

THE DIABOLIC LABYRINTH

My Walk with Schizophrenia



By Cameron Carr

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Biography of the author

Cameron Carr was born in Elliot Lake, Ontario, Canada, in 1960. His early years were spent in Toronto Ontario. Here he excelled in his studies and athletics and was considered a normal and mostly happy child. His family moved to a small town when he was thirteen and life began to go downhill. He lost interest in school and sports, preferring only to spend his time playing music at which he became proficient. By the age of seventeen things were going drastically wrong for Cameron. At eighteen he was diagnosed as having schizophrenia.

After his diagnosis Cameron bounced around a fair bit, hitchhiking and taking buses from one town to another, finding it hard to settle down. He also found compliance with treatment very difficult during the early, post-diagnosis years. Medicines used to treat schizophrenia were different then from what they are today, with more pronounced effects and harsher side effects. This and a lack of acceptance of his diagnosis had Cameron un-medicated and ill for significant periods of time.

Around the age of twenty-seven Cameron finally accepted his sickness for what it was – something that he would have to make peace with. He has since stuck with treatment.

Cameron now works full time in a busy, fast food restaurant as a grill cook and assembler of food. In his spare time he writes, reads, plays music and works on visual art. He resides in Kingston Ontario with his wife Sue and their cat Buzz.

Chapter One

Where was the 'have-a-penny, leave-a-penny, need-a-penny, take-a-penny' box anyways?

"I'm sorry, everyone pays full price and in case you're curious, no credit."

"I'm not asking for credit, I'll come right back with what I owe you."

"That's a form of credit. If I give you credit..."

"I know, I know."

This was just too much; four cents short and she wouldn't budge. I just wanted to slink out the door with a pack of cigarettes in my shirt pocket, next to my heart. She could have had a laugh watching me try to leave the store unnoticed, a guilty recipient of credit. Instead, I left weedless and embarrassed. Alone with a keen longing for nicotine I went home to look under the couch cushions for a nickel.

Languor had always pointed the way to the nearest store as my source for tobacco. It was a handy shop that treated me shabbily. I swallowed my pride when I went there as they knew I'd lost my marbles and treated me in a way that was my apparent due. I wondered if she would have forgone the pennies if she thought I was sane.

In Bridgenorth, a town small enough to have only three stores, it's fair to say that everyone knew everyone else's business. It didn't matter what you were doing, buying smokes, booze or just passing the time, you could be victimized, gossip could smoulder long after you'd left wherever you'd been or whoever you'd been with. Rural insulation from the big, bad world could end up costing you your carefully cultivated reputation. A sign at the outskirts could have read: All Who Enter: Relinquish Privacy In Exchange For Bucolic Bliss. The brutality of it all was enough to drive a paranoiac like me to the outer limits of inappropriate behaviour.

I feared going on about the abuse that was directed my way whenever I attempted to buy cigarettes. I knew that idle words once spoken have their own life and can come back to haunt. But to be refused over four copper coins, an amount that no one would stoop to pick up off the ground? To hell with paranoia, my mind said she'd simply disrespected me.

I always wished she wasn't working, yet I became a piece of well-fried onion whenever I entered the store and saw her ringing up someone's milk or a chocolate bar for some guy whose pimply face made you scratch your head. I'd like to clue him in, but no one listened to me anymore.

The cashier had answered a longstanding question. Did I stand a chance? Would I get close enough to say, "What's that in your eye? Here, let me have a look." She knew I wanted to peek at her soul, to navigate from there until I knew her every move, what every glance or gesture meant. Now I knew what she thought. I was no different to her than others with pining hearts. To her I was the guy who was four cents short. Someone might say, "He's a few bricks short of a full load, or "That one's not playing with a full deck." The blonde-haired girl who deflected my crush while making change could knowingly reply, "He's four cents short of a full pack."

I walked home. Feeling miserable, I took a nickel from my mother's purse while our black cat looked on. I started back to get the cigarettes I needed. The couch hadn't yielded a penny. The way I saw it I had no option to petty thievery.

Why was everyone looking at me? I saw greyish shapes, men and women in the windows of houses, laughing and whispering to one another. A few windows looked empty. I believed the people who lived there were hiding. I didn't know why they avoided being seen but I knew it was spun from pure evil. In a state of alarm, I put my head down and walked on towards a cure for my nicotine fit.

The people who were gazing from their windows breathed, ate, drank fluids and needed sleep. I believed that our kinship ended there. They frightened me and that amused them. I had seen the satisfaction in the eyes of the townsfolk who witnessed me fidgeting, squirming and unable to maintain eye contact. I was wrapped up in fantasy; truth had bummed a ride out of town and I didn't realize it.

Simple things could intimidate me. Someone jingling their car keys, two or three having a conversation out of earshot, someone revving their engine; everything was filled with dark meaning. The way someone laughed tipped me off to impending danger. The colour of a woman's eyes, dog and car could tell me more about her private life than anyone would believe possible. But I believed. I knew I saw truth and wondered why I'd been given special sight that revealed so much while hurting my head. Life was full of significance. I couldn't focus on what was important as everything was vital. Common things, misinterpreted, would turn my cheeks red hot from shame and make my stomach twist in knots.

Finally I reached the store and purchased a pack of smokes. It was another night in what had become my existence. Life was different and less pleasing than it had been. It was now often a horrifying journey wherein I was missing the paraphernalia needed to fit the mold and be normal. I longed for my lost sense of well-being and belonging. I was becoming distressed; something bad was happening. I remembered when I'd been sane and compared it to the present and it seemed that life had dismissed me.

Hunched down against the side of the store I tried blowing smoke rings in the wind, knowing there was a trick to it. I knew I could do it and kept trying. A feeble attempt to squeal a set of tires stole some of my attention from idle frivolity. I imagined an old man with white knee socks getting out of a blue car.

But no, just when I was getting comfortable there was that beaten up brown Pinto, brimming over with red-eyed locals, higher than they had a right to be, dreaming of giant bags of Cheesies and buckets of Coke to subdue their unquenchable teenage appetites.

I got up and walked away, not being in the mood for their wholesomeness. Someone's words followed me. Spoken behind my back they caught up to me quickly. Talk is all business when its intent is to injure and its target wide open. I heard someone say, "What a freak." Then, he may have said, "Creep". I wasn't sure which was worse.

I filed it away as a putdown, but that's kind. It was a dagger plunging and twisting before I could brace myself. I would have liked to confront those kids but I knew that if I asked them what they'd said they would have lied, claimed they were just saying hello and then ask me how I was.

That I might be hallucinating because of a slowly ripening mental illness was an idea I didn't entertain. Schizophrenia was a word foreign to me. The frosty reality of my situation was that I was considered creepy, a distorted character in a Leave-it-to-Beaver village that was frigid towards anyone different. The cold village stance was too judgmental to consider mental illness as a possibility in my case. The local gossip painted me as weird. This caused me pain that contaminated everything I tried. Each putdown, real or imagined, hurt; I was crystal, waiting to be broken. On that punishing night I grew fearful and ran, making a beeline for the nearest field where I could sit and smoke cigarettes in peace.

Tobacco, a member in good standing of the nightshade family is toxic, as are many of its relatives. Still, its poison felt good mixing with my blood; I had developed a tolerance early in life. There was nothing like a strong smoke to calm me down.

As I sat and smoked the knowledge that I was half nuts frightened me. I was prey to repetitive thoughts of being on a friendless road that led to complete madness, of being forever and utterly crazy. Crazy is such a cruel, profane utterance.

I was a nervous wreck. Paranoid, anxious, suspicious, depressed – a regular teenager times one hundred. I was going crazy but was smart enough to realize that my time of normalcy was a small puddle quickly drying in the hot sun.

I was also a guy who loved a cashier. I suffered as Goethe's Werther, from unrequited love. The difference between Werther and me is that I lived and he didn't. The torment of love invested with no possibility of return was too much. He took his life. While sitting in the field, I looked inside where it was dark and knew there was no need for heroics. It was just another day. Still, I couldn't believe that there would ever be another blonde-haired cashier.

Though the blonde-haired girl was my answer to Charlie Brown's red-haired girl, I had feelings for others. My interest in the opposite sex was healthy. That seems to bear out the common belief that the male sex drive doesn't rely on logic.

My world was crumbling; I was having a psychotic breakdown complete with everything needed to fail properly - erosion in my ability to think logically, confidence shattered and lying at my feet, confusion and agitation eating me up. Still, I remained convinced that every time I left the house I would hit it off with a hot girl. It never happened. The more disturbed I became the less appealing I was. The girls weren't interested in someone who was unravelling. Who would bring someone home who was entering adulthood on the run from his shadow?

One of my prehistoric ancestors with whom I shared a prominent gene was probably driven from his cave and forced over a cliff for being different and unfruitful. I was aware I could meet the same fate. Metaphorically speaking, I could be pushed to the brink of a precipice. I only asked for the courage to jump before some jerk in a loincloth decided to give me a shove.

Of course, there was school to contend with. What can be said about high school, a world that seemed so immense but was the size of a pinhead in eternity? It taught things we had no use for and things we had no business knowing. Some maintain the only useful thing high school taught them was how to cheat. Nothing I learned there prepared me for mental illness.

I was a kid who was one in a hundred, because schizophrenia strikes one percent of the world's population. What should a well-meaning student do if a one-in-a-hundred is wandering the hallways and showing overt signs of psychosis? If you took your cue from my teachers,

you would turn your back and write on a blackboard. Admittedly, I didn't know what to do either - it wasn't on the curriculum. It was the one thing high school could have taught me about that would have been useful. I hadn't even learned to cheat well.

I knew I was in over my head. Sensing the horrid days and ghastly nights ahead, I quaked. Whatever was coming I had a feeling for. It was upwind and its stench warned me to tread carefully. A sense of impending doom and the understanding that my life would never right itself danced around me, two sprites lost in a hypnotic trance. My teachers ignored my budding schizophrenia. My parents weren't sure who the kid pretending to be me was but they didn't like him. In the future, there would be those who would try to convince me I was full of demons. I would wonder what possessed them.

When pseudo-reality visited and I could see through my growing psychosis, the knowledge that I may have a sick mind for good was too much. I would lose control. Sitting on my bed in my parent's house I would rock, cry and hold my head. I didn't have two personalities; schizophrenia isn't like that. My mind was a seesaw though – one minute convinced of the cruel intentions of others, the next questioning my convictions. This type of back and forth thinking was futile and exhausting, but I couldn't shake it.

I did have a friend from school, Joe, who could free me from this private, dull brand of self-abuse. I tormented myself quietly and harshly but I wasn't a slasher, didn't set myself on fire, burn myself with cigarettes, eat glass or swallow cleaning fluids. I was hampered by a marked thought disorder coupled with a persecution complex and this turned me against myself

“There's nothing sensational in that,” Joe would say, “you're like Napoleon. He was obsessed, but his fears were less imaginary than yours because he was a prick.”

But the other kids *were* laughing at me and putting me down. I'll take that with me to the grave. When you're given the nickname of “lunch bucket”, it all seems real. The humiliation I felt was painful. I'll never believe the disgrace that clung to me was imaginary.

When I was hanging around with Joe I was a bit in awe. He was accepting. Sometimes I thought he must be simple-minded, but his grades were high. Sitting with him in a field and drinking beer, he'd puzzle me. Sometimes he'd just drink and drink and not say more than two or three words. His quiet acceptance could annoy me. He looked right past the walking hullabaloo I'd become. He must have heard what the others said at school, though if he did, he never let on.

Lounging in a field putting back a few cold ones, the red sky on the horizon calling for darkness to come and shoulder its burden, there were times I saw what he wanted me to – a world without stigma, without one-upmanship. The world seemed to say that if you brought enough people down you could climb the pile and reach your dreams. When all was said and done, I knew that tall and lanky Joe didn't buy into that and I was grateful.

School finally came to an end. The final day arrived and asked me to quietly leave. I wanted it no other way. I walked through the gymnasium door on that day, leaving behind echoes of squeaking shoes and memories of being forced into square dancing with the girls' class. I avoided the graduates. My yearbook, unsigned, made a funny noise when it hit the bottom of the garbage can into which it dropped. It had been my third attempt at grade ten. I was fed up.

I'd finally made it through, lasting until the bitter end of the school year. All I had to show for it were four credits and a thought disorder.

The other kids my age, the healthy and happy ones who were graduating, were under the impression that the planet was a yo-yo tucked in their back pockets. The world was a ripe peach from a tree growing in the backyard, juicy, sweet, always within reach to nourish and satiate. I heard them everywhere, but I couldn't look back. It's been said that if you look back when you leave somewhere unkind you'll return there. In no time I'd be a small stick on the skyline, hardly moving and then gone.

As I left the institution I choked on resentment. Disappointment fueled the hatred I harboured towards everything. I was conscious of the contrast between my depression and the happiness on the faces of those passing in bright cars. Office buildings emanating industry and money also struck a foul chord. Intuition whispered: "You're too shattered to ever belong in a company that furnishes both a desk and responsibility." Where was I going to work? I thought that I might not work anywhere. I had no qualifications, not even a high school diploma.

On that June day I saw couples sitting on benches chatting or strolling contentedly in the warm, perfumed air. My envy was so fierce it stunned me. I was convinced that I would never be desirable. It was a small step from there to loathing those who seemed to take the give and take of love for granted. They didn't get it; none of them understood what it was like to have turned into a toad.

Chapter Two

Sometimes a buzz begins at work and remains there all day. The men get their work done in spite of the buzz and when they leave work it follows. With an envelope that sums up eighty hours of their life they head to the bank, and some, to the tavern. It's the day they've been waiting for. Those who choose to party go all night, eating up booze, good music and strong women. Some were legends, going from Friday until the beer ran out on Sunday. Some of us were pretenders, leaving early and losing our suppers in the ditch.

Yes, *I* had a job. *I* worked with the legends. *I* was one who heaved in the ditch. I wouldn't often party with the legends or the women they ran with but I had money; biweekly, I had a bit of cash to play with. I remembered the girls who had turned up their noses at me. I dreamed that if they knew how I was putting in my time one of them might come to my level to take in the view. It didn't happen but it was still a wonder to me that within a week of having decided work was a no go, I was labouring for dollars.

It seemed a good while since school's melodramatic end, its pinch of promises to stay in touch and cup or two of overdone tears. Boohoo. *My* life would never be the same. For what it was worth, all signs seemed to point to there being life ahead.

I had a job. I didn't possess or need any memories of the prom. Life had dealt me a measure of contentment. I kept an eye on myself, making a mental note to guard against becoming too smug. If I was inching close to that place where one is puffed up past the point that the world finds acceptable, I would pull back. If you stand on a pedestal admiring the view someone may be tempted to give you a nudge. I knew all about falls from grace and needed no reminders.

I was working where my father worked. He was white collar, while I was blue. I wore blue coveralls, and a blue hard-hat. Sometimes a blue mood graced my sleeve alongside my blue heart. I was oozing blue.

I was treated like anybody else at work. Nobody held my father's white coat against me. Nobody knew that if there were trouble at work Dad would likely conclude that the fault lay with me. Nobody knew that and nobody needed to.

During this time of hard labour and, eventually, of disillusionment, I'd spend my evenings walking through the sweet smelling fields with a six-pack and hand rolled cigarettes. Now and then I was with Joe, but usually I was alone. I really wished that my thoughts would be pleasant as I roamed, but they were intent on misbehaving.

My brain could convince itself that people were hiding in the grass, quietly watching me. Sometimes I thought those hiding were men and women that had some control over me.

Sometimes the air attained form. The long green and yellow grass would bend into patterns and hiss. My heart would pick up speed and I'd walk, hurried footsteps making haste. Did I see someone? Did they follow me with their dull gaze? If they ever confronted me would my instinct for self-preservation rule or was flight my only option?

Many nights I saw them, or traces of them. They were a wicked, miserable force. Pathetic outlines resembling women and men, beings without substance. Sometimes I would run hard

when I sensed them, half-laughing, breathing heavily while I crashed through the waist high grass and weeds, climbed fences, and sprinted until I could go no farther. By the time I was tired out the spirits would be gone. Sitting very still I'd relish the ale that soothed me.

It was becoming obvious that Joe wished to end our friendship. I may have had some thinking problems, but I wasn't completely thick. I cut him out of my life, avoiding him at every turn. I made excuses for not being able to hang around with him when he did call. I was rude. Eventually the phone always rang for someone else and I attained the status of non-existence. I can't say why I thought he was tiring of our friendship. Maybe it was something said, or possibly, a misread gesture. Maybe I felt unworthy.

So I was working by day and running around alone in circles at night. The hallucinations weren't much company, looking ridiculous as they strove for invisibility. They couldn't cheer you up, but they could scare you.

Darkness would see me home after an evening in the fields. Muttering a greeting to my parents, I would go to bed and curse ill will into my pillow. As tears of humiliation dried I would find my way into splintered sleep that felt better than being awake. The next day I would work again.

Time passed and little changed. People complained about the weather and sat in front of fans. Children ran through sprinklers, shrieking and getting soaked. Every weekend had its share of weddings, the newlyweds brash in their expectations.

Gradually I reached the conclusion that I was too young for self-imposed solitude. My belief that isolation was character building seemed wrong. After all, I'd been social until recently. The day I would leave the mess my life had become limped towards me. I decided to go west.

As I waited for the driver to inspect my ticket, I looked over my shoulder at the psychological baggage following me. Memories, regrets, disappointments were lined up to wish me a faux farewell. I was travelling to Edmonton, hoping to find some sense along the way.

We left the terminus and I made myself feel nothing. I rode along with the others, with whom of necessity and barring rest stops I was trapped, a bug in a spider's web. For hours I watched the miles pass at a surprising clip. As we sped into the future I thought of work and the men I had laboured with. They had seemed to understand me.

What I'd saved from working was financing my flight from the specters in the field and the derision of other kids. It had bought me a seat on a Greyhound bus. Work was allowing me temporary freedom, a fragile distraction filled with daydreams. I would eventually discover the cliché to be true: you can run but you can't hide from who you are.

As the trip wound on I got used to it. I slept as much as possible, smoked a lot of cigarettes and enjoyed sloppy meals at rest stops. The odd conversation was struck up with other travelers. We could discuss things that we would usually keep to ourselves because we knew we wouldn't see one another again. To one woman I confided that I that I was escaping from trouble, though I did not go into detail. She was very sympathetic and I was attracted to her but nothing came of it. I don't know what I expected possibly could.

We hit the prairies while I was asleep. When I woke there was nothing but flat land for miles. I felt liberated in a way I hadn't for some time. I felt free, no longer a bug in a web. The feeling

lasted until we hit Winnipeg where we endured a four hour layover. This killed the elation of the moment, though I knew I wouldn't forget it. From Winnipeg the trip turned into a marathon, uneventful and boring.

Finally, the ordeal ended. As I entered the restaurant in the depot in Edmonton, the clock had just snuck past 5:30 in the morning.

"Coffee?"

I nodded and was served one almost before I had time to sit down.

"Menu?"

I shook my head and she assumed a frown. Had I been short with her? How can you be short with anyone who speaks to you in one word sentences?

When I finished my coffee I went outside into the brisk air and found myself energized. I sat my suitcase on a bench and walked back and forth, hands clasped behind my back, growing excited now that my fresh start had arrived.

Eventually my enthusiasm waned as I began to question my judgment. I was eighteen, lonely, cold and many hundreds of miles from home. To be unsure in those circumstances could be expected from any teen, regular or otherwise, but was it normal to be cowed by the ill will that seemed to be devilishly playing itself out wherever I looked? Was I delusional? Hallucinating?

After sitting on a bench and going over all the ways in which I could fail, I put my belongings in the trunk of a taxi and slid into the immaculate interior. The air felt colder than it had earlier and I asked the driver for a bit of heat. He obliged and tried to engage me in conversation. I felt a lack of clarity and repelled him with silence. I couldn't have talked if I'd wanted to. The closer I sensed we were to my brother's apartment the more anxious I became. How was I going to explain myself?

When we arrived at my destination I retrieved my bag and thanked the driver. He looked at me indifferently and sped away. In spite of my dread, I found myself hoping my brother was home and that he had some type of comfort food in his cupboard, something he and I had grown up on.

"It could be a hell of a lot worse," my brother informed me, as I looked at the uninhabited space inside his cupboard.

We'd exhausted the formalities, the slapping of backs, shaking of hands.

"It's great to see you,"

"You're looking really good,"

"You think so?"

"Would I lie to you?"

"Look in the fridge," he said, "there should be a few beers in there. It's pretty much help yourself around here, bro. I have to get dressed for work. Got bills to pay, know what I mean?"

I heard someone talking in his sleep and raised my eyebrows.

“Oh that’s Frank. He sleeps through anything and doesn’t talk much. If he’s not up by eight, wake him, okay?”

“Sure, Bob, no problem.”

“Okay, I have to get ready. Grab a beer and make yourself at home.”

When my brother was leaving for work I spoke, between swigs of beer, “I can help with the bills. I saved some this summer. It’s just sitting in the bank getting mouldy.”

“Alright,” he answered, grinning and winking, “you can buy the beer tonight. See you around five.”

“Bob? Hey Bob,” I said, but he was gone.

I walked past the lump on the floor that was Frank and looked out the window at the cars in the parking lot and the other apartment buildings that looked, but for variance in colour, a lot like the one I found myself in. All of them three stories high, without elevators I guessed, and made of brick. Some were endowed with balconies and others weren’t. Momentarily, the sun came out from behind slow moving clouds, and then it hid.

I lay on the couch. I was dog-tired, but I knew I had to keep an eye out for Bob’s roommate. I kept pulling myself from tipping over into slumber, back to red-eyed consciousness, over and over until I didn’t care and I slept.

I spent the day snoozing complacently enough for one who’d let his brother’s roommate down before being introduced to him. Adrift in a sea of vivid dreams and colourful visions I was cleansed of a lot of fear. Many misperceptions that had jumped from the highway to roost in my head left, as I contentedly snored. Who could understand how I feel right now, I asked myself during a time of half wakefulness.

When I came to I didn’t know where I was and then it hit me; I was at Bob’s in Edmonton. There was something I was supposed to do, but I couldn’t remember what it was. After shaking my head so the cobwebs flew, I went over everything that I had done since arriving and still couldn’t remember. Maybe there wasn’t anything after all. I decided to try to relax and went into the kitchen to find something to eat. When I looked into the empty cupboards I remembered my assignment: GET BEER.

Thinking about trying to find the beer store tired me out. After finding it I would have to buy the beer and cart it all the way home. What if I got lost? Without looking I told myself I probably didn’t have enough money anyways. A voice in my head suggested going to the bank and I told the voice to shut up. I lay down again, to sleep, to spend just a little more time where perhaps humankind’s first narcotic, slumber, could weave some magic and, in the bargain, make me part of its tapestry.

Chapter Three

I heard Bob and Frank come in and the fridge being filled with beer. I felt like they had been with me all day and we'd been drinking and swapping stories. I smiled sleepily.

"Hey, stranger."

Stranger than you know Bob, I thought. Someone opened the curtains and the sun hurt my eyes. Fantasies of beer commercial camaraderie fled when my legs were twisted and I was flipped over onto my stomach.

"It's wedgie time," Bob said.

"Hey," I started squirming and foolishly, to panic, "hey!"

"Relax. We're not interested in your crusty underwear. Well, I can only speak for myself, of course."

Bob's roommate didn't speak though I had the impression that he could care less if it was crusty, ripped, too small or threadbare. I grabbed a beer then returned to where I'd been laying, the sad couch that looked as if it was determined to unravel until all that was left of it were a few unremarkable threads. Bob put a Dylan record on. We clinked our bottles together and drank.

After drinking for a while I noticed that my brother seemed different. He wasn't the person I remembered. He was the same visually. I knew him even with the mop of hair he'd been without at home, but he had changed.

"There's something different about you," I blurted.

"Really?"

"Oh, yes ...not that that's a bad thing, it's just..."

"I don't have a clue as to what you're going on about," he replied, "do you think I'm some kind of demon or a guy off a U.F.O. or something?"

"I'm just having a bad trip," I answered quietly, feeling cowed, "just a bad trip."

"Yeah," he said, the beer giving him bitter eyes, "well, you don't expect me to tip-toe around and watch everything I do or say, do you?" I knew he was referring to my state of mind and answered in the negative.

"Well, drink up," he said, "maybe we'll go out later."

I woke in the morning not knowing or caring if we'd gone out. Something, besides my pounding head and shaking hands was wrong. Ah, open up hungry earth and swallow me feet first with my black boots on. What am I going to do, I moaned, how can I possibly explain that I've pissed myself in the night? I was soaked. I'd lost control over my bladder.

Quietly, I ran and jumped in the shower fully clothed, enduring the hot spray long enough to get sopping wet. Towel in hand I went back where my disgrace lived in the fibers and fluff that

made up the couch. The wetness was just waiting to be found. I'd really degraded myself this time.

After drying my hair I arranged the sleeping bag I'd been loaned, driest side facing the sky. I wanted to shake my fist at that sky; I wanted to shout at God and thank him for nothing. But, I didn't. I went to the fridge grabbed a beer and chugged. When it was gone I chugged another.

"Hey," Bob said, amused, "go easy, the bar doesn't open for awhile."

"Hair of the dog," I replied. He nodded. I went out and joined him on the couch.

"You puke?"

"No Bob, I didn't puke."

"Hmmm, something stinks. Maybe it's you sitting there in your wet clothes." He shrugged his shoulders and walked back to his room.

Bob and I had drunk our share of alcohol together. It was a greeting, a farewell, a ritual, a ceremony that treads water in a hallowed lake. When we drank by day the sky seemed brighter, a hallucination that kept me parched. At night the darkness was complete, it was black, a puddle of India ink on fresh laundered white. But I had changed all that. I'd changed pure white to yellow, I'd pissed into the darkness and the truth I had always seen there had melted. I'd transgressed and like any other wrongdoer, I hoped to get away with it.

First Bob and then sleepy Frank left for work. When I was sure that I'd be alone, I started scrubbing the couch with a towel and hot water. On my trips from the couch to the bathroom for more hot water, I berated myself. I was a chump for pissing my pants; it just proved what I'd always suspected. I would never be a man's man. More demoralizing, I'd never be much of a hit with the ladies. What woman in her right mind would want a guy who's liable to mess his drawers?

After I'd scrubbed long and hard my head began to ache. My stomach was turning. I took a handful of aspirin, which only made me vomit. Soon I was in an uneasy slumber, full of shadowy figures and beautiful women. Everyone in my dreams seemed filled with ill will. I forced myself to sleep all day. It was a day like any other. It faced me head on and I shied away, hiding in slumber and behind random tears. It seemed to me that I was a young man whose world was too often under the thumb of disappointment.

So we drank and drank. I didn't relieve myself in my sleep again and if anyone knew I had changed the colour of my underwear, they'd didn't let on. We drank and sometimes we quarreled. One night Bob and I came to blows over a bit of corned beef. We drank and my supply of money dwindled. I had to find a job, had to suck it up and go out, even though going out had become frightening. I had to shake off the stupor that held me like a clammy, controlling lover. I had to get off my duff, put down my beer bottle and pound the pavement.

I was like Socrates who complained about a voice that repeatedly took him from what he was going to do without encouraging him to do anything else. I would wake and say to myself, today is the day I start searching for work. An inner voice would immediately pipe up and dampen my spirits with logic like "All people are assholes out to cause harm in odd and various ways." I wondered if that was what Socrates went through.

Eventually, I left the apartment for more than just smokes, alcohol or one of those delicious burgers they made across the street. I brushed my hair and teeth and put on clean clothes. By noon I was back home with a box of beer, waiting for the phone to ring. I had been promised that it would and it did, the next morning. I had a job starting the following Monday.

An inner voice said, "All people are assholes out to cause harm in odd and various ways."

"Shut up," I said loudly as I put on my boots and coat. All the way to the beer store my new mantra, hastily acquired and soon to be discarded, preceded me, "Shut up, shut up, shut up...."

I'd been living with my brother and his friend for a month and a half. The weather had grown colder and every day seemed damp. At work I kept stock of gizmos used to fix televisions and stereos. Sometimes I'd go out and help a technician install a big screen TV, often in someone's bedroom. We'd giggle, knowing that they weren't going to be watching the Under Sea World of Jacques Cousteau or the Gong Show.

The first night Frank didn't come home I didn't really think anything of it. Bob and I sipped on a few pints and watched the idiot box. I had bought it at a pawnshop and was quite proud of it. It was black and white but the picture was crisp and clear. The next night Frank didn't come home and I started to wonder. We had taken up our positions in front of the box.

"Wanna smoke?" I offered.

Bob shrugged his shoulders and I threw one that bounced off his chest. We lit up. I squinted at him through the smoke and he squinted back.

"He's not coming back," he said.

I took a quick look to see if he was all right. For some reason I thought he might have whatever it was that I had. "We argued, violently. It was bad. It was as close to a fight as two pacifists can come. You don't need to know any more about it - it's between him and me. He sends his regards, you know, he always did like you."

As though having said all that had left him spent, he turned back to the TV and took a long pull on his bottle. The night passed, as would the next one and the one after that. Eventually, they'd all melt together. We never saw Frank again.

Frank's disappearance was lodged inside me in a strange place, a place that lived to convince me that everything gone wrong was my fault. My boss was in a fender bender and when he got to work he glared at me. I was clearly to blame. My brother stubbed his toe, a house burned to the ground, the Maple Leafs lost again - my fault.

Alone, in the apartment I banged my head against the wall, saying over and over, "Stop hurting people." This strangeness stopped not long after it began. I realized I couldn't accept responsibility for everyone who screwed up. I didn't cause their messes or mishaps.

Still, I often felt brittle, as if I might break into shards at any time. To me, that was life. The brand of fragility that lived inside was a driving force. On the outside, my finger had to be pointing at me, nagging, for me to get anything done.

Bob began to look at me with eyes of hatred. Soon, everyone was looking at me with those

same eyes. I couldn't walk anywhere without being confronted and stared down by an unusual loathing people were projecting my way.

Bob's beef, I figured, was that I was an obligation he'd rather be rid of. I had no idea what it was that other people had against me. Defeated, desperate, humiliated and scorned, I decided to see a doctor. It wasn't a decision I made lightly. Nobody wants to admit they are mentally ill, least of all someone who is still young enough to believe that the only thing worse than being crazy is dying. Even that was debatable, among kids with honour.

Waiting for my appointment, I wanted my turn to come quickly. This guy has to be a straight shooter, I thought, looking around at his collection of Norman Rockwell prints. I picked up a magazine and something about Elvis jumped out at me. I couldn't read and put the magazine down.

My desire to be well was real. It had been kindled when I made my appointment and was still burning. After an eternity spent embracing boredom, I was shown to a small examining room and told to strip and don the gown supplied. I shrugged and did as I was told, having no idea what stripping had to do with my head.

The doctor breezed in casually, as though we were old friends. I noticed jealously that he seemed to be carefree. Maybe some men are just better fakers than others, I thought. I was getting flustered and I guess it showed because he gave me a moment before asking what was wrong.

"Well, sir," I began, feeling stupid because I never called anyone sir, "I think there is something wrong, no, wait, there *is* something wrong with my head and the ... my feelings, emotionally, ah emotionally speaking, ah, jeez, I guess I'm always depressed."

"And, how do you deal with this?" he asked.

"I drink," I answered, "and smoke anything resembling marijuana."

"Well, you're honest, I'll admit that," he replied and I mistakenly thought he was impressed.

He asked me a series of questions. Some made sense, others didn't. I'd never, for example, known anyone who lived in a glass house. I told him that a question about people living in a fragile building like that was lame.

"It just isn't done," I said, "it would be far too dangerous." He looked at me over his glasses and wrote something on his paper.

When he was satisfied that he'd bewildered me, he prescribed a medication that I would one day know is used for treating depression and psychosis. Within a week I was starting to feel more comfortable and within a month I was feeling better than I had in years. Realizing how much time feeling ill had cost me made me angry. I started going to bars, behaving aggressively and getting in fights.

When my prescription ran out I didn't rush back to the doctor. Not knowing any better, I thought I was fixed. Alas, my improved state would last but a short time and then would disappear. The soothing pills were gracious, giving relief from my personal upheaval but, after a month without them, the good feelings became a memory. Well-being vanished, leaving emptiness as its legacy.

The change in me that others had witnessed was forgotten once it was gone. I went back to being perceived and welcomed as a bit of an oaf and acted the part to gain a small bit of acceptance.

Christmas was bearing down and would soon crystallize. I hoped that every deserving person would find more meaning on the festive day than was present in the "buy this, buy that" slogans that assailed us all. If only the commercialism the slogans represented could have reminded us that Christ was against greed we may have boycotted the opportunism that greeted his birthday. Surely if Jesus had looked ahead and seen the bastardization of his date of birth, he would have booked forty more days and nights of prayer in the wilderness.

In spite of how I felt, the jingle that changed every day, "Only twenty shopping days left," piped incessantly from my radio until Dec 24 when it finally left me alone.

The day Christmas became a tinsel-tousled reality, I found myself alone, un-medicated, scared, and lonely. Bob was off gliding down the side of a mountain somewhere, showing off, maybe drinking a little Irish coffee with some red-cheeked snow bunny. Sarcastically, I wished them well and saluted them with an imaginary glass which I then threw into an imaginary fireplace.

"All the best bro. Merry Christmas."

It was my first Christmas spent alone and I was a drunk on the hum of solitude. I tasted the lonesomeness around me and it made my mouth pasty. There was an odour too. Christmas day of that year had an aroma. It wasn't turkey, gravy or turnip - it smelled more like mould. I wrinkled my nose and thought of people I'd known, wondering how they were spending the festive season.

I had no way of knowing that soon the old friends I was thinking about would drop me like a hot potato, claiming they had never liked potatoes anyways. When people come as close to shunning you as they can without starting to look bad, it's difficult. How can you protest when you're the one whose perception is out of whack? Who's going to believe you?

"It's got nothing to do with your head, but, ah, the wife's not really comfortable with you coming around, you know, if it was up to me, but, you know, she worries about the kids and, ah sorry."

"Yeah, well, I guess you're right, it probably really is in my head, this feeling of persecution, but, hey, can I just bite you or something before we part, just so you know it was real and I know that you weren't a hallucination?"

Christmas day ended. It was a day of solitude and bleak preoccupation with the organism I call me. Christmas was a reminder that I wasn't exempt from loneliness. I had spent the previous Christmas at home with my parents, my other brother, and a vastly different mind. I was doing well in school, everything pointed onwards and upwards, yet, in a few short months I would start to unravel.

Bob was back by New Year's Eve. I got ridiculously drunk because I knew it was one night of the year when people would make allowances for just about anything. You could have pinned the Kennedy and Lincoln assassinations on me or told me that Bobby Hull had been partying with us most of the night until I insulted him, saying he was a whuss and a whiner to boot. You could have told me just about anything and I couldn't say much, because I couldn't remember

a thing. I'd heard of people deciding to quit drinking when that happened. I just figured that's what happened when you got drunk.

I made a resolution to quit drinking, broke it the next night and then it was back to the working world and the long haul through the bleak months of winter.

Chapter Four

I had an empty job doing mindless things. Work was paying my bills but I didn't like going there because the atmosphere was horrible. I could tolerate the mindlessness, but the backbiting and melodrama was becoming too much. In it I was nothing but a quaking, reluctant player.

I was hired as Doug's assistant, but whenever anyone else needed something menial tackled they'd seek me out. By way of response, Doug would go and whine to the boss or yell at whoever had taken me. Having grown sick of it I would refuse to go off with those who had no claim to my services. Whenever I shook my head and said no, one of the technicians working nearby would pipe up with something like, "Well, well, look at who went and got himself a backbone," or, "There must be a sale on cohunes at Kmart."

It was around this time, when the tension couldn't get much thicker, that I started to consider leaving. I thought I should get out while I could, before I became a slave to the boredom and innuendo, before I signed on as a lifer at the TV repair shop.

I thought of shooting the place up before I left and developed a droll fear of blurting out my fantasy in the lunchroom while everyone sat munching sandwiches, pretending there was nothing wrong with company morale.

I started to sleep my hangovers off in the small staff lounge. I'd go upstairs to do something and before I knew it I'd be lying down with my eyes shut, chewing a Mars bar that, thanks to the honour system, would remain unpaid for until payday. Soon I'd be soundly sleeping. The fat receptionist, Lauren, would almost always come and rescue me before I got myself in trouble. Lauren, who was also eighteen, had been a mystery to me ever since she had told me that every two weeks she was using part of her earnings to pay off a bedroom suite.

I missed the tablets prescribed for the treatment of depression and psychosis. Their effects were a dim memory yet sometimes I found myself nursing a strong desire for them. They'd made everything much easier. Anything had seemed possible. Now my thinking was becoming muddled, I was back to making poor decisions and it seemed each day was a little more difficult to get through. Anxiety and depression were resolutely banging on the door demanding entrance. They set up camp and started whittling away at my resolve. They were hateful, unafraid, incredibly stubborn squatters.

One morning, after Bob left for work, I packed and fled. I thought I was running from my job and my life, but I was really trying to outrun a sickness whose nature is to gain ground steadily on all it set its sights on.

Before I left I looked around. My eyes went from a pile of newspapers to a spilt ashtray and then came to rest on the TV. The atmosphere in the apartment seemed to become suddenly peaceful, urging me to stay. Something tugged inside. I shuddered and slowly shook my head while exhaling. The moment passed and I went to the phone booth to call a cab. Inconsiderate and self-absorbed, I left no note and spoke no good-bye.

Before I caught the greyhound I decided to have a drink. I drank as if I had just discovered thirst, but all I was doing was weakening an ache that wanted to make me cry. I drank enough to make you leery of lighting a match; I swallowed enough booze for two or three to get

blasted on. I became lit, I was toasted, a smashed drunk. It's no wonder that when I came to I was in another city, sleeping it off in a large jail cell full of snoring, muttering, smelly men in various degrees of intoxication and wakefulness. This cage is known as the tank. I'd been put off the bus until I sobered up; leastwise that's what I was told the next morning. I didn't remember a thing.

"You were being hostile," a man in a uniform told me while showing me the door.

"Me?" I said, incredulous, "that's the craziest thing I ever heard."

"You'd know," he said, looked at the ground, shook his head, and then looking me in the eye he slammed the metal door in my face. A deadbolt snapped to and then it was my turn to look at the ground, at my baggage, or rather, my bag. I grabbed it angrily, taking my frustration out on something that couldn't hit back.

"In a perfect world," spoke an unbidden thought, "inanimate objects would be able to protect themselves from those who mistreat them."

"Screw that," I yelled. For a second I thought my bag quaked before I threw it in the air. When it came down I gave it a few kicks. As a result I felt some tension leave me but I knew it only went for a quick cup of coffee at the corner. Problems that give the impression of being gone often find their way back to the host. They may seem a little different but they're usually the same old puzzle.

I walked from the prison for drunks and managed to find my way back to the bus depot where I would re-board the coach pointed east. I would, for the duration of the journey, try to wear a suit of civility. It was a tight fit, but I managed.

I was glad to arrive in Toronto, a metropolis I had spent a good part of my childhood living in. It was a place that I had affection for. This love for concrete and atmosphere was a remnant of youth that I thought I should be able to let go of and put away as one must someday do with all things childish. Yet, there I was, soaking in the whole scene and loving it.

Hours later, feeling a little less smitten after mingling with the natives, most of whom seemed to be having bad days, I decided to check into the downtown YMCA hostel. I was road weary and having brain cramps. I was no longer in the mood to soak in anything other than the warmth of a scratchy blanket. First I had to get past a short, dumpy man with white hair and grayish-white whiskers. He had an oily look that made me feel uneasy.

"How can I help you, Sunshine," he asked, as I stood bag in hand, in the lobby of the hostel that provided food and shelter. Sure the question was a bit foolish, but it was being called 'sunshine' that knocked my pail of sand over.

"Well, Whitey," I replied, no longer awkward, "it's like this...."

"Whoa, hold it there. Nobody here calls me 'Whitey', understand, I don't answer to Whitey."

"Well, I don't remember telling you my name was Sunshine," I replied.

"Okay, look," he announced, "no games"

"Right," I muttered, "no checkers, no chess, no snakes and ladders."

"So, it seems you've had a hard day. Well, we'll fix you right up. Just need a few particulars." It wasn't long after the paperwork was done that I was taking a shower in water that came out wilted but hot. Well, you can't have everything.

Tired and a bit wet, I made a beeline for my lumpy bed and abrasive, gray blanket that reminded me, from a distance, of steel wool. A pillow that resembled a bundle of newspapers in a sack cushioned my head. I was warm and soon enough, I was fast asleep.

I don't claim to know how dreams work nor do I know why we dream. If I dream about something bad is it because I'm bad? What if I don't dream at all? I don't know much about dreams. All I know is that sometimes I dream and sometimes I don't. That night at the hostel I dreamed snatches, bits and pieces. Some I remembered and some I forgot.

There was the bus driver holding my arm in just such a way that I was immobilized yet pain free. If I tried to move he tweaked my arm a bit and then it hurt. There they were, there were the cops, walking my way...now I'm in Bob's apartment, Frank's there, they're laughing at the TV but it's not on, they're laughing at it because it's black and white. They turn to me at the same time, holding my wet pants and sleeping bag. I look down and I'm naked. "Have an accident?" somebody asks and his voice is murky, as if he is underwater.

All of a sudden I am part of a crowd watching two women sew, an old woman and a younger woman. Actually, I guess they're weaving, and they're competing. My money's on the young woman, there's something different about her, something magical. I try to cheer but I have no voice. She looks at me.

I wake and I'm hot. For whatever reason, Whitey is leaning on the bed across the aisle from mine.

"Whitey?" I ask in an innocent voice.

"I told you that's not my name. We don't play games here."

With that he was coming at me furiously, with some tool he held clenched in his closed fist. I tried to yell and then I sat up for real. I quickly got out of bed. A spider fled across the floor. The floor was real. I pinched myself. I slapped myself lightly. Dreams, bloody dreams, so many nightmares, so few good ones like the ones where you're flying around on the tricycle you had when you were five. I sat up the rest of the night smoking cigarettes.

Early the next morning all of us pointless people were given meal tickets redeemable for breakfast at a local greasy spoon, but first, a short speech was in order. Before the herd, made up of men who had made a habit of taking wrong turns in life, thought twice about leaving, a lackey got everyone's attention by rattling off a string of expletives that would make a gutter rat blush. He then carried on:

"Okay! Come here at noon. Get your sandwiches. I don't want to see your faces again until supper, no excuses. If you're sick go to a doctor. If you're drunk go somewhere and sleep it off, because you won't get in here. You may now pick up your meal tickets. Goodbye gentlemen, have a nice day."

What a creep, I thought, Whitey was a lot nicer than that guy. After getting my ticket I realized that any appetite I had been in possession of had fled. A grizzled old lad with skin that made

me think of lizards was walking a little ways in front of me.

"Would you like my ticket?" I asked, "I'm really not very hungry."

"Many thanks, boy," he said, sweetly smiling. If he possessed a tooth I didn't notice it.

"You're welcome, you're welcome."

"Say," he continued, "I noticed you was smokin' them fancy cigarettes. You know, when I was your age we mostly just had the makins and we was glad to have 'em. You couldn't spare me one of those fancy ones there, could you?"

As I was giving him a few cigarettes I saw the twinkle in his eye. It seemed to me to be rapidly turning into a gleam. Correspondingly, my radar went up a notch. We would walk and then he'd ask me if I fancied a nip before breakfast.

"No? Oh, well, could you help me out a little in that direction? I haven't had a drop in a few days and, well, *you* know what that's like."

"See you, Old-timer," I said and as I walked away with intent, as if I had somewhere important to be, I started thinking again about the treatment that the denizens of the Y had received that morning.

It's strange, I thought, as I walked towards the bus terminal, it was like he was speaking to a convention for the hearing impaired; as if he had to holler just to be heard. He obviously believed he had to yell because his audience was thick headed. I laughed when I thought of he who had spoken; I saw him as a guy who still lived at home, without a girlfriend, spending most of his time watching TV. What would he know anyways? It's guys like him who spread the myth that says you have to treat these homeless old guys like crap, as if it's the right thing to do. It's like giving your seat on the bus to a pregnant woman, stopping at a red light or buying a chocolate bar from the poor kid freezing outside the beer store. I thought on it some more with my eyes glazed over and inclined to the sidewalk until, looking up, I noticed I was at the bus depot. Oddly, I didn't remember anything about the walk there. Autopilot, I suppose. I laughed and a woman nearby whom I hadn't noticed, smiled at me.

As I jostled with the ill-tempered, early morning crowd and staked out a place in line, I felt a final wave of concern before the hostel men dwindled and fled my heart. An image of those who would show up for their sandwiches, like gentle sheep, flitted through my mind. Something funny happened in my throat. I daydreamed a bit longer of the hapless men, as the people I was ensnarled with moved as one. The dilemma of those luckless men, gnarly, lean men who'd been made that way by the life they'd lived, seemed almost as mine.

"Can I help you, sir, sir, can I help you?"

I was at the front of the line and in a matter of minutes I'd forgotten the unfortunate men. I had my one-way ticket to Peterborough, and was thinking of the greener grass that awaited me - not to mention the cleaner air, better tasting water and more accessible women.

I generally sleep in moving vehicles whether I want to or not and there was no reason for that day to be an exception. The ninety miles from Toronto to Peterborough were void of conscious thought and substance. I was lulled into sleep by the sounds of the bus and slept as much as I could, dreaming and twitching without apology like the family pet who's a little long in the tooth.

I had traveled the route often enough to know that slumber always stole some wonderful rural backdrop from sight. Farms, some worked others not, faded brick buildings here and there surrounded by fields partially covered in snow. Behind it all, behind huge rocks, machinery in the yard or a woman hanging out wash, was the bush, murky and mysterious.

When we disembarked in Peterborough my stomach was tied in knots and I felt shaky. I always felt better in transit, awake or not. As I stepped to the ground my tattered confidence turned traitor and fled and I was afraid. I went to the corner bar, the only place I knew that could give me back a semblance of self-assurance.

To help get myself oriented, I ordered two glasses of draft. Physically I needed the alcohol as much as the next drunk. It was a potent tranquilizer, an easy way out that worked quickly. It wasn't cost efficient, but I always seemed to find a way to get my share of it. Once I had calmed down a bit and was more easily led by my thoughts, I began to indulge in the luxury of hindsight and from there to regard myself as a young man who'd learned some weighty lessons from his meanderings, such as they were.

After pouring back a few I went out walking around Peterborough and found it much the way I remembered it - a wonderful place if you have money. Unfortunately, I was one of the luckless that hadn't much, so I decided to stop gazing at the pricey menus posted outside downtown restaurants and went higgledy-piggledy, as the drunken crow flies, up one street and down another until I reached the highway to my parent's home. I would use my thumb to hitchhike the short journey that separated me from where I stood and there.

I planned to drop in unannounced. Having spent most of my money, like the rebellious guy in the Bible who had his fun and then repented, I was ready to be received by my family as was he by his, as a hero. Penitent and humbled, he had shown up on his folk's doorstep. I figured I would do the same. Well, I may have been ready to be welcomed as the prodigal son, but it wasn't in the cards.

I successfully traveled the six miles, which brought me within walking distance of my parent's house, in a car that was somebody's wet dream; jacked up, wide tires, oozing speed, music blaring from an absurdly good sound system that made conversation impossible and undesirable. On impulse, after I got out of that car, nodding and smiling a farewell all the while, I stopped to get a bottle of low-budget whiskey. I cracked it open as I walked diagonally across a muddy field bordering the highway. It was a field I was familiar with as being one I had often used to get to the place called home. When I thought about it I got a bit choked up. I swallowed some whiskey and it dispelled the undesired emotion.

So I was back where I thought I'd never again be, a dog returning to his vomit. I took a drink of whiskey and I thought: life isn't so bad, this place isn't the hell hole you thought it was. The dark skies opened a crack and it started to rain. I started to feel cold and picked up the pace.

When I arrived at my parent's house the back door was unlocked and open.

"Aren't we trusting," I muttered.

Kicking the mud off my boots I stuck my head in the door and yelled, "Mom."

Mom had been the greeting of choice for years, as it was more likely to elicit a positive response than hollering for Dad.

There was no answer. I stopped lurking in the doorway, kicked off my boots and went inside. Everything was the same as I remembered it. I sat down beside a table whose surface I recalled as though it was an early memory; I even remembered the place mats that were on the table. I drew a chair close and put my feet up on it, reached into my coat for the bottle, unscrewed the lid and took a long swallow. I thought of the defeated men from the shelter and compared them with my self-assured and successful father. I was a bit drunk and the comparison made me giggle. You, I thought, should know better than to laugh at those outcasts, after all, you bunked in with them last night. I could be harsh with myself. I was suddenly tired and fell asleep sitting, an infrequent act for me as I usually found some way to be horizontal.

I woke an hour or so later, sometime in the afternoon. I turned on the radio and strains of a sentimental song filled the kitchen. I sang along softly for a moment then quit singing. I can't relate to that stuff, I thought, I don't have anyone that I feel that way about. I changed the radio station.

I allowed myself to think about Michele while my mouth, like a baby, accepted the bottle offered it. I thought of the girl I'd loved, who'd stolen my heart along with my virginity. I uneasily remembered it all as another song droned on about love and loss. Will I ever get over that damned runaround, I wondered?

I turned the radio off with a nettled flick and held my head for a moment. I knew some people believed that I had lost my mind over her, but that wasn't true. It was true that I had loved her once and probably still did. It hadn't been that long since she had had said she would never see me again though, strangely, she claimed in the same breath to love me. That was one mixed message I was going to tiptoe around for some time. Every time I thought of how hard I'd cried while she was telling me that it was over I shuddered. Even though she loved me she couldn't go on, even though she loved me it was too harsh, I was unpredictable, moody, a bit of a drunk.

Well, I thought, no sense dwelling on her and her strange way of expressing love. I rose to my feet untidily and staggered a bit as I went to see what my Dad was drinking at the time. Well stocked as usual, I thought, and smiled as I filled my glass to capacity, drank half and refilled it.

Where were they anyways? I was drinking glasses full of straight rye, as though I were in a hurry. I was on my third glass when I noticed over the rim of it a twinkling that enticed. One little ride wouldn't hurt, would it? It suddenly seemed as if the car keys I had spied could speak and were saying,

"Hey, live a little."

Why didn't I stay home, tune into the shell of what was once Hockey Night in Canada and get drunk in my chair? I don't know. All I know is that hindsight can deplete you. It gives you the blues. What if? I'll never know.

I guess I could blame an old girlfriend, a set of talking keys, the watered down state of professional hockey or my own burgeoning alcoholism for what transpired, for my taking the keys and making a break with a whiskey bottle for a quiet friend and confidant, but I won't.

I would soon be in a mess. The days and weeks that followed it would bring to light a true

ailment living within me, one with a set of symptoms that were treatable to a degree. In the time that followed an invasive analysis of my person and an ongoing course of treatment tailored to meet my needs would be enacted.

In the days that were to come I would envision church ladies dressed up for Sunday, wagging their fingers at me, speaking on behalf of God, mankind and all that was decent - in my imagination they would go round and round me, in a circle that came close and then receded. There was nothing wrong with me a good dose of the Holy Scriptures wouldn't cure.

Touring the winter ravaged dirt roads a while gave a feeling back to me, one I fancied I'd been missing. It, felt good to be behind the wheel again, to float and land, to swerve and miss what looked like ice and then to right myself, pick up speed and do it all again. After running the gauntlet of dirt roads I decided to take my father's car to Peterborough and have a quick beer. In a split second of lunacy, I changed my plans. Bucking common sense I took the turnoff to Toronto when it presented itself. Thus began a car ride the likes of which I'd heard about, but believed were made up and reported by the news media as propaganda, whose sole purpose was to keep us all in line.

Chapter Five

I remembered drinking whiskey and the assurance with which it navigated a path that was becoming better worn with each day that passed. I remembered that as the traffic thickened a bit, I decided to race with anyone that was game. I remembered cursing other drivers as I sped. I remembered it all later, from where I sat, in a jail cell. While confined, I would emerge from the spell of a blackout and remember more than I wanted to.

On the highway, a little car pulled up beside me. Ha, I thought, that little thing should know better. I left him eating dust and cranked the music. The same little car pulled up beside me. This time the driver was flashing a badge.

“Ah, shit, I’m done.” I hid the bottle in my coat’s lining, pulled over, lit a cigarette, rolled down my window, stuck my head out and exhaled.

It all seemed staged but it was unfolding in front of my face; an officer of the law in plain clothes, walking resolutely towards me. All I wanted to do was to keep drinking; I was just getting started. I didn’t want to get busted. I was willing to sing soprano with a vibrato, if that’s what it would take to be allowed to carry on with my business.

I felt more doomed with each step he took in my direction. Ideas bounced around inside my head; my brain was a pinball machine gone amok, perpetual tilt, put a quarter in my mouth and I’d have spit it back in dimes and nickels.

“...yeah, she left me,” I heard myself saying, “I feel so terrible, I can’t stop crying sometimes, you know. I’ll try to get over her, at least while I’m driving.”

“That’s a good idea. Here’s another. If you’re going to kill yourself do it on someone else’s stretch of highway.”

“Yes, sir,” I answered and he was gone, stopping once to take a long look over his shoulder as if he’d changed his mind, then to shake his head and spit.

I pulled back on the freeway that could have snuffed me out in the time it takes for a quick goodbye. I shook my head and laughed.

“That was close.” I said to myself and relieved, I laughed harder.

I turned off the expressway and pulled into a church parking lot where I hoped to collect myself. I wasn’t there long when a caretaker pulled up in a little wagon with a motor attached.

“Pastor says you have to go,” he said, firmly, challenging me to be contrary. “You don’t belong to this church, not a public parking lot.” I felt compassion and put the car in reverse.

“See you, Pedro,” I said and drove away.

Guys like Pedro, who were called retarded, could always make me smile with their dead seriousness and fierce loyalties. I felt some type of awkward kinship; I almost knew how he felt. A strange foreshadowing was going on. In spite of myself, I was embarrassed. I knew that I had faulty wiring upstairs and I knew Pedro had similar problems. Was I going to end up

driving a cart hooked up to a lawnmower engine? As I drove I wondered who was saying what about me.

I was soon back where I spent a lot of time growing up. The old neighbourhood, a place I had yet to outgrow. I thought I'd visit with a few friends, but I was no longer known. The few people I thought I'd been tight with seemed caught off guard and uncomfortable when I showed up at their door. I'd been far from their thoughts, if I was ever there at all. Maybe they hadn't imagined me at their doors, drunk and disheveled. Maybe the smell of cheap whiskey made them reluctant to admit they had known me. Maybe I should try to sell him a chocolate bar, I thought, as one guy seemed to have trouble placing me.

"It's okay," I said and walked away. Nothing stays the same, I thought, and thinking it made me tired. I suppose I could have restrained myself, could have stopped going to strange houses and ringing the doorbells of people for whom listening to a gloomy drunk go on about the good old days was unexciting.

