and his money management going down the drain. He was going to lose the house soon, but that wasn't really what bothered him. He didn't know himself. He wasn't in control anymore. He

was a slave to his work, a slave to society, a slave to living the life of appearances that he thought he had to live.

But the foreigner possessing his body was just too good at what he did, and he had to answer what he thought—what he hoped—was his true calling. Putting his family life on the back burner, he composed an exhaustive list of all the serial killers and multiple murderers and mass murderers and whatever the hell else there was in the annals of history from the prolific Sawney Bean to the stone-cold Gary Leon Ridgway. And that would only help presupposing that the Pizzaman really *was* referring to those maniacal men who killed for sport.

But that *has* to be what the Pizzaman had meant. The key to the message *has* to be the two great men of which the Pizzaman wrote. Well, what is a complimenting pair of serial killers who were at large during the Pizzaman's lifetime? During his teen years? He is an experienced killer and therefore aged. Early forties? Late forties? Berkowitz, Bundy, Gacy, maybe the Zodiac...the Zodiac. The Zodiac Killer never got caught. Jack the Ripper and the Zodiac Killer!

But wait. How did these meet their end? We do not know for certain. Of course we do not know—we never caught them that we know of. Old age? That is not like all the great sons of men. The greats were immortalized because they went out in a blaze of glory.

Well, what do the Zodiac Killer and Jack the Ripper have in common besides not getting caught? Sent letters to the authorities and thereby named themselves. Also just like the Pizzaman so far. But they preyed on different types of victims. Different modus operandi, weapons, motive, overall viciousness. And Jack the Ripper did not hail from the Pizzaman's generation. A different century and country altogether. The other side of the world. The Pizzaman is most certainly emulating these two, but the letter does not necessarily have to be pointing to them. Perhaps he does not want anyone to recognize the fact that he is doing something that has already been done before; yea, such a thing could almost be embarrassing. Therefore it is settled: this pair is one step forward and two steps back.

But then who? Gacy and Bundy? That is too obvious. But then again, does he *want* it to be obvious? Does the Pizzaman *want* it to be solved? That would indeed take the attention away from how he is mimicking Jack and the Zodiac.

Gacy was homosexual, Bundy very much not. Gacy and Bundy...both two syllables—uttered in two easy breaths. Both were insatiable sexual predators, yet were passive: they got the prey to come to them. Both were formally executed by the U.S. government. Both liked handcuffs...This is no coincidence. Gacy and Bundy, very promising. Good for now.

Was that the brunt of the second paragraph?...No. Why the slashes after the twos? Why are certain words capitalized? Men, Breaths, They, End, Sons, Men. What? Ah, all are nouns...all *of* the nouns...all of the nouns plus the one pronoun. MBTESM—can that rearrange to spell anything? No. Only one vowel, not going to work. Summary of second paragraph: capitalized nouns, slashes after twos, numerical twos used. Gacy and Bundy.

Now what about that first paragraph? “Get IN THE van i Have caNdy. timE now THAT i Show tHe REAL me.” Random letter cases? Any consistencies? Only the one preposition, and it is upper cased. The articles too? No: “tHe.” Preposition in upper case...the verbs are capitalized. All of the nouns are lower cased—at the start of the noun, at least. Summary of first paragraph: inconclusive.

In one, the nouns are all capitalized and the verbs lower cased. The other is vice versa. MBTESM...GIN THE HNE THAT SHREAL—nonsense. Anything hidden in there?...No. Were the lower cases significant in the second paragraph? great en each uttered in easy reaths but how did hey meet the nd why like all the great ons of en—also nonsense. What about just the leading letters? geeuierbhdhmtnwlatgooe. What about the first paragraph? et van i ave cady tim now i how te me. Leading letters? eviactnihtm. Much shorter, more specific. There could be something there. Definitely could be something there. Can that be cleaned up? Verbs, nouns, prepositions...everything is chopped up. It is a question of supremacy. The verbs were all capitalized in the first paragraph and the upper-cased letters were already revealed to be a dead end, so the letters for the verbs are irrelevant. eviactnihtm reduced to victnitm. There! Only the nouns now: vct. Nouns and pronouns: victim. Victim.

Victim. Gacy and Bundy.

Does this mean a name? The name of a victim? Nobody knows the victim’s name. Dr. Jarrod knew of all the serial killers, but he could not name one single victim. Well, Sharon Tate, but she was an actress. She was not one of Gacy’s or Bundy’s, though. Did he know any more surprise names? No. He needed assistance. Now it was so that clues, for him, would come in waves. When he fired up the Dell, the final piece washed ashore. For while he navigated with his mouse to close unnecessary taskbar programs, a little yellow box popped up in the shy corner of the screen that grabbed his eye. 2/3/05. The mystery of the two twos, the final clue.

Victim. Gacy and Bundy. 2/2/05.

What does that mean? A code. It is a code. A warning? A shift of some kind? Some sort of cycle? Whatever it means, is he too late? Was yesterday the *first* or

last day of it? Or was yesterday...it? Dr. Jarrod nearly jumped out of his wrinkled skin while waiting to get into cyberspace. Strange things happened under his epidermis and his pupils shriveled. His head was in a vice, his heart in his stomach and his throat derelict. So many possibilities of the translation of the code, all of them dreadful. Just waiting, the inescapable eventuality looming, tick-tock tick-tock *fuck you dial-up* tick-tock tick-tock, like waiting for the nurse to take her sweet-ass time and give you that fucking shot that you have to get.

Before he drowned and it was over he got in. The fingernail on his clicking finger was chewed halfway off. Just go. He read and read and read, just sponging up information about John Wayne Gacy the psycho clown. Concentrating on victims' names for once, paying attention to dates. He learned everything there was to know about the man and his boys, trying to highlight any similarities shared with the legendary Ted Bundy.

And then he stumbled into the answer. It was the solicitation of a very special victim in each case that provoked the police, galvanized them, and led to both of the killers' respective captures. The doctor fumbled for the phone, hysterically dialing the wrong number and dialing again, heart throbbing like an infection under the skin, difficulty breathing.

"Hello?" Chief Walker croaked.

"Do you have any children?"

"Who the fuck is this?" he screamed.

"Do you have any children?" Dr. Jarrod gasped again without a shortage of panic. "This is Dr. Jarrod."

"Yesss," answered the chief, fairly annoyed and disturbed. "Why?"

"How many? Boy or girl?"

"Twins," he sighed, not particularly proud of his seed. "Boys. Seventeen."

"Are they home right now?"

Chief Walker laughed. "They never home."

* * * *

Victor Walker and his brother Anthony had grown up with a rather sturdy brotherhood (though not as close as the potential of being identical twins allows) that had only recently started to unravel. The pinnacle of the twins' mutual fondness came when they discovered the thrills of shoplifting. The Box Cutter Bandits would slice away the barcodes on products and, cautiously avoiding the eye in the sky, stuff the goods into the bowels of their pockets. They usually fancied electronics, ranging from everyday batteries to expensive cell phones.

It was the teamwork of this that had created such a resilient partnership. Shoplifting for them had become a two-man job where one actually stole while the other patrolled the aisles for traffic. A simple cough or hack in the throat was their alarm signal. The beauty of it was the complexity and significance of the communication that was wrapped in such a simplistic form, *cough-cough* a way of one intent mind to warn another of potential catastrophe, a system that could not be any more pure.

At first they stole for the possessions. Then, when they owned every conceivable pocket-sized item they'd ever need, it was for leverage in the pawn shops. Before they knew it, it had become an impulse, even a pastime. They in fact started to feel uncomfortable in a store when they were *not* stealing. When they wouldn't feel something sharp or jagged biting their thighs they would get all shifty-eyed and nervous with sweat puddling in their underwear like a baby's excretions. It was here that they each showed their true colors and blossomed into two different people. The boys took different roads to manhood, to destiny.

Anthony felt ashamed inside, ashamed of the sniveling scoundrel he had become. All the pieces were in place for his conversion now, completely inevitable, his past marred and his young spirit humid with ideals. He decided to devote his life to God and become a born-again Christian, putting away the things of old and striving in Jesus' vertical footsteps.

Victor, on the other hand, succumbed to the overpowering temptations of this world. He traveled to Crackville and beyond through the Marijuana Gate. At this point, by the age of seventeen, young Victor had been involved in two homicides; his initiation for the Crips had sealed his criminal fate and, as it were, started the rippling order of events leading to his ultimate kidnapping by the Pizzaman. This was the fortune for the one known as Victor Walker, his short life on this earth nearing its completion, his purpose now only to suffer and die.

In the long run, we are all dead.

—John Maynard Keynes

And now, nine hours prior Dr. Jarrod's discovery, Victor awoke to the sound of grinding, or maybe it was a crunching, definitely something like the sharpening of a pencil, and his dependently intuitive twin was none the wiser. Needless to say he was in the Pizzaman's dungeon, a gruesome lair with chiseled walls like a hewn tree crying blood, a local hell located in the basement of a wealthy, unmarried English-Japanese translator.

The house was especially auspicious for the Pizzaman in that the house even *had* a basement (this is an unorthodox practice in California, but it was a custom track) and that the translator himself had to travel excessively due to his duties, up to weeks at a time. A busy man who lives in a briefcase and has no food in his refrigerator, a man who has gluts of money but not enough to buy some time, a man who never really ventures about his house.

Victor was tightly bound and gagged under that house. *Crunch crunch crunch*. Incapable of turning to see the surface upon which he lay, he read it with his fingers as if he were a quadriplegic who'd retained a strand of sensation. The veneer was very soft, like velvet. He knew it from somewhere. Yes. A pool table.

And still that incessant grinding.

His vision was blanketed by the ceiling, but he could see some of the gray walls in his peripheral vision. Water pipes and bare electrical wire raced along the stained, deformed wallpaper.

Oh, what the hell was that sound? Like a crustacean arachnid being—Oh, God, it was disgusting. A juicy crack and then a halt...lurching and then it topples, like driving a car on oval wheels. Victor pictured it in his mind, the stopping and going, imminent as a broom caught in a set of gears holding holding holding *snap*.

It won't help to freak out. He needed to stay calm. Just focus on breathing.

In and out, in and out.

Where is this? *When* is this? What happened last? Wednesday night. No, Wednesday evening—there was the sunset and all the red creeping in through the windows. He was at his girlfriend's house. Out the door...into the car...

Crunch crunch crunch.

In-out in-out in-out.

Victor freaked out. He tried to wiggle, but the sinews in his hips were askew. It was awful pain, like an iron maiden barreling down on his pelvis, crushing it like a fortune cookie. He snorted in some air and grunted in misery.

Crunch crunch silence.

The Pizzaman jerked his head up and approached. His arms shot straight down and his hands budded out at the sides, fingers curled at the joints. He walked in a smooth, changing rhythm, almost like a ballet dancer. He was electrified, head to toe.

To stare death in the face is the essence of being alive, and the Pizzaman knew it. He'd always thought to himself: "If I had a terminal brain tumor and six months to live, what would I do? Whatever the hell I damn well please, that's what. But why should I wait for bad news before I do what I've always been

wanting to do?” Indeed, a boring life is not a life worth living, and he decided to live every day like it was his last. His only regret was that he had to dress up so excessively before each expedition.

Less the tiny beach around his mouth and the epsilon rimming his nostrils, he was completely covered. He looked more like a burglar or a stealth ninja rather than a killer. He had on a ski mask, swimming goggles with ventilation punctures to visor his eyes, thin leather gloves, two layers of clothing with tape over every gap in his costume and even a voice disguiser mounted on a headset. (This creature of the night seldom bothered with a voice disguiser, but this time he wanted his prey to be under the impression that cooperation could lead to mercy or freedom. Or, perhaps, Victor would presume the fiasco to be a ransom.)

With catlike agility he sprang onto the pool table and hovered over the mouse, his legs squatting in a toad’s poise, arms bent in an offensive stoop, an unnatural grin exposed and he was bouncing, devouring Victor with his goggle-tinted eyes. “Nice of you to join me, Victor,” he greeted in the stereotypically deep drawl. “If I endow you the power of speech, you won’t make me regret it, now will you? Okay. I’m trusting you now, but remember: I’m guarding the door and I’m holding the key. Don’t fuck with me.” He gripped the duct tape on Victor’s lips and peeled off the edge. “We’re going to play Twenty Questions, okay? You ask me a question, then I ask you a question, and so on.” He quickly yanked the tape off and Victor rapaciously drank mouthfuls of air.

“Who are you?” Victor asked between gasps.

“I am a conglomeration of all that has been—of all the...misunderstood individuals of the seasons’ past.”

“Sir, if I may, I asked you *who* you are, not *what* you are.”

The Pizzaman was surreptitiously proud of Victor here, as none of his previous victims had the combination of brains and balls to point that out. “Right you are. I am the Pizzaman.”

And that’s when Victor knew that he was dealing with a lunatic who cannot be reasoned with, no matter how important his father may be. He had that intense visceral feeling that no medicine can remedy. It was like his organs were running in reverse.

In–out in–out in–out.

The Pizzaman jumped off the table as if he were dodging a bullet. “Hang on a second. Don’t you go anywhere.” He went into a dark corner and returned with an old, worn chainsaw. “I don’t like you like this,” he said, repeatedly ripping the saw.

In–out in–out in–out.

The chainsaw roared and he fed it into two of the table's legs, careful as to not cut entirely through either one. Then he set the chainsaw down, grappled both legs and kicked the table, sending it crashing down to about a thirty-degree angle. The two could see eye to eye now.

Victor opened his mouth, but the Pizzaman interrupted with deep, guttural vowel sounds. "Ah-ah!" He raised a finger. "You wait your turn." He twiddled his thumbs, pretending to conjure a question that he'd in fact already rehearsed. "Your father, the chief of police—how much does he know about me?"

"I don't know," he exclaimed, beads of sweat spontaneously dotting his face. "I *swear* I don't know. He don't really talk about it. He like, leaves work at work."

"Okay, Victor, I believe you." The Pizzaman gesticulated for Victor to ask his next question.

He had to calm down. Calm the fuck down. What does this crazy fucker want from him? Shit, he wants *conversation*. Well then fucking give it to him.

"What do you want in life? If you could have anything, anything at all, what would it be?"

The Pizzaman turned around and looked at the ground, in and out, *click-click*. "What I want is a lover. I want to go with her to a place far, far away where everything is different so that the only thing I recognize is the way she looks at me. I want to wake up—just once I want to wake up to a soft kiss....I want to know why the Beatles sing."

Victor had his chance now, the Pizzaman's exposure sprawled out in front of him naked like a corpse in the morgue, utterly helpless and enervated. But it wasn't Victor's turn, and he didn't say anything. And so then the Pizzaman turned around again and looked him in the eyes, his own eyes concealed in the everlasting darkness of his hidden identity, his fists clinching and the window was suddenly closed.

"And as for you, Victor—now you tell me something. Tell me, did you dream before you woke here?"

Victor was honest. "No."

"No?...Hmmm. Okay. Thank you. Now you may proceed."

"What was that grinding noise?" Victor asked with more traces of curiosity than fear.

The Pizzaman nodded as if receiving anticipated bad news, clicking his magnets. Flip, roll, click back on the other side. "You...don't want to know that." He thought about it a moment. "But a deal's a deal." He turned around and pointed for Victor. "You see that weird-looking machine over yonder? It's called a mill-

stone.” He spun back around to face him again. “I’m gonna grind your bones to dust, and then I’ll take that dust and roll it into joints.” He adopted a smirk, holding back laughter. “I’m gonna smoke you!”

Victor’s heart tried to escape from his chest. “What you done to me?” he exasperated in absolute despair.

“Victor, you went out of turn.” Seeing that the sobbing, heavily breathing young man held his peace thereafter, the Pizzaman continued. “Okay, Victor, I can let that one slide. But don’t let it happen again,” he sharply warned.

“Thank you,” Victor whimpered, his voice cracking.

He glimpsed at Victor’s midsection, but not long enough to warrant hysteria on Victor’s behalf. The pelvis had been removed, creating a canyon between the thighs and abdomen. Relatively neat stitching railroaded in lopsided loops about the bilirubin–brown skin. Having wanted to, naturally, preserve Victor’s life force during the operation, the Pizzaman was a neat freak about it and made as few incisions as possible. Regardless of the chosen method, however, it was still impossible to salvage the sexual elements.

The Pizzaman briefly shaped the precise phrasing of his next question in his head. “Has your father been mysteriously tired throughout the day, every day, lately?”

Victor’s expression said it all. “Uh...*yeah*. How—”

“Excellent. Your turn.”

Victor suddenly went blank. What to say? He certainly couldn’t say *nothing*. What then? Talk about sports? About the fucking weather? What? “Why?” he suddenly blurted out, not even realizing he’d said it and not even thinking about it until a second later.

“Why what?” The Pizzaman’s whole demeanor scowled.

Victor knew all too well that this could devolve into a very costly miscue, that such a clumsy question ought not be asked, but he was in too deep now and had to ride it out. “Why are you doing this?” he asked, almost wanting to bite his tongue in retribution.

Volatile anger coursed through the Pizzaman’s blood. “You should never ask why, Victor,” he floated grimly, looking away. “If you have to ask, you’ll never know.”

The Pizzaman dug around in his pocket and found the prescription bottle that he’d stolen from Geoffrey Gaskins. “Here’s a little something for the pain,” he sympathized, popping a few pills into Victor’s mouth like a mother feeding her chicks.

“What is this?” he burbled between swallows.

The Pizzaman shrugged. “I don’t know, probably some kind of stimulant.”

“WHAT?” Victor protested. “I thought you said it was for my *pain*.”

“Yes, I did, and it is,” he mused. “You’re really going to feel it now!”

“You—”

“Victor, shut up.” The Pizzaman produced another strip of duct tape and fastened it to the victim’s mouth again, where it belonged.

The reason for live torture was more about necessity than cruelty. It was a delicate procedure, as technical as gene splicing. The goal here was to keep Victor awake as he approached the death zone, thereby elucidating the line. The pills—whatever they were—would not have enough time to augment his pain or level of awareness in and of themselves, obviously, but the Pizzaman was confident that Victor’s dependent mind would create a specter high.

He set a surgery kit on a nearby table and unrolled it, pocketfuls of gleaming medical scissors and hooks and prongs and rotary saws staring menacingly into Victor’s plastering eyes. The Pizzaman selected a two-inch scalpel and began to tug at the flesh, exacting gashes everywhere that Victor’s skin was not strapped with tape. The plan was to bleed him out evenly as to avoid local shock, to feel his artery pulses dwindle one by one. It looked good on paper, but it didn’t work. The crescendo came unexpectedly. Victor’s eyes lost their sparkle and the lids slowly sank. The Pizzaman frantically tried to plug up the holes, but by then it was too late.

What had happened? Victor didn’t even last five minutes. It could have been that Victor was already intoxicated from his promiscuous visit to his girlfriend’s house. It could have been remnants of the ether that the Pizzaman had used on him. It could have been a conflict of prescription medicine. It was all too confusing now, too complex.

Without dwelling on his shortcomings, the Pizzaman hoisted the chainsaw and ate through Victor’s throat. Really only the skull and maybe the saddle bones could be fully harnessed for what he was doing (theoretically, however, with the exception of the teeth, every part of the human body is in some way edible—even hair).

Removing the tissue on the head was only the first step in a long, painstaking process. It was grisly and fragile and dangerous all at once, sort of like cracking a safe. Although a buzz saw would remove the flesh much quicker and easier, it could very well compromise the integrity of the skull’s ideal structure and remarkable yielding capacity. If something were too small, oblong or splintered, the pulverization process would become increasingly difficult with every tick of

progress. Only the skull, being relatively spherical, had the near-perfect dimensions for grinding. Therefore a filleting knife was in order.

Though the Pizzaman was decently experienced in this field, it remained a challenging task for him. It was best to go layers at a time rather than to peel a whole chunk off down to the bone: if he were to go too deep, it would likely get jerky. The blade could get caught on something, compelling him to apply excessive torque to loosen it. This would result in the uncontrollable slash of the knife.

After forty-five minutes of smoothly gliding the edge through the skin, he was finally prepared for the nerve-racking job of collecting the gray matter. At the base of the skull, where the spine lodges, is a hole too small for comfort. This portion of Victor's skull was lost because the area of the hole had to be maximally enlarged for consideration of the brain.

(The Pizzaman, being an avid admirer of philosophy and culture from around the globe, had been appetized when he read about the way a certain chef on the internet enjoyed monkey brains. This delicacy could be mixed with chocolate syrup for a more zestful taste. Though Hershey's chocolate syrup is unparalleled for ice cream, it is too thick and rich for the squishy nerve network, thus reducing saturation. The substitution of the syrup is not imperative, but it is strongly recommended for the penetrating flavor.)

The Pizzaman belligerently shoveled out two heaping handfuls of brains, portioned them onto the table in cookie-dough clumps and raced upstairs into the kitchen with salivating anticipation.

The kitchen was a bright contrast to the basement. This was actually the first time he'd been in here. There was an island countertop with suspended pans wanting to fall like charred acorns, fake drawers next to real ones as a last-ditch effort at symmetry and a light switch that was off in the up position and on in the down position. Though the Pizzaman was accustomed to seeing different orientations of kitchens, this particular floor plan made him dizzy. But it was a good dizzy, like he'd just jumped into a warm lake head over heels on a cool summer day. Always a thrill to be in other peoples' houses.

It was an old-style refrigerator, the freezer section on top. He opened the lower door for the refrigerator to find nothing but sweets and alcohol. Cinnamon rolls, ice cream that should be in the freezer, some yogurt and...here—bottles of caramel and chocolate syrup, both matching generic brands.

Today was a good day.

* * * *

The meeting for tomorrow became a rendezvous for tonight: Chief Walker had implored Cowell, begged him to come down to the station. Whatever it was at this hour, Chief Walker found it to be of a higher priority than the maintenance of his dignity.

Almost twenty-four hours earlier, Cowell had endured infinite pain in that foggy realm, and now he had to go back. He'd never done two days consecutively before, so this was going to be new to him; but the strange part was the feeling he was getting at the *present* moment. It certainly should have been *jamais vu*, but the experience stirred him up like he'd seen it in another life. It could've been an eon ago and it could've been an hour ago. It drove him crazy. It was an endless cycle, really. He didn't know which was the independent variable, but his visions were directly related to his physical queasiness. It was the most unbearable sensation, worse than drowning. He couldn't tell you which way was up, like his head had been rattled so powerfully that reality lost all meaning. All Cowell could think about was the victim. The victim's face and the victim's pain, both existing inseparably, both leeching off one another like some kind of perpetual-motion machine.

Déjà vu. There was the police station again. Seeing other vehicles in the police station's parking lot only compounded the sickness. The expectation of hot, bright lights, looming shadows, stabbing voices, thick silences...He couldn't stand it. He desperately hoped that his colleagues were early as they had apparently been last time, and that it was only their presence denoted by the automobiles.

The scuffing of the asphalt pebbles underfoot traveled through Cowell's ears and nestled into the heart of his innards as he staggered out of his car. He sat down on the curb a moment to embrace himself, awaiting the brief moment of merciful clarity and hoping the aftershocks will not resonate too emphatically to affect his vocation.

Throbbing everywhere, he rose to his feet and peered inside. No activity. He knocked several times to no avail. On a primal urge he tested the door knob and it obeyed his hand. This door was supposed to be locked...

Roused by the ruckus at the front door, the motley crew appeared, swinging into jackets and parading swiftly down the hall. They didn't register the faintest spark of recognition when they saw him: instead, something inerasable was written on their faces. Chief Walker's even more so. Such horror etched into his

countenance, into his unlevel eyes, reflecting something like a small death from within, like an intangible part of him had perished.

“What’s going on?” Cowell awkwardly asked as the whirling started up inside him again.

None spoke, but Chief Walker handed off a photocopy of a letter to him as he passed. Cowell was just about to unfold it, but then he felt Chief Walker’s mixing stare piercing him. He turned to see the chief looking right through him at the computer on a desk that he couldn’t possibly see; yes, he was definitely dead and detached from this world now, alive only in a biological sense.

A part of Cowell expected the sickness to come back when he set foot outside again, but it was not meant to be. Perhaps it was these quiet fellows keeping his company. They were a strange bunch, the five of them. Cowell noticed that Dr. Jarrod’s world was unaffected—Dr. Jarrod was depressed on his own, and this chaos in front of him was no yoke on his back—and Detective Wells was in a particularly contrived melancholia. Detective Wells was just the type of person who laughed at funerals—not because of any comical value, but simply because of some unexplored kink in his head that made him different from everybody else. But the other two were genuinely eaten up. Detective Hayn had been friends with Chief Walker for years even though Chief Walker didn’t feel quite as strongly for him, and it seemed as though Detective Hayn was concerned as if for his own son on this day.

The five of them silently piled into an unmarked police van and embarked on a journey of cold–shower abruptness. Detective Hayn handled the vehicle with minimal inertia, yet Cowell’s illness thrived with a mind of its own; it was sort of a preemptive attack, as if his subconscious were expecting centripetal forces.

The streets were paved with a sibilant layer of rain and the sky was a beautifully bleak cotton–gray. Cowell’s pain was eased with memories of rainy nights and cold gusts breezing his frame, his sense of warmth heightened with the threat of cold. He could’ve wasted hours just staring at the scenery. He saw an end school zone sign and laughed as he pictured bullies stopping there at the invisible boundary and waving their fists in fury while a wimpy nerd got away with the sum of his lunch money. He saw a child looking out the window with her nose butt against it, the nostrils oppressed and flexed against the glass, her breath steaming the interior in unintimidating puffs, and he pictured her daily routine, sunrise to sunset, bed to bed, beginning and end. And then, while they were stopped at a three–way intersection with a communistic no U–turn sign, he saw four Mexicans ambush the bubbly Audi coupe ahead of them and thrash it, and

he wasn't imagining it. One of the four brandished a revolver at the driver's face, obliging him to swallow his punishment.

Cowell's place in the van was at the very back, behind the motionless heads. He was bewildered at the sight of this, just seeing these sworn men of the law totally indifferent to the atrocity occurring in real time right before them. That was when he put it together. The unexpected summoning of his services, the chief himself fielding a...oh shit, this was a crime scene that they were fielding, it had to be, just looking at all their gut-wrenching faces—and it was personal. The chief. Ah, yes, that's right. The letter that he'd somehow forgotten about even though it was in his hand the whole time. He unfolded it like a Big Mac and judged its weight before he read it. The ink was a copper-red:

2 February 2005

Dearest Walker, how goes it with you?

I know it to be difficult, but sometimes you must face the facts. The fact is that you cannot stop me, but I, yes, I can stop me. Will you accept this? Or will you please merely entertain this thought from me? Consider this: If you, for example, captured a kidnapper like me who could tell you the location of the abductee who is alive and well in exchange for a full amnesty, would you do it? Would you do it if you could? Are you too proud to help me help you? Is it some definition of right and wrong that you have, a definition whose idealism is as brutal to efficiency as I am to my little pretties? You must decide for yourself if you want to do only what is good or if you want to advocate the greater good. You yourself cannot do the greater good; rather, you need me for that. You and I could arrange something, you know. It can go away. I can make it stop.

I just want you to do this one bad thing.

It shall be on live television, nationally broadcast on at least 3 major networks. It is to be scheduled for Sunday the 13th. You shall, on that glorious day, televise the death by hanging of a random, innocent resident of the great city of Los Angeles.

Submitted for thy approval,

The Pizzaman

He flipped the page over to see a detailed list of instructions and computer-generated diagrams for the sacrifice. An ultimatum was set for Tuesday, February 8. The Pizzaman threatened massacre of some unknown group if the police were to fail to publicly announce this letter and their response. The announcement, of course, would never come, and it remained unclear why the Pizzaman wasted his time with such ludicrous demands.

When they arrived at the house of one Kris Tun, Cowell finally mustered the gall to inquire of Dr. Jarrod. Dr. Jarrod explained to him that Chief Walker's son was the target of the Pizzaman's cryptic letter. He also informed him that Tun's social security card was enclosed in the original envelope of the letter he had just read. The chief had received it in the mail shortly after Dr. Jarrod's revelation, and the homicide squad had arrived approximately two hours ago. By now the technicians were lifting latent fingerprints, the last stage of a crime-scene evaluation, and the news crews had been shooed away.

"Tun, it pans out," he continued, "is alive and well in Japan on business." They filed out of the van and Dr. Jarrod updated Cowell with his revised analysis. "With the shift in syntax between the two letters, I believe that he is crying out for help."

"*What?*" Cowell thought for a second. "He didn't change the syntax—he changed the style."

Dr. Jarrod completely ignored him for preference of the sound of his own voice. "He is feeling remorse, and he wants to justify his actions; but since that is not possible, he wants an excuse to stop killing. He wants to be in power. Only he can stop himself? The man is all twisted up inside. He is going to make a mistake, and that right soon."

Chief Walker braced himself and clunked out of the van. Healthy chlorophyll invaded their nostrils as they hiked up the small steps in the front yard and into the house. The inferior four remained together like confused cubs as Chief Walker conversed with one of the technicians.

It was then that Cowell at last viewed this cover-up in the proper light. This underling of Chief Walker had no clue whatsoever that this thing he was investigating was actually involved in a coldly calculated string of murders. The five-man team, being the only people who even knew about the Pizzaman, bore the burden of capturing him. So then, just how were they going to capture this madman? Could they just catch any meager soul and snub all these murders on him? Wouldn't the Pizzaman roam to another city and be their problem if all his dirt here were swept neatly under the rug? It's worth a shot. Shitty it is, but it is for the good of the populace. Only the Pizzaman could stop himself, and he was

demonstrating this by sending in that social security card and burning this perfectly good spot.

The technician held out a plastic bag for Chief Walker and pulled out a flaccid, cocoonlike joint. A skull joint.

“Weed?” Chief Walker conjectured.

“That right there—it’s not any kind of drug.” The technician vacillated. “We think it’s *bone*.”

“Jesus Christ!” Detective Hayn gasped.

“Take me down to this *basement*,” Chief Walker demanded in disgust, pain and sorrow in his trembling voice.

The technician continued the briefing as he led them down the stairs. “We found shards of brain and skull all over. Looks like this guy minced the skull up and rolled it into cigarettes.” He scratched his loose scalp. “Yep, if you ask me, this looks personal. I guess it’s drug related. Trying to send a message, no?”

This was fast becoming one of the strangest cases Cowell had ever seen, and for that reason it irked the most perverse curiosity inside him. The arousing of that formerly quiescent parasite inside, that morbid fascination of a serial killer’s savvy.

As he descended the stairs he realized that the psychic reverberations had faded unnoticed much like the hiccups. He instantly became elated and bursting with a positive vitality, but he knew he couldn’t let it shine among these gloomy men. Cowell strained to keep his smiles prudently to himself.

Like vinegar on soda is one who sings songs to a heavy heart.

The dim, yellow overhead light revealed more than they wanted to know. Dead-red carnage. Livid luminol stung the walls and floor like salt in a wound and ivory fingerprinting dust blistered like talcum powder. But it was a vain effort to try to unearth any potential clue here because this was the Pizzaman’s presentation to them, and he made no exertion to conceal anything but his sacred identity. They saw everything he wanted them to see, and they saw only what he wanted them to see.

The technician had apparently finished informing Chief Walker, as the pair just stood there gazing at the silent screams. Detective Hayn squatted over a scarlet puddle and Detective Wells made his best attempt to look occupied above a medium-velocity blood spatter. And Cowell and Dr. Jarrod stood there with their thumbs jammed up their asses. Cowell didn’t care, and neither did Dr. Jarrod: crime scenes, that is, live crime scenes normally didn’t concern them.

Chief Walker hobbled over to the millstone that looked more like a crossbreed between a bread maker and a meat grinder. A thin layer of white dust inhabited

the exterior and some of the orifices. A box spewing latex gloves on the table upon which the Pizzaman had set a hefty serving of Victor's brains offered itself for intravenous police usage. Chief Walker snapped on a couple and fiddled with the machine, not having the faintest idea as to what he expected to find—typical police procedure. Traces of blood streaked in and on the millstone, but, other than that, he could make no notable observation.

"Tilt it," recommended the technician, shattering the serene silence.

It was too heavy, so the eager Detective Wells came over and awkwardly helped. They rocked it to one side and a thick, cloud-white powder streamed to the ground, certain stripes illuminated by stray light like a zebra's coat. This accumulated the whole of them as an obnoxious audience.

Concerned for his son like any father, Chief Walker turned a pleading face over to the crime-scene technician. "How much of this do you guys have?"

"...Enough. Enough for a DNA analysis." The funny thing here was that the blundering technician thought he was telling the chief what he wanted to hear.

The insidiousness of the overall investigation was in jeopardy. If the media were to discover the Pizzaman's patterns, the entire city would be thrust into panic. Everybody would be shooting at weird sounds and shadows and optical illusions. If Chief Walker were to humbly request the FBI's assistance (which he was required by law to do in an unequivocal amount of hours from now in wake of his juvenile son's disappearance), he would assuredly lose his job by virtue of gross negligence to the dispersion of manpower to this case. Thus, in spite of his unconditional love for his wayward son, he couldn't bring himself to do it. It wasn't that Chief Walker was frightened of termination, but he was simply too timid to take *any* irregular action. He was cowering into his little psychological ball, terrified of drastic change from the routine.

At this unholy sight of a man pushed to his wit's end, Cowell's concealed rapture melted away like ice cubes in cola. He could no longer comprehend the giddy jeering and gleefulness that he'd enjoyed just moments earlier.

Chief Walker suddenly whirled around and put a hammy hand on his shoulder, his eyes tearing up. "Can you...?"

Cowell said yes with his eyes.

Chief Walker bashed away and his entire face gushed.

The chief dripped out of Cowell's thoughts as he braced himself and studied the white-powdered tool. He donned gloves and made contact, but nothing happened. This was radically peculiar, and it left him gawking with perplexion. But there had to be something else. Something else from which he could upwell his freshly calibrated gift. His pupils now fully adjusted to the enveloping darkness,

he browsed the haunted room and found two ice-cream syrup bottles. A ridgeless thumbprint born from a gloved hand on the bottle's neck was the sole fruit of an otherwise hopeless fingerprint test. On a whim he snatched them, one in each hand; he regretted it immediately, like always.

The room evolved right before his eyes in a stupefying neon showcase. He could unaccountably see all around himself in every conceivable direction of the room, thus rendering kinetic exploration obsolete. The staircase rolled up like a party whistle and the objects inhabiting the room evaporated into the rising ceiling. The walls corkscrewed like peanut butter when the basement spiraled into a helix. The floor dropped without him as the whole place took on a new blue tint, and Cowell knew he'd be feeling the vertigo for hours to come. One of the most putrid tastes formed in his mouth during the metamorphosis, like a thousand dissolving Aspirins on his buds. Very juicy and saturating, the evil twin of cotton mouth that would leave you begging for a crusty, arid tongue.

At last the evolution was complete and the real suffering began. The Pizzaman came forth from beneath the shadows, not at all resembling the goblin from his first vision. This time a great insignia of a star dominated his chest. It was certainly a badge; whether police or security guard, Cowell could not say. This—whatever it was—had the utmost significance for him, for symbolism in his dreams often corresponds to the genre that results in a tumult of lunacy.

He also noticed some of the Pizzaman's skin to be visible again. It was a pink rim around his mouth, almost indiscernible. And then, suddenly, in his three hundred sixty-degree vision, Cowell saw the Pizzaman's arms looping round him, converging on something.

That something quickly came into being. Two identical figures fused themselves together like mitosis operating backwards. It was unmistakably Chief Walker's son, naked from the waist up. Pink skin, same as the Pizzaman—*bingo* the Pizzaman is of African descent, an African-American cop or sentry guard.

Meanwhile a long, outstretched V decorated the victim's chest, connecting the navel to each nipple. But this V...this was *not* symbolic. No, it was clearly blistered into the body, for it contorted in conjunction with him, whereas the Pizzaman's glyph was fixed and undisturbed with his pulsating frame. The notion of being fixed betwixt two persons while simultaneously laying eyes on them both shocked Cowell. It was a truly bizarre sensation, like having his head bilaterally cleaved.

The Pizzaman roared an ugly, evil smile that revealed columns upon columns of dull, battered teeth as the torture ceremony was afoot. His voice had no pitch of its own; it was as if he mouthed the words and they materialized in Cowell's

mind. So Cowell therefore expected the victim's speech to, in contrast, be like that of a petite, pathetic being, but these dreams—these nightmares—of his were all but predictable. The victim's utterance was as the sound of gears. That was the best Cowell could put it. Like greasy gears in a clock tower.

He had no understanding of what was said, but he was sure that it was English or something representing English. Gauging by the Pizzaman's reactions, he inferred that the victim's statements were either illogical or enraging. And then the Pizzaman abruptly desisted the verbal volleying and lifted up some...thing. Not until it squirmed did Cowell realize that the thing was alive. It looked like a sea sponge, or maybe a Chia pet; whatever it may have been, it was very precious to the victim, and his every protest only inflated the Pizzaman's sadistic pleasure.

Eventually the Pizzaman figured it to be enough teasing. He dropped the thing into the bottomless pit below them, and they all watched with different expressions as it fragmented and plummeted mercilessly into oblivion. Cowell had never, ever seen a live, vivid victim like this, and his blood-curdling screams were driving him to madness. But before that process was complete, intervention stepped in. He sensed that the show was reaching its end when he noticed a faint glimmer in those tortured eyes. The glimmer multiplied into a shining light, soon consuming his entire body and immersing Cowell deeper into hypnosis. Brighter and brighter, engulfing Cowell, the Pizzaman and the whole place.

He woke up on the ground, weird faces staring down at him with a weird language. His hands were sticky with sugar, his head in shambles and he was sick all over again. He can't keep doing this forever.

CHAPTER 5

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 4

In and out, in and out.

Just breathing. The Pizzaman had risen early in the morning for a brisk jog to try to run it off. His windpipe was still burning like acid on slime from his first ever disposition to an inhalant, but the running was nonetheless simple. The thump of the pumping muscle. The thuds of his adaptable feet. His reliable, invincible lungs. He liked to induce a trance as he ran, running until the filthy air made his sweat run gray, running until he lost his depth perception, running until his body went into overdrive like a vehicle's motor, the process at a definite apex, the paces long and quick and the breathing deep and through the nostrils. He would run until his body burst with endorphins, finding that trance, letting the natural runner's high take him places. The Pizzaman indulged in this tranquillity because it was a relaxing break from the moments when he was caught up in murder, when his muscles tensed up everywhere and his bowels became an insurrecting volcano and his limbs became heavy as logs. It was a place of irreducible peace far away from his nocturnal adventures. Running was addicting.

The longest he'd ever jogged without stopping was seven hours. The Pizzaman believed that, so long as the skip wouldn't be too far, any achievement was possible. It is always possible to do just a little better. He could ascend to infinity if he were to live long enough. It was the same with his night life: he could keep pushing it.

No bird soars too high if he soars with his own wings.

—William Blake

But the problem was that the Pizzaman *had* to keep soaring. He *had* to keep pushing it just to keep from being bored. He had kind of trapped himself. This sneaky bondage depressed him and he sometimes did things that were downright stupid because he, for a flicker of time, didn't care if he got caught. He was his worst enemy.

He was his worst enemy, and the female sex was his Achilles' heel. He was a hopeless romantic, adamantly clinging to the vaporous belief that a true love could exist. Could it? We see so much tragedy in today's world of love, whether it be separation or unfaithfulness or ambiguity. Without even mentioning love, a love to die for, a love to *live* for, the thought of any relationship surviving the test of time is almost unheard of, as precious a commodity as pure gold. True love is inexpressibility personified, the realization of perfection. It's like the line that the Pizzaman had been seeking for so long: he couldn't have it—he didn't even know if it existed—and such a fact only steepened its pricelessness.

Inasmuch as it was a mere cruel fantasy, the Pizzaman found nothing to be more erotic than a lady with the tendency to stalk. His scary-sexy dream girl had a refined dark side, dragged a facility for calculated violence and shared the same idealistic views on intimacy. The Pizzaman believed that he was so evil that he was capable of becoming kindred spirits with an uncontrollable fatal attraction, that he could walk through the valley of the shadow of death unscathed because the evil there would inspect him and let him pass.

Sex wasn't a big deal for him, that is, compared to most males. He longed only for a genuine romance. Women are people too, and manipulative men who would make a game of getting laid disgusted him. Fucking dogs. He saw the depth of their shallowness, their simple lies and all their many attempts to infiltrate the female just like how their ugly sperm try to negotiate with the ovum. He saw the rudimentary speck of brains that propelled their minds and the massive clotting of brains that propelled their dicks. Sure, the Pizzaman had a penis too, but he nonetheless resisted the thought that he was flesh and blood like the self-professed "players." He resisted the thought that perhaps it *was* true that he just needed a good screwing to rectify whatever chemical imbalance was wreaking havoc in his brain.

In any case, the synthesis of a satisfying partnership had eluded him for years despite the fact that he'd craved the same menu the whole time. Now the significance of this sensual deprivation was interwoven with his homicidal hunger, a

common thing among his kind. (Exhibitional murder is not usually sexually motivated, but males dwell on intercourse and sodomy so consistently that their mindsets at any given moment are thereby adjusted accordingly.)

Whether physically or subconsciously linked we do not know, but it is a statistical fact that the lunar cycle has inclinations to modify criminal frequency: full moons attract a crest in the crime wave. Similarly, the Pizzaman had his own cycle. For this monster, there was no lonelier a day than Valentine's Day just like there is no more a depressing day than Christmas. When will people learn that Valentine's day always cuts the lonely people up? When will people learn that couples don't need this day to make them happy? The Pizzaman knew and was aware that the people will never learn. The parabolic region of days rollercoasting around that one were days of despair and unpredictability for him, rising and falling like motion sickness, rising and falling like the never-ending oceanic horizon that continually reminded him of how puny he was. Curse this month of February!

