

The Weight of God

by J.J. Flowers

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## Epilogue

A coin toss put Jonathan's final argument up first.

Still unaccustomed to being the tallest person in the room at age seventeen, Jonathan's six foot four inch frame hunched over the podium. His free hand nervously knocked back long and thick blonde hair. His other hand clutched a crinkled paper against a dishelved red shirt worn over loose fitting jeans, both found two years ago in the dollar bin at the local thrift store. Worn holes decorated his plain black sneakers. Unnaturally pale eyes swept the interested faces of fellow students and teachers in the packed auditorium. His was not an attractive face; it was too round for one thing, his facial hair caught between adolescent and unkempt, while the mischievness in his smile was almost universally mistaken for a sneer, often a contemptuous sneer.

In any case appearance mattered not at all as soon as he began speaking.

"Okay. We need to wrap this debate up with some kind of fireworks," Jonathan began. "Paul wanted us to end with a poem. Some kind of special poem that totally captures how I think about this. Paul, you know, is a poetry connoisseur. Even his mom collects poems about the imagination. She's a famous writer, so that makes sense." He tended to think outloud like that, nodding to himself. "Paul kept trying to help me out, handing me this poem and that, suddenly remembering a poem, looking up, then tossing it, thinking of another one. What I'm trying to say is a lot of effort went into the poems, and because Paul is in a brilliant category—"

“Brilliant?” Paul questioned, watching from the opposite podium. Except for their shared height, Paul appeared to be the opposite of his friend. Curly dark hair crowned a lean, angular face and dark eyes, eyes full of intensity and humor both. That Paul was popular was an understatement; Jonathan often teased that Paul was cloaked in charisma.

“Jonathan must want to borrow my car again.”

The audience laughed appreciatively.

“Actually, he paid me to say that.” The spectators laughed more. “Oh wait. I wasn’t supposed to say that part, was I?”

Even Paul laughed now, but Jonathan pressed ahead, barely waiting for the assembly to settle back down before reaching his point, “Anyway, Paul finally realized the poem he was going to use for his conclusion is actually better for my conclusion.

“So here it is: *If There Is No God* by Czeslaw Milosz:

*If there is no God,*

*Not everything is permitted to man.*

*He Is still his brother’s keeper*

*And he is not permitted to sadden his brother,*

*By saying that there is no God.*

Jonathan paused before employing a recent SAT vocab word, “Now, that is some superannuated shit.”

The principal, Ms. Pickering, leapt from her seat with a warning. “Jonathan Knowles!”

“Well, it is; I make no apologies. The poem says the truth doesn’t matter and boy, the day we start believing that is the day we fall to our doom. Truth is the only thing that matters.

“And this is a small sliver of the truth or reality as we know it: There is mounting evidence that an infinite number of universes exist. Emphasis on the word infinite, meaning the number of universes goes on without end. Our own universe has billions upon billions of galaxies, a number that, considering the limits on our minds, is regrettably incomprehensible. And each average size galaxy is packed with billions upon billions of stars.

“Our own relatively modest Milky Way galaxy has 100 billion stars in it, one of which is our rather average sun. Our solar system sits on the outer edge of the galaxy. The sun’s enormous mass accounts for ninety-nine percent of our solar system’s mass or put another way, about a thousand earths could fit inside our sun.

The young man paused, giving his audience a moment to absorb the vastness of the universe before moving on to the main point. “Okay, now think of this: In every human brain there are more neurons than there are galaxies in the universe—about 100 billion, each drawn from about 10,000 different cell types and woven into a tapestry of neural interconnections that number in the trillions.”

Jonathan greeted the astonished faces of his audience with a triumphant grin. “You heard that right. Trillions! The whole universe exists inside these neural connections that make up our consciousness. What else exists here?” He pointed to his brain before answering. “Love. Love in its chemical form exists right here in our brains. And so, I think, does God.”

The silence stretched until everyone realized Jonathan had finished. Polite applause followed. Jonathan nodded and turned toward Paul.

The courteous applause changed with enthusiasm as Paul turned to the audience and held up a hand for silence. “I would not dispute anything Jonathan said. Science is the mechanism from which we view the world, and this world is astoundingly, spectacularly magnificent. All I know about God is that God is... a mystery.