Later that night I came out of a blackout and found myself in my father's car, crammed in with a gaggle of rowdy teenagers. We were searching for the downtown party that we were all going to, driving around until we found the spot. Once there, my father's car was discarded, having served its purpose for the time being. Some guy with long, blond, over-washed hair parked it behind a building whose brick facade looked like it served as a backdrop for every graffiti artist in the district. The driving duties had been taken over by this person. He wasn't in the state that I was. As I staggered towards the gathering I felt wounded. The car I had assumed temporary ownership of had been taken from me. Someone else was at the wheel, possessing the keys he had wrestled away from me as I had reeled and lurched and tried to convince everyone I was okay to drive. I had been crammed into the backseat and an argument had ensued over who would drive. I had a fleeting pang of guilt - what was my father going to say? I knew he'd find out what I'd been up to.

At some point during that glum evening, I fell down a flight of stairs with a wine bottle in my hand and had to be taken to a hospital. I remember being restrained and stitched up. Another part of a rotten scene; more shapes, shadows and noise I'd have to live with. After my trip to the hospital, I fell asleep in a space I cleared on the floor, amidst the drinking and drugging. Within twenty-four hours, I'd be under lock and key.

The next day was an odd one. The wheels were set in motion that would change my life. My actions during that time brought disgrace, imprisonment, and the gnarled finger of blame pointing my way. Later, while I languished alone and in jail, it seemed that I'd been deflated, emptied, never to be especially happy again.

When I first woke in my jail cell, there were jackhammers in my head. Half drunk, I wondered what it was that I'd done. I remembered getting into a race with a cop on my way to the city. Looking at the gauze wrapped around my right hand, I remembered that I had fallen the night before. Or was it the night before that? How long have I been in this cell, I wondered, and what is it that keeps me here? Eventually, one of my keepers would tell me that I was sitting in a Toronto jail facing a multitude of charges, all of them related to the destruction of my father's car. Someone, besides me, was going to be very unhappy.

When the loose-tongued guard who would prod my memory came by my cell, I asked him what I badly wanted to know, that is, what I'd done.

“Destruction of property,” he answered, and he didn’t say anything else until he’d finished peeking into the windows of some cells that were built into the wall and had opened a few others that resembled mine to a greater degree, no walls, nothing but bars. Though there was no one there, he made a show of rattling his keys.

“Not counting a heap of other bad things. You’re lucky you didn’t kill someone, Bub.”

He clucked his tongue and left me alone. It came to me then, hazy at first and then with more clarity - the accidents that I’d been involved in, what led up to them and what happened after. What I had needed was that jolt, “You’re lucky you didn’t kill someone,” to get my memory working.

A psychologist might counsel that I hadn’t been remembering at that point in order to have time to prepare myself for the shock. However, psychologists don’t leave room for chatty jail guards in their theories. The stranger triggered thoughts I didn’t want to house, thoughts that dug in their heels and made a home. Memories flooded, dingy, black and white imagery, thoughts and emotions that refused to leave. I somehow weathered the onslaught.

That day was noteworthy. Sinister traces of it would follow me far into the future. I would recall for years thereafter, be they hallucinations or not, the shapes, shadows and noise of that time of mistakes.

“Honey, you should have seen this accident. Crazy guy speeding through the streets, broadsides this car. Seems he’s left a huge trail of destruction behind him, running into parked cars like he’s in a demolition derby. Eventually his car won’t go anymore so he gets out and runs, real shabby looking guy. Pass the potatoes. Jeez, you’re something, that roast looks great.”

So I envisioned Ordinary Joe, while, in a cell, fragments of essential well being lay around me, partly decomposed, to be swept up and deposited in the trash with a hundred thousand dust mites and then, to be nothing but a dim memory. What, I wondered, disgustedly, just what the hell is wrong with the blob the sits on top of my neck.

I gulped down fear and choked on it. I drowned in introspection, always arriving at the same conclusion – I deserved to be where I was. Those who were worried about me could breathe a little easier now. Hell, throw away the key - I was born ghastly and evil, though strangely, not without remorse. A spider walked calmly across the floor of my cell. I wondered briefly what he’d done to be there. I wished I could just go to the type of Hades where nobody was too concerned with punishing anyone. If I die tonight, I prayed, please don’t send me to the Christian hell. I began to be very afraid.

“If I die before I wake, please send me to the friendly confines of the Hades of the ancients, the humane alternative to fire and brimstone.” Not exactly how I wanted to phrase it in my head, but the sentiment was there. God, I hoped, knows a contrite heart.

The next day the policeman, who called my parent’s home while I sat and waited, anxious and disgraced, stroked one of his facial scars. He had obviously endured a problem with acne. He didn’t seem self conscious about it though. I supposed it was something he had gotten used to.

Inside me a cruel illness that had yet to be diagnosed, was busy fortifying its home. This illness exploited me using fear and delusion, but two of the distressing weapons in its arsenal. Anything it could do to me it would and then it would feast on the harvest, the by-products of a brain's chemistry gone awry. Surely, this illness had a life force of its own. It was at a banquet table for one and holding me, its sustenance, in a submission hold that would have made the most seasoned wrestler yell Uncle. I was cooked.

Everything looked funny, in a drab, non-humorous way. It was as though my perception had shifted. I would never see life with the naiveté I once had. I became aware of the police officer and I admired his bravery, how effortlessly he dealt with his problem that, due to its physical nature must have garnered its share of attention.

"One more time and then we'll just have to try later," he said to no one in particular.

I began to wonder how long we'd been there. I could smell something cooking and so, figured it was about lunchtime. We'd been there since just after breakfast, with him phoning off and on, on my behalf. Where have I been this morning, I wondered, and then as a type of answer to what had to be one of the most moronic questions I'd ever asked myself, I realized I was handcuffed to my chair.

Eventually the policeman's patience paid off. He was at long last in contact with Mr. Playford. A short conversation ensued and the phone was held to my face so I could speak. I felt that I could do so if someone would take the cotton out of my mouth, the handcuffs off my wrists and pour cool clean water down my throat for a few minutes. Otherwise, I thought, I was utterly incapable.

I was no Al "Scarface" Capone, the famous mobster who went to prison for the only crime the authorities could make stick, tax evasion. He did his time in fine style, without doubt. I had to get out of stir because I couldn't do any time in any style. The only way to dig myself out of my predicament was to speak whether I liked it or not. I badly wanted to see the light of day and lose the crazed animal persona I already fancied I'd begun to acquire. Like a ceaselessly pacing creature in a zoo, I was well sick of the bars that held me captive.

"Hello," I managed. My Grandfather answered and that puzzled me. Why had they called him?

"Carmen?"

"Yes."

"I understand you're in a spot of trouble." I didn't answer. It's not that I didn't want to, I just couldn't. I was sad and full of regret, dumbstruck from top to bottom. I shook my head at the copper, indicating that I couldn't talk at that time.

"Yes, sir, we'll try back later. Goodbye."

I was led back to my cell where I lay face down and motionless for some time. I didn't want to think about my personal assault on the metropolis of Toronto. I remembered a fair bit of it by then. Not wanting to rehash it only made it run around in my mind over and over.

Why had I, the day after I was stitched, beaten my father's vehicle, metal on metal, to a mess that would no longer turn over? Not a cough or a whirr, just dead silence eventually broken by a hiss and a few clicks. Why at that point had I foolishly scurried into an apartment building

and hid in the dim garbage disposal room, smelling excessively of antiseptic. I flinched at the mental image flashing in my mind, of a pair of Toronto's finest discovering me there, on the floor, trying to look inconspicuous which, given the situation, couldn't be done. I was really starting to remember a lot for a guy who woke up without much idea as to why he was in jail, and I wasn't impressed.

Embarrassed, I remembered that I actually feigned innocence when I was caught, pretending, I guess, that I always hung around the garbage disposal. When I remembered sitting on my haunches and lying, claiming to have no knowledge of what the police were asking me about, my face got hot. Being told to get to my feet and staggering so they had to hold me up, one on each side, was not an image I valued. Flanking me, they led me stumbling from the building like the bum I'd become, while people laughed and cheered. I turned it off, somehow, the mental chattering went away and I fell into a fitful sleep.

Eventual calm took hold and I slept deeply enough to dream. Not surprisingly, my parents kept appearing in my dream and whenever I saw them I would run. I ran so fast and hard that I was back in the fields, running from spirits. It was there that I was accepted as a fool of the nontoxic variety. I wouldn't hurt anyone. In my sleep I longed for those days, when I wandered with a clammy six pack in my hand, a harmless idiot but certainly not a felon. A vision of a car that was being carted to the scrap heap while its headlights, panic stricken, blinked on and off woke me and I was full of guilt. Looking at my arms I saw that the hair on them seemed to be partly at attention.

I didn't eat supper that night. Later, the dim lights of the jail and a calming hum of unknown origin lulled me once more into another dreamlike state, but this time it was just a state - I didn't dream. I slept through the night until 6:30 the following morning when the guard woke me and gave me something to eat.

I ate. The eggs and toast were the same, cold and soggy. The coffee was lukewarm. I was happy to eat though and gave no thought to the state the meal was in. It was food and drink - cold or lukewarm, it was essential and you had to partake. That, or perish.

I had enjoyed a restful sleep and was strangely optimistic. I was rebounding with what could probably be explained as the elasticity of youth. My life was nowhere near over and so I had yet to ruin it. I was convinced that my meagre violation of the law could be explained away, that destruction of property and endangering the lives of others wasn't as serious as some people thought. How could the powers that be not be sympathetic and helpful?

Chapter Six

“This is the deal,” said the man at the front desk without sympathy for my fragile state, “If it was up to me, you’d rot right here. You could have killed someone, but, it’s not up to me. You know how I stand though and I’m not alone.”

Keeping my eyes on the ground I offered no response. There was a blur of paperwork and possessions were returned to me. Signing on the dotted line, I agreed to the price of freedom. I gave up my right to drink, the privilege of not keeping the peace and assorted other conditions that had been worked out with my grandfather who I was to meet halfway between Toronto and Peterborough.

My grandparents had been looking after my younger brother while my parents were on vacation, which explained my confusion in the jailhouse with the phone. My mother and father weren’t due back for a few days. I was going to have to sit and ooze some big drops of sweat through the last few days of their holiday. I felt fragile; my stomach knotted and head aching. I was paranoid, which was nothing new. Everyone I saw knew what I did, and they all agreed that through my foolishness I’d embraced the loser’s role and elevated it to new and lofty heights.

It promised to be a long wait. I didn’t know quite what to expect, all that was certain was that I’d done it again. Everyone knew I’d done it again. I couldn’t claim innocence and make a break for it when nobody was looking; I was in way too deep for that. I was guilty, a criminal – all that remained to be decided was my punishment. I couldn’t sit and think happy thoughts because there weren’t any. I had to wonder if there would ever be happy thoughts again. If so, where would they come from?

“So long officer, it was nice to have met you.”

I couldn’t help myself. I had to say something to the one who would be three – judge, jury and executioner. I waved to him as I went through the door to a new type of freedom. I could have sworn I heard him growl.

So I was free; unbound and liberated, my horizon was limitless. There wasn’t anything I couldn’t do, except drink, which is what I most wanted to do. As I walked I thought about cold beer until I was thirsty for anything. I had a few dollars. I stopped into a restaurant and ordered a large Coke.

I had to find the freeway and travel east for a while. I was supposed to phone my Grandpa when I reached Port Hope and he would come and get me. I thought of staying in the city and downing a couple of quick beers but the timing was wrong. I knew, though, that I would pick a bottle up when we got to my parent’s house, that I would swallow sweet whiskey at night, in the dark, when I was supposed to be sleeping. I’d play records by the light of the moon, toast all the sad souls who’d ever screwed up and in the morning swear that I wasn’t like any of them.

Having a stashed bottle was about the only way I figured I could make it through the next few days. I’d never been in a treatment center, nor did I need to be. I had more than a few unhappy memories to supplement my hunch that I was an alcoholic and had no problem with

the knowledge of my addiction. When I craved a drop, I wouldn't stop until I had what I needed. Sometimes I stooped to begging. It was something I did well when I needed a drink in the worst way. When there was no other way to get my hands on the remedy, I could put on a sad face, sad enough that it wasn't unusual for people to forgo pocket change and give me folding money and cigarettes. If I stood in the right place I could easily make thirty dollars in an hour. I knew that it was nothing to write home about.

I made it to an eastbound ramp courtesy of the Toronto Transit Commission. What I had done, the trouble I had caused hadn't made it past my defences; the seriousness of my crime had yet to sink in. The blow was being cushioned. It was similar to banging your shin – you don't feel it for a moment and that moment gives you time to prepare. So, I stood on the ramp, whistling stupidly, blissfully ignorant and full of impatience for the motorists who passed me by, some gawking rudely while others looking preoccupied and bored, ignored me entirely. Still, I had plenty of time to spare when an expensive looking sports car ground to a stop on the road's gravel siding. I ran, which was always my policy when hitchhiking. I slid into a leather seat and was grateful yet wary, which was also policy.

"Hello," I ventured, "thanks for stopping."

The surly looking man at the wheel didn't answer, choosing instead to glare at me for a few moments. He was preoccupied and I wondered if he saw me when he glowered. Maybe he's heard what I've done, I thought, maybe that's why he won't talk to me.

"Where ya goin'," he offered after awhile, without looking my way. His tone suggested that he only wanted the nuts and bolts, didn't want to be my buddy, counsellor, confidant, boyfriend or big brother. He had little sympathy for me. I told him I was going to Port Hope and he exhaled a vague, "Uh huh."

We drove in silence. I was trapped in a frightening world of my own making. Mercifully, as we journeyed, the sound of rubber on cement and the motion of the car were putting me asleep, giving me the loan of a few winks, which spelled temporary escape and mild relief.

No sooner, it seemed, had I begun to doze than I was being shaken with exaggerated vigour. I came to, wondering, "Now who wants a piece, who the hell wants some of me now?"

"Far as I'm goin'," the man who'd subsidized my journey by burning a little fuel said and stuck out his hand, which I took. His handshake was quite weak and I was surprised to realize he had put something in my mitt.

"Where am I," I asked, but he was already gone. Looking in my hand I saw a joint that seemed to be looking back and saying, "Smoke me, that's what I'm here for." I sat down and inhaled the whole thing.

I was taking note that I was near a strip mall when I started to trip out: 20th century schizophrenic male meets a pot-induced, psychotic wonderland. I looked at the shopping complex and the windows there reflecting the sunlight. The sun seemed warm and affable at first and then to suddenly be cracking the windows of the stores. My focus came to rest on the ant-like shoppers as they went here and there with great purpose. Foolishly serious, I thought, as if shopping is an activity of great importance. Something that stimulates the ant's antennae I thought, and laughed a bit. I wondered if I should venture into a place where the sun breaks windows and the shoppers were giant ants. Without doubt, went the answer. I threw my bag

over a fence and hopped over behind it, taking care not to hurt my hand. I looked around and walked forward. I hadn't gone far when I knew for certain that the ants were people and the windows were whole. What, I wondered silently and not without grim amusement, was next?

I saw a coffee shop and it seemed to beckon. "Come in," it said, "have a seat and you'll swear you're in your favourite chair. Taste a cup of coffee like no other." Maybe they could tell me where I was. I entered and noticed on the way in that the brown outer door was scarred up. Inside I didn't exactly find myself in my favourite chair. The coffee was stale.

I heard a humming. It kept my attention and as I tried to figure out its origin I visualized metal in perpetual motion, screaming colours, squealing tires. My sight blurred over with tears. I realized the humming was the sound of the expressway I'd just left behind. The cold purpose of everything snuck up and struck me and I fought an almost uncontrollable need to shout "Stop", and to see everything do so.

The moment passed and I went back to sipping my coffee, maddened by the confusion that seemed to thrive around me while it left others untouched. Why not that guy over there, he doesn't look like an angel? What about that crusty old dude at the counter, slugging away coffee like it's his last? Why couldn't he get sick? I was a young man. I was disgraced. God didn't like me.

The waitress who was passing my table informed me that we were on the outskirts of Oshawa. The truck stop near Port Hope, our scheduled meeting place, was still a ways off and I didn't feel as though I had the energy or perhaps the inclination to go there, to go any further. I went to the payphone and called my grandfather collect. He agreed with reluctance to come and pick me up where I was. The man behind the counter had given me a showy business card with the instructions that Grandpa would need to find me, written on the back. Once I had conveyed the instructions, Gramps and I said goodbye.

I sat back down. Deflated by illness, depressed over my legal problems and dependence on alcohol, I dropped into my chair with a small thud and let a huge sigh escape me. I held my head and squeezed it until I realized that none of the other patrons were speaking. A man cleared his throat as I released myself from the headlock I had forced on myself. Somebody shuffled his newspaper. I stood and moved to the back of the restaurant where I thought I'd blend with the semi-darkness and perhaps, sigh as loudly and frequently as I wished. Maybe I'd squeeze my head because, to be honest, it just felt good.

It could be infected I reasoned, and tried to convince myself that was the problem. It was too convenient though, and, even I could recognize it as a falsehood. An explanation that I did consider seriously was that I might have a tumour. At the moment, I would have accepted anything but the blame I deserved. Responsibility for my situation was a bitter pill to chew on. I began thinking of my grandfather. He'll be here in an hour, I thought, he'll help me through this, he'll understand.

Predictably, everything started to go from ordinary strangeness to very weird. Marijuana and schizophrenia don't mix, as I was realizing again, without the knowledge that I was afflicted by that particular disease. All I knew was that in the time it takes to turn your head things got pretty hairy. The counterman seemed particularly suspicious, darting in and out of view, talking on the telephone. I began to believe he was reporting to some type of citizen's police, underground vigilantes. You dirty bastard, I thought, what do you have hiding in your closet?

Things were getting serious; I was no longer attempting to convince myself I had a terminal brain disease while life went on without giving me a second thought. Life was giving me a hard look. That guy was setting me up, he was selling me out and he knew I was on to him from the look I was giving him. The brazen SOB didn't care if he aired my dirty laundry. Life was a John Wayne western. I was an outlaw and that was enough for him.

It seemed the other patrons all started talking at the same time. Furious glances were directed my way. People debated the punishment I should receive, "He could have killed someone, but he didn't. What can we do? How do you punish someone like that?"

I started to credit everyone I saw with knowing about the accidents. I was alarmed as people passing the coffee shop looked in at me scornfully. I felt what it was to be shunned. I looked down and stared into my oily coffee, looking up now and then to see if matters could really be as I was discerning them. Weaving in my chair, I almost fell over. Spilling a bit of coffee while righting myself I heard a snicker and some guy say, "Hey, look at him, look how he gets his kicks."

I felt him staring and heard his friends chuckling. Before I knew what I was doing I was on my feet, my heart pounding while I made a beeline for the door, past curious diners and coffee drinkers. Outside the distress that had embraced me eventually left, disappeared bit by bit, as, interspersed between deep breaths, a recitation of the many and varied obscenities I had learned in my first eighteen years found voice. The counterman came outside and demanded that I pay for my coffee. I dug in my pocket and coughed up.

Time sped up crazily; the minutes flitted while I slumped on a piece of concrete that met a pillar. A familiar voice imposed itself upon my gloom and the beginnings of remorse. Looking up I saw my father's father looming over me, gazing at me with a question in his eyes.

"C'mon," he said and turned to his vehicle.

His voice had reached me from far up, dripping with a measure of venom that was appropriate. Dizzy and drowsy I stirred, staggered to my feet and shuffled behind him, head down, good hand buried in my pocket with the fluff and garbage that lived there.

The trip to my parent's house wasn't graced with a single word – no off the cuff remark, stern declaration or wise counsel. Looks, however, were aplenty. Every five seconds or so, whenever the highway was clear Gramps would fix his lively, blue eyes on me and give me the look. The look, I figured, was meant to make me fade, droop and wither, however, since I was already there, it was an unnecessary ocular expenditure. Grandpa hadn't had too much experience with marijuana. While he was gazing at regular intervals he couldn't see that I was somewhere he'd never been, not in all of his street corner preaching days.

Along the way I was again attacked by the perception that I was being exposed as a disgraceful person, that everyone going in the opposite direction and those that passed us while going the same way all had the dirt on me. This was not a passing fancy; it was an acute fact that would not be mocked. It was real. When my grandfather turned on the radio things took a turn for the worse. I closed my eyes and all I heard were voices condemning me to every sort of punishment you could imagine. Gramps finally found a station. Someone was selling cars. My spell faded.

In due time, everything came full circle. I was back in the small town where it had all begun, with a joyride and a bottle of whiskey. We pulled into my parent's driveway, tires chewing stone and sand. When I slammed the car door shut I felt a wave of, "We know what you did," and I hustled into the house, abruptly leaving my grandfather behind.

Chapter Seven

What I'd thought was true; I sweated out the return of my parents, filled with dread, quietly drinking the nights away. I smoked out the window as the moon made its rounds. I listened to records spin on an archaic player. Charming times really, if you took away the car accidents and the disheartenment that I heard even the house complain of, as it settled a bit at night.

Because of my misdeeds, sadness would steal my mother's eyes. She would be forced to drag a weight I had shackled to her. I feared that she would endure low looks, meant to injure. Would anyone believe me, if I told them that breaking her heart was going to break mine? When I thought about the chaos I'd created, I chewed over what Dad's reaction might be when they returned, full of post-vacation, gee-it's-good-to-be-back sentiment. Relaxed and revitalized, they would walk into their home and learn of the violent and unnatural death of their vehicle and worse, the identity of the murderer. As retribution, I believed there was a good chance that I would be thrashed.

I began to wonder where I would live. Which hotel or rooming house would I feel comfortable in? Which would meet my needs? Once there would I take a second look at myself and discover that the days that had passed had really been years, that I'd become a longstanding denizen, quiet, a guest who always paid on time, whose hair and beard had gone grey. I wondered many things.

What was Grandma thinking of her wild grandson? She might claim she'd known he was a bad seed for a good while, even before he was first slapped by the doctor, cuffed about until he cried and took in great big sad breaths that were foul with fear. When the big monster slapped me I cried and I breathed, just like everyone else. I didn't know that all the slapping was for my own good; all I knew, as a newborn was that, by nature, life wasn't fair. It was a transition from solitude, warmth and darkness to high beam chaos. On hospital floors all around you, people are saying their last goodbyes while you breathe for the first time. I wanted to go all the way back to where I was dealt like a poker hand, no one knowing if I was four aces or a fistful of jokers. What was Grandma thinking? She looked at me with sad eyes. She made a poultice and put it on my hand to draw the glass out. When all was said and done, Grandma loved me. The poultice, though it did nothing else, showed me that.

My brother came in and glanced sideways into the living room where I sat. I felt something in my throat go tight as I heard him bound up the stairs and slam his bedroom door. Later he came downstairs and motioned for me to join him in the basement. I followed him, taking the steps two at a time. He turned on the television. Over the noise of Maxwell Smart, he asked me how I was.

"I've been better," I replied, dejectedly.

We looked at each other and snickered a bit. We didn't think the problem at hand was amusing; rather we were guilty of uneasy laughter, mirth that shook its head and said, "Pal, you're up the creek."

We turned our attention to the screen. "You know," I observed, "I've never found this show funny."

“Neither have I,” Bill offered, “it’s filler, you know, it’s there when there’s nothing else to do or you’re waiting for a good show. Fluff.” He motioned, pansy-like with his hands.

“What would you like to be doing?”

“I don’t know,” he answered, “getting high I guess.”

“You’re into that now, eh?”

“Sometimes.”

“After supper we’ll go for a walk, hmmm?”

“Sure, Carm, if you want to. It’s not going to screw you up is it?”

“No,” I said, suddenly full of self pity, “I can’t get any more messed up.”

If only I’d known how dreadfully wrong I was. If I’d known that I was buying into the fantasy that things couldn’t get worse when they would, I might have distanced myself from everyone I loved for fear of dragging them down further and from what little I called mine, for fear of destroying it.

One night, when we were breaking bread with my Grandparents, I looked at them. What could I say? Granddad was Granddad; he loved Jesus and believed in miracles. God was everywhere if you asked Granddad. Grandma believed in Jesus too. She could be strict, but underneath the sternness, I believed she thought the best of us, that we could do whatever we set our minds to. In all likelihood she had probably been convinced that this was my first and last foray into criminal behaviour. She had probably been kept in the dark as to the severity of matters, was unaware of my meaningless destruction of a perfectly good automobile. The wretched role I had played in creating all that was to transpire, the disappointment, the pain and sometimes the hatred, was something that I’m certain my Grandmother was shielded from.

As we ate that night, I tried to think about my first evil act, but my memory wouldn’t cooperate. Instead, I focused my thoughts on the kindness both of my grandparents had shown me. My mind drifted until suddenly and angrily, my parents popped into my head, unannounced and waiting for answers. At that moment, I happened to be thinking, with as much amusement as decorum would allow, of Gram and her belief in the healing powers of the poultice. I was bowled over by the intrusion of the vivid imagery that had stormed my mind. I excused myself from the table. It seemed as if another dimension had been added to my life, as if some type of telepathy had occurred. I had to slow it all down.

Putting on my boots, I was halfway to the gate when I heard my brother calling me. I kept going, not wanting to look back. I had to be alone and to do this I had to pretend I couldn’t hear. As I set off into that which was largely familiar, I wished my heart wasn’t racing and that the lump in my throat go away.

I walked the back roads in the black onyx night. I walked my disquiet off as best I could. After awhile, I realized I’d left my cigarettes at home and went back to retrieve them. Once there I was laid low by the knowledge that there was absolutely nowhere else where I could lay my head. My grandfather had taken responsibility for me until my parent’s return and wherever he went I was to be. Finding a book, I went to my room and settled in for the night. Shortly before

I fell asleep, I came to a complete understanding; the blame would always rest with me for the mess I was in. Any way I looked at it, there was no one else I could hold responsible .

I had been released by the police into the care of my grandfather, who, when the time came, passed me onto my parents, while they were in a state of disbelief. No one knew what to do. I didn't hear my grandparents leave - they just quietly faded. I wished I could follow suit but that wasn't possible. After a one-sided discussion, I was given a choice; get help for my mental problems, or get out. I opted for the former. Knowing I would receive the help of a doctor, I suddenly wanted to know why I did mindless things. What I'd find out was that there were no precise answers, even though initially I thought the hospital would be a place where answers grew on trees. Peterborough's Psychiatric Unit would turn out to be a strange place that didn't give up its secrets or solutions readily.

By agreeing to get help, I had taken the first step towards a relationship with the dreary profession/industry that attempted to minister to the needs of the insane. Sometimes there seemed to be as much weight on the shoulders of the staff as the patients. Sometimes it seemed to me that staff members liked to take the attention from the people who were ill, almost as if they couldn't stand being upstaged by their clients. This was distressing and, I hoped, a misperception.

Hospital policy seemed to say: "If treatment doesn't make them better, at least let it leave them placid. As long as they're quiet and don't hurt anyone, at this point that's the best we can do. We'll review the case periodically. What else can anyone ask? " Not exactly the rallying call I wanted to think of as belonging to the mental health care system, particularly when I was being treated by said system, but that's the way it seemed to be. Many pills and, then, with just a little more water you can swallow your pride.

In no time at all I was a regular outpatient. Most of the people I met had schizophrenia. Though I had received no formal diagnosis, I figured I probably had it too. It was such a common diagnosis. I stood around waiting for my personality to split in half or somehow splinter. While I was waiting around to be diagnosed, I was made to understand by others that, contrary to what I'd come of age believing, I would still be in possession of one, perhaps miserable yet completely singular personality, if schizophrenia was the disease that plagued me.

So began my existence as one who was a step ahead of being certifiable, with a coffee in my hand and cigarettes at the ready. I had a doctor and a therapist. I came equipped with ignorance and with prejudice; holding on to my belief that what had happened to those around me would never happen to me. I may very well have a disease but I certainly wouldn't be sitting in a hospital at age thirty. I'd get better. Deep down the others were weak. Strength flowed from my wellspring; it had just been momentarily diverted. Until things righted themselves, I thought self-righteously, I would take the time to learn, which was after all the noblest pursuit under the circumstances. I was snooty and foolish and that would make for a foul taste in my mouth when I looked back.

The doctor I had yet to see and the therapist I had already seen too much of. I would rather have had it the other way around, rarely seeing the therapist who was a pain in the ass and seeing the doctor often, as I'd convinced myself that the doctor had some snake oil that would make me well. If one didn't work we'd try a different snake. The belief that I would be cured

would die without too much of a struggle. It wasn't long before assembly-line psychiatry became obvious to me as the meat market it was. The therapist, for his part, never ceased to be a pain.

The psychiatric hospital wasn't a very happy place. Possibly this was due to the relatively limited methods of treatment compared with we who were individuals, not one mass of sickness, needing more than a rubberstamped prescription to make us well. In the psychiatric discipline, the resources for tailor made treatment were scant. Yes, we were all different. The inability to treat the individual as a person separate from the herd was part of the problem in successfully treating him or her at all.

One day I sat in a chair, in the institution, smoking. A woman came towards me in a wheelchair, propelling herself with her feet, arms outstretched and her eyes closed.

She stopped in front of me and said, "I'm flying, flying, flying, flying."

"Not around me," I replied and using my foot, pushed her backwards.

She started to wail which brought a nurse running on a rescue mission. I was dealt an angry look the intent of which was seemingly to make me wither. Thankfully, I'd already withered enough for one day. The flying woman in a wheelchair was taken away for reassurance or a handful of pills. I didn't have anything against her really and I was too new to realize that harmless behavior like that was usually tolerated.

Being an outpatient meant that I didn't have to take part in any lengthy sleepovers at the hospital. I was a little bit intrigued by the place, and, though I wondered what went on there at night, I preferred going home after being shooed out the front door at three o'clock in the afternoon. I did have a fantasy about a certain nurse and the night shift but fantasy was all that would ever put us alone together in a room with the windows steamed over. If I had a dollar for every fantasy a client has had concerning a member of staff, and a few dollars for the converse, I imagine I might buy a small country.

One day my therapist asked me, "When you look at people do they seem to be shrinking at times?"

"Yes, yes, that's it," I answered, figuring, ah, what the hell. After that, he asked me if people seemed to be getting larger at times.

"Oh no," I replied, "only shrinking, they're shrinking all the time, they never get bigger, no, no."

I laughed later on when I pictured him trying to figure out the significance of smaller vs. larger, shrinking vs. expansion. I never liked him anyway.

Eventually I found myself in his office and knew he had the goods on me. I had by then seen the psychiatrist a few times. The oaf and the doctor had conferred and now the oaf seemed to be smiling, as though what he was about to do were enjoyable. His eyes burned bright behind his glasses.

I eyed with suspicion the folder that sat on the table between us; after all, my name was on it. I waited for an explanation. He riffled through the papers in the folder, a sheaf full of observations about my behaviour. I was looking out the tiny window though all I could see, as usual, was the upper half of a tree and the sky behind it. I was on edge and when he spoke I

jumped. All of a sudden, the wall clock in his office couldn't have been louder, the sparse light penetrating his dirty pane of glass brighter. He pushed his box of Kleenex closer to me.

"As you know we have to give an account of you to the court." He set down the file and a sigh of befuddlement escaped his frame. I could almost hear him thinking, how's this one going to react?

"First," he began, "I suggest that you get your prescription filled and take it as directed. It's part of my job to have to tell you that you have schizophrenia. It's certainly nothing personal, I couldn't give you the disease if I wanted to and in no way am I made happy by nor do I benefit from your suffering."

I suppose it all hit me harder than I'd thought it would. I don't remember much – snatches of riding the bus to the highway. I must have handed in my script when I got home because my father had my pills ready for consumption before supper was on the table. He told me that sometimes you have to do unpleasant things, things that you don't want to do and that this may be one of them.

"Understand?"

"Yeah, Dad, I get it."

"Well, you may as well take one now. They're over there, on the table."

Thus began life on medication. As I fell asleep that wretched night, I saw hundreds of doctors, all with the face of my therapist. They must be wearing cheap plastic masks, I thought as I drifted into sleep. I wished I were wearing one, not of the therapist, just of anyone who didn't look like me, a young man known to have schizophrenia.

Chapter Eight

I've become a pickled egg immersed in psychiatric brine, I thought; I live in a big jar. I was struggling with the uneasy feeling that people were seeing past my defenses, seeing through what I'd done and what I'd subsequently become. Few there were that had any sympathy. As I illegally sat in the bar, I morbidly likened my defenses to the see-through glass of the pickling jar that sat to my left on the bar's top. I was an example of what not to become, I was exposed, a big, bare egg behind glass.

I was growing exhausted with freedom that was condition encrusted - everywhere I went I was reminded that I was bound for jail. A big part of me just wanted to get it over with. I was weary of the bargain basement freedom that had been granted to me by the law, regardless of whether it was justified or not.

Walking the streets I saw lawyers looking at me, running their cold tongues over their icy lips, checking their watches, rubbing their hands in expectation until they were red, like underdone steak. My days were numbered and of negligible quality. The judge himself would soon be fishing in the pickle jar, business-like, with his sleeve rolled to his elbow. He would have me detained in a literal sense, housed in an enclosure that was the real thing. I would be moved from feeling constrained by the limitations imposed on me by law, to looking at physical restrictions in the form of steel bars.

Knowing that it wouldn't be long until I was fenced in and possibly at the mercy of some type of jailhouse hierarchal system, I didn't want to waste time mincing words. So, I outdid myself trying to show my therapist I had understood him, that having been informed of the doctor's diagnosis I didn't want or need to be told twice. When he had told me of my diagnosis, the therapist had told me that my life had changed forever.

"You've been struck down by schizophrenia," he explained.

It was chronic. His advice was to get used to it, to make the best of it. I'd probably never have much in the way of girlfriends and I really shouldn't bother with the whole idea of marriage.

"Just too tricky," he said.

"Maybe I'll turn gay," I suggested, facetiously.

He shrugged his shoulders and turned away as if to say, "Whatever gets you through the night." His reaction made me wonder about him.

He didn't explain much else to me. Behind the grave looks, medical jargon and near ceremonial atmosphere, he managed to pin a label on my coat. It said, "Schizophrenic" and would so stubbornly resist my attempts to smudge and render it unreadable that all I could do was to try to put it from my mind.

When I was given the bad news, I believed we were caught up in a serious process. The therapist had some type of familiarity with what was happening and I thought that maybe that was why he was not as grave as I. I soon realized, to my dismay, that he was at a loss when it

came to having compassion. He seemed to savour his position of being the bearer of bad news and in so doing, squandered any faith I had left in him.

On the very day I found out the lousy truth, when it seemed life was showing me its ass and telling me to pucker up, my father pressed me to start taking the pills. I took one and said to my father that I would get used to them as best I could.

He seemed to be comfortable with what was happening. Perhaps he felt vindicated. For years he'd thought there was something wrong with my mind; earlier in my life he'd championed the idea that I should see a shrink. It turned out he had been right all along and now had the opinion of one backing him up. Dad seemed to figure the tag I'd been given was appropriate, though he had no real way of knowing such a thing. Any label that defined and kept me in check was good. After all, I heard him thinking, the doctor should know what he was talking about, shouldn't he?

I was choking on it all. I wanted my life back, minus the poking and prodding, the growing stack of paper that followed me around, a collection of fact and speculation that dealt with my case. Since when had I become a case?

Those who processed me from office to office put on airs when they dealt with me and I was new enough to the system that I was personally offended. I'd never seen anything like it and it was maddening - people staring, talking over you and then ignoring you. I once tried to use the phone on a receptionist's desk and was fascinated when I realized that she found me so hideous that she denied access and threatened to call security. All I'd wanted to do was make a phone call.

The only explanation I received when I suggested I was being ill-used was that I was paranoid. Then I would think, "Don't you get it, Carmen? You are, henceforth, a paranoid schizophrenic."

Suddenly I would doubt my ability to understand the workings of life and myself and eventually I'd concede that I must be paranoid. It seemed I was destined to disassemble in increments, stopping at each crisis long enough to get my bearings as best I could and then to continue.

The early morning sun shone and painted a bright, fresh light through the window and on the wall of my room. I was still taking up space in my parent's home, breathing their air, eating their food. The day was past when my role in life had been officially changed, when the medical profession had given me its appropriate tag. I was sitting stiffly in a straight-backed chair and rubbing my eyes. When I opened them they came to rest on the bottle of brown, sweet tasting pills, tablets to be taken three times daily, tablets that were to make me better.

I still believed that the onus was on me to fix what I'd become. It wouldn't be easy. I was dealing with a force that could often turn its victim's hands against himself. Anti-psychotic medication was being bragged up as the definitive antidote, my chemical savior. I wasn't entirely sure.

Often, during those early days, when I thought about having schizophrenia for the rest of my natural life, I was sickened. Sometimes I swore I could hear the blood drain from my face. Fortunately, I had yet to consider hurting myself as a solution.

Then there were times when I downplayed the gravity of what was happening to me, telling myself I'd seen the worst of it. I was hopeful that I could defeat mental illness - after all, wasn't

it all in your head? Still, when it came down to it, I usually knew that my downward spiral had just begun and would be as a snowball rolling downhill in sticky snow.

I could hear my father in the shower singing, quite possibly for the first time since he'd come home and found me, morose and camped on his property under a sinister cloud of confusion. The smell of bacon and coffee caught my attention.

"Come indulge, eat, drink, for you know not what today may bring. Good or bad at least you'll be full."

I wished I knew where the voice in my head had come from, the one that, shortly after I'd started taking medication, was always saying stupid things like that. I didn't want to believe it, but I supposed that it was now my voice, belonging to the new, improved, medicated me.

I made my way carefully down the stairs, fearful lest I miss a step and fall. The days of getting out of bed refreshed and ready for the day were gone, replaced by a dazed feeling that made navigating the steps an accomplishment. Once in the kitchen I poured a coffee and lit the day's first cigarette. Ignoring my mother's greeting of good morning, I went outside and listened to the world gearing up for another day.

It seemed that all of humanity was busy. Everywhere, people were involved in activities that gave them a sense of purpose. Everyone was eager to grapple with whatever the day held for them and just by grappling they knew they'd win, for trying was the only prerequisite for victory. I wrestled with feelings of uselessness.

"Look, look," a voice in my head said. I looked and saw one of the neighborhood lads drive by on his way to work. I'd heard that he'd just bought himself a car and was soon to be married. He was a guy I knew from high school, though not well. I didn't begrudge him his happiness and I was grateful that I was spared from being in too thick with the green monster, envy. How the voice in my head knew that I should look at that particular car was a mystery.

It was early and I could hear splashing in the bathroom sink which meant my father had finished shaving and was washing his face. He was then whistling which meant he was ready for toil and would be downstairs for his breakfast like clockwork, in a few moments.

My father loved to work, so much so that he'd work even when he was sick. If he had a cold he'd eat an onion sandwich, swallow some aspirin, put his cough syrup in his pocket and against my mother's sound judgment, go forth to earn his daily bread. If the roads were too snowy for most and my brothers and I were celebrating our school's closure for the day, he'd navigate the storm, slowly but surely. My father was an excellent driver; he was a crab in its shell during storms when most gladly stayed home from work and hoped the beer store was going to open as usual.

On that warmish morning, I sat outside smoking and chewing on bitterness, chaotic ideas racing in my mind, thoughts about running away from all that seemed to define me. Later when I thought back on my situation, I believed it was completely normal to have considered flight.

I felt like one of life's jilted lovers. All that I'd believed was vital and rewarding had discarded me, leaving only shreds of dignity and self worth. So, I would wonder, pettishly, why should I hang around? Why should I do what I'm told? Why should I continue taking part in the

outpatient program at the psychiatric hospital? It might be more therapeutic to forsake the whole thing, to only accept help that came from a doctor's prescription pad.

That day was not a stormy one; rather it was a day where my father would easily find his way to work. Most people will probably think this is a beautiful day, I thought, full of venom, stabbing my cigarette into the well-cluttered ashtray.

I could easily imagine mothers with strollers complimenting the weather, "Oh, it's just a beautiful day, isn't it?"

Some guy asks another, "Did you order this weather? You must have friends in high places."

Lovers walk hand in hand. Someone's secretary takes a long lunch and upon hurrying back to work finds her boss has gone for the day. What a beautiful day.

I heaved a sigh of self-pity. I would have liked to enjoy the sun too, but it would burn me as I now had heightened photosensitivity. I'd become more prone to heat stroke than others. My skin would turn an unnatural red if exposed to sunlight for a half hour or so - side effects of the brown, sweet tasting pills. What a beautiful day it was.

"Bye, Dad."

"Bye, Son. Don't forget to take your pills."

"But, of course," I replied and he nodded, not realizing that I was mocking him, the pills and everything else in the little farce that I had no choice but to lay claim to as my life. I shook my head and looked at the ground. In spite of the way the cards lay, I laughed.

I think Dad might really have believed the brown pills would restore me. I'd take a job, maybe get married and give him a couple of grandchildren. I had to hand it to him though; he had both sides of the fence neatly covered. If I got better that would be great and he'd be happy for me, but if I didn't, well, he had always maintained that I was crazy anyways. It didn't matter how you flipped the coin he came up a winner, smelling sweeter than a ripe field of clover.

Sitting there I grew certain I would never regain my health; it wasn't going to happen. The brown pills took you from one state of pointlessness to another. I would never work, never marry or be anyone's father. I was eighteen and due to a sickness that coincidentally seemed to bring out some of the worst characteristics others harboured, I was looking at a life of idleness and loneliness.

Robins strutted around on the back lawn, pausing here and there to pick for worms. The leaves were on the trees and though we were well into spring, some still seemed young and light green; they spoke briefly of the beauty of new life. For a moment, I felt the whisper of the wind gracing my ears, making a happy sound after the long, cold winter.

"Hey." Someone spoke to me from the gate but when I looked, no one was there.

The day of reckoning on which I was to be sentenced was beyond my control, sneaking up on me like one intending to harm me with nary a sound to betray him.

Justice was a big mystery. When all was said and done, I thought, those like me get away with very little in the way of lawlessness, little is tolerated. But where was my justice? If I was

mentally ill when I wrecked the car, how legally responsible was I? Was I to receive a jail sentence as some type of lesson in tough love? Whose fingers were in the pie?

So it was that in no time the dreaded morning arrived, the one when I would hear what the judge thought of my misdeeds. I hoped that I wouldn't cringe or flinch too visibly. It was fittingly a day of somber tone, gray with steadily falling raindrops that, in my state, suggested taunting applause as they struck the ground.

I dressed in gray pants with a blue dress shirt and jacket. I wasn't dressing for the other lawbreakers. I was dressing for his Honour. I was freshly shorn and cleanly shaven. Whatever way the sentencing goes, I figured, at least I'll look like I can handle it.

On that strange day when one human would have the wherewithal to lock me in a cage and give the key to another, Mom took her seat in the courtroom and watched the proceedings. Knowing that she was there, backing me up and still loving me, made me stand a little straighter.

It's odd and touching when a tired mother stands by her child while others have given up. This unshakable loyalty of a mother for her offspring is beautiful though peculiar in cases where society has formed an opinion and its verdict is all but known. Mothers are the most likely to continue loving though, even when their loved ones are guilty as sin.

When I was led from the courtroom that day I couldn't look at my mother. I was headed for the holding cell. It was over. I was sentenced to three months, two with good behavior. Someone advised me to apply for the halfway house as soon as we got to the jail.

We all smoked while we waited, though smoking wasn't allowed in that area of the building. Someone had smuggled tobacco in. There's always someone breaking the rules, I thought, while blowing smoke rings.

I prayed that I'd finally learned a lesson. If I thought of Mom I was convicted, knew the error of my ways and was momentarily and sharply guilty. Maybe in the future, if I thought of Mom when I considered violating a law, I could shake my head and try my hand at something constructive instead.

Chapter Nine

I heeded the advice I'd been given and spent less than one day in jail. When we reached the jailhouse on the swell of earth commonly known as "The Hill", I immediately applied for a transfer to the halfway house. Accepted and processed, I was out of jail and relocated by mid afternoon.

"First time eh?" asked the guard who was driving.

His huge, dimpled caricature of a chin was an outgrowth that he seemed casually unaware of, or so spoke his easy manner. He knew the answer to his question, first time offenders were the only type of crook accepted by the group home. He wants to see me react, I thought, and ignored him. He turned up the radio and we drove.

It was a windy day and the only noise I heard, besides the radio, was the sound the wind made as it pulled and pushed the trees about. I was captured by the sound of wood and wind and then became disturbed. Looking at the tightly shut car windows I realized I couldn't have heard any of what I'd been hearing, the sighing, moaning, creaking and cracking of the trees as the wind, that had seemed to be whispering and hissing, had its way with them.

Soon after I had blanched and recovered, the shock of having such a vivid hallucination also wore off. I sighed, drawing a look from my keeper. I shrugged off the mental confusion as best I could and watched life as it passed the passenger window. Presently we turned up a winding driveway of gravel and coloured stone that took us to the front of a faded yet imposing house.

I was received as I imagined a long lost son would be. Why this was so eluded me. I was given the grand tour toward the end of which I was guided past a smoky room full of men who seemed to be captivated by the television. I thought that this was strange, yet it goes on all the time in institutions where there's little else. If by the TV they're entranced, then because of TV their life's enhanced, I thought. There was that annoying voice again, making me feel foolish.

I had the distinct impression that those men weren't into collecting stamps or playing checkers. Though they were incarcerated for the first time, I came to believe over the next few days of listening and watching that far from planning anything constructive, most of them were putting in the time as best they could until they were released. Once free, they would return to whatever had got them pinched in the first place.

Just as my tour guide was showing me my bed and locker a huge burst of laughter turned my ears hot. They're talking about me, I thought and became dejected.

"I think I'll take a rest," I told my escort.

"That's fine son, you just rest up a bit."

I suppose I didn't realize how tired I was. Shortly after laying down I gave in to sleep. As I drifted away I asked myself in a whisper, "Why are they always laughing at me?"

I roved around the outside of a dream and then into it. A door opened slowly, and through that door was a room. I entered it. It was filled with colours that made me feel warm and safe. I knew there was a vast world of wonder outside of the room, yet I didn't want to leave the

beauty I'd stumbled upon. I eventually exited and found myself at the top of a huge slide. There was every colour ever known at the bottom of it. Every hue and tone was represented and they seemed to move as one. I'd never seen anything like it; the bright colours were brilliant. Even the dull ones had a happy edge.

This ornamental mass began to ebb, flow and buzz. It began to grow until it was all I could see. Distinct voices made themselves heard. They wanted me to slide; I obliged and it was exhilarating. Near the bottom, as I realized the mass had been made up of more people than I'd ever seen, the slide turned upwards. I flew in the general direction of the sky, higher than I'd dreamed possible and then, elated, I plummeted. I was falling fast. It took mere seconds to land in the arms of a crowd of millions.

"You're one of us, man," someone yelled.

"You're just like everyone else." I felt accepted.

Someone was shaking me, touching me and I wished they wouldn't. I wished they'd go away and leave me alone with my wonderful dream. Whoever it was persisted and I gradually woke. While I was regaining consciousness I was wondering absently if whoever was bothering me was some kind of pervert, like the kind of guy you hear about when you talk about jail. Suddenly and swiftly, I was upright, awake and on guard.

"Carmen," a soft voice said, "it's time to take your medication. Come on, sit up."

My head was sleep befuddled. I thought I'd already sat up, but a fuzzy second look told me I was still lying down, that I'd only sat up in my dreams. The medicine sure made me sleep and dream crazily. I wondered if there would always be one stranger or another at my bedside with a cupful of pills for me to take and just imagining it made my spirits droop.

The dorm was mostly dark. Enough light filtered in from other rooms to allow my keeper to administer my medicine. When he was satisfied that I had taken my pills he said, "Supper in fifteen minutes, okay?" I nodded. "Are you okay?" I answered again with a silent nod and then realizing he may not have seen in the semi-darkness, I spoke.

"I'm fine - couldn't be better."

"It's not so bad in here," he confided, "don't let the others fool you."

"Okay, boss," I replied, and as he walked away I wondered why he was being so nice. It crossed my mind that I'd had my problems from time to time with men hitting on me. Oh Christ, I thought, not again. I went to the bathroom to splash water on my face.

Looking in the mirror, I readied myself for my first supper with my housemates who, like me had done something stupid and been caught or unlike me, had the misfortune of being caught when they knew very well what they were doing and expected to get away with it.

Life continued – the only cure for that being death. My world may have been in turmoil, it may have resembled tumbleweed in a sandstorm but I was too new to mental illness, I believed, to have misplaced my survival instinct. I might, like the tumbleweed, end up stapled to a cactus, upside down and bewildered but I would always try to extricate myself. Well, that was what youth and naivety would have me think. In truth most of the instinctual prowess I credited myself with having at the time was largely a fantasy. A day would come though, when I would

be faced with actual hardship that would challenge my will and ability to survive. Until then I would carry on, thinking absurd thoughts about the world and wondering why people looked at me funny.

In the halfway house I was left to my own devices, though life was limited as I wasn't allowed off the property without an escort. Sticking to myself, I endured fits of depression that lasted a few hours or full days. I had my share of despair and gloom. You'll never amount to anything I'd tell myself, and then you'll die. You'll never meet a woman. The only people attracted to you are old homos. Even the other residents seem indifferent where you're concerned.

It was true that the other inmates didn't bother with me. Perhaps they didn't really like me. When I wasn't depressed I was glad that my friendship wasn't coveted, grateful for the indifference of those around me. They made just enough effort to rattle me for me to know that the only ones they held in high esteem were themselves. They were willing to tolerate me and I had the impression that I was supposed to be thankful for this. The type of head game they were playing can wear you down. I dealt with it all by finding more and more comfort in solitude, wherever and whenever I could find it. I had tears in me, when I was alone I was aware of them and that I could easily cry, but I didn't.

The days dragged by and the nights were almost as long. I enjoyed the pool table and books. Sometimes I tried to fit in, watching TV with the others, but I always felt out of place. After all, when push came to shove I was more crazy than criminal. I was the only person there for whom most everything was a brainteaser, a failing the others were aware of. They had seen me taking cups of pills and knew why I took them. Socially, I was doomed to fail from the beginning, as those possessing criminal minds largely hold people who are mentally ill in contempt.

I began to think that the TV watchers were plotting something, that they had a scheme in which my role was that of a victim. This idea began to root itself and I started to become desperate, wondering just what my roomies were up to. To help me cope, I dreamt up a strategy that would get way out of hand. Instead of helping me to escape my life as it was, I would secure a medicine that would leave me playing the role of a dismal guy who got too high. It was a role I didn't want but that's the way it all worked out.

I called a doctor who had treated me for the migraine-like headaches I was prone to in the days prior to medication. He agreed to prescribe over the phone what was necessary for the vacation I planned to take from reality. I had him phone it to the pharmacy where I had been buying my smokes. Of course he fully expected me to take the remedy as directed.

I fooled the staff into taking me to the drug store and waiting for me while I went to buy cigarettes. An hour or so later, right after supper, I took my first codeine/barbiturate capsule and, by doing so, jumped on a fast track to trouble.

I took one hit after another. I kept thinking that nothing was happening. Maybe, I thought, the doctor had been alerted to my plan and had a placebo dispensed instead of what I had asked for. Eventually, as could have been expected, the pills caught up to me. I hadn't wanted to get so woozy. I didn't want be seen staggering around.

I briefly woke in my hospital bed, a day and a half after the incident. Up to that point my hospital stay had been a thirty-six hour period of deep and heavy, drug induced sleep.

There was a woman in my bed, lying there as clear as day. "What are you doing in my bed?" she asked with a hint of malice.

"This is my bed," I answered and I moved my hand towards her, fully intending to touch her breast.

"It's my bed," she insisted and then she disappeared.

When I could understand what people were saying, I was told that I was discovered half-dead in the bed of another inmate, hugging his radio while it played love songs and rock and roll. I was then rushed to the hospital where everything that was in my stomach was coaxed out. By all accounts I was lucky to wake up. That, I would later think peevishly, depends on your definition of luck. It was generally believed that I had tried to off myself.

Two days after I had encountered a phantom in my bed, they took me back to jail. I was to spend the rest of my sentence in a small cell without human interaction. I felt as loathsome then, as I had ever felt.

In the cell I remembered a guy I had met in a hostel who wore dark glasses all the time. When I had asked him why, he told me he had spent years in a cell where the lights were always on. I had a vague idea of what he must have felt like after my short stint in what became an vexingly bright cell – the light something like a dripping faucet, getting on your nerves the longer it keeps you from sleep, steadily pissing you off until you want to holler or strike out. The difference, of course, is that if it's all that bad, you can get up and fix a leaky faucet.

What really bugged me about being confined to a small cell, besides being completely alone, was suffering the indignity of begging for a cigarette and once having begged, of being ignored. I wasn't allowed tobacco or matches in my cell. Maybe they thought that I'd do something patently crazy like lighting myself on fire.

I asked for something to read and was given a Bible. Now there was a book that I was at that time unfamiliar with, and, sadly, one that just increased my level of frustration. If God loved Jesus, I'd think, then why would he send him to this screwed up world and let him be murdered? How did that benefit me? Or I'd think: how could God have a son when he had no wife? Or, who did Mary think she was fooling anyway? The questions swirled around and around in my cell until they were a small cyclone and I couldn't handle them anymore. The next time they let me out for a smoke I shoved the Bible at a guard and said, "No thanks, you can keep it."

"Well maybe you just don't know what's good for you, eh?" he asked, nudging the guy next to him, without looking at him.

"How so?" I asked, "It's nonsense. Making sense out of this is like beating your head against a wall."

"Ah... but what if it's all true, I mean, we believe, don't we boys?"

There were a few half-hearted nods and one enthusiastic halleluiah. The rest of the men were ignoring the situation or didn't know a situation existed. I thought there must be a shift change going on, as there were more guards present than usual. The man who was goading me knew he hadn't much support.

“Alright finish up that cigarette,” he barked. I was perturbed and blatantly took my time.

“C’mon,” he said in a tight, slightly meaner voice, “let’s get you back in your box.”

I followed him back to my cell.

“You know,” he whispered, “according to that book, if you had died from your little overdose, you’d be in hell right now. Pleasant dreams, loser.”

The door shut behind me and the lock turned in place. I went and lay on my cot and closing my eyes, I took to imagining angels and demons fighting for my soul as I passed on in the tiny, brightly lit cell.

It’s said that all good things must end and I say, why discriminate? It wasn’t too long after my overdose, after solitary and guards with their cryptic remarks, that I was free as a bird and pleased by everything around me. All bad things must end too.

Of course there is fresh trouble around most every corner; enemies disguised as friends just itching to make you feel good, a seductress, a snitch, a good deal which break your spirit and makes you lose your wallet. I sensed that trouble was bearing down on me as soon as I walked away from the jailhouse. I wondered if I would be smart enough to elude it or if I would again be my own worst enemy. I told myself I had to run from trouble at the first sign of it. Avoid the wrong people, be nonviolent and sober. That was a very nice theory but I still had some wild in me that balked at common sense.

I was required to visit the psychiatrist whenever he wanted to see me. That was a condition of my probation. I also had to continue seeing that therapist who seemed, frankly, to be thinking with a soft head himself. I really didn’t think much of him because, among other things, I knew he hadn’t put in a good word with the judge. He’d probably thought it would do me some good to go to jail.