If two lie down together, they will keep warm; but how can one be warm alone?

* * * *

Ivy Schoening was the byproduct of an overly demanding home infested with excess offspring. Weaned on Catholicism from childhood, she inevitably rebelled in her adolescent years, even to change her name (but not until she graduated to legal adult status was it official) from her given name Elizabeth to Ivy. She hit the ruthless streets on her eighteenth birthday without looking back to become a transient for a couple years before getting back on her feet by getting off her feet in adult films that she masochistically hoped were snuffs.

While being a big-boned girl, she was still curvy and devilishly voluptuous with a shallow valley in her stomach and platforming lips at the edges. If viewed from behind, her perfectly molded teardrop breasts bulged out at the sides of her undulating hourglass physique like the super-gripping tires on Formula One racing vehicles. And her pirate-treasure eyes, sieged by dark eyeliner, were a faded baby-blue like those of the blind Kung Fu teachers in stereotyping movies; her pale-blonde hair that beached down to her upper buttocks was so light that it actually accentuated those eyes. She wasn't albino, but she was sun shy.

Right now she was grooming herself on the curious methods of Dr. Jack Kevoorkian, fanning her hands and wiggling her chubby toes to aid the drying of her black nails and piously blasting Marilyn Manson from the stereo. She raked

her ivory fingers through her crispy white hair, tossing it about in lackadaisical boredom, just playing with her beauty.

A long-awaited knocking. Her womanhood bouncing, she strolled to the rusty-red door with the framing flaming licks of effervescent orange that was the only wall space in the whole place not smothered in midnight-black.

“Byron!” she exclaimed in a shrill voice that didn’t belong in someone like her, a voice that will caterpillar down your spine until it makes your anus cringe.

“Hey baby! Hey baby!” Detective Wells greeted with equal enthusiasm, smiling to reveal that hideous rank where the teeth propagate out of the gums.

“Come on,” she tweeted, taking his hand. “I want to show you something.”

“What is it?” he asked with warranted concern for his well-being.

She turned his head with her long fingers. “It’s a surprise,” she whispered, and tongued his ear.

Ivy had been dabbling in the forbidden art of Satanic worship for the last several months, a mute voice that had been beckoning her for as long as she could remember. Though a fledgling minion of the dragon, she compensated with her tremendous zeal and disturbing creativity. She’d gone in chat rooms and was able to hang with honest-to-God witches who had been in the practice for decades; and these weren’t the good witches either, that is, those of the Wicca—no, these were the evil and depraved, the ones that give witches a bad name. She never asked questions: she learned by pretending to already know, by soaking up everything like it’s a foreign language and then keeping her statements short and concise, but in a way she already did know.

Some people are born to be doctors, some people are born to be lawyers and some people are born to be Ivy Schoening.

Her bedroom was overwhelmed by her large bed, a striking pink contrast which was the only thing to advertise her femininity, with the circumscribed five-point star jeweled on the blanket mocking what should have been a flower or a ladybug. The thin, metallic bed poles that were totally inappropriate and unmatching almost wanted to resemble street lamps, towering several feet high only to snarl back down in a threatening hook.

She took him to a chest with a makeshift ouija board plastered on top, their holy place religiously designated for sex toys; the snakes (it had long since been her passion to make love in an orgy of venomous vipers, believing earnestly that only the fearful were bitten; she had yet to persuade Detective Wells to participate) were stored in the living room for display by day, some being relatively tame with their fangs because they were born into captivity and others not so tame. She took from the chest a human humerus with the one side decently pol-

ished into the helmet of a penis and the other exaggerated into a droopy scrotum, capped by Ziploc baggies at each end for preservation.

“I *exhumed* it,” she requiemed triumphantly, relishing the opportunity to employ the word.

“Hmmmh,” Detective Wells sighed, perplexed and unable to conjure a response.

“You don’t like it?” she whined in a sweet schoolgirl tone.

“Uhhh...”

“Awww,” she purred forgivingly as she pounced on him, tore off his shirt and started sucking blood from his left shoulder.

* * * *

The belief that the serial killer evolves—that he continually grows bolder—has monopolized among the profilers and trickled down to the police. And thus, despite the persistent arguments of the invincible Dr. Jarrod, Chief Walker was appallingly hexed about the threat of this macabre massacre and even more so about the welfare of his prodigal son. The demented chief insisted that the party of five congregated once again.

Detective Wells, having difficulty keeping his balance after his field trip in sacrilege, unlocked the door and invited Cowell in. Cowell had never seen the police station occupied with people before; combined with his psychic aftershocks, it produced a whole new aura around him, one that promoted stuffiness and light-headedness. It was that feeling you get if you’ve been lying down a while and then suddenly get up too quickly, making sight a frosty blur and conscious thought an opaque frontier.

That long hall was an intense voyage through a mucky, mine-ridden tunnel for the both of them. Walking through the hall with so many suspects being the outlines of their field of view, walking through the hall with every African-American police officer cause for alarm as potentially being the Pizzaman. A cop to the left, popping out to say hello, with a neatly trimmed mustache and a superficial smile. To the right another suspect, conspicuously disengaging a computer program and looking away as they passed. And then Chief Walker’s office not a moment too soon, where the big man sat on his throne as worried and overwhelmed as a king being usurped. His two loyal subjects were speaking inaudibly as Cowell and Detective Wells came in, then shifting their attention to the punctually late psychic. The chief, absolutely exhausted, pointed at him lazily with his chin, prompting him to say something.

Cowell stammered a few seconds, trying to buy time. Drawing a blank, he opted to tell them all about the agony of his gift. He had told himself that only Chief Walker would know, but now that man was not in the desirable state of mind. It was better this way, he supposed, just to get it out in the open. Combatting his ailments, he recounted the travesties of his visions. He told them about the pain, the insanity, the shapeshifting, the nauseating aftereffects.

Chief Walker threw his hands up like a frustrated sports fan. “I *was* gonna ask you to come take a look at the stolen van we found, but...jeez, man, I’m *sorry*.”

“Now, Mr. Cowell,” began Dr. Jarrod with a sigh, “I still do not understand how what you do can constitute as definitive.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, as you said, everything is all twisted and symbolic. What if, for example, you had seen the van in the vision as a product of seeing *any* van in reality? Moreover, how can you be sure that what you think you saw was not just a, how you say...a subconscious memory of a dream floating to the surface?”

“That’s preposterous,” admonished Detective Hayn. “We *have* three van.”

“Yes, that is true,” Dr. Jarrod quickly acquiesced, trying to take control of the conversation, “but in Los Angeles, a vehicle is stolen every three minutes. It is not inconceivable that any given serial number can belong to a stolen vehicle.”

There’s no swaying a skeptic, but Cowell nonetheless shook his head rigidly. “The odds of even guessing up a license plate that exists at all are staggering.”

Dr. Jarrod cleared his throat. “I suppose you mean, ‘The odds *against* guessing up—’”

“Whatever. Fucker.”

“Guys, hey!” Chief Walker interjected. “We don’t have time for this shit. Alright, does anyone have anything constructive to say? No? Aight then. Let’s go look at the van. Cowell, you can be excused if you wish.” Chief Walker said this, but his tired, unequal eyes clearly wanted Cowell to go out on the battlefield for him. No way. That transparent reverse–psychology did not have a chance of working on Cowell. He was still ill. He wasn’t about to go out of his damn way for the guy.

“I think I’ll go get myself some lunch or something,” he said tentatively. “This has been *waaaay* too much the past couple of days.”

* * * *

Those who can be glorified as genius tend to diverge into bizarre or vile recluses with questionable behavior. All too often the mind cannot keep pace

with the brain's onslaught, resulting in temporary insanity and uninhibited, impulsive actions. Absolute power corrupts absolutely, and these mental giants' cerebral overloads pave the way for marriages with cousins or the urge to cut off their ears or to fit their mouths with double-barreled shotguns.

Watching the detectives dismantle the van, Dr. Jarrod understood this. He understood that he was a sham, that all his education and certified documents couldn't prevent him from being wrong. The way the driver's seat was maximally displaced as to avoid height identification, the way the headrest was removed, the way the carpet was meticulously clipped out—the Pizzaman was too perfect. Genius implies insanity or actions and interpretations of reality perceived as insane (it is easier to whisper the intellectual statistical outliers to suicide, whether they be ingenious or mentally retarded, since mental illness typically dwells in such ranges), but the Pizzaman was obviously in touch with his reality.

Dr. Jarrod wondered why the Pizzaman would be toying around with them if he were not a genius. For were it not for those sporadic letters and driver's licenses, they would not have recognized the sinister series emerging—the extra-curricular cannibalism being such—the only consistency in the *modus operandi*. The Pizzaman was god over trace evidence, and he, no longer finding killing to be as exciting as the first time, maybe needed to frolic in the teasing and ridiculing of the opponent to keep his abominable mirth afloat. Could it be that simple?

No apparent motive, hence he was not a multiple murderer. Unexplainable propensity for cannibalism, hence he was a serial murderer. Crimes were likely premeditated days in advance, hence he was intelligent. No evidence of self-destructive behavior, hence he was not a genius. The Pizzaman was an intelligent serial killer, not an ingenious multiple murderer. How could Dr. Jarrod have overlooked all this?

Dr. Jarrod was wrong. He was never wrong, but he was wrong.

* * * *

“Oga!”

Chief Walker shot up, specking with welts and warts of sweat on his dark, bald face. He wiped his eyebrows and a half dozen droplets clung to his finger like the tiny, benign grip of an infant.

He had dreamt that he was beating his family to death. His wife lay next to him now, innocent and unmolested. He glanced at the clock. 10:38. Still today. It seemed as though the day would never end. Only an hour ago he had managed

to worry himself to sleep, and now those same thoughts swirled in his mind once again.

Chief Walker had kept Victor's abduction a secret from his family, lest they panic. This was no difficult task, since Victor often disappeared for successive days without notice.

The chief was really concerned about his home security—there was none. Peace of mind was important to him, so he wanted to install some; his family's peace of mind was more important, so he didn't. Right now his family was utterly unaware of the danger—real danger—and that was just fine with him. That was his nature: he was a politician, telling everybody that everything is alright, and, for the most part, everybody would believe him.

Chief Walker could convince himself of any reality, a problem however you slice it. He could imagine things that aren't there or build a colossus out of context; he could close his eyes and make a problem go away or say something peachy and make it so.

No home security. No police escort. No problem? If only he could construct a reality that was real to everyone else. But reality is a kick in the head. Soon after he painfully reentered his dreamland the hunter of humans came, immutably real, sanitized in his usual anti-forensic suit and mentally rehearsing the possible scenarios.

The Pizzaman backed into the driveway with a freshly stolen hearse, parked it and checked over some things on his clipboard like a UPS man. Once out of the car, he moved swiftly and fluidly with no energy or maneuver going to waste. He opened the back and dragged Victor's corpse out as if he were pulling a comrade out of a foxhole in the Vietnam War. Victor was completely sheathed in a homemade body bag with a tag on his toe and pen markings to indicate the twenty-nine incisions for the coroner's convenience, perfect and ready to go, except the bag seemed just a little too small...

Dead weight is heavy weight. A significant amount of Victor was inside the Pizzaman (altogether it takes approximately eleven days to eat a whole body), however, and that was an abundant ore of psychological strength for the Pizzaman. He effortlessly threw the carrion over his shoulder, huffed it to the door lumberman-style, set it down and pulled out a key.

He scrolled his gloved thumb over the fat, rubbery key grip with some letters in plateau he couldn't make out that Victor had had jacketed onto the house key. He could simultaneously hear and feel the symphony of clicks as he eased the key into its home. The Pizzaman was an experienced lock picker, and that was what this felt like to him. He was picking that lock now and gaining entry to some

place he shouldn't go. He meditated and projected himself into the mind-boggling mechanism, subconsciously jingling the key against the army of pins to try to trip the tumbler. He watched the copper pins oscillate to his groove up and down like levers in a piano or the chooing exhaust announcing a train. Up and down and *click* and up and down and *click* and up and down and *oh God* he rolled the key and felt the welcoming thud like an ejaculation that he didn't want to come even though he knew it was the best part.

Exhalation.

Now he was able to focus. He converted the deadbolt and then dithered before opening the door, as if tarrying on a divine sign. A home security system? He should've asked Victor. But really, this is what fun is all about. Not knowing what to expect, he stepped over the corpse and cracked the door open. Scrutinized inside for a security box. None.

In and out, in and out.

He'd done things like this more times than he could count and it wasn't like that first kiss anymore, but good God it was still exhilarating! True, his breathing cycle and heart rate no longer felt like seizures, but his blood could be felt as a boil and his fingertips were on fire and his toes were alive.

He hauled the body inside and went back to the hearse, nearly having to sprint to maintain the equilibrium with his rallying cardiovascular system. His eyes were wise to the dark by now, but he could have operated blindly in the back of the hearse anyway. He withdrew a duffle bag and a cooler, collectively containing all of his required supplies.

Back inside, he set the two things down and ever so softly closed the front door. He found his semiautomatic and silencer in the side pocket and fit them together. This he was not able to do blindly, as he really didn't prefer firearms and only used them out of adaptation.

The Pizzaman conducted a preliminary bioscan of the ground level and halfheartedly checked each room. It was a relatively tidy house with spotless carpet and bright, enamel-coated walls. Every now and then those walls would be decorated with a family portrait or an unrelated painting that belonged in a hospital.

The bottom sector secure, he soared the stairs. He clutched the gun's handle in both hands and aimed it at his zenith as he ascended, treading on eggshells. Every step was in enemy territory. Every step could be a bomb.

There were actually four rooms upstairs. The first was the den or home office, peaceful and quiet. An old bookshelf with the T–Thu encyclopedia missing rested against the wall with the keen omniscience of the Lincoln Memorial. A large globe tilted on its axis like Uranus so that Antarctica's frozen wasteland

gaped back at him, a place where Right and Wrong get along and meteors from outer space reveal themselves in the sea of snow until that sea swallows them up forever. An old computer to the right of the globe, still on, the cyclic screen saver floating with a benevolent grace. Other people's stuff.

Every house was a jackpot and it was shearing for him to have to leave even though he knew new goodies awaited him, as if it were some kind of anti-nostalgia that captivated him and left him joyously paralyzed. He broke off into the hallway and instantly forgot about the den that had stunned his mind. There were two doors on either side with a master bedroom forming the culmination of the cul-de-sac hallway. The only upstairs bathroom was presumably in there.

Anthony, with a hummingbird snore, slept in the room on the left. There was a window in the wall next to Anthony that he kept open for a midnight breeze, something that would make him cold and give him a reason to bundle up under his snuggling blanket with a Christmas shiver. His room was bland, dominated by his twenty-eight-inch Sony television and his vintage videogame collection consisting only of Super Nintendo and Sega Genesis with a joy stick controller as the only accessory.

Directly across the hall was Victor's room. It was vacant and the Pizzaman snickered at the concept of this. Victor's was more of a high-octane pad where not a single outlet was unfulfilled. He had no regular lights but only black lights and purple party lights and subway strobe lights. He would always leave them on when he went out and his father would always turn them off to conserve electricity, but they were on right now and the Pizzaman gazed at them long enough to be content to scratch the Northern Lights off the list of things he had to see before going six feet under.

Continuing on down the hall to the master bedroom. Two figures in the bed, a familiar image. The big one was restless but asleep. With his eyes flinching and his face drenched in a dew of perspiration, Chief Walker's sleep was not sweet. O but he was in the deepness of it though, his mind performing tasks that the sciences of psychology have yet to understand; and it was then, whilst he slept, that the Pizzaman did feel the most awake and alert that he ever had in his entire life. Watching this important man sleep, a fat and slow man but important in this society nonetheless, watching this and knowing that he has power over the important man at this moment. God it was heaven just to be in this unfamiliar place, to feel time so dense, to be happy alive, really happy alive, really happy to be.

Not a creature was stirring. Time to take care of business. He'd been drugging Chief Walker with a heroin derivative, but not enough: he had only spiked drinks

that Chief Walker left in his car for lunch. But now, at last, he had access to everything the chief consumed. He will get it done. At this time, as they rest, he has all the time in the world. This is the dawn of night.

* * * *

Beverly and Anthony were grafted into the couch where their legs should have been, outright helpless and unable to move. It appeared as if their fingers were mended into a blobby mitten and their bodies were warping themselves into grotesque noodles.

Chief Walker, stark naked but for a bandana complimenting the copse hair on his face, came out of nothingness to lend a body to his consciousness that was already there. He had to attack them for some odd reason. He had to. The Voice was telling him to.

They sustained injury in uninflected areas, as if they were more wounded by betrayal than blows. Every bludgeon and their eyes grew darker, a random coordinate of flesh was gashed and their bemoaning almost materialized into a thick pulp of mucus in Chief Walker's mouth. Sometimes he felt good when he hit them, and sometimes, if he dwelt on it, he felt their pangs. But it felt...good.

Still pummeling them, sobbing as he unleashed his newfound fury. No, *not* fury, not anger: it was something different, something he had never, ever known, something that didn't go away even after his family gave up the ghost.

Again the nightmare was too much to bear, and he sprang up in the youth of the night.

In and out, in and out.

Calm down. He brushed another team of sweat droplets out of his brows and climbed to his elbows. What was that? Something, *vis-à-vis*, the lack thereof caught his good eye. His wife—she wasn't breathing. She was *decapitated*.

Chief Walker was a child in the face of fear. He didn't touch her. He didn't turn on the light. He just lay there, breathing hard, heart dissenting like a ripe fetus in a womb.

A lump cramped his throat as he finally outstretched a stubby arm to brush hers. But something was amiss. She was muscular. He peeled the covers back and saw no breasts: it was his son, a big V cauterized into his chest, the terrain disturbed like a colony of arthropods in a cleft rock.

"I just wanted you to be able to tell the two of them apart," explained the Pizaman through the same voice filter he had used for the chief's son.

Chief Walker whipped around in an indiscernible snap of reaction and landed his face in sweet-burning chloroform, slightly conciliating his desert tongue.

The Pizzaman was a praying mantis, hiding in plain sight. Waiting, waiting, waiting for the moment to wake, waiting for the infinitesimal window to wink at him. He'd been prepared to lie in wait for hours just to execute the brief instant. This wasn't really a chore for him, however: it was all one package, like dating a cute girl, and the courtship could be just as entertaining as the bedroom semantics. He couldn't explain why he could derive so much sick satisfaction out of this, but basically it was the grinding anticipation. Like a striptease.

These kinds of missions boil down to the single twinkling of an eye where they are won or lost. It goes without saying that this one had gone well thus far, even better than planned, for the Pizzaman. The chief didn't stand a chance. Now to continue whispering into his ear, spawning a demon that will haunt Chief Walker for the rest of his life.

CHAPTER 6



SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 5

It's when you want to stop abusing the snooze button, but you can't. It's when you want to turn off the television, but you can't. It's when you want to ask that special someone out, but you can't.

Dr. Jarrod sat on his leather sofa at four o'clock in the morning, staring into the lifeless cobblestone fireplace, with the skinny nozzle of an antique Luger in his salivating mouth. He had gone to bed with his bland, missionary wife, but he snuck out after she had dozed. He had not slept in dozens of hours, and he was slipping away. He wanted to squeeze the trigger, but he couldn't.

Before becoming a criminal profiler, Dr. Jarrod had been a private shrink. Like Chief Walker, he'd entered the field as a naïve novice. Like Chief Walker, he soon became conscious of the scum of the earth coagulating all around him like an airtight room being flooded, slowly forcing him up and up and up until he has to give the ceiling cardiopulmonary resuscitation.

Dr. Jarrod was the hollow man. It had always been his job to fill his mind with the patients' and to absorb their ravaging psyche into his own, to hold them firmly against his bosom until the crying stopped, to become a lightning rod for all their frustrations and evils and fears. He felt like Christ on the cross, bearing the sin and excrement of the world. He was an item that a savage tribe devised as the object of atonement, to be cursed with the people's transgressions and cast off into the outer cold. He was the man in the barrel with the bunghole for the seamen to violate.

But that was not all. Before he profiled criminals, he knew that the only way to catch a criminal was to think like a criminal—this is common knowledge. Ergo, he had to think like a mental patient if he wanted to help the mental patient (indeed, there really are people who hear voices in their heads). This along with the empty eloquent life had sucked him dry from within so that any insignificant thing could drive him over the edge. He might as well have had full-blown AIDS of the mind. He was a berry with no juice.

All the shallow years had cost him something he could never get back. All those years spent walking in everyone's shoes but his own were coming back to claim even more, to claim something that Dr. Jarrod could not give. We build villages on volcanoes and trample them underfoot, but they must erupt sometime.

So when it came down to it, he was not in control. Simple as that. That's why drowning is the worst way to die—because you have absolutely no control. If a psychological profiler is wrong, then over what does he have control? If he was fallible now, how could he be sure he wasn't fallible in the past? How could he be sure that he'd ever been right?

At the start Dr. Jarrod knew that his profession had the highest suicide rate; he came in because he thought he was in control.

* * * *

Chief Walker came to on the floor, that white, maggotty film lurking in the crevices of his mouth. His throat was lacerated. Morning light homed in on his temples and sliced his brain. He puked on the carpet.

His hand stung and it felt as though the flesh adjusted when he braced himself against the ground. He looked and saw that a hearty gash fault-lined the sole of his hand. Nearby was a bloody butcher's knife. Butcher's knives are always the worst kinds of knives to use for murder because the wielder's hand has the penchant to slide down the shaft and into the overhang upon penetration, thus injuring the hand and contaminating the crime scene; it is best to select a knife where the blade does not exceed the width of the handle.

Last night's events ping-ponged around in Chief Walker's hurting head. His heart told him that it was but a dream; his mind told him otherwise. He adamantly refused to believe it, but *it* adamantly refused to go away. He knew that family members are top suspects in homicides, but only in isolated incidents. Surely this was the Pizzaman's doing, apropos, if he were to play the Pizzaman card...this *was* the Pizzaman's doing, wasn't it? Now he was assuming things. He

was assuming that the Pizzaman had already gotten to his family. But his wife was at work. Doesn't she work Saturdays? Yes, she does. Everything is alright. No good would come of him getting up. Of him checking out the house. He could just lay there forever.

Don't let your dreams cloud your reality.

Fighting every fiber of his being, he stood up. The bed had been made. No sign of a struggle. No blood anywhere except for the kitchen knife. What to do? One step at a time. He looked at the alarm clock with hindrance, the digital red bleeding in his obscure vision. It was an eight or a nine, maybe a six.

Chief Walker felt like he just wanted to die. He lurched through the endless hallway, eventually falling to his right and sprawling out in his son Anthony's room. His eyes zoned out, but his mind churned faster and faster, peddling toward infinity, peddling toward madness.

A long twenty minutes perished before he could look. Anthony never made his bed, yet there it was, neatly creased just like the one in the master bedroom. Nevertheless, he couldn't assume that something had happened to Anthony.

Another near-epileptic episode, another twenty minutes. His joints ached. His esophagus was cracked and iguana-dry. His beard felt like it had little weights on each voting hair. With great exuberance he thundered to his knees and dog-walked to Victor's room.

It was real. Victor was mutilated beyond precedent. Although shaved and sterilized, the body would have smelled like death to Chief Walker were it not for his own skunky morning breath. He'd seen all the faces of death in his day, but this...

Needless to say, he couldn't handle it. He lost whatever remained in his stomach, spewing the low-viscosity bile onto the desecrated carcass like a fly digesting a morsel. He looked down at his son's head that was missing a chunky portion, at the legs that bent in inhuman angles, at the specific cuts covering every strategic surface of the body. And then he remembered his dreams.

"Do you think it possible?"

"*Where you last night af-ter work?*" the beginnings of his dementia audibly asked in the large mirror that made up the sliding closet door. He knew he was talking. He *knew* it, but he knew himself as well. He's been talking to himself since he was a kid. It's called thinking. That's all it is, just thinking. "*Or should say, what you do-ing?*"

"You know what I did. I came home and she was already asleep."

"*But what you did?*"

"I...I went to sleep."

"Oh? And where she now?"

No response.

"WHERE SHE NOW?"

"At work. She's at work."

"Prove it!"

Again no response."

"Prove it!" he screamed sourly, smacking himself across the face. "Prove it!"

"Alright," he whimpered. "Alright. I'll call her."

He zombied down the stairs and found the kitchen as if for the first time. He lifted the telephone from its vertical cradle and timidly put it to his ear, half expecting something to jump out and bite him. The chief's pudgy digits slobbered all over the buttons, activating several with each stroke.

Somebody picked up. "Hello?"

Chief Walker found his social skills before speaking. "Yes, hi. I'm looking for Beverly Walker, please."

"Who?"

"Beverly Walker. I know it's early for lunch break, but—"

"I'm sorry, sir," the voice answered tersely. "You have the wrong number."

Dial tone.

Chief Walker froze again as if imprisoned in an infinite loop, just standing there listening to the operator. Faster and faster. He was frozen on the outside but stirring inexorably inside, like a microwaved man. Faster and faster, blowing fuses left and right. A fly deployed the landing gear, perched in his ear and walked around with homely luxury. Spittle crawled out into his coarse beard like a melting glacier. There was nothing that really existed anymore.

In and out, in and out.

Ah, but he did exist. He was breathing, but he knew for certain that he was *de facto* because there was something physically wrong with him. His stomach had digested nothing but mind-altering drugs for the better part of forty-eight hours. At any given moment he was both awake and asleep. His brain was reeling. The more it slept, the more exhausted he became. Chief of Police Robert Walker had become a science experiment.

The drool in his facial hair hit a roadblock. The fly rubbed its legs together like a cat cleaning itself. And Chief Walker lingered there, shining a light in dark places while peaceful pandemonium made no distinction between his mind and his environment.

In and out, in and out.

One of the Chief Walkers was intolerable of being informed anymore that the time allotted to dial had expired. With an all-out blast of strength he ripped away from the phone, turned on the routine television with a crunch of priority as if it were his last action before dying and then pseudo-fainted. The fly flew away in fear and then returned a second later when it forgot why it had left. He vegetated again, lying on his side, his head at a neck-breaking angle, eyes unblinking, mouth partially open. The same channel, programs changing right on time like the earth's seasons. Melodramatic soap operas, sitcoms with cued laughter, mildly inspirational local news of a one-legged grocery clerk, indoctrinating infomercials. The fly ambled in circles.

Sometimes when you disassemble a machine and then put it back together again, you have leftover vestige parts about which you may ask, "What does this do?" This is what was happening to Chief Walker. Like a twisting, dying galaxy, the inner part of his brain kept peddling faster and faster, thinking about survival, whereas the outer parts were hardly roiling at all.

Not quite awake while not quite asleep, he twitched nary a muscle. Beard spongy from a foam of saliva. The fly buzzed off. He didn't blink.

In and out, in and out.

Neither Beverly nor Anthony came home. Chief Walker knew it, knew it somewhere in the floor of his mind where up was still up and down down. He knew it, but it did not register.

Saturday was coming to a close. All things considered, it was a choice day for this inconvenience to inhabit: he had no previous engagements today.

And then a ray of life.

"You...a...looo-ser?" A diluted utterance surging to the light like a neonatal dolphin to the murky surface. *"You...a...looo-ser? Grab...the...shov-el... Grab...the...shov-el... Get you gone... Get you gone... Grab the shov-el! Grab the shov-el!"*

* * * *

She had brown-sugar skin and cinnamon hair, coercing a toothy smile. The Pizzaman wondered if she was single. He wondered if she lived with her parents or with a boyfriend. He wanted to know how she spent her free time. She looked like she was starving for adventure. And then he remembered the car insurance girl with the cute bangs and those eyes fitting of a goddess, and he realized something that he did not want to realize: those sparkles in her eyes were nothing but studio lights.

The Pizzaman was miserable. The life of murder and mayhem had not been exactly what he had wanted. Do not misunderstand: he enjoyed to kill; it was the moments when he was *not* killing that got to him. Eternally plagued with flashbacks, constant paranoia, relentless restlessness. The Pizzaman would've done anything to just be able to feel normal—or merely different—for a moment. He squeezed a seducing paste of unstrained frosting onto a spoon in swirling tethers and deciphered the one-part animal fat and the one-part pure cane sugar in his dark, cavernous mouth. He peeled cake off of brownies and dissolved the fudge. He slurped down a chocolate shake and finished the bottom-dwelling glop. If he could have a moment of peace by eating himself sick or obsessing over the McDonald's employee or dreaming of his commercial girl, then he would.

But the image of Chief Walker in bed with his wife provoked a very much resentful memory, the only time he'd ever confessed his sins to another soul—an event which, in retrospect, very well could have landed him in prison. He simply could not resist the push to talk about it because he felt so sick to himself. And even after all these years, he remembers it like it was still in the present.

It was a warm April night, electrified with a conduction of chirping crickets outside. A full moon. He had had a taste for blood by now, but this was to be work and not play. He had to be professional about this one, and that presented complications: he couldn't acquire thallium or succinylcholine chloride because the purpose of this hit was to finance his career in the first place. So how do you make it look like an accident?

He'd crept into their bedroom, night after night, until he found the both of them sleeping under the blanket squarely on their backs. He then spread a tennis net over their chests and another over the legs. Fighting against serpentine coughs and sneezes, he wormed underneath the bed on the dust-glazed carpet. He required fifteen minutes to tie the net around the midsections, and, miraculously, their sleep remained unobstructed. He'd tied it tightly too—almost too much so.

Being that they were now bound, he was at liberty to hasten with the legs. That woke them. The young man could hear their disgruntled grumblings and cursings before coming out from beneath the bed. Precut duct tape took care of that.

In or around the nostrils? He didn't think he could stomach it. He wouldn't be able to stand there and watch the eyes die. But while boyishly nervous, he never lost his wits. He knew that he needed to wait, say, a half hour, and that he did. Pacing to and fro. Jumping out of his skin. Suffocating in the air.

In thirty minutes' time he returned and stuffed cotton balls into their nostrils. He didn't observe, but his imagination did. The human brain can survive for

approximately eight minutes without oxygen, and he gave it twenty to be safe. But he wondered when precisely they'd crossed over, when precisely they had found that unavoidable road to the black depths of Sheol, and the question drove him mad. He envisioned it over and over, watching them dip into death. There was definitely some barrier, a point at which they were alive before it and dead after it. But by this time the twenty minutes were up and there was no debate for the here and now, for they were fully submersed.

Presto. Dead. Two dead bodies just looking for a cause of death. Sure, maybe there'll be some clotting behind the eyes, but who's going to think of that? He was going to make the autopsy a no-brainer. Yet he nonetheless had to move quickly, as there was still the *time* of death. (Fortunately, time of death is a relatively crude estimation: the coroner's findings are often based on police reports and they are usually only performed as a failsafe.)

So now how to kill them? Couldn't set fire to the house or drown them because they weren't breathing. Couldn't shoot them because he didn't have a gun. Stab them? No—it had to be an *accident*, that was the whole point. Of course! A car accident. What then, a tuck and roll? He had elbow pads and knee pads, but nothing for his head. All those scuffs would look suspicious. But it was a risk he had to take.

It was a comical picture up in the front: both parents in the front seat as he sat on his father, dead legs interfering, bodies not sitting up strait, necks loose and bendy like nothing he'd ever seen. Driving was awkward. And it was a manual transmission. He was in search of a bridge with faulty railing when he heard the unmistakable sirens of a train. A little dot over there. He meandered off the road to avoid the ding-donging mechanical arm and struggled to realign the car so that it was respectably parallel with the street. Bigger and louder. *Ding-dong ding-dong ding-dong*. The dot was getting chummier, coming closer and closer. He needed to leave before he could be spotted.

Ding-dong ding-dong ding-dong.

The car kept rocking violently as he rolled up and back, up and back, positioning himself on the tracks. His mother's face fell into his lap. He accidentally bumped the wipers and they started to screech over the parched windshield. His butt slid and he sank into his father's lap. He suddenly got frantic and, just for a glitching second, considered surrender, to just cut his losses short and lay down and die and close his eyes to make it disappear. *Ding-dong ding-dong ding-dong*. It was all barreling down on him won't go away can't move. *Ding-dong ding-dong ding-dong*. The train his dad's fat ass his mom's dead head *it's over it's pour-*

ing out the police the paperwork the effort *it's blurring it's fading* remembering to breath vibrating with the bumps hearing the goddam noise *let's just die here.*

Ding-dong ding-dong ding-dong.

Stop. Can't die. *Why* can't die? Because already dead, going to die one day anyway. This is borrowed time. Just have fun and make the best of it. Okay. Must start over. Reboot. Clean slate. Okay. Where was he at now? Okay. Just a little more jockeying. Good enough. Now he needed to pop the clutch—the paranoid boy thought it would have looked suspicious if there were no reason that the car was a sitting duck.

Ding-dong ding-dong ding-dong.

Funny, it's hard to pop the clutch when you actually need to. Bigger and bigger and louder as he harnessed the controlled chaos, fumbling about until he felt the jolt. And there it was. Now. GO. Go go go. And go he did, tumbling out and spectating from a safe distance.

It was awesome. Breath taking. Like a swooping falcon snatching a dumb bird on a wire.

Half a million dollars.

CHAPTER 7

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 6

While Ivy had a preference for highlighting cosmetics such as black lipstick or eyeliner, her milky-smooth skin had no blotches nor her face need of makeup. She was ideal for morning sex.

The morning girl slipped out of the pink bed and got four golden handcuffs from the ouija chest. She clicked them onto Detective Wells's limbs, repositioned the quiet appendages into an X and anchored them to the streetlamp poles.

"Huh?" he mumbled with a blasting headache, having that flulike feeling that told him he didn't belong in this world. He couldn't breathe through one of his nostrils.

Ivy got a knife from under the pillow and held the end of the handle gently between two fingers, letting it suspend like a pendulum as she lightly dragged it over his bare skin. She threatened to slice something off and then just kept trekking the blade, over this and over that, harmless but not harmless. Detective Wells looked at her with angst and that's when she made up her mind.

She left for a second and then returned with her arms outstretched in a T, slowly riveting her fingers as if dribbling on two pianos. She wore only a slender cobra, a moving orchard of scales coiling around each arm and capping down her dancing back. And her eyes were on fire, fire like a fire in zero gravity. There were little stove-blue flames glowing radially above her deep pupils like the corona of an eclipsed star, a halo of fire, a burning sapphire, ciliac flames in a suspended animation with sharp crevasses and toothed peaks of conflicting intensity that

proved to have a definite texture like a transparent crystal that you could rub and grade.

“Oh, frisky are you?” Detective Wells surmised in an air of childish sarcasm, scraping his back on the pentagram and exploring his limitations in the cuffs with solemn fear like a trapped mouse.

“Byron, I’d like you to meet Pharaoh. Pharaoh, this is *Detective* Byron.” Pharaoh stuck its serpent tongue out and then brought it back in with light-switch speed for a preliminary greeting.

She appreciated the liquid scales like an orgasm as they caressed her white skin, dripping off of her with the sleek coolness of cold mercury, shrinking her steadfast nipples into stout little buttons. Slowly Pharaoh brought its lion head down onto the detective’s pubic region and traversed up his frame to offer a kiss.

Ivy hoisted a Bible, only willing to read from the book of Acts with the Gentile author. “But when Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks and laid them on the fire, a viper came out because of the heat, and fastened on his hand.” She skipped a verse and her voice got brighter. “But he shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm.” She vigorously snapped the book shut. “Are *you* a god over the viper, Byron?”

Detective Wells kept his cool. “Bring it, don’t sing it, baby!” Detective Wells indeed kept his cool, but he couldn’t sedate his heart rate. The snake was still coming. He had to control it.

“Maybe I should warn you,” Ivy started, sounding like a little girl’s doll but having a somber look in her countenance. “Mr. Pharaoh has a taste for blood—human blood.”

In and out, in and out.

Detective Wells had to control it. Pharaoh continued to snail up, discovering the ribcage province now. Faster and faster. He tried to tilt his lithe body so as to hide his upbeat pulse from the animal, but Pharaoh, a little startled, overcompensated for the sloping and slithered back to the right. They both felt it. *Smack. Smack-smack-smack.* The alarmed cobra hissed, reared back and struck. It was a quick whip and retraction at almost the same moment, faster than the eye, like the snatching of a coin from a palm.

Ivy sighed with female dissatisfaction, clamped Pharaoh by the cervix and put the flipping reptile back into its glass cage. She came back to her bedroom and waited for the man to stop writhing and thrashing. Then she took him to the hospital.

* * * *

Chief Walker's pit in his stomach abruptly derailed his trance and he awoke on the floor again, but it was a different spot in the house from the previous time and he didn't know how he'd gotten there. He blinked, dispersing drill bits of screwing tears down his cheeks. A paper-cut stinging radiated through his eyes.

All the quadrants of Chief Walker's brain had been ostracized, but his awakening from the hypnosis absolved the segregation. He was elevated to the stage of caveman now. And he looked like one, too. Saliva had become crusty and flaky in his beard like artificial snow. His pants had a large, dried-out stain. Specks of vomitus cruentus clung to the webs of his fingers.

Like a savage stranded on a desert island, he sprang up in search of eat. The hunger dug deeper every time he moved, making the kitchen seem so far away. He painfully limped to the refrigerator and compressed a chunky brick of cheddar cheese into his mouth, grimacing as gasses in his intestines gained pressure.

He looked up suddenly as if with prophetic inspiration, then forgot what it was that had amazed him. He hobbled to the pantry and found a bottle of Tums, smearing biological refuse all over the lid as it outsmarted him. His palm stung as the skin slid and lipped on the crack. Finally he got compliance from the bottle and dumped the contents onto the kitchen counter, eating only the pink ones.

Chief Walker twitched his head as his brain began to turn on like a computer that had been improperly shut down. He belched and flatulated involuntarily, his brain scanning itself for errors. He was an engine spiked up into fifth gear and then left to sag all the way down into the pits of the transmission's limits, a residual hypnosis, all the subliminal messages beginning to browse up, sediments of old memories and new memories and false memories muddling up into one giant collage. He was mumbling incoherently about a childhood friend one moment, then about a high school sweetheart the next. Chief Walker had accomplished a complete delirium.

The medication had an almost immediate placebo effect as a result of his impregnable mental state. Within the minute he was back at stuffing his fat face again, pacifying every sector of his tongue.

Once filled, he lifted his head and felt as though his understanding had returned to him. In a way it had, but he would remain forever influenced, forever in suspension between two levels of awareness. And there was this itch he simply could not reach, something nagging at him, some kind of anti-epiphany, thoughts dissipating like phantom bubbles. Like coming home from vacation and

knowing something about the house to be awry, only you can't put your finger on it.

Then, without knowing how or why, that nagging directed his way. Chief Walker trudged up the stairs like a man without a soul and ruthlessly passed Victor's flapping room in favor of his own.

"It in there, Rob."

He glided the closet door open.

"Dig."

He sifted through the clothes.

"DIG!"

He ripped the annoying clothes from their hangers and discovered that a piece of the back wall had been altered. A square outline was engraved without any attempt at secrecy, as if someone had removed that portion of the wall and then promptly glued it back on. Chief Walker guided his fingers competently in the cracks on either side and pulled, but it did not budge.

"Vic-tor room."

"...I can't."

"GO VIC-TOR ROOM!"

His son had had plenty of burglary kits, and he knew he had to go in there. Shielding his eyes from the cadaver that he feared was alive, he trespassed into his son's aurora borealis room and pilfered through the belongings until he found a crowbar.

Back to the closet. After nearly fifteen seconds of prying he heard a delicious crunch and the wall peeled away. God that felt good! A thick, sticky membrane protested this action by producing numerous strands of glue trying with vain allegiance to connect the piece of wall to its home.

A stagnant human torso was inside the hollowed space. It was on a pole with a circular pod on the ground, like a bride's mannequin. It was gray and leathery all over, save for the black, crumpled areas of cauterization representing body parts that are supposed to protrude from a torso. ALL HOPE ABANDON, YE WHO ENTER HERE ~ DANTE was the postmortem tattoo across the chest, likely forged relatively close to the time of death because it didn't sit above the tough skin but rather dried and shrank with it. Like Victor's corpse, this meat Popsicle offered no stench that Chief Walker could detect.

"Is that...real?"

"On-ly one way find out."

He took up the bloody butcher's knife and pricked the hide. Nothing gushed out, but a lethargic, wine-purple ooze stuck to the tip of the blade.

“Look on ground. There—his I—D.”

He picked up a foreign wallet. The man was identified as twenty-six-year-old Joshua Allen Mueller.

“No—one you know. Fuck it.”

Chief Walker took the cash out and stashed it in his pocket.

“You a lo-ser? Get you gone. Grab the shov-el.”

No response.

“They com-ing for you!”

“No! Noooo!” he exorcized, cupping his mouth with his slimy hands.

He bit the injured palm. *“Grab the shov-el!”*

There are crossroads that we all face at one point or another, even if we don’t recognize it until years have passed. At that moment, the Pizzaman’s scattered seeds germinated and commandeered Chief Walker.

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference.

—Robert Frost, *The Road Not Taken*

It was a boldness inside the chief now, a spirit of power. No more timidity. No more cowardice.

“Not the shovel...”

Soiled pants and all, he took the torso and marched detachedly into Victor’s room, not flinching at the sight of him. Of it. He set the T-bone down on Victor and wrapped them together in the blankets, odd sticks and rods poking out like it was a gargoyle underneath. Then he knotted the corners together and flung it over his shoulder. He did not care that it pendulated obtusely, knocking into pictures and lamps. He did not care that osmosis ushered blood through the cloth and onto his bare back. Just his mission, like a baby turtle kicking up moist sand as it scuttles all or nothing to the sea.

Chief Walker tossed the wet sack into the trunk of his red Saturn, opened up the garage door and rolled on out. For buried deep beneath the sand in Chief Walker’s mummified mind was the memory of a small, barely lucrative steel factory where he’d played as a child when it was shut down for weekends. He found the place without incident. Those two chimneys still towered there to this day, naked without their toxic emissions. A rent-a-fence, frosted with barbed wire, patrolled the perimeter.