This mystery is both profound and deeply compelling to us. God is the mystery that a physicist finds in the immutable laws that govern the universe Jonathan just described. God is what the cosmologist encounters with the contemplation of the unfathomable numbers of the universe that Jonathan just outlined for us. God is the mystery that a biologist finds in the studying the scale of evolution that went from a simple cells to the astounding complexity of a blue whale, a redwood forest, and the human consciousness. God can even be what a preacher reveals in the inspired words from a time long ago...

“To make any further declarative sentence about God is to separate someone from this mystery. I would not want to do that. Except to say this one last thing: Just as God is a near universal experience among humans, so too is love. Love connects us to God just as powerfully as God connects us to love. And in this mysterious way, love does indeed become God’s gift.

“And here then is my poem to Jonathan and all those who view science as opposing religion. It is titled *On Prayer*, and it is also by Czeslaw Milosz:

*You ask me how to pray to someone who is not.*

*All I know is that prayer constructs a velvet bridge*

*And walking it we are aloft, as on a springboard,  
Above landscapes the color of ripe gold  
Transformed by a magic stopping of the sun.  
That Bridge leads to the shore of Reversal  
Where everything is just the opposite and the word is  
Unveils a meaning we hardly envisioned.  
Notice: I say we; there, every one, separately,  
Feels compassion for others entangled in the flesh  
And knows that if there is no other shore  
They will walk that aerial bridge all the same.”*

The audience burst with applause and cheers. Fireworks went off on the big screen behind them. The video of the debate was copied thousands of times in the weeks and months that followed and passed from one person to another, posted on various web sites, and to this day, it is still shown in churches and in philosophy and religion classes.

It all starts, of course, with Lily.

### **Lily**

Lily drove the car into the driveway and parked, lost in rather intense fantasies about her new novel. She had spent the day buried in books at UCI's library. Details of the horrors of the Inquisition filled her mind and began arranging themselves into descriptive paragraphs.

The world became a backdrop for the maze of her thoughts as she began planning the opening scenes of her new work. Reality could not compete with the rich tapestry of

fantasy. Even as a child she frequently slipped into a dreamy fog. Her family and friends captured the elusive prize of her attention with, “Earth to Lily, earth to Lily,” a call both her mom Clair and son Paul regularly put to use.

Yet, she abruptly noticed the police car parked in front of her new neighbor’s house. That this young couple required police intervention for their loud and rancorous arguments came as no surprise. At night, when she walked their dog Big Ben down to the beach, she frequently overheard shocking recriminations from open windows, shocking for their utter banality: socks and underwear left on the floor, or the purchase of the wrong size diapers, or who forgot to pay the gardener.

Gathering up her pile of books, Lily headed to the mail box. A large package waited there, too big to fit in the box. She smiled as she recognized the giant white envelope stuffed with fan mail from her publisher. The older she got—42 and counting—the more she understood that a good life was comprised of these small joys.

The postcard brought a slight gasp, a smile followed. The picture showed a gorgeous aqua blue ocean and white sand beach, that was all. On the other side, the date and the name of a hotel in Morocco scrawled in Max’s neat hand. She experienced the familiar excitement as a physical force, embarrassingly so; she might as well be seventeen again and in the throes of a first love.

Balancing the books, package, and mail, Lily made her way to the door. She wanted to get right to the pile of books, but unfortunately Paul wasn’t home—vacant space in the drive way--so she’d have to walk Big Ben. Fortunately, the eight year old giant mastiff no longer needed long walks.

The massive dog waited at the door. Lily swept down and petted the familiar tan head, as big as a beach ball, sweet talking a warm greeting. He leaned hard against her. With some effort Big Ben rose and nails clacking against the tiled floors, he followed Lily into the kitchen.

Lily had just set Big Ben's food down and turned on the tea pot when the doorbell rang...