I had been ordered by the court to comply fully with taking medication. I was far from knowing myself and had little conscious memory of just how emotionally and intellectually lax I could be when I was without my meds. I didn’t realize that the pills had been helping me.

I decided to quit taking them, reasoning that the law would have no idea if I were medicated or not. I lacked sufficient insight to know that without medication noticeable changes would take place in me, that I would fall back and the system would catch up to me. All I knew was that I felt okay. To my way of thinking, the garbage pail looked as good a place as any for the sweet, brown tablets.

The first consequence of my breach of probation was an increase in motivation and energy. I walked a lot those days and soon enough found myself stopping at bars and licensed restaurants in order to quench the thirst that taking the air gave me. Well if you breach one condition of your probation you might as well get in deeper and breach two. So I had the odd beer which turned into two, four and so forth. As could be expected, I started to get a little messed up.

The whole problem with medication, as I saw it while looking through smudged glasses, was that while it could keep you from being crazy it could also make you feel like a zombie. So, because I didn’t want to feel like one of the walking dead, I found compliance with drug

treatment very difficult. My therapist told me I was in denial and I swore up and down that he was wrong.

Finally, after months spent living in a little rat's hole of a room in a rundown hotel, I thought a change was needed. I was tired of sitting in the doctor's outer office every two weeks or so and being bugged by the quiet whisper of music there that was supposed to pacify. I was sick of getting drunk with anyone that I happened to meet and believed I was spending way too much time in the therapist's office.

I decided to go west again, but before I got things together enough to go, I would end up in another jackpot, would be sentenced to more time in jail and, after that, some time in a drug rehab center. It never seemed to end with me; it just didn't seem to want to end.

Chapter Ten

It wasn't long after I was released from jail, had found a room in a hotel, quit taking the medicine I was by law required to take and started drinking, that my thinking started to suffer. I decided I knew best what I needed medicine-wise, stole a prescription pad and began to write my own prescriptions for tranquilizers and sleeping pills. I took these to various pharmacies in Peterborough and was oddly successful. I knew though, that I wouldn't get away with it forever.

One morning, after drinking all night, I staggered into a drug store. After handing in a scribbled prescription that would have the most seasoned pharmacist scratching his head, I fell asleep in a chair meant for people with bad backs. The next thing I knew, two men in uniform were lifting me to my feet. This time it was straight to jail. I wouldn't be coddled in a halfway house.

Jail was jail – lots of card games, girlie books, and tall tales, a great deal of smoking and, in my case, sleeping whenever possible. I once again found myself among drug dealers, firebugs and the like. I often felt their disapproval of me but they left me alone for the most part. I went straight from that stint which lasted three months and would be my last such waste of time, to the drug rehab center in Toronto, an afterthought the court had tacked onto my jail time.

In drug rehab I gave a urine sample every morning, ate a lot, played ping pong, read books and dreamed about my next trip to the west. I had no money but that wasn't a complication as I figured I'd hitchhike and along the way, bum whatever I needed to keep me going.

One day in the Rehab centre, I was engaged in some good-natured griping with the others. One of the social workers decided to make an example of me and asked me why I bothered staying. If I found the way things were run to be so offensive, why not just leave? I replied that I would gladly leave if I could but, the way I understood it I had to stay put. She retrieved my file and showed me that I was in no way bound to bless them with my presence. Enough said. Someone had screwed up the paperwork.

Two days later, I left Toronto. In the still morning, the first light of dawn and the last glow of the streetlamp illumined my path. I only carried one bag. I hadn't taken psychiatric medication for some time and felt a bit spaced out.

The first day of my journey was uneventful – some old queer making a heavily veiled pass, a drunk whose car veered right a little too often, but mostly just ordinary, short rides. I had a rule that said never turn down a ride. Because of that rule, I wasted time that day on every short ride that came my way; family-filled cars going to market took me six miles up the road and senior citizens out for a ride took me in circles.

When all was said and done, I had only made two hundred miles over a period of eighteen hours. I found myself breathing bleak midnight air near North Bay, on a stretch of highway that was deserted but for one streetlight. I stood in the middle of a mostly black world and pondered the light that seemed to be confronting me. I wondered why it was there and concluded that it was put there so that people like me wouldn't get run over.

I walked away from the light and heard animals running in the forest. I walked back to the light and felt safe, hearing nothing. It became a game; walking into the dark and then back to the

light, taunting Mother Nature, believing I held the upper hand.

Eventually, whispered the trees, the woodland tenants will get you with their sharp teeth. I began to have hallucinations that seemed terribly real. I was afraid in spite of my attempts to reason with myself. I became watchful and alert. The snapping jaws of an unidentified carnivore would not leave my ears alone. I saw eyes shining in the dark. I stood directly under the light and hoped for a ride. I didn't want to see or hear any animals anymore.

In time the predators in the bush left me with a few parting snarls. It was an hour past midnight and all was still and majestic. Suddenly, in contrast to my now calm surroundings a van that sounded unfit sped towards me and then came to a jerky stop directly beside me, where it sat idling. It was the first vehicle I remembered seeing for some time on that lonely stretch of highway. I'd realize later that my illness had played with me there on that road and though it went beyond reason, I'd think fondly of that event for some time to come. It was late June and the air was just about perfect.

When I climbed into the van the overpowering smell of alcohol told me that whoever was driving was likely drunk. I thought he might have a beer or two to spare. I could have used one in the worst way. Once inside I saw two fellow travelers, members in good standing in the fellowship of the forlorn and forsaken, huddled in the back. I was invited to join them if I wished and I did so.

"Grab a beer," the driver loudly slurred as if by being loud he could hide his drunkenness.

"Whatever you say, boss," I replied, helping myself to a cold one.

"Grab me one," he hollered and I rolled my eyes.

I turned to the guys in the back and asked, "Is this the red eye trip or the white knuckle?"

They looked at me a little longer than briefly and having made their point, looked away and were silent. Presently they announced that they both had to answer the call of nature. They seemed surly as though they were daring anyone to question how it came to be that they both had to go at the same time. When they were exiting the van, I saw one of them put something in his pocket. With haste, they ran into the dark, heading for the bush.

"Holding each other's hands I suppose, the little turds," the drunken driver said and then he giggled foolishly.

I wasn't surprised when they didn't return nor was I bowled over when the bibulous driver found that his wallet was missing. When the two thieves failed to materialize despite his pleading in their general direction the driver asked me to empty my pockets. I had nothing to hide and so I showed him what I had – cigarettes, fluff, a few quarters.

"Okay, you can go."

Where was I going to go?

"Well," he informed me as if he had heard my thoughts, "you can't carry on with me. You can see that, can't you?"

"I understand what you're saying," I answered, "but I've done nothing to you."

“Goodbye,” was all he said. I watched him gaining speed, moving off into the night, his red taillights watching me accusingly. I shivered and walking off the side of the road a ways curled up in my coat and caught a few hours of fitful sleep. When I woke, soaked in dew it was to an empty highway. The sun was trying to peek over the horizon.

“Jeez,” I said, “what the hell is going on?”

The day had turned a little too warm. I had to roll up my sleeves just to be comfortable as I waited for a ride. Though the farce involving two thieves, a drunk, his van and myself had taken place but a few hours earlier, it was far from my mind, almost as if it had never happened. It was as if it was all a hallucination that I could dismiss, except for one thing – the hallucination had taken me from one spot on the highway to another. While I mulled this over, I was completely unaware of a stroke of good fortune coming towards me at sixty miles an hour.

Until Lady Luck arrived I sat on the side of the highway. I had started out standing but after six hours or so I dejectedly sat on my bag. I wasn't looking at the cars any more, no more hopeful smiles or sly winking. By the time the highway had shown me to my seat I was no longer entertaining the idea that I could make people stop by making certain movements with my thumb.

By two in the afternoon I was pretty well asleep, the sun having had its way with me. I was startled by a car horn that sounded impatient. Looking behind me I saw a large, golden car.

“Your chariot awaits,” I muttered.

I began growing happier with every step, as I closed in on a shiny Cadillac. It was icy cool, its air conditioner in excellent working condition. I was in for a tailor made ride in a beautiful car that was going within two hundred and fifty miles of my destination. It was a lucky, lucky day.

After five miles of silence my friend, who must have vaporized into my life along with his beautiful car from a lamp belonging to Aladdin, told me to help myself to the cold brews in the cooler. Cracking a pint and taking a healthy swallow I hoped that I if I was somehow dreaming that no Herculean effort would be made to wake me and if I was in fact awake, well, then I had to relax and admit that being so could be surprisingly good.

So we drove and were quiet at first. I began to go into myself, becoming lost in my somewhat fragile thoughts. I thought he was going to speak a couple of times but he didn't. After awhile I began to feel secure and somehow lazy. The contented hum of the Caddy, the beer I had done away with as if I were born parched and the lack of conversation had all combined to make me gradually sleepy. As I often seemed to do, I fell into the ample bosom of slumber. My siesta was refreshing, like the first winds of autumn blowing the summer cobwebs from my perception.

The trip was pleasant, but a blur, not much in the way of talk but for the odd sentence, or two or three strung together taking on the form of a complete thought. The modus operandi was simple: sleep, drink beer and drive. I drove my share, disregarding what the lawmakers would say. Along the way, we picked up another guy and he quickly fit into the simple plan.

I was dropped off four days later at a truck stop near the provincial border of Saskatchewan and Alberta. I was still bewildered by the change of fortune I'd been blessed with. Looking at

the truck stop I felt my stomach growling. I fingered the twenty dollar bill that my traveling buddy had given me as we parted ways.

“Don’t spend it all at once,” he had said with a wink and a nod and then he was gone.

He had become smaller and smaller until he was a miniscule toy from childhood. I looked away and back and he was gone over a rolling hill in the distance. Turning to the truck stop, I shook off the sadness that I felt, picked up my bag and, having no choice, stepped towards the future. As I walked, I wondered why people who gave you money always told you not to spend it all at once.

After grabbing some breakfast I hit the road again. I’ll be there in no time, I thought, as the odd car meandered by, slow moving, driven by people who seemed content and in possession of knowledge that I lacked. Happy, knowing people passed me for a few hours. In due time I concluded that maybe a bit of the medicine I was sure I’d brought with me would take away the peculiar shroud that was draped over everything.

I had the familiar feeling of being transparent. Coming and going, this way and that, people were seeing right through me. Coaxing them from where they hid, I popped a couple of pills after going back to the truck stop to get a Coke to wash them down with.

Oh God, I thought, I really hope I am not schizophrenic; they could be wrong, those bastards. I considered that they might have made me sick for the rest of my life as part of my punishment for breaking the law. Suddenly I was angry; outraged at the loss of perception I’d had to endure. It had only been a matter of a few hours earlier that I had exited an excellent ride so very close to my destination of Edmonton. I had then been elated and thinking back, I wondered what had happened

Frustrated by the foul mood that had crept up on me so quickly, I started to walk and eventually happened upon a small park adorned by picnic tables and benches. I opted for a table, as I didn’t want to risk falling asleep on a bench like the stereotypical bum.

Yes, I was angry because I was ill, but the salt in the wound was that too often I figured I had no one to blame but myself. It was somehow my fault, I’d been handed exactly what I deserved. It was dished up hot and I was told to swallow. Such a big slice of humble pie, I was sure, was never so nauseating. I took another pill. I felt like crying and in order to block it all out I willed myself to sleep with my head on the tabletop. There was a rainy day feeling stuck in my throat.

When I woke the sun said it was half past one. I was calm, serene and I felt pliable in the sense that most anyone could bend me to suit his or her designs. Maybe, I mused, that’s what psychiatry had in mind, when they rearranged me.

The drugs would tranquillize me for a few days. By then, I would have built up a tolerance to the calming effect and I would stop taking the sweet tablets prescribed to me. You are a slug with an incredibly dry mouth and a perpetual yawn, I told myself, a piece of dead meat that can’t get up for anything, a loser who has to be looked after by Social Services. If at some point in my normalcy I had foreseen my days of sickness and knew they would last throughout adulthood unto death, I may well have tried to permanently resolve this dilemma.

I had yet to experience my illness when it was fully wakened to an excruciating, acute state of full-blown psychosis. I took medicine sporadically and could not for the life of me figure out why anyone would take it all the time. It would be some time before I figured that out, but eventually and regrettably I would understand. At the time, as I stood, stalled, on my way to Edmonton, it was unacceptable to me that I would need the pills every day for life. It was my belief that the doctors were sorely mistaken and that they had misdiagnosed me.

I liked to second guess the doctors, to blame them and the other health care workers for the state of things. I did so frequently in my mind, yet no one was really to be blamed. Though I was far from believing it, I too was blameless in the matter of my sickness. I couldn't control the onset or course of a disease whose roots were biological.

Eventually I was picked up by some kind soul and then others of similar ilk and was in Edmonton that same day, in time to see the push, shove and hustle of its nightlife, played out on a concrete playground under the luminous pinpoints known as stars.

Chapter Eleven

I ambled around the city a bit. After a time I found myself in front of a downtown park with benches in it. I was drawn to pass some time there, to rest, revive and once ready, to propel myself forward.

From where I sat I could see people moving everywhere on the Western streets, some commanding a skin-deep respect by the way they walked and looked at you stone faced while others, wishing to go peacefully from one place to another, did so without being noticed. There were many of those who had ridden the boom of the west hanging around. They always stood out – you could almost always tell them from the locals. They were prone to getting extremely drunk and spending freely, always expecting good times in return. It seemed that they always wanted a good time.

The solitude of the road was not to be found in the city, but that didn't matter much - being Mr. Lonely Hearts on the side of the highway had worn pretty thin in the time it had taken to hitchhike from Toronto to Edmonton. I didn't want to travel around like a hobo anymore and vowed that I would cut anything hobo-like out of my image. I promised myself that I would shave every day, buy some decent clothes and find some work. I would learn soon enough though, that vows are easily forgotten when traveling the highway has a hold on you. Hitchhiking was like seeing the country but with a bit of an edge – you never knew what was coming your way.

In the meantime, I welcomed the liveliness and variety of the city, the different faces, the sullen, menacing heavies, their antithesis, those who weren't looking for any trouble and others who seemed afraid; hookers and their clientele – the painted women, some beautiful, some bored, some brazen, and some seemingly bashful, happy to have a nondescript man in tow. Everything was punctuated now and then by the shock of a staggering drunk in his own world. It was a slice of life that seemed foreign after being on the road. I was once again in a world within a world.

“Stay put. We'll pick you up in two shakes.” I had moved from bench to phone booth, passing the prostitutes who stopped primping when they saw me and the drug dealers who similarly quit pitching their wares when I was in their vicinity. Well, it seemed so anyways.

I had called my brother and couldn't help wondering who the 'we' were that he'd spoken of. I didn't like meeting new people. I feared it and, in spite of myself, became increasingly ingratiating the longer a new social situation dragged on. I went belly up and exposed my jugular. I wouldn't make eye contact and I mumbled. I repelled people with submissiveness and they left me alone. I had to protect myself somehow; I had to avoid clutter in my head.

An hour passed and I was about to phone my brother again when he and his friend reached a stop in a loud, gaudy convertible. Having stood around waiting for a time, I was even less in the mood for a meet and greet session than usual. Nevertheless, I shook the driver's hand when he was introduced to me as Ted. We had different ideas about hand shaking and our attempt at greeting was largely unsuccessful. I settled into the back seat. We drove and though at first I found the backseat cold, in no time I began to wish we'd just drive forever, soothed by the unruffled darkness.

As we left the city's core behind I began to feel less defined by what seemed to give others a leg up on me, a feeling of being see-through that made me self-conscious to an extreme. Freed to think I did so, regarding my new acquaintance through quizzical, veiled eyes. I surmised that anyone who drove a convertible must be a bit of an extrovert, a person who needs to be noticed. I laughed scornfully to myself.

My brother had yet to speak to me. His silence reaffirmed the belief I had, that my family held me accountable for my supposed illness. You're getting paranoid I thought to myself and then I wondered: did I just talk out loud? I was suddenly praying, please God let my private thoughts be private. Part of me was convinced that the two up front, one as familiar as the favourite ball glove I had to take absolutely everywhere and the other as foreign as a Chinese dictionary, already knew everything I was thinking. I fished out my phial and two tablets discreetly traveled to their new home in my stomach.

The hands of time, when one is nervously going somewhere unfamiliar, can pass with a terrible quickness. You're where you fear being before you know it. It was not surprising then that shortly after the wind in my hair had helped me to shed some anxiety and I started to enjoy the ride to Bob's place, we were there.

It seemed that, in a few twisted minutes I went from a park downtown to scrubbing myself in a hot shower. My fear of strangers had made my stomach feel raw inside. I hid in the shower until I found myself numbed by the steadily pounding spray whose force per unit area and warmth managed to wash some shyness away. With a few inhibitions having backed off, I went and joined the others in front of the TV. The downtown exodus was a dim memory, and, for the moment, the journey from Toronto to Edmonton forgotten.

No one had taken notice of me when I entered the room and that was fine. Being invisible was something I was learning to be thankful for. I didn't want to be obviously anywhere – being a specter-like person was great. I wanted to relax, to enjoy a special relationship with peace and with quiet. Cagey, like a church house rat on the scent of something half rotten, I made myself comfortable on the couch without disturbing a soul. Part way through the show my pills took effect and though I felt strong enough to fight sleep, it had me as it always did.

When I woke in the middle of the night, it was chilly. Someone had thrown a blanket over me. Most likely Ted's girlfriend Katy, I thought, she seemed nice. I sat cross-legged in the dark and rolled a cigarette. It was cold and, shivering, I pulled my blanket tightly around myself. I wondered what I would do now that I had reached the end of the line.

"Go back," I said aloud and laughed at myself.

Out of the shadowy corner, I heard a rustling that sounded like tree leaves in a mild breeze. It was a noise that laughed back at me.

"Who's there?" I asked, wishing my voice were more assertive.

"Hey, Carmen," went the reply.

"Who's there?" I repeated.

"Carm. Carmen."

I flicked my lighter. By its flame I found a table lamp and turned it on. Looking around I could plainly see that no one else was present, yet I hadn't heard anyone leave the room. How could I have heard anyone speak, I wondered, if no one was there? The voice had been clear; it had belonged to someone. I was more than bewildered. When sleep finally returned to bewitch me against my will, a bright room greeted it; I had turned on every light I could find.

The next morning when I began to wake I didn't do so abruptly, as you might expect someone who'd experienced a nocturnal fright would. I came to slowly in a room filled with a great deal of giggling and whispering. I caught part of a sentence and some stifled laughter. "Scared of the bogey man, I'd say."

At that something snapped and wide-eyed, I jumped quickly to my feet. My brother and his friends were standing there taking me in, curiously, without sympathy. I thought that they were probably wondering why I had to sleep with all the lights on and that was a good guess.

"Afraid of the dark, brother?"

I shrugged, a "who me" shrug. "We pay the hydro here, you know," he continued and as he walked away I knew I'd embarrassed him.

"I'll give you some money for hydro," I told the others.

"Don't worry about it," went the reply. Later that day I went looking for work.

I had no skills to lay claim to. Leastwise I'd none that could be of much use; my rusty skills with a clarinet weren't needed. My ability to read at a level that went beyond what I'd learned in school was not marketable. For a small man I could lift fairly well. I could handle a broom, wash dishes and the like. I was determined to find something and mere days after arriving in town I found myself walking home, cold and soaked to the bone after working at washing other people's dirty cars. I was a full time car scrubber. I could pay my share of the hydro and leave the lights on if I wanted to. I could fall asleep with the TV on.

Every day at lunch, I went to the cavernous restaurant next to the car wash and wolfed down a hamburger and a plate of fries. One day I listened, between ravenous bites of my daily bread, as one of the waitresses told me that they were looking for a busboy to start as soon as possible. I thought starting at the bottom in the hospitality business would be a good idea and filled out an application. I was hired on the spot. I moved from the carwash and trudging around feeling like a puddle had tried to swallow me, to a nice dry restaurant where the work wasn't too hard and the waitresses gave me ten percent of their tips. It didn't take them too long to understand that if they didn't cough up the ten percent, I'd take it from the tables. Most of them paid me fair and square.

When everything had been going well for a while, I again came to the conclusion that I didn't need any medication. I stopped taking it completely, without consulting a physician.

From the time of that decision my world began to slide out of control. The life I called mine would soon become too far gone to be worth much to me or anyone else. The disease I grappled with would find a permanent foothold and would drag me to depths I had never dreamed existed.

One day I was clearing tables when a pretty girl spoke to me.

"You look very sad," she said, smiling softly.

"Just one of those days," I replied absently and went about my work. So I was sad, so what? The next day found her at the same table. As I passed, keeping my distance, she beckoned, shyly.

"Come here, sit for a minute."

"Sure," I said, smiling, falsely cheerful, not wanting her to see that I was still sad.

"What's on your mind," I asked.

"Look," she blurted, "will you read my poems."

"Okay," I said, "jeez, I'd be honoured."

"You can keep them overnight."

"I'll look at them," I said, bashfully.

We sat until I was told to get back to work and so began our brief romance. Our relationship was made of gestures, smiles, poetry and sad eyes gazing into sad eyes. It was an event that took root, prospered, bloomed and died within the confines of the four walls of a restaurant, an establishment in the business of making money, not inspiring affection. Somehow poetry flourished among the clatter of dishes and orders being bellowed.

Her visits to the restaurant became precious. At the height of our bistro passion she gave me her phone number. I didn't draw a connection, as day passed day and I didn't phone, that there might be a relationship between my not calling and her visits to the restaurant becoming less frequent. Ah, if only she could have forced the telephone issue, or otherwise kept her number to herself.

Eventually she was nothing but a fuzzy image. I remembered what a warm smile she would direct my way and how it could make me feel like cupid had thrown a butter knife at me with great force, trying to pierce my heart but only managing to wound a part of it.

She was a memory. I wished Cupid would twist his bloodstained blade he'd put in me and put me out of my misery. I kept seeing her wherever I went, her blonde hair and alluring manner. Still, I didn't call her. Eventually I misplaced her number. She must have thought I'd betrayed her. How could she know otherwise, that I couldn't call her initially because, for some reason, I had believed that we were better off without each other and that later on I didn't call her because I didn't know her number?

When all was said and done, I had been a bit selfish; it had been about me, not her. I had been more than vaguely afraid of being dumped and was convinced that her family, friends, pets, minister and so on would find me unsuitable, lacking too much to be considered a serious wooer.

I kept picturing her father telling me to go away. I mean, I was supposed to be mentally ill. I'd been to jail. My history made me concede defeat before the fight began. In the end, I sent her flowers and retired into my strange world. You have probably have hurt her, I thought; what gave you the right?

It was with chagrin that I eventually realized she was quite possibly off with someone else, barely even remembering my name. Still I didn't call her to find out one way or another and I never saw her again except when I lost my footing while wrestling with my psychosis and thought I saw her every day, glaring at me, glaring her disgust for me, the rat who'd betrayed her affection.

Chapter Twelve

It didn't take much for me to become remorseful, to don my hair shirt in a way that would seem a touch vigorous for even the most contrite man. I believed too gravely that amends weren't always easily made. However, what can be done, I wondered, with a brain that was losing ground daily.

I was no longer sure exactly what I'd done or exactly when I'd transgressed. That we had lost touch was just one snippet of her and me that I felt guilty about. I could have tried to kiss her. I could have heaped more praise on her poetry than it deserved. I could have complimented her more and given her gifts that I could afford on a busboy's wage. I heaped the weight of that and more on my shoulders where it sat, a bully. I thought about her and her feelings all the time. I'd never thought of myself as a bad man who would want nothing more than to hurt women like her, yet I believed I had in some way damaged her.

I should have called her; I may have hurt her tender feelings by not doing so. Or, I wondered, ignoring the feeling of my ego being tweaked unpleasantly, had she decided it would be best to scratch loving me from her to-do list and deliberately done so by not coming to the restaurant? Should I somehow try to make things right? Round and round it went. At least you respected her, I thought, at least you didn't try to take advantage of her when her guard was down.

Whatever the reasoning, it became plain to me that I was in debt to the overall scheme of things. I decided as penance to forsake what had become a reasonably soft and comfortable existence with Bob and friends and to hit the road again with the cosmopolitan city of Vancouver as my destination. I decided I would take no medicine and, as a further expression of remorse, I would allow myself but one very small bag for clothing and anything deemed essential. It was Friday and in three days, I would be gone, dragging a brand of righteousness gotten through self-penalization, behind me. On a whim I would also take my clarinet.

The weekend went by quickly. I told my housemates on Saturday that I was going. I left out the reason behind the rhyme. The truth was personal. Please, I wanted to ask them, don't wonder why.

I knew my name; people had always called me Carmen. I understood that some people also knew me as a fool when I told them the logic behind some of the ways I thought, or things I said or did. That being said, in my mind I was sure I'd done something fundamentally evil. I believed I had neglected someone who had counted on me for a type of friendship I had offered and had not been good for. I was convinced in a larger-than-life way that I had put some terrible hurt on a woman who had been vulnerable. I didn't try to explain that to anyone. In truth I barely understood the logic myself.

My brain was manipulating my emotions while it backfired, while it was losing its flimsy hold on reality. Any reasonableness I had left was in the process of being dismantled by a disease that was turning out to be more serious than I had ever believed it would be. In a few weeks, my muddled psyche would deteriorate further and I would become more disturbed than I had ever been. Over the next few weeks, I'd spiral downwards and then nosedive into the pea soup heaviness of utter confusion.

I was having a breakdown. There was no looking back. I didn't have any time for the professional help I badly needed. I had to stay the course and repent, for I had transgressed against that without which there would be no life – love.

Things would never be the same. As I left parts of myself scattered behind me on that trip I, not surprisingly, felt less and less like myself. Still, I believed I was doing the right thing and I held onto that like a man lost at sea holds onto the most secure piece of flotsam he can find. Self-sacrifice pays off down the road, I told myself. All would be right. Maybe self-sacrifice would lead me to an emotive healing and I'd be better than ever. Say, how do you spell Messiah complex, anyways?

I caught a ride on the first day of my trip with a man and woman who were going to Vancouver. "That's fantastic," I said, "can I go all the way with you? Could you take me with you?"

"I don't see why not," the woman answered.

I sensed that she held most of the good cards in the deck and that she always would. Her boyfriend seemed to play a minimal role.

The Captain and Tenille, Sonny and Cher, Lucy and what's his name. I thought I'd try to remember as many man/woman duos as I could. Mork and Mindy, Romeo and Juliette, Fred and Ginger, Oedipus and his mother... Mercifully, a joint was handed to me and I lost my train of thought.

It seemed that joints were passed around forever. I was looking out of a window at a sky that spread up and out gloriously when someone rolled said window down and fresh air flooded the vehicle. I looked down and saw my clarinet, assembled and cradled in my loving arms and wondered how it had got there and who had assembled it. I began to play. I closed my eyes and played, intensely, yet soft and with feeling, melodically yet without reason. I stopped and rubbed a cheek dry.

"It's like a poster, isn't it?" said the lady with all the power.

"You said it," I said, though I didn't have a clue as to what she meant.

She laughed, we all laughed. In time I fell asleep with my head resting uncomfortably on a hard, vinyl covered armrest. The last thing I saw was an overflowing ashtray. Not surprisingly, I dreamt about cigarettes. Some would call it a nightmare, but I called it a good dream for in it there was always someone at the ready to hand me a smoke when I needed one. I would always have one handy and never have to bum again.

I woke. Day turned to dusk and then night. As far as I knew the earth had always worked the lights that way, though part of me wondered if there wasn't another way that was kept hidden from me. Who really knew what went on when you were sleeping or in a town once you'd left it?

I got used to the darkness and the feeling of security it provided. I was laying still in the backseat, collecting my wits as I relaxed. The radio was playing softly while I absently wondered if I would be able to sleep through the night. We turned off the highway and began to bump along a crude road. I grew a little nervous and was about to stick my head up when we came to a stop.

“Well,” the woman said to her friend, who, I learned, was Roger, “make your fire.”

“Sure,” he replied, and I thought I heard some dejection in his voice.

I sat up and pushed on the car’s heavy metal door, jumped out and ran back and forth stretching my legs a bit before approaching Roger and offering my services.

“How’d you know I was going to make a fire,” asked Roger, who had just been standing, staring at the ground. He was still sullen or so it seemed.

“I heard you,” I replied, unaware that anyone would call what I had been doing eavesdropping.

“Well,” he muttered while looking at me, “you shouldn’t listen to other people’s conversations. You never know what you’re going to hear.”

I walked away. I heard him call for me to come back but I kept going. Let him build his own damned fire.

I checked the surrounding campsites for signs of other life forms but none could be found – no humans, aliens, wolves or bears. What was it with those two, I wondered, they don’t seem very close. I trudged back in their direction. I was beat and just wanted to curl up in the back seat with an extra sweater keeping me warm. On arriving at our digs for the night, I saw Roger lying on the ground, under some blankets, near his pathetic fire

“What’s up, Rog,” I asked, “Aren’t you the man of the family?”

“She’s not family, man,” he grumbled, “she picked me up about an hour before she stopped for you.”

The next day the sparse glow of dawn’s light had barely had time to come and go, when I woke to language that would make the swarthiest sailor blush.

“What in the hell’s going on?”

“She’s left us, man, out here in the middle of nowhere.”

His frenzied behaviour startled me into remembering the night before, when I had looked at a sky full of stars and questioned myself. What are you doing out here, nowhere in particular, surrounded by nothing but critters and ghosts? Sleeping on the ground is irresponsible; there are people worried about you. I had then laughed because I couldn’t readily think of anyone who would be too concerned. After awhile, as the fire feebly hissed and cracked as though it lacked confidence, I felt I was exactly where I belonged. I had fallen asleep with twigs in my hair and stars in my eyes as Roger muttered in his sleep. And lo, the next morning, I found myself left high and dry, abandoned with a stranger.

I gave Roger, who, it seemed I was stuck with, a cigarette and lit it for him.

“Go smoke,” I advised, “walk around the campgrounds and see what you find. She might still be around.”

“Sure boss,” he said and he looked like he meant it. I shuddered against my will.

I couldn’t blame the young lady for ditching us in the dark, but I didn’t like how I was secretly blaming Roger for our misfortune. I was no better than him. Sure he was a little dirtier, a touch

on the ripe side, but who knew his story anyways?

All of a sudden somebody struck fear into me as they grabbed my head and twisted slowly, making as if to break my neck. I struggled.

“Bang, bang, you’re dead!”

Breaking free I whirled around.

“Jeez, Roger, don’t do that again. You want me to have a heart attack? ”

“Okay, boss,” he said and straightening up to an impressive height, he saluted me mockingly.

We hit the road none too soon, heading west. Over the day or so that I knew him, Roger and I sold my clarinet in a bar, spent all the proceeds on beer in a few different bars, and hopped a freight train, a feat that nearly led to my decapitation. We slept, we argued, Roger propositioned me and I jumped off the train. Three hours after jumping I was in Vancouver.

Chapter Thirteen

If one found oneself in Vancouver after sundown, without much more than two well-worn pennies in their threadbare pocket or plastic purse, he or she would be wise to find an extraordinary agency that uses after hours space to help the pathologically jinxed; the offices of Emergency Welfare. When I first arrived in Vancouver, I put my coin in the slot and dialed them.

The office in which I would plead my case was an offshoot of the regular, Monday to Friday, nine-to-five branch of Social Services. This program was designed to help an array of individuals; those who were in the grip of a scowling addiction or one whose person was being crushed by mental illness. Similarly, if you were a destitute prostitute or one who found himself homeless and without the knowledge of exactly how you came to be that way, without a cent to your name or the self-respect you were born with, there was hope.

Anything that held one captive and was desirous of whispering in their ear, "You blew it", was the enemy. Emergency welfare whenever possible, by supplying aid, warred against the enemy, yet, when one looked around the enemy was still alive and well.

The forces of evil saw to it that those on the skids always seemed to have just enough to live on, with a heavy emphasis on drugs and alcohol as essential fodder. Clearly, some black purpose was met by the destitute remaining so. Emergency Welfare couldn't save everyone from everything, the cracks one can slip through get wider and deeper with each successive misstep, but they could help you regroup for two or three days at a time.

After I called them and was satisfied, having spoken to a social worker, that the office would be open for a while, I started out lackadaisically on my way towards rescue. After a few minutes I began walking with increased energy as paranoia and suspicion blotted out most thoughts except the one that said they were going to close early to spite me. Late night welfare I thought and shook my head, all the while making haste. I couldn't help noticing as I scurried, that even beautiful downtown Vancouver had its share of bums.

"So, let me get this straight. You're here from the province of Ontario; you have no money or source of income and are in need of shelter. Oh yes, and medication for, hmmm, let's see here, schizophrenia. That sounds very serious. How is it that you were allowed to come all this way?"

I wanted to tell him that they no longer chained people like me to the wall of some dirty, musty old room, letting us out once in a while for the occasional ice bath or some insulin shock therapy, but I played along instead.

"Well, they really don't know I'm here. I needed to get away and had always heard about the beauty of Vancouver, so, I came here. By the way, it is, indeed what everyone said."

"What's that?"

"Beautiful. Vancouver really is a beautiful city. It makes me feel very good. What I'm really starting to think I need though, would be my meds. I'm getting incredibly paranoid."

While speaking about my ongoing problem with paranoia I grew hot and then cold. I shivered and thought that I had talked too much. Outside two kids were yelling to each other. It sounded like kid one said: "Big yap, big yap," while kid two said: "Talk too much, big yap, talk too much." Things were starting to go wrong. I closed my ears as best I could, without using my hands.

The worker was wearing a pair of yellow tinted glasses that partially hid his eyes. They painted him with the brush reserved for dubious people. His movements became furtive and mouse-like. I was in the middle of trying to decide what he'd done when he removed his eyewear and presented me with two very Christ-like eyes, blue circles filled with large black pupils and compassion. Shyly, I dropped my gaze. I was convicted and felt a little foolish.

I was in the presence of someone who cared about the castaways and cripples of this world and spent his time trying to help them. This man, I thought, is someone who has principles and acts upon them. I was, in a way, intimidated.

The Great One spoke: "I already know enough about your situation," he informed me, "that I can assure you that you qualify for assistance."

He asked for particulars. Particulars, particulars, Christ never asked for particulars. This guy, like everyone else, was some kind of poser. Part of me was still sane enough to supply him with the required information. As we went about recording the facts of my life, I grew bored and impatient. I was no longer awestruck

The paperwork was finished and he smiled at me in his caring way.

"Did they teach you that in school," I asked, "do you practice that at home?"

"Excuse me?"

"Do you practice that look, you know, the look that says I care. Did they teach you that in school?"

"Well," he said quietly, "I'm not so sure I know what you mean. I don't go home and pull faces in front of the mirror, if that's what you're suggesting. As for school, well," he laughed, "I've pretty much forgotten what I learned there."

As I left the office with enough vouchers for three days worth of food and shelter, I looked at him and said, "You know, you're not so much different from me. You're just on other side of the desk."

"Goodnight," he said.

I was then out the door, making my way to the Marble Arch Hotel where I would spend the weekend and Monday.

Unadorned need had me by the lapels. I had no options. It was my gloomy room or the hard pavement outside and the knowledge that anything could happen there. I decided I would spend a few days at the Marble Arch Hotel, Skid Row, Vancouver. Surely it would be better than walking the streets day and night.

A while after I had taken charge of my room I was pulled from reflecting on the unfairness of life by the sound of two men struggling, grunting and cursing and the sight of their flailing fists, as seen from my window. As they struck one another's flesh, I decided that it would definitely

be unwise to look a gift horse in the mouth. I had been given three free days shelter and I would use them up. I didn't want to be the guy getting pummeled in the alleyway, particularly if it was just because I had nowhere better to go. I muttered a quick prayer to God; Please God, don't let anyone beat me up in a back alley.

I was kept awake for a short while posing as eternity. I believed that the night would go on forever. Seconds stopped to smell the coffee, sulking minutes dragged their butts as though they would rather be elsewhere. Music that was born in the bloated belly of the bar, belched its way upstairs throughout the night and flowed in chaotic fits and spurts through the cracks in my door. It seemed that whenever I was on the verge of falling asleep, in spite of the racket, there would be an argument or loud laughter in the dim, diabolic hallway outside my room.

More than once I got up to check the security of the door's lock. I didn't trust it. I was developing painfully unreasonable notions in spite of it. I became convinced that anyone could break my door down. The lock would give and the door would splinter. Once the demons posing as humans had reduced my door to toothpicks, what would they do to me? I refused to think about it in blunt terms. At long last, I slept for three hours, maybe four.

When I woke the light of day greeted me and put a different slant on things. I wasn't angry, indignant or frightened. I wasn't troubled by my living conditions, knowing that they were transient by nature. No one can be housed indefinitely and at no personal cost in any hotel, whether it is a decrepit place starved for guests or not. I caught myself singing and stopped, wondering if anyone could have heard me. Somehow, something signaled me, perhaps someone yelling or a car's horn, telling me that I'd had an audience. I laughed, shook my head in disbelief and then coughed the smoker's cough I'd had for a few years.

Still, I had no options. It was the Marble Arch for me. It was there that I wished to find relief. I wanted to hide from whatever force of wickedness it was that that was turning me into a delusional man full of fear and suspicion

For some time in the back of my mind, I had been tossing around the sentiment that things had to get better because they certainly couldn't get worse. Pretending, while I dressed, that I was someone dispensing unsolicited advice, I spoke out loud in a way that mocked anyone who had ever taken it upon themselves to sit atop a mountain and tell others what was wrong with them. "There's many fish to fry, young man. You're still very young and things will improve, life has just got to get better – it can't get any worse. Don't think it will always be like this, go get your pills, the bad stuff will go..."

Suddenly I thought, if it's all that bad why not begin constructively navigating the course in the only direction available – up? My thoughts drifted. Maybe I had hit bottom of a sort. Perhaps I'd been otherwise occupied and hadn't heard the dull thud that had announced my arrival.

I was getting ready to find a doctor to medicate me. I didn't really care what he gave me as long as it helped me deal with a muddle-headedness that alternated with edgy clarity. After double, triple and quadruple checking, I felt fairly confident that my room key was in my pants pocket. Turning back, as I closed the door on my humble mess masquerading as a pile, I felt a prick of sadness. There lay most everything I owned on the globe, where I had little choice but to live out my days due to gravity; everything that was mine could be taken in at a glance. I locked the door and, with a sour taste in my mouth checked for my key again. I cursed myself for doing so and then made my way to the archaic elevator.

When I found a restaurant that would honour my meal ticket I bartered successfully with the old man working the counter. Food would have to wait – in exchange for a pack of cigarettes I gave him my voucher. The cigarettes were less than the price of the meal and I watched for a moment as he leaned back in his chair fanning himself with the voucher. He's acting as if he'd just won the lottery, I thought and smiled vaguely.

As I was leaving, he called me back and said, "We can't have you starving to death." He gave me a chocolate donut.

"Thanks," I said.

While looking at him, I began tearing it apart as though I were a suspicious animal made bold by starvation. Most of that morsel, a humble fraction of the world's chocolate supply, was gone before I was even out the door and back on the sidewalk. I heard the old man yell, "Come again!"

I went in search of any hospital that my sugar-propelled legs would carry me to. I asked so many people for directions that even I was starting to look at myself as a public nuisance. I'm sure it wasn't persistence that had me eventually going through the automatic doors of a hospital. I'd never been particularly good at following directions and was so confused by those I'd been given that there had to have been some other-worldly force or being that directed my path that day and eventually led me to where I could take a final desperate stab at helping myself.

Perhaps that which was unseen, whatever it was that crusaded on my behalf and kept me out of harm's way, perhaps that force was doing me one last favour. While it had the stamina, while it still had a shred of belief in me, it was taking me to where I could have the benefit of a medicine man and his secrets. My world was collapsing. I saw it in the tilt of a stranger's hat whose perfect slant hurt me inside my head, a fist on a bruise. I felt it in the air. Within a few days I would be moving fast on the little worn path to a much discussed place, madness - intriguing and frightening.

Chapter Fourteen

So, mere days before I shed my Levis for a straight jacket and began marching to an unmelodic tune, I found myself reclining in an overstuffed chair in a room that didn't belong in a hospital. I was drinking old coffee from an urn I'd discovered while waiting for the doctor. I thought that I heard soft music, soothing, angelic, not of this world. I wondered if I should chance lighting up a cigarette and answered myself by hunting for an ashtray. I was caught in the act a few scant seconds later, right in the middle of exhaling a huge, pungent plume of smog.

"Here, let me get you an ashtray," the funny looking man said, and then added, "I'm Dr. Smith."

"Pleased to meet you, sir," I responded, emphasizing the 'sir'.

My attempt at being respectful wound up sounding false to me. I was trying to hide a certain lack of respect I felt for Dr. Smith. When I first looked at him I had wanted to laugh. He didn't look much like a doctor, nor, I would discover did he act like one. He took his sunglasses off and brushed the hair out of his eyes. I could see the intelligence. Yes, I thought, he's a doctor all right; he has the look of one.

I knew that he had been briefed by the nurses when he summed up their slanted observations to me. "The ladies at the front desk assured me that you could use a look see," he informed me. "We usually have a regular doctor check you out before they call me in, but we're a little understaffed at the moment."

I'd had a little run in with the nurses. They had insisted that I fill out forms that I believed to be nonsense. When the nurse at the front desk discovered from the same paperwork that I had been diagnosed as having schizophrenia she kicked the word around loudly enough that I was overcome with the shame of the mentally ill. I ended up in a chair in the waiting room that afforded me the most privacy possible. I wouldn't have been surprised if steam was coming out of my ears or a wisp of smoke was laughingly perched atop my head.

"So, you're the psychiatrist, right?" I asked, while at the same time wondering what the nurse's true assessment of me had been, the one for the shrink's eyes only.

"Yes,' he said, "mmm hmmm.' And you're the schizophrenic, if I'm not mistaken."

I smiled.

"You know, my mother wanted me to be a lawyer, a regular doctor, a baby doctor, anything but a psychiatrist. She said – it's so dangerous. You're not dangerous are you, Carmen?"

"Not in the least, no, but – ah, no offence, but, would you not consider people with your mother's views to be a little dangerous, in their own way, that is?"

"That's a thought provoking observation, Mr. Playford, you're an intriguing man," he said after a moment, and I wondered how he knew that I was intriguing.

"I've never thought of her that way before, but I do consider that type of thinking to be, well, yes, a little dangerous, though in my mother's defense she is quite behind the times." He

laughed and continued, “You see, Carmen, even a psychiatrist can’t help but make excuses for his mother’s flaws, whether she’s in the wrong or not. Do you love your mother?”

I assured him that I did.

So we had a few laughs and talked for a while. He gave me a prescription for thioridazine, a drug that would control the symptoms of my schizophrenia. I was supposed to see him the following week at his office. I would never make it. Our schedules would conflict – while he was waiting for me, absurdity would be doing its best to woo me, while hiding itself behind a mask that replicated the countenance of wisdom.

“It’s funny but it’s true – you have a mission of considerable religious significance,” the voices would say in many different ways, all of them disconcerting and all of them completely and oddly reasonable.

There were ways of being that I’d never dreamed possible, a descent into a type destitution where scarcity of reason was the order of the day, the soup de jour served up cold and greasy. I would have been alarmed had I not forgotten what common sense was. Ugly times had come to roost.

The signs had pointed towards mental sickness for years. I should have heeded those signs and applied fitting measures. I was a skinny bear in a late autumn snowstorm, searching for a den. In my time of need I was alone. In a manner of speaking, it was too late to stick my finger in the dyke; I’d only wind up getting soaked.

I had managed to pry a welfare cheque from the tight fist of Social Services and was walking and toying with the smallish wad of cash in my pocket when it hit me and I cracked just a little more. I would surely break soon. I flagged down a taxi and went straight to the bus depot.

I had suddenly understood that dangerous times were ahead and that I had been preparing for them all of my life. The world would never be the same if I didn’t step in and take control of its spiritual situation. I wondered how I should use the powers that had been bestowed on me by God and told myself that the answer to that would become clearer with time. All I knew for sure was that I had to get to Edmonton as quickly as possible. The world was in peril. The brave attempts at smiling and the teary eyes of those around me as they watched me leave Vancouver later that day left no doubt – the time for action had arrived.

I boarded the bus and looked around. I wanted a seat near someone who could make clear what awaited me. Eventually I sat beside a man with a white beard. It occurred to me that he was more than likely one of the wise men of the Bible. I decided to feel him out.

“Where are your friends?” I asked, in a furtive way, taking care to be as friendly as I could be given the question. I waited on his answer - to me we were about to share secret knowledge.

“What the hell do you want?” he asked back.

“C’mon,” I said with a wink, “the other ones, where are they?”

He got up, grabbed his bag and found a seat elsewhere. He obviously doesn’t know how important I am, I thought, and nestled down in my seat, not giving the incident a second thought.

Edmonton found me spent, living in a time and space that was inexplicable. I had finally snapped and entered a state of psychosis. I hadn't taken the medicine that Dr. Smith had prescribed and was so delusional that I hadn't the slightest clue that I was ill.

I had tried to socialize on the trip from Vancouver but had been rebuffed at every turn. At one point I found a seat across the aisle from a young couple slightly older than me.

"Where you goin'," I asked as I sat down, already knowing the answer – Edmonton?"

"Well let's see," the young man said, stroking his chin, "we were going to the next major city west of Vancouver, but since we would have had to swim most of the way... who the hell are you anyways, why do you want to know anything about us? Tell you what, I'll look you up in Edmonton and punch your bugle so hard you'll sneeze out of your arse for the rest of your life, okay, Mr. Friendly?"

I lurched away, confused.

Someone complained to the driver. He pulled off the road and strode to the back of the bus quickly, for all appearances very charged up. Perhaps for the sake of a ragtag group of weary travelers who made up his audience, he warned me sternly and in an unnecessarily loud voice to stay in my seat or he would put me off the bus. It was around that time, I figure, that the tenuous threads tying me to reality went from frayed to severed. I was adrift.

I looked around meekly at the other passengers. Why are they doing this to me, I wondered, why do they exclude me, why do they threaten me? Are they evil? Are they trying to keep me from entering spiritual warfare in the city of Edmonton? I decided that my mission was something they knew nothing about - that I was saddled to truths of the gravest import that went beyond their scope of understanding. I was horrifyingly alone.

The fate of the entire human race, yes, that was every human soul still breathing on God's green earth, demanded that I stay in my seat while I rode that Greyhound bus from one city to another. I had to complete my journey without inciting the old heave ho. I was to play an integral role in keeping mankind alive and well and for that reason and that reason only, I remained in my seat.

Eventually I departed the bus, a tube filled with ill will, and walked away from the terminus in Edmonton. A few sneering goodbyes followed me. As a sort of answer I started to sprint up and down the street. I was trying to gauge the extent of the damage that had been wrought upon Edmonton and, though my methods were unusual, I knew that I'd succeed.

Eventually, winded and confused, I sat on a patch of grass bordering the sidewalk. I had to admit that I didn't know exactly what it was that I was looking for. I recognized the stench of evil though.

I felt the grass under me. It felt like none other I had ever touched, it was sharp and rigid and it stung me in an odd way. The buildings, in fact the entire cityscape seemed sharp, jagged, as though everything had been constructed of broken pottery and glass. I thought of my brother.

My brother was in danger. I realized that saving him and his friends was the most important part of my mission, perhaps, I thought, protecting them was all I was supposed to do.

"This city's going to hell," I observed in an astonished, terrified whisper. I looked skyward in time to see what seemed to be a group of witches flying in a loose formation.

"God, no!" I hollered.

"Shut up, you stupid fool!" someone bellowed back.

I acquainted myself with one of downtown Edmonton's parks that night. I fell asleep quickly, hidden by a tree with my bag serving as a lumpy pillow. There was no room service and there was no wakeup call but that didn't matter. With dawn, the birds that knew the park as home could rival a call from any front desk.

I had slept for five hours or so when my they woke me with their clatter. After opening my eyes briefly I rolled over and slept further into the morning. Once I finally woke I shouldered my bag, hitched up my pants and started wandering, with my brother's place as an eventual destination.

I spent some time navigating the downtown streets, bewildered and uncertain as to where I was going. Though pedestrian traffic was mild I seemed to bump into others often. Eventually I decided to try bumming change.

"Got any spare change?"

"There's no such thing."

"Spare some change?"

"No, man – can you?"

And so it goes, you suffer the wisecracks and the hostility and you end up with a nice pocketful of quarters, dimes and nickels, with a few pennies thrown in like afterthoughts.

The money shines and makes a musical sound and I don't want to spend it. The weight of it is pleasant; it makes my pocket heavy with possibilities. Eventually on some level I realized that money is only special when you're buying something with it. After arriving at this conclusion I decided it was time to eat. That's how it happened that, while waiting for the arrival of my food, I thought I'd had the good fortune of locating my brother.

I had panhandled enough to afford a burger, ale, and some smokes with a bit left over. I sat at a table looking out onto the street, my preferred vantage point. I liked to watch people go by and speculate as to where they were going and why they were going there. I fancied that some of the women were people I knew and tried to engage them in eye contact.

From another table I heard the distinctive laughter of my older sibling. I got to my feet almost immediately and went to investigate. I peeked around a corner at the only other table in the restaurant that was occupied. He wasn't there. I performed a hasty but thorough walk about and realized that he wasn't even in the building. Anyone can make a mistake, I thought. Sitting down I started in on my hamburger, which had arrived during my stroll throughout the premises and eyeballing of the guests at the other table.

I didn't enjoy my meal much that day. The beer was flat, the burger was cold its bun soaked with grease, the tomato was half frozen, the onions too biting and there was a big black object in the ketchup that strongly resembled a fly. Well, it seemed that way.

An hour later I used what money I had left to board the bus to Bob's place. As I paid I wondered briefly what had become of the money I got from Social Services in Vancouver. Drawing a blank I shrugged my shoulders and put it from my mind. As the bus made its way I felt better and better. With each passing block I was closer to bringing the whole trip to an end. My main purpose for being in Edmonton had become the liberation of my brother from the evil that lurked everywhere. I sensed that my mission would soon be accomplished. I thought about what I would do when I walked through his door and I realized that I had no idea. You'll know what to do when you get there, I told myself. The important thing was to get there.

I pounded on the door, but no one answered. As my heart raced, my head throbbed, my face turned hot, my mouth went dry and my pupils quite likely dilated, my imagination had a field day. Decomposing bodies, messages written on the walls in blood, headless corpses wandering around, strangled cats underfoot...

I let myself in through the basement window and quickly proceeded to check the house for signs of wickedness. All was quiet upstairs and down. That was very good. It meant that any planned wrongdoing had yet to take place. Momentarily I thought everything was just too peaceful, like the calm before the storm and then quickly I discarded this thought. I didn't want to think that way. I sucked in the atmosphere and fell under its spell. My rage was overwhelmed. I slowed down and felt sleepy. I lit a smoke.

My back against the living room wall I smoked and thought of nothing in particular. My guard was down. I was feeling pleasant sensations about nothing and everything at the same time when I began to hear noises coming from Katy's room. It seemed that someone was trying to speak and I struggled to decipher the garble.

I thought whoever was on the other side the bedroom door was saying my name over and over, though I couldn't tell for sure. I grew embarrassed, thinking that whoever was inside the room might have impure reasons for calling out to me, to one who had recently become a holy man.

After listening to the murmuring for a time, I went and opened the door. Quickly, with drawn breath I opened the entrance to another world and waited for the worst it had to offer. What I saw were specks of dust playing in a shaft of light. I laughed, looked around, looked at the dust once more and then left my brother's peaceful home, much the way I had found it. As I walked down the street I couldn't help remembering and wondering: sure, everything seemed peaceful but just who did that damned disembodied voice belong to?

Chapter Fifteen

I moved into the single men's shelter, keeping tabs on my brother by reading the sky and interpreting what I read in the newspapers. I had no money and no means of getting any, except holding out my hand and hoping for the best. I knew that if I found a job the shelter would pay the first two weeks of my rent and supply two weeks' worth of food. I began to look for employment.

The people in charge of hiring where I tried to find work must have thought that I was a real head case. I'd ramble on about the end of the earth and the rising up of the citizens of Edmonton to fight against the termination of mankind. I wasn't shy in telling a potential employer that my success in spiritual warfare depended more than they could know on them hiring me to flip burgers, make pizzas, pump gas and so on. Some would laugh before they showed me the door. Others, wearing straight faces, firmly showed me the exit.

Thinking was a frustrating, fruitless endeavor. If I came up with a reasonable idea my mouth would be sure to misrepresent me. Some men at the shelter had realized this and liked to pick away at me. One guy enjoyed having me roll him a cigarette after each meal, that is, if I had tobacco. If I didn't have the weed he would bawl me out. He wasn't really amusing anyone but himself as far as I could tell. He, for example, was the only one who pissed himself laughing when he called me Fruit Loops, which he did often. Sometimes, when I was daydreaming, I would think to myself that when I was crowned with an ornately etched, sparkling crown for being a great friend of heaven and earth, I would teach him what being a man was by forgiving him completely.

I started to think about trying my hand at the carwash again. They were always advertising for people in the newspaper. If you could use a rag or a hose you were a shoe-in, you had a job for life if you could stand it that long. Stay there long enough and someday you'd be sure to be made supervisor or marry the owner's daughter.

So, with great effort I managed to keep most all of my strange thoughts to myself and grapple gamely with the application that sat on the table in front of me. Some of my answers, I knew, contained my own secret code. I shook my head – if anybody knew the information I was putting on this so called application, if they could but break the code they could make themselves a mint. I didn't pretend to know exactly what the mission, assignment or secret operation was that had need of my secret language and me. That was something that I didn't concern myself with. I did my part and the rest took care of itself.

“Do you like scrubbing?”

“Oh yes, sir.”

“And you don't mind getting wet - you're not a sissy that way are you?”

“No sir.”

“See you tomorrow, 9 a.m. Sharp.”

“So you mean that I have a job.”

“That’s right Einstein, See ya’ tomorrow.”

I walked away and later realized that I hadn’t thanked the guy or even said so long. I had a feeling that I should go back and express just how deeply I was indebted to him, for, as well as giving me a job, he had filled out a form for welfare stating that he had hired me. I could now leave the hostel. Welfare would pay two weeks rent by voucher to any landlord who would take me in.

I forgot about my new employer when I thought of having a place of my own and being away from all those sweaty bodies, lolling around on their beds, talking in their sleep, farting shamelessly, coughing and hacking, always on the lookout for an easy score. I wouldn’t miss the place. I was fast becoming a mark there, viewed as a chump and I was growing tired of it.

That afternoon I ate lunch quickly and ignored the bellowing of my scourge who was looking for a cigarette as usual. I went outside and hung around smoking one butt after another until I saw a friendly face and stopped it.

“Hey there ” I said, “Where can a guy get a room around here?”

“Well,” he answered, all smiles, “a bed doesn’t come much cheaper than where you’re standing right now. But if you want a room of your own then I’d recommend Edson Rooms down on 96th or maybe 97th street, I forget which. They’re cheap, but you know, you get what you pay for. My cousin stayed there. He liked it.”