Chief Walker left the Saturn’s motor purring and paced the fence, searching like a wolf for the weakest link. It turned out that he would not need to ramrod

his way in, fortunately, for he found the chain and padlock erroneously unconnected. He tugged the gate to its greatest gaping angle and jumped back into his car.

He parked in the stall marked for the handicapped, again forgetting to relieve the engine. He popped the trunk, grabbed his Remington twenty-eight-gauge shotgun and slumped on out.

The trunk lid felt heavy, but not so the patchwork corpses. Chief Walker carelessly tossed the blanket single-handedly over his slouching shoulder like a trash bag, shooting beet-red blood everywhere. He lugged it up to the entrance and decimated the door's mechanism with one pump of the gun. The kickback launched the shotgun out of his hand, and he didn't even bother to look for where it had gone.

Chief Walker had never actually been inside the fortress as a kid; it was more grand an interior than he'd given it credit for. The walls were well kept, almost sterling. The floor was neatly swept. His subconscious forced him to study the place and try to see if there be any kind of security measure he had breeched. Appeared to be clear.

Continuing on, mind so numb. He came across an office. Though he could see through the window that there was nothing but file cabinets and computers, he nonetheless pursued entrance. When the knob refused to turn, he grunted like a Neanderthal and pressed on. A few more locked offices, a few more grunts.

Then he came to the last door. No windows to reveal the room's booty. There was something written over the door, but it did not compute. He tried the knob. Unlocked. It lead to the factory.

It was a dull loud inside even though no one machine was visibly operating, as though the ghosts of the machines spoke to each other at night. Barrels and basins and stairways and hallways were in every direction. It was relatively dirty in here, the floor filthy with grimy footprints doing the locomotion and the cheap desks sponsoring half-eaten doughnuts with white banana cream pussing out like the guts of a mortally wounded tarantula.

Chief Walker wandered instinctively through the maze, looking for any door that didn't lead to more confusion. The old Chief Walker would've panicked after being rejected by so many doors, but this new Chief Walker's thinking was more mechanical and right hemisphere now; emotion was non-operational.

At last there was a door that led to a workable chamber. It was very dark and cold inside, ashes light as snowflakes swimming in the thin air. Tall shelves lined flush against the walls. At the very end was a small furnace built into the wall. Chief Walker dropped his luggage with as much glee as he was capable of spend-

ing, an anxious tourist who'd just located his room. He opened the grill door and peered inside. Black tar scarred the interior sides and fluffy cinders carpeted the bottom. He found a dial on the outside for the temperature that clicked gratuitously as he rotated it to the maximum setting. A couple sparks fluttered and it gradually dawned an orange brightness inside.

Chief Walker retrieved the contraband and dragged it along the floor, picking up electrostatic dust while trailing lazy, phlegmatic blood. He swung it into the baby fire and lingered there, oven door blatantly open; and he just gazed at it, unblinking, waiting, waiting for the bag to combust.

In and out, in and out.

Slowly yet surely, perpetual heat tasted and swallowed the Pizzaman's leftovers. Chief Walker's zoned pupils ignited inside with fireworks, welcoming the blazing fireball's evil light from the place where the sun does not rise and the worm does not die.

CHAPTER 8

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 7

Soothing hot water rolled over his wrinkled, soggy skin, following the same predictable path like a trail of ants. He always showered in defiant darkness, redundant black this way and that, life invisible, shadows filling up the shapes of his irises like rising water in a vase. It was almost majestic to shower in the holographic displays of translucent shampoo bottles and buoyant conditioner bottles illuminating a computer-green, the ceaseless voice of the showerhead overhead and the heavy, steamy air.

In and out, in and out.

Few are the seconds of indulgence before the eyes adjust. Showering in the dark is both neurotic and therapeutic, and so was the cold steel of the Luger against the hot water. He sat in the shower hugging his knees, sobbing between his bony legs. Tears hotter than the shower water, breathing erratically.

In—in and out, in—in and out.

Peaceful confrontation, meet the struggle to survive.

He was tired of breathing, and the more he thought about it the worse it got. Thirty million times a year he had to breathe. That is fifteen million in and fifteen million out. A lifetime will be about two and a half billion. He would have to breathe in over a billion times if he wanted to have even a basis for a chance at life. That's ridiculous.

Life is ridiculous. And he had already experienced it all. He had been to several parts of Europe. He had gone skydiving. He had seen a berserk mental patient

break seven ribs to dupe the restraints, the straitjacket slipping off like a sweater, an act worthy of Houdini just so the nutcase could bite off his own penis. Yes, he had seen it all, and now there was nothing left but another billion or so sword-fights with the air. He put the Luger in his mouth.

In—in and out, in—in and out.

With every breath he was getting closer to his date with death. He was afraid to die, but sweet Jesus he was terrified to keep living. The human body is so complicated. There is the production of the different kinds of blood cells and the correct balance thereof, proper blood pressure, maintenance of neurons, digestion of food and a thousand other jobs that all could glitch at any moment and cause an epileptic seizure, heart attack, cancer, tumor, acute respiratory failure and so many other goddam things that it drove him to the precipice of madness. He was losing his sanity, and he knew that he was eventually going to fall on his own sword. Pick your poison: is it preferable to fall by treason of the flesh or by conscious process of the mind? But what is he besides mind? What is he really? He is an entity that he has to set free from this wheelchair of meat, from this gruesome world of kill or be killed.

He pulled the gun out of his mouth a little to angle it upward. Cold. *Oh, so cold now.* He was dead! No, he was not dead—that was an external stimulus. The water. The water was cold.

In and out, in and out.

“Quinn, honey, are you almost done?” breezed his wife, who knocked in the middle of the sentence and blended all the noise into one heaping pile of racket. “Sorry about that. I didn’t know you were in there. I need to run the dishwasher.”

“Yes, dear. I was just finishing up my lather. The soap is being difficult.”

Dr. Jarrod the former psychiatrist knew that people are often lying when they offer too many details, but yet here he was running his dumb mouth like a water fountain. He couldn’t do anything right.

* * * *

A wide-eyed Detective Hayn invited Cowell into the station. He’d told him that both Detective Wells and Chief Walker were AWOL and that Dr. Jarrod was on his way. The chief had shown since then, but the kid was still truant. Detective Hayn emitted a fragrance of fatherly concern about the matter, as if he were his companion’s keeper. The man was never graceful on his feet before, and

now, with this blossoming stress, he stomped thunderously with a perturbed rhythm.

Cowell was surprised to see Chief Walker in his office, but he didn't want to say anything to Detective Hayn. He was almost disappointed to see him there where he belonged, as it was his nature to thrive on chaos.

"Sup, Cowell," Chief Walker greeted without bothering to get up, displaying a peculiar combination of pride and apathy.

"Sup, Walker," he boomeranged with equally indiscriminating indifference.

Chief Walker poured himself a mug of coffee. "You seen Wells?" he quizzed abnormally.

"Negative."

"*Negative?*" Chief Walker repeated, as though he didn't know the meaning of the word. "Hmmm, altheright. Anyway, moving on. What're we gonna do about this deadline?"

"We don't have a choice," the detective interrupted, almost about to lose it. "*Not* an option."

"You will never succeed in life," began Cowell, trying to sound anciently wise, "until you realize that failure *is* an option."

Chief Walker nodded philosophically.

"Failure was definitely an option for *you*," Detective Hayn said with a deadness in his voice.

It was too depressing in there. Cowell had to get out. "You know what, I really gotta go. Can you tell me where the head is in this toilet?"

But neither of the temporarily insane men could tell him where the head was in this toilet. He snooped around and tried to digest the stupid conversation they'd had and what kind of evidence—or rather, how much—they had on the Pizzaman. When he came back moments later, Detective Hayn was out and about and Dr. Jarrod had arrived in his place. Chief Walker and the doctor were both huddled over the desk, conspiring. Something about the way they were...it wasn't right.

Chief Walker noticed Cowell waiting in the doorway, but he stalled a good thirty seconds before respecting his presence. "You're fired," he grunted bluntly, narrowing his eye. "You *are* the weakest link. Good-bye!"

"What?" Then he understood that he was mocking his name, but in the wrong context of the wrong show of the wrong goddam station. "You idiot."

Chief Walker glimpsed at Dr. Jarrod, then back at Cowell. "It's been a constant problem that there is some tension between you and Dr. Jarrod here." Chief Walker battled a wave of sleep. "You keep insulting him by trying to do his job

for him,” he charged, raising a hand to stifle any protests. “The two of you are not able to work side by side. It’s got to be one of you.” Chief Walker took particular pleasure in terminating Cowell, probably because he was offended when Cowell had said that the Pizzaman was an African–American.

Finished. Just like that. But this was inevitable, really. He had performed well, too well, and the prize was this price he had to pay. For the same reason that the strong protect the weak and the living tend to the dead, unto Cowell was bequeathed his just due. Futility. There is no end. Humans are mulish asses kicking against the goads.

“If you replace the u with an e in ‘argue,’” Dr. Jarrod added childishly, “then you have the letters for ‘agree.’” Dr. Jarrod, too, was incensed that Cowell insisted the Pizzaman to be African–American, being reluctant to admit that Cowell’s job wasn’t all that different from his own. “I do hope that you find another source of employment soon, but please try to leave racial profiling to trained and certified professionals henceforth.”

Burning with anger. “Okay,” Cowell griped indignantly. “Fine. Go fuck yourselves. But just don’t lie to yourselves. Don’t give me that shit that you don’t believe in what I do. I didn’t hear you complain when you got that fucking license plate. You know you need me. Because if you don’t have me, all you got’s him. You two and I *all* know that you ain’t got shit, and you know you need him to kill somebody else if you’re going to get him. Good luck tomorrow, motherfuckers.” He glared at them both in piqued disgust. “See you in the next life.”

Cowell hated that job anyway, so he decided to celebrate his termination by pampering himself in a local doughnut shop. But having been attacked from every angle like that stirred up the aftershocks, and he began to have difficulty ordering the sweets.

“Just...surprise me,” he begged as the worker’s body began to warp and her flesh started to crawl.

Cowell only ordered four, but she put them in the big pink dozen–box anyway. He took a bite out of an old–fashioned maple and a nest of scorpions came chittering out of the lesion.

He thought he was going insane. He abandoned his breakfast and busted through the door, but Los Angeles had little fresh air to offer. Cowell needed a camisole, or just to be confined. He felt like he was walking in circles, but he managed to locate his car and was victorious over the lock. He kicked the steering wheel in his haste as he got in and felt it as though he’d done it barefoot.

He was able to keep a lid on this madness due to his unenviable veteranship. He turned the key to a mediocre degree in his ignition and indulged in the heal-

ing power of Reagan-era music. Recline back, nothing but A-Ha's one-hit wonder to massage his ears.

For some reason it was difficult for Cowell to maintain an equilibrium. He didn't exist, and he just as much didn't belong here; but he had to exist if there was a place in which he didn't belong and if he were to commit the action of not belonging. Furthermore, if he were to commit the action of *not existing*, he would first have to exist before he could commit that action. Right? Then that means that everything exists.

In and out, in and out.

Oh, here it came, his most favorite song. It was the Verve's rendition of "Bitter Sweet Symphony," with its grandiose opening, the shining melody of pure masterpiece. It was miraculous, like they were playing the piano on the violin, doing things that had never been done, an absolutely resilient tune, swimming in the air as weightless as a ballerina manatee, brilliant as an underwater palace. Okay. This is real. *He* is real.

I think, therefore I am.

—René Descartes

Indeed, the most powerful words in the universe.

He just needed to keep himself occupied, so it was back to the old trade. Although humiliating and degrading, low-paying jobs come with little stress and zero physical torture. So, just for the fun of it, he applied at a Pizza Hut. They were just opening when he arrived, though the bright store lights were not glowing. Nothing jingled or rattled on the door when he opened it.

It was freezing cold up front, but he knew it was a sauna in the workers' area because of the ovens. And the place was as crampy as a coffin. The leg room for one of the lobby chairs was impeded by the vending machine. The head room for another chair was intercepted inadvertently by the leaves of a fake tree. Cowell eyed a roll of uncooked dough accumulating dust in the only spacious corner and some cornmeal powder feathering the lining of the floor mat. He wondered what the monthly bill for exterminators was and then sniggered as he learned it was bupkis when he saw a furry-tailed, red-eyed rat-mouse hybrid gnashing on a cube of cheese.

Nobody was stationing the computers here at the front, but he could hear what sounded like human murmuring in the back. Apparently they'd heard him come in, because the stifled speaking eventually reached a mutual ending and one of them came up front.

Cowell hated to judge people, that is to say, he hated to judge people too quickly, but this fellow was truly an idiot. Not just the deer-in-the-headlights look, but the way he conducted himself. His fingers twitched without his consent as he walked, a surefire indication of intellectual deficiency. Cowell could tell that it was no chemical dependency that caused this, for his eyes were neither blood-shot nor lifeless but only void of significant intelligence. He read his name tag. KYLE. Naturally, he was the store's general manager.

"Can I help you?" he asked in an infidelic tone, like MTV's Butt-head.

Cowell thought about leaving for a moment, but then decided that it might be entertaining to have an incompetent superior. "Do you guys have any openings right now?" he asked.

"Only for driver." He reached down under the counter with little physical exertion but yet a fantastic amount of mental focus, as if he were a motor that had been modified disproportionably as to where the excessive amount of torque consumed the top speed mercilessly. The man borrowed unfathomably meticulous concentration for this duty, evident in the way he unwittingly nipped his tongue out and fixed his eyes blankly on something on the counter. "You interested?" he posed, handing Cowell an application sheet.

"Yeah, sure."

He gave him a pen. "Okay. Fill it out and I'll be back in five." He disappeared again.

Cowell knew the procedure. He already had with him a photocopy of his driver's license, driving record and proof of insurance. He looked at the application and was tempted to use a false name. Just to see if he could do it. But he knew he could do it. It would be so easy, and all he'd have to do was start up a bank account with the same name. He could be Paul or Rick or George. "Hi George," they'd say, and he'd answer back.

Kyle was more than five minutes. When he came back to examine the resumé with a drum roll of idiosyncratic ticks, he was surprised to see that Cowell already had the proper documentation in hand. It was always desultorily entertaining for him to see morons in a state of delightful ambush, the way their faces contort and contract with such passion that they soon forget whether they are happy or sad or mad.

He was hired on the spot. Kyle informed him that he would start training tonight, since Mondays are traditionally slow.

* * * *

A shadowy figure towered above Chief Walker in the blinding light, trying to wake him up, trying to tell him something of dire importance.

“Wha...?” He squinted into the shining silhouette through the brightness. “What up?”

“I just found out what happened to Wells,” Detective Hayn drawled grimly. “He...”

“He...what?” coaxed Chief Walker, still unaware of who stood before him.

“He is dead,” he said, his voice at an endeavor with the air.

“He WHAT?”

“Some bitch...she got him bit by a king cobra.” But Detective Hayn still hated being single. “And we can’t do shit about it because we have no proof that she trained the damn thing.”

“Oh my God,” Chief Walker commiserated, trying to manufacture concern. “You alright?”

“I...I can’t...I’m sorry. I can’t work for now. You need to replace me. I’m going home now, and I’m either on vacation or I quit. I don’t care which.”

“Vacation,” Chief Walker yelled rashly as Detective Hayn left. “Without pay.”

Now back to the clouds. Sleep this pivotal day away. Sleep.

* * * *

Things got uncomfortable that evening when Cowell came in for work, that is, training. Passing through that store door again, this time in employee garments, he was alerted of his dying dignity as if he’d stepped through a metal detector. He loathed hats because the headbands soak up sweat until they turn urine-yellow and make you wonder things about your body. The tag on his brand-new shirt was irritating his sensitive skin. His work belt was too loose and so he had to keep fixing it when it slouched. All this for the hierarchic company, of which he was a puny crumb with no intrinsic value, a little speck of dust in the ash-caked walls of the asphalt-black hearth.

“Feels like the first day of school, eh?” joshed Steve, a round man with a Santa Claus beard.

Cowell humored him and he generously stopped folding boxes long enough to show Cowell how to clock in.

And then there was Tommy McGee, the one with whom Cowell had to ride along tonight. Tommy had spotted dark–chocolate skin and very small ears, and his thick Jamaican accent was a pleasant shift from everyone else’s drab tones. Though Tommy was very courteous in that he didn’t abuse Cowell’s shadowing assistance like many other indolent drivers would have, he was very jaded and withdrawn. He hated humanity, but he was willing to give the individual a fair chance—only the benefit of the doubt that he was indebted to any individual until that such individual committed one too many stupid acts.

“I give you enough rope to hang yourself,” was all he sang as they stuffed into his car and the automatic seatbelts came out of the darkness to try to choke them. And that was really all he had to say. They each recognized one another as intelligent.

Cowell started to think that the universe was possibly circular in nature. Intelligent people, and likewise single–celled organisms that behave more like chemicals than living things, are not inclined to express themselves superfluously but are content to just sunbathe with one another in silent harmony; relatively smart animals, like dogs and dolphins, and stupid humans alike are prone to do anything besides shut up.

The first customer was right in between a dolphin and an imbecile. There was a note on the door asking them to neither knock nor ring the doorbell because a baby was sleeping, but Tommy went ahead and rang anyway. After a few seconds the porch light said hello and the door resigned to present a dangerously overweight woman with so much makeup that it made her face sterile to light like the rabbit in the moon.

“Oh, I’m sorry about that,” she countermanded when the stupidity of her note glowered at her impenetrable face. “That’s just for solicitors. I’d forgot I had it up!” She looked at Cowell and he cringed. “Wow, two of you tonight, huh? Well, how much I know you gentlemen?” she asked even though she knew exactly how much she owed them and was in fact already prepared.

“Seventeen seventy–seven.” Tommy surrendered the pizza and she opened it up just to breathe all over it. It was a vegetarian pizza: the obese lady who was so fucking fat that she smelled like feces all day because she couldn’t wipe right after taking a shit thought she was on a diet.

“Ohhh, looks yummy!” she exclaimed, her double chin swaying like it had the equivalent of a healthy woman’s breasts in there.

Cowell jerked forward as if ejaculating, but he was not ejaculating—he was just throwing up in his mouth a little.

She forked over a check. “There’s three–fifty for you.”

And, sure enough, the check was exactly twenty-one dollars and twenty-seven cents, three-fifty for Tommy.

They were both aggravated by her mirth that was as artificial as the dipping sauce. There was another silence in the car (except for that godawful music) and Cowell felt like a waste of L.A. air, the way he just followed Tommy around dismally. Then he became aware that Tommy was supposed to be teaching him, and that he was supposed to be pretending to be listening—Cowell wasn't at fault here, but neither did it mean that he wanted Tommy to go running his mouth about all the proper procedures. Cowell was glad that he had encountered somebody remotely intelligent and took solace in that, even though the complimenting awareness had thrust him into philosophical wonder of his own that instantly got him depressed because all his favorite philosophers were dead which left him no choice but to unconsciously know where his final destination was.

A peaceful eternity later they came to their second and last stop of this run. REAL MEN PEE SITTING DOWN was the bumper sticker on the boxy Toyota in the driveway. The porch light here was already on in expectation of the delivery service and a little kid came to the door right when Tommy rang the doorbell.

"Hi. How much is it?" the little kid asked, holding an unorganized wad of bills.

"Twenty-seven thirty-nine." Tommy gave him the food.

The pizzas almost reached a vertical angle at one point of their transit from the kid's hands to the floor. "I forgot. How much is it again?"

"Twenty-seven thirty-nine."

From the money that wasn't his, the little kid counted out twenty-eight dollars and kept three dollars for himself. "Keep the change."

Tommy resisted every natural urge of violence in his body and just walked away.

Cowell still wasn't accustomed to that automatic seat belt when he got in Tommy's car, and he nearly gasped like a little girl when it attacked him. At least the atrocious music served as a shroud for his embarrassing fright.

There was a clot in an intersection on the way back to the store because of an accident, and Tommy grew restless after a while.

"Have any odda part-time jops?" he inquired without turning his head, trying to birth a conversation with an excruciating uphill effort.

"Nope. You?"

He grinned proudly. "Armored car. Ride-along man."

Oh shit. OH Shit. "You ever killed anyone?" Cowell blurted out.

“Oh heavens no!” he chuckled. “I don’t get no license to kill wit dat jop.”

“What *do* you get?” he asked, his voice virtually cracking.

“A nine–millimeter Glock, a stick and some Mace. We’re not allowt to in...”—Tommy rolled his hand in search of the word—“inflict any major damage unless it absolutely necessary.”

Cowell gripped the door handle, disoriented with anxiety. “How much do they pay you?”

“Twenty–eight dollar an hour.”

“Wow. Do they have any openings there?”

“Yes, but not as many as you dink. Now dat you mention it, dey may be *over*–stocked wit employees.” He rhythmically tapped his hands to the beat on the thick steering wheel. “Actually, it’s been about tree monts since I even went in—I not even go in for de Christmas rush. I’m a replacement, you see. No, not replacement...uh...sub...—”

“Substitute?”

“Yes. Substitute.”

A Jamaican serial killer? Cowell had read of serial killers from almost all the nations and peoples (albeit the serial–killer gene is most frequent in white males), but never anyone from Jamaica. Jamaica was due.

“So how long you been working delivery?” He just knew it sounded forced.

“Two...two and a half year,” Tommy mumbled, concentrating chiefly on the rerouting road ahead of him.

“Wow. Why don’t you become manager?” He already knew the answer, but he was just trying to survive the long ride.

Tommy wrung the wheel and pinched into another circuiting lane. “*Manager?*” he repeated, as if he’d been asked to jump off a bridge. “Drivers make more money.” He rubbed his night–and–day fingertips in the well known sign. “See, managers only make maybe one or two dollars more dan minimum wage, but deir jop is waaay more stress. We get tips and we don’t have to report it. Fifteen dollar an hour, easy.” He rolled the stereo button a wee bit and spoke over the volume influx. “And best: you get paid just for driving around listening to your favorite tunes.” Tommy had a way about him; he just made you feel relaxed. He had this quality, this charisma radiating from him that made Cowell feel guilty about himself and his inadequacies.

When they got back to the store, Nick, the current manager, sent Cowell home even though he hadn’t yet completed his two hours. Nick was absurdly hilarious without even knowing it: with his tremendous biceps and tree–trunk

neck, he had difficulty saying anything without imposing a combative manner. He could grill you with a greeting.

Cowell was not intimidated, however, and he had no intentions of leaving just yet. Not until he investigated the matter more. Not until he could prove that Tommy was leading a double life.

“You should make a pizza,” Becky the in-store girl suggested, one of her nipples standing and the other flat for a black-eye effect.

“That’s allowed here?”

“Sure,” she insisted, her petite nose quivering like a chipmunk. “Go right ahead. Everybody does it.”

Fortunately for Cowell, Tommy was given a mandatory break and Nick was too busy yelling the specials at a customer to remember to make him clock out. Tommy, too, ascribed no sense in foregoing the looting of company supplies. He kindly designated half for Cowell.

“What kinda toppings you want, Nelson?” he asked with a cool islander lag.

“Uh, what kinds are there?”

He giggled politely. “Dey’re right here,” he proclaimed, fanning in the general region of the make line.

The precooked ingredients rekindled obscure memories. Strong-smelling pepperonis consummated a spicy fire in Cowell’s mouth. The sausages looked old and smelled old, but that was just the grease in which they swam. He glanced at the white, crisp onions and then they overpowered him; it was as though his brain interpreted distinct scents in conjunction with what it saw.

“Could you pour jalapeño juice on it, but hold the jalapeños themselves?”

Tommy angled his head and swiveled it. “Okay, man. Whatever you say.”

As he watched Tommy prepare the dish, a striking inconsistency sprouted up in his mind. “African-American” has become a fairly loose term, almost interchangeable with any other description of a person with heavily pigmented skin. These African-Americans are minority here in America, and it has become almost profane to refer to them as “black” (though this epidemic has loosened its tie as of late). But how would this *Jamaican-American*, the minority of the minority, feel if Cowell called him “African-American” instead of “black”?

After eight minutes, the scalding pizza was done but premature for consumption. Tommy led him outside through the rectum of the store, presumably to allow the cold air to expedite the cooling process. Some trash bins territorially marked with graffiti loomed in front of them and abandoned grocery carts rolled with the chilling night wind. Tommy positioned one of the drifting carts, locked its wheels and set the pizza down. He lit a cigarette reluctantly, as if capitulating

to his urges only because some inescapable disaster was stalking him and the end was near anyway. He seemed to despise the waning moments between work worse than the work itself.

Cowell all at once felt like a snitch. He'd never before met the people that he'd helped put away, and now he saw the humanity in Tommy that he was going to betray. But he had done this many a time before. And Tommy himself will ultimately have to falter if he were to be caught, since physical evidence or a confession will be required of him—meaning it will be his own damn fault. But Cowell was getting ahead of himself, for he hadn't conclusively proved anything. Los Angeles offered countless suspects, and Tommy didn't *have* to be the Pizzaman.

A spark flared in the air as Tommy finished his cancer stick and eliminated it under his shoe. He estimated the temperature of the pizza and opened the box. Their sides were divided by two olives on the crust for the diameter. Only after Tommy despondently took a slice did Cowell timidly dispatch a hand. Tears of algae-green jalapeño juice streamed down the glands of cheese, then splattered vigorously as the cheese bridges snapped. The rubbery mozzarella savored itself, dominating over the light amount of tomato sauce that Tommy had applied. Tommy was expert at making pizza, a real pizza man.

Tommy: two syllables. McGee: two syllables.

CHAPTER 9

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 8

Dreams are tightly affiliated with stress, when the conscious and subconscious wrestle together. They often come to you when you sleep in an alien environment, if you had endured extraordinary afflictions during your most recent waking interval or if you were deprived of masturbation or sexual intercourse long enough. For Chief Walker, it was all of the above. He'd spent last night in the station with the Voice, the first time he hadn't slept in his soft bed with his soft wife. Sprawled out on his square desk, he dreamt of perennial, nonsensical chaos, of random events so incredible that he thought they had to be real. He would wake up from the improvisations every so often, reality being a recurring kick in the teeth. In such a reality, nothing was comprehensible any longer. He would accept or reject any given thing arbitrarily, with no solid contemplation attributing. To him, a land of munchkins and unicorns was no less plausible than a world where people sit in cubicles all day and friends kill friends just for gaseous money. While he wasn't sure whether his family had become a couch or had been living on Jupiter or was actually eleventh century royalty, he understood the concept of a thing dying, and he did know that Victor was dead, dead forever, and that Anthony and Beverly probably were as well and that the Pizzaman was irrefutably the man to blame.

Revenge. Revenge was another concept he understood, as clear as the revolving blue crystal in his dreams. It was his fulfillment to avenge, not necessarily giving his life meaning but just a thing that he naturally gravitated toward, a drive—

reduction so to speak, the most probable event that the electrodes in his brain will decide to make him do. There was revenge—the retaliation of a wronging—or at least the concept of revenge, but there was no concept of Right or Wrong, no justice, no oaths. He wasn't at fault. His eroded conscience—whatever was left of it—no longer yoked him, but he did know that he could've done more to help prevent his family from becoming statistics. True, he could've maybe done more, but it wasn't *really* his fault.

We come once again to Chief Walker's cumulative compromise that has appreciated into irrational rationalization, the eventuality of any wrongdoing. For surely word of the Pizzaman will spread like butt cheeks in San Francisco if he were to utilize a taskforce. Surely there will be more accidental deaths when trigger-happy dads shoot at things in the dark, and an accidental death leaves a corpse just the same as a horrific, torturous murder. Once again, L.A.'s name will be dragged through the mud. There would be more pressure to bottle the Pizzaman, and who works better under pressure? Maybe some do, but not Chief Walker. On top of it all, the city of Los Angeles averages more than two murders—not fortuitous fatalities, but *homicides*—every day. Small pebbles make small ripples, and it would be logical to permit the few to perish in place of the whole living in anxiety. But Chief Walker was not a deceiver by nature. He knew what he was doing, and he wasn't deceiving himself.

The death of one is a tragedy. The death of a million is a statistic.

—Joseph Stalin

Chief Walker knew that the media could grab hold of just one person's death and shake the whole nation. He knew that one smiling face of a dead man on the big screen could cause an upwell of contempt for his impotence. And he knew that nothing is more quiet than the screams of an invisible group. He knew that nobody would care if a hundred people fall victim to a hundred different killers, so long as a hundred don't fall to one solitary man.

The downward spiral of corruption for Chief Walker had only begun in the first place because of the original pliability of his morale, for everyone seemed to be doing it. And in a way there was no recourse: such a great authority should be destined to die of itself. Being a cop isn't really such a glamorous job with all the bureaucratic paperwork, and all it takes is one man with the luck of the cards to stand up defiantly and rebel against the system. They *are* the system, so why the hell should they have to make up asinine rules just to break them? Why not exterminate the middleman and call it a day?

Even if he were in his right mind, Chief Walker would not have been able to remember who (if not himself) had started this anarchy. But that was the past, and the present Chief Walker was not persuaded that the past was even real. It wasn't tangible to him. How did he know that we wasn't created five seconds ago with detailed memories? Whatever had happened in the past, he had become what he had become and what he had become was the only thing in which he could place his faith. He was the bull, literally seeing red with splashing rage, sincerely viewing himself as the only specimen capable and worthy of matching wits with the villain. No need for detectives or doctors or psychics. Fuck them. Fuck this place. He'll get the Pizzaman. He will gouge out the cannibal's eyes and eat them like oysters sandwiched with saltine crackers. He will disembowel him and wear his entrails like a fur coat. He will masturbate into a napkin and shove it up that virgin ass crack. The Pizzaman is going to die...slowly.

* * * *

Why do we worship the stars? Quasars, dark matter and everything in between—none of these phenomena will any one person understand in this day, yet astronomers devote their lives to them. But even more intriguing than the unassailable heavens is the dark matter inside ourselves. For how can we understand the cosmos if we do not first understand the mind that observes them? So the question stands: why do we worship the stars?

The fitting peg to this enigma is not universally known because we do not want to know. We do not want to know that we define our existence by the timeless cycle of problem and solution. Yes, we *need* suffering and struggling in order to provide the euphoria of deliverance, and most of us do not know the danger of a lifetime's desire realized. We fervently aspire to know the secrets of the stars; but say you, what will we do when we do know? What would there be to do if we've already done everything there is to do?

Though we do need agony so we can find peace, it cannot be argued that agony is good; however, the two are wholly dependent upon each other like rain is to sunshine, and they are both just different notes of the same tune. Essentially, for this reason, it *can* be argued that the difference between Good and Evil is somewhat contrived. For it is the magnitude of a spectacle—not its inherent "good" or "evil" temperament—that captivates us. Some love it, some love to hate it; some want to snare the monster, some want to *be* the monster. Regardless of the emerging result, we all take the same path until the divergence in the woods obliges us to choose. Left or right? Black or white? Good or evil?

There are no facts, only interpretations.

—Friedrich Nietzsche

The spectacle, then the divergence in the woods. The same interest will lead one boy to become an investigator and his clone to become a freelance killer, one boy to become a greedy defense attorney and another to become a vicious prosecutor. We may not know why the boy would choose the one over the other, but there is some configuration of events that leads to it and there is, no matter how complex, an ultimate why. Our zeal, our will power dominates the extent at which we may do a thing, but chance and happenstance continually shape our psyche. However, it is important to keep in mind that even though everything is random and capricious, destiny is not nullified. There was the beginning, the Big Bang and the uneven dispersion of matter that, if different, would have created an entirely dissimilar structure of galaxies and solar systems throughout the universe and consequently different habitats for life for different forms of life. The future was decided then, the only possible future, the one and only future, the arrangement of order and inescapable uniformity, a logical progression of events that cannot be undone, a system of laws that makes x equal x and outputs the past, present and future as clearly as a line on a graph. Cause and effect: there is one solitary source from which any number of stems may branch out to become a paradigm of the source so as to have subordinate effects of their own. With consideration of quantum entanglement and Einstein's Theory of Relativity, however, causality itself could just be a broken toy; we don't know if cause must precede effect, we don't know why quantum particles just keep disappearing and we don't know what it looks like inside of a black hole. Simply put, nobody knows what is going on. But in any case, whether an effect in fact precedes its cause or whether an object's length actually digresses if measured from another angle in extra dimensions, we do know that things affect things. We know that in this haze of confusion where quantum chaos and the Butterfly Effect and the global economy and the human psyche and the speed of the expansion of the cosmos must be considered, the conclusion is that reality reacts to itself. Chemicals, not spirits, are responsible for neurons firing. There are no moral agents. For if a rational mind makes rational choices and an irrational mind irrational choices, then free will is an illusion. We think that we're spiritually alive, but we're really not. We think and therefore we are—we exist—but we're not really alive; we are clumps of cells formed into organs, a massive labyrinth of tissue, an action-reaction chain of nerve cells. Many forget that the heart goes through the entire body: veins and arteries are part of the heart, as are the organs connected to the heart

that receive blood; the brain goes through the entire body as well, and therefore our intellect in our brain is not transcendent of the physical—this means that, were we to actually have spiritual vessels, the personality and essentially every aspect of the psyche of the spirit will be different from that of the physical person. We also mustn't forget that "choice" isn't transcendent of the physical either—"choice" is a physical process occurring in the brain through a medium of bio-electricity, a thing unseen but nonetheless very real and tangible just like the physical wires of a computer—and that the same inevitable cause and effect that operates the brain's electricity first brought about our planet Earth and the primordial soup and the early weather cycles and eventually the first organism with a brain, and that creature's very first thought was nothing more than the effect of a previous cause; all other interaction with the subsequent life forms was foreseeable, predictable by mathematical equation, because even things involving chance are predictable (chance is merely humanity's crutch when too many false answers cannot be eliminated or when too many unknowns or variables make the equation impossible to solve). Any decision in a person is comprised of general intelligence, mood, personal history, blood content, physical health, regular or reverse-psychology and so many other factors that will, like a computer, transmit the electricity through the brain a certain way to make it do a certain thing, perchance to move the arm like a lever. It is true that we are, in a small way, distinguished from computers in our curious propensity to learn some things we don't want to learn and not forget some things we want to forget. This can be confusing, but we must remember that we are programmed to crave knowledge. We crave it as early as our infancy, and most surely through childhood. You ever notice how easy it is to raise a child as a skinhead or a saint, a woman hater or a mindful gentleman, a Christian or a Muslim—whatever you feel like? You don't choose your parents, you don't choose your mindset, you don't choose your religion and you sure as hell don't choose what you think. How can we say that we are good or evil when our actions and our very minds are supremely lorded by the erratic Butterfly Effect, by the haphazard twists of fate that drag us to our individual maturities? For of the five base emotions—anger, fear, shame, sorrow and joy—shame is the only learned one, and the guilt of an "evil" act is rooted in shame.

Most serial killers don't think what they're doing is wrong or evil, and no sooner will a confessed killer clam up than when you ask, "Why?" Why? Why you ask? A contempt for humanity? An innate mental malfunction? Why not instead ask what motivates a mountaineer? Or why do we beef up our cars to the point at which they become cumbersome and impractical? Or, once again, *why*

do we worship the stars? It's because nobody cares about regular celestial events but only the commodities. It's because we need to want to know something that we think we'll never know and we need to want to attain something that we think we'll never attain. It's a cycle of goals and accomplishments. We want more. We want more because it's there.

On the same bubble, we can pester a crime solver with the question, "Why?" He will lean on society's meaningless definition of "Good," of course; so, for the sake of argument, let's imagine a society that were to deem an investigator's actions as "wrong." A prison setting would work nicely here. Would he still pursue murderers and feed their names to the authorities, even if it cost him his life? The answer is yes (though some demons of society would do it *because* it is "wrong"); if you were lucky enough to coax that affirmative from him, however, he still couldn't tell you why. He doesn't realize that he and the killer both ask the same questions of each other: "What's he thinking right now? What's he doing right now? What is he planning next? What does he know that I don't know?" The investigator's motivation is very simple, and it's not money. Not for the faceless victim, not for society's porous tranquility and not for righteousness, but simply and solely because he needs a nemesis.

Morality is relative not within the society but within the self.

* * * *

The dogleg street had an uncanny serenity about it, something not commonplace here in Los Angeles. It was just after sunset, yet the entire block had retired for the evening. A rusty, denim-blue Honda Civic's pub-pubbing was the only sign of life here.

The Pizzaman sprang out, cloaked in his familiar shadow-master outfit. There was something about the street that moistened old wounds in him. It was his best worst memory. It was the day he Chose.

The hunt, the kill, the cleanup.

Driving at midnight, inconsiderably blasting his brights, Mario Buono was rhyming his head to the temporary sensation "Sweet Dreams" as performed by the Eurhythmic. It was a decent car he was driving: a black, four-door Volkswagen with tinted windows and covetable rims.

Sweating profusely in the back seat was a stern, determined teenager. One might think that it was actually quite fascinating how he'd gotten there, most especially how he'd gotten there without the concerned party knowing any better, but it just wasn't—it was easy, a little bit too easy; and he sometimes thought

to himself that the concerned party up front knew all along. But the concerned party didn't know. He had no earthly clue that there was a stalker in the back. And that stalker, despite the vortex in his gut, kept saying to himself that everything was okay, that everything was proceeding as planned, but there was just one solitary fact that kept haunting him: he wasn't supposed to be there. He felt like he could vomit at any moment. His chest was dangerously compressed, and he had to feel his wrist to reassure himself that he wasn't in cardiac arrest. He didn't kid himself. A rookie, a virgin, a rascal—this was his first time, his first night out doing what he knew he ought not do. He was aware that all the great sons of men started as innocent little nipple suckers, and he knew they had to be evil serial killers before they actually killed. Experience was overrated and he was evil, but he still knew he didn't have it in him to slowly drain a human being. Not yet. But he could do *this*...

Hunkered down, watching the full moon, seeing its image oscillate from the window's parallax, worrying about the slipshod measures he'd taken regarding forensics, traveling his exposed elbows over the plush leather upholstery: this was a real person he was going to kill. A living, breathing person who was fluent in English.

In and out, in and out.

Perhaps he, deep down, wanted to be good. Perhaps there was spiritual warfare inside him, and this act of murder was actually a defense mechanism to ward off mental divergence that would result from the seesawing civil war. Either way, he was obsessed with darkness. Fiction, nonfiction, fantasy—whatever, it was all good. One moment he'd hate his humanity and wish himself a supernatural creature, the next moment he'd find himself idolizing the infamous serial killers. And now here he was, ready to come one step closer to godhood. He pictured himself chilling with friends and secretly having a kill under his belt. He was going to sit with the sheep in a movie theater, look maliciously at the screen and say, "Behold, I have done that! I have done that!"

Then, before he knew it, Mario rounded the bend on the L-shaped street and started to curb up. The point of no return. He'd come this far...

The fledgling in the back seat made the Choice and knew what he had to do. He knew he was going to have to pull hard, for the skin will resist.

Go.

He pressed his ambidextrous left hand to the driver's forehead, the red-and-white gardening glove with its crusty dirt scraping the skin. Before Mario could scream, his windpipe and larynx were slit. Easy as pie. It was a flooring knife: a crescent blade with the point perpendicular to the handle, a scythe just like

Death's sickle or a velociraptor's talon, a perfect weapon for stealth that will let you harness the full potential of power and coordination of a slitting motion by allowing you to slash without contorting the wrist.

The young man learned volumes then. There are but two truths to man: self-preservation and the preservation of the offspring; if as deranged and premeditated as this, that first kill superbly sharpens the Zen of self-preservation.

They die but you're still alive. Seeing someone die firsthand certainly splashes the mind with cold water. The significance of death is not fully appreciated. For without death, there is no sanity; without death, the self-evident first principles are denied because there is no opposite of the state or quality of being alive. Indeed, the gods envy our mortality. And since we are mortal, we have the power to take lives. The young man in the back seat of the 1981 Volkswagen understood this. He would never forget that sensation over the passing years. When he put that tip on Mario's unsuspecting throat and pulled. *Snap*. He felt a distinct snap, felt its vibration scuttle fiercely and determinately up his immortal arm, through the veins, through the honey in the bone. He felt it so vividly that he swore he'd heard it too, and he also would've seen it in his head if he were not in the back seat.

That internal stimulation was subsequently augmented by the external. The blood gushing out of Mario's neck like water from a faulty dam had rerouted his voice, now whistling too early and before being reprimanded by the tongue. A blood bubble was born, lived and died as he gargled and wheezed and croaked, still unaware of what had transpired. That haunting sound lingered, barely audible now over the radio, like Mario's kicking, screaming soul was being sucked from its body. Blood. Blood. And it just kept coming out, pouring out, Jesus Christ how much blood is in this guy? Oh look at it, it just keeps flowing, yes, beautiful death. Blood all over oh God blood everywhere *it's PERMANENCE it's PERMANENCE* oh God yes this guy is fucking dead oh God yes nothing but red red red.

Such a rush for him to do something new. Such a rush for him to see it in real life. Such a rush for him to drive someone else's vehicle with the unfamiliar knobs and lights on the dashboard and the fat numbers on the odometer and the weird center console. He found a desolate area and put the pale, moonlit carcass on the hood. Look at him, just begging to be dissected. He lies there, waiting for you. Very well, then. Where to start? Hmmmm, cuttt...here? Like so. Okay. *Oh*, what is that? Is there a slug in this guy or something? Resembles an obese leech, big as a fist. The liver? No—there's two of them, so it can't be the liver. Ew, what is this bagpipe thing? It looks like a giant macaroni. It was disgusting. It was real life.