### Clair

Dr. Clair Merton, popular professor of contemporary art at UCI, rushed down the grand sweep of Turbine Hall of the Tate Modern museum in London. Once upon a time a power station for the city, the towering brick building—thirty-five meters high—had been transformed into the world's most architecturally stunning museum and then filled with some of the most exciting art of the twenty-first century. The professor normally took her sweet time, marveling at the splendid proportions and height of the grand entrance. She especially loved Louise Bourgeois' extraordinary sculpture Maman that occupied the far corner of the space, the giant spider the size of a two story house.



Today she had no time to spare; the squeeze of time bid her to rush.



She had only forty-five minutes to film the exhibition of Damien Hirst's Pharmacy. She'd show the video in her upper division and graduate classes this fall—the masterpiece never failed to solicit awe, amusement, and a lively discussion. At noon exactly, she was meeting two gallery owners who were going to take her on a whirlwind tour of all of Banksy's graffiti art to be found in London.

Clair arrived in the ancient city at least twice a year to collect pictures of new artists. To keep her classes and her teaching fresh and alive, she tried never to present the same art twice. There were exceptions of course. The basic intro classes of art history demanded a presentation of the masters and the icons: Michelangelo, Rembrandt, Leonardo, etc. all the way up through Picasso and Matisse, but for her Intro to Contemporary Art she rarely taught the same thing twice. The field constantly reinvented itself.

Banksy was an exceptional new addition to her collection. People knew Banksy only from his fantastic graffiti art, which stealthily popped up in public spaces around the world. There was the graphic representation of two policemen kissing, a lover escaping from a window, a rat spilling a can of poison onto the street, Monet's Water Lilies, but with trash thrown about, or the common depiction of the grim reaper, but with a happy face.





Death with a happy face. She'd ask her students, "What is the artist trying to communicate?" Just this morning she had discovered Banksy's mission statement on his web site. It haunted her still, the extract from the diary of Lieutenant Colonel Mervin Willett Gonin DSO, one of the first British soldiers to liberate Bergen-Belsen in 1945.

*I can give no adequate description of the Horror Camp in which my men and myself were to spend the next month of our lives. It was just a barren wilderness, as bare as a chicken run. Corpses lay everywhere, some in huge piles, sometimes they lay singly or in pairs where they had fallen. It took a little time to get used to seeing men women and children collapse as you walked by them and to restrain oneself from going to their assistance. One had to get used early to the idea that the individual just did not count. One knew that five hundred a day were dying and that five hundred a day were going on dying for weeks before anything we could do would have the slightest effect. It was, however, not easy to watch a child choking to death from diphtheria when you knew a tracheotomy and nursing would save it, one saw women drowning in their own vomit because they were too weak to turn over, and men eating worms as they clutched a half loaf of bread purely because they had to eat worms to live and now could scarcely tell*

*the difference. Piles of corpses, naked and obscene, with a woman too weak to stand propping herself against them as she cooked the food we had given her over an open fire; men and women crouching down just anywhere in the open relieving themselves of the dysentery which was scouring their bowels, a woman standing stark naked washing herself with some issue soap in water from a tank in which the remains of a child floated. It was shortly after the British Red Cross arrived, though it may have no connection, that a very large quantity of lipstick arrived. This was not at all what we men wanted, we were screaming for hundreds and thousands of other things and I don't know who asked for lipstick. I wish so much that I could discover who did it, it was the action of genius, sheer unadulterated brilliance. I believe nothing did more for these internees than the lipstick. Women lay in bed with no sheets and no nightie but with scarlet red lips, you saw them wandering about with nothing but a blanket over their shoulders, but with scarlet red lips. I saw a woman dead on the post mortem table and clutched in her hand was a piece of lipstick. At last someone had done something to make them individuals again, they were someone, no longer merely the number tattooed on the arm. At last they could take an interest in their appearance. That lipstick started to give them back their humanity.”*

How would her students relate this shocking text to the artist's remarkable work?

There was never enough time in London—that was the problem.

Clair rushed up the escalators to the third floor gallery, swept through two exhibit halls, purposely ignoring the two new pieces there, and into Damien Hirst's masterpiece. The installation consumed the room, the size of a tennis court, shelves lining the walls, floor to ceiling. Infant and baby products filled the shelves starting at one end, while

products for old age appeared at the other end; each age represented by pharmaceutical products. There were literally thousands of products for each of life's passages.