My room was small and by no means bug-free. I had a bed with piss stains all over it. I had a sink and a table. The bathroom was down the hall. I wondered why anyone would wet the bed with a washroom so close and then figured he or she must have been drunk and passed out. Many of the other tenants seemed the type who would do just about anything for a bottle whose contents packed a punch.

I worked at the carwash for four days and then quit, telling my supervisor that I had a bad back and important business to take care of. She berated me, calling me a user among other defamatory names and then told me I’d have to wait a week for my pay.

“Now I take offense at the word user,” I began and was cut off.

“Get the hell out of here before I have someone throw you out. Damned lunatic.”

I thought better of taking offence to the word lunatic and left on my own steam.

With the two weeks rent the hostel had sprung for and the pay cheque I had coming, I figured I could stay about two and a half weeks longer at Edson Rooms. That’s okay; I thought, from what I read in the papers all is well with my brother. I wasn’t planning on staying all that long anyways; it was just somewhere that I was hanging my hat.

I started walking without destination, wandering and meeting people. I would babble about the end of the world. The odd individual, usually a senior as lonely as I was, would listen and politely pretend to follow my train of thought, but the majority would push me aside like cold peas on their plate at supper.

Now that I had left the carwash I remembered it fondly, how my thoughts had ebbed and flowed in harmony with the sound of soap meeting metal, lulling me into a pleasant state. Now

that the carwash was gone, my schizophrenia seemed to intensify, becoming an ogre that horrified me in my room.

One day towards the end of my stay at Edson Rooms I sought to escape the hallucinations in my room. They followed me though, out the door to the grimy street where they were alive and breathed the same air I did. I hadn't gone far when I found myself being berated by the alarming audio hallucinations that dogged me. I wasn't surprised when eventually I was directed to lie face downwards on the sidewalk by the same voices. People stepped over me and walked around me. Eventually I found myself enjoying the view. It was so cool and comforting on the cement.

Sometimes during those days absurd visions and thoughts took my breath away, making me laugh hard and then harder. This hilarity I believed to be divine, coming directly from God's throne and floating awhile in the Sea of Love and Mercy before it found me. Conversely, the fears I dealt with, I believed, could come from nowhere but the molten pit of hell. I could hear the tortured lament of the damned and I took to carrying a pocket size Bible.

With just a couple of days left to live in my sometimes cozy, oft distressing, skid row room, I had enough money to go to a local bar and drink for the afternoon. I met a man who was looking to exchange prescription drugs for money so that he could keep on drinking. I exchanged a bit of money for some pills, and finished my beer before making my wobbly way home. I went to bed forgetting all about the dope.

When I woke I rolled over and, while remembering where I was, felt the pill container digging into my leg. My head was throbbing so I took two of the tablets that the barfly had claimed were potent painkillers. I brought my chair to the open window and sat.

After awhile I gave my head a shake. The people on the street looked shiny, all the streetlights glared at me and passing cars were a blur of cold metal. I started to feel paranoid and mildly nauseous. I leapt from my chair by the window, turned off the light and lay down. It struck me that I could easily be watched through my window, that the technology existed that would allow anyone to observe me at any time they wished to. I started to shiver, either from the sudden cold I felt blowing into my room or the fear I experienced when I thought of being kept under scrutiny. It wasn't long until I made my way back into slumber in spite of the vibration that I'd become. I was just another man having a bad trip in his room, in the slums of Edmonton.

Satan had it in for me. I had, to his chagrin and at long last, figured out that I could only save one person at a time. With kindness, love and assorted other virtues as tools and weapons I was to dismantle the devil's work, doing my best to banish him from the lives of those I met. I was a godly door-to-door salesman with a special offer - to rid you and yours of bad spirits, and to do so, miraculously, free of charge. I worked soul-by-soul, a modern day faith healer. In my arsenal, I had the ability to affect other people's emotions. I could let them feel what I was feeling and this I did, in small doses. I would convey how strongly I felt about getting the evil out of their lives, let them know that I was willing to go the extra mile if they were interested. So, Satan had it in for me, his adversary.

I was developing a desire to turn people on to God, a yearning. Whenever I saved someone by using telepathy, another one of my powers, it was a punishable affront. I had transgressed against the devil who would then hurt my head with his own type of mind control, which was substantially more powerful than mine. So, I believed that I was attacked telepathically by the

devil when I helped in a small way to put people right with God, and further, I believed with all my fiber it was worth the pain the serpent inflicted on me if only to help one human find the path.

On my last night at Edson Rooms, I lay on the bed I'd become used to and looked at the drab walls. I was, in spite of everything, going to miss my room, my hole in the wall. I wasn't sure where I was going to go. As I was drifting into slumber I was thinking,

"Yes, God, let me be what you want me to be."

I was but scant seconds from losing myself in sleep when a voice came from thin air, saying,

"You are my angel."

Euphoria replaced the blood in my veins for a swift second and was gone. When I woke I filled my suitcase and then I left.

Chapter Sixteen

It was early October and the sky was a deep, dark blue. If you squinted you could imagine it to be the cold heart of a distant and mysterious lake. The demons from hell brought new tragedy to Edmonton, on an almost hourly basis. I witnessed one man staggering downtown and, though I heard someone nearby marvel at anyone who could be drunk before noon, I knew that he wasn't drunk, but possessed. I wanted to run to him and almost did.

Edson Rooms took on official status as somewhere that I used to live. All the other so called homes I'd occupied made room for their new cousin.

My cash, though I had been frugal, had run out. Money was like that with me – it would show me a good time for a while and then it would be gone. Every day I was looking more and more like a bum, like somebody who slept in bus shelters, parks, apartment lobbies or underground parking lots. While other people were snug in their beds I was the guy who could be found dozing over a 3 a.m. cup of hot water in the donut shop.

I picked cigarette butts off the cement and in public ashtrays, which was where the juiciest butts were, long, fresh and who cared about the lipstick. I took to hanging around burger joints at meal times. When a group left their table, I would check for anything edible, pieces of burgers, a few cold, salty fries, a watered down coke. Sometimes I'd score in a big way, sometimes it was all bun and sometimes I'd be spotted and told to leave.

Late one night, I had grown tired while staring into the blackness of night. I started walking and eventually came upon what appeared to be a heated bus shelter. While I soundlessly closed the door like a sneak, I was thinking excitedly that I might have found a home of my own. I decided to test it out. I was soon sleeping like I had never had a problem in my life.

Eventually I was stuck in a cold nightmare that presented me with a problem; what do you do when you are being struck repeatedly, how do you know you are the victim of an assault that began when you were soundly sleeping? How do you know that you aren't dreaming? All I could do was wake up as quickly as possible. Someone was, beyond doubt and reason kicking me in the chest and stomach. The advantage was clearly his. Upon seeing that I was awake he started yelling at me,

“Get the hell out of here before I give you worse... Goddamned bum.”

I needed no further prompting and hauled ass. When I was a safe distance away I yelled, “I may be a bum, but I'm not goddamned, take that to the bank, you stupid shit.”

Either he'd had his share of fun or he'd worn himself out with all his kicking and yelling, whatever the reason he didn't pursue me.

A few weeks passed. Each day was a challenge of trying to get by in a full-sized city that seemed strange, like it was home to a strain of beings that bore little resemblance to most of the people I'd known.

I finally gave in and ate at the soup kitchen; I had been too proud to do so but finally I wavered. Hunger can often overrule pride with a thunderous voice. I still found my own place

to sleep come nightfall. The hostel was a place I didn't trust. I may have been a bit different but I liked being bullied about as much as the next guy. Some nights I just walked around all night and the next day slept as long as they would allow me to in the public library downtown. They'd seen my type before.

I started to think about my brother and believed that something terrible was wrong. I couldn't put my finger on what the problem was. I tried a little telepathy but no one was receiving. I tried to believe that no news was good news.

It was an early morning in October and my brother's image fought for attention with my strong addiction to nicotine and the need for a coffee. When compared to tobacco, the need for coffee was a mere craving. I made a conscious decision to think about Bob later in the day and went to scare up a smoke or two. I was really hanging and didn't rule out being a touch intimidating if I had to.

Later I retired to a park that was thick with people my age. My disheveled appearance shouted schizophrenia. I imagined the way I looked at others to be sly and sneaky, perhaps even a bit devious as if I were always wondering, what's in it for me. Soon enough I found a patch of grass that was inviting and sat counting the cigarettes I had bummed, while my brother's image danced in my head.

In my mind he was smiling, stroking his beard and laughing. His long hair shone, his teeth sparkled and his eyes glittered. He was radiant with secret knowledge. With this glossy, polished image front and center, my musing on that autumn afternoon reached the natural conclusion that one who frequently entertained religious delusions would accept as an ultimate truth.

He was He, the alpha and omega, the beginning and the end. He was Jesus Christ. I was livid.

How could he let me go hungry? Why would he let me freeze? He wasn't my true brother, I knew that now that I was aware of his identity, but still, how dare he? I'd always thought that I knew him better than most anyone. I realized with a start that millions made that claim. But I'd grown up with him. I'd worn his old clothes. I'd caught his knuckleball when it needed work. Now I knew where that knowing look he wore had come from. Someone had conjured up his look and his wisdom in heaven. I realized that he'd left me to go hungry and cold because in his infinite understanding he had thought it was for the best. Well, I thought as I started to warm up to the whole business, I'm sure he knows what's good for me.

Then he started hee-hawing in my head. He was radiant, he was running the show but he was braying and laughing me to scorn. People were driving by and their radios were blasting the news that the 'holy man' had finally been clued in. I heard crowds of people laughing and someone yelled jubilantly in the distance, I heard it clearly and blushed – "Did you clean up the city yet?"

There was more laughter and I thought the moment would never pass. I was stranded in the park, anchored by fear and humiliation. I felt all the pain of a common beetle pierced by a pin through the thorax.

Oh yes, everything was clear now. Damn them, as soon as I could walk I was out of there. I'd hit the road and I'd find somewhere where I was welcome, a place free from the common

ingrates of Edmonton. Let them fight their own battles - I'd tried hard to save their city but I'd obviously failed.

"Hey man, you look kind of freaked. Are you okay?" I looked at the clear eyes of the young man speaking to me and I started to cry.

Chapter Seventeen

While standing on the border of the road, a path of dust, sand, gravel and small stones that sparkled vaguely, I remembered the man in the park, how he had given me a cigarette and how softly he had spoken. I remembered that he had walked away and come back with two coffees and a fresh pack of smokes. The coffee was too sweet and he'd bought cigarettes that weren't strong, but he was kind. I'd understood in my way that he was well meaning in word and deed. I hadn't been afraid of him. He had told me in a sad way of his brother who was in a hospital and would probably never be released.

"There's something wrong with my brother's mind," he'd said.

"Jeez, that's tough," I'd replied, wondering why he was telling family secrets.

He'd looked at me awhile, smiled and cleared his throat. "Where are you going," he asked. I wondered how he knew I was going anywhere.

"Oh," he answered, "you just look like a guy on the move."

A lull in our conversation followed.

"Come on," he said, "If you want I'll give you a ride to the highway."

After I'd grabbed my bag, we had made haste to leave the park behind. I had forgotten, by then, my brother and his true identity, but for the odd twinge of wonder at the craziness of it all. Was he who they said he was?

In what seemed a few moments we'd put twenty miles between the city and us and then I was alone on the highway with my benefactor's words ringing in my ears.

"You *are* worthwhile. I know you have suffered, believe me I know. Many people don't acknowledge your brand of suffering. Don't let them get you down. You're too good and you're too strong. Goodbye, Carmen."

He had sped off, leaving me alone in the cloud of exhaust fumes his u-turn left behind, standing at the side of the road, wondering what he'd been talking about.

I toyed with the money in my pocket that he had given to me. So nice, so kind, if I'd had any tears at the ready I think I would have cried again. I reminded myself to say a prayer for his brother.

It seemed that after the thrashing I'd taken in the city, being at the side of the road was where I belonged. No one was going to kick me while I slept; no man would make me roll cigarettes for him. There might not be much food, no streets lined with restaurants, but your next meal could be but a ride away. Some kind soul might invent a chore that needed doing; someone might share their sandwiches. I figured, though not in so many words, that a hungry stomach once in a while only taught you to appreciate food, whether it was spread out on a pleasant table in front of you or a quick snack at the side of the road.

I had been dropped right in front of a gas station that, as though in step with my musings, sold food, as well as gas and cold beer. Right away a struggle began, one that I knew a small part

of me would lose. Common sense told me to spend wisely while the rest of me with its loose morality could care less if I spent my last buck on a glass of beer. Acceptable arguments were sure to be put forth on each side of the argument, between sips. I studied the pub; a heavysset man was exiting, staggering slightly as he walked to his car.

In the tavern, I decided against beer and ordered a bottle of their finest wine.

“A bottle of the best is fairly expensive,” the waitress informed me, “you don’t look like you could afford it. Do you have any money?”

“Of course I do,” I countered, “I wouldn’t be in here if I didn’t. I have twenty dollars, at least.”

“That’s not going to take you far,” she shot back, “why don’t you have a beer, or a pitcher of beer. Beer’s more in your price range.”

“Now just a minute...” I began, but she cut me off.

“Look, I saw you out there, ready to stick your thumb out and I saw you look twice at our sign. I knew you couldn’t have much cash or you’d be taking the bus. I was sure you’d end up in here. I’m not trying to put you down.”

“Alright then,” I said, “bring me a pitcher of your finest.”

“Coming right up,” she said with a hint of mockery and she was gone. She’s trying to flirt with me, I thought, I’d better be careful.

As soon as I took the first sip and it made its way past my taste buds, stopped to cool my parched throat and hinted at going to my head in the incomparable way of alcohol, I had a hunch that I was traveling head first towards some type of conflict.

I was overwrought yet wistful, longing for some type of sense. Life in Edmonton had left a hum inside that I couldn’t get rid of. My brother was Jesus with a neon countenance and I was a bum. To top it off, the contrast between brothers made for such a good joke that it kept the whole city I’d left behind laughing.

In no way duty bound, free to walk away from the sweet ambrosia, I nonetheless started whittling away on my second pitcher. I smoked a cigarette every time I felt hungry. I was laying odds that it wouldn’t be long until I was urged to drink up by a barkeep pretending to be friendly, but, who had actually long since lost patience with most of his customers. He dreamed of owning a bistro in a trendy section of a real city - a cow town like Edmonton would never suffice. Poor Mr. Misunderstood was so much better than his fellow man.

Time flies. I wasn’t sure if I had been thrown out of the saloon or if I’d staggered to the spot of grass, hidden by a bush, where I found myself. I felt my face – nothing broken. I checked my pockets – nothing there. I lay back and looked at the stars. A nearby shape that was a clump of trees spoke to me, throbbing in cadence to the words. It was saying something about university. The syllabic patterns of the words that came out of that patch of trees in the middle of nowhere were in rhythm with the pulsations of the stars.

I was on the receiving end of a strange conversation, all about higher education. I turned over on my stomach, closed my eyes and rested my head in my hands. Why does everything have

to talk anyways, I wondered? Sleep soon found me and dragged me under for what remained of darkness, sparing me the solitary hours filled with shadows and import.

I woke early the next morning to a sky that most would say was early morning majestic, vast, low, and radiant. A dark mood had a hold on me and I would have described the sky as a glaring and harsh fact of life, one to be shielded from. I went to look for some water and aspirin.

Water is not hard to find in Canada. Finding someone who would give you a glass of it can be, but I did some creative groveling at the tavern. I could have sworn later that I had promised in a vague and murky way to move on in exchange for having my thirst quenched, but I wasn't sure.

Standing on the side of the road I had no way of knowing that I was clinically insane. I didn't know that reason and insanity mix together like a block of ice and the desert sun. When faced with insanity, sanity bows out. Reason, without chemical intervention, loses to madness.

In my state I took things at face value. There were no hallucinations or delusions; it was all quite real. That being said, I needed an explanation, something to account for what I was seeing in front of me. No amount of clear thinking could have made sense of it. How could I expect to understand?

My problem was that my father was happily passing me on the highway, driving every second or third car that went by. I didn't get it. He'd drive by smoking a cigarette, looking at his watch, scratching behind his ear, eating a sandwich, picking his nose; the same face that I knew well, seemed to wear a smirk that got bigger and bigger, keeping pace with my growing agitation. Eventually a car stopped; mercifully, it was one not driven by my father.

"Where ya' headin'?" he asked in happy kind of way.

"Anyplace is better than here," I replied.

"Well," he said, and I expected him to say he was going a few miles up the road, "I'm goin' straight through to Winnipeg."

"So am I," I said, "so am I - if that's okay with you, that is."

Though we seemed to play an inordinate amount of car tag with my father's clones, no one had stepped forward and made a serious attempt to hurt us. I grew frightened when I realized those people were all wearing masks. Why, I asked, why do they hate me? They were hideous in a washed out, dreary way. Every second or third driver on the highway looked just like dear old Dad. They had a pale glow. In spite of myself I became grave and concerned.

I thought that my father must be a rich and important man to be able to afford to have so many people made up to look like him and then to have them follow and harass me. I thought that they might be the living dead I had heard about and I shuddered. My friend seemed worried.

"You look like you've seen a ghost. Are you alright?"

"Oh yeah, just thinking about my father. " Under my voice I muttered, 'yeah, and 1001 zombies."

"What was that? That last part, c'mon, come clean?"

"I was just thinking about the zombies my father has tracking me."

"I knew it," he laughed, "you are crazy. Well don't worry about it, that is, unless you think I might be a zombie."

"No sir," I said, "I don't think you're one of them."

He left me at the corner of Portage and Main, under a streetlight that shone brightly in the dark night.

"Welcome," a voice out of nowhere said. "Welcome," said another, "to Universe City."

Within twenty-four hours I would know what was what. I would come to understand that I had not been brought to a western city, as I had believed, to go to university, no, I knew the clones on the highway had somehow steered me through a cosmic maze to where I found myself, that being someplace the voices called Universe City.

The voices were my enemies and had cornered me as I walked, just a few blocks from what was soon enough to be my home, the sweet Sally Anne located at Main and Logan. It was a skid row flophouse that looked much the same as any other I'd encountered. Before taking up residence there I would receive some psychiatric treatment and that would work for as long as I stuck with the program.

Out of thin air the vocalizations came at me.

"Look at him," one said.

"I know," responded another, "he's not old enough to be smoking. He is a he isn't he?"

"Put that out."

"There's no Jesus here."

"Welcome to Universe City."

I could have sworn I was in hell, but apparently not. I was the new guy in Universe City. I had no money and nowhere to go. I no longer knew who or where I was. Was I in purgatory? Was I dead? Soon enough the bitter winter of the province of Manitoba would be upon us. That night I found refuge curled up on the, smooth, cold cement floor of a bus shelter. I slept fitfully.

The next morning a nondescript man drove by, smiling as I stretched at the side of the street. He seemed as though he was in possession of privileged information. He wore a grin that seemed to say he was enjoying my undoing immensely. He had a look about him of complete satisfaction and I thought he had been waiting a lifetime for my humiliation. His big, blue car hissed a message as it receded.

"Your mine," it said.

"Piss off, all of you, just piss off," I shrieked.

There was something about a talking car that put me over the edge. Before I could stop myself I was begging,

“Whoever you are, God, Jesus, Satan, Dad, I give. I don’t care, take anything you want, do what you want. I surrender, just stop hurting me.”

“Don’t hurt me, don’t hurt me,” one voice mocked.

“He doesn’t get it,” said the other.

“He’s going to get it.”

“We haven’t started hurting you.”

“Not yet.”

A car squealing far off sounded like a scream. My mother materialized in my mind. Her nose had been flattened to one side by a cruel blow. She tried to smile but couldn’t.

“You aren’t the only one.”

“We don’t like her either.”

“That’s right, we don’t like her either and when we don’t like someone...”

There was a pause and then I realized that the voices had been inside my head, looking around. They had seen my mother’s image in my mind. I had in no wise spoken of her.

My heart began racing. I had to get out of this place, this Universe City. But, I was lost, as lost as I’d ever been. I started to walk, looking for any person, place or thing that would help me defeat the voices, those cowards who with a clear conscious used their distinct advantage, invisibility, as a weapon against me. A cruel quiet had settled on the world around me. I drew no peace from the hush; it only seemed presentiment making it very clear that I would again be visited by those voices that lived in the atmosphere.

Eventually I had to figure out a practical plan.

Chapter Eighteen

It took about a week before I did anything to draw the attention of the police. I didn't really do anything to feel guilty over but I did frighten an old man, the type who invites a young man to his house and tries to figure out, with the young man acting as his assistant, how to get the lead back in his pencil.

I had been wandering for quite a few days when he approached me and offered me something to eat. Even though my better judgment had been absent since Vancouver, I was sensibly distrustful of the man. I leaned towards declining but was lonely for someone to talk to. I was also hungry and so decided I would be happy to join him for lunch. The soup and sandwiches he suggested sounded fine.

"I'm not far from here," he explained and led the way.

As we walked, one old man and one young, the voices started.

"Look at the dirty queers," said one.

"Yeah, I know, two queers," said the other one, the stupid voice I thought.

"Save yourself," said a voice that seemed to echo from far away, a voice belonging to my mother.

"She'll pay for that," said a different voice, one I didn't recognize and then I realized that it belonged to the old man.

"Don't do that," I said under my breath, barely controlling my anger, "that's my mother."

I glared sideways at the old timer, trying to emphasize my point. He wore a smile and seemed unaware of my stare and the ferocity that lay behind it. I hated him for not recognizing that I meant business. Would he smile like that, I wondered, if he didn't possess secret knowledge that set him above it all? Nevertheless, hunger was my real enemy and I held my tongue.

"Here we are," he said and with unnecessary flourish unlocked the door of a small house.

"Great," I said, and then thought, I'll eat like a starved pig and then I'll find out where they are keeping my mom. When I thought about her as I'd seen her, shortly after I arrived in Universe City, her nose broken, trying to smile but unable to do so, I started crying.

"Just a minute old man, there's something in my eyes."

I efficiently shut off the tears and wiped my cheeks dry. I certainly wasn't going to let him see me cry. When eventually I looked around I beheld a marvel of order and cleanliness.

"I'm surprised you'll have someone as dirty as me in here," I said.

"Maybe later you'll take a bath."

Just like those old men, give them an inch and they'll go for a mile, I thought, but my stomach had me reply that that wasn't necessary, thanks just the same, maybe some other time.

“Sit, sit,” he said in response.

I sat, most of me glum, my stomach anticipating something hot and nourishing. I tuned the old man and his strange needs out. As I ate, I was only vaguely aware of his hints, suggestive behaviour and attempts at conversation. After awhile I realized he was asking me to critique the meal. It was all I could do to improvise as I had very little memory of the food I had greedily swallowed. I lived as a wild animal and I ate like one. As I started to speak, he leaned toward me as though he was going to touch me and then he drew back. I told him the food was fine and I had enjoyed the meal. No, the soup wasn't too salty.

We had eaten and we had talked. It was all small talk though and the time for small talk was over. My lunch companion was going to tell me where my mother was. I believed that telepathy was possible and that there was a certain charm about the whole procedure.

I began by thinking: ‘How do you know my mother?’ Mom's image popped into my head and his thoughts followed.

‘You mean her? Well, as far as I know Edward is slowly having her put to sleep. It's all for the best.’

“Who's Edward?” I wondered out loud, my manner aggressive, my voice tremulous.

The old coot looked at me and laughed.

“If you want to find Edward,” he informed me, “you're asking the wrong person.”

“Alright” I said, bluffing, “okay, so be it. Your superiors might find what you've told me here, to be very interesting. Have you thought about that?”

“You're crazy,” he said.

His eyes bugged out like a fly that has been on the receiving end of far too much Raid. “You really are far, gone, crazy.”

He scrambled for the phone and called the police.

“Think long and hard about Edward,” I said to the old man as I was being taken away, “he may not be who you think he is.”

“Lover's spat?” one cop asked the other.

“I don't think so. This one's a little off center, that's all. The other one swings a little, though. That's what I'd say.”

They were silent until one asked the other, “The Ward?” “

The other cop nodded, “Affirmative.”

I was admitted to the Health Sciences Centre and diagnosed as suffering from an acute psychosis. I was asked if I had ever suffered from schizophrenia and I said that I hadn't given it much thought.

“I might have been in hospital in Peterborough,” I informed them and they seemed satisfied with my answer. The doctor made me promise that I would swallow all of the pills that the

nurse asked me to.

“Consider it to be a personal favour to me,” he said. I sat still, silently overwhelmed. The fresh smell of the doctor’s starched, white coat lingered after he was gone.

The medicine started, within a week or so, to make me tranquil in a way that troubled me. It was familiar and I didn’t know why. The drug induced peace I was experiencing stood out as having been present in a past experience or life. I came to believe that if I were calm and sensible I would be deemed acceptable. In my own way, I understood the connection between this and swallowing my pills. Suddenly I wanted to be well received and so, took it upon myself to comply with the prescribed treatment.

Sometimes the pills had an odd way of filling me full of an aching nostalgia. At other times a type of serenity flowed through my body. Eventually I would have a measure of peace and that would allow me to reconcile myself to the beggarly hand-to-mouth existence that had been mine. I would rationalize it all, all the bad memories - leftovers at Burger King, sleeping in places that were not intended for slumber and so on. In time, my body began to feel rigid and I couldn’t seem to sit still for long. When I told the doctor this, he prescribed another medicine.

In some ways I had a hard time giving up my delusions for with them riding shotgun, I had been able to make cockeyed sense of the world. Truth be told, I was on the brink of leaving the hospital after ten days or so and going back to my old ways.

Around that time, the doctor told me I would soon feel like a new man and I thought that might be interesting, though, in truth, I considered this transformation without much enthusiasm. When all was said and done, it would take some time for me to convince myself that I hadn’t enjoyed my life and its struggles based in delusion. In time I would realize that even when I was medicated and stable, I would have new battles. Conflict, it seemed, was something I needed.

I slept fitfully and caught but a few hours at a time during the first while in the institution. When I did sleep I often woke feeling as someone who hadn’t rested at all. I ate my meals in my room and was afraid of most everyone on the ward. When I ventured out of my room I saw staff, patients and visitors sitting around sharing the time of day. They were so sophisticated and strange. Their clothes were colourful and vibrant and made me feel plain, drab. I had a bit of work ahead of me when it came to self perception and self esteem.

I was beginning to become aware of a crisis, no, not a crisis, *the* crisis. Everyone was talking about a lack of energy or the energy crisis; being half sick, I didn’t quite understand. Strange, I thought, I have a fair bit of get up and go, I guess it hasn’t hit me yet. I wondered if I could catch it in the hospital.

Time passed and I got better, more completely saturated with medicine. I started to enjoy having three meals a day, warmth, television and the company of a few others. The doctor, though always in a hurry, was kind and full of encouraging words.

“You’re really improving, hang in there,” he’d say, “stay on those meds, you’re getting better all the time.”

The days faded one into another until there were no longer any exceptionally good or bad ones. There were boring days and there were times I couldn’t concentrate very well. I

managed to take in Hammy Hamster every weekday morning, which was as far as I went towards establishing a routine. As the time passed I became sedate and eventually I fancied I was in control. When I spoke I was understood and sometimes what I said seemed of interest to others. I was getting well.

The day I had quietly anticipated, finally arrived. It was the day I would walk out of the hospital doors without supervision. It was a day that brought with it confusion and scarcely controlled emotion. It was no longer a day I pondered, it was a day upon me, a day once in the future that had shown up on time, as expected.

I was waiting for the psychiatrist on one of the hard plastic chairs in the hall, outside of the nurse's station.

"The doctor will be with you in no time," promised a short, squat woman who somehow made me feel as though I'd already left. I was old what's-his-name whose bed needed changing. Yeah, I thought, I'll never forget old what's-his-name. One of the nurse's strong points must be her knowledge of the doctor's comings and goings, I thought, because, as promised, he materialized in a matter of minutes, looming over me, extending his hand whether to shake or help me up I didn't know. I ended up doing both and felt uncomfortable, half standing and pumping his arm vigorously.

I had to do a double take when the doctor confusedly consulted his chart. "So, ah, ahhh, Mr. Playford..." He'd been treating me for over a month. I looked at him again. Everything around me started to get very loud. Someone laughed and my ear felt like it was being ripped in two, starting from the lobe up. I heard somebody drop something; my eyes hurt, someone cursed and another yelled. My forehead was burning and caving in at the same time. My heart started to beat wildly while the rest of me was once again seated.

"Mr. Playford, are you with us?"

I nodded.

"You're alright then?"

Again, I nodded.

"Good. It's very important that we know our patients are healthy before we release them."

"I completely understand that, sir. You're not my regular doctor are you, because, if you are, I may never get out of here? I don't recognize you."

"Well, that's actually a good sign," he said, "your regular doctor is on holidays. Somebody should have told you, but rest assured you and I have never met before today. I think I see what was bothering you, though."

"Well," I answered, "if it turned out that you were my doctor and I didn't know you... I was just a bit spooked that's all, thinking about spending the rest of my life on a back ward somewhere, you know, unable to recognize anyone."

"I really don't think that you will get stuck in a hospital for life. From what I see written here," and he wagged my chart, "you have a lot going for you. You simply have to stay on your medication - you do understand that, don't you?"

All of a sudden he looked a little too intense for my liking and I nodded meekly. He continued to look at me.

“Yes,” I said, “I understand.”

“Good, then,” he said, and it was a declaration that all was still right with the world.

“Here’s a prescription. Take it to the hospital pharmacy. Here’s your appointment slip, you’re due back in two weeks.”

“Well, thank you. I’ll see you in two weeks.”

“Yes, two weeks then.”

I never laid eyes on him again.

When I arrived at the Salvation Army the door was locked. I pushed the buzzer and gained admittance. It was dingy but it was warm, that much I was grateful for. I stood by the office door and listened to the chatter.

“I still say he should have hung ‘em up for good.”

“Are you kidding? He’s good for the game and believe me he can still wheel – he puts those young lads to shame.”

“He’s a has-been.”

“You, my friend, are full of crap.”

Are they talking about me I wondered, suddenly and briefly visited by stale delusion?

“Hey guys, who’re you talking about?”

All jaundiced eyes were on me and someone said, “Bobby Hull.”

The whole place seemed a bit jail-like, a prison without bars. I wondered if they gave out tobacco. I saw one of the men in the office smoking and decided to ask him about it. Surely, I figured, he could sympathize.

“You know where you are, right,” he asked while giving me a cigarette.

“Sure,” I answered him, “the Salvation Army Hostel. Why?”

“Well, you don’t get anything here but three squares and a bed at night. No frills, no money, no tobacco, we’re not going to buy you a drink or take you to see a movie. Are you getting my drift?”

“Yeah, but what do I do then, for smokes and stuff I need?”

“Get a job,” he replied. That’s heartless, I thought. It turned out that I was being a bit on the hasty side.

“There are quite a few places in the neighbourhood that will hire you out by the day, you know, daily labour pools. They pay okay and let me tell you if you show up without a hangover you’ll be one of the first ones out. There’s one just around the corner, yeah, go out the front, turn right, turn right again and watch the storefronts. You’ll find it.”

“Thanks,” I said, grateful for his guidance.

“Hey, come over here,” he said and we walked a ways from the other men. “I’m not supposed to do this but here’s ten bucks until you get on your feet. Who knows, you might get out tomorrow, work-wise, I mean, then you can pay me back.”

“I don’t know how to thank you,” I said, visions of cigarettes dancing in my head.

“Ah, maybe you can help me out some day.”

He then arranged his face in a scowl, turned and walked back to join the other men.

Chapter Nineteen

My first day at the daily labour pool started before seven in the morning. As advised, I showed up without a hangover. Not that I would have minded drinking myself into oblivion the night before, I'd always had time for that. It's just that common sense came to roost at nightfall and was still around to tuck me in as I fell asleep.

I went to bed early. I had to find some work, and toilsome work was what I found. It wasn't brain surgery; I found myself unloading an eighteen-wheeler whose trailer was packed full of frozen turkeys with a shriveled up little guy, a wino who looked like was about to give way to the cold sweats at any time. I did his work and I did mine. He tried to help, but he wasn't much good for anything in his condition and I told him to relax.

When we got back to the office I said nothing about the old guy I'd worked with and he got paid the same as I did. Outside the door he was profuse in thanking me.

I was in a hurry and said, "Sure, sure, anytime."

I went to a neighbourhood restaurant and once there bought some cigarettes and a meal. I walked on, to a bar near the Salvation Army that had the dumb luck of being situated near a hostel that harboured some of the most chronically addicted alcoholics in the country. When I entered there was my grizzled buddy filling his glass from a lonely pitcher of beer. Suddenly, I didn't want to drink alone and, so, I approached him.

"Mind if I sit down."

"For you, my friend, I would roll out the red carpet." We laughed and I sat. We started to drink, neither of us having much idea that we would fast become friends.

"What's your name?" I asked, an innocent icebreaker.

"What's it to you?" I was about to reply when he burst out laughing.

"Emile," he said, "had you goin' there, didn't I?"

"Yeah," I replied, "I guess your brand of humour skipped my generation."

"Ah, don't worry," he replied, "ah, waitress, another round, no make it a double round. Two pitchers." He held up two fingers.

"How does your generation like that?"

"We like it just fine," I said, "just fine."

Emile became a good friend. We drank together, worked at the same place, slept under the same roof and in the same huge room in the mornings ate the worker's breakfast together - cold eggs, toast and a warmish cup of dirty water masquerading as coffee. Every morning Emile would wonder the same thing.

"If that's the worker's breakfast what the hell do they give the unemployed?"

Late one night we sat in the can, careful not to make too much noise while we passed a bottle of cheap sherry, our second that evening.

“Hey, Emile,” I said, “did you ever hear what happened to that guy back in Ontario – London, Ontario, I think it was.”

“Ah, what guy’s that?”

“I don’t know, some Jerry guy, I don’t know his last name.”

“You have to be more specific, there are a lot of guys in Ontario who go by the name of Jerry.”

“Ah, well, he was trying to break some kind of record.”

“Break a record, eh, well that takes a lot of guts, but I don’t know who you’re talking about.”

“I remember,” I announced triumphantly.

“Shhh, Carmen, you’ll get us tossed out.”

“Well,” I answered, “I wouldn’t mind getting out of this dump anyways.”

“Me too,” Emile replied.

“We should,” I responded.

“We should and, mark my words Carmen, we will...we will.”

“Emile,” I said, starting to slur my words a bit, “it was the radio.”

“What, my friend, what was the radio?”

“Jerry in Ontario was trying to set a record for spending the most hours listening to the radio without stopping. Whatever happened to Jerry, Emile?”

“I don’t know Carmen,” he answered me, “but I think he’ll go deaf if he keeps that up.”

I started to laugh and so did he. He’d laugh and then he’d put his finger to his lips. Finally he stood wobbly to his feet and then did a little dance. He handed me what was left in the bottle, whispered, “See you tomorrow,” and was gone. In my mind I saw Emile and me, always trying to find our way to a better place, where getting by would be easier.

It wasn’t long after our conversation that Emile and I were sitting in the daily labour office, putting in time. It wasn’t very likely that we would get any work, it being mid-afternoon. One of the benefits though, of working there, was the open door policy extended to employees who were considered productive.

You could come in out of the cold and warm up, under the pretext of looking for work. Since the Salvation Army wouldn’t let anyone indoors except for meals and after supper, well, we were stuck. No money, a few smokes, all the wine drank up.

“Emile?”

“Huh, yeah, wait Carmen, look at the ass on that, jeez.”

“Hey, Emile, stop looking at the girlie books, would you? She could be your granddaughter.”

“Right you are, I’m just a dirty old man...” Now he was singing his heart out, making the melody up as he went along, singing,

“I’m a dirty old man, that’s what I am, who gives a good goddamn?”

It had to have been two weeks at least since I had taken antipsychotic medication and Emile’s singing was starting to get on my nerves. I had disposed of my pills, finally, by taking them to the Harbour Light Centre and telling them I was trying to quit. They had accepted my tablets gladly, too enthusiastically I thought.

Emile knew he was bugging me. I suppose it must have shown because he stopped abruptly and said, “What’s with you? You don’t like my singing?”

“Emile, I just want to get the hell out of here, you know, like we talked about. Remember?”

“Oh yeah, I remember. Let me ask you though, Carmen, how do you know I’m not some type of old fag?” I laughed. He smiled.

“Emile,” I said, “you’re some type of old drunk, but you’re not queer, that I know. You’re not, are you?” I would have been disappointed if he’d said yes, but he didn’t.

“No I’m not. And you’re right. We should get the hell out here.”

“But it’s so friggin’ cold out, man, that’s the problem,” I said, telling him what he and everyone else, even those who could go indoors during the day, already knew.

We decided that if we wore extra socks, sweaters, long underwear and the like we could make it to the coast with little trouble. If we worked for a couple of days we would have enough money to bundle up and take our chances. Emile told me we could sleep on the beach any time of the year once we reached shores of Vancouver.

Everything went according to plan. Two weeks later, the night before we were to leave, we spent half our money on alcohol, cigarettes and food at a greasy spoon, acting as though money never had been a problem.

Emile was mopping up the last of the gravy off his plate with a piece of bread. I noticed something funny.

“What’s that,” I asked, smiling.

“What’s what?”

“That ring on your finger,” I replied, “where did you get that?”

“Oh I bought this off some kid at the shelter,” he replied nonchalantly, “good dinner for a change, eh?”

“Emile, is that a mood ring?”

“Yes sir, that’s what he said when I bought it.”

“Nobody wears those anymore,” I informed him, “they’re not really in style.”

“So,” he countered, “you’re saying I’m a nobody who’s behind the times. Thanks Carmen, somehow you just made me feel my age.”

“Ah, c’mon, I didn’t mean to do that,” I said, “here let me buy you a cold one. Waitress, waitress, two bottles of Blue.”

“That’s very nice pal,” he said, “but, well,” here he looked at the gray tabletop a moment, scarred, with black diamonds on it, “Carmen,” he looked straight into my eyes, “you know I drink Ex, you son of a bitch.” And we laughed

The next morning, at 6:30 I was roused by the lights being turned on and someone yelling, “C’mon, guys, up and at ‘em.” I never did figure out who the guy was that was hollering every morning. I was used to him by then, he couldn’t piss me off anymore. Emile, who’d moved into my dorm, came over as I was getting dressed.

“How much money do you have,” he asked, a worried look on his face.

“Don’t know,” I answered, “let me look. Jeez, it’s cold.”

“It’s colder out there,” he informed me, pointing at the window, “You sure you’re up for this?”

“I have fifteen dollars, Emile, fifteen friggin’ dollars. Where did it all go”?

“Carmen, my ring is saying that we should leave after breakfast. We won’t tell them we’re leaving, just in case we have to come back tonight.”

“You sure you want to do this?” I asked him.

“Yes,” he said, “I have to. I can’t stand this anymore. I’m going even if I have to go by myself.”

“I’m coming with you,” I said and with that it was settled.

Chapter Twenty

There we stood a couple of slowly freezing, December scarecrows on the highway's snow covered shoulder. Stomping our feet as all manner of vehicle passed, Emile and I encountered invisibility. Emile joked about this and that because he knew I was annoyed and he wanted to pick me up, to make me laugh it all off. He didn't know I'd been without my anti-psychotic for far too long.

"This sucks," I hollered and promptly realized that there was no need pointing out the obvious. All was quiet though I fancied the snow, which was beginning to swirl, was making all together too much noise.

Suddenly I was yelling again, "I remember," I hollered.

Emile reacted by yelling, "Remember what!"

"I remember that the average I.Q. is between eighty-five and one hundred and fifteen. I remember that I.Q. stands for intelligence quotient. That's one monkey off of my back, let me tell you." My voice rang shrill in my ears and I wondered where that outburst came from and why.

"That's great," Emile replied, "now, speaking of our ancestors, quit monkeying around. Keep your eyes on the traffic, eh, make a happy face."

"Do you really believe that our ancestors were monkeys?" I asked, jeering, trying to make him angry.

"Monkeys, apes, whatever."

"Well maybe yours were monkeys, but not mine."

"What? Do you think your ancestors are superior to everyone else's?"

"Alright, okay, let's drop it," I suggested and he agreed.

Emile seemed different, but, truth be told, I was the one who was changing. I was starting to become ill again and, though, for a fleeting, bitter moment I knew it, I stubbornly refused to acknowledge it. I'd been having too much fun. My days of playing the wag though, with others who enjoyed doing the same, were just about exhausted. The medicine had been almost completely metabolized and expelled from my body.

Time passed, as did all types of potential rides, people who gave us the once over and thought that we looked a touch dangerous. We were an old man and a young man, dressed in Salvation Army clothes, yesterday's fashions that refused to fit. I was surprised when, around mid-afternoon, a teenager in a pickup truck pulled off the highway and waited for us. I deduced that he hadn't been on the road long because his back window still had frost on it. When we squeezed in the front I noticed that the cab was still cold and this backed up my observation. "From Winnipeg?" I queried and thus began a conversation. Overall, I thought the ride was uneventful. To hear Emile tell the story I was on the kid's back right away.

When we were left off about ninety miles from Winnipeg, Emile started cursing me out. "What the hell were you thinking? You're not supposed to ask personal questions unless they want you to. Don't embarrass people. You knew damn well he wanted us to believe it was his truck, that he was a big man - you know how kids are. Now he's dropped us in the middle of nowhere. What's wrong with you?"

"I'm a nut," I retorted and giggled a bit, but it wasn't funny. What is wrong with me anyways, I wondered, why did I embarrass the young lad? Emile growled like an old pit bull.

"Nuts to you," he said and it was my turn to be embarrassed.

It was growing colder. Dusk was beginning to steal the glimmer from the snow; the wind had picked up a little and was starting to bite.

"Emile," I asked, sheepishly, "what do we do if it gets dark and we're still standing here?"

"Well, Carmen, we'll keep trying. If it gets too cold or looks otherwise hopeless, there's a road about a quarter of a mile back. I think we can find some shelter there."

We ended up backtracking a while later. "People rarely pick up one at night, let alone two," I said. He agreed and we went looking for the country road. Eventually we found what would be a dirt road if it weren't covered in so much snow. Everything, for that matter, was snow covered.

We walked down the tire tracks on that still country road, so quiet, so disturbing. There wasn't much to see, nothing but darkness, deep and black and the white snow that was everywhere, absorbing it. We persisted though and we were rewarded.

"Carmen, I see a building, a big building, maybe a barn."

"Emile, you've been here before," I accused.

"Nah," he said, "never. And I'll never be back, that I promise you, my friend." It seemed that he was no longer angry.

It was indeed a barn, a big empty barn and far off sat a farmhouse. We both looked at that dwelling with longing, a few of its lights winking in the night, a steady plume of smoke coming from the chimney. A dog barked.

"Jeez, Emile," I whispered, "Do you think that dog sees us?"

"Do you honestly think that beast can see this far, in the dark?" He laughed scornfully.

"Emile, you never know with animals. We could be sleeping in that barn..."

"Which we will, man," Emile said, interrupting me.

"Whatever," I replied, indifferent for a second or two, "but that thing could come in and rip both our throats out. He's obviously their watchdog, you know."

"If you're trying to scare me it ain't working," he said. I hadn't been trying to scare him, I'd just felt compelled to finish what I had been saying.

Having had my say I fell silent, as did Emile who I thought was once again becoming hostile. I'd better just shut up, I thought, this guy could be some kind of psycho.

"People don't like psychotics," a voice out of nowhere said, and I shivered. "Welcome to Universe City. Universe City is everywhere, man. I said welcome."

"Thank-you, thank-you truly," I mumbled.

"He's not a man, he's a boy," a voice said. It was the voice of the man who had fetched the police on me.

"I'm going in," I said and ran into the barn.

Little animals scurried about, mice, I thought. The sound of their claws quickly sent matters from unsettling to hellish. I wanted to jump like a superhero, straight to the roof so I could hide in the rafters. I lay on the floor and shut my eyes tight. The mice kept scampering. "Here little mice, micey, mice," I tried and gave up. What would I do if they came to me? Maybe if I keep my eyes closed they'll think I'm sleeping, I thought.

Outside I heard Emile talking and thought that he was conversing with the voices. One of my worst fears was coming true - I'd met someone who could hear them as well as I could. I was trembling against my will.

Whatever it was that made me fall asleep I was grateful to. After the mice and Emile talking to the voices I remembered nothing. I woke to the thin light of dawn finding chinks in the barn's walls and roof and covering Emile in golden light as he snored beside me. After dusting myself off soundly, I went outside.

"Smarten up." "No you... hey there he is. Fools rise early." The voices were active, in the mood to torment as usual.

"You were up before me," I yelled, at the top of my voice. This was greeted with silence. In two ways I was mad.

I was unable to understand that the invisible beings who were talking to me, might have their roots inside me, that my problem with hearing voices was as much part of my physiology as breathing or having a pee. To me I was at the mercy of a powerful being or beings that hated me. I started to cry softly.

"Look at the big suck."

"Yeah, what a suck."

I started running around, pulling hard on the long weeds I found sticking out of the snow. It seemed be the only logical way to vent my anger. I found a big rock and hurled it as hard as I could at the barn.

"Hey, what the hell," Emile yelled, but I wasn't convinced it was him. Maybe my enemies were switching from whispers to ordinary speech. Maybe there was a man in the barn who could talk like Emile.

Emile ambled out of the old building looking for whoever had woken him. He didn't see me and I took the opportunity to watch him. He stretched, "Good morning world," he said, then farted

and spit up some phlegm.

“Good morning, kind sir,” one voice said.

“Yes, good morning sir, all is well,” the other one added.

I was astounded. Why would they give him the royal treatment? Astonishment turned to revulsion. I thought the boot licking way the voices fawned over Emile was repulsive. I became fearful; Emile’s acceptance of their adulation, as though he were used to it and expected it, frightened me. He’d been around Universe City for quite awhile, that much I now realized. He’d been pulling my strings since I met him, the bastard.

“Hey,” I yelled, “over here. You don’t fool me anymore, Emile, you potato peel.” Hardly an expletive and definitely not expressive of what I felt.

“Ah, Carmen, my little friend, how did you sleep?” I was taken off guard. He was an important man from a place that held me in contempt.

Quietly, I replied, “With my eyes closed.”

“What,” he asked.

“With my eyes closed,” I said, louder, bolder, “you asked me how I slept and I told you, with my eyes closed.” He laughed and for the life of me I didn’t know why.

“I’m leaving,” I said loudly enough that he heard me.

“Wait,” he implored, “who am I going to travel with but you?”

“I’m going back to the city and I think you know which one I’m talking about.”

“Winnipeg?” he asked.

“You can call it what you will. I think while I’m there I might go to *University*, if you know what I mean.” Having unleashed some of my wrath I kicked the snow and laughed to myself. I’d fight the pricks all right; I’d fight and win.

“Carmen,” Emile spoke softly, “I think that it’s a good idea that you go back to the city. I’ve seen this before; it’s in my family. You don’t know what I mean right now, but you will. Come on, let’s go to the highway. You see,” he started to explain on the walk and he talked for quite a while. He wound up saying, “I’m sorry.”

I thought he’d been talking to the voices all the while and I hadn’t heard them answer. I thought about that and started snickering. He wasn’t that important after all. By the time I was where I wanted to be on the highway and had started thumbing, Emile had become a memory, walking on the other side of the asphalt ribbon that would convey him to his dream of a better life.

In due time a truck driver came to a stop. I climbed up and into the passenger seat. I wore a smile on my face. I had noticed that on his license plates there was an M, an E and a nine. Using my deductive reasoning this told me that that particular truck driver had little respect for Emile. Since he thought Emile was a small fish it followed that he might consider the voices to

be no big deal either. My intuition told me that there were others like this man with the enviable job.

I decided to try a bold move. When he asked me where I was going I told him plainly that I was going to Universe City.

“Oh, what are studying?” he asked. I was stupefied. How could he miss my hint? Was he under strict orders not to share secret information? He must be new, I thought and I answered his question cryptically.

“Oh, some of this, some of that,” I replied with a wink.

I was inventing a language as I went along. Some, in my mind, became sum. I’m broke was what I had told him, in couched terms, when he’d inquired as to my field of study. And it worked. He let me off at a restaurant because he was going to be leaving the main highway. As I was getting ready for the cold he gave me a well-used ten-dollar bill.

“Thank-you, thank-you very much,” I said and bowed after fully vacating his truck. I had just completed a performance for a camera I had detected in his truck, hence the bowing. “Elvis might have died a few years ago but who says there can’t be a new king/” I asked my friend.

“I don’t know, man, I just don’t know,” he said and lumbered off down the highway.

I yelled, “All Hail King Jesus.”

A voice spoke up, “We told you there is no Jesus here.”

“DAMN YOU,” I screamed, “JESUS WILL BE HERE OR MY NAME’S NOT...” here I paused and lost my train of thought as I was suddenly compelled to look around me and then intently at the restaurant.

“Or your name’s not wiener,” one of my hallucinations said and laughed. We’ll see who’s who, I thought dimly, secretively, in case they were tuned into my thoughts, all will be spoken and then, by all that’s fair, we’ll see.

Chapter Twenty-One

I was back at the shelter in time for supper. One of the larger staff members, a daunting man whose job, I believed, was to intimidate troublemakers, informed me while I was eating that he wanted to see me in the office. He bent over and said, "Finish eating and then hustle your butt." His breath was hot on the back of my neck and that bothered me. I wanted to tell him that he could take his foul air off my person. I remained mute though and continued eating, not wanting to rock a broken-down boat adrift in waters that were churning.

Not much later, I was told, "You are this close to losing your bed."

He was holding his index finger and thumb close enough together that I had to make sure that they weren't touching. "Don't look at my hand you fool," he snarled, "*you* were supposed to go to Social Services and get your two week renewal. You're lucky it's the Christmas season. Everyone's in a good mood – we all agreed to give you until tomorrow."

"Well, Merry Friggin' Christmas," I said, doing my best to scowl and growl right back, "Has it occurred to you that I'm sick and tired of going to Social Services and begging, for what? This! Three cold meals, a bed full of bugs and if I want to clean myself, well, there's precious little hot water to be found around here."

"If you don't go to Social Services, you're going to be one cold son of a bitch." When he said that I had, for some reason, a murky image of the prick leading me by the hand to a cold and barren field full of elephants, where I would be left to freeze. I gave my head a shake.

"Let me think about all this," I said and stood up, "Give me until tomorrow."

"Alright man, I already told you that you had one more day." He started shaking his head and making a clicking noise in his throat. "Remember, its bloody cold out there. If you freeze, I'm not responsible and I won't feel guilty, no way, not in the least. I've done my best and that's all I can do." Jeez, I thought, I'd hate to see his worst.

Waiting for sleep to come, I half-heartedly wrestled with my latest problem until I detected a strange odour. Though the stink was vile it was a godsend as it mercifully took my mind from myself. It seemed to be coming from my bedside locker, the kind you have in school, minus the dents and scrapes. I'd always believed that there were many safer places I could put the things I valued or needed. Anything that was of worth to me I kept on my person or hid under my covers.

I looked inside my locker for the first time and saw a bag of rotten vegetables and fruit, some old dirty clothes that seemed from another time and a worn out pair of boots.

"You're going somewhere where the poverty is far worse than that," a voice said, but this time the voice was inside my head.

After this chilling premonition an audible hallucination put in its two cents worth. Its words were unintelligible but the derision behind them was very clear. I shut the door to my locker softly.

I'm going somewhere, I thought, but I don't know where. I don't want to go anywhere without a little money. A line from a song played in my mind, something about bad times. I walked to the

window. The snores and mumbling of the dormitory went with me; in every bed was a destitute man fast asleep, except for the guy at the end who wasn't destitute, but a spy who was also faking sleep. I looked down at the snowy streets and sidewalks. A line of blue cars drove by and somebody honked their horn. It played part of the traditional Wedding March.

"You will be my bride and I will be your king," a voice decreed and in my mind I saw my husband and she was a woman with long, brown hair. It seemed that I had ended up in a place where things were backwards.

I made it to my bed before the same dread that had slain me in the barn stunned me into unconsciousness again. When next I woke it was morning and my first thought was that I would soon have a woman for a king.

Immediately following breakfast The Salvation Army gave me a dishonourable discharge. They began by asking me if I planned to stay. I replied that I didn't know, wanting to add that the guy working the night before had been a prick and I didn't want to stay anywhere that was run by people like him.

Someone explained the deal all over again: "Every two weeks you are given bus fare, in the form of bus tickets. We don't trust you with cash. Your tickets will get you to welfare where you wait to receive papers saying that the city of Winnipeg will pay for two more weeks at the hostel. The remaining ticket will get you back to the shelter along with your paperwork."

"I'm not going up there with my hat in my hand again," I told them. They looked around and at each other. One guy looked at me sadly, started whistling and then puffing out his cheeks started shuffling the files on his desk.

"Look, we're giving you one last chance," spoke a man whose face seemed somehow familiar, as though it was one you see wherever you happen to go, "I mean, at least it's warm in here."

"You know what," I replied, "I always found it too warm in here. You freeze all day long and then you come in here and it's just too bloody warm."

That was the last straw. "Okay, since you won't go along with the program, we'll have to ask you to leave." When I left it was snowing lightly and it occurred to me that it was only a few days until Christmas.

It was only natural that I ended up at The Main Street Project, the last refuge for refuse like me. On Christmas day I was lying on my wooden palette, on a cold cement floor, surrounded on all sides, it seemed, by drug addicts and alcoholics. Someone moaned and another cried. Not exactly turkey and could you pass the turnip please. No one said grace – you were lucky if you got your hands on a blanket. The evening of Christmas Eve, though, had been even worse than the Christmas day I found myself enduring. It was a night that I hit one of my personal lows.

There I sat at the airport while the planes took off and landed, patiently waiting for Santa Claus. I sat in a plastic chair by a window looking out on a street where cars drove slowly by, one after another. "Pick one and it's yours," a voice said and I looked around. Someone was peeking around a corner and abruptly disappeared. Everyone seemed to be missing teeth.

All the cars looked so nice that I couldn't make up my mind. People walked by with suitcases full of gifts for me, their eyes made shiny by the delight they took in giving. Perhaps they are from my spouse, I thought. My king and I had been wed in a telepathic service.

I found an ashtray filled with long butts and considered it my first gift, not what I would have chosen, but better than nothing. I watched young men and women around my age as they hugged and laughed with their friends and relatives. I smoked while I waited for everyone in the airport to yell, "Surprise. It's been a joke. You're one of us." I took people in and tried to look at them knowingly.

Eventually, I had to admit it. Old Saint Nick wasn't coming that year; it had been a hoax. I saw my "husband" at the other end of the building looking for me and, after grabbing a few choice butts, I went out and jumped on a city bus going downtown. I thought momentarily, that this was the way things would be forever. It was a cold idea to grapple with.

When people looked at me, they saw a walking mess. A weary, rundown man talking to himself, dressed in dirty old castoffs, haggard, smoking a stale cigarette butt and looking in garbage cans for treasure.

Some people were particularly disgusted; they found me detestable. These were usually the ones who might threaten me or try to make a joke of me in front of others. Sometimes people who thought I was bent on evil attacked me. In truth my thoughts harmlessly meandered, considering the mystery of Santa Claus, for example, when he was in season. I believed my thoughts were sometimes a conduit for the majesty of God, and this to me was a source of hope and encouragement. The Creator didn't see murder in my eyes. Those who glared as if to keep me in line, in their self-righteousness, seemed to think I was living the life I deserved.