Real life isn't that utopian burger on a billboard. It's that greasy, flimsy disc they feed you. It's that soggy cereal with no marshmallows and a bunch of broken bits of the other stuff at the bottom. And Mario here was real life. He had blotches and pimples and freckles and tan lines. He had pieces of organ and tissue here and there that will stick to your fingers like snot and not come off until you smear it onto something else. He had things inside him that didn't look like the color-coded anatomy diagrams.

And then suddenly there was a rustle in the bushes, about twenty feet away. Stop. *Did* he hear something? He thought he did. Wait. Listen...Silence. Nobody's coming. Nobody knows. And nothing inside telling him it was wrong. Nothing. He felt nothing. All clear. He knew what to do now: eat the soul. It had never gone anywhere. It was still there. He could see it. Do it. Eat the soul. Consume the thing that is Mario Buono. Look into the eye and sample him.

He had anticipated the muscles and organs to taste rather bland. They did not. Cooking Homo sapiens makes them taste a thousand-fold better, but it takes some of it away as well. Raw human is much more flavorful and pungent, overpowering in fact. To the teething cannibal, flesh fresh with life can be quite an emetic. He began to feel nauseous, but not just in a physical sense. He didn't like the meat, and the prospect of this travesty horrified him. It was betrayal.

But it wasn't betrayal. He wasn't owed a single motherfucking thing. He was not invited. He had to earn his stripes. He viewed the situation without bias and saw himself as a puny chump with a long road ahead of himself. He needed to train his taste buds like he'd done with his vegetables. He needed to become numb to the violence.

In an amateur move he scattered Mario's body parts in every conceivable crevice of the automobile, including the engine. He gilded blood on the driver's seat and on the pedals like war paint. Then he found a large mall and quieted the car in the spacious parking lot. He got out and viewed it briefly from the outside, seeing nothing that he shouldn't see. Okay, now prepare the trap door. He pushed the key in *skt-skt-skt* through the sliding sphincter, seeing the little lock's mouth open for the one and only, and that's when he knew it was done. He left those keys dangling temptingly from the door for some unlucky soul. *Skt-skt-skt*. Done. It was that easy.

Skt-skt-skt. He could still hear the scratching and rustling and jingling of the metal on metal. In hindsight he did get away with murder, but the true victim in this case was only convicted of one ghastly homicide. For the future, he would have to pin more than just one kill on the scapegoat.

Skt-skt-skt. Keith Fish, a demented man who had previously served seven years and change and then had to publicly register as a convicted sex offender for fondling a twelve-year-old boy, was now semiconscious and struggling in the back of his Honda. The Pizzaman ignored him and arced around to the passenger's side of the car. He took out a heavy cardboard box that wanted to spill its guts and lugged it up to Derek Dodd's house, a cozy two-story slightly pedestalled at the street's knee. He set the box down with a sore back and rummaged through it. His semiautomatic. He set that down. Ah, here we are. His lock-picking kit. The Pizzaman silently defeated the front door and casually made his way around as if he'd been here before.

It startled him to see how unkempt the house was. Coffee stains crawling on the carpet, empty milk cartons and dirty dishes populating the dinner table, old newspapers skyscraping in corners. He checked a door in the hallway. It was a ground-level closet. Nothing of use, just a starving vacuum cleaner and some tennis equipment. A door in the kitchen opened to a veiling screen door and the garage. Among other treasures was a long, black nylon rope, tied in a sloppy bundle. The Pizzaman undid the clumping, spun it into a noose and rewrapped it. Whenever feasible he preferred material such as this for his victims, as ordinary rope is often too itchy on the nape.

He briefly returned to the porch and took a spaghetti scoop of electrical equipment out of the box. He went back inside and readied a laptop and a web cam on a deep window sill, framing the unmoving dinner table. He removed the phone cord from the jack in the kitchen and plugged the laptop's wire in instead.

He entered a good amount of gothic chat rooms and posted his URL, saying that the stream will be ready in just a few minutes. Then he went into his personal space to set it up. Just like that and it was roaring to go. He put up a little banner that said: LIVE! YOUR NOVELTY CYBER HANGING.

Moving quickly but not hastily the Pizzaman got his gun, went back out to Keith's car and opened the hatchback. The pedophile was gagged with duct tape and hogtied with handcuffs, left hand to right foot and vice versa.

"Okay, I'm going to eighty-six him and you're gong to sixty-nine him—this in no particular order," the Pizzamn advocated through his voice filter. "You'll live through this, pending your cooperation of course."

He unlocked the rings on Keith's feet, one by one, and connected them to the corresponding wrist, leaving Keith double-cuffed. The Pizzaman yanked the squirming thing out of the hatchback, closed it and forced him to the front door like he was walking the plank. The comfy noose was inside on the filthy floor, awaiting their arrival.

“Pick it up,” barked the Pizzaman.

Keith struggled to squat over the cord so as to blindly get a good hold of it.

“Got it?” the Pizzaman inquired, and ripped off the tape.

“Yeah,” he rasped.

Careful to avoid the web cam’s silent shot, he marched him upstairs into Derek’s room, sniffing out the loud snoring. And there was the man himself, half in darkness, one eye closed and the other unseen under the shadows. The Pizzaman pointed with his masked chin, indicating to Keith that he had to wake the man up. Keith sucked it up and did it. Just one little shoulder nudge, not too much; but Derek, frightened at Keith’s unfamiliar silhouette, immediately sprang up and pinballed around the dark room, knocking things over.

“Where’s he going?” The Pizzaman would have laughed were this not such a nuisance.

Plan B. Leading the target by a hefty sum, he squared his feet, drew a red dot on Derek’s torso and fired. The quack gulped in air as he felt the beaming sting. But he didn’t go down: the Pizzaman, overcompensating for the mild kickback of the petite gun, had missed and hit the left thigh. Derek still okay, and so it was back to Plan A.

The Pizzaman recoiled the gun to attract the injured man’s attention. “Okay, Rule Number One is to not do that. And Two: don’t speak unless spoken to. The others you’ll pick up as we go along.” He gestured with his gun for Keith to encroach. “You. Come here. Give me that.”

Keith came over, turned around and relinquished the noose. The Pizzaman cradled it under an arm pit and, one hand clutching his gun, managed to unfasten the first set of cuffs and the other halfway so that it still lipped to one wrist.

“Handcuff him,” he ordered, yielding a pair.

Derek complied, assuming the position on his knees. The homosexual pervert took his time with the handcuffs and, once he was finished, helped the stranger to his shaky feet. They both tried to stare away, as if bracing for a flu shot.

“Good,” applauded the mutilated mechanical voice. “Now find the spent shell on the carpet.”

Derek dawdled nervously as Keith scoured the area.

“Both of you!” the Pizzaman irately screamed. “Now!” It can be frustrating to work with two people like this, kind of like trying to ride two bicycles simultaneously.

The restrained man gave an awkward effort, channeling most of his energy into making an appearance of searching. Meanwhile Keith, negotiating a mound of dirty laundry, pinched it inside a gray, long-sleeved shirt. He withdrew it,

remiss of fingerprint evidence. “Found it,” he announced, hoping his enthusiasm and honesty would help him.

“Okay, give it here.”

He nimbly approached the murderer and dropped the shell into a waiting hand.

The Pizzaman pocketed the paraphernalia without taking his eyes off the pair. “Take this,” he commanded, holding out the noose. “Follow me, you two.”

They shuffled out into the hall.

“Stop.” He leaned and peered over the edge to confirm that they were aligned with the table downstairs. “Now cuff yourself to the railing there. Good. Give me the rope.” He looked at Derek. “You. Follow me.”

The Pizzaman almost looked like he, too, was injured, the way he descended the stairs sideways like a crab with one occupied arm on the railing. At ground zero he arranged a chair and directed his hostage to step up to the littered gallows.

Derek’s face was shining from sweat and tears. “Please, Mister, I—”

“Hey, have some fucking dignity,” scorned the Pizzaman with a leakage of anger, “because you haven’t got anything else.”

“Yes, but—”

“Yes, but what? Who are you to talk to me, O man? Do you not know that any given situation can always be worse? Do you want I should shoot you through the testicles right now?”

Unable to formulate a thought, Derek just moaned. It was a disturbing moan, like when a stray cat on its last life is cornered. He didn’t know that he was doing it. His brain disengaged. Derek was terrified, but a part of him told him that he was only dreaming. This just couldn’t be happening, could it? The pain in his leg was not really real. His life was not real, nor his estranged ex-wife in Colorado, nor his nine to five. There was no dilemma at hand. Nothing existed. He was in shock, like a man who had gotten his legs blown off in war.

“On your knees,” the Pizzaman sneered condescendingly.

But that command was real and it was obeyed.

With the service of only one arm, the Pizzaman turtlenecked the death loop around the non-dissenting throat, tightened it, liberated the wad of line from the tanglement and then heaved the length up to Keith. But Keith, pretending to be comatose, let it fall back down. Derek did not so much as flinch when it came raining down on his head.

“Goddammit, Fish! Fucking catch it,” whined the Pizzaman, partially able to keep a lid on his boiling rage. He had to make it look like a solo job for the camera by producing the illusion that the rope grappled onto the out-of-view railing

above. "I swear by your God, you'd better catch it this time, Fish." Keeping a strait aim fixed at Derek, he carefully retrieved the line and lofted it up again for Keith, who caught it this time.

"Charli," Derek choked out deliriously.

The Pizzaman looked down at Derek as if he were an animal on a slab. "Okay, soldier," he bossed cavalierly, losing interest in the whole thing. "On your feet."

Derek rose slowly, losing precious blood.

"Now tie it tight," he ordered Keith. "Tie it to the bottom. Make sure you tie it to the bottom."

The metal cuff sliding and grinding against the wooden rails, Keith pulled up all the slack and wove a double knot.

"Charli."

The Pizzaman disappeared from the web cam's view for a moment, allotting time to make it look like he was scaling the stairs and tying the knot himself. He checked the hit tally on the web site. 81.

This just wasn't fun anymore, and he didn't know why. It was even painful and monotonously redundant, like the third round of marathon sex. He no longer saw the point. His arms grew heavy and his eyes formed footballs underneath themselves. His fingers tremored involuntarily. Everything started swirling. Colors darkened. Sounds dissolved. The Pizzaman was headed for perdition. Stop it, stop it now. He pinched the sinus of his nose as if fending off a migraine. Keep it together.

In and out, in and out.

"Charli."

The tally ticked up to 84. Okay, time to go. Back into the camera's eye. Keeping the gun on Derek, he climbed back onto the table and tugged the line, testing its durability. Mildly pleased, he hopped off the table and smoothly jerked it out from beneath the victim's feet, sending silverware and fast-food wrappers everywhere. Magnificent, the way the man levitated. Other than the skipping and kicking of those disoriented feet, there was no observable difference from when the table was supporting him. It was like walking on water, like climbing Jacob's ladder.

The Pizzaman plugged a microphone into the computer for his audience. He stood out of the shot and watched his display, standing strait as a pencil with his feet pyramiding together. A click of the magnets for good luck and then he held the microphone to his voice frequency-anonymous mouth. "You know, in the seventeenth century, during the Salem witch trials, people were hanged improv-

erly.” His tone—whatever amount of it could be discerned through the voice filter—had abruptly changed, as though he were reciting a memorized soliloquy.

“*Oh my God,*” Keith swamped under his breath. “*Oh my God.*”

“See, when one is hanged,” continued the Pizzaman, probably unable to hear Keith’s whispers, “the executioner is expected to account for the variable elasticity of the rope. That way one will fall far enough to break his neck, while not far enough so his feet can touch the earth. This was a problem sometimes, since hangings were always a public kind of execution and therefore occurred outdoors.”

Derek’s gaunt face started to blush and his white T-shirt melted to gray with salty sweat.

“The problem with outdoor hangings is that sometimes the rope can become too moist. This makes them stretch longer, causing botched hangings.”

“*Stop,*” Keith cried dryly, but nothing really came out. “*Stop.*”

“William Williams of Minnesota was essentially the last man to be formally sentenced to death by hanging in the United States; the rope was too long and, when he hit the ground, they just yanked up the slack instead of stringing him up again because of legal mumbo-jumbo technicalities, so hanging was consequently ruled as cruel and unusual punishment—although it is not very unusual. Since then, very few have been hanged by the government. The most recent was in 1993, I believe, for a child molester who said himself that he deserved hanging and actually demanded such a thing. Forgive me, but his name has eluded my recollection.

“Please tune in to next week’s broadcast and see just how much violence can be done to one man. I must go now and monitor this one’s progress. Until then, I’m the Pizzaman saying good-night and good-bye. Over and out.”

He dropped the microphone and closed the program. He undertook another gloomy trance, just staring at God knows what with a glumness in his stance. It had smothered him a little to act so professionally on the outside while he just wanted to ease his loneliness on the inside. Sure, he’d had an audience, but nobody was talking to *him*. He was a ghost. He could’ve been the hanging man’s shadow. He was in the world, but he was not part of the world.

“What is your *problem?*” Keith nearly had to yell just to reacquire the power of speech because the intense amount of adrenaline he’d ingested created a queasy, weighty feeling in his bowels and the loin-freezing shock had robbed him of his voice.

His outburst was unnecessary, but not without purpose: it was sufficient to wake the Pizzaman up. A good thing too, a very good thing, as it’s extremely dan-

gerous for the Pizzaman to be treading sleep here. He blinked a few times, squinted intently and focused on the hanging man in front of him who was a perfect candidate to fish out the line. He looked at the combination of life and death that was inside Derek now, how his face was so red but his eyes were so dead, and wondered if he had passed the point of no return in his voyage to the river Styx. Then his eyes naturally settled toward the bulge in Derek's boxers as the restricted circulation resulted in what appeared to be a premature, saggingly weak rigor mortis of the penis.

"Mr. Fish, are you fond of auto-erotic asphyxia?"

A curious whimper from above, a very pathetic sound that started out fairly light and died off with a high pitch.

The serial killer chuckled and buried his face in his hand. He looked up at Derek. He had misjudged him: Derek had a good three minutes left, and his eyes weren't even hemorrhaging yet. Oh well. The Pizzaman still had a job to do. Psychologically preparing himself for the uncensored sodomy that he will need to supervise, he kinged his way up the stairs as Derek gradually found light at the bottom of the ocean.

Keith was shriveled into a ball like a gimp in tight leather. His thumb was in his mouth. The Pizzaman unlocked the cuff and lifted the slumped semen machine, but it just rag-dolled back down like a dead animal. He felt the flow. Deceased, petrified to death. Or was he? He opened Keith's eyelids, trying to stare death in the face. But it just was not happening.

And Derek was passing away down below.

Problems. Think think think. He rooted in his pocket unwittingly and groped the cylindrical bullet casing a while. When he finally came to grips with his subconscious's squirming, he let out a long, spanning sigh of exasperation.

The only thing worse than failure is when you have to do the dishes after you've failed.

He hurried back down the stairs with haste, as if his thought were evaporating out of his head. He set his baby gun down on the displaced table and dashed into the kitchen, his black tennis shoes squeaking on the tile like a basketball court. He rummaged through drawers until he found the knives, selected a glimmering meat cleaver from among the orgy of blades while being careful to not cut himself and returned to the dining area with poised hands like a child on Christmas Day.

But Derek was dead. His face slowly received its rightful color again as vanilla extract-black blood oozed out of his ears and nostrils. His erection saluted slightly more. He kicked out a couple neural twitches, but the Pizzaman knew that those didn't count. The man was dead.

The Pizzaman evaluated the bullet hole in the thigh. No exit wound, just as he'd predicted. His firearm was designed like that so he could, under normal circumstances, simply take the corpse for incineration; he could not provide himself such a luxury this time, however, because such accommodations always had to be planned in advance. That's not to say that he had absolutely no plan at the moment; rather, he now had a dead plan.

He got depressed again, and it was starting to aggravate him. This juggling act to try to misdirect police was all for not. He remembered a younger man who'd savored the idea of a full-body suit. It seemed outrageously fun. He could become like a videogame character, able to infiltrate any place and do anything without any real repercussions. The world inside separated from the world outside, do whatever the heart desires, take this and leave that, fuck around here and fuck around there, alter the world without even existing in it. He was there without actually being there, and he almost wanted to roll around in the mud just to prove the point. But his younger self just kept killing without ever first taking the time to conceptualize and construct, and he never actually got around to making such a suit until the notion no longer aroused him. Every time he wore it, it seemed to grow tighter and he hated it more; every time he wore it, he became more dependent upon it because of his exponential paranoia. The Pizzaman looked at the shiny cleaver in his cloth-covered hand and saw a mask looking back at him. He wasn't there, he didn't exist, nothing but this stealth assassin who himself has not realized mortality. We all go through a phase as teenagers where we try to find ourselves. The young man had killed before he had the chance to find himself, and to this day the Pizzaman was still searching as a result.

Everything became surreal, and the Pizzaman vanquished his agony by the last means necessary—expunging every thought from his head. This was a matter of survival. Don't mind this, don't mind that. No mind. Without thinking about it, he twirled Derek around for further inspection. The bullet had probably eaten through a wealthy amount of flesh and therefore nestled into the back of the leg. Drawing a strait line in his head without concentration, the Pizzaman made his best conjecture as to the location of the shrapnel. He hacked and hacked and hacked at it, *whack whack whack*, or at least his mind made it look that way. He envisioned himself hacking for hours, but it only took two hacks before the thud switched to a click as he discovered the femur. He spun the dangling body around again and learned that he had been digging well above the wound.

The Pizzaman was unperturbed and rolled with the punches. He re-entered Derek's chaotic garage and located a claw hammer, all the weight hovering in the

head to produce the chimera of weightlessness. He wanded in the air with it until it appeared as though that head was rubbery and wobbly.

He went back to the body and cleared out the flesh until he formed a vasselike structure with the flesh on the knee, the bare femur and the flesh again on the lower crotch. He took a swing with the top-heavy hammer, being mindful to steady the piñata by the leg. Spouting blood and bone chunks, the appendage surrendered after three lops, and the other leg's resulting swing was nominal. The severed limb felt unnaturally weightless in his grasp as well, as though in water. He looked at the layers of life in the meat and he could swear that the tissue fibers were moving with him, bending the leg and tightening the quads as the whole stump doodled in the air. The leg was still alive. Perhaps Derek was still alive.

* * * *

The Pizzaman rested every outraging muscle of his body in the hot, frictionless bubble bath. Whenever he wasn't plotting murder in the tub, he was usually indulging in mental masturbation.

A few hours before he'd killed Mario Buono, he had taken a warm, full-power shower. He'd been planning and stalling and planning and stalling for weeks, but that night he realized that time is not expendable. He understood that the most difficult things in life are the most rewarding, and he wondered if he had what it took to break that threshold. Surely, the reward would be great. So why not tonight? What's wrong with TONIGHT?

It was this thinking that ultimately led to it, but it was his impervious mindset that had carried him there. He was obsessed with serial killers and personally lamented their individual captivities. He himself had yet to kill anyone, but experience was overrated and he ranked himself among history's greatest. He had no real favorite serial killer, and he wanted to explore every murder method possible. And though he likewise was a mere self-proclaimed cannibal, he by no means craved strictly a cannibalistic diet.

He divided all meat into three Aristotelian categories: of the sea (even if it can't swim), of the air (even if it can't fly) and of the land (yes, even if it can't walk). In that order they ascend in taste and descend in nutritional value. Human is the exception, barring some obese ones. He liked all the meats, but processed meat, such as marketable pork and beef, disgusted him. The animals are force-fed until perilously fat. They eat in the same places they defecate. Mating is exhausting. These bovine creatures are so unfit for natural selection that they hardly need to be slaughtered. Homo sapiens, however, have only been partially

commercialized with butters and oils and grease, and remain among the select few meats that are both nutritionally valuable and enjoyably delicious; he simply did not comprehend why cannibalism was such taboo—it does occur frequently in nature. He researched lots of things, and he did notice that carnivorous and cannibalistic animals tend to be rather healthy. He was a health freak, a carnivore of carnivores, a super carnivore. He wanted to survive.

His base animal instincts were driving him. He wanted to hunt. He wanted to sit by the fireplace with a stringy strip of bicep dipped sparingly into sweet onion sauce, tilt his head back and feed it to himself like a dolphin. He could feel it, springy and crispy between his teeth, more than he could taste it. A rough, tough meat in his mouth that fought back when he chewed, guaranteeing to imbue him with pure energy. It was like gnawing on a sliver of flavored rubber ducky. Then he would picture himself with a leather sap. *Whap!* Tenderize the flesh. *Whap!* Smack that carcass! *Whap!* He was just a man in a peaceful log cabin with nobody around for miles, doing whatever he wanted whenever he wanted however he wanted.

The Pizzaman reminisced nostalgically about his young self and the old fantasies. A long, smooth erection emerged and poled itself out of the white bath water. He stared at the viney vein and the swelling head, and he remembered vaguely that he was human. It was then that he saw clearly, as if for the first time, that he was sick, that he was fucked in the head.

CHAPTER 10

▼

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 9

Just get up. Just turn it off. Just ask her out. Just pull the trigger. Just pull the trigger. Just do it. Just do it. Just do it.

His arm was turning rubbery, but the metal tasted so rife. So gentle to graze the big little hammer with his licking thumb. So nice to rock it and balance it in his hand.

Just do it just do it just do it.

Strands of saliva trailed the nozzle as he incremented the gun out of his mouth and relaxed his arm. Deep breath. He stared politely at the painting above the empty cobblestone fireplace. A bird with a diploma in its beak, the graduation hat's tassel partially shading half of its head. It was a robin, painted purple with a yellow stripe across its eyes.

Those eyes were staring at him in a way that had never been done before. No love, no hate; no knowledge, no ignorance; no life, no lifelessness. It was staring at his soul, or perhaps it was even an extension of his soul. It saw him in and out. It was the manifestation of his self. It knew the features of his body like one would know the features of a lover, knew all the freckles and moles, knew what made him tick and what made him conk. It was the facsimile of a lover, a thing that should never be, a very sick thing. Yes, this was a very sick thing. It was himself.

The bird cocked its head. *"That is you. You are the birdbrain. Wrong. You were wrong. You did your best and failed—what is a greater sign of uselessness than that?"*

Whatever you do right is only a fluke. You are a fluke. You are a whale of a fluke. Go away. You do not belong here. Fly, fly away. Be gone with you. Fly, fly away."

As a psychiatrist, Dr. Jarrod was always in control over his patients. Control over who came and went. Control over the treatments prescribed. Control is one of the basic fundamentals of science: you have the variable and you have the control. The ability to control something is what gives us the feeling of stability and diversity; without a system of hierarchy, up is down and left is right and only insanity can balance the equation. It was the worst kind of sickness for Dr. Jarrod when he was not in control, worse even than being cast into the sea with a boulder tied to his neck.

"Can you control this? Or are you going to be blindsided? Will you be a fish swept away in an omnipresent net? It is a dangerous world out there. Have you yet forgotten? Employees do not always wash their hands at restaurants. How many times have you gone out? You probably have sperm and semen and ova and female fluids drifting and mating in your stomach this very moment. Congratulations, Mom. What are you going to name it?"

A tear slavered down the doctor's cheek.

"Quinn. Quiii-iiiiinnnnnn. You were raped. You whore. Do you dream dreams in the night, dreams of forced fellatio? Do you dream of a big, fat, ripe cock stuffing itself into your blow hole? Hmmm? You whore. You are inseminated with half the city's filth."

If Dr. Jarrod were to turn away, then the robin would leave him be. He could shut it out. But he had to listen. For once, just for this once, he wanted to be the one being evaluated, however much it withered him up inside.

The black, pebbly eyes pierced him like the fangs of a spider. *"Release yourself, Quinn. Release yourself. Do not be society's toilet. You know, you have had the same life insurance plan for more than five empty years now. It covers this..."*

Would the world disappear if he closed his eyes? Worth a shot. He sealed them with a click of moisture on the eyeball.

In and out, in and out.

Blackness, nothing but the taste of spit in his mouth. He split the dark and the robin was still there.

"Just do it just do it just do it."

Okay. Just do it. No note, no final kiss good-bye, no last will and testament. No thinking about it, just doing. After downing a deep breath, the hollow man expelled all the pockets of air out of his lungs until they crumpled into raisins, took off his rimless glasses, put the wet Luger above his ear and painted his gray matter on the wall.

Dr. Jarrod breathed his last a dead man.

* * * *

There was no mention of the Pizzaman in the news.

He went running in the streets of L.A., thinking about how notoriety had always somehow eluded him. What did he have to do? Well, he had to focus clearly for now, for it was only a matter of time before he would freak plumb out of his mind. Goddam Valentine's Day just kept getting closer, and he could only ward off the madness with the agony of others for so long.

But aside from all the chaos, all was good for now. He was running on the cement, shadowboxing with his divine hands, breathing in consciously with deep, absorbing lungs. He had evolved, and his running-induced euphoria was now thoughts of searing the flesh and smelling the toast, breaking the bone and hearing the gurgling crack, shearing his prey open and absorbing the red with his eyes, pushing his quarry over the border and being cognately aware of it crossing the line with his undefined sense. He had neither anger or rage nor hatred or contempt, but his countenance spearheaded into a hawk's. He wasn't happy, but the corners of his mouth curled up like a Chinese dragon. He was in a state of mind of pure evil, content as a spider to just exist, to lie in wait, to make them suffer. That was his sanity; that was what made sense to him. It would be only natural that such a thing could not endure indefinitely.

When a man finds no peace within himself, it is useless to seek it elsewhere.

—François de La Rochefoucauld

And indeed it was useless for him to seek peace elsewhere. The world was dead to him now...or maybe he was dead to it—he wasn't sure. Life proceeded, but it was all so detached and hollow. He saw fellow joggers and he waved, but they didn't wave back. He ran adjacent to oncoming vehicles and closed his eyes, expecting the big whoosh of air; and he instead felt nothing, no breeze, just deadness, empty and dry like an old maiden.

The Pizzaman galloped up a steep incline in equal, predictable treads of his soles and found himself one stride backward in his mission to find himself.

* * * *

Andru Meyers, with thicker dreadlocks than Medusa's snakes, was only a moderate man of corruption. The paperwork said that he had killed just three men in his lifetime, all of which were legitimate takedowns while on duty. Most people were afraid of him. He roosted more gold on himself than Mr. T, and he would have been weighed down by all the glittering jewelry he'd stolen from the evidence lockers were it not for his own huge physique. The skin supporting his broad nose and blubbery lips would stretch back and forth whenever he swayed his bazooka arms, and his pectoral muscles could tap dance at his command.

Chief Walker, invariably warring against his heavy eyelids, had been monitoring Meyers's actions all day Wednesday morning. Watching him from his office, he obsessively construed Meyers's every move—going to the bathroom, talking on the phone, pecking at the keyboard, everything—as suspicious activity. The portion of the chief's brain that puppeted social intercourse had been diminished, and amicable confrontation no longer computed. Only one resort: follow him. Look, his shift is over. Look, he's about to leave. Follow him home. Stalk the stalker, hunt the hunter, kill the killer.

Chief Walker went outside into the bright gray sky, setting foot on gritty pavement for the first time in three days. It took him a considerable amount of time to locate his ride.

Patiently tarrying in his red Saturn now, his mind in the twilight of consciousness. Everything was unreal. The horizon seemed closer than the blue tint frosting the top of his windshield. The other cars were benevolently alive, like trees in a forest. He saw strange things as he drifted about. He would slip away and wake up after a minute flew by only to find the seconds towing anvils. Waiting, waiting.

And then there he was, the big man himself. He could've been a tree, too. His humongous arms gracefully walking on the air, Meyers went to his car, got in and lit it up.

* * * *

It was a very dim place where the walking fecal matter instinctively congregated, a place where you'll find stoners with ink sleeves chasing the dragon and recyclable prostitutes fucking for a buck. Meyers had been saturating in the tattoo parlor for over a half hour by now.

Finally Roy Rian, Chief Walker's disloyal snitch, weaseled into the semidark room, dropping the non-anonymous hood from his head, walking as if his spoke-like limbs were orbiting his spherical body. He had a fresh black eye that hadn't taught him a thing and the roof of his mouth was missing its matrix of false teeth.

"The fuck, man?" Meyers hollered from across the room without shame.

"Sorry sorry sorry," Rian shushed covertly as he tiptoed to his client, trying to remain inconspicuous among the apathetic crowd. "Angie, that bitch..."

"Yeah, whatever. You got it?"

He marveled. "You're the only black dude I know who trips on this shit." Rian drew five rocks out of his coat pocket for the exchange. "What the hell do you do with it all, anyway?"

"Police business," Meyers alleged, conceding a fold of cash.

Rian didn't bother to count it. He turned around and started to leave, but Meyers dropped a gargantuan paw on his shoulder.

"I'm leaving first," he asserted.

"Sorry, my bad. You the boss," Rian squealed.

Chief Walker nearly regurgitated his Subway sandwich onto the steering wheel when he spotted his man exiting. Bumbling the sandwich, he just barely breathed life into his automobile in synchronization with Meyers's. Showing remarkable restraint for a man with his uninhibited mind, he waited for Meyers to leave the parking lot before he started to tail him.

But then he saw Rian come out right after Meyers had vanished around the corner. Chief Walker made the executive decision. He pulled up right beside the rat as he was boarding his vehicle.

"What the fuck are *you* doing here?" Chief Walker scythed, his window not even completely down.

"Huh? Uh..." Rian sputtered, never having seen this side of the chief before.

"Get in here," Chief Walker scorned, pounding the steering wheel. "GET IN HERE."

Rian got in and adjusted the seat belt settings to his comfort zone. "What is this all about?"

"What'd you do in there?" demanded Chief Walker, cutting somebody off as he grafted into traffic.

"Nothing. I was just seeing if I wanted a tat."

Chief Walker webbed his hand on the back of Rian's head and snubbed it against the dashboard. "Don't fucking lie to me." He snuffed him again. "DON'T fucking lie to me."

“You broke my fucking nose!” Rian croaked between knitted fingers on his face.

“It’s okay—I had Subway today.”

Rian looked at him and doubled back in terror when he saw that he Chief Walker wasn’t laughing. “Alright, alright. Sheesh. I hooked some guy up’s all.”

Chief Walker cocked a fist. “Hooked him up?”

“Heroin,” Rian said, hiding behind his hands.

“Heroin?”

“Heroin.”

“Who?”

“Hey, where are we going, anyway?”

Chief Walker bullied him in the stomach with the side of his fist, just going belligerent on the poor guy’s body, and Rian lost his wind like a punctured balloon. “We’re going down town if you don’t open up.” Chief Walker pulled over and glared at him.

Rian did not hesitate to give up the information, but consumed time only for lack of breath. “Andru,” he coughed. He still felt the lazy eye on him. “Andru Meyers.”

“And das it? Just drugs?”

Coughing voraciously, Rian nodded quickly and intently like a child selecting ice cream.

Chief Walker looked at the wheel and brought his lower jaw forward like a man making a grim decision, then glanced over at Rian. “You trafficking in my territory? Motherfucker, are you trafficking in *my* territory?”

“No. No, maaan, I swear. It was just this one-time thi—”

Chief Walker brought his elbow into Rian’s face and the rat was suddenly lifeless. Blood was his only feature now, like a goatee, the blood getting thicker and darker by the second, his nose indeed broken with a little fissure on the bridge like the mouth of a volcano, his hair wet with sweat and his face a sickly green from the stress that only his kind of lifestyle could produce.

“You murdered him.”

“He’s not dead.”

“You murdered him.”

“No. He isn’t dead.” Chief Walker took a nurse’s hold on Rian’s wrist, but he wasn’t good at taking pulses. He couldn’t tell.

“The neck.”

He couldn’t tell if there was any pulse in the neck, either.

“There good news and bad news.”

“Good news and bad news? I’d rather just have fffucking bad news.”

“Do it.”

“No.”

“Pound.”

Chief Walker didn’t do anything.

“Pound.”

“No.”

“Pound.”

“I don’t wanna.”

“Feed to dogs. Then nnuuuua you eat dogs. Feed him to the dogs and then eat the dogs.”

“He isn’t dead.”

“GO GET DOGS FEED TO DOGS THEN EAT THE DOGS.”

He put his ear next to Rian’s gaping mouth and felt breath. “He isn’t dead.” In plain daylight he got out, went to the passenger’s door, pulled Rian from the vehicle and laid him limp on the sidewalk.

* * * *

Tommy didn’t show up for work today, and Cowell learned that the man wasn’t going to work until Saturday when he checked the schedule. Tommy’s name was there for today and tomorrow, but it was scratched out and somebody else’s name was written in its stead; Cowell wondered if the managers were even aware of this or if they each assumed it to be the doing of another manager.

He observed the workers and was amazed at the fluidity of everyone’s labor: independent yet sophisticatedly strategized, like worker ants. Drivers doing their own thing without opening those eyes on the backs of their heads, in-store people not being anxious of the managers’ whereabouts.

As the dinner rush began, Cowell slyly made his way into the office. It was a hunchbackingly small, convex room. He could hardly spin around due to the sheer volume of the file cabinets, desk space, computer hard drives and pizza boxes. Even under the sanctuary of his constricting hat he felt threatened by the low ceiling. Overall, the silent chaos in here rivaled the workers’ frenzy outside. He couldn’t think. He put his fingers on his temples, squinted his eyes and focused. The filing cabinets were all locked, but there was a vulnerable pouch hanging on the wall space above the desk. He unhinged it and fingered through the papers inside. These were the resumés of the current employees, likely con-

taining a residue of ex-workers as well. He found Tommy McGee's, folded it up and stashed it.

Cowell squirted back out of the office without being detected. He all of a sudden felt alone because there was so much human life that was so viciously independent and ignorant of him. Phones rang, pizzas were made and the world kept on turning.

By and by, the pizza delivery gig was a fairly mutual system. Drivers were motivated to labor efficiently, for their tip money was a direct function of how many deliveries they ran. But Cowell was not in any mood to work. He just took one delivery, his main agenda to fill up his gas tank and take care of his errands while on the road. And to maybe check out what Tommy could be up to.

His first solo was to a gated apartment community in the opposite direction of Tommy's place, that is, according to the obsolete map. The streets did all line up with what he had written down.

Cowell liked driving at night. He appreciated the way the gravel oceaned endlessly through his unfaltering headlights, the harmony of all the individually styled taillights bleeding that unique red into the air, the jet-black sky with blue clouds and perhaps a pizza crust of silver.

He found the Rolling Hills Apartments tucked away behind a garrison of trees. The aqua-blue gate scooted open after he punched in the code three times. Slowing down for crowning speed bumps, he located the secluded Apartment 237 and parked vigilantly in a vacant resident's stall.

The stairs were so flimsy and echoing that Cowell was sure they would know he was coming. He tinkered the door bell, balancing the pizza with disoriented difficulty. The porch light jumped on and a beautiful, slender green figure materialized before him. Her long, brown hair, parted in the middle, fell just below her wing-stub shoulder blades. She was wearing a robe, but just barely; Cowell kept a strait face as he spied a dark nipple popping out of the gap that revealed sharp cleavage and a well defined stomach. Though he'd obviously interrupted sex, he could see no hint of her partner. They employed the minimal amount of communication as they exchanged coin for sustenance.

She was pristine to him. The way she would fling her hair twice or thrice to get the part that was matted down to her forehead with sweat, the way she seemed to have infinite control of her fingers when she handled the things without even trying, the way that robe bent and wrinkled and crisped indifferently—he saw in her the beauty of apathy, the beauty of living in the moment.

She made him view the situation with Tommy through new eyes. He was about to knock down Tommy's door and accuse him of heinous crimes, but for

what? For what reason should *Cowell* have cared whether or not Tommy was the Pizzaman? To try to entrap someone and prove that someone to be a ghoulish serial killer was not *his* responsibility. He was in it for the money, and, being stripped of that, he now vowed to just enjoy his portion in life. He will let the world serve its own needs.

Having come this far, he was going to quit now. Yes sir, the woman had that much of an effect on him. Cowell got back into his car, unfolded Tommy's resumé and ripped it up.

CHAPTER 11

▼

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 10

Chief Walker's wet cheek chilled frigidly as he peeled it away from the warm puddle on his desk. By now the bizarre sequence of dreams had dissipated, since he was accustomed to waking to strange places and faces, but sometimes he *thought* he was dreaming. Especially like now.

Dragging saliva, he swiveled in his oversized chair to gather the personal mail that accumulated for him in a basket from a mail slot in the wall. He swigged some coffee, his horrible breath polluting the beverage. There were three envelopes, but only two of them were bills. He stared at the third one in gawking disbelief. Six stamps overkilled the corner, the return address simply "The Pizzaman."

Chief Walker was despondent. It was a contradiction in reality: he hadn't lifted a finger to stop this and he was therefore to blame, but he was never wrong. This is impossible. He'd become a piece of paper, a man who didn't really exist. He was not a diplomat, nor a medium, nor an agent nor an enforcer. The world around him revolved on its own, failing or succeeding without his express permission. His responsibilities had been delegated to everyone around him, and the system could subsist in his absence; he was a dinosaur.

And so he answered with uncompromising rage. To hell with the possibility of anthrax or any of that stuff. He didn't even care if he lived or died. Vision a throbbing red, he opened it like he would a fish's body, annihilating the envelope

and carelessly endangering any potential trace evidence. For Chief Walker's eyes only:

9 February 2005

Good Afternoon, Chief.

I am disconsolated by your lack of cooperation. A criminal makes deals with the prosecutor, so wherefore will you not negotiate with me? Your motives confuse me. All in all, I am hard-pressed to determine whether your work is dominated by shoddiness or treachery.

In light of this, I believe you need my assistance. If you will accept it, I therefore have for you a clue: Flex in your gut, Police Chief Robert Walker, and feel that tiny little pulsing dimple right under the stem of your ribcage. That is where the soul resides. That is where my next victim will be thrust through.

It can go away. I can make it stop.

Until next time,

The Pizzaman

And on the reverse side was a grainy photocopy of a public city bus.

* * * *

The banshee shrieking of the bulky bus brakes clawed at his blood and the hydraulic puffing of the phone-booth door cotton-swabbed him. He stepped up into the bus, paid and made one-way eye contact with the myopic-eyed driver, a twinkle-toed young woman reeking of flamingo pheromones.

The Pizzaman would've looked suspicious in any other city. Dark sunglasses, a round shade hat, brown leather gloves and a cream trench coat. He had a strange way about him as he hesitated in the entrance of the bus, like he was preparing for something, like he was tense, ready for anything.

He quickly scanned the passengers. A lot of empty seats, nobody clinging to the overhead rings. About a dozen people in all. No children and no gangstas.

Okay. He cradled his small duffle bag and waded to the very back. Privacy here for the next two rows.

The fragile feminine flower remained a mystery to him. Other than his own mother, he had yet to slay a woman; in other words, he'd never killed someone who was a potential mate. He couldn't: he feared it, he feared the unknown, he feared change. But women are people too. This was another hump to conquer. This was another one of those things he had to do before he died.

The bus jerked and twitched as it pulled out into traffic. Driving at its smoothest, the vibration was still violent. Ah, just like the first time. It's so much easier, he discovered, to go through with something once you've put yourself in the position where you *have* to do it. Verily, much will be accomplished today.

Throw another soul on the fire, ascend higher and higher.

He tried to simultaneously subdue himself and force a lycanthropic attitude for his first bloodbath, but his heart refused to slow. He soothed a hand on it to try to absorb the overflowing energy as if trying to drain a cumbersome erection. He had to control it. Calm. Calm.

In and out, in and out.

The unleashed thoughts started barking like the neighbor's dog. His was a spirit that longed for romantic companionship, and his unappeased mind consequently treaded into more penetrating thought than that of the average involved person. No peace, heart still jackhammering. Stop thinking, start doing.

In and out, in and out.

He shook out of his trench coat and removed the hat and shades. He had stolen those items just a few hours ago; the gloves he wore were forensically clean, but not so anything else. The bus bouncing like a dinghy, he meticulously combed over the unclean glasses and found no fingerprints. He located three hairs in the hat and swallowed them. But he moaned dejectedly just looking at the large, pocket-plagued coat. He no longer cared, and so he just took a shortcut on that one. He almost wanted to get captured, to just end it all. He was tired, tired of all the hiding and worrying and killing. He didn't want the pernicious girl. He wanted a companion, a girl with innocence in her voice and trust in her eyes, a girl who'll sew mittens and bake cookies, a girl who will allow him to let his guard down and not be looking over his shoulder or afraid that she would do something to him that he would do only to others. He wanted to not have his past. Rest. He just wanted to snuggle in the dark with a lover and cry. Just to sit in the shadows and look at the tones of blue and purple and black and know that there's something there that he can't see. He was there right now, in the dark. There's the smoke detector. There's the digital alarm clock 1:56 *go to sleep*.

There's the standby on the stereo. He thought about it, his muscles relaxing and he was humming, his home the permissive darkness. Peace all around. The dark is beautiful. His happy place.

And then it vanished. This is that moment in the morning when you have to get up for work. He couldn't just sit there. He had to get up. Stop thinking, start doing. Get it done.

The duffle bag and its contents were clean. He extracted a green ski mask and laid it on the leather seat; he would have liked to wear goggles, but he was going to need his full screen of vision.

And then the two other items in the bag: two of his prototype blades.

The first was something like a grappling harpoon-dagger hybrid. At first glance it looked like any ordinary dagger, except for the rim guard sandwiched between the handle and the blade. But the tip of this special dagger was designed to split into opposite directions at the whim of a button at the butt of the grip so that each half would be perpendicular to the shaft. The blade itself was not solid, yet it was just as weighty as if it were: the mechanism responsible for the mouth-
ing of the tip was internal, as were the clasps, in order to uphold the integrity of the serrated edges.