Alone, Clair wasted no time. Her camera emerged from her large, colorful bag. The purse brought endless amusement; she could scarcely believe she lived long enough to see a return of the hippy fashions she had always loved. She wore a loose gold and blue long skirt, a pretty blouse, sandals and a matching bag, an outfit she might have worn in college some forty years ago, but now came straight off the fashion pages.

Beethoven's Ninth, her cell's ring, interrupted her filming. Seeing Lily's number brought a smile. "Lily," Clair's voice sang into the empty room. "You won't believe where I am! I'm standing inside Pharmacy—you remember me telling you about it? The giant pharmacy that represents the stages of life. It's brilliant; every imaginable product to get through our time on earth, but still the inevitability of—"

Lily managed to interrupt, her voice weak, distant, strange. "Mom."

Clair had never, not once in the whole of her life, heard such pain in Lily's voice, and the understanding that something terrible had happened arrived with a powerful jolt of adrenaline. "Lily? What happened?"

"Mom..."

"Okay, sweetie, you have to stop crying long enough--"

“Paul...”

Clair repeated her grandson’s name. “Paul. What’s happened to Paul, sweetie?”

“An accident...Mom, Mom...Come home...”

“Ohmygod.” The camera dropped in her bag as Clair moved towards the doors.

“Lily, is he in the hospital?”

The muffled sound of Lily’s tears broke the silence. “No...no. Mom...”

Clair never remembered the rush to the airport: cutting in front of a dozen tourists who waited for a cab, stepping in front of the older man just as he was about to get inside one, mumbling incoherently that it was an emergency—the grossest understatement in the history of human language...

Nor did she remember the scene at the ticket counter. The screaming, crying, hysteria, all eerily similar to the part in *Terms of Endearment* when Shirley McClaine runs out to the nurses’ station and screams for her daughter’s pain medicine; a mother’s desperation to bring an end to her child’s pain was universally understood.

They put her on the next flight.

She had no memory of the take off, the kindness of the flight attendants, the three vodkas that arrived, one after the other, or the steady stream of tears that fell down her cheeks.

A young black man sat next to her. At first he pretended not to notice the extreme distress of the older woman next to him, but at some point he abandoned the pretense. His large, smooth hand slipped over hers.

She remembered that; she remembered clasping it like a life line.

### Jonathan

Jonathan Knowles leaned over the toilet, staring at the remnants of his breakfast, coke and an ice-cream sandwich. If he had thought about it, he'd have seen a certain irony in the idea that the ice-cream sandwich was owing to Paul's articulate and elegant defense of animal rights; Paul's surprisingly pervasive argument had begun to affect his food choices this last year. The ice cream sandwich had been a substitute for some ham and egg crap at the convenience store.

Yet, he couldn't think now.

He felt queerly light headed, like he might faint.

Geezus don't pass out here.

After stepping on the flush handle, he tried to pull himself together, to take a deep breath, but he couldn't move even that much. Frozen. As usual synonyms raced through his ever active mind: frigid, numb, but also petrified, suspended, and also afraid, stunned, alarmed, terrified. Every friggin synonym he could think of worked to describe the avalanche of feelings going through him.

Loud sobs came from another stall.

Jonathan tried to guess who they belonged to, but couldn't. They could be anyone's. Half the class had started crying after the announcement. He had been in AP Calculus, ignoring the teacher. There was nothing new in basic calculus he hadn't known since 7<sup>th</sup> grade. Gregory Bendford's new book opened in his hands, a ruse to hide the fact that he stared at the beautiful Amy Erikson sitting two seats over. He hadn't been

fantasizing that he parted her lips or felt her breasts or anything natural like that. No, loser that he was, his fantasy involved entertaining and impressing her with words, ideas, his 'exceptional' intelligence.

That was until the moment Pickering's voice broke over the loud speakers. Normally the unnaturally cheerful voice of the principal brought the stupidest kind of triviality to their attention:

"It is my pleasure to announce Laguna Beach High School's new homecoming queen and king: Jenna Harrington and Kevin Dodd!"

"Just a reminder students: Tryouts for band this Thursday zero period. Don't forget to bring your instrument!"