So I ended up lying on a piece of wood that Christmas while someone's son cried and another's daughter moaned. I closed my eyes. A car horn blared, the door banged shut, someone cried more intensely. Outside, I sensed, children whose parents were slumming, chased each other.

Someone had a radio out of which Christmas music was dripping, like the tears of the man that couldn't stop crying. Maybe he missed his turkey and gravy like me. Maybe he was sad because no one had given him a present; maybe no one ever had given him a present.

I rolled over as though to shut it all out. Mentally I toiled, looking for an agreeable perspective regarding the airport, my spouse and her fleet of blue cars. She was obviously rich and that being so, why was I where I was? It wasn't long until I exhausted the subject, it became Lilliputian for the time being.

There was nothing to do but sleep. The crying man had stopped doing so and just before I dropped off I heard the sweetest sound of the day – wise, mysterious, and almost deafening was the silence that caressed my ears.

Chapter Twenty-Two

I was still bunking in with the Main Street Project by the time New Year's Eve came along, that frivolous day that encourages those with feathers for brains to do almost anything they want to in the name of fun. Admittedly I was not much different, except that I didn't need a day approved by society to encourage me to behave badly. One day was as good as any other, though I did have an excuse; I had a doctor's note that said it was quite possible that even in the best of times I didn't have any idea as to what I was doing

It was a big day to a lot of people. Vows would be made, promises to one's self and others, but, in the end it seemed to me it was mostly about letting loose and applying booze until your inhibitions fled, until you were kissing your neighbor's wife at midnight while everywhere people were busy tuning out the energy crisis, illiteracy and the U.S. hostages in Iran.

We would be entering a new decade with the passage of one more day. On that last day that the seventies would know, several of my fellow partakers of woe, seemed somehow transformed. They'd traded in their usual languor for a feverish excitement. Either they were party bound or they had found some cheap drugs somewhere and were just starting to trip.

Three hundred and sixty-four days of the year we could be mole-people, living in the dark, damp and musty warehouse where the only things that thrived were mould and misery. It seemed possible, judging by the behavior of those I suffered with, that there was one day of the year when even we were free to grab a party whistle and be happy, as long as we didn't get too close to anyone.

People get a little strange it seems, on the party day most widely recognized as such around the world. Whether you had two nickels to rub together or not, whether you were preaching the end of the world, trying to save it, or getting blindly drunk, alone, in a little hole in the wall, December 31 was the day anyone who wanted to, could cut loose. If the party atmosphere can invade the Main Street Project, it can live anywhere.

I didn't indulge many thoughts of a cheerful sort on New Year's Eve 1979. I did have the decency to feel like a wet blanket though and so, instead of upsetting the people I lived with, I left the warehouse and went out walking without direction or destination. It seemed everyone was happy, with a bounce in their step and a smile and quip for a stranger. Why aren't they like that all the time, I wondered, and I felt unlike them.

All too soon the voices started up. "What's the matter, lonely boy?" "Fun is for them."

The hallucinations always had remarks like that at the ready, cruel, sarcastic, all the more deflating because I couldn't strike back. Those spokespersons for all that was rotten, stirred up everything; delusions, paranoia, confusion, it all grew worse. Those voices were making me more of a screwball than I'd ever believed possible. When I thought I couldn't listen anymore, they would get louder.

While I was pinned and maligned by declarations whose cruel source I didn't know, I felt the eyes of multitudes looking on. As I was humiliated I understood in a flash that I was a captive and always would be. I wanted to lash out at this injustice, but I was trapped, immobilized, and there was not a thing I could do. I believed that other people sometimes heard what was being

directed at me from thin air, and, to my mortification, not one soul offered to help, no one seemed to think anything much was out of order. Of course, I'd think bitterly, it was only *me* that was being toyed with.

I kept walking and though I was tired and burdened, I walked some more. I must have gone a long ways and indulged in some type of soul searching for the day passed quickly, and seemed to say as it bowed out, what are you complaining about, look at me, here today, gone tomorrow.

That was fine with me, I almost always felt better when the sun was elsewhere. To my relief I sensed that the dark night would soon cover us like a tight fitting lid. I could feel the blackness eagerly waiting. The town of Winnipeg or Universe City, (depending on whether you were me or not), would soon be in the darkness.

I neared the Project. There was more traffic on the streets than usual. Nice looking, well dressed women walked here and there with their upscale boyfriends whose chests stuck out and heads were high, belligerent men and snobbish women. I guessed that women went for that type of thing, the aggressive type. Even in my state though, I knew that if you wanted to call them honey you had to have something that rhymed with the endearment.

A tall, thin man with leathery skin came up to me. I had never seen him before.

"How are you doing?" he asked, adding that I looked like I could use a little 'cheering up'. "Here," he said, "Get yourself a cold one on me," and he gave me two bucks.

I made my way to a tavern I had in mind – a little shabby, but the beer was cheap and their license to sell it was still intact. At first, after waiting awhile, I thought they hadn't seen me come in and so, I started to clear my throat. This escalated into a coughing fit that I didn't know I had in me. When, as a means to getting noticed, I'd exhausted showing off all that smoking had done for me, I dug in my heels, determined to outwait whoever it was that wanted me to leave. I was familiar with not being noticed and could play the waiting game.

If I had some money and went for a coffee or something to eat or a drink, I might be served or I might not. In all my disheveled glory I would get the server's attention sooner or later. Usually, it was later. Other patrons would stare as I ate my food. Those who didn't stare averted their eyes. I became used to being slighted. It didn't upset me in the least when people who came into an establishment well after I had, were served ahead of me. I understood, without really knowing why, that what was desirous to the manager of the pub or restaurant I was taking up space in was that I leave and do so without making a scene. If I were particularly stubborn they would feed me. If they could ignore me until I left, so much the better for them. There was little doubt that they wanted me to think twice about giving them my business again.

Admittedly, I was a mess - dirty clothing, cracked, broken and filthy nails, greasy hair and a dirty beard. On top of that I would talk to myself at times and laugh, if I'd told myself something especially humorous. I was bad for business and I can't blame the restaurants and bars that wouldn't serve me for the stance they took.

But the tavern I was sitting in had no right being so condescending. It was seedier than a really bad orange. No one went there when they had money; they only skulked in when they

needed a cheap drink. They were often so strapped for customers you'd think they would roll out the red carpet for a guy like me or any other tramp off the street for that matter. They should have welcomed me like a long lost friend, even though I only had two lonely bucks in my pocket. It was the type of place that should have welcomed one-celled organisms and plied them with liquor until they could be sweet talked into dividing. It was about the only way they'd ever get a full house.

When the bouncer, a gargantuan, hairy, monster of a man who was suited to his vocation, came to my table with a tray, he said to me, "The boss says this is first and last call for you, so what'll it be."

"Wait a minute, hold on," I said, to my credit, "do you mean to say that I'm being thrown out before I've even had a drink?"

"That's about it," he replied and he looked at me squarely. "Listen," that big man relented and smiled a tired smile, "you get yourself cleaned up, you know, shower, shave, clean clothes, you'll be welcome anytime, okay?"

"Okay," I replied, "thanks, I guess. Give me two dollars worth of draft," and I handed him my money.

He didn't come back right away and I was grateful for the wait, thankful to have enough time to shake off the sad feelings that had me by the scruff.

Mr. Big put seven glasses of beer on the little round, red table in front of me and handed me twenty cents change. "The boss threw one in, on the house," he said, "and wishes you all the best in the New Year."

Humbled, I smiled crookedly. "Here's to the boss," I said.

"To the boss."

When next I thought about Mr. Muscle, he was not in my field of vision. I had left the skid row bar, where I wasn't welcome. I walked the streets. Going past the Salvation Army I hurled curses at the building and punched the words someone had written on the wall, "Salvation Army Niggers". I almost went in and made a scene but I thought better of it.

A blue car went by with two more in tow, followed by an orange VW Microbus, that drove by cautiously, as though its navigator was lost. My husband, no doubt, I thought. Her and her entourage, scaled down, with a van thrown in for appearance's sake.

"Where are we going for our honeymoon? Don't you want to meet face to face, one on one? Come on, Baaaby!"

I was half in the bag. I hadn't hastily tipped back seven glasses of beer in a while. My father came around the street corner in another car, this one black. Beside him a woman used a vanity mirror while she applied makeup. That's her, I thought, that's the one I'm supposed to have married.

I knew then that I was a pawn and that was sulphurous knowledge to try to keep down. I had a helpless feeling when I realized that I was entirely without value in their eyes, those people

with cars, money and quite possibly influence. My dad, if anyone asked, would say that he was with his boy's spouse. I was an alibi for my already married father.

Strangely enough, considering the chaotic day I'd endured, I slept soundly through the last night of the seventies right through to the first light of the eighties. I woke refreshed, ready to take on the world, fueled by my particular brand of energy that was equal parts excitement and delirium. This highly charged state would shortly prove to be my undoing. Not knowing this I cheerfully stopped to salute the staff and bum a smoke on my way out of the dull warehouse.

My morning strolls had become a bit of a ritual. I would walk and scan the ground frequently, hoping to find a pack of cigarettes though I'd settle for a juicy butt in a pinch. Every now and then I would look slyly, left and right, making sure no one was watching me. Mine was an altogether harmless morning occupation; a type of scavenging that relaxed me.

As usual the hallucinations were geared up for another day. I found myself pretending I couldn't hear them. When the voices became frenzied with anger because I wasn't listening, I laughed until the tears rolled down my cheeks. I had scored a point, they weren't getting to me.

"You'll get yours, just wait and see." Unfortunately that prediction was about to come true.

It was cold but the sun was shining. I'd lost my gloves but I had found some damp mittens. I had a warm toque and I'd soon be home where maybe I'd bum a coffee from the staff.

I was in a good mood. I skipped up the five front stairs. When I opened the door I saw a resident arguing with a male staff member at the top of another set of stairs, which led into the repository. Being in an effusive mood, I believed I could solve the problem and walked up to them briskly. I started talking nonsensically and was told to kindly shut up by the man on duty. I did so for about as long as I could, ten second or so, and then started into round two of mediation. This earned me a fist in the face that sent me tumbling down the stairs. My assailant, the social worker, opened the door to the big bad world and lifted me to my feet. Giving me a shove he kicked me in the ass. I landed awkwardly on the snowy sidewalk.

"Don't," he said, shaking his finger at me, "I repeat, don't come back. I'm sick and tired of looking at you." He slammed the door shut. I looked across the street at a woman who had witnessed my degradation. I felt guilty for being the disgrace I had become and for not being able to do anything about it. It was a momentary feeling that mercifully, didn't linger.

Chapter Twenty-Three

I walked the streets of Universe City for days on end. I knew where the taxpayer was paying for heated bus shelters as well as the location of a donut shop that would give me a cup or two of hot water. I had knowledge of a certain apartment stairwell that was safe. As I plodded along, I heard in my head, repeatedly, the hallucination saying, "You'll get yours..." How prophetic can a voice from thin air be? As if they hadn't gotten enough pleasure from predicting the ending of another chapter in the rags to more rags story mine was becoming, the voices were still with me, trying their best to convince me I was without worth. They commented on my clothing, in particular my green pants tucked into old knee high boots:

"You look like a cat." "I think he's Puss'n'Boots."

I decided to hitchhike to the city of Regina in the province of Saskatchewan. There was nowhere left to go in Winnipeg. I'd hit bottom as far as a homeless person was concerned and I'd been told to leave there and not to come back. So, with nothing to lose, I left.

On the way to the highway I stopped in the transient friendly donut shop I had been frequenting. Sitting down I ordered a cup of hot water. Beside me two guys were talking about Gordie Howe. One friend informed the other that the man was entering his thirty-second pro season. "That's a lot of hockey," I said. They looked at me and went back to their conversation.

Over the radio the dj was giving out the secret to long life. "SShhh, listen, listen," one of my neighbours said to his companion. "Okay, loyal listeners, here's the secret to staying around on this planet for a while. It seems a Martha Cooper of somewhere in Ontario, I forget where, turned one hundred and six today. Hurray, Martha! How did she do it? Well, first off, she never married." There was a general titter in the room. "Secondly she spent a great deal of time living with her brother and sister-in-law. When they died she moved in with their children and then their grandchildren. What *is* the secret to long life? Stay single and freeload as much as possible."

The man beside me chortled at first and then guffawed. I said, a little too forcefully for someone who's only buying water, "She's just a little old lady."

"You talk too much," the burly man said, "mind your own business."

"And now here's a classic from 1974, Gloria Gaynor and Never Can Say Goodbye."

"When are they going to outlaw this crap," the redneck asked more to the dry, smoky, thin air than to anyone present.

Dog days of winter. Even the birds and animals were in their shelters. I was some way from Winnipeg and, as if it things weren't glum enough, the blustery wind was in my face, demanding, in wind language, to know what I had up my sleeve. I prayed for a ride. I begged the Almighty to make the wind change. If severity were a problem, I'd settle for a change in direction. If God were in a listening mood, it would be nice if the bitter, confrontational wind would stop trying to convince me to run for cover, as looking around I could see none.

A man stopped around the time I was considering making myself a bed in the manner of the sled dog, that is, lying under a covering of snow in a bid to keep warm. He turned out to be one those old guys who never seem to go anywhere but 'up the road a ways'. My spirits sagged because it seemed I'd be back outside and cold again before I could even warm my bones. I summoned up a bit of nerve and asked the old man if there were a restaurant or gas station in the area that he could take me to.

"Well," he drawled, "There's a gas bar about a mile past my stop, but, well," he checked his fuel gauge, "I suppose I could take you the extra mile."

When he said the words, 'the extra mile', I was touched. When I was well I believed that the gnarled old man who gave me some of what he valued most, precious time, along with many others who went the extra mile when I was in a time of need, rubbed off a little and made me a better person. At the time I was sick and I knew that I would be warm and that was enough for me.

The gas bar had no restaurant. There was a pop machine and a vending machine that sold chocolate bars, chips and a few apples.

"Who would ever buy one of those apples," I asked, unaware that anyone was listening. Moved by the spirit of absentmindedness, I was giving voice to my opinion, forgetting that my words were audible to anyone with ears in that cramped, cluttered and mercifully heated, multipurpose rectangle. I turned around and realized that the owner of the sorry business, an unfortunate enterprise whose misfortune was that it was stuck in the very heart of nowhere, was standing there, listening. I felt obliged to apologize, I mean, after all, he was letting me get in from the cold.

When I'd finished prostrating myself he responded by saying, "Don't worry about it. You're right; I wouldn't buy one of those apples. They've been in there for ages." He jingled his keys and laughed loudly. I tried to match his laughter decibel-wise with my own, but I was too flustered and only managed to giggle in a flimsy way.

It became mid-afternoon and I was sleepy and warm. There was a hazy sun in the sky; a yellow globe that gave me the impression that now and then it was taking warmth when no one was looking, instead of giving it unconditionally. I thought it was a good time to be going so I bid the apple man goodbye. The snow crunched a bit as I walked but the wind had died down. The snowy landscape was enticing in much the same way as a flesh eating plant is to its prey. I didn't want my tombstone to say, 'He died while admiring the view', so I walked up and down the highway, trying to keep moving, holding onto warmth as best I could.

A black car pulled over and I ran to it. I was drawn to the car like a bull to the arse of a fat woman in red. I was sure it was warm; it had the presence of a comfortable car even though it resembled a hearse. As I neared the vehicle, someone opened the black, rear door. I shinnied in and was about to speak but one quick look told me to be quiet. By my astonishment you'd think I'd never seen identical twins before I laid eyes on the passenger and the driver in the front seat.

I rudely stared at the two men, oddities of nature; right there in the middle of nowhere. They were dressed identically, black hats, black coats, same shirt collars. The passenger had twisted the rear view mirror a bit and was watching me as I gawked. He turned around.

“Not from around here, are you?” he asked gravely, though I could have sworn a grin was tugging at the corners of his mouth, making them twitch.

“No,” I replied, “no, I’m not.”

“Well,” he began, stroking his beard, “We’re Hutterites. Don’t be alarmed; we love the Lord, you know. We’re not some kind of mind control cult or anything. We just choose live a bit differently. If you’re going a ways, I suggest you spend the night with us, in the colony that is. Nobody’s using the schoolhouse, surely you can sleep there.” He looked a question at his companion who seemed to nod his approval.

I didn’t say anything but the voices had started to invade that car like eels in a freshly sunken horse’s head. What had he said, hut, he lived nearby in a hut, a mud hut, what?

“Of course they live in huts, fool...you’re not getting out.”

“Ha-ha. The mudhutter. You’ll be there forever.”

God I hated those hallucinations.

While grace was being said, I was peeking through squinty eyes at a nightmare in the making. Everyone was dressed the same, and would soon be eating off of identical plates and drinking from indistinguishable cups and glasses. The women seemed afraid to look up and I thought that this was so because they felt shy around me or perhaps because of the requests being asked of God. I too bowed my head, wondering sheepishly if God would forgive me for spying on people during prayer.

When we were all seated, I heaped my plate to overflowing and, all smacking lips and fingers, wasn’t in the least concerned with looking like a starved swine at the trough. I hadn’t eaten to excess in a long time and I was going to do so while the food was in front of me. I ate as if it were my last meal. There was so much food and all of it so kind to the palette. That chow was so wholesome you could almost see the building blocks of life in it.

All that food did funny things to my head. I dreamt vividly that night in the schoolhouse that my parents, my two brothers and I were all seated around the table getting ready to eat. We all had beards and we all wore black hats, pants and coats and checked shirts.

“Would you say the grace please, Bob,” my father asked humbly. I heard a guitar and turning around I saw Bob Dylan as he started to sing, “You gotta serve somebody, yeah, you gotta serve somebody, It might be the devil or it might be the Lord...”

Turning back I saw that I was alone with my father who was chewing on a piece of straw. His beard was gone and he was wearing a wide brimmed hat. He was looking at me strangely and then he smiled widely and said, “We kinfolk now, we all be kinfolk.”

I left the colony with a smile on my face. Two days later, I encountered a strange night that stole that smile from me and stayed with me for a long time. Begging rides from Winnipeg to Regina in the winter wouldn’t have been easy in the best of times but that one damned night seemed to be symbolic of the whole experience. It would all be engraved in my mind for years to come. For quite some time, wherever I was, when I had to go out in the cold I would remember it.

What I couldn't seem to forget was spending the night sleeping fitfully on the bathroom floor of a gas station, perched outside of a small town. It had to have been minus thirty Celsius. I don't know why the gas jockey didn't lock the bathroom door that night, but mercifully, he forgot.

It was one of those washrooms whose toilet looks as though it's never known the abrasive back and forth of a scrub brush. It was a can that wouldn't have been itself without paper towels strewn across the floor, graffiti on the walls and rust in the sink. Reading some of the chicken scratch therein, I learned who would do what to you for a buck and what her phone number was.

When I lay on the cold floor, I felt the wind come under the door, a steady stream of frigid air invading my sanctuary, my place of refuge. Curling up I did my best to stop thinking about the cold. Eventually I fell into a dubious slumber.

I sat up a few hours later, fully awake and in a panicked state because I'd heard a chicken and several drunken teenagers. I went out to investigate and found that there was no one there. I was sure that it would soon be dawn. The sky seemed to be lightening up a bit. I went back to the highway and there wasn't much I wouldn't have done for a ride. From time to time, I went to the gas station's bathroom hoping to coax just a little warmth from the cold-soaked porcelain accessories and tiled walls.

Chapter Twenty-Four

I didn't think it was possible for anything to measure up to my time spent in the flophouses of Winnipeg as far as detestable treatment one to another was concerned. In a way I was looking to Regina to give back to me the faith I had in others, the trust that left me at a point in time that I could not pinpoint. I might have ceased to believe in my fellow man, when he kept trying to dump me off on someone else as though I was a supreme burden. It was possible that my innocence succumbed as I was being tossed around like a human hot potato, from the hospital to the Sally Anne to the Main Street Project and then to where my home was wherever I happened to be standing. As far as my hopes for Regina were concerned, that all other cities would be redeemed by her, it turned out that I might as well have kept right on looking, for Regina had no sympathy.

I was picked up here and there, on the outskirts of small towns, in the middle of nowhere, typically standing though now and then, crouching. Ride by ride I made headway, slowly, in a strange rhythm that made it seem as if I was sneaking up on Regina. Suddenly, coming over a slight incline I saw the city. Cold and alone I arrived; a tangled ball of yarn, one you'd have trouble making sense of. I found my way to the hostel as though I were iron filings and it a high-powered magnet.

I could tell by the man's youngish face, framed by prematurely graying hair, that I looked bad. "Got any beds?" I asked, hopefully.

He looked at me momentarily with furtive brown eyes, then looked at the counter in front of him, scraped his foot over something on the floor for a few seconds, closed his eyes and then looked back at me. "Yeah," he answered me, "we got beds." Surely, he's seen worse than me, I thought.

Name? Date of birth? Hey mister, all I want is a bed, I don't want to tell you my life story. My name is cold and my birth date is tired. Everything else about me is hungry. Cold, tired and hungry.

The shelter was in an unsavoury neighbourhood, on Osler Street, just down the block from where the hookers waited for someone to pay them seventy bucks to stare at the ceiling and dream of Barbados and a non-paying gig, putting their kids through university or scoring some really good dope. It was a smaller hostel than the one in, well, that other place.

I was given soap and shampoo and told in a firm way to shower and to make sure I washed my hair. Believing that my acceptance by others would be governed by how clean I was, I scrubbed hard. I didn't know if it was it was customary to throw new people who were cold under a stream of hot water and I didn't ask. Maybe I smell bad, I thought, but that was unlikely as I hadn't thawed out enough to really stink.

After awhile I started to enjoy the pulsating warmth. My muscles absorbed the heat that seeped through my skin in waves as steam rose from the shower floor up, filling the room. Eventually the warmth found its way to my marrow.

The shampoo was a horrid reddish colour, thick and strong smelling. I guessed they were giving me something to kill the bugs that were nesting in my tangled and matted mane, though

it would have had to be one tough bug, to have made it all the way from Winnipeg. When I was finished, I looked at myself and laughed, finding it somehow funny that I had rubbed my skin red and raw with the scratchy bar of soap that I had been given. I'm so clean now, I thought, that everybody will like me.

My high hopes were dashed. It took but a few days in that miserable little prairie city for the other hostel denizens to begin complaining about me. I could tell my days were numbered though I really didn't know why. I supposed they were aware that I had a problem with their reality and that didn't sit well. I hadn't even really started settling in or begun to feel at home when I was called to the office. The other homeless men, as I'd suspected, had been sounding off about my behavior. The general consensus was that I didn't belong and should probably be in a hospital.

When the worker told me I had to leave, I started shaking. I was under a peculiar delusion at the time. I thought I was a very old man.

"You can't just throw me out," I argued, "I'll freeze. A man of my age cannot live long in weather like this."

"Well Grandpa," he countered, "Those are the orders I have. You have to go. We can't have you all over the building."

I pondered for several days his remark about me being all over the building. I reached the conclusion that he probably thought I turned into some kind of geriatric giant who lounged on the roof of the building in which he earned his daily bread. Something like the Jolly Green Giant, I figured.

"Where will I go," I pressed, "I've only just got here. It's not right."

"How did you happen to *get* here," he inquired. I thought that if I gave the right answer they might let me stay, but the only I answer I could think of was the truth.

"I hitchhiked," I croaked, as my throat failed me, suddenly going dry.

"Well," he said, looking at me, "I suggest you hitchhike somewhere where they'll have you. Now, leave or I'll call the cops."

"Go ahead, Big Man, Mr. Hero, call them," I replied in a scornful voice.

I left the office and went into the TV room. When the policeman arrived he found me absorbed in watching the TV, though it wasn't turned on. What I saw in the blank screen was often more intriguing than any program, but I didn't expect him to understand that.

The cop asked me to step outside. I was incredulous. "You want to fight an old man like me? Okay, I've had it, let's go."

"Wait," he said with amused authority in his voice. He may have been entertained by my antics, but I knew that, when all was said and done, he had been given the choice cards long before the deck had even been cracked; I had to do as he bid.

"I don't want to fight you," he told me in a friendly voice, "I just want to talk." We walked to the street and a couple of Native girls were looking at me. One of them laughed and the other scowled. I got in the cruiser and sat up front while he ran a check on me.

“You’re clean,” he said and then he asked, “Just how old are you Pops?”

“I, sir, am eighty seven years old.” I could feel the whiteness of my hair.

“That’s funny,” he observed, “you don’t look a day over nineteen.”

I spent the next two weeks wandering the streets of Regina. I was too confused to attempt finding permanent shelter. In a perfect world no one would roam like that, all systems out of order, vexed by hallucinations, struggling to stay alive in their own little world, their belief system rooted in psychosis.

Typical days were horror filled, half walking, half running the streets, feeling the circle tighten like a noose, the circle being made up of those who wore masks, those who had forced me into a bogus telepathic marriage. They were in my dad’s employ, those whose worst problem was whether to buy premium or unleaded, and to make sure the oil was topped up.

“How’s the circle,” they asked one another.

“Tightening? Ah, that’s good, that’s very good.”

They had resurfaced. Those who had started surrounding me on the highway outside Edmonton and had, without question, continued working against my best interests from behind a façade of industry and normalcy were back. It seemed as if crowds of them had been injected into my life, they were in the way everywhere my freezing feet propelled me. We were all in what I thought of as ‘the stream’ and, I well knew, the longer I was there the harder it would be to get out. They drove and they walked, they jogged and rode public transportation. The ring around me grew tighter and tighter. Everywhere people were masquerading. Every third person bore a resemblance to my father.

Not long after leaving the hostel I became convinced, beyond doubt, that everything and everyone was being filmed. I saw cameras wherever I went, in the yellow headlights of a car, implanted in a dog’s eye, rudely trained on me from the top floor of an office building, in a streetlight as it winked on – everywhere, it seemed, there were cameras.

I started to develop a few ideas. In order to make a movie realistic, I reasoned, the actors should live their roles.

I thought, if that is what this is all about, could it be that I’m only playing the role of a hobo, could life be that strange? Do I get paid? I ceaselessly walked the streets thinking about the depth and mystery of what I believed I’d discovered.

When I wound my way through the glacial streets I would test the waters with little hand signs, subtle nods and the like, all directed at those who looked as though they were in the know. I wanted them to understand that I had figured it out and that it was all right as far as the movie went, that mind control wasn’t necessary.

As night descended it would grow cold and then colder still. The air was like a hungry animal, wild and cagey, one who found sustenance in exposed skin. It seemed the beast was always hungry, always in the mood to bite. My snarled hair covered parts of my face and the best you could say about that is that I was partially protected. The running shoes I was wearing were flimsy things I’d picked up at the shelter. The wind went right through those stale, old sneakers

- not only were they poor protection for the cold, they further disturbed me by frequently coming undone.

After night had fallen as far as it could I could be found lounging in the YMCA waiting area, watching the TV that was bolted to the wall. I knew the routine, as did everyone I encountered there. Twenty minutes to get warm and then, sorry, you have to go and come back in an hour or two. So I sat there on a cold night and put the finishing touches on what I told myself I must accept.

Often times any explanation is better than none. By my calculations I was a hobo who had been surrounded by a mind control cult operated by my father and I was being controlled and tormented, as part of a movie-making project. Take it or leave it, that's what I got when I added two and two.

It seemed that addition was a time consuming task. By the time I'd finally come to understand and fully believe the wherefore and the why, I was politely asked to leave. At least they were civil about it.

I developed an unusual belief in Regina. It all began when I was crouched with my back against a heater in an apartment lobby. I was unencumbered, having nothing but a few cigarette butts to my name.

I was making noises through my teeth. To my ears the sounds I was making were indistinguishable from those a cat makes. The more I meowed the more my brain picked up on the noise and turned it into a highly plausible explanation for why things were the way they were. Of course you couldn't have a cat wandering around in a shelter for homeless men. If only for the animal's own good you'd have to throw it out, you never knew what some sadistic bastard might do, who knew, some serial killer in training might get hold of it and God only knows what might happen.

Late one evening I was walking through a park when I felt compelled to get down on all fours. I didn't know that insanity had me firmly in tow. Well, I thought, you are a cat and that entails walking a certain way. I looked up at the lights and then the cars passing and could have sworn that I felt the sadness and loneliness that only a cat in a human's world would feel.

I reached a busy intersection and waited for the light to turn green. When it did I crossed in cat style. I believed I was a four-legged feline and I walked the walk. In a further effort to be as my fellow felines, once I'd traversed the street I curled up in front of a bar and tried to sleep. I made a few hapless noises through my teeth. It was cold. Thankfully the better part of me was unaware that my behavior was in any way curious. I wasn't worried about lying vulnerable on the sidewalk. As far as I knew and for all I cared I was following the rules, as far as the comportment of cats went, I was exemplary.

I must have dozed a bit. At some point in the evening, a man who looked like the Pope put me in a car and then I remember warmth, blankets and more blankets until I stopped shivering. Food, sleep and more sleep. When I woke the next day, I was alone. The room smelled funny. Something seemed out of order - something was twisted. There was a strong smell of antiseptic cleaner and under that a cigar. I dressed hurriedly and with my heart in my throat I fled.

Chapter Twenty-Five

I didn't intend to settle down in Moose Jaw, but, once I found myself there my first impressions left me guardedly optimistic. I noticed its residents were pleasant. I had a glimmer that perhaps I'd stumbled onto a good thing.

Moose Jaw was perfectly situated if you were running away from Regina, being close enough that I didn't freeze getting there, yet far enough away that I felt safe. It was there I found asylum – warmth, food, an ear inclined to listening, a warm bed in which to lie.

Mere hours before I discovered the city that was to be my haven, I stood outside of Regina, the cow town in need of some down home decency. Eventually a man wearing his hair and beard long picked me up. He enhanced his look with rings and bracelets, faded jeans, a colourful T-shirt and running shoes that looked indestructible, unlike mine, which I expected, might fall apart at any time. We rode in a tranquil stillness for some time. He smoked thick joints and I looked out the window at the cold, cold snow.

Suddenly he started talking, telling me about some teenager he had given a ride to, who had been amazed that he knew who Pink Floyd was, let alone that he had some of their music.

"I've been a fan of Pink Floyd since the sixties," he said, laughing. "I was living in London when they put out their first hit single, 'Arnold Lane', and let me tell you it was big." I shrugged an 'I wouldn't know' shrug. "I was going to call my son Syd after Syd Barrett. My wife talked me out of it. Lucky thing that; the fool went nuts and had to leave the band. I mean, who would want to name their son after some psycho?"

"You don't see many Adolphs around, that's for sure," I said and then asked, "What did you call your son?"

"Paul, after Paul McCartney."

"That's nice," I said, "real nice. He's sure no psycho." I choked on the word psycho. My head started to throb and the knot that was always in my stomach tightened. I hardly knew why anymore, but words like that made me feel real funny. I wondered if Paul McCartney would disapprove of someone like me.

"Yeah, old Sid went batty, right off the deep end. Of course I wouldn't have my boy walking around with the name of a psycho." Now he was repeating himself.

People had called me a schizophrenic and I figured that if he knew that, his hostility towards psychos in general might find a new focal point. He was a little bent himself as far as I could tell, but he couldn't be too far gone – he still knew how to push the buttons of others. I was being overwhelmed by a need to get out of his vehicle.

"I always thought that Lennon had more balls, know what I mean? I should have named my son John." I had no reply ready and could think of none that pertained to Lennon's privates.

I propped my coat up against the door and window, to act as a cushion. I leaned on it and tried to relax and sleep a bit. Closing my eyes I cleared my sinuses and throat and started drifting...

"I guess Paul had himself a little scare though, eh?" I jumped. He pointed to a pile of t shirts. "Have a look."

I looked and saw Paul McCartney with Japanese features in the middle of the shirt. It said, "Free Paul" at the top and "Free Light Society" at the bottom.

"What's all this about," I asked.

"Man, where have you been?" he asked, "McCartney was busted in Japan. Caught with half a pound at the airport. Man, I'm on the cutting edge with these shirts. I'm going to make a bundle."

"What's the Clear Light Society?" I asked.

"Rrrr," he growled and slapped his forehead, "don't you ever read the newspaper?"

"Sure," I lied.

"Well then you'd know that they're the main group behind legalisation in Japan."

"Hmmm, I see."

"I'll bet you do. You're probably a psycho like that ass Syd Barrett, foolish bastard, ruined my life." Even I was left looking for the logic there.

"What's the next town?" I asked.

"We're just about in Moose Jaw," he replied.

"As good a place as any," I declared, "I'll get out there."

"Anyways, my wife filed for divorce and I didn't contest it. She thought I had put a curse on our son's life from the start. Here then, I'll drive you into town a ways. I have to drop off some shirts anyways. Not too many though, I think they're just discovering marijuana in Moose Jaw." He snorted, having amused himself.

As I was getting out of his vehicle he asked, "You okay? You're pale as a ghost."

"I'm fine, just need some air."

"See you, Syd."

I shut his door and immediately turned and started walking. I heard him drive away and heard his reproach "psycho" over and over. A phantom, I thought, plainly a phantom.

I rode up in a slow moving elevator, sniffed the air and said, "Cleaning stuff," to myself. Walking into the welfare office I fully expected to be rebuffed when I approached the receptionist and asked to see a social worker.

I was the same mess I'd been since what seemed the beginning of forever, but no one wrinkled up their noses or threw their hands in the air in disgust. I was politely told to have a seat and that someone would be with me soon. In short order I was led to a small, sparsely adorned office – one lonesome print hung on the wall and a plant that had been allowed to turn slightly brown sat in the corner.

“So, how can we help you today,” I was asked by a man who looked very much the ordinary, everyday, social worker. His tone of voice and demeanor were perfectly neutral. He tapped his pipe in an ashtray. He didn’t try to see through me, he didn’t glare. There was no gaze of steel. It seemed like it had been so long since I had beheld a look that didn’t judge. I felt some type of warmth and my eyes filled with water. I looked down for a moment and then back at him and after thinking twice I stated my business, without spilling my guts.

“I need a place to sleep for a while. I guess I need a place to stay.”

He nodded what appeared to be an affirmation, so I went a little farther.

“I also need food.”

“Nothing else?” he asked, and I said I could use a smoke.

He pulled a pack out of a drawer and tossing them on his desk he said, with a smile, “Someone left them here, knock yourself out. I have to go talk to the boss.”

It didn’t take long for him to return with the go ahead. I knew he had not been long because I was only on my second cigarette and I’d been pulling hard on them. I was delighted beyond words when I learned I was going to have my own room. Social Services would provide shelter at the Brunswick Hotel if I would agree to see a psychiatrist as soon as an appointment could be arranged. I agreed.

I was cut a small cheque and given two vouchers redeemable for food at Safeway. The proprietor of the Brunswick was paid directly by welfare, as a safeguard against fools like me squandering their rent money. If I had to actually enter the hospital, I was told, my room would be waiting for me.

I signed on the dotted line, but I didn’t quite get it. Someone out there somewhere, must be waiting to rain on my parade. This must be a mean-spirited joke.

After I had checked out the bed, looked in the mirror, turned the hotplate on and off a few times and found the bathroom down the hall, I understood that no one was joking. I finally had a warm place, a place of my own.

There were times over the next few weeks that I was afraid and found myself looking over my shoulder in a literal way, spooked by a feeling that someone was following me, creeping up to ruin everything. It was an overwhelming sensation that made me uneasy and oft times led me to look for a place to sit down. Each time it struck, I thought the feeling would never end. But it would end. As I grew used to having my own place I would shed some of the anxieties that had been victimizing me, in one way or another, since the days of my flight from city to city - since the times of looking for warmth and some type of fellowship with, or at least, understanding from my fellow man.

I was in the can, in the midst of reading a week old paper when I was summoned to the front desk. The hippy that had dropped me off in Moose Jaw had planted a seed. His derisive, ‘don’t you ever read a newspaper’ had stayed with me, had started me reading a paper any time I could find one. I would read a bit and then become absorbed in the patterns the words seemed to make on the page. Sometimes the other residents would send their thoughts onto the page I was reading. I played schizophrenic games with the words. “Hmmm, Indira Ghandi

becomes Prime Minister of India again, hmmm, Indira, India, they sound the same, that makes sense.” I had no comprehension in the conventional sense. Though being called to the hotel’s command central was taking me from a useless word game that I couldn’t win. I was, nonetheless, irked at being take from my reading.

I was given my message – phone Social Services, nothing more or less. Ah, no, I thought, they’re going to kick me out, I’ve been all over the building again. Timorously, I dialed the number that was given to me by the blond haired and by no means unattractive desk clerk.

“Hello, it’s Carmen Playford.”

“Yes, just a minute please, I’ll put you through.”

I proceeded to have a short, mostly pleasant, conversation. I was expected to show up the next day at the hospital, with a change of clothing, a toothbrush, comb and so on.

“Can I take my books?” I asked. I had two books, the Bible and the Arabian Nights and I was assured that they were acceptable.

Just before we said goodbye I had a groundless suspicion that my worker was amused to see me in the situation I was in, that there was mirth in his voice as he said, “Get a good night’s rest, try to get eight hours sleep. Everything will be alright.”

I did everything I was supposed to. I slept for the recommended eight hours and then some. I packed my bag with everything I thought I’d need. Still I didn’t feel on the road to a turn for the better, possibly because I was beyond knowing I was ill.

The next day, as I neared the hospital I felt worse than I had for some time. I gathered that the doctors were supposed to fix something that was wrong with me. Yes, I knew that’s what they were supposed to do in hospitals, but I had my doubts as to what their real intentions were. I wasn’t sure what they were going to be up to, but I understood that I could be homeless again if I didn’t comply. Being asked to leave another place of refuge was something I would have had a hard time dealing with. I desperately needed to live in a warm, predictable environment. I dragged myself into the hospital screaming and kicking, in a non-literal way.

I was immediately put on the psychiatric ward. I don’t imagine there was much head-scratching going on when that decision was made. The good doctor asked me some questions that made no sense and reached for his pen. I was taking stelazine 10mg. three times daily before you could say vegetable.

I started sleeping a lot. I wasn’t well after one or two doses; you can’t just take a pill and have everything go away. It would take me a month or so of being saturated with antipsychotic medication for me to begin to think clearly, that is, clearly for me, which was akin to a faraway radio station, music, static, your favourite song interrupted, fiddle with the dial, some hissing...

Unexpectedly I began to develop a new problem, which was something I didn’t need. It all began after I had been there about a week.

While I was taking a bath after supper I looked down and thought, are you ever fat. This was laughable, though marginally. I became even more distressed when I started to see fat on everyone around me. The other patients on the ward, the staff members, the guy who cleaned the floors; they were all dopey and obese. I started boycotting food and in response, the

people around me encouraged me to eat more. I eyed the meals we were given with distrust, thinking the food was poisoned.

"I'm tired of being fat," I told the psychiatrist. He gazed at me sadly and gave me a prescription.

"You can come back," he mildly pressed, "if you change your mind." I put his script in my coat pocket and by the time I was pointed in the direction of my room, I'd forgotten about it.

Once home I set about throwing out everything resembling food. I kept the bread I had and the grape Kool-Aid along with sugar to sweeten it. I had read my Bible while in the hospital and I knew that they ate bread and drank wine at the Last Supper. It only made sense that I should try to emulate those who broke bread with Christ. I had to, in order to prove I was worthy of whatever good things God would see fit to send my way.

I figured that I would exist on bread and Kool-Aid. Only grape Kool-Aid for me, it was so much like wine. Living on bread and grape juice was something I did because of Jesus. I no longer believed that my brother was Jesus; he was just a very rich guy who always pretended to have nothing whenever I saw him. The real Jesus, I thought, was in the sky peeking on us all.

Time passed and I had grown very skinny. I was allowing myself coffee and cigarettes. I had decided the anorexia I lived with was no problem; it was just a very long fast. If temptation paid me a call I would remind myself that Jesus had fasted for forty days and forty nights.

One night I was sitting in a restaurant, piously sipping water. The Eagles song "New Kid in Town" was playing through a fine speaker system. I saw a man turn and point in my direction.

What now? Was he pointing me out as the new kid in town? I glared dull daggers at him. At another table a woman laughed hysterically and I heard someone say 'Universe City'. I heard more laughter and someone said 'town'. The guy who'd pointed seemed to be saying something secretive as he shook hands with the man he was with. I got up and left. I had to think.

As I walked downtown a man walked by with another and I thought he asked his companion, "When did you get back in town?"

There's a new kid in town, town, back in town. What the hell's with all this town crap? There's a new kid in...town. So, town's a place. Related to Universe City, I'd heard it in the coffeehouse, both places were mentioned and then the guy who'd pointed at me had shaken hands with his friend.

"That's right," said a mean voice out of thin air, one I failed to recognize, "and if you thought Universe City was bad, we're worse." There was a long silence, then, "Welcome to town."

As I stood there, stupefied, I saw a long line forming for a movie. "There you go, cat," the mean voice, spilling over with pure derision, said, "go have a look." I didn't dare disobey.

As I drew close, I saw myself in the glassed in case that housed the movie posters. I believed I was in a sex movie about an older man and a younger man. I was the young man.

Yes," the voice spoke again, "we've used your image."

I walked quickly down the street saying repeatedly, "I just want to get warm."

Someone laughed. "Wonder what's wrong with him," another said.

Turning to a woman I'd never seen before, I said, "Don't believe everything you hear or see." The man she was with started to object but she held up her hand, telling him that she could handle it.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"I'm in a movie I didn't want to be in."

"Really," she said with eyebrows arched.

"It's not make-believe," I told her, "they took my image and used it."

"Oh," she replied and hugged her man a little closer. "See you, Mr. Moviemanager." She faded into the crowd with her friend. town was worse already.

Chapter Twenty-Six

My conduct was normal. I carried myself, as one would be expected to if they suffered under a domineering mental illness. That having been said, on some levels I knew my behavior was perplexing, that my carrying on might have been completely unacceptable.

The answer to my problem came in a phial. The solution could be ingested. All the same, every time someone tried to steer me towards the psychiatrist's office I would rebel; everything was a plot, the world was out to make a zombie of me. The doctor was a devil and couldn't be trusted.

It would have been nice if I could have made some concrete sense of it all. The person I was when I was medicated was the version of me people were apt to be square with and possibly grow to like. Yet some would argue that the psychotic isn't well when medicated, only different. My feelings whispered in my ear, telling me that all I was when people liked me was a head full of chemicals, one whose veins percolated with the laboratory's version of what was genuine.

Even people with a 'just say no' aversion to drugs urged me to take my pills. When in my natural state I was a curiously galling thorn in the paw. I got under people's skins. I was a fly in the ointment, gumming up the works by throwing a monkey wrench into everything. Those who didn't understand mental illness or who ungraciously chose not to, found me to be exasperating. Yet, I was human, and when I was alone at night in my room, I understood I was a vexation.

I liked to go to the Indian Friendship Centre, the library or the YMCA where I had somehow managed to get a membership. I knew I ruffled feathers to varying degrees at all three places but I went anyways. I would pretend that I was well liked at the library, even when the pretty librarian would narrow her eyes in my direction and, flipping her hair, walk briskly away as though she had to tell someone that I'd arrived.

I knew it had to be my imagination, the guy who worked at the Friendship Centre wasn't telling the odd joke at my expense, even if the guy next to me asked, "Hey, did you hear what he just said about you?"

I spent a lot of time in the steam bath at the Y, shedding excess pounds, unaware that they had all been shed. Nobody bothered me much at the Y. I imagined I was known as the guy who was either wrinkly from steam or who swam lap after lap in a deliberate way, as if he was going to stay in the pool for the rest of his life.

Sometimes I would be a little sad when I figured I'd been talked down to and looked down on throughout the day, spoken to by others as if I was the original simpleton. There were times when I sat in the park and thought if I could only sprout wings I would, in an instant, go off to live with whatever birds would have me. I was not happy with having a bothersome nature. No one wants to be a pest.

It was a simple concept, yet I just couldn't sink my teeth into it; pills—healthy, no pills—sick. There are few books of dime store psychology and even fewer dime store psychologists that would resist the idea that I was anything but in denial.

One day, when I was particularly maddening, when I had just been chewed out at the Friendship Center for some infraction or other, I decided to go for a little trip to see what the world had to throw my way.

I hitchhiked to nearby Swift Current. The trip was uneventful. The song of tires on the highway on which snow was in short supply, the music playing softly, the satisfaction I was getting from the cigarettes I was smoking, all of these, as I punctured the outskirts of the city, lulled me into an unguarded state.

After thanking my ride, I walked directly into the nearest bar and started bumming money. It wasn't exactly a fair-minded establishment when it came to the type of behavior I was displaying. It was the type of place that primarily administered beer, one where you paid your own way. Panhandlers of any type were unwelcome. Eventually I would come to understand that most establishments that cater to the public believe that beggars are bad for business.

Some men who were drinking beer started giving me a hard time, demanding to know why they should give me money.

"Hey, asshole, what have you ever done for me?"

I didn't take that as a question. I thought I was being goaded.

"What do you want me to do for you," I inquired, as though I was being prompted.

"Stand up in front, on the stage there and sing us a song." They promised to buy me a beer and give me a few bucks if I did.

I stood up and sang, off key, but loud and clear.

"There was a man from Pakistan...." When I'd sung all the words I could make up I dropped my drawers, those thick woolen ones that are often held up by suspenders, the same kind my Grandpa wore. Of course, I was wearing another pair underneath.

A man stood at his table and started shouting, "Cut it out, that's enough, cut it out!"

His voice invited confrontation. He motioned for me to come to his table and I did so for the same reason that no one had stood to him – he was an imposing man.

"What's the matter with you," he hissed in disapproval as I approached.

I thought that hissing didn't suit such a large man. He was staring at the group that had given me a hard time, and, as a group, they laughed at him.

"Sit down, sit down," he said, "I want to talk to you." He seemed angry. A waitress made her way over wearing a smirk and not much else.

"Wanna beer?" she asked.

"No thanks, I don't drink much." He bought me a ham and cheese sandwich but I didn't eat it.

After he had lectured me every which way about the importance of self-respect, he mentioned, in an offhand way that he owned a motel and that I could spend the night there if I wanted to.

“And don’t worry,” he said loudly and clearly, “I’m not some kind of freak like most of the assholes that drink here.” He was having a hard time letting go of his anger at what he’d seen. I was unperturbed; sadly enough it was just another day. I took a chance on him and we left the bar together.

That night was as pleasant a night as I’d had in a long time. I could watch a coloured TV, take a hot shower or lie on a vast, cloud-like bed. Around supper Rick’s wife brought me a plate of food and a pot of tea, not a cup, but my own pot. I spent the night trying to figure out what the small people who lived in the television were trying to say to me.

But, I was shameless. I was up the next day before most of the province and within minutes of waking I was skulking away from the motel with the innkeeper’s bed sheets hidden underneath my coat. I was an ingrate of the first degree. I was a disgrace.

I gave nor received any goodbyes. There were no, “Let’s have a coffee before we part,” or, “Maybe you can make it up to the cottage this summer.” There was only me hitching down the road waiting for the perfect field to catch my eye, one that would suit my designs. In it there could be no livestock for they have owners. There must be many trees and most importantly the land I was going to trespass on had to be in the middle of nowhere.

I was a little disappointed with myself for stealing, but my idea of a place in the very heart of all that was obscure, a place that was altogether mine, was just too hard to resist. I thought that the man who had helped me would forgive me when he learned why I had stolen his bedding. I had a feeling he would understand

There were so many fields that seemed deserted. Finally I told the man who was giving me a ride to let me out.

“Right here, are you sure? There’s nothing around for miles.”

“Yes sir, if what you say is true, then this is the perfect spot.”

“Alright, here you go.”

“Farewell,” I said and I felt somehow worldly having said goodbye in that way.

“Farewell, farewell,” I rolled the word around my tongue as I made my way through the mud and dirt I needed to traverse in order to begin construction on my version of paradise.

I knew the place when I saw it. There was a large tree surrounded by smaller ones that would be perfect for keeping out the wind. I noticed when I drew closer that the big, old tree was brown and black and quite knotty. There were patches of snow around its trunk and the ground around it seemed to have less give to it than the field I had crossed. The fact that the earth at that spot seemed different from the rest of the field convinced me that the hallowed status I had assigned to the big, old tree, on sight, had been the correct assignation. It was a tree among trees.

I just wasn’t in a state to appreciate that the bedding I was about to use to construct a crude tent had always been cared for, laundered after each use and stored in a neat pile until the day it would, in a business-like way, be coaxed from where it lay and put back into service. The innkeeper may have been pleased, knowing that nobody had ever slept on dirty sheets at his establishment. Whoever made the beds up may have enjoyed working with the high

quality, crisp, white linen. And there I was ready to put the bedding to a dubious use. Under blue skies, they would flap in a crisp, cool wind. I started to doubt that Rick would forgive me.

Once I had done the best I could do, I gathered twigs, dead leaves and anything else that looked like it might burn. Huddling inside what amounted to a lean-to, I put my hand to lighting a fire. It started stubbornly and I fed it slowly. Eventually I ended up with a lot more smoke than fire. I put my face close to the smoldering confusion I had evoked. In mere moments my eyes could have been nothing but ruby red. Tears rolled steadily down my cheeks. They weren't droplets; they were sharp edged, triangular. The more they cut into my cheeks, the more I felt their strangeness and the harder I wept.

When I left the seclusion of that odd, little spot I left the sheets behind. I also left in my wake my delusions about Indians, living off the land, forsaking my fellow man and so on. But, I was wonderfully refreshed.

I started hitchhiking. I was going back to Swift Current, not knowing what to do with myself, aimless and bored. Maybe the blanket police are out, I thought, maybe the police don't have anything better to do around here than to chase those who steal bedding. I started to laugh much harder than was warranted. I turned to check for cars and found myself looking at two lawmen as they slowly drove by. I was as surprised and guilty as a mouse caught stealing cheese. They stopped abruptly, turned on their rooftop lights, let loose with a 'blip' of the siren and backed up to where I was standing. They acted as if they didn't know I was guilty, but, from the description I imagined they had of me, I knew they had to have me pegged as the desperado with a passion for quality, starched, white cloth.

Rick didn't press charges nor did he forgive me. He said that if I came on his property again he'd kick my ass. I asked the police if he was allowed to do that and they said if I was on his property he could kick my ass if he wanted to. I promised not to bother anyone and our meeting evaporated.

I wiled away the hours until dark picking rocks out of the ditch and hurling them into the bush and seeing how far I could piss and spit. I bummed a couple of smokes off some guy who was also wandering around. He seemed to want to be chums but I told him I had somewhere to be and walked away.

That night I slept in Rick's doghouse. I kicked one of the German Sheppard dogs out and slept with the other one, on a bed of straw. They were strangely gentle for guard dogs. The following morning I hitchhiked back to Moose Jaw.

I was still acutely embarrassed by my screen debut, chronicling the life and times of everyman's favourite degenerate as he attempted to defile me. I started to stay in my room most of the time. I grew a beard and had my hair cut very short. When I did go out I wore sunglasses and this seemed to help. People won't recognize me now, I thought.

If I'd only known that the people I'd seen at the theatre were lined up to see Monty Python's 'Life of Brian', it might have made some kind of difference, but then, maybe not. There's always something around the corner to scare the hell out of you.

Though I didn't know why, town graciously dissipated, became one less problem, scattered, blown by the prairie winds to places best left unexplored. Once in a while voices from town

would start in on me and they were frightening, but they just weren't as menacing as the whole illusion/delusion/hallucination that was Universe City.

I weighed ninety-three pounds when I finally left Moose Jaw, bound for the province of Ontario, yet I still believed I was fat.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Gram's kitchen was much as I thought it would be. I could have sworn I smelled the bread baking in her sturdy woodstove, even though the stove was long gone, replaced with electric. She sucked in her breath ever so slightly when I turned up on her doorstep, caked in the dirt of a vagrant, then shook her head and went to make food. I looked around.

In the kitchen I found myself surveying, entire days had once been spent making jam and preserves. Anyone with the gumption to roll up their sleeves and help would go home with their fair share or more. There was the table I remembered, that had been witness to discussion, humorous stories, heated debate, advice, predictions, warnings, and somewhere in there, words of love. Life on the farm always found its way back to the table. Somehow I sensed that time had changed things, that fewer were those who now sat at the table to pass the time.

I refused the bowl of soup offered to me. The voices were telling me just what they'd do to me if I ate. "After all," one said in a threatening way, "you want to look good for your next film."

"You don't want the soup?"

"They won't let me eat, Gram, I swear." I felt like running away.

As if she knew my mind, Gram said, "Go upstairs for a while and rest." I heard her gently put the soup on the counter, as though bemused. I navigated the stairs to the attic and the throngs of flies that always seemed to live there.

I nodded off into a hazy dreamscape. I was flying, gliding over trees and fields until an owl flew up to me and, looking at it, I realized I wasn't a bird. I had no business in the dark, bluish-purple sky. I fell and saw huge animals on the ground. Then there was warm, clear water to break my fall. I went feet first, right to the bottom where my mother lay looking at me, bubbles coming out of her nostrils and the corners of her mouth.

"You have to eat," she said, and then, "remember the other one, he needs your help." I wondered at her ability to hold her breath.

My younger brother's bloated face floated into the picture. His heart had stopped and he was dead. He needed more than help. I woke up crying and saw my Grandmother talking to my uncle, saying, "He has to eat, look at him."

I fell into a steamy, sweaty sleep, graciously void of dreams. Over the next several hours I was alternately asleep, dozing, sleeping with one eye open, in a state of what had to have been delirium, and wide-eyed awake, a time I hated, a time when I, without reservation, regretted and despised my entire life, the whole thing from day one. It was a horrible sensation.

One time when I woke I felt as though I was going to cry.

One of the voices started making things worse. "You're not that sad, you fraud. You're spoiled. What's so bad about your life?"

Embarrassed, I closed my eyes tightly and, though the voices continued to mistreat me, they could not get me to open them. Eventually I slept.

The following day my parents came and stole me from my Grandmother. Gram stood with her arms folded, looking sad, yet stern, while my parents rushed me to the car. I'll be back, Gram, I promised in my mind as I was whisked away. I felt like a celebrity, unaware that if I was it was for all the wrong reasons.

I know about you Dad, I thought as we drove, I know that you are involved in some type of affair with a woman who was betrothed and later married to me, both events made possible by the miracle of telepathy. I believe that you have gone out of your way to make my life miserable and I know that secretly you are a man of means and influence. Where do your transgressions end? How long will you continue to sin?

I tried to penetrate my father's armour with my gaze. I knew, without a doubt, that he noticed the way I was staring, not a glare but an insistent, probing look directed at the back of his head. From my mind to his, I was asking many questions, but he would not acknowledge me. He was pretending he'd done nothing wrong. My poor father had no idea why I had not spoken to him at Gram's or looked at him when he had tried to engage my eyes. The mental disease that bound my thoughts was very convincing when it painted my father as a scoundrel.