The second weapon was a one-handed sword unlike any other ever designed. A double-edged blade almost capable of hacking off a limb in one stroke, its main purpose in life was to impale. End to end it was approximately forty-eight inches, fitting into the duffle bag thanks to its collapsible feature. Right in the middle it could unlock with a key and shell into itself (the key was not necessary to lock it upright). When erect it was as strong as a katana, despite the fact that the lower end of the metal was hollow like its sister dagger; the locking pin was entirely endoschematic as well. Above all, the grip of this custom sword was its most convenient feature. Attached was a sleeve, like an adjustable cast, into which a right hand could fit, thus marrying the sword and its master into one flesh. It was a swift sword that could not be dropped. It was a hungry sword that could not be sheathed. It was the perfect combat sword.

The Pizzaman substituted the ski mask and the weapons from the bag with his trench coat, hat and sunglasses, then quickly lowered the window and chucked the bag. He crouched down into the cow hide, pulled down the mask and crawled his forearm into the sword's unique groove. He fastened the buckles so tightly that he could sense every individual pulse. And then, without thinking about it, he took the magic dagger, flicked his wrist to naturalize the sword and sprinted to the front of the bus through a river of shallow gasps.

He reeled to a stop at the driver and knelt down at her feet before anyone could react. It was an awkward angle, but he prevailed due to his unnatural dexterity. The blade narrowly missed the knob in her foot as it sharked through the flesh, through the accelerator, through her hair-raising screams. The bus swerved around belligerently, scraping things and smashing cars, but the Pizzaman managed to squish the obdurate button at the base of the handle and the tip fanged itself in half. And she screamed again as if that hurt her further.

The Pizzaman thought about stumping her hands, for he didn't want to give her the opportunity to rip the valvelike wheel for a jackknife or to fishtail it with the emergency brake, but he equally didn't want to bleed her out at the controls. Before he could make up his mind, however, his peripheral vision detected a threat. Man coming. The Pizzaman stabilized himself, his center of gravity a small ball deep inside him that could stop any impetus dead in its tracks, standing his ground and he gored the charging savior right through the solar plexus.

"You walked right into that one, son!" he shouted with his naked voice as the hero's granite face precipitated into an aching lull. "Get offa my sword." He kicked him in the stomach and the man slid penitently off, leaving behind the blade's cherry-popping trail of blood.

And then everything blurred to white. The next thing the Pizzaman knew, he was in the eye of the storm. He was serenely breathing innnnn and ouuuut, and everybody but the driver was dead. He felt much better physically, but the mental lapse terrified him. Was there a schism in his brain? How did he get here? Had any of them had a gun? *Oh Jesus he was covered in blood.* Soggy all over as if he just dove into a pool with his clothes on—yep, it was blood. He padded himself down to check for wounds. Not his blood. He was okay. But then his uncovered eyes bugged with unspeakable horror when he saw a handful of cell phones in the grasps of the dead. He bent down over one, wiped a lake of blood off of the screen and saw that a 911 operator was still on the line!

The Pizzaman keeled over and his cheeks instantaneously puffed with vomit. He chewed it back. He'd gone too far this time, and he knew it. He was fucked.

Meanwhile the frantic bus driver, unaware that the barbaric mayhem had subsided, could have called for help as well on her radio but instead zoned all her concentration on damage control of the hell on six wheels. She was just starting to get good at controlling the bus, but then the rampant street suddenly divided and she beheld a tunnel of royal-blue light as the Pizzaman intruded a sword into her spinal cord.

Faint sirens from the horizon were tattling on the Pizzaman now. He tore the driver out of the commander's seat and took her place, having difficulty with the

throttle because of the blooming blade. The police came into his mirror uninvited, and the traffic seemed to think of them as uninvited as well: the Pizzaman looked over his shoulder at the blind spot and, through the blood-stained windows, saw a gray Ford pickup with an outlandish driver who kept poking his head up and down in search of a conceivable angle. What does *he* want? Hmmm, out-of-state plates. Is that Kansas or Arkansas? The Pizzaman had lived in Kansas once, should've known which state it was just by character sequence. Brain not working, not good. What to do what to do what to do *keep going*.

Upcoming light green *keep going*.

The sword still at full length on his arm, he scoured over the panels and found the door switch. He reached over with his left hand and activated it, but, to his chagrin, it opened the door in the middle of the loaf-mobile instead. There was no lever for the other door. He got hyper with panic and started to disturb all of the switches. Blinkers, wipers, the radio...the door. It opened shrewdly with a teakettle wail, letting in smoggy air that whistled with a lethargic burrowing.

Over the shoulder again. The truck driver had evened up to the bus, either being some kind of undercover police vehicle or an obnoxious bystander. From the gaping mouth and the wide eyes, the Pizzaman deduced him to be the latter.

About three seconds to the next light—it, too, was green. The cops were getting frustrated with the adrenaline junkie in the pickup. He seemed immune to their warnings from the public address system. But what could they do? No way they were going to put their own jobs on the line. Protocol obligated that they obtain the go-ahead before using a PIT maneuver even in a situation as volatile as this, and the hot pursuit was just warming up.

The Pizzaman took advantage of the cops' restrictions. He gave it a little burst, pulling ahead of the curious gray Ford. He trained the wheel to the right, inching toward the border of his lane. Then he ditched his seat and stalled momentarily until the failing momentum leveled him with the truck. As soon as the sputtering bus paralleled him with the truck's bed, he leaped, leaped like he'd never leapt before, the cold air a million needles on his wet body, outstretching his augmented arm and embedding it into the steel.

The unmanned bus logjammed one of the police vehicles. Another cop violently veered out of the way and chopped down a kid in the street who was jubilantly flashing gang signs in the Pizzaman's honor.

After an elongated second of straddling the bed, the Pizzaman's superb upper strength hoisted him into the back of the pickup. Then he stood, raised the sword with both hands into an executioner's pose and hedgehogged it through the roof and into the crown of the trucker's skull. Operating quickly, he unbuck-

led the sleeve and abandoned his loyal blade. Though there was cloth underneath, the release encouraged a relieving coolness on his arm, that feeling you get when you shave your head or get out of the shower.

“Are you fucking crazy?” cried one of the cops to his partner who was leaning out of the window and trying to shoot the Pizzaman.

“No, *he’s* crazy.”

“I can’t let you do that, Epp.”

“Well then stop me...Hey, what the *helllll* is he doing?”

The Pizzaman was trying to get into the truck because it was slowing down because the driver was dead. He reached over to the driver’s-side door with his warm arm and luckily found it to be unlocked. Like a circus monkey he climbed over into the cabin, smoothly and effortlessly using all four extremities in unison.

Red. There were smears of red everywhere in his trail, everywhere on that side of the truck, red palm prints and red lines and red stripes. The Pizzaman was wet all over and the truck driver was wet all over too, and they produced slime together as the Pizzaman settled into the man’s lap. Squishy squishy.

He felt a jolt when he commandeered the pickup. A cop was trying to ram him—they didn’t really need permission after what they had just seen. The Pizzaman sped up and good-gamed a red light. Six cars were in the chase now. He cut a sharp right, sharp as he could, but he still ate some of the oncoming traffic’s lane. A couple accidents formed behind him since few cars adhered to the police sirens. He saw the few that did pull over for the police, pulling to the right only because the cops were right behind them and conveniently prolonging the signal; and then, after the cops passed by, there was a tidal wave of civilian cars as the light quickly morphed to yellow, all the vehicles that had stopped now flying away like they had emergencies of their own, just creating a situation of pure chaos.

The Pizzaman ran another red light, and this one was a close one that came with many honking sounds, but the light after was green for him. And they all were green for him after that. The cops made it that way since the Pizzaman wasn’t going to obey them anyways.

What the hell was he going to do? He wasn’t going to evade the police with finesse, that was for sure. And he knew that these chases exceed a ninety-nine-percent capture rate; they are a mere inconvenient formality. History repeats itself. He was fucked. And he had forgotten his magnets. Shit. There they were at home, on the fucking nightstand. This was the epitome of being fucked. He was going to have to do something that had never been done before, and he didn’t even know what that something was.

He thought he'd uh-ohed his pants, but he learned that it was merely blood soaking in there. A part of the Pizzaman wanted to have a panic attack: he was going to go to prison and get sodomized by a big black bubba who would huff hot, moist breath onto his back and rock him back and forth like a fluffer. Another part of him wanted to embrace this chase since it would likely be the most exhilarating drop of time in his life and also his last bit of freedom. But he instead became a clear-thinking machine, and neither happened. The streets became a lucent maze and other vehicles mere obstacles, sort of a digital representation of a thing that is not really there, and he captained through them with steady hands and inorganic eyes.

Things went on like that for a while. Eventually a helicopter smiled down upon him and there were a dozen visible units devoting themselves to his demise. The roads were not any less congested. He was having a hard time seeing because so much light was fixed on him and the sun was at that killer spot where the visor doesn't do squat even if you're sitting on a body.

Then the dead man's cell phone rang. The Pizzaman prodded around for it blindly and found it right when it had quieted. What to do? Call a buddy? He paged through the history...oh, look at this. Blockbuster Video.

"Blockbuster Video. This is Julie, how may I help you?"

The Pizzaman disguised his voice as best as possible and made a mental note that he was maybe going to have to kill Juile. "Are you guys located in a big shopping center by chance?"

"Yes, we are. Right by Mervyn's."

"Excellent. Could you give me directions, please?"

"Sure. Do you know where Cedar Street is?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Take that, go right onto Blue Sailor, right on Javier, left on Parsec and then you should see it. Did you get all that?"

"Right on Sailor, right on Javier and left on Parsec?"

"Yep," she approved cheerfully.

"Thank you. Bye."

The news reporters from up above wondered if the Pizzaman was possibly a homosexual necrophiliac or if he was on PCP when he began to tear at his clothes. They saw him from afar, just shredding his garments like he had absolutely no use for them, taking it all off except for that green mask which he was saving for the very end. But he kept driving the whole time and he wasn't homosexual and he wasn't on PCP and he wasn't giving up. He bobbed and weaved his way through unyielding traffic until he came across Cedar Street. Right, right,

left and there it was, the great shopping center, his savior, a blinding beacon beckoning him to come. Through the parking lot he went, through the glass entrance of the Mervyn's store where it was new clothes galore.

Gallons of customers pouring out in muddled chaos as the limited number of police cars converged on the scene at sunset.

CHAPTER 12

▼

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY II

There was mention of the man in the green mask in the news.

The press loved it because the man in the green mask made monkeys out of the Los Angeles Police Department. It had everything the sheepish connoisseur body was told they wanted: mass murder, car ‘jacking, police pursuit and a good getaway for the bad guy. The man in the green mask was such a fan favorite that there was an onslaught of suggestions from the public on what to name him. But “the man in the green mask” stuck, possibly because such a mouthful was considered to be the only tribute anyone could give to the man in the green mask.

The LAPD scrambled over all the tips coming in that turned out to be bogus. A two hundred–man taskforce was assembled in allegiance with state police and the FBI. The man in the green mask was a terrorist, they said, and they urged the insubordinate city to help.

All the Blockbuster employees were interviewed when the truck driver’s cell phone was located. The voice Julie had heard sounded like Martin Sheen’s, but the minx lied and said it sounded like Charlie Sheen’s. The FBI took it over from there like a parent helping a child with a school project. It seemed as though everyone *except* the residents of Los Angeles understood the atrocities that had been committed by the man in the green mask, and to all the rest it was indeed no joke.

It was no joke to the Los Angeles police, either. They wanted to catch him before their rivals could. The man in the green mask was a fresh fad. The cops

would've done anything just to see a glimpse of the man in the green mask or to hear him breathe into the telephone. Or to maybe get a letter from him. Everybody who was anybody was on the case, excluding Chief Walker of course, who was absolutely sick of it all and had resigned to the fact that he was going to have to play possum until the Pizzaman made a mistake. Chief Walker was slothful, and that fit his plans well. Those who are active are continually active, and those who are lazy continually lazy; negative energy had consumed Chief Walker in the days' past. Every movement was significant now. It may sound dubious, but it's not too hard to get to that point, really. There are men who work like healthy stallions their whole lives only to perish after just a few months of stagnant retirement. Let this be truth: standing still is self-destruction.

The torpid Chief Walker hadn't been in his ghost house in well over a week, and his offensive odor was more repellant to other human beings than a poisonous frog to would-be predators. He knew it. He was inebriated, but he knew that they all despised him. He had to get away. He remembered Roy Rian calling him with the John Doe in his boat, remembered the way he felt when he heard the ocean whispering into his ear through Rian's phone.

His mouth habitually open and his shunned eye envying its brother, he staggered through the hall, the haunted hall that seemed to twist and warp for everybody that passed through it at some point or another. He nearly fell through the door, the beaming passageway to the infinite brightness outside. Still unbalanced as he walked, mentally magnifying every crunching footfall, the car so far away, so far away but somehow getting bigger, step by step he went, just going, just going.

He plugged a quivering key into his whirling car door and tumbled the lock, opened the door with sweat and exerted a great deal of leverage just to sit down. Into the ignition *click-click-click...*

Though he was losing his mind—and he knew he was losing his mind—he definitely knew there was the feeling of cool leather on his forehead and a strange gun nozzle nestled into his ear.

“Don't move,” commanded a mechanically disguised voice.

“What do *you* want?” Chief Walker asked malevolently, complying but without being frightened in the least bit. “*WHAT YOU WANT?*”

The hand on his forehead disappeared and came back with a bottle of Evian water. “I want you to drink this. It's going to taste...a little salty.”

Chief Walker took it and inspected it. “The lid's been fucked with,” he objected wryly. “What's in it?”

“GHB.”

“What the fuck? You wanna rape me or something?”

“I’m gonna rape Beverly if you don’t fucking drink it.”

Chief Walker swigged some and instantly spit it out. “This is goddam *ocean* water.”

He nudged the gun against Chief Walker’s ear. “This isn’t for shits and giggles, and I won’t ask you again. Drink it.”

* * * *

After slipping in and out of consciousness for the last six hours with bouts of rapid eye movement and the occasional dream of his revolving blue crystal, an alert Chief Walker now waited in an abandoned ice cream shop. He was sitting on the filthy floor with his hands cuffed behind his back around a thick pipe. He looked around, but he couldn’t see anything in the futile darkness. Even after his eyes had adjusted, the darkness only revealed a purple curtain spanning the wall before him. But that curtain came alive a hitchhike of the clock later, and then his eyes met the Pizzaman.

The mass-murdering serial killer, layered with three different shades of night, lifted up a portion of the purple and hunched as he plodded under it. He strutted with that bizarre shuffling of his feet, his arms parallel to his upright figure, hands flared out, fingers curled like a dead spider’s legs. This time the Pizzaman had taken more precaution than usual to prepare his anti-forensic suit of armor. He was wearing a flannel shirt and spandex under his cotton exterior. Extra tape sealed the gaps in the clothing more securely and thirty-dollar goggles kept his eyelashes to himself. Chief Walker’s one-way hypocrisy street that yielded to no man was secretly impressed with his foe’s fortified defenses.

“You know, I’ve always wondered,” postulated the Pizzaman through that classic filter. “If we are”—he air-quoted—“‘innocent until proven guilty,’ then why are juveniles tried as an adult half the time? A juvenile is a juvenile is a juvenile. If you try him as an adult, you are labeling him things that can be detrimental when the jury looks at him. Listen to me, Walker. You are assuming the very thing that is in question. You’re saying, ‘Look, we know he did it, so let’s try to get this punk the maximum penalty.’ You want to give a juvenile life imprisonment. Speaking of which, why do jails exist? Obviously you send the guilty to prison, but instead of arresting the innocent—or should I say, not guilty—you should cite him and notify him that he’s been charged. In the distant future, they will look back and be amazed that we actually used to put people in boxes.” He

reached down without worry of being kicked and tore the duct tape off the chief's mouth, taking some crass facial hair with it.

"*You* should be arrested," Chief Walker hissed, his admiration notwithstanding.

"But if I'm arrested, I will be rotting in jail gaining credit for time served while I'm still an innocent man. Gaining credit for days when I'm not even guilty yet."

"Would you rather *not* gain credit?"

"You just...don't get it, do you?"

"Oh, no, I get it. It's called probable cause. Reason to arrest. We are em...we are empowered with the authority. I stand by my statement: *you* should be arrested."

"No, I don't believe you—you wouldn't arrest me. Given the opportunity, you'd rob me of my life, wouldn't you?"

Chief Walker dithered. "No."

"But my freedom—you would strip me of that?"

"Yes, of course I would. We will always have jails. That's the way it's always been and that's the way it'll always be."

"You're lying to me," the Pizzaman said with neither sorrow nor anger.

"I don't lie. I'm the chief of fucking police. Who do I even *need* to lie to?"

"See? You see? You call me the bad guy. But me—I don't lie. You know what I'm all about."

"You *are* the bad guy," Chief Walker clashed, widening his disagreeing eyes.

"May-be," the Pizzaman confided, stressing each syllable with precision as if he'd spoken two separate words, "but really, who's the good guy? You? Don't make me laugh. You're a phony. A liar."

"Stop fucking calling me a liar."

"You, guardian of the law and keeper of the innocent, are to serve and protect the civilian, but you wouldn't sacrifice one speckle of your stature for the people you detain. To you, they're all guilty until proven innocent.

"Where do you draw the line between criminal and cop? Every single cop, even the most honest one, has turned a blind eye to a fellow officer breaking the holy law. You fuckers have smashed every statute that exists. You're immune to the law. That's why you're a liar."

"Is *that* what this is all about?" Chief Walker inquired incredulously. "You are mistaken, sir. What laws have we broke?"

"You can lie to a suspect—tell him you have evidence that doesn't exist—in order to get him to confess. And what's the difference between lying on some IRS

sheet about your goldfish being a dependent—which you can't do if I'm not mistaken—and lying to get someone to confess to murder? A big difference.”

“It's not illegal to lie to a suspect, and there's a reason we do it. But besides, it don't matter. They guilty. They confess, they did it. Guilty.”

Click. “Not necessarily. What if you say you got witnesses and you can place the guy at the scene, and he thinks that he's just totally fucked but maybe will get a little slack if he cooperates and confesses? You ever see a half dozen men separately tried and convicted on the same solo-job murder simply because they all separately confessed? Or a confessor released after years only because they find the supposed victim alive and well? I have seen such things. And now there are doctors who study the art of false confessions. Fucking cops show graphic pictures of dead people and contaminate the suspect before they even question him, then the poor guy breaks down and tells them whatever they wanna hear just so he can get the fuck outta there. Police brutality, deceit, faulty courts, biased judges...” The Pizzaman had to pause, lest he become overheated by the system's alleged double standards. “The only real good guys are fictional, like Batman and Spiderman. You know, how they swing around, rescuing old ladies' purses and bullshit like that.”

“*We* are the good guys. *We* do what we have to to put pieces of shit like you away, and Batman would do the same thing if he had his own jail.”

“Does that ‘what we have to’ include planting evidence on someone you think you know to be a criminal?” the Pizzaman asked, slightly tilting his head to the side. “You do not understand what you are dealing with. There are indeed many problems and loopholes, and the system is not ideal. Some efficiency has been lost. But you must understand: it does not guarantee to catch everyone, it does not guarantee to only put away the guilty, it does not guarantee to be perfect. The only thing it guarantees is self-perpetuation. You, Chief Walker, remind me of the neophyte arsonist who just totally saturates crime scenes in gasoline expecting a bigger blaze. You don't understand how things work. You don't understand that things do work without you. You don't understand that there's a system, a system which has been around for generations before you ever saw life and will continue for generations more after the end of your miserable existence. It's dumbasses like you who try to perfect an imperfect system that gum up the works. Hypocrites always fuck things up.”

“You're the hypocrite,” Chief Walker charged in a ringing monotone. “Think you don't deserve to die. Think I'm the bad guy. Fuck you. *You're* the problem. *You're* the one who keeps killing people.”

“Even if what you’re saying is true, you’re forgetting one thing.” The Pizzaman smiled. “I’m innocent right now.” He laughed. “It is you who is the problem. It is you who failed to do your job, or else why would we be here right now?”

“You’re the liar. You’re the hypocrite. You think you can justify your actions.”

“Oh, did you come up with that all by your lonesome?” the Pizzaman countered. “Well, tell me this. What are the consequences when a lioness kills a zebra? Is that justified?”

“You *cannibal*,” Chief Walker slumped from the pit of his throat, pure animosity being his voice’s medium.

Click click click click click. “You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

“Are you gonna eat me? Eat *mee*? Huh? Come on then, do it!” He stomped his foot for punctuation.

Click. “No. You will serve me in a different way. Like in sports: there’s the opposing team, and then there’s the audience.”

“What?”

“Think hard. Which one are you? Remember that if love is good, it can still have two bad opposites: hatred and sorrow. Hatred and sorrow, each the opposite of one another, each the opposite of love. Neither of us is good, and on that note, you know deep down that you need me. You need me to keep hunting if you’re going to have any chance whatever of arresting me. You need me because hatred needs sorrow.”

Chief Walker slightly chuckled. “Yeah, you gotta keep leaving the right bait out if you’re gonna trap a pest. And on *that* note, may I ask why the special à la carte?”

Why why why why why. The word was eating the Pizzaman alive, gnawing on him until he became a raw, sullied clump of excrement that would repel even a vulture. He blushed with fury under his mask, and he hated the day of his birth.

“It’s a dog–eat–dog world, Chief,” the Pizzaman reasoned with boiling blood, talking more to himself than to the chief.

The Pizzaman was getting under Chief Walker’s skin, but Chief Walker was getting inside the Pizzaman’s head. And Chief Walker saw with superior satisfaction that he would leave this day unscathed.

“So what exactly is it that you want with me, then?” Chief Walker asked; and, by asking this, he thus activated the scripted part of the Pizzaman’s dialogue.

The Pizzaman concentrated on a light switch a few feet left of Chief Walker and spoke without any emotion, remaining defiantly still. “Two guards and two doors,” he said, *click*, “one door to sadness and the other to even more. One guard always tells the truth; the other has been a liar since his youth.” He went

over to the purple curtain and ripped it from its suspenders. “What question do you ask?”

Undaunted, Chief Walker rebutted with a new riddle, Rudy Rucker’s infinite regress from *Infinity and the Mind*, one that Chief Walker had heard from some nerd but not understood until now. “True or false: ‘This sentence is false?’”

“What?”

“‘This sentence is false.’ Is that true or false?”

“This thing you say, it is irrelevant,” the Pizzaman said commandingly, hiding his frustration. “You are missing the point. Sorrow provides the clouds for hatred’s thunderstorms.” He stepped up to Chief Walker and leaned close. “You can’t have love without first the existence of hate. You need me, and I’m about to show you your ‘why.’” He flipped the switch and then floodlights instantly illuminated the stage that had once been shied by the large, purple curtain. Two large guillotines loomed above two chests with permissible slots through which the blades were allowed to pass. On one chest was a framed picture of Chief Walker’s wife, Beverly, and on the other a picture of his good son, Anthony. The pictures were of a respectable quality and size, and the pictures were all too clear—even from the distance.

“Both of them are bound with butterfly knots, so they’ll strangle themselves if they struggle. Oh, but don’t you worry—I told them about that already. Your main problem is that they’ll suffocate—”

“Please don’t...” Chief Walker whimpered. “Please...just take me instead.”

“Do not interrupt me again!” the Pizzaman boomed, pointing a judicious finger and shedding fibers like a bird its feathers. “There are sensors—are you listening, Walker?—there are sensors on each apparatus...apparati...whatever. You should know that they’ll both come crashing down as soon as you tamper with one of them. Yes, it is as you think: you will only be able to save one of them.” He turned and faced the stage. “Behold, I give you the gift of choice.” Then he swung back around and held out a tape recorder. “They’re sleepy heads right now, but I have here their last words. Which would you like to hear first?”

“You know I can’t choose,” Chief Walker wheezed through heaving breaths, attempting to thwart hyperventilation.

The Pizzaman pushed the play button and *click* the chief of police heard his wife for the first time in so long.

“Brocky,” she sobbed, “you know I love you, but save our baby...save our baby...”

And that was it. The Pizzaman flipped the tape around, rewound it and played it again for Chief Walker.

“Dad, whichever choice you make, you’ll always be my dad.” Anthony’s voice swam through more static. “But whichever way you go, don’t hesitate. Go all the way. I love you, Dad. Jesus loves you.”

“Aaaaand it ends there,” the Pizzaman announced, pressing the stop button *click*. He tucked away the tape recorder and held up another electronic, this one some sort of homemade detonator. “You have one minute until they both get the axe. Better to go with the lesser of two evils, don’t you think?”

The Pizzaman pulled out a novelty miniature police baton key chain that served a dual purpose as a handcuff key and tossed it onto Chief Walker’s large belly, and Chief Walker thought it was an L-wrench at first.

“Reeeehhhdy...seeht...” the Pizzaman hummed through his predictable voice filter, helicoptering his thumb ominously over the detonator.

“Wait, Pizzaman!” Chief Walker gasped. “It’s never too late...to change,” he let out in two frantic breaths.

“...go!” He squeezed the button and hurried out of the ice cream parlor.

Thousands of thoughts permeated Chief Walker’s mind, but he was able to move without thinking about moving and make decisions without thinking about making decisions. His stale muscles groaned when he rocked his midsection and the key avalanched off, bouncing on the butt and almost skipping out of reach. He squatted up, pinched it under the thick heel of his shoe and scraped it back like a hen scooping a wandering chick. Next he sat back down, located it, felt the fin and the pothole on the head with his tentacling fingers, poked his way into the handcuff’s pinhole and unlocked one of the loops.

He stampeded up the two landscaping stairs of the makeshift platform, having no idea how much time remained. This pressing dilemma purged out the real Chief Walker, and, in the churning nucleus of his primal existence, he knew the tragic truth. He knew that he could never look at Anthony without seeing the dismantled Victor, and he thus surpassed the second law of preservation—this is perversion.

The Pizzaman had made rescue—rescue for one of the two—elementary for Chief Walker: the only thing keeping the lids on each chest was an unsecured Master Lock sleeping on weight sensors. Chief Walker made his final choice, gripped the guillotine’s heavy blade and threaded away the padlock, wincing as the dense cleaver on the other decapitator created a temporal vacuum that sucked down Anthony’s smiling picture and then made a carrot-chopping thud as if dividing a fresh, moist head of lettuce. The blade in Chief Walker’s hand wanted to freefall as well, but instead dug deeper into his already sliced palm. With debt-compiling strength he used his free hand to wipe the chest’s lid off and hurl the

ebony figure onto the harmless floor. Then that hulking hand levitated the guillotine's contraption long enough for him to eel his riveted hand out as though it were stuck under a window. And that hand was mesh now, all torn and scratched and mutilated. He took one look at the revolting mixture of old and new blood and then fainted.

CHAPTER 13

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 12

Surgery, although barbaric, is the only channel into the human body: if you take arteries or cartilage from one part of the body, it is possible to integrate the material into another area because the body knows not the difference. Similarly, hypnotism is the only channel into the human mind: with language as your fine instrument, you can navigate, build, demolish or rewire to the extent of your ability. But will the subject accept it like the indistinguishing body? Is it possible to convince a man of anything your heart desires? Even more important is the question of *how much* incising of the mind would constitute hypnosis, for there is no tangible epidermis of the mind. And how long would the operation be? A lifetime? A twenty-minute session? This is a gray area. Rome didn't decay in one day, but there was indeed one day when it was standing and a tomorrow when it was not.

Chaos Theory: if a society deteriorates, it deteriorates from the inside out; if the individual deteriorates, he deteriorates from the inside out.

* * * *

The canvas man, suspended in midair, was being stretched and pulled apart limb from limb by a system of ropes, and Chief Walker was painting him with a big, fat scalpel. A brush and a flick of red, a swab and a string of blood. The canvas man did not scream, but Chief Walker wanted him to. He wanted him to

yelp, to beg, to give him *something*. The canvas man indeed held his peace, but his body, however, surrendered the irresistible sound of material like cloth shredding. Chief Walker went in deep, tearing away patches of skin as if from a notepad, that ripping sound that hissed in the air, shooting sharp like compressed vapor, a sound that echoed with a certain saturation like a quagmire of a thousand chirping maggots. There was some cracking and slurping and then he pinched out the pancreas, that little bugger, and with delicacy and precision he excreted the pugnacious enzymes onto the tip of his tool. More flashing and gashing of the scalpel, and then a muffled voice. The canvas man? Couldn't be. Did he just imagine it? No, someone was surely speaking. But who? He was sure it wasn't the canvas man. And it wasn't the Voice. Somebody else...

"Dad."

What? What was that?

"Dad."

There it was again. What was that?

"Dad, wake up."

Dad, wake up?

"Dad, wake up."

The canvas man abruptly vanished and Chief Walker was back under the warm floodlights.

"Dad, wake up."

"Uah I'm awae."

"Get me out of here, Dad."

Where was he? What time was it? Who the hell was that?

"*Victor?*" Oh shit.

"What are you doing? I can't breathe...I don't have any air in here and these ropes are choking me." It was certainly the muffled voice, down and low, down and low but a voice that nonetheless retained the hysteria of suffocation and restrictive confinement.

"Alright. Hang on a sec." Chief Walker coughed up butterscotch-colored mucus. "How long I been out?"

"I dunno—I just got up."

Chief Walker checked his watch. 11:29. And there was light coming in from the outside. A Smith & Wesson handcuff was still dangling on that wrist. He rolled some sleep from the ball bearing of his eye. His body was not agreeable today. There was pain everywhere. Throbbing headache. Freezing cold. Disoriented.

"I'll be right back," he slurred to his helpless son.

He got to his feet and went out of the shop. His red Saturn was right there in the alley, waiting for him, with the keys hanging in the door. He got in and the car smelled like death, but it didn't bother him: it was bliss to just sit on those springy seats and thumb over the snake-scale steering wheel.

Alright now, think. Think. What was Dr. Jarrod's input? The Pizzaman was no serial killer but a multiple murderer. And a psycho—something cannibal. What else? No geographical profiling, no race, creed, sexuality, childhood...Ah, but there *was* a race—he was black, right? That was what Cowell had said. Yes, definitely black. And a man with a badge.

Alright, could Andru Meyers be eliminated? Shit, he *could* be eliminated. He was there that day, there at the station when the man in the green mask had terrorized the bus. And there was really no one else Chief Walker knew of who fit the description. It was a dead end.

Alright, what did the detectives have to say? Nothing. They had nothing—that was the point. They needed the Pizzaman to keep killing and...they *needed*...Cowell had said that when he got fired. He said exactly that. Yeah, he was pissed. What was that last thing again that he'd said before he was fired?

Chief Walker had said, "It's gotta be one of you."

Then Cowell said, "Okay, fine. Go fuck off. You know that you need me. Because if..."

Yep. He sure as hell said it. The detectives weren't all sensitive about being needed, and they just talked about *waiting* for the next kill. But Cowell wanted to feel needed or important. *And that's what Pizzaman said.* Oh. Something about how they needed each other because hate needs sadness. And storm clouds and tornadoes...He *needed* him?

Chief Walker needed Nelson Cowell. Chief Walker needed the Pizzaman. *Snap* Nelson Cowell is the Pizzaman.

* * * *

He arrived at work early Saturday evening when the sun appeared five times its size on the touchable horizon. Before he even killed his Malibu's motor, the store's door cut through the hazy air. Tommy McGee, with murder in his eyes, stormed out of the Pizza Hut, yelling and cursing at whomever be the current manager.

He entered the store after Tommy peeled out of the vicinity only to find a huddled red crowd in the customer lobby. Kyle was sprawled out in a little pool of blood with a few teeth shards jutting out like icebergs. All the employees kept

sepulchering over him while telephones went unanswered and pizzas backed up in the oven output. At that instant he was lamentful for having given up on Tommy so quickly, a man so full of both intelligence and rage, as demonstrated here on the incompetent Kyle. If Tommy was single, it could have been probable that he would have been naked of alibi for any and all of the Pizzaman murders. Capturing Tommy himself would undoubtedly be a nugget in his credentials; and even though Tommy was neither the preferred candidate nor the one into which he had put all his energy, it would nonetheless have been unwise to decline a sure thing.

In the midst of the store's bedlam he again slithered unnoticed into the manager's office. This time the computer was already accessed—presumably Tommy had rendered Manager Kyle incapacitated while he was in the middle of something. It will be interesting to see if Tommy would perish by the stroke of his own pen...

He took a seat in the crusty, cheese-ridden chair and unburied the work history files for the preceding three months. He painstakingly pilfered through the plethora of names—the names were not deleted upon the individuals' respective discharges. Lorenz, Lucco, Lupe, Mangum McGawn, McGee. There we go. He'd had a busy schedule. Saturday, December 4, 2004 he'd had off. Good. Thursday the Twenty-third too.

Two down, seven to go. Come on come on come on.

What was the other day? It was a Thursday as well, but not the *next* Thursday. Must have been the Sixth of January. Tommy had had that one off. Okay. Tuesday the Eleventh? No. There—he worked on Tuesday the Eleventh.

Oh well. It was a long shot, anyway. He just needed to cast his net in a new place.

He made a pit stop at home with the intention to change out of his Pizza Hut clothes so he could go apply for another job. He had one foot on the curb when he suddenly started to feel queasy. A strong radish taste in his mouth, his eyes puffing up like balloons, a force pulling his head backward, and backward he went, totally disoriented, the stars swirled overhead and he crumbled to his knees.

CHAPTER 14

▼

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 13

The random number generator: you input a set of numbers and it selects one of them at random. So if, for instance, you have a hundred numbers from zero to ninety-nine, the probability of drawing a seven would be one in a hundred. But what if you could have a random number generator with an *infinite* domain? What would be the probability of grabbing a seven then? Would any number even be chosen at all? If you were to take a dart with an infinitesimal point as a tip and throw it at the number line so that it just kept sinking into the abyss of decimals, what would happen? Would it behave as with a black hole, getting there unhitched but yet appearing to be frozen in time to an outside observer? Or would it actually never get there at all, just falling and falling eternally as if in the condensing core of a planet? A manmade computer could not handle this, but the pure language of the universe could. Though the significance of this is not often contemplated in practical interaction and though the detailed explanation may be complex, the answer is nonetheless very simple: there is no mathematical choice but for it to hit one of the numbers. For there are no restrictions, contradictions or overlappings when every number is considered; and so, because the set is true in and of itself, a number of the set will be therefore selected instantaneously. All it needs is a chance. For example, the probability of an ordinary leaf falling to a specific set of coordinates to the precision of a picometer on the great sidewalk is exceedingly small for the sake of the many other equally specific coordinates, but there must be *some* system of coordinates to describe the exact shape of ground it

covers when it does fall to the ground—otherwise it would never be able to land at all. When considering this matter, the conclusion is that every conceivable and possible outcome is extremely unlikely; and yet one of them must occur. Yes, there are trillion-to-one occurrences that happen every day as we pass by obliviously on our way. And there are infinity-to-one occurrences as well, occurrences with a zero probability that not only will happen but *must* happen.

The incompetent are easily awed with grand events; to an intelligent mind, however, it is not the big that is fascinating but the small. All too often we wonder what happens at infinity, but the real question is, as we have seen, what happens at zero. Enter the Nelson B. Cowell Unifying Theory:

Section I, Part I

Claim: $0 \div 0 = 1$

Method: Proof by Contradiction

Assume

$0^n = 0$ for all $n > 0$

$n + 0 = n$ and $n - n = 0$

Then

$0 = 0^n$

$0^n = 0^{n+0}$

$0^{n+0} = 0^{n+n-n}$

$0^{n+n-n} = 0^n \times 0^{n \div 0^n}$

$0^n \times 0^{n \div 0^n} = 0 \times 0 \div 0$

$0 \times 0 \div 0 = 0 \div 0$

$0 \div 0 \neq 0$

Therefore

$0 \neq 0$

Many claim that there is an error in the fourth step in which the division of zero is performed. Saying that one cannot divide by zero in order to prove that zero divided by zero equals one, however, is just like asking someone to prove that one can walk on water without allowing that someone to actually walk on water. So we must ask this one question: what is the meaning of dividing zero through zero? If there are zero people and zero cars, then how many people are in each car? Before you disregard this and label it nonsense, it is imperative to understand that in every scientific experiment—aside from the accidental discoveries—the math comes before the science. For the realm of the mathematics supercedes that of the sciences with extraneous solutions and imaginary numbers and infinite spatial dimensions. If you were to graph, for example, the radioactive

decay of uranium, then in theory the uranium will never completely wither because the graph of the exponential maturity of a half-life never reaches fulfillment—you can cut a number in half ad infinitum, but not an object. There will be the last atom. This holds true with all. Mathematically speaking, therefore, you could have, as another example, three and a half people in three fourths of a car, and thus four and two thirds people in each car. No problem. So why not zero? Why not zero? Well, they say that zero divided by zero is indeterminate because there is no determinate answer—that is, if zero divided by zero equals one, then, through cross-multiplication, zero equals zero times one; and, so they say, zero also equals zero times two, which would in turn mean that zero divided by zero has an infinite amount of solutions. But remember that all this is with the given assumption that zero has the capability to wipe out any number, small or great, with equal devastation; that zero times a thousand is zero just the same as zero times ten, and that, once the multiplication of zero is executed, there is no reversible operation like there is with all the other numbers. The implication is then that zero is some form of a cardinal, sort of a supernatural number like infinity: the obvious question, then, would be how exactly we could justify the use of a zero in arithmetic but yet not the use of an infinity. The Unifying Theory, however, assumes that both zero and infinity are ordinals, that is, that they are ordinary numbers; as such, the Unifying Theory fails in our system only because the number one in the form of zero to the zero power is *defined to be undefined*. But Pascal's Triangle and also any function similar to $f(x)=x^x$ (these are accepted entities) imply that zero to the power of zero maps to one—this is the crux of the theory. For if zero to the power of zero is indeed one, then the removable discontinuity—zero divided by zero, which is implicitly inherent in every equation (because every equation naturally contains an infinite amount of the variant forms of x divided by x)—is no longer a removable discontinuity but instead a solid plug in the graph.

It is true that mankind has fathomed supercomputers and has seen the dark side of the moon thanks to modern mathematics, but the system is still manmade and it does have its flaws; it cannot be built upon indefinitely. It would be expedient, although tedious, for us to redefine all that exists in the mathematics. Knowing that it is bigger than us and knowing that it exists independent of us, we must analyze the situation from a non-human perspective. And this here is a fact that must be clarified: if a mathematical operation is legal, then it is performed regardless of whether or not the mathematician sees it. Every equation is dynamic, not static—a dynamic equilibrium, indeed the very nature of the cosmos only because it is precisely the nature of the presiding mathematics. All digital expres-

sions ever changing yet ever the same, each side of a given equation constantly being multiplied by identical numbers and by equivocally equal functions. Why? Why is this happening? *Because it can.* If it can, then it must. Assuredly, if we are able to multiply each side of the equation by equal numbers, then this operation was already performed in the concept of mathematics before we had ever done it (otherwise we could not have legally done it). The undeniable consequence of this is the fact that each side of the equation is also being multiplied by zero, and, although this is happening, the equation remains stable. This must mean that zeros are retrievable. This must mean that zero times two is greater than zero times one, albeit the distance between the two numbers is a zero. The Unifying Theory states that the sum of an infinite amount of zeros is the definition of the number one, and that the number zero is defined as one part in infinity (yes, like language, numbers can only be defined via other numbers). So, although two parts in infinity may be greater than one part in infinity, there is no practical application of this in the economical world. But mathematicians don't care about that. They care about what the universe thinks. They care about the purity of the universal language, of which we speak a very shoddy dialect. There is no gray area of the universe's mathematics, but there is one in our mathematics. There is a problem. We should be able to define all with math. We should be able to feed anything into it and receive a result. Perhaps, if we could retrieve zeros, we could revive the dead. Perhaps, if the Unifying Theory, the math behind the science, held water, then it would be possible to bring a soul as close to the line as you want.

* * * *

A sweet aroma danced in the fuselage of Cowell's nose like a shy sneeze. And his throat felt constricted, as if the cactus root of his tongue were too large for the swollen tube in his neck. Too much chloroform is bad, very bad, and he probably had irreparable liver damage by now. But that was the least of his problems: Tied to a series of backless chairs, his head was propped up to a respectable vantage point in order to allow him to witness his own torture—he anticipated a slow, agonizing torture since he wasn't dead already. He wasn't gagged either, so he suspected that his impending tormentor was possibly predisposed to being enthralled with the chilling screams that come in accordance with pain and plight. And Cowell was tied down well, too—very firm on the limbs but loose on the body so as to allow wiggle room which will, of course, make the experience all

the more real for the sadistic participator. There is no escape, so all there is to do is wait.

Although dazed, Cowell could recognize this flat as his own, the living room having been rearranged. And there were sounds coming from beyond, whisks of papers and grunts of bulky furniture legs, clothes landing on clothes and solids tapping against solids, things of glass falling and shattering, scrapes against the walls, and ruffling sounds too. He really wished he couldn't hear his captor pillaging his plunder in the bedroom.

A sloppy hole in the living room window must have been the original means of entry. This could've been anybody, really, for he had so many potential enemies. The intruder probably didn't bring his own chemicals and weapons if he was planning on staying a while; whoever it was, the son of a bitch better not have left the freezer door open...

Breathing was an uphill battle and speech no less impossible. He began to flex his vocal cords as quietly as possible only to hear croaks and distorted moans. It took a while, but after nearly ten minutes of jaw exercises and spurts of air through that tight windpipe was he finally confident in his voice.

"Olli olli oxen free!" he howled, not recognizing his own voice. He needed to yell while lofting a legible pitch. Try again. "Olli olli oxen free!"

"Right here," assured a tone that was inevitably Chief Walker. "I'm right here, Cowell." And there he was indeed, shouldering a lumpy backpack stuffed with Cowell's things. Like a true novice, he'd thought that a pair of yellow soap gloves from under the sink and nothing more would suffice for identification evasion. "What do you think, Cowell? If anyone even shows up to your funeral, is it gonna be a closed casket?"

"Closed casket?" Cowell appealed, evicting his fear to a desolate land. Well, as much as humanly possible, anyway. "I guess it depends on how good your artwork is."