"Tickets for the Artist Theater's new production of Guys and Dolls on sale today in the cafeteria!"

This time she offered up no such banality, but rather its opposite.

Old Pickering couldn't get through the friggin' sentence. "It is with the deepest regret that I must inform you our beloved valedictorian, Paul Merton has been killed in a car..." The words replaced with an old woman's sobs, the whisper of his name, "Paul..."

Sudden chaos erupted in the classroom. Mrs. Newton dropped inelegantly into her chair, hand over mouth to stop a cry. Students exchanged confused glances before a chorus of "Oh my Gods," and "Not Paul," cries, even screams, people falling into friends' arms.

Without even understanding the necessity, he simply rose, left the room and headed for the bathroom, barricaded himself in a stall.



His hands went clammy. Perspiration lined his brow. He was going to be sick again.

The bathroom door opened. A group of three came in.

“Man, Paul Merton. Paul. Geezus.” A fist hit the tiled wall. “Fuck!”

Jonathan recognized Jeff Hall’s voice, his sobs sounding like coughs. The tallest dude in the school at 6’6”, not too bright but not dumb either, and no matter anyway; athletic enough to land a basketball scholarship to UC Davis.

“Man, I love that guy,” Jacob Simon said with touching feeling. A polo player, but neither as smart or talented as his friend, therefore destined for the local JC. “I cannot believe it. Dead. Paul is dead.”

Laguna Beach High School was small, just over six hundred kids, most of whom started school together in kindergarten. He had known Jeff since first grade and Jacob since third. And he had indeed known Paul since kindergarten.

The sobs still sounded from inside the other stall. “Ortiz?” Jeff queried.

Paul had been tutoring Juan Ortiz since last year, elevating the poor kid’s grades enough to enable him to graduate. Ortiz drew a sharp breath, then hesitated. “Yeah... Is just... My God...”

“Hey comprende, man—”

The door opened to the sound of female voices, all packed full of emotion, pouring into the boy’s bathroom, the nature of the emergency rendering all protocol meaningless—no doubt there were guys in the girls’ bathroom as well. Hugs, tears, laments.

Hysteria stuck Laguna Beach High School.

Jonathan felt his breath come in gulps. The drama in the classroom, the administration office, the boy's bathroom underlined an arresting fact: The whole school would mourn Paul's death.

Yet, only Jonathan understood that had he died, Paul would have been the only person alive to notice, much less mourn the loss.

Now Paul was gone.

He knew that after Paul's mom and grandma, he would feel this incalculable blow the most. Other people had friends and family to diffuse the tragedy, but he had no such help. Not a single person. Paul had been it.

A weight descended over his chest. He couldn't breathe. He had to escape. He pushed open the stall door, and ignoring the startled, red faces of his classmates, he started walking.

He didn't stop for seven and half hours. There, in San Clemente, two cities south and fourteen miles from home, he collapsed. Once he started crying, he found it impossible to stop, which was a problem. Hitching a ride was hard enough for a six foot four, two hundred and fifty pound young man with long hair at ten o'clock at night in the best of circumstances, but add crying to the mix, it'd be impossible.

Somehow he'd have to find his way to dry eyes, if only for an hour.

Numb: frozen, anesthetized, unfeeling, dead...

### **Ruth**

Finally! She heard the sirens fast approach.

The sirens went dead in front of the small white cottage attached to the Oak Street Church. Ruth watched the two paramedics, a middle aged woman and a younger man, rush out of the ambulance. The tall, heavy set woman with short blonde hair looked attractive. The much taller black man effortlessly swung a heavy square back pack over his shoulder. Together they carried the stretcher passed her flower garden; neither one stopping to admire the first spring blooms.

Paul had always paid attention to her garden, since he was five years old. Paul loved flowers almost as much as she did. The only thing he loved more was animals, she thought, and of course his mom and grandma.

Ruth opened the door for the paramedics. "Please, do come in," she said, trying to smile, but finding the effort taxing. She might have made some cookies had she imagined she'd have company, but it all happened so fast. There wasn't any time.

"Ma'am, someone called 911 for an ambulance?"

"That would be me," she confessed, a hand crossing her heart as if to offer a visual aid of the suspected trouble. "I think I'm having.... Yes, I must be having a heart attack. I cannot seem to catch my breath."