My mother was on a tirade over the Americans and their electric power plants. "The pollutants they produce," she said, "sulphur and nitrogen dioxides are responsible for most of the acid rain in our country as well as theirs and still they don't want to stand up and change their standards..."

"How about some food," my father interrupted and gave me a look, sideways, over his shoulder. Ten minutes later we were parked and Dad was trying to interest me in something edible. I shook my head both times he asked.

I was by and large silent throughout the long and drawn out trip. I hadn't much to say anymore. I was glad when the strain of it was over.

I was hard to deal with and hostile, yet my parents did their best to get me into the hospital. They quickly realized trying to use the telephone to make arrangements was useless, so we made our way to the red brick structure and presented ourselves in person, asking for a healing. What the staff saw was someone who was insane and had starved himself to the point of being a danger to himself. I was committed and admitted. When my parents left they seemed confused by it all.

I was hustled off to a room where I was to be examined by the doctor. I was muttering about 'town' and 'Universe City', blue cars and my bride who was also my king. I had the sensation that all sorts of ghouls had followed me from the prairies. Miniaturized, all those people who wore masks and were in my father's employ were climbing on me and getting right inside my body through the pores on my skin, my nostrils, ears and mouth.

When the psychiatrist on duty said that a needle could make all the bad stuff go away, I consented. My days of running were drawing to a close for a time. I was going to rest and eat. I was going to try my hand at thinking logically. I would have ups and I would surely have downs.

I remember being given a nourishing drink in a can. After the first few sips I blacked out, and was unaware of anything until I woke the next morning with the smell of fresh food snaking up from the cafeteria, hovering in the air and making me feel sick. That day I was told that if I didn't eat on my own I would be fed intravenously. I did the math and agreed to eat, reasoning that I could always spit the food out while, if I gave them access to my veins, I'd be stuck with whatever they put into my blood stream. Over the next while I would reacquire a taste for salty bacon, tuna sandwiches, soggy hot beef sandwiches and the like.

By the time my needle had mostly worn off I was much improved and compliant. I waited patiently while the doctor stuck the spike in again, granting me another month of level-headedness.

I was faced with new problems. I was repulsed by what I had become. What had happened, what parts of it all were real and what parts were the meanderings of an unbalanced mind? The line was still blurry; I blamed myself for falling down and not being able to get up.

I was released from hospital when my doctor thought I was well enough to leave. Well enough but not whole, not normal, no clean bill of health; it's drug therapy for life, get used to it, conform to the rules, take your medicine though it be hard to swallow.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

I stayed at my folks for a while after being discharged from hospital. While there I bounced around like an Indian Rubber ball thrown with gusto into a small, octagonal room. I ricocheted between dread and hope and miscellaneous points in between. I was waiting for a spot to open up in a group home dubbed the "Transition House". An ambitious name I thought, a tag that seems to promise a shift from sickness to health.

When I realized the name referred to the home's role in the move or transition from hospital to a bed in a long-term haven, I was embarrassed at my lack of understanding. I saw that getting better was going to be tough. I had to improve myself while learning about a health care system that, it seemed, viewed me as just another person to consume. I was another somebody turned nobody who would become nothing but a statistic and a burden for the taxpayer.

Before going to the Transition House, I feared that, when I became a resident, I would be walking into the brewing of some unusual magic. I thought that illegal medical treatments were probably practiced there, devil-pleasing goings on that were kept well hidden from prying eyes. Yes, strange things were afoot.

On those times when I was distressed, when thinking about the home made me want to hide, I would do so in my room. My favourite time to be alone was at night when I turned off the lights and the darkness that I provoked would protect me. The strangest kind of people would then cavort in my mind, those, I imagined, that worked and lived at the Transition House. They were tormentor and victim locked together in a morbid yet, on some level, satisfying dance. Some wore looks of confusion if you could see past their ghoulish expressions. Some wore looks of satiety. You could see fear in most everybody's eyes. I was sure that when I came on the scene I would be pushed aside, put in front of a television and excused from what really went on. I would be left to draw conclusions about any sinister occurrences from the vantage point of a non-participant.

Maybe, I thought, I was far from better in spite of the medicine. I was the same person I'd always be, simply rearranged. The morbid side of my imagination could still chase away good cheer, convincing me that black magic was alive and well in Peterborough. My senses were still, though I was medicated, subject to all manner of distortion.

When I wasn't daydreaming I was breathing tension-filled air at home, the main conflict, as I perceived it, being between my father and me. He thought I was a bit of a fool and I couldn't seem to shake the way I had seen him during my episode of psychosis. We would give each other funny looks, but nobody said much. What could you say?

"Hey, remember Universe City?"

"Were you there? I didn't see you."

I was once again ingesting food. In the hospital, the staff's number one priority in my case had been to put some meat on my undernourished bones. Thanks to the injections I received my sanity was imminent and not of concern. I guess this freed up a little time. Whenever I ate something, animal, fruit, vegetable, grain, fish or fowl someone invariably had a moment to

make a fuss, praising me as if I were the most wonderful idiot they had ever had the honour and privilege of meeting.

An older woman had pointed out that eating good quality food in any quantity one desired would be heaven on earth for many. Though I resented her supercilious tone I couldn't argue with the content of what she said and, so, from then on I ate and I got into the habit of eating and before you knew it I was hooked. I was still scrawny when I was released into the care of my parents, but not alarmingly so.

While I was with my parents I continued to take Haldol for a while, a drug I could best describe as being one without feelings. It was a harmless looking green pill, but it was harsh and strange.

One day my mother, who never stopped coming up with ideas for things I might do, suggested that I do a little yard work. I wearily obliged. Weary was becoming the word that best defined me. The day was stark and overcast; it was a sad day. Many leaves had left their hosts and lay dead at my feet, a multicoloured mosaic asking to be raked and laid to rest. I stared for a time and then started raking the same spot over and over. The rhythm was comforting. Eventually, spent, I dropped the rake where I was standing, the very thought of putting it away overwhelming me.

Mom had watched me work. "If I didn't know better, I would have thought you were a little old man." By way of reply I collapsed in a chair, spent.

I was 20, going on 80 and seriously in need of a new pill.

When I asked the doctor for a medication other than Haldol he seemed a little surprised.

"You're having problems with the Haldol?" he inquired, seeming a little disappointed, almost offended.

"Well, yes," I answered, "it makes me very, very lethargic."

"Well," he said and I could have sworn he was huffy, "we'll give you something different."

I went home with a prescription for thioridazine, a drug that was much gentler. Thioridazine made my eyes go a little slit-like and, as I discovered one lonely night, it also made me impotent. So what, I told myself, no woman in her right mind would have you anyways. I had to laugh, because I didn't want any woman in *her* right mind.

As I began to understand what I'd become the days painted themselves in different shades of grief that put a lump in my throat and a funny pain in my chest. When the sadness struck and pushed me around, I would go out walking in spite of my fear of meeting someone I had known in high school. I believed that bumping into any of those who still believed life was a roller coaster ride would only screw me up more, but if I was really down I sought perspective, at the risk of high school hangover.

Once I'd been unperturbed and a little wild. Suddenly, it seemed, I found myself fearful and full of sadness, stiff and wooden as only neuroleptic medications can make you. Around this time of a type of self-discovery I could have lived without, the Transition House called with the news that a bed had become available and I had the privilege of claiming it, for a year at the most.

The group home was a huge, old yellow house in Peterborough, a warehouse like building that was equipped to handle eight people at a time. We bought our own food, and drink. You could have a beer if you wanted to, you could smoke cigarettes, sleep on the couch, stay up all night watching TV or come home in the wee hours of the morning. One of the few rules written in stone was that you had to attend a program at the hospital, usually occupational therapy. I did not see any basket weaving during my time at the Peterborough hospital though, if that was what you were into, OT would have been the appropriate setting in which to indulge yourself. On any given day I might play with clay, while someone else cut pictures out of a magazine and pasted them on pieces of paper and another made boxes out of wood. It was adult kindergarten without the promise of advancement.

When we were finished for the day we all went to the cafeteria where we could belly up to the trough and stuff our faces with as much of that day's fare as we wanted. After all the excitement, after OT and eating, I often went home and slept. The day's first dose of antipsychotic medicine would have kept me captive through the hospital morning, bound in a chemical dungeon where I languished, sleeping with my eyes open, drowsily thinking about just how soft the world's softest mattress might be. When I got home I was always more than ready to stretch out on my rack and catch a few winks.

One night a bunch of us went out for coffee, six people in total. In the all but deserted restaurant we happened to find ourselves at a table that had twelve chairs, so we sat with a seat between each person and his or her neighbour. We were talking about nothing in particular, small talk, a bit of gossip, a joke or anecdote about one doctor or another when the waitress in her unfortunate uniform and softly whistling nylons approached our table and offered a joke. "What are you, a bunch of schizophrenics?"

She laughed, but we laughed harder. Yes, we laughed pretty hard for people on medicine and we asked, "How did you know?" "What gave us away?"

Sooner or later you get used to the personality myth. It's very common for people to believe that those who have schizophrenia have two personalities and quite possibly a great many more. (It's also very common for those with schizophrenia to believe ordinary people have preposterous, fixed ideas and that they see life as a great big one-dimensional stereotype)! The truth is that I have only one personality, just like anyone else, excluding those with multiple personality disorder or death row inmates in Texas trying to escape the sting of a lethal injection.

The man of colour walks by dressed up on a Saturday evening – he's obviously going the dance hall to use up some of that rhythm he's got inside...Anyone who's blind can play beautiful music if they want to...bored housewives are nymphomaniacs...rich people are snobs and poor people are uncouth and dirty... It seems that whoever's in charge likes to sort everyone out; please, no pushing, no shoving, there's a box for everyone; if you don't fit someone will be along shortly to apply a little pressure.

Some days we endured group therapy. In the room in which group therapy took place was a see-through mirror. Everyone knew it was there, that someone could be on the other side watching but it was never officially acknowledged. When I looked at the mirror I'd primp a bit, smile at myself and check my hair. In the smoky mirror, we saw ourselves in many ways.

To those whose medicine made them ravenously hungry, enduring the morning program was not a problem. The Monday to Friday, all you can eat lunch was well worth the sacrifice of a couple of hours. To me, not a large consumer of food, the morning ritual in exchange for an all you can eat meal was like dragging me behind a car, shirtless and over gravel and then offering me a dab of skin cream and a single, standard issue bandage.

Once a week I sat through an hour of therapy. Every week the Kleenex box sitting on the table confronted me, daring me to make use of it. That box would catch my eye as soon as I'd sat down. I'd envision myself snuffling, maybe sobbing a bit while my therapist held out the offensive receptacle, coaxing me, "Here, help yourself, use all you want." It never happened.

Tuesdays we went bowling and Thursdays we played volleyball. Most of us were of the lamb being led to the slaughter variety. We arrived at the bowling alley or the YMCA in a yellow school bus and we filed into those facilities quietly. I was already humbled by what had happened to me in my life, what had happened to my mind. It was a further affront to be carted around like some kind of burden, a sponger, grown old before his time, one who would never do anything but waste oxygen and consume food and drink he hadn't earned. It wasn't lost on me that I was among people who needed professional caretakers and that I in no wise was considered any different by said keepers. I was often given the sense, by those who were paid to watch over me and my peers that we should be grateful that anyone would take on such a demoralizing, disagreeable job.

During the winter preceding June of 1981, the month and year that I would leave the group home bound for a wedding halfway across the country, some of us tried to improve our predicament by taking care of a large outdoor ice rink. That was one cold winter and colder still for us because we had to flood the rink at night. Winter's unyielding breath was intrusive, penetrating my clothing, giving me the feeling that I was standing around in my birthday suit. Winter laughed at extra sweaters and thought toques were nothing but ornaments.

It was on one of those cold nights with a sky so exceptionally black and the air so clear you were halfway breathless, that I realized I'd really been out of touch. One of the others that I was freezing with was sliding across the ice. He yelled, "Nystrum scores and it's all over."

"What the hell did Nystrum do?" I asked.

He stopped and looked at me. "Are you sure you're a hockey fan?"

"Of course," I replied, "of course."

"Well, you must have missed the playoffs last year. Nystrum scored the winning goal in the Stanley Cup finals."

"For who?"

"For the Islanders, who'd you think?"

"I don't know," I replied, "I don't know." I had to wonder how much I'd missed.

I managed to fall in love while I was living at the group home. Smitten as I was, I often dreamt of her at night and, when I woke warm in my bed, half asleep and savoring my nocturnal imaginings I would try to fall back into slumber, hoping for just a touch more.

Thinking about her, thinking about her, thinking about her – it was well within the bounds of possibility that I had her on my mind too often. During the day when I had to meet the criteria for being awake she was utmost in my mind and, at night when I gave in to the medicine and to sleep, she was one long warm thought. I was just a bit too enchanted I suppose. I knew she was out of reach; whether I felt warm and misty or not she was still staff and staff were in no manner available when it came to ways of the heart. It was an innocent, one-sided, sun-spun infatuation, surprisingly pleasant, entirely harmless, and very free of commitment.

I developed a hobby, playing chess, and this took my mind away from forbidden desires. I started reading books of fiction and books on chess. Where the time had crawled it began to flee. The days peeled off the calendar and rushed to find their place in history, each one exclusive, standing by itself as one that would never play itself out quite the same again.

I was lying on the couch listening to some guy, an American, talking about his nation's 1980 defeat of the Russians in Men's Olympic hockey and their subsequent gold medal triumph. I shook my head, mildly amused. When he started comparing it to Canada's 1972 victory over the Soviets, a feat that was just barely accomplished in eight grueling games, I got up to turn the TV off. Before I could silence the offensive language I noticed an envelope on the coffee table that was addressed to me. I wondered why nobody had told me of it. I opened it. I read it twice. The southerner proclaimed the superior nature of the American game to deaf ears. He was effectively silenced. I shook my head back and forth in wonder while a Charlie Brown smile took over my face. My brother was getting married in Edmonton and I was invited.

It was perfect. To my way of thinking I had my health back. I figured I was as close to wellness as I'd ever be and this knowledge emboldened me, filled me with confidence. I knew that nothing short of an ice storm in July could stand in my way of getting to the impending festivities.

I didn't know at the time that the respite from sickness I was enjoying, would evaporate. I would find my way to the wedding. I would return to Peterborough and for a while, things would be okay. Then I would be struck down as I had been before. I'd be left wondering who was driving the truck that had, once again, hit me. It wasn't yet my time for lasting peace, for permanent transformation.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

It was suggested by some that I shouldn't go to Edmonton for the wedding. The trip might be a bit too taxing and besides, how would I pay for it? It was reasoned that I could phone my brother and wish him the best and look at all the photographs when my parents came home. The more guff I endured, the more I fancied I understood Cinderella. The more I thought I understood Cinderella the more determined I became. In June, I bid farewell to the friends I had made and after cashing my welfare cheque I once more hit the highway, heading west. My stubborn streak hadn't been gobbled up by my unbalanced chemistry - one of the best ways to get me to do something was to tell me I couldn't do it.

The trip was uneventful, so much so that it was a bit irksome at times. There were some really pleasant people, a few jerks and one dyed in the wool asshole that stood out in the crowd. He was ordinary looking, drove at the speed limit, sober, clean – an everyday guy. We were driving along, listening to the news. Pressure was being put on South Africa to release Nelson Mandela. Like someone who was out of touch would, I asked my companion who Nelson Mandela was.

He replied, "Nigger. Nigger, nigger, nigger, should never have been born."

"Why?" I asked, already ashamed of my skin.

"Let me tell you. In life what do the bad guys wear?"

"Pardon me," I returned, "I don't think I..."

"No, no, you wouldn't understand, I can tell that. The good guy always wears white, and, the bad guy always wears black. Enough said, I'm not saying any more."

We drove quietly and then the penny dropped, I understood. I asked him to drop me at the next place that sold gas. A few miles went by in uneasy silence and when at last I was getting out of his car he said, "See ya, Nigger Lover." I shut the door and walked away, filled with worry for those who have to put up with people that grotesque.

Gradually I made my way. Slowly past Winnipeg, so slow it seemed that we were walking. I wanted to go into the city and present myself at the front counter of the Salvation Army. I wanted to say to them, "I'm not a mess anymore. You can't kick me out because I'm showing myself the door."

I floated through the province of Saskatchewan on a stranger's dime and I was thankful for the strangers, for their charity. I fought hard the urge to find my way to Moose Jaw, just to look in a store window at a guy who weighed what he was supposed to.

The miles passed and I lost count of the days. My trip was full of beauty; hills and the valleys that kept them company, the vibrant green of tender, youngish leaves on grand old trees, sprawling, majestic prairie farms stretching out forever, ponds and forests and all along, it seemed, the warm wind blustered through car windows helping me stay very relaxed.

Before I knew it, I was in Edmonton. It had been an easy trip – only two drunks (depending on how you define the term), no stuttering men lisping, "I need you," and no violence. My odyssey

had played itself out quietly.

I was back in Edmonton, home of my brother, Jesus. Seriously though, after I had been on medication for awhile and had therefore escaped the nettling intensity of insanity, I knew my brother was as mortal as the next guy, a human, not a part of the Holy Trinity at all.

I had tried to contact Bob once during my hiatus from reality. In a phone booth I had picked up the phone and without depositing any money punched a great many numbers at random. Of course it didn't ring but I defiantly gave vent to my suspicions anyways.

"I know you're Jesus," I hollered, "and you're not sending me to hell, you son of a bitch."

My other brother, Bill, would also be at the wedding. He hadn't yet played much of a role in my disrupted normalcy. I *had* believed he was a horse and also a chess piece. I briefly believed that he had some connections in Hollywood.

The way it's told, when we were kids I watched out for Bill wherever he went, to the point where, looking back he joked that he'd never had any friends of his own age. After we were reacquainted and I'd had a chance to watch him out of the corner of my eye, I had a disquieting thought - was it possible that at some time in my life he'd end up watching out for me, that he'd be saddled with the responsibility for his handicapped, older brother?

My brother's wedding was, in a good sense, a blowout. There were a highly respectable number of toasts made after the ceremony. With each one everyone seemed to get a little bit happier. One more salute to the bride and groom would have been one too many for more than a few in attendance. I wasn't drinking so eventually, feeling as a fish out of water, I left the festivities to walk for a while, to compare my relative unhappiness with the near bliss experience many seemed to be having at the reception. As I was going out the door I heard someone ask, "What do John Hinkley Jr., Jodie Foster and a chimpanzee have in common?" I didn't stay for the answer.

I had set ashore in Edmonton well in advance of the wedding. I had found myself a place in the city and worked selling light bulbs over the phone. At work it was understood that I was only going to stay in town until the end of July and that I was then leaving for parts unknown. It was prudent to keep one's eastern roots to one's self.

After the newlyweds had driven into the sunset with tin cans intact, I thought about the trip back and it didn't seem inviting at all. The more I thought of it, the more I grudgingly accepted my journey as a chore that obviously couldn't be left undone.

Sadly, most of the fun had played itself out. I would miss everyone I was supposed to as I wound my way along the path back to Ontario, back to head shrinks and to the system. I had no choice though, I had to don the air of a beggar, stick out my thumb and pray for the best.

The month's end came. I said goodbye to everyone and then I was on the highway, shaking the western dust from my boots, reconciled to doing what I had to do.

My ride and I passed Winnipeg. I imagined the cold, cracked, stone floor of the Main Street Project and the way it looked back and absorbed you when you lay down facing it. Who knew what lived in its corners, nooks and crannies? Who thought of the people, flesh and blood, as

is anyone, prone on pieces of wood on that floor, stretched out like so many corpses. I wondered how I let myself end up there. As the miles passed I forgot about it almost entirely.

Ten miles from Peterborough and the green fields welcomed me; my nose contemplated the sweet, gentle breeze and for just a few moments, it smelled as it had always used to. Past the well kept properties and then, in the twinkling of an eye, getting out downtown. The hustle and bustle said hello as I blended in; a nice feeling, blending.

Not much time passed, a month or so, until I applied to once again lay claim to a bed in that old, yellow, ghostly house, still referred to as the Transition House. It was a place I would take a bed in with the full knowledge that living there would not help me recover my sanity in its entirety.

The necessary paperwork was completed three times over, or so it seemed. There were meetings with those whose opinions mattered and an interview or two with others who were merely mortal. I was deemed acceptable. The obstacles between a life of relative ease and me were removed from sight. I was officially free from worry as long as I stuck with the program and didn't try to stay for more than a year. I once again would inhabit a space where I would not be alone in hiding the shame that encompassed me, the shame of one who had been crazy and would be medicated for life. It seemed strange to me that I could still often pass, that is, others often mistook me for normal.

Unlike hearty, homemade stew, the Transition House wasn't better the second time around. Later I moved to a co-op house where you were not required to do anything, aside from your chores. You didn't have to go to the hospital, you could sit in the same chair all day and smoke your life away, you could sit or lie through TV movie marathons, professional wrestling, hours of how to improve your home or cartoons that eventually convinced you that animated violence really was a bit much. If nothing caught your fancy, you could always spend the day in bed.

I didn't want to live in an unending rut. I needed something to be involved in, something that was at least potentially rewarding. So, I delegated one to two hours a day as time to be spent in the damp, unfinished basement, where I boned up on my skills with the clarinet. When I felt ready, I joined the Peterborough Concert Band.

I wanted to get to know people who weren't on medication and the band gave me that chance. I was expected to have a working knowledge of the pieces we were playing and I tried to meet my responsibilities. My obligation to others motivated me to work hard even when I didn't feel like it. The whole band experience was good for my health, a restorative that, given the nature of my life at the time, had no choice but to grow bitter.

Everything was rosy. Sometimes I thought that my life was going to just continue on a gradual slant upwards and get better and better until I burst and flew heavenwards in a million pieces of bliss. For the time being I was buying into the idea that if I stayed on the medication and took it faithfully, I would end up being a reasonable facsimile of myself.

This belief quickly became old news and nonsense. I would end up starting all over again, beginning with some good old suffering of the mental and emotional variety.

Chapter Thirty

It was a cold night and I walked home from band. I was dissatisfied with my performance that evening but tried not to let my unhappiness show. I had a flimsy smile ready for all band members who drove by in their cars, who waved and left me cheesed off at having to chew their smog. If it wasn't one thing it was another. If it wasn't a lack of musical prowess, it was my fellow musicians not offering me a ride.

Walking in the wintry darkness, I figured if I only had enough get up and go to make some decent money I'd be able to afford a car like most everyone else. I would never have to walk stiffly through any black and unfriendly, glacial night again

I'd grown disgusted with myself for living in a group home full of society's castoffs (of which I was one). I regularly chided myself for needing head pills. I was, day by day, slipping into a dismal mood.

When I got home I went straight upstairs to my room, to the thin curtains I was sure people could see through and the bare floor that was always at odds with my feet. I spoke to no one. With a sense of urgency I cast off my coat, got down on my knees and prayed.

"Dear God, whoever you are, show me what it is that you would have me do. I know that you have something for everyone, what do you have for me? Please give me a sign that will guide me, show me the way. Push me, shove me, throw my sorry ass in the direction you would have me go. Amen." As I was falling asleep under a mountain of blankets, the answer came to me.

"Stop taking the medicine," the voice said, a voice that was inside my head but seemed external. "You don't need it. You will be healed completely, if you stop taking the pills."

Within moments I fell under the influence of sleep, knowing that I would implement a change in my routine. I would forsake the medicine again and in the process forsake myself and those who cared about me.

If one has a disease that makes him or her behave in ways incomprehensible to most people, that is, beyond the scope of the life experiences of most people, the tendency is to shun that person. The average person who develops schizophrenia doesn't know what they're really like when they are off medicine and ill – they don't have a clear picture of how they are presenting themselves and they don't understand why, if others insist on doing it, they are being cast out.

So, I wanted to be healed. In my mind, I was certain I was viewed as some kind of basket case by my fellow man. I was always being shown to a seat on the sidelines. Now I had been promised a healing, God had promised me something supernatural. I would be normal again. My mind nagged a bit, questioning. "Are you sure, is this the right thing to do at this time, what if it wasn't God you heard, maybe it was the devil, maybe you were hearing voices, you might regret this, maybe you should get a second opinion." When the opposition to my scheme died down, I thought, "This time I'll prove I don't need medication, for schizophrenia, of all things. This time anyone who cares to look will see that I'm just as normal as they are. No one will cast me aside again, they won't dare." Diving in headfirst, I began the process of unraveling.

When I first went off my pills, I felt so good about my decision and God's promise that I went out, applied for and was given a job at a local car wash. Truth is, I had virtually been promised a job when I wanted it. This consideration was shown to me only because I was a friend of a certain attractive woman who mentioned me while dealing with the manager of the busy, little endeavor.

I worked at the auto wash during part of my first week off medication. I noticed very little change in the way I thought or felt, as I bungled through the days with my companions in toil. At one point I swore I felt better than I had when I was taking my pills. I had more energy and slept less. I thought that I was doing well at the car wash and I was getting the hours to back that up. I started to wonder why I had hesitated in claiming the job. I recognized that it wasn't exactly a dream job but we did have some fun there.

During the second week I was starting to feel a little blue, but I still had a lot of energy. I was wiping down cars as they came out of the wash. There were two of us there, one to wipe down each side. By the end of my second week without the pills I was holding a rag in each hand and wiping three quarters of each car. I reveled in the fact that I was strangely full of pep. Most everyone there had to have known that something was up. They probably didn't want to confront me and ask me if I was as unhinged as I seemed to be. How can you soften a question like that? What if you ask someone something like that and you're way off the mark?

By the third week without any reason in a bottle, I was growing irritable. I was becoming convinced that people at work were putting me down when my back was turned. Given the circumstances, they may have well been doing so; the whispers I heard might have been authentic. My friend would be asked and she would have to explain that I had a mental illness. I argued with a fellow worker during my third week.

Part way into my fourth week I was cleaning inside a car as though I'd never have the opportunity to clean again. I finished and was exiting the speckless vehicle with several things I had next to do prominent in my mind. My haste was my undoing – I banged my head as I stood up, nearly splitting it on the exasperatingly solid place where the door joins the rest of the car. I rose shakily to my full height.

Everything was suffused in a soft light. My boss came running, his usual cheeky sneer replaced with concern for another. I was touched by this side of the man who had never shown anything but disdain for those under him. Being thus moved was the last vague touch of normalcy that I was to experience for a while.

“Are you alright? Should I take you to the hospital?”

“No,” I replied, “but I have to leave.” I handed him two balled up rags. I stepped out of my coveralls there and then and went to look for my coat. It was where I had left it.

As I was leaving the car wash supervisor, whose father owned the establishment, stopped me and said, “Come back when you're better, okay?”

I nodded and for a fleeting moment I knew I was sick. I walked away and into another trial that would last much too long.

I wandered around after bumping my head. Everything still seemed to be soaked in a vague, yellow fog. There was snow on the ground and snow also fell from the sky, thick flakes

tumbling gently, briefly brought to splendor by the streetlight and then gone. I became elated. I held my hands in the air as I crossed the street. I was catching snow but as soon as the snow landed in my hand it melted. I thought, you're not catching snow you're killing it. Some guy leaned on his horn. I continued to wander.

I found myself at the YMCA, home of the best hotdog in town, reasonably priced, sliced open and fried on the grill until they were just right. I had two and washed them down with a cup of coffee, black, because I wanted to watch the oil on the surface, blue and purple with a touch of yellow.

Lighting a cigarette I went out into the street and looked this way and that. Not much was doing and I thought I might go to the mall. While grappling mentally; well the mall is warm but it's stuffy, it's not all that cold, I could walk around and get the fresh air downtown, maybe I'll have a beer, you don't drink, oh yeah, it's snowing, maybe I should go home – while fighting to make some type of decision I noticed that the snow seemed to have stopped suddenly. It was as though someone had flipped a switch and whatever had been was now separate from what would be. The earth seemed barren at that moment, as if most everyone on the face of it had somehow flown off it in mid-rotation. Life seemed so sad without the falling snow. I thought for a moment that I might shed a few tears. My eyes watered over, I sniffed a bit and then the illusion was gone. I could live without snow. The world seemed, once again, as overpopulated as always.

One thing I knew for certain was that I'd never go back to that damned car wash. They had almost killed me. I knew without doubt that the bumping of my head had been carefully orchestrated and quite likely rehearsed. I looked back on it and I remembered the slight tug on my arm that made me lose my balance, which in turn caused my skull to crack on the unforgiving metal. There was no doubt in my mind, the guy I had argued with, Doug, had tried to murder me.

I decided I would call the cops when I got home. That would serve them right, the dirty, lowdown, rotten... that was it. I'd go to the mall another time. Instead of going shopping I would go to the house in which a peg waited for my coat, faithless peg that would lend its services to another without thinking twice. Pegs are like people I thought and I snickered.

I started on my way home to call the police and report an attempted murder, and then, in mid step I grew a new set of plans. I decided I was in the mood for walking and set out, head down and without direction. I made a mental note to notify the authorities when I got home, as I didn't want what happened to me to happen to anybody else. Before I'd traveled a block, my intent to inform had vanished like the cold flakes whose disappearance I had lamented.

I wandered the streets for a prolonged period of time – too long for one to trek in the cold air and snow when one had no destination, when one was without anywhere to warm up, a place to have a drink or two and pass the time of day with friends. Eventually, after misreading street signs, walking in circles, going left instead of right and vice versa, I found myself attempting to let myself in the side door of the group home. I jiggled the door every which way until I finally realized someone had locked me out. I started to get huffy. You can lock the door all you want, I thought angrily; I can and will stay out to the wee hours if I please. Agitated, I used my key as if it were a weapon. I jabbed the lock with it a few times and then plunged it in the keyhole and twisted angrily.

“Lock the door on me, will you,” I muttered, without shame. Once inside I wasn’t quite so sure of myself. Where am I, I wondered?

“Where the heck am I?” I asked out loud.

Something was up, something was in the air; the atmosphere even though somehow washed out was strangely electric, as though someone could be waiting around any corner ready to break the fragile peace by freaking out. The ambience in the group home said, “No nonsense tonight, bloke.” Usually it said nothing. I thought I must be in the wrong house.

My stomach tied in knots when a chiding, sinister voice scolded me from out of nowhere, welcoming me to ‘town’. “You escaped once,” I was told, “you won’t get away this time.”

Suddenly, in a matter of seconds I understood the fundamentals of town, the dimension I had encountered in Moose Jaw, the one from which I had apparently escaped. I knew why town was spelled with its trademark small “t”. Everything in town was less, in particular the inhabitants. There was no capitalization because nothing was worthy of even that degree of respect. The small t that I saw in my mind was to be a constant reminder that you were small, worthless and doomed. The keepers were no better, they were just rats, people who had been inmates themselves and had committed foul or indecent acts to get a measure of relief. They were slaves to the small bit of peace they had and would do anything to keep it intact. Oh God, I thought, why can’t I just wake up somewhere comfortable, as if it were the old days? Though I couldn’t really remember a specific place or time where I had known peace of mind, I lived with a sad sense that I’d once been there and that it was probably long gone, far beyond the peripheries of my life. I heard canned laughter. Was I on TV?

I looked on the kitchen table and saw an old tennis ball. “That’s your world,” an oddly persuasive voice declared, “a ball of crap.”

What am I going to do, I wondered after a minute or so of gazing at the ball. I envisioned it being devoured by a clockwise spiral of water made pristine by the amazing 2000 flushes.

Evoking virtually no noise, I went upstairs and lay on my bed. I kept seeing a toilet in my mind. That was where, it seemed, my life belonged.

“Gone,” I said to myself, “your world’s a ball of shit that will be gone forever.”

I swung around and put my feet on the insensitive floor that would see me numb from the ankle down. I got out of the lumpy bed with stains of unknown origin on the mattress and grabbing all my pills I went to the bathroom. “*This* was my world,” I said and dumped my pills in the white, porcelain crapper. I watched the water propel them in an ever-tightening ring and then witnessed their complete disappearance. I went back to bed satisfied. I had responded fittingly to a rather abrasive comment that had unkindly related my life to a turd.

The next day there seemed to be more cars on the road than usual. Brutes, I thought, loud and smelly. They all seemed frenzied, all trying urgently to be somewhere. I found the traffic distressing. To escape the kerfuffle I pointed my feet in the direction of the waterfront and started walking. It was colder than it had recently been. As I plodded along I realized that I was alone except for the voices.

“Well, look who thinks he can escape.”

“No-one escapes from town, absolutely nobody.” The second voice sounded like my dad.

“Dad,” I said, “why don’t you guys just leave me alone. I won’t tell anyone about your secret cities, really, you can trust me.”

“Trust you. I wouldn’t piss on you if you were a fire.” I heard laughter and tried to smile and laugh with everyone else but I couldn’t.

I ran through the snow a bit, until the truth matter-of-factly hit me in the forehead. There was nowhere to run. If I were sensible I’d go to the hospital but I was in no way reasonable. Sadly, the law was on my side. I could walk around in this wonderland of delusion as long as I wanted to. If I wasn’t a threat to others or myself treatment couldn’t be forced on me; it was strangely against my rights for anyone to do so.

With care I retraced my steps back to the group home where I hurriedly packed a few things in a small bag. Though my money situation was somewhere between humble and embarrassing, I thought I would go to Toronto for a few days to see if I could figure out what was happening to the world around me. Everything’s closing in on me, I lamented; I used to be so much more at ease here. I was beyond equating medicine with a measure of peace. I threw my bag on the floor and, downhearted, I lay on the bed. I tried to stay completely motionless believing that if I remained still nothing would hurt me. While assuming the position so to speak, I fell asleep.

I was dreaming. I was a little kid and a bigger kid was sitting on top of me. I told him to get off, I asked him, I begged him, I cried and I laughed, I taunted. He would never get off, he swore an oath that he wouldn’t and I betrayed myself by believing him. The other kids walked by and looked curiously, some stopped and laughed and others stopped and cried. Some yelled and one kid freaked out and had to be restrained.

I woke to the darkness between day and night. That damned kid, I thought, just didn’t want to get off of me. I shook my head viciously trying to rid myself of the sleep that induced such nightmares. “Jeez, it’s cold,” I remarked to the shadows that were playing in the corners of my room.

Chapter Thirty-One

The next day I tried to thumb to Toronto. I stood rigid, watching a drawn-out line of cars glide by, driven by shy people I guessed. When it came to the spectacle of a beggar, they wanted no involvement. After a while I concluded that everyone was going to pass me by and so I made the lengthy trek home.

It turned out that I could really have benefited had any of those timorous motorists helped me to reach my destination. The day after the highway farce was one I had hoped to spend wandering around Toronto. Instead, on that cold winter's day, my housemates in Peterborough turned me in. In their defense, they did so because they didn't know what else to do. They had run out of ways to deal with me. If they couldn't understand or deal with the problem I'd become, I suppose they thought the psychiatrist could. But he is only one human being, who happens to have enough education to be legally sanctioned to give injections, or order others to do so.

So, it was bend over and take your medicine. Depending on whom I queried, most believed the needle was good for me. For some reason the doctor only injected me with enough haldol to last two weeks.

Once again, I refused to eat while I was on the ward, because I believed there was poison in my food. Every morning one or two nurses would get me out of bed and try to talk me into ingesting something. Every morning the smell of breakfast would plead their case and though the argument was persuasive, each morning I remained resolute. My stomach complained more and more loudly, but I was sporting a deaf ear. I couldn't satisfy my hunger because I feared death. I envisioned my gravestone and it read – "Poisoned in a Psychiatric Hospital".

I was soon given the same option I had been given the last time I'd been in hospital - join everyone else in the dining room and eat or be restrained and nourished intravenously. Knowing that I could be poisoned intravenously, I changed my tune. I told myself that a little poison never hurt anyone, that I could eat small portions and minimize the damage. I began to eat one meal then two and finally three meals a day. The powers that be were satisfied and I was left alone, none the worse for wear, a little resentful and a bit embarrassed because I believed I had caved in.

One day a bunch of us were standing around in the cloud of blue smoke that seemed to follow the in-patients around the hospital. One ragged looking man stopped pacing and, while flicking his cigarette, expressed a popular sentiment to no one in particular. "It would sure be nice to walk out the door and just keep on going," he declared.

A few voices were raised in agreement. One man put forth a solid "Amen" that seemed to hang in the air.

"You're right," I said and in spite of the fact that I was only wearing jeans and a t shirt I walked out the front doors into the fresh January weather; baby blue sky and bright sun. It was cold enough to freeze most anything but a rock.

I walked a good mile at a brisk pace until I found myself at the bus terminal downtown. There I caught a bus that would take me to the group home. On the way there some guy who was too

old for such arguments was trying without success to convince his friend that Raiders of the Lost Ark was superior to The Empire Strikes Back. Their arguing hurt my head. Someone coughed up a complaint and a woman looked over the top of her book mischievously. The cover of her book read "Bodily Harm" and I took it personally. I looked in time to see I had arrived at my stop. I disembarked without the knowledge that I'd been kicked out of the group home. My room sat waiting for its next inmate.

Letting myself in quietly, I snuck to my room as though it was my nature to be secretive. My digs looked vacant, as if a high-powered vacuum had sucked up everything resembling me and, trailing bile, had wheeled itself to the gutter outside and puked it all up. I found the sleeping pills that I had for some reason hidden in the closet and taking three, I spread out on the bed. The bed squeaked and groaned as if it were quarrelling with me.

One of the capsules seemed stuck in my throat and I thumped my chest for a minute. It wasn't all that long until a doped up sleep relieved me from thinking about the great and imagined responsibilities that I figured I'd been ducking out on. All that was really expected of me though, was that I take my medication and, sadly, I wasn't even very good at that.

I was eventually discovered by someone who slipped away and called the police, someone who believed there was no alternative but to squeal on me again. For all I knew my former housemates might have been instructed to automatically summon the law if ever I showed up. I was the big, bad wolf.

At any rate, when Peterborough's finest arrived, they found me hugging the Sandman, begging him to never leave me. I was woken from a sleep full of images that were fuzzy, friendly distortions of people I knew. One cop lifted my left leg and the other one grabbed the right. After I'd made haste to convince them that I wasn't going to try anything they let me get out of bed on my own steam.

The police took me back to the brick hospital building where some type of smoke or steam was coming out of a gray pipe on the roof and crystal-like snow sparkled undisturbed on the grounds. Everything looked cold and brittle. None the worse for wear aside from having a chill, I walked in the door I had so recently used as an exit, accompanied by one of the officers of the law.

I was a minor celebrity for a short while. Some guy with a Fu-Manchu moustache slapped me on the back and called me 'Houdini'. The name stuck for the rest of the day. I fancied that a few of the nurses were amused as well. I could have sworn they were suppressing laughter when they spoke to me, but I was probably imagining that.

Eventually and with real intent to be successful, I did run away from the hospital and when I did, I found my way to the highway that led directly to Toronto. I was sure a while later, as I entered the city courtesy of a quiet traveler, that there were trials ahead of me. Still and in spite of my active psychosis, there was a genuine and wordless feeling in my chest that intuited that, in the end, all would work for my good. I knew that I'd dodged a bullet, that the hospital hadn't put enough medicine in my system to have much of an effect on the well-rooted psychosis that ran me.

I stayed at the wonderful four-star hostel, The Salvation Army at Queen and Sherbourne. If I needed a change of pace from being pampered there I would try to get into the Fred Victor

Mission up the block, but they were usually full. One afternoon, after a month or so at the Sally Anne I took all my belongings, most of which was trash - broken glass, rocks and stones, colourful bits of paper and newspaper, all of it in plastic bags, and I moved them with me to Seaton House. Having graced that fine institution with my presence before, I wasn't surprised when the closer I got to my prospective new abode, homeless men seemed to be popping up out of nowhere. They must be hungry, I supposed, they must be waiting for a meal. Sure enough, it turned out to be suppertime. Dejected men, disappointed men, intoxicated men, deviant men and mentally ill men all began filing through the hostel's doors and I joined them.

It was in Seaton House that, one night, I witnessed the spectacle of two thin, malnourished and drunken winos fighting each other. It was a two-punch fight – each man took a great big swing and each missed his target. One man fell on his face and the other's momentum carried him into a wall where he remained spread out like a mosquito having been swatted. After their "fight" the combatants became fast friends and shared a drink of something. I laughed until I was worried about the state of my underwear.

In Seaton House I would rise early and come across the sadness of fallen men, sharing their early morning drink of shaving lotion, lovingly poured into small cups. After a salute hastily made, the unloved men welcomed the first jolt of the day, a taste to get them upwardly mobile, ready for another twenty four hours of wandering and shoplifting their drug of choice.

When I was in need of money I worked for those who supplied workers by the day. There were several outlets in the area that catered to businesses that had small, monotonous and messy jobs that nobody else wanted to do. On a fairly regular basis and in spite of my curious behavior, I was sent to different work sites.

I met many people while I waited for work and many of them were odd like me. Frankly, there was no shortage of eccentrics in that neighborhood. Some were quiet and afraid and others indifferent to everything. Some were loud and disturbing.

I met a man one night that had to have patterned his own brand of weirdness off someone deep and disturbed. We had both been locked out of the shelter and he had asked me if I wanted to go for a coffee. He had such intensely serious eyes that I didn't dare say no. Before we set off to find a cup of joe, I hid my bags of glass, stones and paper in some bushes. I worried about them the whole time they were out of my sight.

He had the money. When he sent me into a restaurant to get two coffees to go, I couldn't refuse.

"I don't like sitting inside," he explained and I understood. Who needed all the dirty looks?

We went into a park with our coffee. The trees were playacting, being silhouettes of things other than trees, forgetting their daylight existence. I looked through the darkness and saw people I knew in the branches. I looked at the ground – it probably wasn't a good time to play with trees.

I needed a smoke and so found some dead leaves that had blown onto the sidewalk. That was where the dry ones were to be found. I asked my companion if he wanted a smoke and he looked at me with his more than strange eyes, knowing very well that I was rolling dead leaves in newspaper that I carried in my pocket and said yes, yes he'd like that very much. He

wondered how I came to be so kind. I looked at the trees and at him and I started to walk away.

He caught up to me and for most of the rest of the night we walked the dimly lit streets. A sleeping body here and there, sleeping or passed out – what was the difference. Lots of garbage in doorways and alleyways, the odd person cruising, for what, God knows. We bought readymade cigarettes and then he told me he didn't really smoke. I began to think I could take advantage of his loose way with money. He picked up on my need for his money, I could tell, and he began to withdraw and then to walk on his own.

He stopped in front of a donut shop and I caught up to him. He gave me money for a coffee and he gave me the smokes. He said that he had to go make a phone call and that he would be back. He walked away briskly. I knew he wouldn't return and I was right. He had been in too much of a hurry to get away to be someone who would return.

Sometimes things seem to come in pairs. It was only a few days after my encounter with the strange man with the money that, while lounging in the wee hours on a downtown bench, I encountered another peculiar person.

I sat up agreeably on the bench as he approached. He sat down wordlessly and pulled some cards out of one pocket and a joint out of another. We smoked and he tried to show me a game, but I couldn't understand. He laughed at me for being dim, but it was a kind laughter. We got up and walked and talked and daylight found us drinking coffee out of Styrofoam cups near the train station. He had smoked a lot of dope and was tired. We parted ways as quietly as when we met. I felt as though I had been useful to him. I was someone he could talk to and then walk away from. Doubtless, he counted on never having to deal with me again. I had to wonder though, why he walked the streets all night long, smoking dope and befriending strangers. What was with the card games?

Eventually the weather turned warm and my feet began to itch. Without much thought I set my sights on Peterborough, where I thought living outside would be pleasant. Toronto and its shelters hadn't proven to be the tonic I was looking for after all.

There was no one to meet me when I got back. There were no marching bands. I wasn't Gulliver returning with a team of acrobats in a matchbox, nor Elvis come back from the dead. In my grandiosity, I thought that no one was waiting at the gates of the city because they didn't recognize me, what with my beard and matted hair.

The blue cars and their drivers still bothered me but not as much as before. Since I had begun communicating with God things had been different. Even the shadow of 'town' didn't affect me much. In my delirium I was almost happy.

So there I was, the prodigal son or conversely, some kind of beast, depending on who you were and how you looked at it. I phoned my father and it was safe to say that from his point of view I was the same old beast. He wanted me in the hospital immediately. I was still in possession of a mind of my own and wasn't ready for hospitalization. The weather was nice; I could get a cheque from city hall and live outside.

I ran into people I knew here and there I could have sworn by the look on their faces that they were disappointed or disgusted. Were they sneering at me, mocking me when I walked away? Someone gave me a card with a picture of Jesus on it and I cried.

Sometimes I felt that God was about to tell me a joke that had survived the ages, one that had been making people laugh for centuries. Almost invariably, when I had that feeling, something would happen within the next few days that would make me laugh hysterically. I was sure God had let me in on something funny. I would remember His joke for a while and I would smile and shake my head.

As I began to believe more and more strongly that God, the Creator of everything, was with me, I handled delusions and fear much better. The Lord of it all was not only involved in my world he was in my corner. The people in the blue cars hated God as I saw him – all powerful yet willing to share a laugh. I didn't care what they thought, I felt stronger than them. Their days were drawing to an end. New trials awaited me though, as I would fight my diagnosis and the need for medication for several years to come.

Chapter Thirty-Two

My freedom to witlessly meander eventually came to a close, terminated by the law and medical science each adroitly applied in its fashion. I think that I would have walked around in my rags, talking to myself and bathing in the river for the rest of time had I not one day behaved in a way that tweaked somebody's sensibilities, alarming them in such a way that they just had to call the fuzz.

My undoing began a week or so before the police were summoned to deal with the menace that I was. It was then that I had bumped into a friend of mine, Ken. He too was riding the difficulties that go with being pushed around by a psychosis. Neither of us was taking medicine when we met. We were both saddled with an untreated, acute mental illness or, leaning towards the colloquial, a serious head problem.

We were foreigners from the mental hospital; neither of us knew the lay of the land in the real world, nor did we speak the language. All either of us had to do to understand that we were on the outside looking in was to try to get friendly or quick service in a restaurant, store or bar. We looked and behaved like non-citizens and were treated as such.

We both knew that the only way to please was to give in to the chemical solution. An imitation of reality was just a prescription or two away, free of charge and highly recommended. We would not be apt to cause problems anymore, we could integrate to a certain degree – it would all be for the best. Misguided as we may have been, we believed we were doing our level best with what we'd been dealt. I myself was starting to somewhat enjoy life without psychiatry and its pills and milligrams, its antidepressants and antipsychotics. After months on end of being sick, it was as if I'd endured a hard fought battle and was suffering from unconcerned fatigue. I wanted to be left alone, even if it meant bathing in a cold river or trying to get a bank loan with nothing but fancy white shoes for collateral, which was what Ken was doing when I first saw him.

He was sitting in a bank looking forlorn and shabby in his tattered clothes while sporting a very expensive looking and entirely out of date pair of white dress shoes. He hadn't seen me so I had waited outside that I might, as mentioned, 'bump' into him

My friend exited the bank with nothing more substantial in his pockets than perhaps a colony of microorganisms that lived on cotton. I was there to accost him in a friendly way. I remarked on his shoes and said he looked well. I noticed that something was different; something had been added or taken away. The sun came out and shone on his face. When his ears twinkled I realized he was wearing earrings in both ears. I complimented him on his fashion sense and shortly after and for the time being we parted ways, once we had each dropped words and names that had special meanings to us.

I walked on while mirth and melancholia contradicted one another inside me, both hard to control without chemical gallantry. I was often up and down, unsure of whether to laugh or cry, to kiss a stranger or frenziedly destroy something that, unlike my life, had meaning. Exaggerated mirth was like a hot air balloon gone out of control and melancholia a frothing river hell bent on causing a flood.

Later that day I was still walking, something I could easily do to excess. I was walking off my frustrations, an activity which put in the time, cost nothing and was seldom boring. I considered myself good at it. At the time, I was in short supply of things at which I believed I excelled, except perhaps reading minds. As I passed the Salvation Army thrift store I looked in the display window, as was my habit. I saw some costume jewelry and, on a whim, went in to see just what they had.

They were waiting for me at the counter, just what I wanted, two studs with stones of sparkling, blue glass. I had barely enough to buy them but I didn't think twice about laying the asking price on the counter in the form of nickels, quarters, dimes and pennies.

I walked toward the river. Once there I cupped my little treasures and their counterfeit jewels in one hand and spewed a beautiful incantation over them, secret, mystical, wise and lyric words meant to ward off evil.

I stretched the lobe of my left ear, plunged the post of the earring through and fastened it at the back. The other ear received the same treatment. I walked around like that for a good spell, picking off the scabs as they formed. I knew that it was different for a man to have two earrings and for that reason I liked it. I didn't feel any pain but I thought the mosquitoes would drive me to distraction at night.

Four days after meeting my friend outside the bank I ran into him again.

"You too, eh?" he inquired with a wink as I scratched at one ear and then the other.

"Me. Me too?"

"You, the earrings. I had two but I got rid of them."

"What do you think, Ken," I asked, "be honest."

"Well," he said and paused, "they're bloody. Let's get some wine."

"I don't drink anymore," I confessed, "but don't let me stop you."

"Okay, let's go, I'll buy you a coke or something."

"Could you buy me a big bottle?"

"You just said you don't drink. I have witnesses."

"I meant a big bottle of Coke. Who are your witnesses?"

"Sure, I'll buy you a bottle of Coke. There's something I want to talk to you about."

Who are his witnesses, I wondered as we walked? Eventually we found ourselves by the river. Ken took a pull on his bottle of rotgut. He was of the school that believed drinking outside was far and away the best way to drink. In the time I'd known him I'd never seen him buy a bottle that didn't have a screw top.

"I have a proposition for you; listen first and then tell me what you think." he said straight out. For a moment I thought, Oh, no, not him too. Why do they always go that way around me? He took another healthy swallow.

“Well,” I said in a small voice, “lay it on the table, I can handle it.” He must have read my thoughts.

“Oh,” he said, “oh. Cheer up, it’s not that, I’m surprised, I mean, you know me better than that. Though, you are kind of cute.”

Simulating innocence I blustered, “What are you talking about, lay it out, I’m interested.”

“Are you sure you’re interested?” he asked and made funny eyes at me.

“Cut it out,” I said and laughed which something I’d been meaning to do for some time. He drank some wine and I drank some coke.

The plan was for me to share with him a townhouse that he had found. I balked, explaining that, as much as I appreciated the offer, I really preferred to live outside. After some persuasion, (the more he drank the smoother he got), I agreed to have a look. As we were walking there, my two strides to his one, he explained that we were going to a student residence. I stopped in my tracks while he made haste to explain that the students were gone until mid-August and that further, the landlord would take just about anything rent-wise until the little angels returned. We could have it for next to nothing.

“Don’t you see,” he said, passionate, a pitch man selling an exotic remedy, “we’ll live like damned kings. Think of the chicks and the parties. We’ll have a party in your name; you’ll be the guest of honour. We’ll have the best place in town, eh?”

“Let me see the place first. If it’s as good as all that, you’ve got a deal.”

When I saw it I agreed to share the rent with Ken. It was a great place, roomy, nice kitchen, two bathrooms and four bedrooms. Those students must show up with a truckload of silver dollars every year I thought, they have to be about the richest people around. Just then a truck bumped noisily down the street, its banging and clanking talking to me. “Silver dollars, silver dollars,” it parroted.

We moved in the next day with a skimpy payment and a promise: “We’ll pay the rest, in full, when we get our cheques.” This guy must be desperate for tenants, I thought, I only gave him twenty bucks I borrowed and it was as though he was less one burden, relieved, really happy to have us move in. It suddenly seemed to me that he was a bit too happy. I thought some more:

I wonder if there’s some type of mafia thing happening here or maybe the doctors at the hospital are keeping track of us, maybe we’re being monitored, maybe someone’s watching us. I think that son of a bitch landlord sold us down the river.

“Ken, I think you may have been fooled.”

“Why do you say that, this place rocks man, it just plain rocks.”

“Did you ever stop to ask yourself why we’re getting it at such a good price?” I asked.

“No, I didn’t, Mr. Downer and I’m not going to start now. Relax man, enjoy it while it lasts,” he replied, mildly annoyed.

Three days later life was a bad experience with no end in sight. I wandered the streets and saw hit men shaven so close that all that was revealed of their faces was the colour blue. Their collars were pulled high and their hats pulled low. They lurked down alleyways, crouched behind parked cars and hid behind shrubbery. I felt their fully loaded weapons trained on the sweet spot between my eyes.

Mob muscle confidently strutted its oily self up and down every street I crossed or attempted to walk down. Doctors with syringes up their sleeves drove by, slowing down now and then for a closer look.

I would have throttled Ken if I could have reached high enough to do so. I had known from the beginning that the place was too good to be true. It made perfect sense that it was owned by the mob. I didn't know why but it made perfect sense.

What really surprised me was that the medical community would have a hand in all this; were they answering to organized crime? Or maybe they were working together - but that didn't make any sense. Suddenly none of it made sense. I concluded that I was as good as dead.

I sat on a park bench and tried to summon God. I was only too aware that it had been a while since I'd last tried to reach Him. Maybe, I thought, horrified, He's severed the connection. In good time I received an answer to my prayers.

I could hear someone behind me saying, "Sleep, go to sleep."

In mere seconds, I understood. I was to go back to sleeping outside, under the sky where most of God's creation slept, where my forefathers had once slumbered with one eye open. I embraced the answer. Once I was away from the townhouse I wouldn't have to worry about the gangsters. As for the doctors, well, I was somehow sure they'd give up quite easily.

Daydreaming about storing food for the winter and building a shelter that would protect me from the cold, I curled up on the bench and there, as the voice had directed me to, I fell asleep.

I woke in a hospital room hours later. I remembered most of what had landed me there. I remembered walking down the main drag in my pajamas with my stuff in a bag. I was going to sleep outside all right and I was going to do so in apparel designed for the bedroom. I remembered that just as the cops pulled up, the person with the delicate sensibilities mentioned earlier, having no doubt dialed them to report my criminal garb and demeanor, had come running up and taken a cut at me. One of the cops packed me into the car and his partner and he got in, making the vehicle sink closer to the ground.

I was admitted to the hospital. I wouldn't let them give me a needle so I was strapped down by four orderlies and then injected by a nurse. Later on, to my relief, I was un-strapped. It was thought wise by those in charge to leave me in the locked room by myself. I closed my eyes on the day that had been and fell into slumber, a state I all too often had to enter for sanctuary.

Chapter Thirty-Three

I stayed in the hospital for three weeks or so, in body. My mind was separate, battling the medication and roaming from pillar to post. I was in a compulsory therapy group and, while the talk ran high, I'd stray from what was being said, thinking things like, she's pretty but I really hate her perm. Why do women do that to themselves? Or, that guy looks like trouble. Steer clear and watch your back. Sometimes I'd stop dreaming and focus. With my attention riveted, it often seemed as if the whole group would end up looking at me, waiting for me to say something. This lasted only seconds; you could call it an illusion. When it had passed, I drew comfort from the knowledge that no one there seemed capable of seeing past themselves – no one in the group was looking to me for my observations. When I realized just how insignificant my thoughts and opinions were, what remained of the uncomfortable illusion would vaporize.

I had to swallow pills on top of the injection I received. I was being soaked with medicine that was changing my brain. I could almost hear the bad neurotransmitters idling, waiting for me to make a break for it and quit the drugs so they could take over again.