"I always liked...Picasso." He grinned as he remembered something he'd been just dying to say. "I had a dream that this was going to happen. I dreamed that I was going to make you a work of art." Then he recalled to mind that the canvas man never cried and never actually died, but the chief didn't let it show. That was Chief Walker's business and only Chief Walker's business. It was his unfinished business...

Cowell's heartbeat was so crazy that his respiratory system burned rubber to compete. A thin film of sweat misted all over his tensed body. The beavers in his bladder were on strike and he had to pee.

In-out in-out in-out.

Chief Walker deliberately trophied a razor-sharp vegetable peeler high in the air like the Statue of Liberty and then brought it down as if administering a sobriety test. “Hey Cowell, what do you think is your IQ on a scale of one to ten?” He laughed at his own joke as he began to unstitch Cowell’s shirt with that peeler. “You are *sooo* fucking stupid, I could eat your brains and it wouldn’t even be cannibalism.”

“Really into that cuisine, are you?” he retaliated, trying to slow Chief Walker down. Not good enough. Stall him. He has to say something. Something. Say *something*. “You know, I think it’s funny—you want me to say that my IQ is a ten on a scale of one to ten, and you think that by saying this I would make myself mentally retarded with an IQ equal to ten. But you don’t understand that scales aren’t numbers and that an IQ of a ten on a scale from one to ten is an IQ of the maximum magnitude comparable to all of the geniuses who ever lived.”

In-out in-out in-out.

Without responding, Chief Walker plucked the name badge off Cowell’s shirt, tweaked the needle and inserted the pike into the sensitive trough of the umbilicus. Cowell instantly saw spots and his body convulsed.

Chief Walker jumped back like Cowell was demon-possessed. “Whoa! Did I push the wrong *button*?”

It hurt, hurt bad, and the pain was not going to stop. It just—oh God—it just kept radiating from the belly button through the entire body, a continuous flow, in through the belly button and out through the arms and the funny bone and the sensitive parts on the backs of his hands and to the tips of the fingers, up and down his spine like a treacherous bolt of power, traveling all through his body and sticking a sharp finger up his anus. But it’s not real, the pain being mere electrical signals in the brain. But if pleasure is real, then—FFFFFFUUUUUUCK he’s twisting it *oh God oh God oh God* it’s not real *psychosomatic it’s psychosomatic it’s psychosomatic it’s IN YOUR HEAD BUT YOUR BODY HURTS*.

As if playing with a bug, Chief Walker leaned over the flagstaffing name badge and delicately began to open Cowell up in an attempt to explore the catacombs inside him. “Now it’s *my* turn to be the Pizzaman,” he said with an apathetic hiss, his voice heavy and cluttered with detritus.

“What do you mean”—Cowell waited until they locked eyes—“my turn?”

Chief Walker ejected the red-tipped talon. “What are you talking about?”

“*You’re* the Pizzaman,” Cowell said, raising his head.

“Alright, shut up. Just shut up.” He recognized Cowell’s attempts and didn’t bite at first, but he did not truly respect the power of suggestion.

“You really don’t know?” They met eyes again. “Then Hayn was right—you’re schizophrenic.”

Chief Walker took a hippopotamus step backward and outstretched a yellow hand as though to shield himself from the piercing words. He was confused. He saw the Pizza Hut shirt, that it was on Cowell and not on himself, but his drugged brain reverted to a primitive form of thought where there is only the self and the interpretations of the senses; the mere image of this thing was sufficient to spark a flicker of qualm in his mind.

Cowell gave it a few seconds to brew and then said, “You’re nocturnal, I’m sure?”

After that initial drop of doubt trickled in, the ensuing tidal wave was automatic. “No,” he gasped. “It’s not...”

“Possible? *Someone* is that black cop I saw. *Someone* is cutting me open right now. *Someone*...is the Pizzaman.”

“Go away!” Chief Walker cried. “Stop.”

“You’ve been tired lately, *haven’t* you? Been up *late* lately?”

Chief Walker’s mind made his old palm wound start to bleed again and hot tears ribboned down his cheeks. And his head was swaying and bobbling unintelligibly, but something miraculously hooked his attention: Cowell’s bookshelf. Among other philosophical and cultural books was the Holy Bible, the black sheep of the line of white-covered books, the golden letters jumping out at him.

“I’m no murderer,” Chief Walker declared, “and I’m gonna prove it to you.” He sniffed and smudged the tears from his face. “Nelson Cowell, I...”—he took a breath and then spiked the vegetable peeler like a football—“I forgive you.”

Cowell was shocked. Chief Walker had not the authority to do this, but there is no denying the fact that he had just very well done it. But even letting that be, *how* could he muster such words? What on earth could possibly possess him with such power? It must have been a temporary glitch, but this matter nonetheless concerned Cowell; for he, knowing basic psychology, knew that Chief Walker had now planted a seed in him. This is going to haunt Cowell. This is going to grow into guilt, emotion, impulse, stupidity.

And then the world outside the apartment suddenly became real. They both heard the police siren. Chief Walker froze as though the great wail would go away if he were quiet enough, listening with an air of wisdom to the inflating sound until it cut out. The clapping of the car doors brought him back to life and he immediately ran over to the insolent window with the Ezekiel hole in it.

“Hey Cowell,” he gruffed, one leg in and one out, “see you in the next life.”

* * * *

Chief Walker would've eagled his eyes out were it not for the gloves. Surprise. In his home was a large banner, gaunt and wicked, its twisted letters spelling out: WALK IN LOOK AT WHAT YOU DID. And he did look at what he did. His house had become a slaughterhouse. Rusty blood roadmapped the walls, slithering up over the pictures like caramel drizzle on quality pie. Illegible blood writing strudeled the white carpet. A few butchered cadavers and corresponding strawberry chunks of meat were strewn about the floor, the stairs, the countertops. It was the kissing of Eddie Gein's funny farm and the Polansky mansion, a dash of looping devil music to set the mood. It was the house where the air held no breath, the house built on death.

Chief Walker began to lose it. He kept digging at his sockets like a dog. "Go away. Go away. Go away. Go away." He sobbed and his voice started to come from a different place in his throat. He batted at his face weakly and defeatedly, like a menstruating woman ineffectually flailing on a man whom she doesn't know if she hates or loves. "Make it stop. Make it stop. Make it STOP. MAKE IT STOP. MAKE IT STOP." Silence. A loud, restless silence broke into his head.

In and out, in and out.

So it was: there was the surreal silence in his head now, and he shifted gears. He looked at all the carnage that lay before him as if committing it to memory. He breathed in deeply, like he wanted to inhale death. The extrema of his lips skull-grinned upward, the abomination was born now and he was feeding it, the monster in his head throbbing and growing, feeding it and feeding it, a beautiful grotesque inside him. The reinforcements of tears in the banks of his eyes retreated and he said, "*Let there be evil.*" His tongue massaged the roof of his mouth with sinister intentions, perhaps plotting to murder its neighbor when it least expects it. A fly landed on his head.

Chief Walker threw his shoulders behind himself and became the Pizzaman.

"Help! Helllllp!" It was a voice, fading into the scene to dissolve the silence. It was there, it was not himself, and it was real. Maybe it had been there the whole while...maybe...maybe he was never supposed to hear it until he knew *feed it* what he was supposed to do. It sounded distant and contrived, but Chief Walker knew it wasn't the music. "Is somebody there?" it persisted. "Help!"

The unsuspecting protégé, home for the first time in nearly a week, tripped up the refuse-ridden stairs and into the master bedroom. The room had been trans-

formed into a torture chamber: every supply imaginable was provided in a neat cache on the bed. There was a new background melody in here that you wouldn't want your kids to listen to. And there, by the bedside *feed it* where Chief Walker had woken up with the bloody butcher's knife, was Detective Michael Hayn, inexplicably bound to a chair. Tape had had his mouth sealed; but he'd attacked the adhesiveness over time by creeking saliva through the crack of his lips and mechanically stretching his slippery jaw, fur from his perspired face being the casualty of this effort.

"Oh, thank God you're here, Chief. Theee Pizzaman's got two more people in here...I think one of them is behind me in theee closet. You should—"

Chief Walker pressed the dull tape back onto Detective Hayn's wet lips and wound another fresh strip. He peeked in the closet. Sure enough, there was another victim, this one a middle-aged Vietnamese cab driver with a Robert De Niro mole trying to invade his right eye.

"Stop looking at me."

The cab driver wasn't looking at him.

"Stop looking me. I can hear you looking at me motherfuck stop looking at me." Chief Walker dragged him out and discovered that a thin bungee cord was attached to his ankles. *"Hmmm."* He looked up at the ceiling. An orange, rubber-shelled hook designed to hang heavy garbage that you store in the garage was screwed in as close to the smoke detector as possible without wandering into the hollowed area and, at a relative angle worth just about a hundred degrees or so, another hook was in the wall conveniently above waist level. *"Well, this don't take a genius."* He snatched up the end of the cord, climbed onto a nearby nightstand and sipped it through the ceiling hook. Chief Walker pulled and pulled *feed it* with superior strength until the wiggling worm's feet were about a foot from the ceiling, then bent the rope about the second hook and bowed a couple firm knots.

He took a step back and admired his work, his hands resting on his hips. Enough of that. He turned around to gaze into the eternal hallway, arms tunneling down now with his hands winging out, and he strolled through the abode of the dead while he waited for the blood to lump in the worm's head.

Anthony's room was silent and undisturbed, but an ominous theme resonated redundantly in Victor's. Now, this time, it was more violent than the previous. Chief Walker treaded through that doorway once more, but this time without fear. A pile of pink, blood-laced flesh befriended a heap of dirty laundry and a skinless man lived in the bed. On the television was a coal-black human head *feed it* that oversaw the room, a couple flecks of the eyes incidentally thumbnailed

away like the white of an egg, the entire surface of the skin charred so severely that the black, flaked tissue virtually resembled crisp foliage.

It was altogether Satanic in this place. He'd seen Satanists before, professional ones *feed it* who would sell heads for profit, but this work displayed here required much more devotion and research. The versatility of each torture technique tickled Chief Walker's curiosity, slowly nurturing that vague homicidal urge. Like a blind lion whelp instinctively seeking the plump nipple, that it might grow up to be a natural-born killer. So he continued on down the Halloween hallway *feed it* to see what else he might see.

In and out, in and out.

Awkwardly, there was no local music in the den, but Victor's strobe light collection had been set up in there and it seemed just as loud. Twenty-two two-pint glasses of raw blood were on the carpet in the shape of a lemniscate, banqueting the guest; and in the corner of the breathing darkness Chief Walker found the other hostage of whom Detective Hayn had spoken, tied up in a similar manner. Chief Walker was breathing heavily now, but doing so more out of his own free will than because of a psychotic cardioid.

He viewed the whole house over again in his mind like a slideshow and silently thanked himself for the presentation. This saturation of madness was a necessary evil *feed it* in order for him to have his moment of clarity. It was an indispensable evil. The restrained man who had nothing to do with anything was an obligatory part of the transition, and the things that will happen to him are a justified evil.

"Stop fuck looking me shit motherfuck stop."

Feed it.

Having located the final victim to be sure that all was in order, Chief Walker dandelioned his way back to the master bedroom for a checkup on the worm. The dangling man's forehead was a ripe red from coagulation and his face was blushing as much as it was ever going to blush, as the new equilibrium had settled in. His hair was floating majestically like a sojourning jellyfish and his underwear was hibernating in his crack. Chief Walker wanted to *feed it* savor it, wanted to taste the worm's death, but the intense music wired his veins too much. Faster and faster *feed it*. He could fly if he were to piston-pump his knees hard enough. If he concentrated, he could will himself to transcend time. He was invincible at this moment. Lo, at this moment, he was God.

Feed it feed it feed it feed it feed it. Shoot him in the fucking head. Kill kill kill kill kill.

The good evil being in totalitarian control of his mind, self-deprivation was impossible. He eagerly chose a gun at random *feed it feed it feed it* and shot the worm in the fucking head and he hungered no more. It was beautiful, beautiful like a vampire party to him as he forcefully exhaled and watched the blood showering down onto Detective Hayn, the bound man beginning to writhe and squeal with excess, stuck there like a fly in a web, the feed for the spider, helpless and waiting for it, *oh God just end it all* and the fly sees it coming now, every movement tearing his soul apart *oh God just end it all* and he keeps waiting and he keeps breathing.

“You snitch-bitch, Hayn? You make me do something about? Don’t worry—I no kill you.”

CHAPTER 15

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 14

Valentine's Day

Dr. Quinn Jarrod, the man who loved to observe but yet couldn't interact to save his own life, had stamped a lasting impression on Cowell. For Cowell understood now that the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle went both ways: you cannot measure a thing without altering it, and likewise that same thing cannot be measured without altering you. All the victims, all the pleading eyes, all the questions of "Why?"—they were affecting him now, and the brunt of the impact was raining on him this day. A ton of bricks weighs just the same as a ton of feathers, but an ounce of his sorrow was heavier than the other two combined. It was the worst feeling he'd had in his life.

And it was fucking Valentine's Day today.

Drenched in guilt, depression and loneliness, he lethargically brought his Chevy Malibu to a large, five-story stowaway parking building and then took a taxi to a bank that had a nice security deposit box section: before ditching any city he would always lay away a vehicle, thirty thousand dollars in cash and all of the things that he needed for his practice.

He went to a Denny's afterward and ordered an omelet with extra bacon even though he knew the waitress wouldn't bother with it. He really only ordered it that way so he would have excuse to use extra words—he just wanted to talk to somebody. He was lonely. And you could see it in his face, too. He had stilettos

in his eyes, eyes that were so fragile and melty that they reflected the light into little daggers of white, a thing resulting from deep dysthymia that can obscure the vision. But he still saw the two lovers who were in the booth next to him. He saw all the lovers, those ruthless couples eating joyously together. He saw them feed each other and playfully wipe one another's mouths. He saw them holding hands.

Cowell lost his appetite and stormed out. He had to get away. With a leeching stroke of anguish chiseled into his heart, he got into his new car and took more than an entire minute to find the parking brake. When he got on the road, he couldn't find the interstate either. But he didn't care where he was going. He had no appointments, no kids, no bills to pay, no wife or girlfriend to be intimate with tonight. His whole life was in that car. His whole life was here and now in the car where he was, not arranged in some room. All these years of his life and now he's back at zero, nothing to show for it all except the wealth of knowledge in his head. There is nothing in this city for him. Just leave it all behind, let the world flow on either side, just keep driving until there is an ocean or another state or another country.

He wasn't even out of the confines of Los Angeles County before red and electric-blue flashed in his mirror. Of course it had to happen now, the *one* time that he had strayed from his procedure: he had always disciplined himself to legitimately—that is, through paperwork—purchase a vehicle before leaving any city, especially a hot city, but he was, naturally, having complications with social function today and therefore had decided to steal a car rather than haggle with someone who probably had a wife and adorable products of love to call him Daddy. As a consequence of the fact that this was a stolen vehicle, he'd had no inhibition of storing an illegal snack in the back; if this car had already been reported stolen, or if the owner had a felony warrant outstanding, Cowell would be in a bit of a quandary. It could get messy.

He went through the motions without emotion before pulling over. He took his trusty handcuff key *quick quick quick* with the string on the ring, anchored it to a molar and swallowed it (years ago his throat would have rejected this action with compulsive revulsions). He put the pick *quick quick quick* back into the ignition so he could start it back up instantly and put his regular keys in plain view to fool the cop. He took the safety off his gun *quick quick quick* and put it inside his jacket. Good. Done. Fifteen seconds. Incredible. It seemed like only about fifteen seconds to complete his routine. And he did a good job of stalling the cop too, pretending to have difficulty getting out of the left lane.

So he pulled over and just sat there with his hand in his coat, gripping his gun, *go for it motherfucker* waiting for the pig. He got lost in a trance as he waited.

Indeed he was running through scenarios and planning courses of action, doing what he should do, but he was so engaged in thought that he drifted off to the private area of his head and thereby lost track of time.

And then there was the peace officer by the window, twisting his uneven mustache and peering down at him through mirroring silver sunglasses. When it came down to it, Cowell wanted to avoid a gunfight at all costs. Just comply. Just roll the stupid manual window down and put both hands on the wheel.

“License and registration, please,” the cop said with less enthusiasm than Ben Stein, sounding like one of those voice amplifiers for chronic smokers.

Cowell opened the glove compartment and shoveled the contents out, examining each crinkled paper. He finally found it and relinquished the crumpled DMV document.

“License?” the cop droned in a tone mixed with inquisition and impatience.

“Oh, uh, jeez, you know what, I left it back in my apartment.”

The officer removed his glasses and glared at Cowell with eyes that were so soulless that it was impossible to designate the place where the ink-black iris relented and where the dark cistern took over. “Why the gloves and beanie?” he asked, swirling some suspicion in his voice.

“It’s cold out.”

He squinted at Cowell another second and leaned closer at an oblique angle, showing that he actually was alive by jittering those eyes in curiosity. “Alright. I’ll be right back.” He replaced his eyewear and went back to run the name on the registration sheet.

Cowell was freaking out. He was out of time, he was out of his mind. It was indeed cold out, but he was doggedly wet with sweat. His fingers were pulsating. The capillaries in his eyes were swelling.

In and out, in and out.

He took his hands off the steering wheel and felt a thigh underneath his lap when he went to check his pockets. Soft and squishy, like uncooked dough. It was dead, but it was still retaining its warmth. His mother was in the passenger seat now, falling over in slow-motion, falling through the seat belt. Her curly blonde hair flowed as if being caressed by the wind. And the hairs on her arms were being rustled by that wind, but Cowell felt the coolness and the likeness of the current passing over his own arms. And he knew he was dreaming. He looked at her, knowing what would happen. He saw his own treacherous acts, saw her eyes wide open and saw her skin not yet pale and saw she was dead.

SMASH. The omnipotent train cut through the car like air. Again. *SMASH.* Sparks, debris, body parts. Unprecedented pain. *SMASH.*

In and out, in and out.

In the bedroom now, strapping the blue duct tape on their mouths and plugging puffy cotton balls into their nostrils. Taking the cotton balls out so they could take in one last, long breath and then putting them back in. Watching them require more time to expire, watching the apples rot in their eyes, watching their skin fade colors like a tropical lizard.

“Do you know why I stopped you?” the peace officer asked, rescuing Cowell from his terrifying hallucination.

“No, sir. How come?”

He handed Cowell the paperwork. “You need to renew your registration.” He rolled his tongue over a month’s worth of plaque layering his teeth. “I won’t give you a hard time about it, though, since you’re only one month late. Just be sure you get that done, okay?”

“Okay.”

Clearly, the peace officer was lonely as well, being that he didn’t have this special day off. He, too, knew that Valentine’s Day is a bitch. He, too, felt Cowell’s abstract pain. He let Cowell go.

* * * *

In short, Detective Hayn had absolutely no earthly business being alive. His arms and legs had been sawed off at the sockets, his jaw removed, his ears superficially cut away and his retinas shaved off. The skin that remained was soaked with several different types of blood. He looked like a pterodactyl, like evolution had dragged him through crude, grotesque phases of knotty stumps and sharp, aerodynamic ramps on his face and deceptive designs of his body hinting at extremities that weren’t actually there. The wretchedness was demonically acute and the pain was everywhere, everywhere and in all directions so that it became confusing and disorienting, this way and that like a futuristic highway in three-space. Agony on tap. But fortunately for Detective Hayn, there is a godsend in the human genome for this degree of misery: inasmuch as it is not possible to attain the purest of joy, it is equally not possible to attain the purest of sorrow.

The operation was supposed to be a delicate task: though much blood is lost when any one limb is amputated, that much less blood is needed for the body to function; the tricky part is stopping the bleeding. Chief Walker was no doctor, and he was pretty reckless about it. Detective Hayn lost over four pints of blood and the unsanitary conditions had resulted in sepsis of the little blood that was left. For some reason he didn’t die. And so now the final chapter of his trivial,

insignificant life had come, and still the cats will come out to mate and the birds will sing in the morning.

Chief Walker strapped the waste of meat to a relatively expensive hand truck and stepped him *bump–bump–bump* down the horrific stairs, rolled him through the dead living room, through the kitchen that smelled like Detective Hayn, into the garage and into the back seat of his Saturn.

“Well Mr. Hayn you never again going see light of day or set foot grass but I have some good news: I save fifteen percent on car insurance by switch to Geico.”

When you pour milk out of a bottle, you can never quite get all of it out (and millions of dollars must be lost this way annually); or when you make a copy of a copy, it’s never a seamless resemblance of the original. Similarly, a percentage of Chief Walker’s common sense and rationale had been forever lost. Lost in frictional heat, lost in translation.

He set off for the police station, believing the schizophrenia was done and over with. It *was* done and over with, but the thing about it was that the schizophrenia had conquered him. He was indeed stronger by proxy of his new self, the dominant personality that had won out in the end, but this new personality was his timid personality’s conjugate—it will take too many unnecessary risks.

It was a new feeling he had. He wasn’t jittery. Remorse was no more. He didn’t think about anything, but he kept on doing, kept on doing. No determination, no perseverance, but mere instinct. Take action. Kill or be killed.

In and out, in and out.

There it was. The police station. Pull in. Round to the back. Anyone around? No. Alright then. It is time...

He took the utterly helpless and useless thing out of the back seat and stood it on the curb. Hearing the creature breathe was like listening to the endless cycle of popping glue followed by the suction of a basketball pump. Over and over and over again. *Pop–pop–pop suuuuuck, pop–pop–pop suuuuuck*. A thick, creamy globule of mucus seeped out of the no man’s land in that horrible face and dribbled down the pink neck. Maybe it was aware, maybe not.

In and out, in and out.

Chief Walker robotically processed the lot for witnesses once again. It was clear. He unfolded a letter which demanded exclusive payment of three hundred thousand dollars each to the individuals on a list of a hundred random names, of which he was one. He reread it and reread it with self-sustaining pride.

“Good.”

He squared it back up and propped it in one of the straps supporting the flesh-packaged ghost. Chief Walker was everyone; Chief Walker was no one.

Both one and none, everywhere and nowhere. He will never be found. Or so he thought. He had neglected to consider the random number generator. All it takes is time.

* * * *

Turned out that Cowell was headed east, and he found Harrah's Hotel and Casino. Harrah's is a nice little resort located at the outskirts of Laughlin, Sin City's prudish sister. The hotel overlooks the Colorado River, a brilliant conglomeration of drossy purple and shiny black at night. On the Harrah's side of the river is an artificial beach of imported sand and on the other Arizona territory; Cowell wondered how many criminals had pulled a heist on this hotel on an impulse strictly because of its auspicious location with regards to jurisdiction.

This little hot spot in Nevada is the only place on earth where the nights are busier than are the days. Throngs of people—most of them couples and honeymooners on this awful day—were enjoying themselves with drinks and gambling and escape from routine. Cowell, too, needed to escape, needed to escape the sight of all these people happily engaged in their own escape.

He found the poorest-lit buffet and chose the furthest, most-cornered table. He sat down to eat, but something wasn't right. He looked down at his plate and saw that his food was mocking him: He had, either by some freak coincidence or by subconscious drive, selected two and exactly two of everything that was on his plate. Two bread rolls, two slices of roast beef, two potato skins and even two forks.

Cowell was thinking about it, thinking about ending it all. He ate little bites slowly and extensively, making sure that the action of his fork did not interfere with the placement of those selfishly indulgent foods. He looked at his fork and considered its natural shape and design; and then he thought about his heart, his hollow hologram of a heart, and wondered if he would even be able to pierce it with the blunt utensil. Another small bite, careful not to rearrange the beautiful food on his plate, careful to let them be in peace as long as he could. He looked down at the lifelessness of it all and knew that he would be just as lonely on any other day in any other place. And he looked down at his hands, the same hands that he'd had all his life, realizing for the first time that the loneliest place on earth is the space inside his head. He almost cried, and he wanted to cry; but he just couldn't do it. He never could do it. So he just kept with the small bites, those bites getting smaller and smaller until he was just bringing an empty fork to his mouth, the taste of metal getting better and better, putting that fork down

when the taste of it lost its mettle and then choosing the other fork, bringing it in and out over and over again, swirling it around on his tongue and pretending that it was a gun.

Then it happened that a succulent figure at the entrée section caught his eye and canceled his hand in mid-flight, leaving his mouth gaping open like a garage door. *Oh God she was beautiful.* Thousands of rubies and gems and emeralds conspiring in a dark cave only to produce one hopeless ray of light couldn't compare to the priceless trapped in the rings of those eyes, and it was there that you could see, vaguely, the history of her life, as with the rings of an astute tree. Dark makeup spiked down her sad cheeks for exacerbation; and that made her look gorgeous to Cowell, for a bird is sometimes most beautiful when it is wounded. Everything else about her was immaculate by anyone's standards: Her jaw line, sharp and well defined, curled up in a candy-cane swirl at the junction of her neck like a perky fox. And her snout was like that of a fox as well, the overpass of her nose concaving from the top to the tip like the diameter of an eddy while narrowing itself in the middle like God intended. Her glowing brown hair, parted in the middle, descended in ranks of hierarchy with an oaklike composition. Her joints had the uncanny fluidity of a cat and she was coming over now, strutting gracefully despite her broad hips. She and Cowell never took their eyes off one another as she set her dinner down like an experienced waitress and pulled the chair opposite him back by touch. Cowell looked at her and knew there was something inside her looking back at him, a coherent mind with inimitable eyes traveling over the features of his face.

They might have stared at each other for a half hour. No talk, just the Morse Code in their eyes. They were able to communicate without need of speech. They could say things that words couldn't say and describe things that language couldn't describe. It was a perfect love. Like a cold, gray day with bedspread clouds in the sky and a slight drizzle, you stick out your tongue and only taste enough droplets to know that they're there—that is how he craved her.

She had recognized him long before he her, and she quizzically asked if they had seen each other once before. He thought a moment, then exploded with memory and asked her if she was from the Rolling Hills Apartments in Los Angeles. She looked down shyly, then back up, fiddling with her fork. She had long, skinny fingers with pink tips and neatly clipped nails. And she had two forks, too; indeed, it is a small world.

It was a different art of the romance, tender and personal rather than rough and feisty. Cowell never imagined that he could ever appreciate this kind of intimacy, but it turned out to be more than just sex. Although the kissing and the

feeling and the penetration was much more biological than magical, it was still better than he had expected. They shared their minds together, and it felt like something that was meant to be. It was what he'd been searching for.

He felt her body close to his, felt their diaphragms dancing together and their hearts going on a courtship of their own. He saw her not as many parts assembled into a living being but as one complete unit, and he saw clearly how unspeakably perverse it is to dissect something that is alive. His lover was alive. She had her whole lifetime that had led up to this moment, many cognitive memories of birthday parties and boyfriends and school days and makeovers. She was a person, living and breathing. And here he was wanting to see what her insides look like. She moaned sexually, a sound that came from deep within that place where he knew he ought not go, and he could feel himself absorbing some of her soul from the air passing over her lips. But he knew it was okay because he knew it was meant for him. He looked into her eyes, into the sharp, jagged borders dividing one shade of cocoa from another, and those eyes were looking into his. The bulbs of reflection in the coves of her eyes weren't studio lights or the sun in a car window: those bulbs of reflection in the coves of her eyes were him. She was thinking about him. She was beautiful, and she was thinking about *him*.

After making love they watched James Cameron's *Titanic*, a film that can move you if you let it. Cowell did, and at its climactic ending something irritated the tear ducts in the corners of his eyes. For the first time in forever he had a tear to shed. It felt good to cry, to be sorrowful. It felt good to wish with such futility that the ending of *Titanic* could be the beginning of *The Blue Lagoon*. It felt good because there was something near to his heart.

Her luscious body went to the bathroom for a shower, but her graceful presence lingered. And suddenly, without even indulging in deep philosophical thought, Cowell realized so plainly the terrible truth: beautiful spirits *do* inhabit this world, and he was not one of them. And he knew, clear as day he knew: he didn't belong in civilized society.

Everything, everything went to plan—everything but this. Picturing families still setting their dinner tables for four instead of only three, picturing people having to scalp season tickets because there is no longer a dad in the family to bear those tickets, picturing widows waking up and expecting to feel their husbands when they roll over and instead only feeling flat sheets and the cool side of the pillow. Overwhelming guilt surged inside Cowell, redundantly telling him that he was corrupting an innocent and orderly utopia. Evil. Bastard. Sick. Monster. Death inside him. Knowledge of what he had done. Inside him. Conscience mercilessly pulling him apart, burning coals inside his bowels.

He knew deep down that it was not in his nature to murder, and he was not like any of the serial killers in the past. No, he was a new generation of a serial killer. For while the former killed out of instinct, Cowell killed because he wanted to be like them, to be like the gods of yesterday; in a way, he was their offspring, doing right what they had done wrong, completing their incomplete statements. But the fact still remained that it was not *his* statement, not *his* ambition, not *his* nature. He knew he had done a very very unnatural thing in the back of that Volkswagen. He had effectively become psychotic because of it, but he was never pathological—it was not his nature. Thus, he was never without guilt. There is no action without consequence, and there is no escape from our makeup. Murder is not in his head, but it is in his hands.

And while he pondered such things, he saw his mystery girl's driver's license on the coffee table and remembered her again. He so badly wanted to elope with her and start anew, but he couldn't. He began to simultaneously realize the miserable inevitability of that four-letter word we call "love." He realized that no matter how much he loved his new dearest, he would only have his perception of her beauty and not her actual beauty. She is now to exist only in his mind, her very existence pending on whether or not he is actually thinking about her—out of sight, out of mind—and consequently this means that if he were to be in love with her, he would be in love with *his own* memory of her. Yes, realizing now that he has absolutely nothing but himself, realizing that she is still beautiful and pure even though he knows that she only exists in his head. In any case, it can be agreed that she is really real and that she does not deserve a relationship with a homicidal maniac. For he knew that she would eventually—whether or not it slipped out of his mouth—discover his horrible secrets and the droves of skeletons in his closet. And then what perception of him would she have? The part of herself which is the memory of him she will begin to hate and fear and despise, and he couldn't do that to her. He was dying inside, but she would survive and never let go and go on to make lots of babies. He knew he loved her. He didn't have to ask what love was. It was real. He wanted her to be happy, whether it was with him or not. He loved her so much that he was willing to accept the ramifications. He knew what he had to do.

It's never too late to change.

CHAPTER 16

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 15

“You can erase your fingerprints—I’ll bet you didn’t know *that*. Yep, a friend of mine did it. Alls you have to do is get a shallow dish of hydrochloric acid and dip your fingertips in there. Just do it for like twenty minutes a day for a year. Then you’ll have no fingerprints. Oh, ha, that reminds me. You know Vlad next door? He’s in here because he used latex gloves. Your fingerprints bleed through those motherfuckers—well, they *can*, anyway.

“Have I told you about Mark yet? Listen to this. True story. He’s a client of mine, right, and I invited him over to my pad real quick for some free dope before a little beer run. But there was a catch. I roll out this foot-long line, okay—big-ass motherfucker—and I say, ‘If you’re gonna hit *my* shit, you gotta hit the *whole* line or else nothing at all.’ So he hits the whole line, okay—and this guy’s never even *snorted* before, let alone shoot up, so he was tripping out—and fifteen minutes later we go on the beer run. He’s all sweating and shit in the back seat, paranoid as a motherfucker. Well, when we’re stopped at a red, the son of a bitch opens the door and starts running off! I kid you not. He just booked it, man. It was fucking comedy.

“Speaking of comedy, you’ve *gotta* hear this. Fucking Danny—my buddy Danny owed me some money, okay, so he comes up to me one day and he’s got, like, a hundred fucking NO SOLICITING signs. And so I say to him, ‘What the fuck you gonna do with all that shit?’ And you know what he says? Fucker says, ‘What the fuck do you think I’m gonna do? I’m gonna go door to door and sell

these motherfuckers.’ And he did it, too. He made money and he fucking paid me. What the fuck, huh?

“Did I tell you about how I got busted yet? It was fucking bullshit. They catch me with an eight ball, right, and they want me to tell them who I got it from or else they would get me with some bullshit or another. But I wasn’t buying it. I just said, ‘Fuck you. I got the right to remain silent.’ Fucker tells me I *don’t* have that right because I’m not under arrest. So you know what I said? I said, ‘Look, man. If you think I’m breaking the law by withholding information, then you’re just gonna have to arrest me, motherfucker, because I ain’t saying shit. And hey, don’t you have to Mirandize me? Well, well. Looks like I had the right to remain silent all along.’ Hual!”

That was Mikey, Cowell’s cellmate. Although an insomniac, he was combustibly hyper. They called him Baby Face because he looked like a teenager compared to the other guys in there. His teeth seemed to be too large for his small mouth and he had really young, robust cheeks. It was interesting to note the lone tattoo on his body: the word LEVITICUS in a gigantic vertical font, traveling down the length of his right arm; and to complete it, the chapter and verse 19:28 in the same vertical design on the left arm. It was a real rock star tattoo, the typical tattoo—green of course, its features gaudy and yet not without a hidden dark overtone. And there was lots of pain in his eyes, as if to match his tattoo; but he masked it by wearing a happy-go-lucky façade or by barraging his guests with hospitality. He was an intriguing fellow, really, a guy who could not complete simple tasks but was nonetheless excellently skilled at the more difficult ones. In some areas of his brain he was almost genius, yet he couldn’t perform simple arithmetic or keep a simple train of thought.

He’ll be leaving soon, as he’d just signed a fifty-six-month plea bargain for methamphetamine manufacturing that wasn’t much of a bargain. Essentially, he just hated this place. Prison would be better. The here and now offered a maximum-security jail where eighteen hours a day are frittered away in the undersized cells, and that just wasn’t acceptable.

They were contained in a twenty-man dayroom with ten of such cells. The cells measured six paces by three and the dayroom was a square indoor courtyard as wide as the ten cells. It is the most confined you will ever be for a semi-permanent basis unless you are dealing with something worse than the judicial system of America.

Baby Face continued with his anecdotes, and it somehow boosted Cowell deeper into his own realm, into his own land of thought. He tuned Baby Face out as he bunched up his knees on his bunk and reluctantly concentrated on the snap

sensation slithering up his arm, on all the memories of physical feelings and meta-physical ambiances. He sat there aging centuries every second as if he were a spiritual consciousness eternally caged inside a statue, pondering the meaning of life, wondering *why* life.

* * * *

Politics. Quite simply, longnecks can't play with three-horns in jail. Yes, racism is more than prevalent and mutual—it is the way of life. From herds of animals in the wild to the shipwrecked children of William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* to the rich, sophisticated gossip-gobblers who use words like "splendid" and "beastly," politics are an inevitable formality. If you're born a lion, then you stick to your pride; and that's just that. All for one and one for all. You live and die with your race. It's a different world.

Though the races try to juggle a diplomatic, tolerable relationship with one another, there exists an underlying tension of hatred. It's always the Whites and Mexicans against the Blacks in the event of a war, even though the Whites and Mexicans war with each other more than they do with the Blacks. This may sound unfair, but many times it is the Blacks who outnumber the other races two-to-one. Just not here. African-Americans typically aren't gamblers, and so there isn't a high concentration of them in Nevada even though it is especially hot; and they are therefore outnumbered here in this jail. It had been a while since there'd been a race war in this particular pod, and it was a good place to be if it was your first time on the inside.

But in spite of all that, the fact remains that jail is not lollipops and rainbows and bonfires. It's a real place where the real rules apply, a place where white people trade in their iron crosses for swastikas and Hispanic people speak with an accent even though they don't know a word of Spanish. It's real when you step inside, real because it's different than you expect. You see your misconceptions drip apart and then you know that it's no joke. You see how the food is served and how the jumpsuits look and how the people act and you realize that you can't go outside. And yes, you then realize that you'd had a misconception the whole time about what it is to be incarcerated, about what it is to have no freedom. And you belong.

For the most part, jail is a warehousing facility for defendants with pending charges whereas prison is more of an unpack-your-bags-because-you're-staying-a-while home. You get more liberties and privileges in prison, hence the shanks and smugglings and financed escape attempts. It is counterintuitive to

think that prisons are better than jails, especially since you are predominantly “innocent until proven guilty” in a jail, but the truth is strange and cruelly unfair most of the time. The deputy is not there to protect you, the psychiatrist is not there to listen and the nurse is not there to make sure you get your pills that you absolutely have to take in order to prevent certain death. They don’t care about your rights, and they only honor them because they have to. And they don’t care if you’re innocent. It just works out that jails are inferior to prisons: humane treatment and luxurious comforts in jail are second on the totem pole to security measures because inmates are not to be housed in jails for excessive amounts of time.

Even more pressing a concern than the housing conditions is the very people with whom you must stay. Half the people in jail or prison have been sexually molested as children, and they let it fester in this place. There is no escape. You end up worrying. We all do. Sometimes you worry at night about how you’ll pay the bills and the mortgage. Sometimes you worry about your family. Sometimes you worry about your case. And sometimes you worry about survival. Do they know you got some bad stuff on your jacket? Do they know you’ve been in protective custody? Do they know you used to roll with a gang but dropped out and now have a hit on your head? Do they know your name?

Shanks can’t really be constructed in a facility like this one, but the inmates nonetheless get their grubby hands on things that can be assorted into weapons; and everyone eats with the knowledge that shit could pop off at any moment.

But nothing happened today. After an unappetizing dinner of half-baked potatoes and bony meat patties at the tables in the dangerous dayroom where everybody wears jumpsuits (and not a few hours of downtime in the cells thereafter), they were allotted some playtime out of those cells back in the dangerous dayroom where everybody wears jumpsuits. And it was there that Baby Face and Cowell paired up against Matt and Pusher for a civil game of pinochle.

Matt was a skinhead with an orange mustache and eczema cropping on his back. His pupils never dilated, making his thin blue irises look like the tires on a bicycle wheel. He had strangling Popeye forearms with an awkwardly limp handshake, and the collar of his neck sported a bumpy, fuzzy tattoo that read: FUCK-EMALL. Matt was facing sixteen years for home invasion while armed with a deadly weapon. He’d been a mainstay in this specific tank and had therefore become entangled in the politics. Everything aside, he was the most honorable person that Cowell had ever known.

Pusher was a bit more intense. His was a more droopy complexion and a rainbow of tattoos over nearly every practical square inch of his skin. His shaved head

revealed a 666 just above the hairline and he mowed his eyebrows regularly in favor of red flames. He had a little swastika hesitating between his nose and forehead just like Charles Manson the brainwasher. The district attorney for Pusher's case was lobbing a myriad of decades at him, but the crazed inmate didn't seem to care at all: Pusher had been incarcerated for the majority of his life now.

Baby Face and Cowell lost the civil game of pinochle, and Baby Face gave up a Snickers bar—substantial currency in a place like this. Nevertheless, he was unfazed and still in a gaming mood.

“Are you challenging me?” Cowell asked when Baby Face set a chess board down and plopped two bushels of packaged pieces on the table.

“You're goddam right I'm challenging you. But you're Black.” And Baby Face looked jaundiced as he set up the pieces, like he had to get something off his chest. “Does it ever bother you when networks air paid programming and then say they're not *responsible* for what those guys say? They're getting paid for it, ain't they? And don't you hate it when those contestants in *Jeopardy!* take the two hundred-dollar clues first and then risk not having enough time to pick the thousand-dollar ones? And why the hell can't the Simpsons ever just sit on the goddam couch like normal for once without something weird happening?”

“You make it sound like they can broadcast pornography without the network being responsible. No. Paid programs are nothing more than commercials, and the networks are not responsible for false advertising. The contestants in *Jeopardy!* don't take the expensive answers first because that's where the daily doubles are, and they want to make money before they double it; and *Jeopardy!* puts the daily doubles there because they have to go somewhere, and by putting them in the big-money answers they save money. The Simpsons used to just sit on the couch like normal in the first season, but now the show is making parodies of itself so it doesn't get boring.”

“Fffuck,” Baby Face hissed with a sour expression. He chewed on what Cowell had said as he worked on his opening strategy that he referred to as “The Drunken Monkey,” a mobilization technique where he would slant his bishops out to the sides and move his knights up in front of the royalty like a cherub covering its eyes. “You ever wonder how many criminals are in commercials? They're all smiling and shit so it may not occur to us, but a certain percentage of them *has* to be murderers and bank robbers. Ha. Could you just picture it? A rapist telling you to talk to your doctor about Viagra. Ha!”

Cowell castled. “And some guy you talk to in a café could be the next Charles Whitman. Only God knows what's out there.”

“God...hmmm. ‘God is dead.’ I can’t remember who said that, but it was originally in German and it rhymed. ‘*Gott ist tot.*’ Heh–heh. Or, as I like to say, ‘I AM is not.’ Yep. I read the Bible, I’ll tell you what, and it’s *fulllllll* of contradictions. I don’t think the Bible was meant to be read. No, listen. I mean, okay, the printing press wasn’t even invented until, what, five, six hundred years ago. Before then you could only get your hands on a Bible if you were a priest who knew Latin, but those priest guys were so down with Christianity that nothing—*no-thing*—could convince them otherwise. Do you think they told the scrubs when they found contradictions? Fuck no!”

“Name one.”

“Name one what?”

“Name one contradiction.”

Baby Face snorted and then brushed at his nose as if he could wipe the sound away. “One contradiction. Okay. Jeh...I think his name was...Jehoiachin...yes, Jehoiachin. Jehoiachin was king of—dammit, what was it called?—not Israel but the other one...well, it don’t matter none. I’ll just say he was king of Jerusalem. Anyway, Nebuchadnezzar captured him—Nebuchadnezzar’s the king of the neighboring country, the real superpower of the time like the U.S. today—and locked him up in a dungeon. Motherfucker does thirty–seven years hard time until Nebuchadnezzar finally dies. Then the successor gave Jehoiachin clemency. Second Kings and Jeremiah both specify the exact date when he let him out—read, like, the last few verses of each book—but both books give different dates. They disagree by two or three days.”