As they lay her on her back and checked her heart rate and blood pressure, she noticed the woman wore too much make-up, an odd incongruity with the blue and gray uniform. Face paint, her mother had called it, pink lipstick, black eyeliner around pale blue eyes, purple eye shadow and mascara. Three gold and diamond earrings in one ear, two in the other. The makeup was all together too much, but of course it was not her place to criticize. It was never her place for that.

"Are you feeling any pain?"

The question confused her. She started to shake her head, but realized that was wrong.

The black man was talking to her. “Your numbers are checking out just fine, young lady.”

Young lady? Why he must be teasing her!

“I’m quite certain I am dying,” she informed them, though with less certainty. “I’m having trouble breathing, you see.” Indeed each breath came fast and shallow. It had all started just after Pastor Simon walked her home and left her. She had been trying to think what she could do, how she could help, when her heart beat began a slow and steady escalation; her breathing suddenly labored and gasping.

The young man listened to her heart again. “Sounds like you’re going to outlive us all,” he smiled as he began folding the equipment.

The lady leveled a contemptuous look on her partner, followed by an irritated roll of eyes. The gaze lazily or perhaps indifferently traversed over the modest space of the old woman’s home: the worn wooden floors, the Monroe’s ancient gold brocaded couch and matching chair, the same family’s plain glass coffee table, all donated to the church some twenty years ago. As the church secretary, she got every thing the poor didn’t want. On that coffee table sat a large, leather bound Bible, opened to Christ on the cross. A small TV unobtrusively took up a corner, perched on a narrow wooden stand. A modest dining table and two chairs stood before the yellow tiled kitchenette, that was all.

The walls held only the familiar wooden cross. Ruth had never lived in a house whose walls displayed anything but the cross. She often thought of getting a picture,

flowers or an inviting landscape, but she remembered her father saying that such adornments detracted from the word.

After this brief inspection, the woman's unkind gaze found Ruth's face again. "Listen," she warned, "You can't be callin' us every time you're feeling lonely."

"No, no, of course not," Ruth said, struck by the word lonely. Loneliness was indeed a given, like waking to a new day or drawing breath, a fact of life so commonplace as to merit no consideration. It certainly wasn't the reason she called them.

The handsome man cast his partner a mean look. "Better safe than sorry, right? Here, let's help you up."

With surprising agility Ruth managed to come to her feet. She smoothed the folds of her dress. It was a bit too large for her, and almost as old as she was, but she loved the colors. Tiny pink flowers sparsely arranged against a pale green background.

"Just remember," The woman pointed an impossibly long manicured nail, "While we're here helping you, someone might have really needed us."

"Oh, why yes, of course. I am sorry. I just thought, you know, that..."

"Hey, it's okay." The young man had a warm and bright smile, a reflection of his kind heart, Ruth thought. "No worries," he said. "I'm glad everything is good to go."

Ruth listened to their voices as they carried the equipment back to the ambulance.

"Geezus, she's just an old lady."

"There was nothing wrong with her."

"No harm done."

"I just started that steak sandwich..."

Ruth focused on the sound of their departure. The back doors opened and slammed shut before both the driver's and passenger's doors closed. The engine started, the ambulance drove off. The nesting finches chirped in the new quiet, and ominously a couple of crows sounded near-by.

The silence descended upon her like a monster.

She had to do something, she had to. For Lily.

She had tried to call, but they weren't answering their phone. No message machine picked up either.

What could she do to help?

She should get Lily a card...

She wasn't supposed to drive any more. This had been Paul's doing. Some older man had plowed his car into a market place, killing ten people and injuring dozens, an unfortunate tragedy that had triggered Paul's concern. He asked if she thought maybe her reflexes weren't what they use to be, and if so, perhaps he could start driving her to the grocery store once a week? She had lied just to be with him. It was terrible, she knew, if God almighty frowned on anything, it was dishonesty, but a weekly visit by Paul proved irresistible.

She looked forward to it all week.

Still, she could drive if she had to, and she had to get Lily a card. A pretty card with a sweet poem of comfort. His mom, Paul had mentioned, loved poetry.