On the other hand, if I listened hard I could hear the doctor say, "There is no way he is getting away this time, not without some type of reason intact." If I listened extraordinarily hard I could hear the doctor whispering in the air wherever I went.

After a while I became so unsettled that it was all I could do to stand still. I felt overwhelmed and one day, as I mulled over alternatives to getting well I decided I would play the running game again. I had to go somewhere; I was so restless that I couldn't stand it for another minute. Running was the obvious solution; it was all I could do, to run with an eye open for relief.

I hitchhiked to Oshawa. It was there for some reason that I hoped to find what I needed to settle me down. I was unaware that a bewildering restlessness can be a side effect of the medications used to treat schizophrenia and that there is an antidote for it. All I knew for certain was that what I was going through was somehow unnecessary, that there had to be more to life. After all, everywhere I looked people seemed to be happy, or, at least, happier than me

As could be expected, my hopping from one foot to another and endless pacing was still active when I reached my destination. I couldn't stand still in Oshawa any more than I could have in Yellowknife, Wawa or Fredericton. Wherever I went agitation would tag after me, so, I did the only thing I figured I could do – I went to those who promised to serve and protect.

"Yes, Officer?" I asked while dancing in front of the front desk.

"Well," he said, impatiently.

"Yes Officer," I replied.

"Your name, your name, I asked your name. Are you that stupid that you don't remember your name?"

“No, well.” I caught myself before I slipped and said ‘Yes Officer’ again.

I supplied the man with as much information as he needed and as much of my life story as he could bear.

“Save it for the tabloids sport,” he said having lost interest or leastwise, patience. “Stop jumping around like that and take a seat.”

In a short while that seemed endless, the gears meshed and something happened. Two policemen came bearing down on me from the other end of the well-waxed hall. For no reason I could think of, I felt guilty. As they got nearer I saw that they were big, strong looking men in blue shirts who would certainly make me think twice before making mine a life of crime.

“I didn’t do it,” I said and smiled, half serious and half not. The two men regarded one another. As if reflecting my statement one of them looked grim while shrugging his shoulders while the other laughed and shook his head.

“Come on, Capone,” the laughing cop said, “you’re going back to the puzzle factory and we’re taking you part way.”

Once we had navigated our way to the highway and our journey had commenced, I was made wise to what had gone on behind the scenes. I learned that the law had contacted the hospital and they had confirmed my story. I wasn’t surprised when I discovered that the hospital claimed innocence with regards to my struggle with fidgeting. When they learned of my odd behavior they recognized it as a reaction to the medication. It seemed they had been unaware that I was having side effects. They pointed out that I hadn’t said anything.

In any case, medication would be administered that would deal with the adverse effects. Further, whatever belongings I had in the hospital would be packed and waiting for me. I was to remove them and myself from the premises. They’d had it with me; they couldn’t control me and were through trying.

The police dropped me at roughly the halfway point between the two cities leaving me to find a ride to take me the rest of the way, which I did in short order.

The hospital had been in touch with the provincial hospital in Kingston on my behalf. If I wished to be treated there I would have to find my own way. I didn’t have to pack. Somebody had gone ahead and manhandled my stuff for me and then, perhaps, had made haste to wash their hands.

The doctor strongly suggested that I find some way to get to Kingston, the sooner the better. Having administered advice he gave me some medication and a prescription. They officially shut their doors on me. I was once again reduced to being data, perhaps a curious case, nothing more, and nothing less. I wondered briefly if I might possibly be a memory to someone there and then I realized that it didn’t matter.

When the gloomy night finished its business of settling over me and a light chill slightly complicated my life, I swallowed my pills. Later I found a hidden spot and there I slept fitfully with my coat on until dawn.

Every night the last glimpse I had of creation was the yellow stars that seemed to be property of the brooding and possessive black night. The sky was like a shroud that I sometimes pulled

over myself when I was neither sleeping nor awake. Close enough to sleep to believe that the heavens could be stroked; I would wonder how the moon and stars felt when I took their backdrop from them.

As I continued to take my medication I started to shed these strange, poetic notions. When I was greatly improved I found myself more concerned with finding a place to live than anything.

I didn't like being homeless anymore; it made me feel foolish and dirty. I wanted to find a solution to the problem of waking up in a park, my clothes wet with the dew. I despised the early morning pet lover who was watching me. I disliked his way of walking on tiptoe as though he was passing my bedroom, while his dog looked embarrassedly for the right place to deposit whatever it was that he'd been harbouring throughout the night.

I needed the care of a doctor whom I could see regularly and for more than a few minutes. I needed some money in my pocket. I could do with a friend who would sit with me, who would have a beer and watch the game with me. I had to repossess myself. I thought a lot about Kingston and became convinced that going there was my portion at the time. As disconcerting as it was, I believed that the government hospital in Kingston and I were destined to collide.

I swallowed my pride and phoned home. I told my father that although I didn't know what I was getting into, I thought that going to the provincial asylum in Kingston was the best thing for me. Since hearing about the facility there, my father had trumpeted it as being quite possibly just what I needed. Up until my ungracious exit from the Peterborough institution, Dad's zeal had been enough to keep me away from Kingston, but now I had put the ball in his hands and he ran with it.

I think that my father believed that I should go to Kingston because I wasn't getting any better in Peterborough. He was well meaning but misguided, or perhaps misinformed. The quality of care wasn't keeping me from being healthy. With a few exceptions the quality of care is the same from one hospital to another. There is only so much that can be done. You can't stop brain chemicals gone cockeyed from proceeding to misbehave simply by admonishing them. You can tell neurons and dendrites to smarten up all you want. Unfortunately for those of us who wish they would, they don't respond. All that can be done is to bathe the brain in chemicals and hope everything slows down and is eventually still. However, if I'm not a danger to myself or someone else, you need my permission to proceed with any therapy, drug or otherwise, and, there's the rub.

I bunked in with my folks prior to going to Kingston. I'm sure that I crossed the line from houseguest to house pest by the time day one was over. I smoked my Dad's cigarettes and helped myself to just about anything else that was within my reach. When I wasn't helping myself, I was watching TV. At supper I piled my plate high and behaved as though I was raised by wild boars.

I was told to remove my earrings and I did so. I shed more blood than you'd think could possibly come from the earlobes. I cursed more than was necessary.

The morning that found us loading the car for the pilgrimage to the hospital wherein I was to be set on the straight and narrow crept up on me. When I woke on that day the morning was mocking me. The kettle screamed shrilly, telling me I was no good. The bacon spat harshly, laughing hysterically because I was finally going away, quite possibly for a long time. It was a

morning full of jeering and black mirth. I thought about a woman I had met, who had told me I'd never last in Kingston. I thought that since I now had no choice but to go I could at least prove that she was wrong. I knew I had to go to Kingston because there was nowhere else to go. On the drive to the hospital the wind that blew past us was fierce. It was a ride that couldn't end too soon.

When we'd parked in the spacious lot of the Ontario government hospital, we sat and ate sandwiches. I looked around and was more depressed than impressed. My immediate surroundings became to me like a pin applied with increasing pressure to a balloon; I was quickly and entirely deflated by the look of the grounds. I was none too eager to leave the relative comfort of my father's car. I wished I could conjure up a magical recitation to break the spell that seemed, at that moment, to have the whole world stupefied.

"Say, this is just some kind of warped nightmare, let's go home, Mom, Dad, let's get back on the highway and go far away. I won't tell anyone we were here if you don't." Was I speaking my thoughts aloud again? Mom was still chewing and Dad was lighting a cigarette. They hadn't heard. I fought the urge to repeat myself.

"Come on, son," my father coaxed. I looked at Mom and though she didn't let on I knew she had to be disappointed. She smiled shy and sad and I walked away with my dad.

"Hermes, Hermes, messenger of the Gods, come and bring Dionysus, God of wine and pleasure. After we've drunk and made merry, summon a herd of centaurs so I can leave this place behind. Arouse the compassion of Zeus..."

"Carmen, Carm, hey, big guy."

"Huh?" Unawares, I'd been looking at the ground while I fantasized. Suddenly I was painfully aware of the small stones imbedded in the asphalt underfoot.

"We're here son. Now don't worry about anything, just talk to the doctor."

"Dad?"

"Yes, what is it?"

"Did you hear me thinking out loud?"

"No, son, I didn't hear anything." I took a quick look at my father and he looked as tired as he sounded.

Chapter Thirty-Four

I thought I'd done reasonably well. All of the questions whose answers I knew I had answered correctly. I had answered the rest honestly, not necessarily responding with what I thought the doctor wanted to hear. Once or twice I thought he'd blanched. That was probably my imagination as he must have seen and heard just about everything. Overall, I thought the interrogation had gone by without a hitch and relieved, I anticipated going home. Obviously nothing was too wrong. I'd take the pills and get a job. I'd turn it all around.

A short while after the questioning the doctor, who'd left us in a waiting room, reappeared and ushered my father and me into a stuffy little office. "Carmen, we'd like to admit you now. We think we can help you here. What do you think?"

I didn't know what I thought. I wasn't even sure I was thinking. I looked at my Dad and I knew what I had to say. "Yes, you can help me all you want; I'll take all the help you can give."

"Good," the doctor said as he stroked his snowy goatee, "that's very good."

He rose while putting his paperwork in order and then he checked his watch that seemed suddenly to shine brightly. "Shall we?"

I felt a wave of anxiety – my stomach churned, my face felt very hot and my mouth went dry.

We passed people talking to themselves and others searching for well-endowed cigarette butts in the tired ashtrays that were affixed to the walls of the hallways. Some simply looked weary while others were downright cadaverous. I figured that there was nothing much in their lives to help them fill their days and time proved this to be true.

Some were so reliant on the hospital and its skill in devouring their days that they would never consider leaving. Where would they go? Sadly, there weren't many places that would tolerate them or that they could survive in. As we walked to where I was to start a new chapter, mean, hard looking men reclined here and there, holding up the walls and speaking with their eyes, their cloaked faces giving away a whole bunch of nothing as they looked us over.

A button was pushed to summon an attendant. The doctor found and inserted a massive key in the lock and he pushed the door inward. "Here we are then." The orderly approached and I was instructed to go with him. I walked onto the ward, following him like a zombie until I realized I had not said goodbye. I turned only to see the doctor locking the oversized door.

The first things I lost were my clothing and belongings, such as they were. Any dignity I had went with them. I wandered around with my arse hanging out of one of those blue, tie-in-the-back numbers that should be banned.

There was one guy who seemed intent on giving me heart palpitations and sweaty palms. He was a large person who walked around violently banging his left fist into his right hand. Whap, whap, whap. There's nothing quite like being confined with an agitated and seemingly enraged person to put one's paranoia through the paces. Still, I had to wonder about the man's rage, what his story was. Why, I wondered, does this person cultivate such a forbidding presence? Does he even know he's making all us folk nervous?

I turned to the guy beside me. "Hey, what's the story?" I received no answer and thought he must be hard of hearing. I tried again, a little louder, "Hey buddy, what's with that guy?"

A woman's voice behind me said, "You can talk until the cows come home, he'll never answer. He never talks to anyone, do you, you stupid son of a..."

Her voice trailed off as she walked away. I never did find out what was going on with the guy and his fist. When I woke up the next morning he was gone.

It was July when I first set foot in the Kingston Psychiatric Hospital, the month in which my mother had brought me into the world. I had loved life as a child, however the very world I had loved then, I had grown to become leery of. During that hot July I sweated out life on the ward, which was a slice of humankind unto itself; we were all lost souls in the big bad world, hedged in by medicine and the maze of hallways that made up the hospital. Every which way, we were herded, watched and kept in line. We were protected, kept out of harm's way for our own good.

Thankfully, the gray and boring world that was ours could not in any substantial way affect the world at large, or nothing would ever be done. Whenever I saw my doctor I hoped he would put me somewhere else, anywhere but where I was. Soon enough I got my wish.

It seemed that what was frowned on as bad behavior in Peterborough was rewarded in Kingston. After only fifteen days on the ward I was transferred to a very large house on the hospital grounds. It was a step in the right direction, something I gladly accepted.

I guessed I was being rewarded for keeping the peace, being of good behavior and taking my meds without any fuss. On the other hand, maybe it was all the time I spent pretending to read that book I carried with me everywhere. If you could read you were sane, right?

Though I enjoyed greater privileges at the group home - coffee or tea at night, my own room and being allowed to rest in my bed, I was still confined to the hospital grounds. I had permission to wander freely on the grounds because I had been given a group three classification. Eventually I was in possession of what was known as group 4 parole and this enabled me to roam anywhere I wanted, on or off of the hospital property. A few of us used to laugh. We needed parole yet had committed no crime other than that of being vulnerable to sickness. Still, I was determined to play along. Rung by rung I would climb the ladder and emerge from the hole I'd dug and jumped into.

Those of us who lived in the big, old building with many rooms, still had to go to the hospital for OT, to eat our meals, get a needle, buy cigarettes, use the library, play pool, see the dentist, (who pulled any tooth suspected of harbouring a cavity), and take care of any other business that, like a lazy cat with nothing to do, stretched itself out in our paths.

I was usually in a hurry when it came to meal times because I hated eating in the chaotic atmosphere of the cafeteria, hundreds of mouths munching, a rhythm of bite, chew, swallow that was hard to block out. Conversation was a feat best left to folk who liked to holler and there were a few of those present at every meal.

One day I was trying in vain to crunch a wilted salad while also chewing and swallowing a sandwich. Forgetting everything I'd been taught, I put down the sandwich and pushing away the salad started slurping tepid soup straight from the green, government-issue bowl that was

cradling it. I was in the company of a few hundred others who were similarly engaged, all of us using identical bowls, cups, plates and spoons.

When I was almost finished, I looked around and everything seemed right, everything in its place. Things were winding down. People were leaving alone, in twos and threes. The sound of a post meal cleanup could be heard coming from the kitchen. I noticed a guy sitting nearby and looked twice. That's in poor taste, I thought, there's no need for anything like that. The misinformed person was sporting a swastika in his ear that was too large to ever go unnoticed.

The next day I saw the same man who once again had his earring in and was also wearing a T-shirt with a picture of the first man on the moon putting up a flag, not of the American persuasion, but rather one sporting a swastika.

That misguided shlemiel eventually went elsewhere and I forgot all about him. He wasn't missed – in his absence there were others eager to get on my nerves, though none of them had his flair for things distasteful.

Speaking of unusual people, there was one woman at the hospital that I would see every so often who definitely had her own way of seeing things, that being over her shoulder. She would be the backwards lady. Everywhere she went, she went hind end first. It would be safe to say that she suffered with some unshakable idea that some type of harm would come to her if she got about any other way. Sometimes she'd lose track of where she was going and someone would have to help her stay the course before somebody got hurt. I admit that she made me laugh sometimes. The last time I saw her that stands out in my mind was when I saw her walking backwards at a fair clip while she puffed away on a cigarette.

Then there's the rapist. He enters the canteen sheepishly, but there's no sense in it. He's not ashamed of himself or made uneasy by what he's done, that much is quite well known. Actually he thinks he's getting a raw deal, he thinks people are against him and the staff treats him like dirt. He'll tell anyone who'll listen that there's no good reason for the way others are towards him. The murderers, he says, incredulous, get more respect than he does. He spends his share of time alone and seems as if he doesn't know why.

It's odd, in a strange way, when he's around the canteen the guy's accepted. It could be that in the hospital nobody wants the boat rocked. Perhaps the people possessing sanctioned authority may have trouble drawing distinctions between guys like the rapist and people with brain diseases like schizophrenia. They might discourage any animosity that might possibly be directed towards a criminal of his persuasion by one with a mental illness who may also happen to have a sister. I'm not necessarily saying the staff was guilty of seeing through blurry spectacles at times, however, if the slipper fits they could try wearing it. Maybe a system that puts convicted felons with those guilty of having a disease needs to be looked at.

It's said that he raped a woman and then let her go. She went and called the police. When they went back to the crime scene to look around he was still there, just standing, still and docile, looking around at things no one else could seem to see.

And then there's Willie. Everywhere Willie goes he has one thing on his mind – cigarettes. Willie, he of the perpetual cough, can hardly stop hacking and wheezing long enough to ask for a smoke. His idea of a good time involves a bale of tobacco, some rolling papers, someplace dry and a few clean handkerchiefs. On those rare times when Willie stops

coughing, he starts talking. After awhile you start to wonder which is worse. The first time I met Willie he bummed a smoke. The last time I saw Willie he bummed a smoke. Willie had been in the hospital too long. He'd been too long without any money in his pocket.

There goes that girl who breaks my heart. Yeah, she's pretty and she has a sad way about her that makes me sad too, but that's not what gets to me. I know I don't have any right looking into her business and being dismayed, but I can't help myself. My heart is grieved whenever her coffee cup is empty. I know that when the coffee money runs out she'll wait until night and go to the basement. There she'll think of other places while doing things she doesn't want to do. When she comes back to the canteen the next day she'll have enough for coffee and cigarettes. She'll be okay for a while and then she'll go to work again. People look the other way, "you know, it's not like she does it every day." Somewhere, a mother yearns for the daughter she knew. She'd had everything going for her, everyone had always said so.

There I was, convinced that I had no friends, that I didn't fit in at the group home, in the hospital or anywhere else. There are people who are friendly towards me, but the illness has dug itself in. I'm suspicious of every one – they're all harbouring animosity, they all look sickly. Some of the people I've met like to drink a bit and temptation is nipping at my heels. I hold onto sobriety, at times, as though it's the last tie to sanity I have. It seems more and more likely that a life of drunkenness will reclaim me and thus destroy my fragile peace.

The hospital grounds can be nice. There are some tall, old trees and the water can look really beautiful in the right light. If you can find a place, where no one will bother you, you can close your eyes and just drift with sounds of the water and the gulls, and then you can escape.

Chapter Thirty-Five

The orange and white pussycat that lived in the same stately house on the hospital grounds as did I, was mysterious to me, a secret incapable of being understood. How many people has that furry puzzle seen come and go, I wondered, how many have thrown stones at him or cursed him. I watched him chase something that only he could see and then, later, watched him rolling on the road, getting oily, dusty and dirty. Later, when the hot sun had set and darkness coated everything, he carefully groomed himself. With one eye on his task and one looking out for stray humans, he stayed busy until, clean and ready for another day, he entered slumber.

He reminded me that each of us wants to keep busy. Human, avian, animal or insect; is there any creature endowed with life that doesn't want something to do, some way to put in their days? Alas, none of us are cats. If we chase things that aren't there and get too dirty it's because we're crazy. We will be locked up then, because we can't look after ourselves. We will have to take drugs that can make the simplest chores so hard that we want to lie in our beds and be left alone. We won't want to be busy anymore and will start the process of forgetting what busy was.

I won't get dirty I promised in my mind, you can count on it. If you let me out and somehow take away the harsh drugs, I'll try my hardest to stay busy and clean. I'll avoid chasing anything that can't be seen. In some ways I'll take my cue from the orange and white cat and in others, I promise that I certainly won't.

The cat doesn't seem to like me anymore. I'm starting to believe that he never did. I saw the girl feeding him scraps from our meals and knew that she had stolen his affections by applying leftovers. I should have thought of feeding him myself; praise and affection weren't enough. Sitting on the porch I thought; if only I could entice a girl with table scraps, and then I winced and thought if *they* ever knew what I had been thinking they'd never let me go. I went upstairs and lying on my bed I thought foolish thoughts over and over, trying to prove to myself that what the workers had always maintained was true, that no one, not even the nurses, could possibly know what went on in my mind.

It's funny really, that girl stole the cat and just when he was over me, I stole the girl from him. Though I had been watching her I hadn't noticed until it was too late, that I was falling for her. One day I found myself walking the way she walked. It was so noticeable that someone asked me about it

"Why are you walking like that, she doesn't even know that you're alive."

I looked at my feet and said, "I don't know why I walk like her, I just do. Of course, you're probably right; it's not likely that she knows if I'm dead or alive or cares one way or the other. Well, she's caught my eye anyways, unless, of course, it's just that I admire the way she walks."

And that's how it went. As though we were in grade school, someone told her how much I thought of her and she, in spite of possessing no more than a faint interest in me, agreed to a date. When we were together I walked like myself, when we were apart I walked like her. I

laughed at the cat that I figured was missing his snacks and, as though he had a good hunch I was responsible, he kept a safe distance from me, staring and wagging his tail. I found out later, after I realized that it was just the way she walked that I admired and we had stopped seeing each other, that she had still been feeding the cat when she could get away with it. I had told her that it was bad for him to eat human food so she had fed him when I wasn't around. The whole hospital-dating thing had really been about nothing more than one person's lovely and enticing gait and temporary ownership of a cat.

So there were temperamental cats and shrewish women. What else was happening at the health care facility that specialized in treating the chronically different? I suppose one of the best days for me was when I was given the previously alluded to level 4 parole.

"What did I do?" I asked.

"What," the social worker asked, "have you done?"

"That's what I asked you," I replied.

"Well," she answered then hesitated, seemingly lost. I resisted believing she hadn't been asked that question before "You were sick," she said, finishing her sentence.

"Yes," I answered, "I was. But, I don't see what that has to do with being given parole. What I'm trying to say is this: when I first came here I was put under lock and key and my clothes were taken away. Shortly after I was put in the halfway house, clothed of course, and now I'm given parole. What I don't understand, unless I'm actually a criminal and someone forgot to tell me, is why I was locked up and why you use the term parole when letting me off the hospital grounds?"

"All I know *sir*, is that it was called parole when I started working here. Other than that I have no explanation. You do want to be free to come and go, don't you, because, you know, if you don't it can be arranged that the hospital looks after you, we..."

"Never mind, I'm on parole, fine, fine, when can I be on my way?"

"You can go right now," she replied. I stood up and started walking out of her office.

"Wait," she demanded, another person reining me in.

"Yes?" My question was one syllable, sharply spoken. I didn't care if I lost my privileges because I answered a command with the wrong inflection.

"There are certain restrictions..." Her voice droned on. I heard the buzzwords – drugs, alcohol and curfew. "Is that all clear?"

"Crystal," I replied and walked away, leaving her no doubt believing I was just another uncouth and ungrateful person, one she had no recourse but to deal with, simply a frustrating part of her job.

I walked to the core of Kingston and was captivated, as others had been before me, by the remarkable waterfront. The sun dipped its rays in the blue water of the lakefront, bringing, when regarded, a sudden clarity to the mind that came and went so fast it was hallucinatory. Beautiful boats were moored in an ample harbor and flowers in green parks were abundant and looked every bit as fussed over as they were, fortunate flora living in a town that could

afford to see that they remained beautiful. There were other sights to command a young man's attention on that summer afternoon, namely a myriad of attractive, self-assured women who languished in parks, in restaurants and on the main street, as though they had nothing but time on their hands. Lending themselves to the whole scene were ambitious street vendors, outdoor cafes doing a brisk yet relaxed business and architecture that was soothing to the eye. It was all very impressive. The boats and cars, well tended parks, the shops and well dressed women, it all screamed at me without apology – money lives here. Suddenly it seemed to me, a guy with next to nothing, that this might not be a bad place to find a bed under which to put my boots. I could certainly do much worse.

I didn't linger long in the city's core on that warm day. The change in my pocket wouldn't even buy me a cup of coffee. I walked around enough though to see others like me, the local have-nots; sitting on benches, rolling cigarettes, looking hard, regarding the world quizzically, almost confusedly as it passed them by. Though we didn't know each other then, I figured that in time we would become acquainted, those men and I, and we did.

I made the long walk home, for home was what the hospital had become. My head swam with images of affluence, poverty and pleasant looking women sunning themselves by the water.

That night I felt transformed by my off grounds experience. I happily explained my plans of settling down to one of the night staff. He surprised me by speaking to me on a personal level.

"You know," he said conspiratorially, even though we were alone, "you really don't want to spend your days floating around these grounds, trying to get something out of the latest drugs they put in you. Honestly, all bullshit aside, I think you can do better than that."

We fell silent. This was different. Anywhere I had been the staff had pushed compliance and soundness of hospital policy. I was temporarily off balance. At length I broke the silence by blurting, "Thanks."

He winked and said, "Don't tell anyone I don't buy into the program one hundred percent. You have potential, that's all."

"I think you're right," I answered, "I think I can do better, no, I know I can. I think I'm going to sleep well tonight. I'll tell you, for the first time in a long time I'm starting to feel really, genuinely tired. I've settled something tonight and you've helped." He put up his hand and shook his head.

"Oh yes," I continued, "you've helped make up my mind. I'm going to live here, in this town. I can do whatever I set my mind to. Isn't that what you said?" He nodded. I smiled and left the office, not quite sure if he'd meant a word of it.

The very next day I plunged headfirst into extricating myself from the machinery that powers a government institution filled with hundreds of inmates. I didn't want to get caught in the cogs that made everything go, to gum it all up and come out feeling like something finely ground. I wanted the right forms to be filled out, the right people to be filled in, connections made and adios, this time goodbye really is forever.

To my surprise it all went smoothly. At some point during the process I realized that they never really had any authority to hold me, which made me scratch my head again, wondering what things like parole were all about. Nobody objected to my leaving or to doing the paperwork

involved in processing my release. I got the impression that they would gladly manage the vacuum created when I left. When one leaves another is sucked in to fill his spot in short order. It's a strong vacuum. I figured that within a few hours someone would be lying on my vacant bed in the halfway house. I'd been a model citizen in the little community, sober, nonviolent, and respectful towards others. I was out within two weeks of making it known that was where I wished to be.

I had made some friends in the hospital during the three months and change that I dwelt there. They were then friendships in their infancy, being taught and being the teacher, testing and being tested, what do they really think of me anyway?

Some that I met in the warehouse where we were labeled, filed away and forgotten, I would remain friends with for years. Others I'd only know in a vague way and for a short time. They would leave Kingston behind as soon as possible, determined to never return. There would be yet others who would be on the periphery of my life and I theirs. We might share the odd, unexpected coffee or just nod and say hello when we met downtown.

So, I didn't have to be alone much by the time I was out of hospital and set up in a group home. I could pick up the phone or go out walking. I knew enough folk that I could usually find someone interested in coming to my place to share in some coffee and cigarettes, those most dependable and affordable of stimulants. Sometimes though, I still chose to be by myself.

Often I would seek out the afternoon nap, for, just before I drifted into slumber I would experience a rush of emotion that was identical to feelings I had before I became ill. I could connect to an event from years ago and somehow feel what was in my heart then – strange, that those old feelings, unbidden, would revisit me years later in the group home, on its well-worn, dusty couch. Sleep would always become overbearing and I would deal with it by giving in. I would sleep deeply and dream vividly. I would wake to non-feeling. Getting up slowly I would once again wander an emotional desert looking for a drink.

Chapter Thirty-Six

My head was fuzzy, as though I'd been drinking too much and had passed out. I couldn't remember how I'd come to be in the bed I was in. It was with a start that I realized the strange bed I was in, lumpy mattress and all, was my own.

It came to me slowly. I sensed a little imp in my room, receding, sniggering, as it got smaller. I began remembering what the little imp was laughing about. I had taken more than a goodly amount of medication at suppertime of the previous day, a dose that would be considered a hefty amount for most people with schizophrenia, and a dose that would likely disturb or even unhinge those who bore the weight of being normal. It was another victory for the evil forces of which the imp was a part. Aye, the dark nature that dominated the sphere I was spinning on never seemed to lose. I was getting queasy. The world was like an eternal roller coaster ride without the thrill. Looking at my clock radio I focused on the wavering red numbers that told me it was just past two in the morning.

I knew I wouldn't sleep again for a time. My mouth felt perfectly dry, as though I had taken an old vacuum cleaner bag to bed with me and had been licking the dust out of it. It was plain that taking extra medication wouldn't increase my understanding or awareness; it just made me stupid and uncomfortable. Take it or leave it, this was the freedom from the hospital and its authority that I had wanted. Those in charge believed in me, in their cautious, clinical way. It was hoped that I would be responsible with my medication; however, they wouldn't police me. I would have to answer to myself. I would be aided in this respect by a guilty conscience.

If I played my cards right I might never again have to listen to someone with leather lungs yelling, "Medication ... MEDICATION! Get in line for your MEDICATION!"

The best way for me to learn what I could handle was through experience. If I woke up feeling as if I'd been eating sand it would make a much greater impression on me than would some guy in a lab coat telling me exactly what the do's and don'ts were.

I didn't have juice or pop but water would work. I drank long and deeply. I smacked my lips and realized I was thirsty again. Even though I was three quarters full and bloated, my body still called out for fluids. I tried to swallow and it felt like my throat was all wrinkled up, my poor throat was the forehead of an old, old man raising his eyebrows. I drank water in small sips for the duration of the night.

When I took my medication as it was prescribed a slightly parched mouth was one of the small and usually inconsequential side effects I dealt with. We were advised to chew sour candy or gum or to chew ice chips. I don't know about anybody else but walking around with ice chips in my pocket proved to be, well, I didn't actually try it as something made me think better of the whole idea. As far as sour gum or candy went, I just wasn't interested.

One day I met a woman I vaguely knew, an unexceptional woman, a nurse, someone whose acquaintanceship with me I wished was more than what it was. Our "relationship" was in critical condition though and about to lapse into a coma. While, of course, I hoped for a miracle, I was past wanting any heroic measures taken.

At any rate, I had barely started to articulate in her direction when my mouth went dry and my tongue started sticking to the roof of my mouth. She hung around long enough to see the frothy spittle hanging around the corners of my mouth. Mentally ill, on welfare and a nasty, dry mouth to boot – it all added up to little if any consideration as a love interest. I was not very appealing to her or anyone else, I was well aware of it and it chagrined me like the Americans winning Olympic gold in hockey. These things weren't supposed to happen – I was meant to be taken seriously and the Yanks were supposed to stick to baseball, golf or beating up small countries.

I could always find a normal woman to go out with me the day I got my cheque. I could promise her a meal at the restaurant of her choice. I'd give her whatever she wanted within reason. If I liked her, I wouldn't mind if our date broke me. Yet, one reason I had for not approaching any of the 'normal' women I knew was a mental image that plagued me. I kept seeing the look on my dream date's face when, in a crowded eatery, I stood up too fast and keeled over. Most people would swear I'd fainted, they might even throw a glass of water in my face, but my falling on the floor would actually have been caused by hypotension, another wonderful side effect that took me by surprise from time to time. Side effects could complicate life, especially, I believed, for one such as me, for it was the proverbial bane of my existence that I wanted everything to be normal, my health and the women I thought I knew included; it was a pitiable desire that could never satisfied.

I figured I'd bide my time, accepting my fate for the time being. I was poor in several ways and therefore, unacceptable. Women who were my age lacked character, I would tell myself. If a man had some money and a halfway decent car he was a good prospect. If he had some type of presence about him, some money and a vehicle, he might find himself being pursued by the very ones who habitually turned up their noses at me. Chagrin. Sometimes, in spite of it all you just have to laugh.

The Walkman was becoming very big at that time, a really hot item – if you had a Walkman you were on top of the fashion scene in my neck of the woods, you were one of the trendsetters. You were style and savvy with a healthy heartbeat.

In stores I would look at all the different types and their prices. I couldn't afford one and that was galling but what bothered me the most, what made me panicky was that I believed I might never be able to afford one. The clerks in electronics stores thought that it was necessary to watch whatever it was that I happened to touch or fiddle with, which bothered me further. They used no discretion, they didn't hide or peer at me from behind shelves, they watched me shamelessly with glaring, rat-like eyes, satisfied in the knowledge that when I left their merchandise was intact, that I hadn't boosted anything.

Every day I watched young people like me walking around with their headphones on, music being pumped straight to the soul. Theirs was an audio fantasy world where the artist of their choice defined life until their batteries ran dead, at which time they were transformed and became once again mortal. I watched them and the noises of urban life grew shrill and mocking. I was broke in an affluent city and that either pissed me off or humbled me completely.

I thought and I thought and when that didn't work, I thought so hard I could have sworn I smelled smoke. Finally I decided to put together my own Walkman. What I was going to do

had been done before; there was nothing original about it. The tricky part would be finding what I needed at the right prices.

After looking in thrift stores, second hand electronics shops, scouring the wanted to sell column of the local rag and otherwise seeking until I had tired of doing so, I found an old tape recorder, on its very last legs, in a stylish, used goods place. Go figure. Like many humans that I'd known it was temperamentally functional, like a rich artist it worked when it wanted to.

I found an old earplug of the kind that was used in prehistory, one that, at one time, had let someone listen to his or her transistor radio without bothering anyone. It was designed to go in one ear and, as pleased as I was to have it, I couldn't get the picture out of my mind a papery old man. He had yellow-white hair and thick, smudged, black rimmed glasses. I knew the type and could almost picture him ramming my earphone as far as he could into his waxy ear, all the better to listen to the football game. Who really knew where it had been?

I got over that, borrowed some unlabeled tapes, bought some cheap batteries and made myself comfortable on the front porch. There I sat with the group home that I lived in behind me, made mean by its humble status, both of us facing the street. The sky glowed pink as the sun went about its business of bidding us farewell, promising to return soon. I turned on my makeshift Walkman.

Nothing. I stopped and started the machine and still nothing. Stop and start, wait, I heard something. I thought it resembled music and wished for something above a loud whisper, anything. It got a little louder. "It's not that bad," I told myself, "things could be worse."

A guy walked by singing the words of a popular song. He was listening to his Walkman. Pink Floyd, eh? I thought. I tried but couldn't really make out who the artist was that I was listening to. I cursed under my breath and tried harder to tune into the music that was in my possession. Losing patience, I started to talk to myself.

"If I ever get my hands on the guy who came up with the saying, 'If life gives you lemons make lemonade', I'll make him recant. I'd like to tell him the way I see it; life is a series of problems with one solution, and that solution is final, no matter how much citrus fruit you surround yourself with."

At the time my spewing of sentiments like that, concerning final solutions and the like, seemed somehow deep, a curious mutation of something Solomon might have muttered when teaching practical ways to view life to a group of tax collectors, chronic gamblers and alcoholics.

I gave up on the front porch and went inside where I was accosted by the old black and white TV bellowing, "THE SURVEY SAID!!"

Richard Dawson was giving it his best as usual as two families, seemingly strapped for cash, tried to outdo each other. I suppose I tuned most of it out. The next thing I knew Shelley was turning the television off, giving it a rub, sighing and saying, "See you tomorrow."

I thought that it was funny that she liked Richard Dawson and his cheesy suits, but then I was going through a stage of sneering at a lot of what I was wading through from one day to the next. With little else to do, I decided to stir things up a bit.

"I don't know about you Shelley, but I can't stand that Dawson guy. I read somewhere that he's gay."

"Ha ha," she responded, "I'm not getting sucked into your little game. I'll say this though, he looks kind of like you. If you were wearing one of his nice suits, nobody would be able to tell the two of you apart. Are you hungry? I've got a little Chinese..."

"No thanks, I just lost my appetite, misplaced it somewhere I suppose."

She seemed hurt. I could never see why people were offended if you turned down the food that they offered. Food had never resembled anything social to me. Sometimes I wondered if I was lacking some type of warmth or humanness when it came to food, if I was missing out on something by only eating when I was hungry.

Shelley often wanted to feed me. She would lend me a little cash from time to time. She was warm, a good person and an over-comer. She would remain obscure, in spite of having tamed her afflictions. This world we're on, that belches smoke because that's what happens when it swallows our trash, could use a heaven sent flood of people like Shelley every now and then.

Besides Shelley I had three other housemates. There was Mary, a lady, (you wouldn't dare call her anything else), who died her hair black, drank twelve beers every Friday night and most notably and above Shelley's protestations, washed her panties in the kitchen sink every second or third day. Eventually the people who made sure the group homes ran smoothly sent a worker around to solve the underwear issue. Suffice to say no one backed down.

The air was charged. When Mary was told to keep her bloomers to herself, or at least out of the kitchen sink, she took it gracefully, though I was sure I could sense retribution in the air. Mary was a nice woman who would play rough when she thought she was in the right and I had the feeling she thought she was precisely that, most of the time.

Then there was Donald, a large man who had twenty years or so on me. He took such a high dose of antipsychotic medication to control his schizophrenia that I wondered how he even got out of bed. He spent a lot of time shuffling around the streets in his jeans and scarred, tuckered out work boots whose laces were chronically untied. He smoked a lot and had a boastful stomach. In one area he didn't shuffle though. Donald was always limbered up when it came to telling expansive tales. His imagination was surprisingly nimble.

I was on my third day at the home when he caught me relaxing on the couch, smoking hand rolled cigarettes and trying to understand why I was where I was. I became aware of his voice, low with a type of gurgle that put me in mind of what a half drowned man might sound like when he calls for help.

I wanted to believe him. When he was describing in considerable detail some of the better goals he'd scored while playing in the NHL for Boston, I wished it were true but I knew it wasn't. When he was shooting a line about body slamming Whipper Billy Watson I pictured him in tights and I smirked. An image of Donald in Maple Leaf Gardens hoisting Whipper Billy in the air and pausing before he threw him to the canvas, made me laugh. Eventually I decided to feign sleep. I pretended I was dreaming until make-believe blurred and became actuality. My mind overflowed with oversized men who wouldn't stop talking and who were unquestionably laying it on thick. Anything anyone said was quickly outdone. I couldn't seem

to find my own voice and so, was forced to listen. I woke in the dark and pulled a nearby blanket over myself.

The final character in our house, Bobby, wore his hair short and gold, wire-rimmed glasses. He was around my age. It wasn't until years later, when I went to visit him in the town in which he'd chosen to plant himself, that he explained that he was no longer in the closet. When he told me that and I looked back, I remembered, red faced, that he had really wanted to be my friend, so much so that sometimes I felt like I was being smothered.

I told him that once; I said that I needed some space. He flew into a rage and I thought he was going to belt me, but he managed to hold back. Still, it was all very unfortunate because I shared a room with him, a tiny little room. When we were lying there in that miserable room on the night of the day he freaked out I thought, this moment is so insignificant, all things considered, so microscopic, he could do anything to me. Whatever he chose to do would barely make the local papers and never be included in the history of this world except as the footnote of a footnote of a footnote. My life would register as a blip in the cosmos; over and forgotten before it had a chance to make any kind of a difference. Thinking like that could really bother me, so I broke the silence.

"You still pissed?"

A moment passed during which I envisioned this former private in the Armed Forces strangling me and laughing, say, "Space, eh? Space?" Froth forms at the corners of his mouth and spews on me while he laughs and I turn beet red from trying to scream while I am being choked...

"No man, I'm not mad, how could I stay mad at you?"

"You know that Joseph guy," I asked, relieved that I was still alive and able to change the subject.

"Yeah," he said, "he's a jerk."

"You think so?"

"Oh yeah, he's right into that D&D shit."

"Really," I said, stalling for time, hoping he'd tell me what he was talking about. But he didn't, he just rolled over as though he was ready to sleep.

"Hey Bobby. What the hell is D&D? Is that some kind of sex thing?"

"Are you ever naïve," he answered, laughing and rolling over to face me in the dark.

"D&D," he commenced to explain, "is a game, a role-playing game. He and his buddies are all getting stoned and taking on new identities, elves and shit. Some of their roles are evil. Sometimes people get screwed up. Some players are supposed to be more powerful than others. Joseph told me he was some kind of dragon master or something and I almost leveled him. Take my advice and stay away from that guy."

There was one thing I didn't get about Bobby. He walked around with this T-shirt that said A Flock of Seagulls. Since I had been naïve once I figured once more wouldn't hurt. I whispered, hushed yet perceptible. "Hey Bobby, are you awake?"

“What?” he answered in a conversational way.

“Why do you wear T-shirts with ‘Flock of Seagulls’ written on them? Are you into animal rights or something, I mean, I thought people were trying to save whales not seagulls - there are too many of the old shit hawks as it is. What’s with the shirts?”

“Listen,” he said quietly and getting up he put a cassette in his tape machine.

It played for a while and I said, “Yeah, so.”

“A Flock of Seagulls,” he said, “techno pop.”

“It sounds like a lot of electric crap with some kind of rhythm, computer disco,” I commented.

“Goodnight Carm,” he said and left the tape to play itself out and shut itself off.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Many people with a brain disease can spend years lamenting. They think that they are less; stuck on a ridiculous portion of the world that esteems them not. I would guess that many do this for as long as they live but there are others that come to allow some self-celebration and realize that what makes them *different*, in many ways is what makes them valuable. If we take words literally *different* has never been synonymous with lowly. Those who would believe otherwise are men and women whose nature, I think, is a little dubious. Perhaps, if I may take my crack at generalizing, they are evil.

Some people will say, in an attempt to downplay another's suffering, "What's normal anyways?" If these masters of glib could experience the fearsome core of a mental illness and how it can, even after abating to a degree, turn one inwards and encourage self-loathing, they might, with more deference for the suffering of others, thank their lucky stars that they are normal. They might gladly acknowledge that normal really does exist and that they are it.

I kept bumping into Joseph, he of Dungeons and Dragons. Wherever I was there he would be. Sometimes he'd come to my place and he'd have dope to smoke, magic elf dust or something, who knew what was going on in that guy's head. Every time he saw me, he'd want to smoke some with me but I wouldn't. Unwavering, I responded in the negative each time he lit up and offered his crinkly, pleasant smelling, little cigarette. I really didn't think I needed marijuana at the time and frankly, Joseph didn't need it either. Sometimes when he was high he would try to bulldog his way into borrowing money, but I had none to give him whether he was in a pushy mood or not.

We were both on welfare so when we went for a cup of coffee we went to places where they would give you at least one free refill. We were out-and-out rapturous when we found a place that put a full pot on your table and charged for only one cup per person.

For a while, we were welcomed at that restaurant as if we were royalty from someplace far off. I suppose they were half right, in a sense we *were* from some place far off. Come in, drink the java, can I get you an ashtray, a glass of water, a newspaper, no you can't have the waitress but everything else is here for your enjoyment.

I knew it was coming and wasn't surprised when we started to get the cold shoulder and the chilly looks. I guessed that they finally understood that we weren't going to spend much money there; in fact, I figured, we were probably a liability, when we walked in the place the manager felt his pockets get a little lighter. So they took their time serving us and when they did get around to looking after us they no longer offered a full pot and a smile but one cup at a time, no free refills. I wanted to ask them what the score was and apologize if we'd offended, but I didn't. After all, we couldn't expect a free ride forever. Later I would suspect that Joseph had been going there alone, stoned and belligerent, or with someone else who had caused a problem.

I suppose through all that happened during that time, no money, shoddy treatment and just hanging out with each other and telling horror stories about the illness, some bond born of mutual suffering developed. I figured I had gotten to know Joseph well enough to be friends with him, going against the better judgment of my roommate in so doing.

Some, eager to strike out at Joseph, would say that he got me back into drinking. I would say to them that in no wise did he pinch my nose and force the hooch down my throat. The fact is that I started to drink again and I did so because I gave myself permission to. There was no one to blame. There was no need for blame. After years of abstinence I very much enjoyed having a beer. I still steered clear of the pot and hash; that stuff was a little too mind warping for me. One of life's great mysteries for me at the time was how my new found friend could smoke dope until it was practically pouring out of his ears and remain conscious let alone cognizant.

So with mixed emotions, after years of teetotalism and a month or so of having the odd beer, the day came when I got drunk. It was unavoidable, like rain on the coast or Hollywood celebrity scandals.

Ah, the first sip of beer on that night when I knew I was going to cut loose. How can I explain the taste of it, that initial bubbly mouthful? Even the feel of the cold bottle in my hands was in a sense liberating. I was closing the door on sobriety.

I had a few and became a little more talkative, sharing my opinions and later, drunk, I shared my experiences. The people I was drinking with, friends of Joseph's, were surprised at some of the things I'd been through. Later, having become drunk and nonetheless withdrawn, I thought that maybe I was imagining their indulgence, that maybe they thought I was a bore and were probably glad I had stopped talking. I couldn't remember much the next day, so I told myself that what they thought could be filed away under 'N' as in 'neither here nor there'. I felt sick most of the day.

I may have made friends with a person that most people disapproved of, but that didn't change the way I conducted myself. I continued to live in the group home, paying my rent on time and respecting my fellow boarders, doing my chores and not agitating in any serious or harmful way.

I was rewarded for my behavior, for playing by the rules and pasting a smile on my face when staff came to visit. I was moved to a house in a nice, quiet neighborhood where there was less supervision. My new home also happened to be near a great bar where, as I took to drinking more and more, I spent a great deal of time, usually nursing just the few beers I could afford.

It was there, at the bar, that, though I knew it was foolhardy, I became completely bewitched by one of the barmaids. I fought my feelings and was as befuddled as one could be when they, with deceptive strength and cunning, hit back. The fondness that struck me startled me. In a way, it was like losing control all over again.

Once I was smitten I had to accept what soon became obvious, that even casual contact with her, other than tipping beyond my means when she brought me a beer, was out of the question. I had to accept that I didn't have a chance, that I didn't have the means to be around her. I had no job, no car, no house, no dog, in fact I was so lame I was sure I would get all kinds of wise counsel against having a dog if I wished to own one.

I had to accept it when the one with whom I fancied I was in love asked the bouncer to have a word with me because I was acting strangely and in so doing making her uncomfortable. From that point on I felt his eyes on me wherever I went in that crummy establishment. I had to accept that falling in love had been a lousy idea.

Unrequited love is a harsh mistress, driving you to folly, stripping you of self worth, poise and common sense. It seems all you have is your love and you live off it like a drug. I had loved the idea of her that much; she became, for a time, like a narcotic to me.

The days grew shorter. We were into fall. I had begun receiving my disability pension a while after I moved into my new home. I had waited for a little extra money for a long time and when it came, I went straight to one of those grab-your-wallet-and-suck-out-the-contents electronics stores that sold Walkmans. I walked around putting my grimy fingers on most everything that wasn't under glass. I thoroughly enjoyed myself and then grew tired of the game. I picked out what I wanted and opened my wallet wherein lay every single dollar from my cheque. The clerk became conciliatory. I paid and walked out without a word.

I wandered aimlessly while it sunk in. I was on a disability pension. The powers that be believed that I would never be fit to work. I grew depressed and drifted, listening to the radio and not really noticing or enjoying it. I was officially retired. I had extra money but the day was much more bitter than sweet.

I first stopped tipping the barmaid and then I moved to another section of the bar where someone else would serve me. Eventually I got over her. I would watch her and think: she is made of flesh and bone like anyone else here. She's putting herself so immensely out of reach that she's in a place that I'm sure is reserved for demigods. After awhile of thinking like that I'd have to laugh and shake my befuddled head. The sting gradually left, as did my desire for her. The elitist in her and her friends no longer convinced me that I was of little worth.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

It was two in the morning. The varying tones of gray of which the shadows indoors were comprised and the sleepy hush from the street, made it seem like four. Someone spoke out loudly in his sleep. I couldn't log any Zs myself and so was sitting at our kitchen table, a piece of furniture that had come to us by way of a government grant. It was a handsome table that the manufacturer had no doubt made with four, maybe five hungry people in mind, folks eating, talking about their days, laughing and passing the salt. Its designer may have imagined children coming home for lunch and leaving cookie crumbs and puddles of milk behind on the easy to clean surface. Now and then someone's mother would sit there with her head in her hands, crying softly because the kids were growing up too fast. In our home, it was a sad table, misused. No two people ever seemed to sit at it at the same time. There was a radio on the table, which was why I was there, that and the close proximity of table to kettle. I was smoking, drinking coffee and quietly cursing my luck.

All of a sudden, I stopped and listened hard. In a rush the silence of the house and night intensified and became a steady ringing in my ears. After a minute or so, as though coerced by an unseen force, the ringing stopped. The words of a song on the radio caught my attention and I inclined an ear. What a goddamned melancholy song, I thought after awhile, hoping that my eyes weren't in the mood for a downpour. I knew though that however warranted, bawling just wasn't possible. A trickle yes, but the cascades that had once upon a time drenched my cheeks, leaving me with a nose full of snot and barely breathing were long gone. Sometimes I wanted to muster up a good cry; something I thought I needed to in order to enact the old adage, have a good cry and you'll feel better. I really wanted to feel better.

I started listening to the next song. It reminded me of the way music was when I was a boy in the sixties, when I had loved to run and play and never dreamed of anything but good things, of always fitting in, having friends and of course being very normal. The combination of the song's melody, its lyrics and the feeling it evoked of life in the sixties had an effect on me, so much so that it brought on a few droplets of eyeball rain. Yeah, I thought, wiping my eyes, you got it; the lyrics had been right, they had talked about things never being the same. You've really gone soft, I thought and turning off the radio I went back to my muttering, smoking and cursing.

It seemed that I was depressed from that night on. I began to feel as though I was alone in the world. I thought I was a letdown, a misfit who chronically came up short, another nuisance who would have to be taken care of from the cradle to the grave. I started sleeping too much or not at all. The world that rejected me has now entirely forgotten me, I thought. I grew bitter and my depression crystallized.

My head shrink concurred. He said I was clinically depressed and that he had seen it coming. I wanted to ask him why he had let it happen if he was so smart, but I knew he'd have a lot of nonsense ready to spew and more if needed. I didn't feel up to deflecting any self-exculpating long-windedness and kept my peace. Actually, I felt guilty, believing that I had brought it on myself. To his credit, my doctor told me that feelings of guilt were often part of being depressed. He prescribed an antidepressant medication and lithium.

I had the script filled and mindlessly downed some pills when I got back to the home, wondering what they would do to me. Just more drugs, I thought, to pick me up, make me numb, make me sleep, make me hungry, restless, horny, dead or at least have a dead feeling or wish I was dead. I lay on my bed, choking on bile that often ravaged my throat when I felt defeated. I started thinking: this sucks. That doctor can't cure me. I'd probably feel better if I didn't take anything, hell, I'd probably be better off dead, but then with my luck the afterlife will be worse.

That night, as if I hadn't learned anything more in life than how to tie my shoelaces and where food goes, I skipped my dose of anti psychotic medication as well as the pills for depression. I was gearing up to do my imitation of a speeding train without a driver. If I wasn't thwarted from traveling the treacherous paths I was poised to locomote, I was going to crash.

The difference between a runaway train and me was that trains are made of steel and I possess a soul and am of flesh. Humans have feelings and we think. When someone came up with the authority and method to stop me dead in my tracks I wouldn't be like the train, which, when its fit of lunacy ended, would be cold and remorseless, then recycled and fashioned into something of practical use. I didn't consider it when I quit my pills that night, but it was possible that I could end up damaged beyond usefulness.

My reckless behavior made me believe I was taking charge and the depth of emotion present during those first medicine-free days excited me. At times, I would feel uncomfortably strange though, and when I did, I would wonder if I wasn't going to just up and die. I spent a lot of time hoping that I wouldn't, as the state I was often in was oddly sweet, somewhere in between madness and my brand of subdued, peculiar, but harmless normalcy. When things got a little dicey, I would lie on my bed, bracing myself for something to snap. I rode out these storms of weirdness that were, at times, excruciating. After weathering the storm I began to think if that was all I had to do to stay medication free, it was a small price to pay. When I wasn't panicking life was as clear as the thin, early morning ice on a puddle in late October. I wanted to believe that this time everything just might play itself out differently, this time I might be okay. After a while longer without any medicine I became prone to confusion. I started to believe I should get a job, which, in my state would have been disastrous.

Predictably, in classic form, the illness started taking over, day-by-day, week-by-week. People were starting to look me over strangely, I fancied, as if I'd just fallen from the sky and landed on *their* planet. Or maybe I'd tunneled my way up from the bowels of the ball of water, dirt and precious metals that was sustaining us all, and had somehow managed to tolerate the light of day. It depended on my mood. I was either a creature sent from heaven, half-angel, half-human or a hideous hell-dweller.

Things got worse. I slipped right into a psychosis and it wasn't like slipping on a banana peel and receiving a sharp, unexpected jolt, it was raspberry Jell-O between the fingers, so delicious, so all consuming. When what was left of the Jell-O that symbolized my sanity slipped through my fingers and landed on the floor, half liquid and full of dirt. I fell to my knees and ate. I was sick. I was alone. When I looked around from my place on the floor, I knew I had been lulled by my own foolishness into deep trouble. Then, I was acutely psychotic, grappling with the full-blown fall from grace that had crept up on me again.

I was physically sick, though not in the traditional sense. My problems were very much biological, though that would be a hard sell when you walked by me downtown and I bugged you, bumming change and smokes, conferring with myself and making you uncomfortable when I gesticulated wildly and without reason. It's hard to believe that a disease could make one act like that. To most people who passed me on the street I was an idiot, a waste, an annoyance, a persistent mosquito on a warm summer's night. To some I was an object of pity. I don't think I was, to anyone, a man suffering from an untreated biological brain disorder. I was though, a man suffering from an untreated biological brain disorder.

One day Joseph showed up at the home. I hadn't seen him in a long time, maybe twice in all the time since I'd moved. I figured we'd just drifted apart and I hadn't had a problem with that.

He looked at me squinty-eyed for a while and then said, "What? What are you looking at?"

I smiled and responded, "Just like you to want to play with my head, Joseph." I looked down though I didn't want to.

"I hear you're flippin' out or something," he said quietly, rubbing my shoulder caringly and giving me a light punch. I became alarmed for a moment because I didn't want anyone punching me, however lightly.

"Hey, Joseph, forget about me, what are you up to?"

"Well," he fished out his wallet and pulled two tickets out of it, "Phil Collins, Dec 6. It's called the One Neat Guy Tour." A pause ensued, then, "You know that's what you used to be, a neat guy. Now you're just being an asshole."

"Hey wait," I said as he started walking away, hands in his pockets.

"What."

"Who's Phil callin'?"

"What!"

"Who's he callin'?"

"Phil's callin' the planet earth," he responded, shaking his head, "he's looking for you."

I looked down at my shoes, dirty, greasy old shoes. I should get new ones, I thought, but right now I don't know where I put my money.

"Thanks, whoever you were." I said loudly, "You've made me feel dirty all over."

Later, I sat and wondered. Then, abruptly, I asked the empty room, "Who was that finger-pointer who was in my driveway? He told me he was Joseph but he wasn't. I know Joseph and that wasn't him. I think that was the guy from TV, the guy I used to communicate with by using telepathy. You bastards, whoever you are out there, watching, screwing up everything. What did you do with Joseph?"

Joseph was somewhere else. Though I wasn't overly fond of him, I began to sniffle a bit and there was a lament in my heart. I figured I had lost a friend and somehow it was my fault.

I ambled through the streets of my neighborhood. Why did it always become so horribly cold when I was without gloves? As time passed and I watched the sun slowly fall out of the sky, it got colder. I had pockets though, I was alright. I was going to find my friend. Well that was my intention but I abandoned the cause, gradually becoming absorbed in interpreting the street signs, what they meant and which way they would have me go. After going here and there until I was lost, I sat on a bench, not caring that it was snow covered.

I realized that I hadn't smoked a cigarette in a long time. Looking at a streetlight, as I had become convinced that I was so close to heaven that the streetlights were stars, I prayed that I would find a cigarette somewhere. When I found a half a pack in my shirt pocket my belief in miracles was given a hefty shot in the arm. I didn't get it at all. The fags had been in my possession all along but I believed that I had prayed to a streetlight/star and my prayer had been answered.