“Two or three days, big deal,” Cowell conciliated. “That’s not a contradiction. It’s a typo.”

“It *is* a big deal. It’s the Bible. That shit don’t fly, man. God’s standard for us is perfection, and so our standard for Him should be perfection.”

“God’s standard isn’t perfect for us. Look at the thief on the cross—he was nowhere near perfect, and yet Jesus promised him heaven.”

“No one was perfect, not one. You can read that in Romans. We all fall short of the glory of God, and so that’s why He had to torture His son like that. And the point is that we would all go to hell if Jesus hadn’t died for our sins, which in turn means that the standard is perfection. Case in point: our—or *my*—standard for Him is perfection too. And He has not lived up to it. He can’t keep his story strait. The Bible’s all fucked up. He said it is perfect and it would remain perfect, that hell would freeze over before one jot or one tittle would pass away. But that’s bullshit There’s just way too many inconsistencies.”

Cowell looked him square in the eye. “I ain’t buying what you’re selling.”

“You know, I’ve tried things. I’ve spit in the face of God just to see what He would do.”

“What do you mean?”

“Blasphemy. I have jerked off on the Bible, called down curses on the name of Jesus Christ in different languages, stolen from collection plates, ate out the moldy, disgusting pussies of innocent virgin Catholic girls, ordered authentic Jesus voodoo dolls from New Orleans, convinced Christians to give up their faith, donated food and alcohol to starving bums only under the condition that they first deny Jesus. I even attempted to conjure spirits and tempt Satan to materialize himself. Nothing. Nothing ever happens. There’s never a bolt of lightning. You name it, I done it.”

“You’re fucking going to hell, you know that?”

Baby Face sat back coolly and laughed. “I also spiked the communion wine with cocaine once.”

“I’m serious, man. I’ve seen and done some really deranged shit, but you...you fucking *jerk* to the Bible?”

Baby Faced laughed with evil in his breath. “I had this one Bible I fucked so much that I could smell it when it was dry. I’m serious man, it smelled like jizz when it was on the shelf. All those pages sticking together...yep, I got a lot of mileage out of that Bible. And when I fucked it...goddam...I would jerk off onto certain passages—my favorite was John 3:16—and when I closed it tight afterward, it would bleed cum. Most beautiful thi—”

“You know what, I don’t give a shit. You can take a shit on the preacher’s face and it won’t prove the Bible wrong.”

“I don’t have to do that—I just fucking proved it wrong to you.”

“No, you didn’t prove shit. You just said that two dates disagreed when you know damn well that there was no set-in-stone dating system back then since it was Jesus that provided us with the starting point that the whole world adheres to. And you consequently know that there’s two different authors here who could’ve been going by different calendars in those days.”

“So what does that mean? You want some more?”

“No, I can’t want *more* if I never got anything to begin with.”

“Okay, okay, okay,” Baby Face machine-gunned as he thought of another example. “Okay, okay. Okay, here. Same guy. Jehoiachin. The book of Jeremiah puts a curse on him. ‘Write this man down as childless’ and so forth. It says that Jehoiachin is cursed to never have the fruit of his loins sitting on the throne of David. But Jehoiachin is Jesus’ ancestor—on *both* sides.”

“*What?*”

Baby Face sighed quickly in exasperation. “Joseph and Mary. This guy Jehoiachin has a kid and a grandkid who are in *both* genealogies, on Joseph’s side by the blood and Mary’s side by the books.”

“By the books?”

“Marriage. The family lines knock heads for a second there (and if you go back far enough the family tree goes strait up).” Baby Face used both index fingers to make a vertical line and then a figure eight, down and out and in and out and in together again, sort of like the shape of a guitar, exhibiting that osculation in the middle. “The original separation is at King David and stays like that for probably four hundred years, bumps at Jehoiachin’s kid and grandkid and then separates again for another four, five hundred years, then comes together again for the umpteenth time with Baby Jesus in a manger.”

“So the whole nub of the Bible collapses because of Jehoiachin?” Cowell saw Jehoiachin, a man who went from royalty to a dark, filthy dungeon. Thirty-seven years of hell and then the door opens up so that the luminosity consumes him, sealing up his pupils with the glory into two little slits like a lazy cat’s eyes until those eyes become two big ubiquitous irises basking in the magnificence, the dense shower of brilliant light cleansing him of the decades of grime, the heat pulsating on his cold face and the fresh air satiating his dirty lungs, walking into the white and he was free. “Thirty-seven years,” Cowell mumbled in astonishment. “I never heard of this Jehoiachin character. What else does the Bible say about him?”

“That’s it.”

“I like Jehoiachin.”

“Me too,” Baby Face said. “My ticket out of going to church.”

But Cowell wasn’t done disagreeing with Baby Face. “The Sermon on the Mount,” he said efficiently.

“Huh?”

“Jesus was referring to the Pentateuch in the Sermon on the Mount because he said, ‘Not one jot or one tittle will pass from the *law*...’”

Baby Face deliberated. “The only places of the Jewish Bible that can be said to have contradictions are those where sets of books overlap in the same timeline—the books of the prophets and also the Kings and the Chronicles. Moses’ books—the *law*—don’t overlap with any other known history, so it can’t be proven that there are no errors. But since there *are* errors in other places where it *can* be proven by comparison, we have absolutely no reason to blindly believe that Moses’ work, which was written in an archaic pre-Hebrew language, doesn’t have any. Believe you me, I am not the first one to uncover these things. The

Bible has contradictions in it, but people go to great lengths to keep you from finding out.” Baby Face suddenly became stern and looked Cowell up and down. “So it has come to this: either God *cannot* or God *will not* preserve His word.”

“These are strong words you say,” Cowell said, overwhelmed. “But what about Jesus’ resurrection? There’s proof. Eyewitness proof. People saw Him walking around. The Jewish government people never said anything because there was no dead body in a tomb to look at. How do you explain the absence of a corpse?”

“Wrong again,” Baby Face countermanded. “Most of the Jews at the time accused the disciples of stealing the body. But—”

“But the eyewitness accounts? Four hundred strong?”

“Who actually knew what Jesus looked like except for the Twelve? Nobody, man, and that’s why the big shots needed Judas to fucking point His ass out. And when He was ‘resurrected,’ everyone came to see Him and there were huge crowds. And do you remember how all the accounts agree that Jesus appeared to people at first and they didn’t recognize Him? That’s because it *wasn’t* Him. It was mass hysteria and delusion and the mind unwilling to accept the fact that the man was dead. Dead dead dead. It wasn’t Jesus who appeared to Mary Megaslut and it wasn’t Jesus who appeared to the hundreds. All the Jews looked the same back then—you know, the hair and the beard and the whole fucking...goddam Jewish thing. He just looked like any old no-good kike. They coulda used anybody to pull it off.”

“Are you saying it was a conspiracy of the disciples?”

“Yes and no. I don’t think they meant for it to be a conspiracy, at least at first; but when they were accused of stealing Jesus’ body, they had to deny it and it became an official conspiracy. I—”

“But still, an investigation would have been launched,” Cowell persisted. “The Christians were causing too many problems. The authorities would have done what was necessary to find the body. When they were torturing the disciples, one of them would’ve rolled and told.”

“Not if *there is no* body.”

He pondered for a second. “Do go on.”

“It is my personal belief that they *ate* it.”

Cowell disagreed like any normal person would. At first.

“Hear me out. Hear me out. What was the last thing Jesus said to the disciples? It was the last supper. ‘Take, eat; this is My body. Wash it down with My blood.’ They ate Him to have the Holy Spirit inside them. They ate Him because He was the object of their faith. Christianity is a cult, my friend.”

“You know, people have been trying to disprove the Bible for centuries. You think all of a sudden you’ve got the answer that everyone’s been dying to find?”

“I’m not the first guy to come up with something new like this,” Baby Face argued. “When the revolutionary chemists came up with chemicals to help us keep clean, it didn’t change the world. We have the chemicals to do what we need to do, but there *are* some people who remain filthy. We call them niggers.”

“But there are people to this day who *believe* in the Bible. There are people who *die* for it.”

“What about those suicide bombers? Do you think they don’t have any beliefs? Christians *know* they’re right, Muslims *know* they’re right, Buddhists *know* they’re right, atheists *know* they’re right, Hindus *know* they’re right. It’s just a question of how blindly you’re willing to believe in something and how stupid you’re willing to be. Or I guess it also depends on how shitty your life circumstances are as well.”

Cowell consumed one of Baby Face’s rooks with pleasure. “So then what *do* you believe?” he asked deviously.

“Well, I used to believe in evolution, but that’s bullshit too. It breaks down in practice. Because did Charles Darwin’s ‘Survival of the Fittest’ apply to individuals or the *species* as a whole? Or was it a group of individuals within a species, like kin? I think it certainly implies that the most fit specimen will survive, meaning the most fit *individual*. But there are clearly examples of self-sacrifice in nature, parents dying for the offspring, parents sometimes dying just to *make* the offspring. If, say, you get an intelligent organism that does not want to mate so that it will live, how will it pass on its genes? How will its good genes be passed on instead of a dumber one that shoots its shit in the females and dies like the horny bastard he is? Huh? Answer me that one. What good is it to survive if you don’t pass on your genes?”

“I don’t know, but you’re answering a question with a question. And it was Nietzsche who said that *Gott was tot*.”

“Oh, Nietzsche! Damn,” Baby Face mumbled. “What was your question again?” he asked after a lapse.

“What do you believe?”

“I just believe that we, as a species, aren’t intelligent enough to fabricate a good enough theory or religion about our genesis.”

“That’s just a lazy man’s out. I can’t buy that. Think of String Theory: matter and energy are born from space-time, and space-time is born from the concept of dimension. You can explain away everything you want, but the fact is that the

concept of space–time—the concept of something like a spatial dimension—had to be created.”

Baby Face clicked his mouth. “Nuh–uh. I’m telling you, we’re not smart enough as a species. Ummmm, okay, here. Think of it this way. If you put a rhinoceros brain in a man, would he be smart enough to make a mud hut?”

“Yes, he would. I’ve seen some stupid motherfuckers, and I wondered myself if they didn’t have a rhinoceros brain in there. You just need the vertical vertebrae and the opposable thumbs, and you can pretty much do anything.”

And then suddenly something more important than the argument at hand stole Baby Face’s ephemeral attention and he shoved his queen into Cowell’s face with the assistance of one of those opposable thumbs. “Checkmate!” It was indeed an elite comeback and he was about to jump up and glorify himself, but then he remembered where he was. He remembered who he was. He remembered what he was. And so he sat there farcically and gained an understanding, a profoundness from the stupid. “Chess...is all about the positioning,” he said mystically. “Life is positioning. It’s not what you have—it’s how you use it.” He immediately didn’t like that and tinkered it. “No, well, it’s half and half. The size of your dick matters—only little wangs’ll say it don’t—but a foot–longer is useless if you use it like a pussy. I mean, if you use it like a sissy.”

“Whatever you say,” Cowell sighed, either unimpressed or anguished from his startling defeat.

“Yep, aaaaall about the positioning.” But Baby Face saw that his cellmate wasn’t interested in philosophy anymore, so he decided it best to introduce him to new people.

Chris was trustee and shot caller for the Whites. He was a rugged man with cracked and callused elbows that looked like elephant skin. His eyes, small and beady, were sunken back into his skull from stress and he was missing several of his teeth. Chris was proud of his clique. There was Vladimir the manic–depressant Russian. There was John the overhand–voiced bully who was HIV positive (mind you, he did not acquire the virus in any impure manner). Not to be forgotten was Suicidal Sebastian with the mangled goatee. And then there was Brother Oliver, the gentle giant. Brother Oliver always had a perfect posture and a nice thing to say, and he was a man who consciously practiced what he preached by putting off profanity and taking youngsters under his wing.

Cowell talked with them all to see that they were fairly incompetent in comparison with himself or Baby Face who suffered from haywire attention–deficit hyperactivity disorder. Everyone had their own little story, though, and Cowell found himself to be passively entertained. Before he knew it, the time had come

to lock it down for the night. It had suddenly gone from combustible order to controlled chaos. Everybody going this way and that like they'd done hundreds of times before. He realized that his cellmate had evaporated into the crowd and that he hadn't the faintest idea as to the address of his cell. And the loudspeaker just kept shouting, shouting a voice so muffled and loud that the only understandable things were the words right before or after a pause. Cowell ran around aimlessly like a decapitated chicken, just accomplishing absolutely nothing by those wasted efforts of zipping around without going anywhere.

"Hey Nelson, over here!"

He found his way to the foghorn and Baby Face shut them in.

"I was trying to tell you at chow, man," Baby Face said, as though they had just gotten back from chow. "DON'T drink that juice they give you—it's got saltpeter in it."

"Oh. I see."

Baby Face started to pack his scattered possessions into his box for when he will voyage to prison. "Do you like poetry?" he questioned, floating his voice.

"Yes, I do. How about you?"

"I'm working on a poem right now," he casually said as he continued to cram his box. "I love poetry because it's...it's profound simplicity, you know?" He thought about his revelation he'd had after the chess game. "What I mean is that sometimes the complex things are simplistic in nature, and to be...no, scratch that. Okay, here. I got it. Poetry is about describing a waterfall in a paragraph with the grace of a thousand words. Poetry is to simplify the complex."

"What is so complex that you're trying to simplify?"

"Man, I don't know—it's hard to explain."

"Well no shit it's hard to explain," Cowell ripped. "Okay...why don't you just let your poetry do the talking then?"

Baby Face looked Cowell in the eyes and knew his own defeat. "Fine. Fine. Whatever." He got a crumpled piece of paper out of his box. "Here. Take it."

"Is this the one you're working on?"

"No, that one is *done*. Nobody reads my pending works."

"Which one you working on?"

"Which one? You don't know any of my works. How in the—"

"Just tell me the fucking title."

"The work in progress shall be titled 'The Death of a God to Fatheaded Hog.'"

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

"Like I said, you don't know any of my works."

Cowell looked down at the poem in his hand. "Okay. I'll give you a shot."
And so Cowell, his expectations exceedingly low, gave it a shot:

"Genesynthesis"

By Mikey Brenneron

Me myself and I
The three-headed monster
That you call a trinity

We are the masturbating god
Watching the impure virgin as she bathes
We fought to see who would get to have her first
And we argued over who the father was when she gave birth

Isn't Jesus a bastard if His father wasn't married to His mother?
Isn't Jesus an inbreed if Abraham's wife was his sister?
Test-tube baby grown up to be insane
Starving carpenter, master manipulator

In the beginning we created a man and a woman
Because we wanted to have an orgy
But since the serpent came to tell them the truth
We have to settle for sex with ourself

Isn't Jesus cursed if He was hanged from a tree?
Isn't Jesus guilty if He refused to even offer a plea?
Cult leader corrupting the country
Divider of households, commander of demons

We are the mystery in the sky
We are three men in one
If 6 is indeed the number of man
Then 666 is the number of God

Forsaken
Forgotten
Cursed

Guilty
 Inbreed
 Bastard
 Scapegoat
 Savior of the world

Shit. *Holy shit.* Cowell climbed up onto his bunk and considered for a moment. He looked down at his cell mate, at that little man all hunched over his little box; and depression swept Cowell over so that he had to roll his eyes upward to prevent tears from overflowing. “Tell me a story, Mikey,” he said, pleading, the ceiling blurring in his vision.

Baby Face sat down on the ground and looked at the stainless steel toilet that is always in plain view of anyone on the outside who cares to look. “Once upon a time there was a chimpanzee named Amy,” Baby Face began. “Amy lived in the zoo and was cared for by Nicolas. Nicolas was a good man, caring and loving, and he always enjoyed the time he spent with Amy. Now Amy’s sign language vocabulary was only about five thousand words or so, but Nicolas kept teaching her new words and new concepts every day, ever hopeful to help her learn more. Once Nicolas became confident in her understanding, he told her about Jesus Christ. He told her that she will go to heaven for ever and ever if she believed that Jesus Christ had died for her sins and so on and so on. And she believed. She accepted Jesus into her chimpanzee heart.” Baby Face exhaled deliberately and then resumed. “One day Amy died and was buried. She did not go to heaven. She is dead.”

Cowell cried for the second time in as many days.

“I always found it interesting to entertain the thought of immortality,” Baby Face continued, still in his narrative voice. “Modern medicine, if we could break past the point of death, of decrepit old age, so that it is possible to sustain life indefinitely with routine medical procedures.” Baby Face nodded his head with conviction, eyes fixated on something and not moving, jaw tight, mind steadfast and firm, already agreeing with what he was about to say: “If we can conquer death, then we can conquer God. Therefore God is death. God is dead, and we’re in the dark. Woe is man. Do you ever get the inkling that man is cursed—cursed with the burden of existence?”

CHAPTER 17

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 16

It is a general trend for happiness to plummet as intelligence climbs; pleasure is transitory, even as fleeting as gas in a vacuum, for the genius. And though his mind be the culprit for the melancholy filter over his eyes, the genius would sooner surrender his precious sight before descending to the depths of an infidel.

Magnifying Cowell's loneliness was his pubescent position in the twilight, stranded between run-of-the-mill intellect and pre-genius. He was far too intelligent for average classification, but bump him up to the next notch and he was a dunce. Nevertheless, he understood that this was for the best. For light is needed for life, but too much light blinds. The Roman Empire cascaded, the Third Reich succumbed and the United States of America will surely see its day. Cowell knew that he, too, would self-destruct were he excessively intelligent; yet, like a moth *neeeeeds* the bright white light, he yearned every day to see in binary and to trap the mysteries of the universe in his hand.

His anomalous status, in conjunction with the alignment of all the dominos over the course of his life, had culminated in that failure that he was today. Cause and effect: You see it, you need it. You hate, you concentrate. You plan, you prepare. You kill, you become a groveling monster. You feel dry inside, you have to talk to somebody. It is the destructive nature of avarice. For with the hording of gold comes only the greed for more gold, and Cowell came closer to the void every time he soared higher in the plane of awareness. It was this awareness that made him realize that he was alone. That he will look at a thing and interpret it

with his mind, his mind echoing louder and louder like an empty house opening doors only for more empty rooms, plunging him deeper and deeper into the pinwheeling chaos neatly tucked away so that only he could see it, driving him mad. Sex is very warm, but the warmth is in and of yourself and not of your lover. Look into the vacancy of a chimpanzee's eye, and see that it is content with its kind and stupidly ignorant of its filthy, indignant condition. Exclusively those who are really alive in the mind know that the only good thing about life is death.

Entropy, unraveling, thermodynamics—the more complex the system, the greater the eventual demise. Stars, for example, are the largest of any harmonious and unified body known, and what, pray tell, can fill the sky like a supernova?

* * * *

The best way to describe jail is that the entire place is like a public bathroom. Cowell woke up after his first night in a soup of pigtailed pubic hairs and Velcro-static fuzz balls. The door was already open and Baby Face was absorbed in the breakfast queue. Cowell methodically dressed himself and took his place in the White community.

His half pint of milk only lasted a couple swigs, forcing him to drudge defenselessly through the rest of the meal. He took one look at the sausage that was drowning in its own grease faster than it could be smothered by the all-encompassing liver spots of larva-white fat and decided to become a vegetarian in jail, a very perverted thing for him. The oatmeal was having respiratory problems of its own due to the critical penny-pinching dilution that allowed the jail to reuse the withheld portion for the morrow. The plastic spoon was submerged in the very substance for which the utensil was to be used.

“Zis not *oatmeal*! Zis fucking *floatmeal*!” Vladimir shouted through a mist of spit, having to take a quick, shallow breath after saying each soft t. He was a straggly man with a pinhole chin and a thick, monstrous uni-brow. Two years of incarceration and a heavily combative case had stripped him of any residual patience—the polar opposite of what happens to any of the other more nominal inmates.

Cowell decided to pass on the fucking floatmeal for today. He ate a crunchy pastry with self-pity and returned to his cell. Up on his bunk again, embracing his knees, eyes perhaps glowing out of loneliness in the dark, the loneliness reflecting dull, off-center circles of yellow light in those wolf's eyes.

In and out, in and out.

Was this how the saga should end? He thought about all the great sons of men and how they'd each met their own undignified ends, eternally pacing in their cells like caged panthers. He thought about his graduating class and where they all were by now. They probably had their two and a half children and the white-picket fence and the dog named Fido and the pension-promising job at a multi-million-dollar corporation with the colossal glass building and the exclusive office with the firm, bunion-haired brunette secretary that they would fuck sideways on the side. And here he was in jail. The fuckup.

In and out, in and out.

A slight flicker of the two yellow dots as Baby Face rolled into the cell, rubbing his belly and tapping his head in synchronization like a crazy clock. "Haaaaah," he sighed benignly, unmindful of the parasite laying its eggs of self-destruction in his cellmate's gut. He closed the door and started filibustering again, this time about how you can devise dynamite out of oxygen and magnesium.

Cowell, meanwhile, stared at the fancy gangster writing on the brick wall until an optical illusion became certain. The E that looked like a backwards 3 spilled over lengthwise and jumped off the wall. It was a car now, zooming in closer to him ever so slowly. There was a transition and he found himself in the driver's seat, sitting on his deceased father. The pads on the bends of his appendages furiously nibbled at the flesh like piranhas as he searched in vain for a bridge in the horrible place that existed only in his head.

It was a necropolis for the living, its repulsiveness austere and to the point. It was hell. Why did he like it so? Why was it so...almost attractive to him? Perhaps he saw it that way because everything here was the way it wasn't supposed to be. Perhaps it was the way the sky was the dark half of the color wheel and the skyscrapers refused an upright structure. Or the fact that motion was like a dancing phantasm, that is, that footsteps and revolving wheels were not obligatory; and that all the traffic around him was undead, people operating vehicles in various states of decay. There were skeletons, endless skeletons with fractions of skin and viscera buttoning like organic emblems, blood rivering through them like armies of fire ants, unjoined bones pivoting on imaginary ligaments. Foggy yet so tangibly three-dimensional.

After an unbearable mile of time that picked at him with aggregated conscience and aching remorse, the roaring of a blood-lusting locomotive came into the light. And there was Mother, her hemorrhaging eyes pleading him that he might not do it. But he couldn't not do it. He couldn't control it. He couldn't move. He was drowning.

The car maneuvered up and around the dead tree branch guarding the tracks and then bumped onto the train's road. Back and forth, back and forth, oscillating vigorously like a humming bird. Back and forth, back and forth, and then a rifling BOOM.

It had just happened and he needed to get out of there before it happened again. And so he covered out and watched the invincible, unwieldy mass obliterate the automobile. *SMASH*. Over and over again, still coming back for more. *SMASH*. The purest form of theatrical masochism. *SMASH SMASH SMASH* until it lost all meaning. The train looked at him every time with evil laughter in its eyes. Evil like a mother scorpion plucking a hatchling off her lobsterlike back and eating it alive, evil like a man cursing God with his last breath.

And gazing at the splintering annihilation, Cowell had his reluctant epiphany. He became enlightened of the unshakable reality that evil is the answer to the question. He became aware of the fact that there is no love to die for unless there is some element of danger or need self-sacrifice, that the existence of the love may thereby be made manifest. And he became aware of the fact that the iniquity of this world is like a shadow that cannot exist without the good but yet must exist if the good does. But if this is so, if Evil and Good both exist, then is it possible to forsake Evil for Good? No. This cannot be so, for darkness cannot turn to light. Right?

* * * *

Disgruntled, he awoke to Baby Face's jabbing hand.

"Chow's almost here," he announced. "Five or ten minutes."

"Okay, thanks," Cowell replied, rolling over to try to shut him out and get more sleep.

"You know, I wouldn't eat the gravy if I were you," Baby Face persisted, prolonging Cowell's state of purgatory between sleep and alertness. "Yeah, man, nobody knows what kinda lardo shit they put in there."

"Hey, how soon until you think they can colonize Mars? I don't think it'll happen any time soon. I'd say not even until 2100 before man *walks* on it, 2400 before we get a little village up on there."

Cowell flopped over onto his back and sat up, realizing that the rambler will not relent.

"You know what bugs me, though, is all this bullshit about prostitution. I mean, it's a free country and outlawing it is one thing, but they do even MORE than that. Fucking sting operations, undercover whores. I mean, come on! That's

bullshit, man. What if I'm not *looking* for a good time, but then I see her shit just spilling out of that skimpy shirt. Fuck, man. What's a guy to do? Mr. Happy has feelings, too. He can't be left alone in the cold. Don't those old pieces of shit who make the laws know what it's like to be a guy? Those guys are stupid, man.

"That reminds me. Where do you stand on stem-cell research? I mean, I don't believe the Bill of Rights supports abortion, but if we're going to abort the baby anyway, we might as well utilize the fetus. Right? Is it fetus or zygote? How developed are they when we use them for stem cells?"

"Embryo."

"*Embryo?* 'Embryo' refers to an animal, like egg yolk."

"No, an embryo is anything that's pulled out before it's born, for any mammal," Cowell explained calmly.

"You're fucking crazy. What, do you think I was born yesterday?"

"No, I think you were born *today*."

Baby Face's eyes darkened like the canopy of a helicopter. "Born today? Born *today?*" he shrieked in disbelief. "But you were *here* yesterday. You *saw* me."

"It was a complicated procedure that lasted eighteen hours. They tried to abort you with a poisonous potassium solution, but you didn't take."

"Oh, don't get me started on abortion," Baby Face said, cold-bloodedly planning on discussing it and not remembering that he'd touched on it just moments ago. "They call it their choice, freedom of expression, elastic clause, 'my body' bullshit. Whatever. Pornography I can see as protected under the Ninth, definitely and defiantly. But abortion? No way. That's bullshit, man. Goddam liberals taking away our guns despite the right to bear arms because they say that that amendment has to be taken into context for the time—militants, resistance against British tyranny. But then they go right ahead and say that that *same* two hundred-year-old document protects a woman's right to kill her fetus, embryo, whatever you wanna call it. Human fucking being. What do you think the founding fathers would've done with a woman who'd had her baby aborted?"

"It's a conspiracy," Cowell bladed.

"It *is* a goddam conspiracy! Like, why do they charge you with double homicide when you murder a pregnant woman, but any old bitch can kill her own zygote slash embryo slash fetus slash infant baby without the dad's consent? Hell, they can do it even if the bio-illogical, twenty-three-chromosome-giving father *wants* the baby. It's bullshit, man."

Baby Face was a complainer, a man content to be contempt. Maybe he was a good cellmate to have, maybe for Cowell that is, since they're complete opposites. Cowell couldn't care less about politics—jailhouse politics or White House poli-

tics. So, just to draw the stampeding man's ire, he purposed himself to play the devil's advocate. That was his role in relationship to Baby Face.

"I, personally, am pro-choice," Cowell said affirmatively. "I don't think a woman should be forced to endure the most painful thing that anybody could go through. If we force them to, then we're not really a civilized society. Giving birth is like a train wreck"—he subconsciously suppressed a wail from the simile—"and it can cause permanent disfigurement or even death."

But Baby Face had fenced against so many people that argument with an equipped person rather than a vulnerable concept was now just annoying; and the more passionate he was about a subject, the harder it was to defend it interactively. He was a complainer, not an arguer. He abruptly changed the subject. "Hey," he said in a new timbre, his eyes less alive, "what do you think we're having? I hope it's cheeseburgers and fries. And chocolate cake." And then he suddenly stopped talking and stared out the door's bulletproof window in indignant anticipation. He watched the trustees glove up and duck-walk under the weight of the stacked trays, watched them divide up with tender precision what he hoped was cheeseburgers, watched them distribute the little pink milk cartons like Monopoly houses.

The doors eventually gave way and the feeding frenzy was on. They were served darkening salad and imitation mashed potatoes eggshelled with gravy. The gravy was sickening just to look at. Cowell poked at it with his spoon and saw that there was literally an epidermis that caved in as quicksand. It was like magma under the surface and he doodled in it to mix it around.

"You gonna eat that?" taxed John, pointing with a hand that had a lightning bolt on each of the two most longest fingers. "You like my bolts?" he remarked when he noticed that Cowell was looking at them. "That's what you get when you stick a nigger." He made a stabbing motion.

"Well then, I'd hate to deprive a gladiator of his...food." Cowell didn't like to call the excrement on his tray "food," but John nonetheless took it merrily.

Cowell was first to return to the sanctuary of his cell. He hopped onto his bunk, leaned against the wall and then moaned when he realized something. It was the thing he feared and loathed most. It was routine.

Baby Face came in with the day's newspaper. He rationed it up and gave Cowell the section with the back page. And then there it was, Cowell's ripple in the world. This was not routine. This was the bull's eye of his diabolical plan:

Chief of Police Arrested as Suspected Mass Murderer, Extortionist

LOS ANGELES, CA—Authorities have apprehended L.A. Police Chief Robert Theodore Walker, 42, in connection with the Man in the Green Mask's slaughter last Thursday.

Walker—calling himself “The Pizzaman” in his letter to police—allegedly tried to swindle hundreds of thousands of dollars in a scheme that backfired on him. He anonymously delivered the police a list of 100 people, one of whom was himself, and demanded that every person on the list be paid \$300,000 or else he would continue to terrorize public transportation, authorities said. Authorities declined to comment on the details of the threat, but they executed search warrants on all of the homes involved.

Inside Walker's house, investigators found a doom's-day stockade of weaponry ranging from families of unregistered firearms to axes, buzz saws, scalpels, and also restraining devices. Upon even a brief preliminary forensic analysis, they found poorly concealed blood stains on the walls, large areas of removed floor insulation, and even human body parts hidden in the refrigerator. To Investigator Gus Billormy, it was eerily similar to notorious serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer's apartment. “It was nothing short of macabre,” Billormy said. “I remember reading about [Dahmer's] place fifteen years ago, and this was way worse. [Police Chief Walker] was one of our own, and he did this.”

Walker is currently being held without bail in protective custody and authorities believe he is responsible for up to three dozen deaths, including the disappearance of his family.

Cowell couldn't help but delight in his doppelgänger's dismal demise. He knew it was the wrong thing to do, but he was unable to resist. He felt it coming back. All the evil that had brought him so far only to abandon him in his time of need was back. He couldn't stop thinking about his masterpiece. The most unlikely of events had come to pass. He thought it was the edge of the coin, but it wasn't. This was the inevitable outcome. There is a natural order of things: of deception is begotten corruption, and of corruption self-destruction. There was no other way for history to unfold but for Kennedy to be shot, and there was no other path set before Chief Walker but self-destruction. And Cowell just kept laughing at it, seeing what he had orchestrated, wondering how many fellow serial killers he was instructing and encouraging. He had become a martyr for the greater evil, and the more he resisted it, the more he realized that evil was in the air he breathed. There was no escaping it, and there was no other way.

* * * *

“Wow, shit. You have AIDS?”

“Want some?”

A new lad had arrived today. They called him Jesus because he had earlobe-long hair and a thinning beard. He was a wiry guy with knotty joints, an overall hippielike bounce in his walk and a typical stoner's lazy drawl. He was young—eighteen or nineteen—and this was probably his first time in the big house.

Jesus gawked at John, at the tattoo of a dotted line along the soft of his forearm accompanied with the adjacent words SLIT HERE; and at the other tattoo too, the tattoo of lightning bolts lining the fingers that were fanning the hand of cards. He wondered if it was AIDS or HIV, but he was afraid to ask.

Matt and Cowell were smashing on John and Jesus in the spades game, and John was looking for an excuse to quit. John was a rider, and he hated the weak (it was in fact his philosophy that a more intelligent society would force the weak to protect the strong, as is prescribed by the uncanny nature of the intelligence of man to employ tools). He couldn't stand losing because that made him among the weak. He saw someone sitting by his lonesome and took a shot.

"Hey Sebastian, you want to fill in for me?"

"I'm going to kill myself." Suicidal Sebastian rocked back and forth despondently, his arms overlapping in his lap. "I'm going to kill myself."

"Fucking..." John mumbled harshly. He finished the set at hand and said, "I'm gonna go check if Vladimir wants to play."

"But he's in his cell," Matt entreated.

"So I'll ask the deputy if I can get a head check."

John went over to the cell and peered in hopefully. And Vladimir was there on the bed, pumping away on himself like an oil well and probably chanting some girl's name.

"Hey Skippy, you can't make a campfire with a twig and two berries!" John mocked hoarsely as soon as he found his breath and after his bowling-ball figure wasn't doubled over with laughter.

Vladimir pulled a face and his nuts grew cold. "Fck yoouu," he spit in his native tongue. "Fck yoouu."

John laughed a smoker's laugh and went back to finish his game.

"Hey Sebastian," he beseeched again after a proper interval. "Wanna play?"

"I'm going to kill myself."

Matt and Cowell won a half a Milky Way apiece and went their separate ways. Cowell wasn't two feet from the table when someone pulled his arm.

"Hey Nelson, you want to play some chess?" It was Baby Face.

"No."

"Too bad. I have it all set."

Some unknown force compelled Cowell to comply. Baby Face came out with his Drunken Monkey stratagem again, and again Cowell consumed a rook.

“You killed my guy,” Baby Face protested, his mind warming up. “I’ve been working on some one-liners. How do you like this one: ‘You are not just a number—you are a number in a set of numbers?’”

Cowell leaned back on his stool a bit and supported his chin and cheek with his thumb and forefinger, respectively. “‘This sentence is true.’ Is that true or false?”

“Hmmm. I dunno.”

“Do you know about this?” Cowell glided his queen and pinned Baby Face’s king. “Checkmate.”

“Well done, Nelson,” he admitted grudgingly.

“Looks like I have my dignity back, then.”

Baby Face’s face lit up and he shrank back with horror. “You’ve always had your *dignity*,” he scolded. “You think they can take our dignity by taking our clothes and our things and by feeding us that manure?” He stood up triumphantly and held out his hand like Hamlet. “The only loss of dignity is the loss of the sense of dignity.”

“I don’t know about that, Mikey.”

“Do you think William Wallace died without dignity in *Braveheart* just because they pelted him with rotten food and publicly tortured him? Do you? That man had some fucking dignity.” Baby Face had said everything with one breath up to this point, and he struggled with the last couple words. “Nobody could take it from him except for his self—not the king, not the crowd, not that snooty guy who kept saying, ‘Confess, confess.’ Wallace took the brunt of that shit like a man. He didn’t beg for no fucking mercy. He yelled for freedom, man.” Baby Face sat back down and thudded his heart with an invalid fist, his eyes slightly puddling at the bottom. “Hits you right here, man. The man had pride. ‘Every man dies; not every man really lives.’ That’s the way I wanna go out, man. I don’t want to just be like the next man. I don’t want to confuse my life with someone else’s on my deathbed.”

Cowell was astounded. These things Baby Face said, they were true. Dignity, like honor, is a thing of the internal. He found himself combing over the proverbs Baby Face had said in the past, and he was anxious to formulate some new philosophy of his own.

They played chess for the rest of the night, and Cowell was impressed with the restless man’s ability to sit down, shut up and focus. After that, they locked it down and Baby Face prepared a spread—a mixture of potato chips, instant soup,

leftover meat from the jail's meals and anything else that would go with it. He oared the plastic spoon through it and it made wet-cheek sounds. Cowell was viscerally appalled, but Baby Face vehemently insisted that he try it. So Cowell shoveled a spoon into the muck and took out a mound, steadying it in the air while Baby Face stemmed out a topping of French dressing on it. Cowell put it into his mouth with some inhibitions.

"Not bad," he critiqued incredulously, and coughed as some of the peppers scratched his throat.

And Cowell suddenly saw himself eating this same slop in this same cell as an eighty-year-old man.

C H A P T E R 18

▼

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 17

This was only his first trip to court, and already he despised it. Everyone—murderers fighting life and drunkards who'll go home in mere hours—without fail, everyone alike was deemed a flight risk. When they were loaded onto the bus, they were shackled together into little chain trains. Cowell couldn't tell how many inmates were implicitly connected to him, but it must have been in excess of a half dozen.

The idling bus was not nearly as bumpy as he'd thought it would be, and he could almost comprehend the music leaking out of the speakers. They had already been waiting for probably thirty minutes before the engine started up, and had about twenty or so to go. And then finally, crammed in like sardines, they began the tedious launch through the jail's facilities and ultimately into the real world where people have orange juice with breakfast and wine with supper and as much butter as they want for their biscuits. It was actually rather captivating to watch people from behind the bars of the windows. As he witnessed this remarkable procession of life outside his own vehicle, this procession of people competently operating two-ton vehicles and not even thinking about it, he began to wonder what music they were listening to. He knew it was sharp and clear, digitally enhanced to perfection, surround sound to wrap them in melody, whatever they wanted at their fingertips. Cowell saw society as a machine, and for the first time he saw it as an efficient machine, a construct that is as best as can be made when so many people want to be number one, truly the best that we can do

in light of the individual's selfish introversions. And Cowell was one of the demons here just to fuck it up: this, to dwell on the magnitude of his actions, shall be his punishment.

"How you doing, sir?" asked a genial, vibrating voice.

Cowell had difficulty locating the source of the greeting for respect of the air that was musty and staticy with conversation like a cafeteria, but when he turned he saw only one figure looking at him. "Okay," he responded.

"I'm Amos."

"Nelson."

Amos was a dreary-eyed black man with sleek, slender braids in his hair that funneled over his dome and ice-sickled loosely at the back. Though he was pudgy in his face, he was highly muscular. He also had a belly on him, but it was quite evident that he worked out because there was a definite crease above the waist like an upside-down sunset. His pectorals told the same story and his biceps were nineteen inches round.

"Nelson, how is your walk with God today?"

Malnourished and scared, Cowell was becoming more and more disillusioned by the second. "Walk with God?" he repeated ruefully. "*What?*"

"Your walk with the Lord," Amos persisted. "He carries you in times of trouble, my brother." He pointed to a ravenously sweating glutton two rows ahead. "You see that brotha right there? That's my homie. They trying to give him sixty years for some *buuuuullshit*. But we prayed about it, and now his lawyer says he can run dat shit concurrent. He might get him fifteen wit seventy-five percent. He'll do thirteen. That's right, my friend Nelson. God is with us. He is *with* us."

But Cowell was in a much worse place than jail now, and God was not with him. He dreamed about demented and debased things that were frightening and nauseating even to him, sick mutilations of people mere constructs of his own mind, a madhouse where the circumstances of life have diminished the meaning of suffering so that only the guest may be presented it. It was frightening because there was no fear, fearless like in death; only that these were alive, eyes of life with no fear indeed an aberrant creature to see. He was neither the victim nor the killer (he was rarely the killer in his dreams), and he watched as incoherent people were torn apart. Gross dismemberment. Violet-blue blood spilled out of their mouths as they clapped—or just flailed their empty arms like broken androids—and hummed nursery rhymes with bloody patches of cotton over their eyes or their ears or their noses and IV cords ceding into darkness and clamps on their chests to hold open the red, red chest cavities and scalpel-friendly dotted lines on their scalps to tell the psychotic doctor where to cut. Cowell felt like his heart had

stopped as he watched the stupefying horror. Everyone lying on hospital beds, dying on hospital beds. Saturated gauze. Broken tourniquets. Chainsaws. Insanity. Why Nelson? why Nelson? why Nelson? *too much* why Nelson? why—Please stop! Too much! O, that his mother were his grave! If only he could renounce himself right here and right now. If only he could just go limp and let the world pass him over, not flinching or acknowledging command nor hunger nor thirst nor pain, just laying there like a wilting piece of malleable rubber, not thinking and not doing. To become invisible. To be not of this world. He could just lay there until and through the gradual cessation. But alas, there is air in his lungs, and that air is part of the world. That air is the same air that other people breathe. And he knew that he would have to face the music.

* * * *

The courtroom was large and spacious with a very high ceiling, and it was divided into two main sections: the one for shackled inmates and the other for friends and family of the accused or defendants out on bail.

It was rather bizarre to Cowell how little attention each case would garner: they seemed to be granted only a moment's consideration. Time was of the essence and everything was steamrolling ahead, but that did not in any way spare the courtroom inhabitants of the inevitable monotony. The judge's voice fused with each passing moment so that his speaking became like silence and the silence an unsettling buzz.

The inmates were pretty down, but not as down as you might expect; for this courtroom experience, as unique and unsettling as it may have been, was just routine to these damned souls.

"They giving us luuuuuuv today, Nelson."

"How much are you looking at?"

"Sixteen months wit half. I might even get exonerated, though."

"That's good for you, Amos."

"You think you might get exonerated, Brother Nelson?"

"Yeah..." Cowell said emptily, as if his throat were a vacuum. Clouds of darkness gathered behind his eyes and his insides had the spontaneous urge to implode. It was, of all things, a lie that made the truth so true.

"Oh, here comes my public *pretenda*," Amos rapped. "Motha—fucka thinks he's a *contenda*. Whatchu up to, fooo? Rep—re—sent. Rep—reee—seeeehhhhhnt."

Amos's attention shifted to his case, and it left something missing in Cowell. For even though Cowell hadn't said much to him, Amos had become a little bit

of a burden bearer: Cowell's depression was contagious, and Amos's outreaching personality had sopped up some of his grief. But Cowell knew, he always knew that all good things come to an end. He saw in Amos a man that he would never see again, and, if he *were* by chance to see him again, he wouldn't be allowed to associate with him anyway for the regard of politics.

As Amos haggled, Cowell explored the palace with his eyes and caught a glimpse of one of the female inmates, a desirable woman immaculately jeweled in silver fetters. She had streaking blonde hair and bubblegum lips, and she was giving him this look—her head was intentionally bowed so that she had to look under her thin eyebrows in order to see him—that was totally sexy. She accompanied this with one of the most devilish grins he'd ever seen. Then she tilted her head back up, licked the circumference of her lips and mouthed something to him, but Cowell couldn't make it out because it was too fast. When he flipped up his hands and lip-synced a "What?" she threw her head back and laughed silently, her hair splashing uniformly in golden waves. She mouthed the words again and he read her lips this time: "Do you want to fuck?" Her bottom lip slit forward voraciously with the judgment of the sharp f. Cowell knew he should've been disappointed that she did not have something more insightful to say; but, unfortunately, men are pigs, and a woman with the goods need not do much to excite a man—if anything at all.