Ruth found the keys in the kitchen drawer. She made her way outside to the garage. With some effort she lifted the heavy door. The old white Cutlass sedan fit

snuggly in the small space. The engine hummed to life. She turned on the lights and backed out.

Oak Street ran straight into the highway, which paralleled the ocean for two miles before passing the drug store. Proceeding slow and cautiously, the sedan turned right on main road. Only two horns blared at her along the way. She sailed smoothly into the pharmacy's parking lot and pulled diagonally into two spaces. It was too hard to park straight in the dark; she didn't even try.

Inside Ruth stood beneath the bright lights above the row of condolence cards. Systematically she picked up one and read it:

*We could not know this hour*

*That God would call \_\_\_\_\_* Ruth studied the blank space left for the deceased's name before continuing: home.

*In life we loved him so!*

*In death we'll do the same.*

*He left us happy memories*

*His love is still our treasure...*

Ruth agonized over the poem. It seemed perfect, but for the blank space for Paul's name. As if this anyone's name could appear there; as if she needed only to fill in the right name...

She set it back and picked up another:

*Mother of Sorrow, You who held Jesus in your arms, please intercede with your Divine Son in our behalf. Ask Him to help us to know one another better, to forgive one another more readily, to love one another more deeply. Mother of all mankind inspire us*

*to travel without falter along that road at the end of which, under the Fatherhood of God, there is true peace...*

Too Catholic, with the improper emphasis on Mary....

Ruth read the floral prose on another: *She's in a better place right now...* Wrong sex...

An hour later the ornate print began to blur. For a long minute, the blurred world confused her. After all, it had been over five decades since she last cried and that she was still capable of generating tears came as a shock.

Ruth dropped the half dozen cards to the floor as she sank gracefully to her knees with the habit of a lifetime. Once the tears started, she seemed unable to stop.

The cashier's hand came to Ruth's shoulder. "Ma'am, ma'am, what's wrong?"

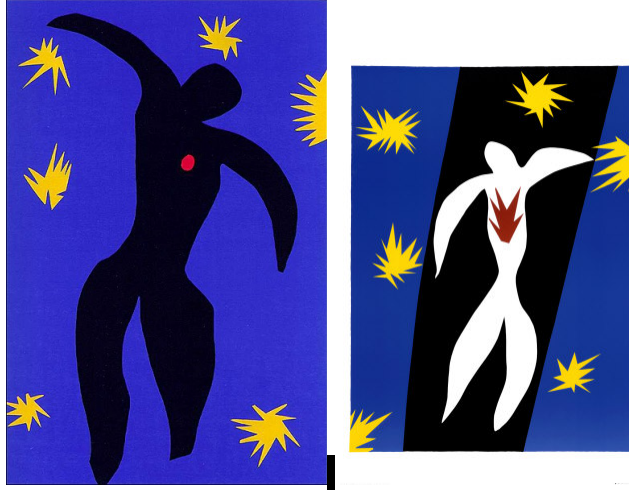
She knew the answer to that question. "God..."

"God?"

"Why Lord?" the old woman whispered. "Why oh why did you take Paul, of all people in the world, Paul whom everyone loved, instead of me, an old woman whom no one has ever loved?"

Lily





Lily lay on the overstuffed fire engine red pleather couch beneath the dual Matisse reproductions of Icarus rising and Icarus falling. The weight of her head fell on her mother's lap, and she tried to focus on the loving stroke of the familiar hand through her hair. They had just returned from the hospital where she had been hooked up to an IV, a desperate measure to get fluids into her dehydrated system and ease the worse of her headaches. She never would have guessed that a person could become dehydrated from crying too long. She cried even as she slept. She tried to drink water throughout the day, but it felt as if her body had started to shut down and she could barely manage a few sips here and there. The doctors wanted to medicate her, but she didn't want to go down that path—it felt like a one way street to the darkest end.

She imagined a double funeral. Ending her grief for good felt as compelling as a hot bath after a cold ocean swim. As tempting as suicide had become, it was not an option. More now than ever, it seemed a morally unconscionable choice. She had always

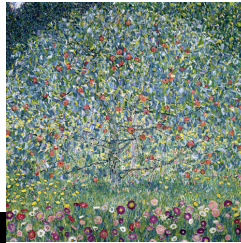
been close to her mom; she could no more give her mom this grief than she could have orchestrated Paul's death.