Eventually, beneath a deep, beautiful, dark sky, I found my way home and let myself in. I was laughing quietly. The house was still. Heaven had been fantastic, so full of warmth, wisdom and goodness. I would crash through the clouds though, Kingston's answer to Wiley Coyote. I would fall and puncture the earth's crust, my head in hell and my boots sticking out on earth, should some kind stranger cared to pull me from the heat and fetor.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

“We’ve been hearing that you may not be too well these days, Carmen.”

The woman speaking was not in any way striking however she was in possession of a fair amount of power and that gave her a certain allure. Then again I was in a frame of mind where even a Big Mac could have an aura about it. I began to wonder how many broad shouldered men were in a van parked nearby, listening to everything on hypersensitive surveillance equipment. I shrugged my shoulders. ‘Well’ was a relative term.

“No one here wants to hurt you, I think you know that,” she offered, preferring honey to vinegar to catch the fly.

I could have saved her some time and told her what any fool knows, that bullshit works best when it comes to flies, but I didn’t and she droned on, “We want to help you...” “We’re in your corner...” “Pulling for you...” “In this together...”

I spoke. “Dear people,” I began, “what you see before you, this man, me...well, I’m not what you think. I simply want to be the person God meant me to be. I...”

“Carmen,” someone else spoke, a woman with a raspy voice, “we all, believe it or not, understand what you’re going through. Not because we’ve been through it but because we’re trained to deal with it.”

“Listen,” I said, “I have somewhere to be. I really should go. You don’t mind do you? I think we’ve covered a good deal tonight.”

“You go now and you might as well pack your bags. Are we on the same page?”

“Can I sit down?”

“Yes, this isn’t a trial, please make yourself comfortable.”

“What are you reading?” I asked. Maybe my mind, I thought.

“Reading?”

“You said we were on the same page. ma’am.”

“I wasn’t referring to books and I think we both know that.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Don’t be smart.”

“No, ma’am.” Someone stifled their laughter.

“This meeting is about to end, we’re all busy people, too busy to play games,” declared the head lady. “Carmen, you go see your doctor within the next two weeks at the latest. Who is your doctor?” I told her and she made a note. “We are here to help you. If you cooperate we’ll do all we can. Now go, start taking your medication and make an appointment to see your doctor.”

“Yes, I will, I’ll do what you say,” I lied, “thank you, thank you all for coming.”

“Good-bye Carmen.”

“Goodbye, ma’am.” The ladies filed out and one smiled and winked as she left, which made my day.

Browbeating, coercion, bullying, these terms could be used in combination or could stand alone to describe what the women who ran the home had tried to do. I guess it worked as, even though I believed I’d won, I decided to do as I was told and called the office of the doctor who gave me my medication. The phone rang a long time until finally the receptionist answered. She growled at me. I was given an appointment for a week hence and tersely told to show up on time.

The last time I had seen my doctor he had told me he was disappointed in me, but, who wasn’t? I knew, though, that he’d seen people in worse shape than me. In my mind he and everyone else with my best interests in mind were seriously overreacting. He had wanted to know if I was taking my medication.

I answered evasively, saying, “Not regularly”.

“So you’re just here to roost, live in the homes until you wear out your welcome and then move on? Is that the plan?”

“The way you understand me doctor,” I replied, flippantly, “it makes everything worthwhile, you know?”

“Yes I know, Carmen. You’re using the system. What should I do about it?” I was tired of being threatened and stood up.

“Wait,” he said and held up his arm like a traffic cop.

“Yes, what,” I replied, suddenly tired and a little sad in a what-can-you-do kind of way.

“Just start taking your medicine and everything will be fine, you’ll see. Do you have enough or should I write you a prescription?” I looked at him and couldn’t figure out who was sorrier, him or me.

“I have lots of pills. Goodbye.” I left and as I was walking down the street I picked up a stone and projected it angrily in the direction of a telephone pole.

Why couldn’t he understand that Jesus didn’t want me to take the medication? Why couldn’t any of them understand that? I heard some laughter from behind a hedge thick with branches and a voice said, “Take the pills.”

Another voice from across the street said, “Yeah, take ‘em.”

My old roommate Bobby phoned a while after the head lady and her entourage had visited me. He was, he told me, leaving Kingston. It seemed that I wasn’t fully appreciative of what he was saying. In truth I didn’t know what to say. After weeks and weeks of no contact, he seemed to expect me to be shaken up.

His voice went up a few decibels and he said, "You don't get it do you?" and then, "We may never meet again."

I was dumbstruck, not sure of who he really was. Because of the sudden rush of emotion I thought he might be involved in the Hollywood scene, maybe an agent or a rock star high on drugs. I was contemplating this when the phone slammed in my ear. Definitely the Hollywood type, I thought.

He was such a miserable person, possessive and controlling to the degree that, even when I was stuck with the understanding of a rock, his attitude towards me made me uneasy. I didn't get angry, I simply thought, I suppose that's the way a Hollywood agent is.

When he left his secret went with him. Even when I was well enough to know him to a degree, I hadn't figured him out. When he had told me that he thought of men the way most men think of women, it should all have crystallized in an uneasy moment or two. He had been so angry when I was leaving our group home to live with Joe, Frank, Paul, and Brian. I pondered and puzzled over that but never quite figured out why he was so wound up.

It's been said that ignorance is bliss but in my case it came nowhere near, not even in the neighborhood. In the end, after I'd thought it over and knew what he was about, I shook my head disbelievingly. Was I to him as the blond haired barmaid had been to me?

I reneged on my pledge. I didn't start taking my pills again even though I had promised I would. At the head office, the department in charge of telling grown men and women what to do had confirmed that I had been to the doctor, which indeed I had. The doctor in charge of drugs and, if needed, electro convulsive therapy, believed I was taking my medication. I was all set to claim squatter's rights in some place psychotic, a fictional spot with its origins in my chemical makeup, but people talk, other people listen and word gets around.

It wasn't long after I thought I had everyone fooled that the cat clawed its way out of the bag; the jig was up, it was curtains for me. The doctor was on to me and so was the head lady. I became convinced I was going to be hospitalized and so I packed a small bag and left. Unfortunately I was going to have to hit bottom face first to see that there was any up.

I ambled and wandered and ambled some more, ending up in a mid-sized burg, in an all night store, in the middle of the night, sticking a can of sardines down my pants. I went into a donut shop, ordered a cup of hot water and ate the fish with my fingers.

I traveled a while longer and found myself wandering the midnight streets of a one-horse town. The snowy paths and avenues were deserted, a train sang in the distance. I was stuck in Disneyland, a mutant version of the famed carnival, something that would make Walter Disney shudder. Only I could see the rides and hucksters and vendors and only they could see me. The next day I would get a ride through Oz and later be dumped in purgatory. What was that other than highly accelerated confusion?

Like a cruel storm, I had left a mess behind me in Kingston. Not the kind of mess a regular storm of high intensity leaves, tree limbs, branches, dirt and dispossessed sections of newspapers that can be cleaned up in a thorough way, with a sense of purpose. No, what there was of the mess my disagreeable behavior had wrought – distrust, anger and bitterness would be swept into a pile and kept burning until it was ashes. Many folk who had been on my side would have little if any respect for me again.

For the time being though I wasn't concerned about all that, I was focused on the voices that were directing me here and there, on the phantoms I saw lurking around corners, in doorways, in the bare branches of trees silhouetted against the dark sky and floating in the smoke coming from a chimney.

That guy from the TV show "Eight is Enough", Tommy, was constantly in my mind and on my case, laughing because I had to beg just to get a smoke or something to eat. He laughed at me because I was freezing. My teeth would chatter and I would search out shelter while he would watch and deride me from where he rested in his Jacuzzi. I saw him clearly in my mind's eye and I began to hear his laughter ring out.

"Give my regards to Pierre," he said, lazily.

"Pierre?" I thought.

"Yeah," he answered, laughing, "Pierre True Dough, as in real money. We're all in this together. We have to keep you poor."

A rush of wind and snow carried the conversation away, no voices, only cold feet and colder hands.

Where did I sleep at night? I haven't even a blurry idea. Obviously, I didn't freeze; nevertheless, I know the nights were full of a strange brand of emptiness as I walked up and down streets that were destitute of traffic. The snow would swirl in the yellow halo of the streetlight. Everything would seem attainable and then hardly anything would seem so. Those were nights of bumming cups of hot water and getting out of the wind in parked cars.

I 'd believe that I was the rich person who lived wherever he wanted to and had whatever he wanted – I owned the town and I was out for a stroll. I was an athlete in training, a superstar in the making; everything I was living through was simply part of becoming tough enough to win. I was young, a child and I was being given a second chance. This time I knew what to do and what not to do. I spent my time talking to the only listening ear that took me seriously – the one attached to my head.

Eventually I grew tired of wandering and began the task of finding my way home.

I managed to find my way back to Kingston in a couple of days, bringing with me the smell of cold air and a grim case of the munchies. The cold shoulder with which I was greeted when I got back to the group home wasn't lost on me, but I put it on the back burner. It was much colder outside and, anyways, I was too busy to worry what the others were thinking. I was looking for anything resembling a victual, any morsel that I could lay claim to as mine.

Yes, it was warmer inside than out. The warmth was nice. The ruffled feathers inside would smooth out but outside the winds would continue to blow, making me want to run, cry and even laugh, laugh at everything and the way it all worked, laugh until I was crying, once again cold and frightened.

I had been unaware that it was nearly Christmas until someone asked me where I'd be spending it. I then realized why I had seen houses with their festive lights shining bright red, yellow, blue and green. The odd plastic Santa Clause and his entourage of hooped beasts should have tipped me off but, strangely enough, they didn't trigger any thoughts. The other

residents at the home were all going to be with their families. I'd be alone in the house for a few days, I was informed, and I was pleased because I figured I could pilfer some of the tastier food that wasn't mine. When I'd been foraging I'd found hardly anything that belonged to me, so, I was fairly hungry.

It seemed that I was barely warm – lots of hot showers under my belt and into my bones and some good sessions of hibernating in a warm bed – when the house was deserted and I found myself alone. As I ate the ice cream, jam, yogurt and such that I found, I realized that I wasn't really by myself. There were many ghosts, ghouls and phantoms right there in the house with me.

The whole jumble called madness had my undivided attention that Christmas. I was alone, there was no one to attempt conversation with, to bug or extract a chuckle from. My illness took center stage and it told me what I didn't necessarily want to hear, that is, that my time was long past due and that I would never again have a better chance to bring closure to this farce called life. It became an obsessive idea, persistent and in no way willing to take no for an answer.

Chapter Forty

The voices had brought it up and the more they recommended it the more I considered suicide as an alternative. The whole idea started to take me over. Will I be sprinkled on a favourite body of water, I wondered or placed six feet under, disappearing into my cavity for good, accompanied by cool, well groomed soil?

I scolded myself, putting myself down as a loser and a fool. I hit myself. Every time I'd berate myself I could hear amen's and halleluiahs bandied about, one voice to another. In spite of it all, I was strangely free of anxiety; rather a type of surety possessed me as though what I'd begun planning was the answer I'd been searching for. Over the course of a day or so, I came to believe that my last act should be that of submerging myself in the nearby lake, and then to wait on the shore until I was frozen stiff and no longer drew breath.

The day arrived for me to put my ghoulish plan into action. Brian had returned to the abode but Paul, Joe and Frank were still with their loved ones, though they'd been gone so long, the love was probably wearing a little thin.

It was New Year's Eve. I walked down to the water, a nondescript person who was out for a stroll on a cold and overcast day. I don't think any motorist driving by took any notice of me. If anyone did look my way they would have had absolutely no clue that I was going to do something as dismal and purposeless as trying to take leave of the planet before it was finished with me. I like to think that if any of those people had known of my plans they would have pulled to the side of the street and tried to persuade me that it just wasn't worth it, that I would upset my mother to a terrible degree and that my brothers might end up hating any reminders of me.

I stood by the black fluid, so essential to life, yet more than willing to help me snuff out mine. I smoked a cigarette and thought sadly that I wouldn't miss much, but that I would miss having a good smoke.

"Go ahead, go ahead." "It's painless." Terrible voices, I thought, suddenly stung by a little resentment and mildly reticent, I'll see you in another life and I'll have the upper hand. With that I walked into the cold water, up to my shoulders and turning walked back to the shore.

I took off my cowboy boots hurriedly. I was very partial to them and couldn't dump the water out of them soon enough. I put them back on and lay down to perish. Fifteen minutes passed and I didn't really feel like I was dying. Two men in conversation walked by, took a quick look and went on their way, their heads inclined to the ground. They didn't offer to help, after all, there were so many crazies running around courtesy of the insane asylum; anything could be expected and nothing should be taken too seriously.

A half an hour passed and I was cold, nothing else, just crisp and glacial. I wasn't floating out of my body; there was no bright, white light or warmth that beckoned me to a new and everlasting life of bliss. There was not a whisper of angels or the embrace of a long lost loved one I didn't even know, a being who'd been waiting for ages to commune.

After an hour I went home. It would just take too long lying there, sprawled out on my back, looking upwards and waiting for my spirit to float away. Just like damned near everyone else of

my generation I need instant gratification, especially when it came to offing myself.

After I took a long hot shower I went into the hole in the wall that was my room. There, where I had plotted my own conclusion, I sat on my bed and took a slow look around. A pile of clothes lay on the floor, shirt sleeves entangled with a sweater, socks and underwear peeking out from under an oversized pair of tan corduroy coveralls purchased at the thrift store for two dollars. A book on its spine stuck halfway out from behind the dresser. I reached an ashtray from the bedside table and set it on the mattress beside me. As I was lighting a cigarette my eyes fell on three pill containers, each with a month's supply of a psychotropic medication within. Without any prompting from the hallucinations, I knew what I had to do. I went and filled two large glasses with water. There were more than three hundred pills in the three jars and I gobbled them up.

Just a few seconds after every last pill and capsule was in my stomach, a voice said, "You've been waiting a long time to do that, haven't you?"

I uttered a frightened sigh as it registered clearly, for a brief moment that I was going to die, that I would be no more. Then for the second time that day, as my moment of clarity passed I lay down and waited to pass on.

Waiting to die is a funny thing. After a few minutes I was like an elephant that had finally found the burial ground he'd been searching for. I had the feeling that I had brought some kind of closure to the problem of my existence. I had solved the problem that nobody had been able to solve and the solution was nothing more than a feeling. Oh, that pretty, blond haired waitress, well, maybe in heaven. Wasn't Charlie Brown in love with a blond haired waitress? Maybe I'm going the other way from heaven. Ah, it's too late to worry about that, I don't feel scared in fact I think I'm happy. It's true; I was waiting a long time to do this. This world has been showing me the door since I was a teenager anyways.

I started having convulsions, wave after wave that I felt in my head more than anywhere else. I bit my tongue over and over. I struggled off my bed but my legs couldn't have supported the weight of a fly. I fell hard to the unforgiving floor. I managed to pull myself back onto the bed where I continued to convulse violently. Around this time I lost consciousness.

When I woke, the first thing I noticed were the tubes that seemed to be growing out of my arms. I looked at the rest of my body and it seemed to be okay. I didn't know where I was but I wasn't frightened. I noticed a circle over the left side of my chest and I heard a speaker squawk, "Dr. Robertson to room 404 please, Dr Robertson, 404."

A nurse approached my bed, a pretty nurse with attractive green eyes that were embellished by the way they caught and held the light.

"Hello," I croaked, "what happened to me?"

"You don't remember?" she asked, softly.

I adjusted my position in the bed and replied, "No."

"Well I'll find someone who can explain it all to you better than I can." And she was gone.

In a short while a self-important woman walked briskly into the room I was sharing with two older men, one of whom was bald. Wrapped in a sense of purpose and with a file folder under

her arm, she walked towards my bed.

“Well,” she said and my ears started to tweak, “we almost lost you.”

Why do we always assume that people like her can explain things better? I would much rather have heard it all from Miss Green Eyes. At least then, as what had happened was coming back to me and I was starting to think that I might possibly be dead, I could have believed I was in heaven.

I growled and scared both of us.

“Just what’s going on?” I shot the question at her, an arrow released from a taut bow.

She flinched, her cheeks turned red and she regained her composure in a barely perceptible millisecond. I found her self-assurance and presumed superiority maddening. She was hard to deal with and I was further vexed when it occurred to me that I was intimidated. Even though I sensed that her act was well rehearsed, I was cowed.

“Well, sir,” she went on, “you came this close to dying of a drug overdose.” She held her index finger and thumb together and rubbed them back and forth. I had to admit I’d never seen that one before and I really believed then that I was dead and in hell.

“What’s this on my chest, this ring?”

It turned out the ring had been left by some device that had been applied hastily, with the purpose of starting a heart that was not beating, that was as dead as the rest of me had been.

“Anything else?”

“No,” I replied. “I don’t want to know any more right now.”

What happened over the next few days was freakish. Throughout the first day I was still overtly psychotic. I could quite clearly see that both of the old men wore crowns. They were obviously royalty. I was being kept against my will. Though I could only swallow fluids due to the damage I had done to my tongue, I refused to ingest the juices, nutritional shakes or any other concoction whose aim was apparently to nourish and hydrate. As an enemy of the kingdom, I was obviously being poisoned.

When I woke on the second day I noticed the crowns on the two kings were fading – I could hardly see them but for the odd twinkle. I was hungry by lunch and drank a few shakes after which I remembered I was being poisoned. Oh yeah, right, I thought and shook my head. By supper I felt like myself when I was medicated.

I told the doctor this, the next day. I was examined and a psychiatrist asked me questions. The head doctor turned to the regular doctor, shrugged his shoulders and said, “He’s fine.” The next day I was transferred to the psychiatric ward.

I had swallowed enough medicine that I was well in three days rather than the thirty or so that it usually took to achieve some type of balance. It was a quick route to sanity, one I wouldn’t recommend to anyone.

I had bit my tongue so hard that I had to live on fluids for weeks. When I got home I was confronted by my bed sheets and pillowcase covered in blood that came from my tongue. The

stains seemed to accuse me, of what, though, I was never quite sure. It took some time after my return to the group home before I could fall asleep without my bedroom door being wide open. I needed the light from the living room. I needed the sounds of others and the drone of the TV. I may have been dead and that may have scared me, but, as sure as Neil Armstrong was the first man to do a jig on the moon, I couldn't shed one salty drop over it.

Chapter Forty-One

What can one possibly say to another who catches him in the act of trying to murder himself and saves his life?

“Sorry you had to see that.” or, “Get lost, you don’t want to understand.”

As matters turned out, I said very little, as could be my way when I’d crossed the line and harmed someone. When I was feeling guilty and depressed over “The Incident” those feelings showed themselves in the way I carried myself. The devil had me dead to rights and he wouldn’t let me forget.

Shoulders stooped, as though I was making a payment on a burdensome debt, I bought Brian a bottle. It was my way of saying, “Thanks, can you forgive me, can we pass the jug and forget about it?”

He was the one who’d found me, he was the one who, for reasons unknown to me, had ventured from his room in the basement where he spent most of his life and ascended the stairs, something he rarely did. When he heard me thrashing about, he looked in my room and was confronted by the problem I had with existence. He called the ambulance and was then forced to watch me convulse and bleed from the mouth while he waited.

For a long time after the incident, I felt very selfish. I felt wretched for having put Brian through the spectacle of my acting like a fish forgotten on a sandy beach by a fisherman who was over his quota. I imagined that he must have been afraid, wondering if I was going to die right there in front of him. I was a strong candidate to go away for good with nothing but a grunt, a sob and a malodorous mess in my pants left behind for him to ponder. I felt like a creep, for all the right reasons.

After a time the new antidepressant I had been instructed to take began to work. I started to forget or at least I lost the desire to continually lambaste myself. It wouldn’t be too long until I moved out of the group home, wherein I felt obliged to tiptoe around, cringing every time I made the floor creak.

I was embarrassed, but told myself that people do foolish things when they are mentally ill. Generally, besides being red faced I was feeling well. The medicine was working properly for a change and under its influence; I decided to try to find a job. I enlisted the aid of an employment agency that helped people like me, free of charge. I wasn’t optimistic; rather, I was convinced that they would probably be about as able as anyone else in helping me. To my surprise, despite the pungent ill will that radiated from me the first day I entered the job bank, the people who worked there weren’t half as bad as I thought they’d be.

I envied their normality. I was jealous because I was sure not one of them needed a daily handful of chemicals to help them fit in. I thought that they were lucky men and women.

My worker turned out to be a great guy to talk to. Over the span of a few weeks, we must have exhausted just about every topic that people usually toss around. I’d been missing someone like that. He helped me feel interesting and then he found me a job. I put away my animosity

and promised not to tell anyone that he loved to smoke pot and was stoned at work most of the time.

On my first day at the delicatessen, my boss pulled me aside. “Did you hear about the guy in New York who tried to book a suite for New Year’s Eve 1999, in a hotel they haven’t even finished building?”

“No,” I replied, ready to laugh no matter how lame the punch line was.

“Good,” he said, “you’ll fit in just fine around here. Go back to work and don’t take any shit.”

I walked away thinking, what was that all about? Later when I thought about it, I had to admit it was all very funny, in a confused kind of way.

I worked hard at the deli. There was a butcher shop in the back and that was where I could usually be found, the head gopher by default. Clean the meat lockers, you forgot fresh sawdust, put that meat and those veggies on those skewers and don’t tell me about your crushed vertebrae and how your back hurts, grab that meat off the meat hook, that’s it, we’ll make a man out of you yet, oh, and don’t forget to sand the block when Joe leaves. I loved it; I thrived there and I had more money than I needed.

Gradually, day-by-day, work was giving me a pleasing sense that, in my own obscure way, I was useful. I’m like everyone else, I would think, except that I’m held together by pharmaceuticals. To think, I would muse, if I don’t take the medicine I’m no more than an animal who doesn’t even know his own name.

Eventually, having had more than enough of walking on eggshells, I moved into my own place, an apartment that was ridiculously low priced for what I was getting. I wanted to tell people that my apartment was someone’s tax write-off but I didn’t know what that meant and didn’t want to expose myself for the ignoramus that I was. In that apartment, I would live with a French woman for a number of weeks masquerading as a very long time.

There, in that apartment, I would eventually lose my mind and go on a long journey trying to find it and nurse it back to health. I would leave town in the dead of night with what I could carry and would throw it all away as I floundered and staggered my way to the highway.

“The voices are right,” I would speak aloud, as the icy wind blew spiky snow in my face, “I don’t deserve anything.”

I wouldn’t blame Marie, the woman I was to live with but her ways certainly didn’t help. A master of understatement would say she was a little off the wall. A straight shooter would say that she was a poison, to me.

Desensitization through drugs didn’t appeal to Marie, nor did the anesthetized world of the drunk. She liked to shoplift here and there. It gave her a kick. She had an enormous sexual appetite; so big and robust that one man couldn’t possibly satisfy her. Her needs were so great that, after I had been with her awhile I began to find her unattractive, though she was physically, a fetching woman. Of course, as luck would have it, at some point during the time I fancied myself in love and Marie was still desirous, I found myself engaged to her.

Marie had introduced herself to me at the hospital. She asked me to come and visit her and I agreed. We talked – she had a son, had given birth when she was sixteen. She had manic

depression and was being stabilized after having quit treatment with lithium.

“I’m a schizophrenic,” I told her as though that was all that defined me. I saw a pretty face and heard an accent that made me stupid with yearning.

“What’s your name, what should I call you?” she asked.

“I’m Carmen,” I told her and smiled a smile that seemed to just keep growing.

“Come back tonight,” she said, and I, stupefied by enchantment, feeling the holes loneliness had dug in my person filling with possibilities, agreed to do so.

That night we walked around the ward. There wasn’t much to see there but we were stuck. She could go no farther than the locked door at the end of the hall that needed either a button pushed or a large key inserted to let anyone on or off. She was confined to Ward 15 until her doctor said otherwise.

Going past her dormitory, she looked in. It was empty. “Wait here,” she whispered, and walking in she left me at the door. When she’d gone a short distance, she turned around and pulled her shirt up.

“What do you think of these,” she asked.

What could I say – “Not bad but I’ve seen better – “ I’m not sure, could you turn sideways?” - “Well if it wasn’t for all the blue veins...”

I said what any young, red-blooded, heterosexual male would say when confronted by an attractive woman’s breasts. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen nicer breasts in my life.”

At this point, I didn’t know where our little friendship was going, but I know where it nose-dived and exploded – in my apartment where I found myself holed up with a mad woman. If on that first day I’d had half a clue as to where it was all going, I would have started running and never stopped. I seemed to do a lot of running, I know, but in a not too distant future, a while after Marie, I would finally turn and face the biggest problem I’d ever encountered – my sickness.

Around the time that I’d first met Marie, I was offered full time employment at a store that sold carpet, paint, wallpaper and the like. After mulling it over, I accepted and gave two weeks’ notice at the deli where I only worked fifteen to twenty hours a week.

My boss followed me around singing, “You’re gonna miss me lover.”

Oh well, I figured, I suppose Greek men are like that, emotional and all. Sometimes I could have sworn I’d hurt his feelings while at others I thought I’d probably offended him.

At the deli, you were always busy; something always needed to be done. At my new job I sat around half the day listening to some crusty old guy who worked there and managed to heap scorn on just about everything that happened after 1950. He was missing half of his fingers and I figured that was what made him so sharp and discourteous. That didn’t make him any easier to listen to.

I sat there and pined for the industrious atmosphere of the job I’d left while the old guy jabbed a nonexistent finger at the air to emphasize his point about the laziness of youth and the total lack of respect they had for just about everything, the poor quality of modern day automobiles,

the evil of television, stoned drug addicts lounging in doorways, the way the weather had changed for the worse, how you couldn't get a decent tomato anymore, the cheek of Wayne Gretzky, single mothers and so on until I learned to tune him out, grunting and nodding when appropriate.

The days passed and I became increasingly convinced that I had been hired to listen to one of the boss' mildly senile relatives. At any rate, whether the old man was related to the boss or not, I ended up as his sounding board all too often.

Marie and I had been together about a month. She'd been deemed ready to take on the big, bad world. They were getting set to discharge her from the institution. We were both sad that she would be going back to the northern town from which she hailed, sad that is until she realized that the tears of sorrow we were set to tread water in would dry up if she moved in with me for a while. I thought it over for five seconds before agreeing. I you could elongate those five seconds and give them a voice I'm sure they would have said clearly and with some force; bad idea, abort, abort, abort. However, who pays attention to five seconds. We were in love.

It was agreed then. As I carried her suitcase, I looked at Marie shaking everything God had given her as she made her way to the taxi. God had been kind to Marie.

She's practically my wife, I thought, I mean we're going to share the same bed, the same can. She's going to cut her toenails at the supper table, I can tell that; she'll probably use my razors too. The way she strutted her stuff was a bit disconcerting, not the least bit alluring because I knew it was meant for the benefit of the cabbie who leered while I struggled with her bag. As I heaved it into the trunk, you could say my spirits drooped or even, that my heart was sore. I could picture our life together being filled with greasy men knocking on the door and saying, "Oh, sorry, man. She didn't tell me she was married. C'mon guys, let's go."

I'd never lived with a woman before, virtuous or otherwise and I tried to hide the agitation that plunging in head first with Marie was causing me. Would I be able to soak in the tub and read or would she be in there washing my back all the time. Would I be able to fall asleep on the couch or would she have the TV blaring? Would she insist on feeding me when I wasn't hungry? Who would handle the money and who would do the shopping? What about the hockey games on television, would I be able to take them in, in peace?

Why am I doing this, I wondered? I hoped everything would go well, yet I knew almost beyond a doubt, almost as certain as gray skies bring rain, beavers dance when you sing to them and fluffy hair would be there to greet me in old age, that I was going to have my heart broken. She was just too damned loose. I should have clued in the first day when she bared her soul and then, bared herself. Still, I couldn't let go.

We were in Woolworths a week or so later, Marie was looking at the costume jewelry and I was absently looking at her. I didn't stare at her as though she was an exotic plant anymore, I just stared without knowing it, until she would laugh and ask me what I was looking at.

"Stand over here a bit," she said.

"What?"

“Over here, over here, you’ll see.” I did as she requested and watched as she started dropping stuff into her purse – fake diamond rings, fake sapphire earrings set in fake gold, a fake silver bracelet.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” I hissed through clenched teeth, certain that we would be talking to the police before too long and that she would probably try coming on to them.

“Let’s go,” she said, laughing.

“Yeah,” I said miserable, “I’m all for that.”

I was able to control my anger until we were out of the store. By the time we had walked a while and I was sure we were safe, I wasn’t mad anymore. I just couldn’t understand why she wanted to see life through the eyes of a petty thief.

Marie was never detected as a shoplifter, nor I her unwilling accomplice. I fast grew leery any time it looked like she wanted to enter a store and always tried to keep her from going into one to browse. I was starting to realize that her sickness was a little different than I’d thought. She was not some little puff of magic that needed my protection, no; she often made *me* feel as though I was the one who was utterly helpless.

Not only was she a shoplifter, she turned out to be a horribly aggressive flirt, a part of her nature that I had a great deal of trouble with. What, I wondered, is she up to when I’m at work? I started to get nervous whenever we were going somewhere. I started getting anxious at work as well, wondering who was sleeping in my bed. I was being held to my promise to marry her by her and her family, a group of people in which every second person seemed to have an identifiable form of mental illness. We had the marriage license and the rings were bought and paid for at Woolworths. Go ahead and laugh. May you never be me.

The big day approached.

We were expecting our disability cheques and figured on some time shortly after that for the surgery at the Office of the Justice of the Peace. There they were going to graft together two without anesthetic, making one that was part me, part Marie.

I decided, as I watched Marie all but copulate in a bus shelter with some poor guy who just wanted to catch his bus that the J.P. was going to have a hard time making one of two because there just weren’t going to be two. When I get my cheque, I promised myself, I’m out of here. My main problem, as I started to feel the sting of being next to nothing in her eyes, was that I had really loved Marie.

We didn’t talk much after that day. The way she’d been behaving towards a stranger, who just wanted to be left alone, was the last straw. I’d finally had enough. A few days later, I quit my job and thereafter spent my days at the hospital. I stopped sleeping with her and stopped taking my medication too. I guess, beneath any bravado I could muster, I was pretty shaken up. I had no idea just who she’d been with.

Once we argued and she threatened to have sex with a friend of mine who happened to be in our home that evening.

“You want me, don’t you?” she asked while he sat strangely stiff in one of our saggy, droopy living room chairs.

She knocked a lamp over and stormed out. He told just who she’d been with later that night, that she’d been with just about all of my ‘friends’, in the basement of the hospital of all places.

You name it she tried it; anything to rattle my nerves. I started to think that she hated me.

Chapter Forty-Two

Road weary in Edmonton; hadn't I done this before? Perhaps neither with such haste, nor with such a mind-boggling war zone left behind. I walked the familiar, gritty, western streets. The pavement underfoot seemed to have a certain give to it, it accommodated my weary footsteps. This time around the cityscape was comforting, yet I didn't take that for granted as Edmonton had turned on me in the drop of a hat before.

I wanted to celebrate my freedom from Marie with a strong drink of whiskey chased with a beer. I wanted good music and to drink and smoke, but the bars were yet to open their doors to those who liked to drink in the morning. I walked and then I called my brother. He was surprised to hear from me. He hadn't expected me, yet there I was, his unstable and needy sibling, intent on visiting and sharing a story of misery with him and his wife.

I showed up with enough grease in my hair to oil several rusty bicycle chains and an odour, I fancied, that could have landed me a job in the advertisements as a hard won convert to the virtues of deodorant. My whiskers rounded out the whole picture, making me look as dirty as I felt. Even before I'd left Kingston, I had not really been looking after myself.

Nevertheless, I was back in the Promised Land. Thank the Gods in charge of beating a hasty retreat, it wouldn't be necessary to get back on the bus for a good long while. Or so I thought.

It had taken me over half a week to reach the city in which, at one point I had known considerable discomfort, in which I'd found myself sitting on the grass of a downtown park, dazed and incapable of much in the way of movement. I had then been like a swatted fly that's not quite dead.

After my brother had talked me into a shower, I spent much of my first day in his company spinning fearsome tales for the sake of him and Katy. At some point, as I, with perhaps a little too much mustard, poured my broken heart out from one of the cracks in it and obscenely bared what was left of my soul, my father phoned and without much ado told me to haul ass back to Kingston. I was, dutifully, back on the greyhound bus the next day, feeling this time like a fly in October, bedazzled and stupid.

I was a few hundred miles from Kingston, the town in which my whole voyage had begun, the place I had run from screaming. The guy who was beside me, turned my way and asked, "Do you know how the band Lynyrd Skynyrd got their name?"

"Huh?"

"Where they got their name, you know, what people call them."

"No," I replied, because I couldn't think of anything else to say.

"Well, it seems the guys in the band had a gym teacher who always told them they'd never amount to anything. The teacher's name was Leonard Skinner. The band modified his name, took it as theirs and the rest is history."

"Yeah," I said, "that's weird."

“I’m just telling you that because you look like you believe people when they tell you that you won’t amount to much. Don’t listen to them.”

“Thanks, man,” I said, “thanks for caring.” He was sloppy in the head too, I could tell. He insisted on shaking my hand for far too long and his grip was limp and clammy.

I turned from him and thought of Kingston, home of the government hospital and my zany fiancée. I wondered at my father who was convinced that was where I belonged, in and out of an institution in an institutional town. As I thought of the past few weeks, I thought that I might spew battery acid if someone pierced me. I had once again been separated for far too long from my medicine.

When that snake of a vehicle finally pulled into Kingston I was a snake’s child, tired, with a mean eye watching, ready to apply venom to anything that looked the least bit menacing. I was more than angry. My wrath had been contained over the trip and so it had managed to build up and intensify to the point that, now that the trip was over, I was frothing-at-the-mouth furious.

Could anyone tell me why this town was one of the few and perhaps the only one in which I was being told, not asked, to believe I would ever belong? What made it so all-fired great, besides the warehouse for lunatics down the road? Who was my dad anyways? He was just a guy whose hormones had been impossible to control, who had to pay the piper for being human, every time he thought of me.

That was how I was seeing it all as the elongated van, short on love, packed tight with misery, indifference and poorly disguised nastiness pulled into the terminal with a sigh. I had no remorse for my thoughts. Let me take the stand in my own defense. I don’t know anyone who could travel for days on a bus, get off for a day and a bit, go back from whence he came in the same fashion and disembark as rosy, jovial and full of good cheer as Santa Claus in a snowstorm. In fact, if I knew anyone like that I think I’d write him off as ever having been an acquaintance, or at least regard him dubiously for a time. Yeah, I was grim.

I walked to a nearby tavern and had a nice tall glass of beer. It cooled my throat and my temper. After two glasses and a third on the way, I mumbled, “Sorry, Dad,” under my breath.

Not long after voicing my regret to a man who didn’t really think I was capable of having a thought, let alone a bad one about him, I remembered I had to deal with the woman who would have been my bride. I didn’t feel bad about having stood her up; after all, she’d destroyed me by being on a mission to have a go with any male in town that was in possession of a pulse. Facing her was an obligation, something I had to do for myself, not her. I didn’t believe that I owed her anything, not an apology nor an explanation. I left the bar a little tipsy.

The showdown took place the very day I arrived back in town. It didn’t quite happen the way I had envisioned it would. I suppose I should have been ready for something from her that would be tactless and minimize any role I had played in our relationship, but I wasn’t. I’m quite sure that I was a person she had cared for and I’m equally confident that within a day of my leaving I was, in her mind, gone, nothing more or less. By the time I reappeared, I was simply a fading memory or perhaps, I didn’t even exist anymore. It sounds harsh, but she knew that most every guy has an appendage that clouds his judgment to one degree or another. If I

didn't want to play dead while she stepped on me, she'd take what she could carry and walk away. She'd find some other sap to lead around, a fool for her who, like me, would end up thinking he should have known better.

When I got home to my apartment and let myself in the door I was unconcerned, not in the least worried about whether she'd be there or not. All was quiet, not too quiet, not sinister, but pleasantly hushed as though in awe of my wanderlust and me. Having found the place empty though, I admit to playing detective, checking for recent occupation by touching the kettle – no, it wasn't hot. I couldn't help myself and ran my hands over the bed sheets to see how recently they'd been soiled. When I realized what I was doing, I was repulsed, I mean, it really wasn't that important. Remember, I told myself; she is a person you once cared for. A man deceived can be a touch indelicate. I really have to bring closure to all this in an appropriate way, I thought, in a way that minimizes the pain and bother for both of us. I lay down to rest.

I was finding my way into a slipshod, alcohol induced slumber when noises on the stairs brought me around and for some reason I smiled widely. I realized that I still loved her but I knew it could never happen, it would never work. I heard a key turning this way and that and knowing that she was the only one besides me who could gain admittance by working the lock, I reclined quietly, becoming still, scarcely moving lest I give myself away. I heard two people talking. Who was she with? Were they here to use the bed? Thinking thus I grimaced and wished I could stop thinking she had the brain of a man and therefore would often be found thinking of only one thing. Then, with her track record, I thought and then the thought faded as their conversation came more sharply into focus.

I listened as the two of them talked, Marie and another woman, speaking French. I strained but couldn't understand anything at all of what they were saying, not a word. I didn't know what they were doing either. I grew tired of lying there, passively eavesdropping on their unintelligible conversation. I walked out of the bedroom and caught Marie with a bag of rice in her hands. She clutched it to her chest, looking guilty at being caught in the act. Her sister was foraging amongst the cutlery and paid me no mind whatsoever.

"Well, well, look who's back. Did you get your hair cut?" That was Marie for you, acting as though I'd just been downtown for the afternoon.

"What the hell are you doing with the rice," I snarled and immediately felt ridiculous for snarling.

"It's mine," she replied, holding the bag tighter as though I was going to tear it from her, rip it from her hands and run through the streets, arms and rice held high, the victory won.

"Ah, keep the stupid rice," I muttered, "What else have you taken?"

As I went from room to room, it became apparent that I'd been pretty well stripped bare. Dishes, ashtrays, chairs, even my record player and stereo speakers were gone.

"Get out, thieves," I said loudly and with enough serious intent that the two sisters went quickly, taking my rice and God knows what else with them, in their pockets.

Later that evening the phone rang. It was Marie. "Listen," she purred, "I'm not staying too far from you. I'm at my cousin's. If you want to see me, call me first. I love you."

She gave me her phone number and address. I couldn't believe anyone could be so brazen; nonetheless, I tucked the slip of paper, on which I'd scrawled the particulars of her living arrangements, into a pocket in my wallet.

Chapter Forty-Three

I only saw Marie a few times after that. I was starting to settle into a condition that will one day be easily and humanely remedied, that will be short lived and stigma free. I was starting to lose my grip. I was once again entering psychosis. This was to be my last foray into that flabbergasting state of being. It was so frustrating to be that way. Way at the back of your mind there is a very small voice telling you that you took a wrong turn a while back, that things aren't the way you're seeing them.

“Get help,” it says and then the voice is swallowed up by garish delusions that make your heart beat too fast and fill you with strange explanations for everything curious under the sun.

Yes, I was going strange one last time. No longer domestic, a little wild, and somehow unable to see it. All too soon I would finally “understand”, that is I would be illumined by delusion and I would know the reason behind the rhyme. I would mourn for all the years I had been kept in the dark. I once again would come of age – I would know that the guy named Bob that I had grown up with, ‘my brother’, really was Jesus. My father was a United State senator and he had discarded my mother. I was being chased by a mind control cult. I was an angel; I was a demon, a movie star, rock star, and a cat. I was a tree and a stone imbedded in a wall. I was rich and I was poor, cold, hungry, drunk and sober. Bags of garbage were filled with treasure. Yes, I was rich beyond words and waited for a man with a briefcase to walk up to me and end the abject poverty that had hold of me. One minute I was a king the next I was a toothless, 16th century commoner, a stereotype of everything base, vulgar and disgusting to those who really were royal. Oh, how they hated me, the pretender to the throne, an imposter who nonetheless had a following. License plates could give me the lay of the urban landscape, informing me as to which streets were sympathetic to someone who had all of a sudden time traveled from the 16th century to the 20th century courtesy of God. Of course, there were others like me. If I walked up to the man on the corner and borrowed a dollar, I would be given instructions on how to meet them. I was to be murdered. I was a woman. I was a genius and a fool. I lived alternatively in heaven and hell. I was a world famous painter. I communed with the dead and all the demons in hell loved me because I dared to. I was Satan's ashtray and I saw Jesus in the donut shop smoking a cigarette. I wasn't sick. Those who said I was only wanted to harm me. On and on it went, thankfully, for the last time. I would turn and face my illness when this bout was over.

From where I eventually found myself, on a cot in the storeroom of a rooming house, with a month's worth of medication in my system, I would accept the strong presence of schizophrenia in my life. I would admit that I needed medication and from then until now, a period of twenty-five years, I have never considered missing even one day's dose. If I forget my pills, as sometimes happens, I do not double up on my dose, but go back to my regular schedule. These days, I'm as close to a cure as I can hope to be and I have to say that the key to my about-face was acceptance.

Acceptance of one's plight can be difficult and painful. Be it a job you have to stick with to put food on the table, a straying wife or, in my case, a chronic sickness that's always lurking in the bushes, acceptance can be a difficult and disagreeable task.

I've written with my heart on my sleeve on matters I believe I know something about. The act of recording some of the curious experiences I had trouble letting go of, has allowed me to do just that. To a degree I've forgotten. We all have our methods; whether we search them out or just happen upon them, we all have a means to escape, to forgive ourselves and move on. No one method is better than any other, as long as you don't injure others in your journey towards acceptance of a person with an existence as valuable as any.

No matter how hard it seems no one should give mental illness the right to run their life. I regret the years I wasted, the giving in that was my daily lot in life. When I understood that I possessed ways unique to me with which I could fight throwing my life away, I realized that my unusual vantage point is but part of the whole that makes me unique. This uniqueness was something I learned to work around and then became something to celebrate. My impediment is only a part of who I choose to be.

If you are mentally ill, you can and should reward yourself for even the smallest steps forward – getting out of bed while it's still morning, taking your medicine as prescribed, keeping an appointment when you really feel just too tired to go or encouraging another who is having a hard time. Eventually the small things add up and you may find yourself in a state where you're recounting your blessings rather than cursing your rotten luck.

There is always someone who has it worse than we do. We know this because we hear about them all the time. Anyone who believes they are the only person who suffers in this life has to have been trapped under a rock and had absolutely no contact with the world around them, had no one with whom to converse barring the odd worm or a bug with legs too numerous to count.

If you feel isolated and alone, should you choose to come out from beneath the rock that is distinctly yours, you'll find that with new medicines being employed these days and even better ones on the way, your suffering is a barrier you can quite possibly get around and do so to a fair degree. You owe it to yourself, to those you love, and to those who love and care for you, to try, to aim at wellness and all the benefits that go with it.

As for me, I believe I have greatly bettered my odds of accepting the way things are in my head and going forward by ignoring the counsel that I was given at the age of eighteen, the age of my diagnosis.

When I was diagnosed I was counseled that it would be best for all if I had little concern for romantic entanglement. If I wished to be all that I could be, I would be fairly wise to concern myself with my own plight and subscribe to Playboy. Above all, I must keep my existence as uncluttered as possible. Of course, not all advice is good and we all have the right to choose, to trust our intuition, particularly if it is behaving sensibly, and to take to heart words that seem right and are encouraging, for we may quite possibly need them along the way.

So, ignoring the advice I was given, I became a slut who dated whenever possible, even though I was clearly told I shouldn't. In some ways my obstructor was right. I had my heart broken more than once, but the last time I checked that was part of life, or at least a distinct possibility! Why should I be exempt? Not only did I date, I actually committed an unthinkable normal and in my case, almost unnatural act. I got hitched. Sometimes one should be a little careful when it comes to whom one accepts advice and encouragement from! This being said,

my wife is in no way a trophy in the sense that she is much more than walking proof that I can do things that those in charge told me I couldn't.

I love my wife and she loves me. It's that simple. I'm human and so is Sue; we're both endowed with the capacity to give and receive love, to enjoy tenderness and intimacy. Why should we be denied these great and wonderful silver linings lurking about the dark clouds that hover ever near?

Sue suffers with the same illness that I do. In less than a year we will celebrate our twenty-second anniversary. We anticipate sharing old age and its aches and pains with one another and I would expect, being laid to rest beside each other. Still, as my wife will point out, sometimes with eagerness and liveliness that makes me a mite uncomfortable, marriage for us is not always easy.

Thanks to modern medicine, we only have to deal with muted symptoms of our illnesses as opposed to being warehoused in an institution in a state of permanent and utter derangement. We are spared from being unable to make sense of anything. Still, sometimes neither one of us feels too good; our respective illnesses can make life miserable, especially when they fight with one another.

Of course, there was no certificate attached to our marriage license granting us immunity from other more mundane problems of matrimony, those nasty moments that are common to any marriage, no matter how well they may be hidden. We argue and fight at times; we feel misunderstood by the other, we get mad. We've yelled and acted otherwise poorly, we've graciously apologized and we've swallowed our pride for the sake of making up.

Sometimes, because we both have leanings that can make life seem bleak and pointless, it can seem like we're alone. When we look around realistically it often seems we really only have each other to turn to for compassion, that there's only one warm body close at hand that understands, that really tries to care and will issue the hug we are often in no small need of.

We have to possess, on some level, a measure of selflessness, we have to listen and bite our tongues while our own sickness is biting us, we must try to put the other first and in so doing sometimes we end up feeling better ourselves, and, sometimes not. Our willingness thus far, to put the other first, especially when they are out of sorts, may help our marriage work where others unfortunately fail. This is all very well and good, but, every now and then, like anyone else, we have to clear the air when we realize it's taken on the static of a week's worth of electronic heat in a biting cold snap in January and reeks of a thousand cigarettes smoked out of boredom and indifference.

Sue was diagnosed eons ago as having schizophrenia. She has a hard time on dark days. She is a kind and giving person who wears bright, vibrant colours. She's not given to being judgmental, nor is she a selfish person. She prays and usually fights her battles quietly. Though she wears lively colours, I think she looks great in darker shades and in this, she will indulge me from time to time. Her hearing has faded over the years, possibly because she's heard all of my stories more than once.

Our beginnings are a bit strange and from my view, a bit, tongue-in-cheek funny. Really, I don't like having fun at the expense of another, but sometimes that's just the way things slip into place.

I had known the guy who first introduced me to my wife-to-be and considered him, in my more benevolent moments, to be an oddball acquaintance, someone whose life happened to overlap with mine. It was unavoidable; we ran in some of the same circles. He'd been bullying me for ages; I never knew what to expect from the guy, he'd be your long lost pal one day and convinced that you had been scandalizing him behind his back the next. He even went so far as to try to make me leave a bar one night, simply enough, telling me to, "Get out." Of course, I refused. When he and his buds got up to shoot pool I drained their beers and then I left, in search of some bushes to sleep behind, for I was hopelessly homeless. Though he was a bit volatile for my tastes, through no conscious effort he burrowed out a little piece of my heart that he and only he can occupy. If he knew he was domiciled within me, rent-free, with an endless lease he would, I'm quite sure, try to give two months notice and leave with a snarl. But, I'll always know him as the guy who introduced me to my Sue, so, I'm stuck with him.

Sue was attached to Randolph when we all got together for the first time, attached but not seeming very happy about it. He was shameful towards her; always sure she was running off to be with someone else as soon as he looked the other way and so forth. In the end she had to tell him, in a nice way, to take a hike.

When we met on the street a few months later and conversed, the only thing we had in common was our acquaintanceship with Randolph. With him as an unwitting springboard, not to mention the butt of a few jokes, we became friends.

Sue was living in a group home around the corner from the mildly squalid, warmish and homey little bachelor apartment in which I lived. In the dead of winter we would get together at my place. She would arrive, cheeks red from the cold though the walk was a short one, boots off at the door, rubbing her hands together and smiling.

"Cold, isn't it," I would offer as I went to put the coffee on. "Not really," she'd reply and I would remark inwardly that she possessed a hearty soul.

In the beginning I valued the friendship that sprang up between us and I believe she did as well. Neither of us was really looking for anything more than companionship, a friend who would brighten the restless depression of short winter days and dwarf the long, coal-black nights when the even the whispering cold sought refuge, seeping through any crevice, chink or crack available, always searching in and around my windows and door.

For my part, I had virtually given up on romantic entanglements of any stripe. When I found myself becoming attracted to Sue, I tried to douse the flame that was a maddening trick candle from the novelty store; every time I thought I'd extinguished it, it reappeared. As we grew to know each other better my feelings became stronger and any attempt to squelch them became more like dousing a fire with gas.

We grew closer and eventually we went from being friends to being great friends who were always together and, as is known to happen you could say we became even friendlier, closer – the finest of friends you could say. We jumped feet first into romance and became an item.

There was a guy I knew who I lent fifty bucks to when he was, apparently, hard up. I shook my head and laughed when I saw him, a few hours later, stagger by my place with a case of twelve bottles of beer, not the first for him and his buddies I guessed by the way he swayed and floundered. A few days later when I met him in the park he mentioned he'd have the ten

dollars he owed me within a few days. I laughed a bit and let him off the hook for the money. He had then insisted repeatedly, as he slapped me on the back and shook my hand, that I was good people.

Later, as being one for whom money means little, I chuckled and thought, Maybe I've found something with Sue that could stand the test of time, something lasting, maybe the Good People Fairy is favouring me. Be she fuzzy or striped, perhaps she makes it her business to reward "Good People." At any rate, I suppose I'd fallen in love again as I often felt during those days as though I had located a field of sweet, four leaf clover and was perpetually reclining therein, at peace with the happy buzzing of the bees, without a care in the world.

Friendship to relationship to partnership, this natural progression eventually led us as if it were benevolently boxing our ears, to sit across from one another and talk about what it would be like if we lived together. It was actually a short-lived discussion, there wasn't much to say; it had already been said. We were becoming as serious as my lost fifty bucks would have been to a miser, pleasantly devoted to one another. We two wanted to occupy one space, one dwelling, we wanted to fall asleep together and wake up seeing the other when we first opened our eyes on a new day full of possibilities. So that is what we did and we've never lived apart since.

The night before Sue moved into my bachelor apartment I lay on my couch and couldn't help, once again, remembering the words of authority: "Forget about dating. The chances of finding a compatible mate are slim for you and it would not be worth your while to look."

Whoever it was that said that, well, that's irrelevant, though it is a bit disconcerting as he was a mental health professional. What I saw was that he'd been dead wrong. I was living proof that he was wrong, that men with schizophrenia could give and receive love. Hell of a thing to tell a teenager, I thought as I reclined in contemplation and I gave the provider of such advice, who actually gets paid for doing so, the Bronx cheer.

The next day I sat and waited, wondering what the future held. Would we continue to get along or would we tire of one another, get on each other's nerves, squabble over the last scrap of food in the fridge and whose turn it was to do the dishes? Was she a runaround? I didn't think so, but you never knew. I wanted to protect myself, but from what? She'd shown me nothing but kindness; she'd been gentle and caring.

I helped her with her green suitcase that had the look of one that had seen a few miles and the few boxes that held her earthly goods as we began a life together that I don't think either of us dreamed would be going strong more than twenty years later, most of it lived as husband and wife.

Walking to the Beer Store with my friend Stirling was pleasant. Spring, having laughingly chased winter away with a flexible green sapling was everywhere, and I could reach into my pocket and finger the money there, enough to pay for all the beer you and your cronies could possibly drink in a night. Stir and his girlfriend were going to put a few back with Sue and me. I was in a good mood, bubbling over with unselfishness and other pleasant feelings. I was in love and the beer was on me, even though I knew that drinking with my friend would leave my pockets feeling pretty light the next day, that is to say, he had a wonderful tolerance, the more he drank the more laid back and kindly he became. It's hard to not cater to a guy like that, you just want to make sure he's always holding a cold one and bending his elbow.

As we sauntered I told him that, though it had only been four months or so, I'd finally, just when I was really about to give up, found the one I'd been waiting for. It was crystal clear to me. I was happy and wound tight in giddiness that made me want to propose in a hurry. I was excited and frightened at the same time. Though I was still in possession of my senses, sometimes I couldn't tell elation from fear, the physical symptoms of each were strangely similar.

I was escorted from a room in the back of the church along with my best man who happened to be my younger brother, Bill. While we had waited to be thus led and every reason to flee danced in my head, I'd stared at the Bible for a while before realizing that it was upside down. I was getting antsy and a wee bit tense.

Before long we were standing in front of the crowded church and I couldn't for the life of me stop looking around. I was tormenting myself, more nervous than I'd ever been. Still I fully believed that I was entering into something that would serve me very well. My eyes were white, blue and black, in perpetual motion. I wish now that I could have relaxed enough to enjoy it all, every moment.

As we watched the video the next day, my brother-in-law kindly remarked that I looked as though I was expecting the cops to bust in at any time.

It seemed as though I was left up front making a spectacle of myself for an unusually long period of time. Then my bride walked towards me, began to make her way down the aisle. Everything seemed designed to heighten my anxiety, though having never been married before I really had no yardstick to measure by. I have since seen videos of men who fainted at the altar so I suppose I was a tolerable groom. I managed to stay on my pins anyways. Maybe I should have tried to entertain the crowd when they had seemed to be restless and made bored by my unease; maybe I could have done some break dancing or sang Amazing Grace while drinking a big glass of one intoxicant or another, but I didn't and wouldn't had I been given the opportunity. I wasn't there to entertain – all that was expected of me on that day was that I show up in a tuxedo that fit and, for the most part, stay out of the way. I wish I could do it again and someday I might. I was too wound up to appreciate what a lovely bride Susan was.

We walked out of the church hurriedly. There was no rice but people were clapping.

"I'm dying for a smoke," Sue confessed, "should I?"

"Do whatever you like," I answered, removing a pack from my pocket. I gave her a cigarette, lit it and then lit one for myself. "I mean, what are they going to do, annul the marriage because we were too full of nicotine to know what we were doing?"

Sue giggled, which was one thing I appreciated – she always seemed to get my lame jokes.

At the reception, my brother Bill was required to deliver a short speech.

"I remember Carm, the athlete," he said, speaking with emotion, "always ready to take one for the team. He was a good athlete in his time. I remember Carmen the musician, a consummate musician in his day." What, I thought, did I die? Did I become a part of history when the hospital first swallowed me?

When we arrived at the honeymoon suite that had been booked for us, we were both tired. I uncorked the champagne only to find out that Sue wasn't fond of it. So, while this person who seemed suddenly brand new to me and who I'd vowed to always cherish slept, I watched late night TV with the volume low and drank champagne out of a bottle. Later, I kissed my bride softly on the cheek and smiled. I wiped a tear from my eye and wearing a smile that was now more than tender I congratulated myself, for I was looking forward to sharing the rest of my life with someone I loved. It was something I was told could never happen

In the morning, I woke and looked at the ring on my finger. I smiled a different, thoughtful smile. I was no longer a "schizophrenic" nor was Sue. I was someone's husband and Sue was a wife. A man and a woman united in love.

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