Additional things were said that Cowell did not understand. She laughed and giggled some more, professionally keeping it quiet. But then in an instant her glowing countenance became solemn and lackluster as her attorney leaned over and whispered confidentially in her ear. Cowell alerted himself and his ears perked up, his sense of self-preservation enhanced with the knowledge of another's danger, and he wondered which one of the suits was the public defender representing *him*.

"Concerning the people of the state of Nevada versus Natalya Angela Foller," the judge began, clicking on his mouse. He looked her over and continued to speak, but it was a blur. Basically, Natalya was in deep shit. She was apparently asked something because she grumbled some form of a confirmatory in an uninterested tone like a child in elementary school, her dirty-blonde hair drowning her face and her posture a natural slouch. "How does the council wish to plead?" the judge asked plainly.

"Not guilty, your Honor," her attorney answered, standing stiffly upright in a neatly ironed suit.

"Will the court recognize Miss Foller's plea of not guilty?"

Done.

Immediately after this little time out, Natalya resumed her provocative flirting as if nothing had happened. Cowell tried to return the favor and entertain her, but he became horrendously nervous and clammy as the significance of it all began to settle in. He knew this moment for what it was. In life there are ambiguous moments where everything is surreal and meaningless, and then there are other moments of dense clarity where you are aware and have intensified senses of sight and sound; this was the heaviest moment in Cowell's life. The jingling of the shackles, the inmates' breath and huffing voices, the computer keys rebounding, his flaunting mistress's vibrant hair, the bailiff on the Target-red phone, the judge's tedious droning...This was it. Life. He was to be incarcerated for the remainder of his natural life. Every day. Every day. Never again will he wear regular clothes or eat regular food or talk to regular people or have sex with a woman. Never.

All the symptoms and illnesses flooded over him. He felt hot all over, but his hands were numb and cold. His veins were a wrathful purple with adrenaline. Nausea, blinding headache, fermenting stomach, burning soul, sore joints. He would have thrown up right then and there in the courtroom if anything were being expunged through his system. He hunched over so he could touch his face, and he almost wept. He smudged the heel of his palm into his eye so that the eyeball receded into its socket, then circled it with his palm to cure it. His throat was giving him problems and millions of itty-bitty knives were in his lungs. He felt like he'd been bitten by a snake.

Natalya may or may not have noted his calamity, but her affairs were clear in that she could not stop in the middle of this mind-fuck. She wasn't touching herself or closing her eyes in a sensual way, but it was all in her facial expressions, now more serious and erotically warped.

Cowell was dangling by a thread, in jeopardy of being consumed from the inside out by negative energy. He clenched his fists. He cried out to God. He begged for forgiveness.

Then he heard his name. He somersaulted out of his cheap prayer and saw the one who must have been his court-appointed attorney wading toward him as the judge spoke in seemingly another language. He heard something about extradition or excommunication or expulsion or whatever the hell it was. And then he started to float above himself, watching his puny body now with the bird's-eye view. Did they see into his heart, his new heart, to know that he was a changed man? Would they have mercy? *Why should* they have mercy? How about leniency? How about they just say fuck it and put a Chinese bullet in his head and send a ninety-nine-cent bill to the next of kin?

Zip and it was over. Like the unannounced culmination of a dream, he suddenly found himself inside his body with the first-person perspective and passively observed his distant feet shuffle out of the courtroom in line with the other inmates.

“I love you!” It was a voice that desperately wanted to bounce and emanate the proper emotion, yet it failed to.

Cowell turned to see Natalya’s flowing hair just as both their respective chain trains disappeared into separate hallways.

* * * *

The metal left bracelets of pink ligatures on his wrists and ankles, in addition to the pineapple loop phonelining his ribcage. He came back to his cell to learn that Baby Face had been Fed-Exed to state prison, but not before considerably leaving one of his poems on Cowell’s bunk:

“The Death of a God to Fatheaded Hog”

By Mikey Brenneron

Knock knock
Who’s there?
The church
The church of whom?
The church of Jesus Christ

I don’t want to talk to you today
Your voice is like a check engine light that won’t go away
I said fuck off because I’m not in the mood
That stupid book is poison and not food

God hates the evil in me
Theme dogs live in heat
Hedonist ogre
There is no God
Priests rape kids
Kissed a stripper
The death of a god
To fatheaded hog

They say that I can lift the mountains
And they say I can do the runway strut in water fountains
But I can't even do the slightest thing to a mound
And when I put my firstborn's feet on the water he drowned

Eleven plus two
Twelve plus one
Thirteen is good luck
To the ungodlier sick
Listen
Silent
It's all the same
Stealth is lame

Knock knock
Who's there?
The church
The church of whom?
The church of Satan

Not beautiful, not totally fucked up; not poetry, not drivel. Cowell had read some of Baby Face's other blasphemous work and it seemed as though this one was the voice of a dead man, like Baby Face was so tired of arguing with God that he just stopped caring, like he was able to be exactly this hideous to God in his natural state and that such filth is not at all contrived in a being such as himself. It pained Cowell to see Baby Face's defeat in his poetry, and he wanted to just read one more God-defiant poem to make sure that everything will be alright. But this will be the last of those poems. And everything will not be alright. It reminded Cowell of the decades of loneliness awaiting himself, among other things. Baby Face was gone forever, never to be seen again, all the time spent with him in vain now. And Cowell was a stranger of this land, cursed to bask in his own solitude for all eternity. Now and for the rest of his life, he will have to wake up every day and decide whether or not he wants to live. What the fuck's the point?

If a shark stops swimming, its gills will pucker.

And Cowell wanted to stop swimming and just let the current carry him away. There was no doubt about it. He knew it was in his power to let go. He was strong enough to make the choice that required action.

“Nelson.”

Who was this disrupting him now? He turned around slowly, hoping that nobody was actually there. But, sure enough, through his cell door he saw Chris, the White trustee, shirtless and shoeless. He had a stern face, two stacks of bricks in his gut and a mop.

“You go to court today?”

“Yes,” Cowell avowed softly.

“Let me see your paperwork.”

Cowell pulled a wad out of his pocket, corrected it and fed it through the door by means of the threshold. Chris read it over like a man who wanted to buy a car and then, very subtly, flinched as though the car were ridiculously overpriced.

“Oh shit,” he said under his breath. He gave the papers back to Cowell. “Just had to check. I can’t have no rats in my car.” He knuckled on the door’s window twice to communicate respect. “Good luck,” he belabored, and went back to his grunt work.

Cowell needed to keep a leash on his depression, so he moved slowly so as to keep himself occupied for an extended period of time. Slowly he took his lumpy mattress and put it on the bottom bunk. Slowly he shaved his face against the grain. Slowly he brushed his teeth and savored a cup of tap water. And then there was nothing left. He lay on his bunk and stared at the one above him. Various scribbles and calendar marks. Some time passed. Another nightmare haunted him, and he woke up to jail again. There is no rest for the caged souls. He could’ve gone mad then, but suddenly and without warning the powers that be granted recess from the cells.

He decided to take a shower—another thing to do. Even the cold water will be warmer than his body. Oh, but somebody else is in there, probably jerking off. And there’s a big huge line as designated by the arranged toiletry items next to the shower wall. Does everybody have to run and line up for the shower like kids? Why can’t anybody in this fucking place be mature? The other shower is free—ah, but that’s the *Black* shower. Can’t use that one, else it would be the end of the fucking world. Oh look, Mr. Jackoff is done now. Have a good time at Disneyland, pervert? Whatever. Fuck the other people in line. Just leave the shoes on and jump in.

The weak bead of water penciled over Cowell’s back and he instantly felt better, but only in a physical sense. He looked down at his naked body and saw that

he was alone. Water dripping down, and nobody sees it but him. The taste of undercooked hot dogs harbored in his mouth, and he was the only one who could taste what he was tasting. And he was the only one in here who wasn't yet acclimated to the general smell of this place.

In and out, in and out.

Scraping layers of dirt from under the shelves of his fingernails, he contemplated suicide. *Is* suicide an option? Yes, because failure is an option. And anybody who calls suicide the easy way out is a goddam idiot because there is nothing *easy* about taking your own life.

Cowell was thinking too much now, and it was killing him. But really, what is there to do besides think? Is it true that life, just bare life, is miserable? Are we only happy because of distractions? Because if we don't need distractions, then why can't we be happy when we're in the most fucked of all situations? What have they taken from prisoners that they cannot be happy? Do they not live up in their heads, their little control centers where all external data is processed and where memories of the yesteryear are rerun for enjoyment? And even if there are no good memories or sources of pleasurable input, cannot one merely entertain one's self with complex thought? Because if we're just looking at all the pretty colors for our temporary amusement in this great big white world, then what *is* happiness?

Cowell accepted some of the shower water into his mouth, swished and spat. He could get the blade out of his shaving razor. He'd met many with scars on their wrists, and he knew he had to go longwise to do it right. Or he could hang himself. He could use that blade to cut up his sheets and make some line. So many choices...

In and out, in and out.

He dried off and joined his comrades, now having more pubic hairs attached to his body than before he'd gotten into the shower.

"What's wrong, Nelson?" Matt asked with concern. "You look like...I don't know, you look like shit."

Cowell was not up to answering, but he mumbled a response so he wouldn't look like he was ignoring him.

"Come on, homie, lighten up. Okay, listen to this: What do you call a Mexican on a John Deere?"

Cowell stared down blankly at the table.

"...A *white-collar* Mexican!"

Nothing.

“Okay, alright, how about this one: If the God of the Bible is so rich, why doesn’t He lavish us with all kinds of gifts and stuff?...Because He’s a *Jewish* God!”

Still nothing.

“Hey, cheer up, Nelson. You got ten fingers and toes, you’re breathing, you’re white—what more could you ask for? Tell ya what. Let’s play some war. Do you like war?”

“Sure,” Cowell bleeped.

“Great.” Matt turned to Sebastian. “Hey Sebastian, you going to use those cards?”

“I’m going to kill myself.”

Matt took the deck and discarded the jokers. “Don’t listen to him. He’s just kidding. Don’t trip, Nelson. Everything’s gonna be cool. It’s all good.” He started to deal the cards but then suddenly and seemingly at random halted right in the middle of it, his jaw dropping in shock and his immutable pupils eclipsing in rage.

Cowell lent a curious eye to see what had stolen Matt’s attention and beheld Jesus graciously receiving a Black’s sabotaging offer of a pear—fruit more forbidden than that of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Politics. The matter had to be discussed even though the young man’s fate was already determined, and Cowell couldn’t believe his eyes when he saw Brother Oliver involved in the conference. And Brother Oliver was not trying to reason with them so as to mitigate the miniscule issue without the use of violence—no, he was *involved* in the conference. This just couldn’t be. And then Cowell realized that this was no miniscule issue. His last assembly of hopeful assumptions degraded as he gauged Brother Oliver’s demeanor—his leaning against the wall like a mercenary, his massive arms folded like a hit man, his forehead crouching as if he personally were offended. Brother Oliver nodded a few times and grumbled some curt words. Ten seconds later the powwow disbanded.

Jesus was just a kid, but he was also a man just like them; and so, for his unpardonable greed, Jesus was ambushed by Brother Oliver. Amazingly, this combustible situation was swept under the rug so discreetly that Cowell could not hear it from ten yards away despite the fact that he had been listening for it. He couldn’t hear it, but he knew damn well that it had happened.

The car-collision surprise of this incident rampaged through Cowell’s mind. For how could Brother Oliver—a saint, a man of God—do something like that? Cowell was under the impression that a disciple of Christ would die before volunteering to dishonor the Lord or any of His pillar statutes. Aren’t Christians

commanded to be a light to the dark world? And why would or even *how could* a holy God allow such debauchery? How can this be? Does God really exist? Is anybody out there?

Well, there has to be a God, for we are here. *We* exist. Causality requires that we had a beginning. At some point, if you go back far enough, there had to be a starting point—a book is on a shelf because someone ultimately put it there, and the universe is here because someone put *it* here (if “here” could be used to define the location of an all-inclusive universe). In that conversation that Cowell had had with Baby Face he was so close. What was it, now? What was it? Space-time had to be created—no...space can create itself, but the *concept* of space-time still had to be created or else space couldn't exist, because there is no natural agent to create the concept of space-time. And that is exactly what those crazy Christians say. Yes, yes, YES. If this is true, if philosophy has become enlightened of such high things, then philosophy can effectively kill God because of a byproduct of this particular fact. Cowell saw it right in front of himself now, right there for the taking, the finishing blow to finally disprove the existence of our maker. Time to cut off God's arms and legs and see if He'll fit in our little box. But Cowell needed to see it on paper first. Hard copy. Facts. Bible. Where's a Bible?

There on the hypocritical Christian table that doesn't allow Blacks. One of those little miniature New Testament Bibles with the Psalms and the Proverbs. Cowell brushed through Paul's writings, layer upon layer of bullshit and lies; and there, exposed and brazen as a nude model, was the demise of the logic of the Bible. Ha, the last few verses of the eighth chapter of the Epistle to the Romans states in context that spatial dimension is a created thing.

Once again, in order for something to, as they say, be on the dinner table, someone had to put it there—meaning that if something or the concept of something exists, then someone had to create it; else it created itself, which cannot be so, as it would make any case for God moot because things or concepts of things would be capable of creating themselves. Yes, it has long been contended that God created all things—this entails physical matter, the concept of a space-time continuum of course, the digital entity of a mathematical lexis, our souls and our free will. And this here is the kicker: He also therefore had to create the very concept of a choice of a thing, that is to say, any novel written was already in a conceptual existence before it was written; otherwise the writer could not conceive of writing it, let alone *choose* to write it. There are many choices we may make at any time, not an infinite amount but many nonetheless, and so, for this specific explanation, we shall simplify things by reducing it to A and B. Input: choose A or B. Free will. If A or B is a choice to a man, then the concept of A or B already

exists. If it exists, then it was created. Honestly, do you think we humans could think a thought before God had already thought it? Before anything and everything was ever seen or heard or done, God knew of it; and if He knew of it, then it existed; and if it existed, then He created it. Hence God created the concept of sin and watched our free will choose it as an inevitable eventuality, waiting there in the long haul with nothing better to do and not planning on taking any action whatsoever until Adam botched it, prepared to go the distance into the deep future when the universe runs cold and isolated and all the friction in the cosmos has bled out its colors, just waiting for Adam to bite into that moist, crunchy apple, waiting outside of time and knowing full well that any event that can happen *must* happen in time. Adam had no chance and probably no choice either. God knew that Adam would fall and He knew of all the wicked abominations that man would commit on man before He'd ever created man—to tell the truth, He not only knew of it but He was also responsible for it. The thought of a baby's insides being hollowed out for drug smuggling, the thought of a father beating off on a child's face just to break the kid in and fuck him up for life and the thought of God "reluctantly" tossing His fuckups into the eternally hungry lake of fire and brimstone was created by a holy and just God, and this cannot be. $1=0$ /error. It is quite simply impossible for the holy God of the Bible to even exist, that is, He obviously exists in concept since we can think Him up, but He does not and cannot exist in any material sense since His existence is founded upon fundamental contradictions. And supposing that this holy God did exist, then it would only follow that His corrupted holiness would oblige the people to pronounce the judgment of guilty upon Him this very day and banish Him to His own hell. And so this is now what we know: either the God of the Bible is completely fictitious or He lied about Himself in order to make Himself appear as holy; so if this unholy God is real, all we can do is hope and pray that such a depraved and sadistic God does not actually have absolute power like He claims to have in that book.

At that moment, Cowell realized the truth. There's a mathematically reinforced science set against this theology: the same mathematics that gives us cell phones tells us that a null set may be twisted into a finite number, and a finite into an infinite. This means that it was possible, however unlikely, for the universe (and consequently the elusive concept of space-time) to have created itself accidentally from nothing; causality, it seems, is just another one of those man-made theories. Now this is extremely significant: while it does not prove that any kind of a god or higher power does not exist, it does prove that such a being does not *have to* exist. Therefore by Occam's razor there is no God.

This may not be what Cowell wanted to hear, but it's the truth. There is no one overseeing mankind. Nothingness, all nothingness. He began to ask himself what he knew, what he really *knew*, and he could only find one conclusion: there are absolutes. For if there are absolutes, then there are absolutes; and if there are no absolutes, then that statement in and of itself is an absolute which proves that there are absolutes. So then let this be Axiom Number One: there are absolutes. Something is either true or it is false, and it cannot be anywhere in between. And it should be clear now, given what he had seen, that the existence of this thing we call God is certainly not an absolute. For if God is fallible, if God is not capable of preserving His Bible, if God is limited in power, then He is not God. He is mortal like us all, and if He is executed on a cross then He will stay dead. We do not have God, and He will never be there for us. The self is the only thing that any of us will ever have.

While Cowell understood this fact that the face in the mirror is the only one who will ever be there for himself, he also knew that most members of society would never grasp this concept. He looked at the mini society here in jail, seeing that it is all about the community and not the one, seeing also in the real world that self-reliance is not particularly what the rulers of society would want us to think about (and you can't really blame them either, since society is better off this way). And in order to get the people to take their eyes off of themselves, you need something as grand and misleading as religion. The Bible was not meant to be read by the intellectual individual but rather to be fed intravenously to the communal hopeless. For a nation at war, for the front-liners with fate so bleak that the only hope is hope itself, there is room for the Bible. Necessity is the mother of invention, and in times of warfare it is necessary that the pawns do not fear death or that they should even embrace it.

Religion is the opiate of the masses.

—Karl Marx

Suddenly Cowell felt more alive, like a heavy yoke had been lifted from his shoulders, something shedding off of him and falling up; perhaps like a wraith raven, eating its way to the surface and burrowing out of his flesh, maybe dissolving into the air as it flies away, a momentary transcending of the physical. His pain, his guilt, his sorrow—it was all torn down, stripped away, and the only thing left was hatred. Now—hungry, cold, tired, depressed and incarcerated—he finally got it. Chaos reigns supreme. Entropy is god. The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to men of under-

standing, nor favor to men of skill; but time and chance happen to them all. Indeed, it does rain on the just and the unjust alike, and it is possible to override karma. He doesn't have to put up with this damp existence. He can have his own agenda, and there is no God or benevolent force that will stop him.

The frostbite came back to Cowell's heart. The lamp in his eye flickered away. His sinister brows returned to their natural place. His breathing patterns changed. His hands teacupped out. He was born again, baptized by the holy evil.

Fuck the world. He wasn't sorry. He didn't owe anybody a goddam thing.

CHAPTER 19



FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 18

The more things change, the more they stay the same.

He understood now more than ever the why. Why the killing, why the cannibalism. It was simple to him, now that he was able to view things as neither right nor wrong. So then why, you ask? Well, if you must know, it is nothing more than the inherent desire to do that which is not natural. For why do we love to swim when we humans are not meant for the water? Or why do we love to fly when we are not meant for the air? Humanity (and all life to a certain degree) is a never-ending feud against equilibrium. It is the ceaseless battle within ourselves that compels us to go beyond. Beyond what? Certainly not beyond what we can see or covet. No, we are simply driven to go beyond where we are right now; it is not circumstance but *disposition* that dictates our mood. For the cycle of problem and solution is not a circle—instead, it is an Archimedean spiral. It is an internal force that screwballs us from the opening of the womb until the closing of the tomb, and it is why we have come so far.

Most men appease this natural urge to do the unnatural by subverting women with non-procreative sodomy. But some prefer rape to that. And still others prefer to divvy up their fellow man for lunch. Nothing is more forbidden than the latter, and the experience is therefore transcendent, even godlike. It's as if the meat is assimilated into your body the instant you put it in your mouth, the red things melting into the red inside you, the mutton dissolving and solidifying again in your body like a collective mass of red-hot metal, the fissures of your

muscles opening up to welcome the new integration and then swallowing them up forever, a system of amalgamation. You can feel it absorbing to every twine of your person with perfect distribution. You can feel it burning as the most efficient fuel that could possibly exist. You can feel it levitating your coordination, galvanizing the neurons in your brain, kickstanding your eyelids, reddening your blood, deepening your lungs, pinpointing your fingers, bulking your arms, electrifying your legs. It gives you wings. Take, eat, become God. Human meat is no treat; it is Mother Earth's milk.

Cowell longed for it. His evil (as "evil" is casually defined) had been fully restored to him, that part was clear. He'd been reset, pulled up by the roots. He wanted the things of old again, wanted to relive the you-know-what memories because those are the memories that will be there till he dies. But there was something that had to be done before he could have this, and so now there was but one word on his mind: escape. Escape. He would escape, or he would die trying.

He refused to believe that this should be a pipe dream. Nothing is impossible. But of course, that's easier said than done. No matter how much the hatred inside him lifted him up, he was still bogged and swamped with the burden of reality. He knew that the reality of it all just kept saying that he, in all probability, will die in this place. And he remembered that time from many years ago when he was in the car on the train tracks, indeed the single most hopeless moment of his life, the intense feeling of anguish in his bowels that was so bad that it had probably shaved off five years of his life. He remembered feeling like he was a boxer who was down for the count, head swirling, puke brewing down inside; and he could recall to mind the very peculiar fact that it was at *that* moment, when he had suddenly felt like he had absolutely nothing at all, that there rose a voice inside him, a voice quiet but furious, saying, "Fight! Fight!" He knew that it was not necessarily absolute despair that brought about revolution but instead the sense of loss. Envy for what one once had had. He had lost the will to live back in that car, but the natural order of things restored it to him. And now as he sat here in this hellhole, his future a big locked gate, there grew inside him once more the lust for what once was. Again in the midst of sorrow and defeat there rose inside him the voice of revolution, the voice of a thing that remembers what it once had had. There is no doubt: even if it is pathetic, he will attempt.

He had no viable access to metal and the window in his cell was only big enough for him to fit a fist through—*if* he could somehow breach it without the use of any tool whatsoever. The dayroom was also an elaborate dead end, so he would need to travel through the hallways of the maximum-security jail. But that idea was ludicrous, for the ratio of deputies to inmates would be staggering there.

He was totally trapped. He looked at his cell, saw how it was constructed, and realized that the fuckers had thought of everything.

Thinking about the edifice of the jail will get him nowhere. For if any facility can be breached, then one need not focus on the facility's weaknesses but rather on one's own weaknesses. No one could help him on this. Cowell needed to approach this all by himself. He dug deep into the library in his head, into all the knowledge that he had illegally downloaded from the world, into all his life's input, and realized that it couldn't help him either. He had difficulty going back in time, and the fresh events were all that were left in the itchy straitjacket that he called a brain. He looked it over and over, these last few days. There was the trip to court. And there was Baby Face. And that was it. He simply could not think about anything right now, his paranoia and fear of life imprisonment suffocating him, and so he did the best he could to grasp the thought of Baby Face and not let go and hope it could take him somewhere. He reflected on some of the things that the wise one had said and realized that Baby Face was right, was right the whole time. It's all about the positioning, like in chemistry: two elements need the right shape and positioning to balance the charges in a molecule, lest the structure collapse. Cowell knew about nuclear fusion in stars and how two hydrogen protons will take eons to collide and make a deuterium isotope even though two tritium isotopes will only need seconds to bump and make an alpha particle. He wrestled with the puzzle of positioning for hours, and the time flew by since he wasn't counting the minutes. Breakfast and lunch were almost adjacent to one another.

Writing down equations now and finding the patterns of mathematics, looking at the walls and finding the same patterns, picturing in his mind a man and the same patterns. Then he understood: circle. Man, circle. Can man use the tool known as mathematics to defeat the circle? If something is inside a circle, and the circle cannot be destroyed or ruptured, then the only way out of the circle is the transcending of spatial dimension. So then, is the circle a construct of mathematics, or did the circle come first, or are they forever one and the same?

Cowell fashioned a Möbius strip—a ring of paper appropriately twisted so that it has only one side (he held the two connecting ends together with saliva). With not a small amount of difficulty due to the solitary bend in the ring, he drew a line across the length of the entire paper—what would have been both sides if it were still a rectangular shape—and he saw the line come back on itself. Back on itself, back on itself and covering both sides of an ordinary piece of paper without picking up his pencil, perfectly unicursal even without any form of symmetry or order whatsoever. He poked a hole and wondered to where it would

lead, since the loop by definition had to have only one side. He tried to picture it in three dimensions so that he could see all of it simultaneously. He pondered everything imaginable about that goddam Möbius strip. It was the abstract mathematics behind the science of his escape. It was his one shot. Figure it out. The loophole had to work. It had to. If it failed, he will fail.

It failed.

Cowell shuddered his eyes and thought of all the prison–escape stories he knew. Could he use *The Count of Monte Cristo*? No, they don't throw dead people off cliffs here. How about *Natural Born Killers*? There was no way Cowell was getting his hands on a shotgun in this place. *The Shawshank Redemption*? Andy Dufresne spent two decades on that. No thanks. *Tango and Cash*? That movie was way off. They all were way off. None of these were going to work, for they all were written by people who themselves had never been imprisoned.

So then what about true stories? Ted Bundy through the library in real life. Twice. But Cowell's library was here in the jail. Won't work. There was *Midnight Express*, but did that help him? No, completely different circumstances. And then there was the escape from Alcatraz, but they probably died at sea.

And Cowell was dying too. He needed some kind of lifeline. Totally drowning, flailing for anything, *anything*. Any other fictional tales that could be of assistance? *Con Air*? Was there anyone else here in this tank who was going to be extradited? He didn't know, but it didn't matter because the mandatory supplies were inaccessible. What else? *Papillon*? Not much different from Billy Hayes' novel. Fuck. Okay, okay. Think...novels do sometimes get it right...*The Silence of the Lambs*? Yes, holy shit that's it! *The Silence of the Lambs*! Okay, what exactly did Dr. Lecter do? Smuggled in that pen tube and mastered the cuffs. Cowell wasn't crafty enough to MacGyver a pen tube, but he could sure as hell make do with a key. A key...

His blood temperature dropped ten degrees. Was it still there? By God, WAS IT STILL THERE?

Cowell quicksilvered his tongue back and felt the fraying filament like a lasso on his molar. Eureka. Okay, the tricky part now was just to grasp the thread with his blunt fingertips. One shot, here we go. Cautiously he slid the string off its base and extracted it as if up an elicitation well and it was working and he was doing it, the whole time being able to feel it gliding up his throat and then onto his tongue, a totally indescribable feeling. And it was there now, inside, in his mouth. The key to freedom, freedom on the tip of his tongue. It had somehow survived for four days.

He unbuttoned his jumpsuit, pulled his penis out through the boxers and coiled the wet string around it, being sure to keep both ends of the handcuff key strapped down tightly on the bottom side of the shaft of the penis. The key will be completely out of sight and the string should be nearly invisible. He knew a little bit about cavity searches and the like, but there was nonetheless the element of doubt; just hope to God they don't inspect the recess between the scrotum and the penis if they do decide to perform a strip search.

And he knew what to do now. Chaos, panic, disorder, haste, mayhem, pandemonium—if he was going to slip through the cracks, then that was what he needed. Make a plan like Hannibal of *The A-Team*. See the plan clearly in the midst of the confusion. See the individual strokes in the painting. Know and understand that paper and pencil is extremely important for the manifestation of an idea, know and understand that simple symbols can be manipulated into something complex, but also know and understand that the greatest ideas in the world are useless without *action*. See it, see that physical interaction in the world, guided by intellectual insight, can achieve anything. See that—

Pop.

What was that? It was his cell door. A new cellmate? Yes. He looked out the window and saw someone fumbling around with a box and a mattress over yonder in the sally port. The pod deputy had opened the cell door prematurely like they always do.

Although Cowell had been abruptly disembodied from his concentration, he was mindful of hiding all of his papers and making sure that the crotch of his jumpsuit looked normal.

The new cellmate came in and Cowell assisted him with his luggage. “Fuck, I *cannot* believe I’m back already,” the man shouted. He locked his hands on the back of his head and then missiled them forward. “Fuck!” The man paced to and fro in the cell, dragging his white knuckles on the wall in alternation. “Fucking Clive. It’s *his* fault.” He stopped his ravenous tirade and looked at Cowell contritely. “Sorry about that.” He stuck out an empty palm and Cowell shook it. “I’m Alexis,” he cheered, trying to kindle a friendly conversation, “but I go by Ghetto Wood.”

“Nelson.”

Ghetto Wood was a balding man with no frontal incisors and a chipped second incisor who refused to look his age in the eye. He had a blurry six pack and spherical mountains for biceps, this not jiving with his chicken legs. Overall, though, he looked pretty tasty if you’d be willing to devote enough chewing.

“What they got you for, Nelson?” he inquired.

“Murder,” Cowell confessed, keeping a poker face.

“Oh shit,” he grumbled magnanimously, instantly wanting to change the subject. “They got *me* for sodomy of a pit bull with a poodle prior.” Cowell was not amused. “No, I’m just fucking with you. They got me for GTA, but my real problem is the parole violation.”

“What do you think you’ll get?”

“As a matter of fact,” he proclaimed profoundly, as if he’d generated the phrase himself, “I think I could get sixteen months.”

“Okay. Good luck,” Cowell empathized.

Ghetto Wood broke some teeth off a comb and used them as fillers for the piercings in his face. “Well, could you do me a favor?” He grimaced as he dilated a hole in his ear. “Wake me up when dinner’s here, please.” He hopped onto his bunk and began to set his bed in order.

“Oh, absolutely,” Cowell agreed.

Ghetto Wood finished making his bed and then remembered that he needed to bring the blanket back out of its press so he could get under it. And Cowell just lay there on his bunk in silence. Ghetto Wood couldn’t sleep, and so he just pretended to sleep; and Cowell could tell he wasn’t asleep because of his breathing. Every moment was an eternity for Cowell now. He tented his knees and became a monument, cranking away like a computer in his head. How exactly should he go about this escape? He considered consulting Ghetto Wood, but Ghetto Wood will be out in a year and wouldn’t even think about participating in an escape attempt. So Cowell just continued to work out his plan without anyone’s help, alone evermore, visualizing exactly what to do, repeatedly rehearsing every conceivable scenario.

In and out, in and out.

Should he succeed, he is to be a fugitive of the United States’ government until death or recapture (probably the former no matter what if he had any say in it). Escaping incarceration only to be outcarcerated, living in constant paranoia and never really being *free*. Be that as it may, he’d always been prepared for this day with a surplus of cash and equipment under false names in cities across the continental U.S.; he was dumbfounded at the fact that he had forgotten. He remembered *Fight Club*, and he almost felt like one of his alternate personalities had dipped him into a place so deep underground that only one of his other personalities could rescue him. He was prepared for any stupid actions he might take; and no matter what he might do, he could still wake up the next day and find a letter in his back pocket containing instructions on how to fix it. In a way it had happened like that, like he, collectively, was in control. This in here—this

jail cell—was his presentation for himself, a mere dream as a requisite for his interaction with the real world. There was his good self that would create a fool-proof system, and there was his bad self that would continually seek a way to penetrate it. Checks and balances: we are naturally inclined to struggle with ourselves in order to prevent the hazardous acquisition of absolute power, and many times our bad selves overcome our good selves. Indeed, this is the most natural and likely result of a powerful being.

But it is possible to avert self-destruction.

Cowell looked down at the freeways in his hands and saw clearly the purpose of his life, saw his birth together with his end, saw that flesh cannot be right or wrong but only the mind, saw that the mind is only a computer chip that reacts electrically to stimuli and random-access memory. He saw that if he pushed someone off a bridge when no one was around to hear it, it couldn't be called "wrong" since sight and sound and judgment is contained wholly within the observer, and that if sensory information is contained exclusively within the observer then multiple outcomes occur simultaneously if there is no objective observer present; and he saw that a man who couldn't help himself but to pick up prostitutes and strangle them when he's thinking of his mother while excited is not evil if that is normal behavior for him—if his thoughts are pure and these actions require no trigger. Yes, the answers came to him now so quickly and he understood all things before he even knew he understood all things, his brain computing so fast that his mind had to slow down and think about it before anything could be comprehended. Cowell closed his eyes and thought about what was outside these walls, his hands hovering over his poised lap like a metal detector over sand, palms floating like a music director's wand, in and out and in and out, pure silence now, mind and body and clothes all one. He saw himself years ago, *evil* he's in the back *evil* he's got the knife *evil* he's thinking about it *evil* he sees Mario *it's evil* he puts the knife to the throat *it's evil it's* pulls the handle and hears the snap *it's evil it's* and Mario is a dead man, dead, eyes closed, innocent *it's good*. And he knew then that there is only one evil, and that is for a thing to strive against its nature. He remembered that first time, when he transcended to a new nature—his only evil act—and saw that it was only evil while he planned it and no longer evil when the deed was done. Evil is sublime, unattainable to any living thing. Go ahead and try—you'll never get there. Suffice it to say that the activation energy of evil is infinity, that is, evil is a match that cannot be struck. Cowell looked back at that day again and remembered to himself what he had learned. And through this perspective he not only knew all but he *understood* all. He had no piece of knowledge that was foreign or complicated to him. He knew and

understood that death will take him one day, knew and understood why sex and killing thrilled him and knew and understood that his irreducible complexity was nothing but the chestnut core of his brain.

Cowell achieved nirvana and found himself.

Dinner was announced an indeterminate amount of time later. He prodded his cellmate who was already awake and then went outside, adrenaline flushing to the tip of every capillary in his plumbing. Sweating unreasonably, Cowell took his place among the convicts and stared at the goop before him. They say it takes the better part of a decade to purge everything out through cellular multiplication, that is, until the body is completely renewed with respect to every cell. Ten years before he would be ridden of all this jail food.

In and out, in and out.

He waited with grasshopper patience until everyone was settled in, nice and unsuspecting. Then he casually arose, went to the off-limits territory, confronted a Black and said, "Malcolm X is dead." When the confused man stood up to face his ambassador, Cowell grabbed the back of the furry head and smashed that face into a stumpy kneecap, definitely breaking something on the poor guy. It was a pure, square shot: Cowell didn't even feel it. Right on the sweet spot. He bounced off Cowell's knee like a repelling magnet and flew two feet into the air.

As a result of his audacious behavior, Cowell found himself to be instantaneously on the front lines; this was expedient, however, as his sole objective was to accumulate enough injuries so as to require immediate medical attention. And Cowell had a knack for getting what he wanted. Though the Blacks were ruthlessly outnumbered, they compensated with outrageous tenacity. But outnumbered or not, they had Cowell surrounded for the moment. He curled into the fetal position, protecting only his face and manhood as they swarmed him with bashings of trays and fists and feet and knees. It hurt all over his body in concentrated pockets of pain like a gigantic spasm.

Then the flurry subsided as the other Whites rushed in. The tempest of shouting and screaming and yelping reached a steady crescendo and hovered there, unwavering like a candle flame. When Cowell tried to get up again and rejoin the mash pit, he discovered at least one of his ribs to be broken. And so while he could only wallow in the mire of his own blood, he confirmed that his groin—and the key—were still in place and that none of his cooked teeth were wobbly.

After an exaggerated five minutes the deputies finally shoved in to break up the fight, dressed in SWAT uniforms. The first wave advanced with enormous transparent shields and the second took their positions, armed with tear-gas cannons and rubber-bullet rifles. One of them even had a camera. But all the fancy

equipment was just an intimidating bluff and they balked with it, for the spirit of the riot had died at the first sight of the army. And so now it was—bloody, battered and bruised, both friend and foe stood breathless, waiting for the pod gods to direct the moves like they do for every other aspect of their institutionalized lives.

Naturally, the races were segregated in transit to the hospital. The vans were a blank television—black with barred one-way windows and a screen separating the cockpit from the cargo seats. There was a maximum capacity of six inmates, and it was necessary for those inmates to be shackled into triplets due to the orientation of the bench seats. From where he was seated, Cowell could see that the vans with the other wounded inmates had already left. His party had been negligibly delayed back in the jail—this was fundamental in his escape plan, and, in order to achieve this delay, he prolonged the pre-departure process by benignly playing dumb when they tried to shackle him up. It was very amazing to him that it was so easy to manipulate the deputies.

Two armed deputies sprang into the front and unveiled some song on the burping radio that Cowell didn't recognize. The accompanying inmates in the van were steaming at Cowell, giving him the you're-dead-as-soon-as-we-get-back look: though they had to back him up in battle, much physical pain would be required of him for his recklessness. But he had to look past that. As the van took off, Cowell quickly studied them to ascertain as to whether they would likely have incentive to break out with him. Jesus was in the back: his lumps were conveniently assumed to have been acquired in the riot. Brother Oliver was next to him, and by him Vladimir. In the middle bench seat, Cowell was on the end by the door, directly ahead of Vladimir. At the other end was Pusher, his wounds present but camouflaged in his collage of body graphics. Between them was the skinhead Matt, who had a purple raspberry pooling in his eye and a crooked nose with cotton stuffing up the bottom like gauze on a broken limb. He was down for the cause. Cowell didn't know anything about Jesus's or Brother Oliver's cases, but he knew that three in that van, including himself, were looking at life imprisonment and that cars will be flying before Matt will get out.

They will most likely cooperate.

Cowell returned Matt's and Pusher's spiteful glares with his finger to his lips for the universal sign to remain silent. Then, with their undivided attention, he unbuttoned his jumpsuit and pulled out the key. O how beautiful was that key! Cowell could sense their antennae perking up as if he'd told them the location of the fountain of youth, like he was now their savior and they his sheep, ever attentive now to anything that he might say or do.

Cowell slid into a trance that stifled his emotions, just letting the mysticism take him places. He stared at the handcuff's keyhole that looked like the manly symbol for Mars, at the strength-guaranteeing Peerless logo, at the teeth overbiting out from the slack in the handcuff ring. He saw the thing as a whole, a mechanism with moving parts, and he realized that it was going to work. He was going to do it. He was going to escape.

By now the other two were glaring at him with rapt impatience, having completely forgotten the odium from a moment ago. Cowell unlocked his own four cuffs but left them draped on his hands and feet so that the deputies would only notice it if they were looking for it. He passed the key on with a slothful craning of his arm between carefully pinched fingers as if it were a joint and the other two did as he had done, being sure to be spotted by neither the people in the front nor back. The conspirators had no need of an intricate plan, for they were all uniformly motivated. Just waiting and thinking.

In and out, in and out.

Until now, Cowell had never been able to fully interact with a crime scene, to completely soak himself in it. But, at long last, the gloves were off. Now he could bite someone with his own teeth and feel the blood carelessly curling down his chin like foamy beer, could feel that blood drying and cooling all over his mouth and cheeks like child-applied lipstick, could go inside and binge like a fat man in a pie-eating contest. No more of this wake up and shit's missing. No more of this tedious wipe-up-the-blood clean-off-your-shoes bullshit. He was free to be barbaric and nasty now. He was free to indulge in his animalism.

They arrived at the hospital, an ugly brown building with a raggedy, cracky structure. Two old people were loitering out front. The other vans had arrived by now and they were already hollow. While it was tempting to just stare at the other two peaceful vehicles, Cowell needed to face reality. Prepare for it. Get ready. Focus.

In and out, in and out.

The two deputies stepped out and opened the sliding door. The inmates were tense. Though the wrist shackles and leg irons no longer threatened to hinder them, the chains about the belly still linked the three musketeers together. They sort of moved in one accord, but more like a wretched, limping science-fiction creature. And it all somehow happened so quickly too, that was the other thing. Hauling and bumping and stumbling they went, lurching forward, knees bent in a gnomish squat as they hunched in the van. The driver wasn't fast enough. Cowell unbuckled the strap on the holster and the gun was his, the shackles telling all and falling to his thighs like useless dust, the leg irons lying lifelessly on the floor

now like artifacts from an old western town long decayed. In one gesture he cleared the safety, snapped the bolt, brought it up to the driver's jaw like an uppercut and was sprayed with a dark, pulpy mist and a few chunks of pasty gray matter before he could feel the ejected round on his chest from the redundant loading of the chamber.

The other deputy was years older but without blemish on his face nor a single hard-day's work in his shampoo-smooth palms. And as those silky hands fumbled for the sidearm, Cowell freed himself with a blast to the chain. He kicked the debilitated driver to the ground, his legs constricting rearward and then launching back out again like a fast ripple in a wriggling caterpillar, one small step and he was on the earth, the weak padding of his shoes providing him with a barefoot sensation, a rugged man in a blood-stained orange jumpsuit with a gun a very unnatural thing, lanky black flames dancing in the pits of his eyes and a fresh hatred in his soul, rib pain not belittling his agility, his arms bracketed and his dormant breathing a radio static contained entirely in the link of his throat. This was it. The end was in sight. Level Eight *Mario Bros.*, no continues, no extra lives. He coiled the springs in his calves and crouched with a shallow hiss, eyeing the last line of defense. Let's duel. He shot the prissy deputy in the hand and missed his target, but was nonetheless victorious in snipping off the tip of the trigger finger. Then, as the pathetic weakling cradled his vulnerability, Cowell lunged at him, lunged at that swelling neck like the elegantly savage vampire he'd always wanted to be. Thrashing and flailing and gnashing and ripping, he tore out the Adam's apple and sucked out the juices. Fresh, gravity-defying blood strait from the jugular. What was that taste? Ah, yes. Like rusty metal. Like a tease of sugar glazing on day-old ravioli.

Cowell glanced at the driver to see that he was staring back at him—*staring back* at him. Completely conscious yet brain-dead, stroking the line with absolute genius, off now in his own little world. He'd done it. He had sailed off the edge of the world. He had touched an event horizon. He had found the point of no return. He now had the Knowledge.

Blood metallic an adulterous black oiling down his gnarling lips in the clear twilight, he went in for another sentimental bite.

He's back.

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