She and her mom had passed the weeping clichés of I can't believe it. For the first two weeks those words were uttered a hundred times. Gradually, the utterance became less and less frequent because it was no longer true. The terrible reality claimed them both.

"Lily, I have to get up."

With effort Lily sat up. Clair made her way into the kitchen, where she set about making tea. For a long moment Lily focused on the familiar surroundings of their living room, the colors bright, disarming, utterly incongruent with this new self, a new self of alternating grief and numbness. Many people might imagine a historical romance writer's home decorated in old fashioned early American or perhaps country French, rooms filled with antiques and pastel flowered fabrics trimmed with lace and frills. Not so Lily; she grew up with an extremely modern aesthetic. The living room dramatically reflected this.

As if it were an inherited trait like one's political party affiliation, she and her mom both shared remarkably similar tastes, an uncanny correspondence of preferences in color and furnishings. Mexican pavers covered the floors, except for the upstairs bedrooms. They both loved bold and primary colors, and these bright shades appeared in the paintings that hung on naked white walls: Matisse's Dancers, Agam abstracts, large colorful Miro's and Klimt's The Apple Tree and Field of Poppies. Clair had created the large coffee table in the center of the room, this a glass encased reproduction of Matisse's Red Room set on a sturdy bamboo table.



All one space, the enormous living room opened into the tiled kitchen. While her mother waited for the tea pot to steam, she peered into the refrigerator. The over head lights fell on the tiled mural of the counter top. A long ago gift from one of Clair's famous students, the mural depicted a colorful ocean sunset in bright blues, golds and

silvers. The small fractured tile caught and reflected the light and gave life to a startling luminosity. The artist had gone on to earn a well deserved international fame.

Art decorated every corner of their home.

Presently, as Lily sat perched on the couch, the art and its vivid colors disappeared in her mind's eye. She returned to the accident as if it were a scene she was writing, but just couldn't get right. The pictures from the crash came, one after another, effortlessly. Indeed once the sequence started she felt powerless to stop it from playing all the way to the end.

The sequence goes like this: A twenty-five ton big rig, packed full of big screen TVs and other electronic equipment, headed down the hill where Crown Valley Parkway connected to PCH. The driver realized his brakes went out half way down the rather steep incline. "The brake pedal suddenly slammed against the floor," he had told the police. One hand tight around the steering wheel, he pounded his open palm on the horn. The truck's horn, its continuity loud and alarming, rent the quiet afternoon air.

Horn still blaring in warning, and with all his strength, the driver pulled up the emergency or air brake. The big rig began its skid, all seventy-five feet of metal started swerving to the right.

Paul drove his green 2003 Toyota Echo north on the Pacific Coast Highway, heading to school for his Model United Nations class. He had bought the car a year ago. Clair had given Paul ten thousand dollars for his birthday to buy his first car. (They might have guessed the money would not be spent as intended.) Paul bought the salvaged 2003 Echo for 2,575 dollars, giving the rest to Habitat for Humanity and bragging to anyone

who listened that his car bought four families a home in Mexico, a feat no Mercedes, Lexus, or BMW had ever managed.

Paul loved that car—no doubt about it.

Lily learned what music Paul had been listening to on his Ipod at the time of the accident, though it had taken a dozen hysterical phone calls over the period of a week to convince someone to search for his Ipod in the crumbled metal of the wreck. At one point someone had said to her, “Calm down, Ma’am. You’re upset—”

It was as far as they got. “Upset? You think this is upset?” she cried. “Are you out of your mind? Upset is the dry cleaner losing a favorite sweater. Upset is a virus crashing your files. This is upset times infinity!”

Infinity. Meaning infused the word. Their small family always parted company with an ‘I love you’. Over time they added, “I love you more.”

“No, I love you more!”

Paul was about five when a teacher explained the concept of infinity. That day he left Lily for baseball practice and he said, I love you infinity. It stuck right off; it’s what they always said to each other. Every day. Twice a day: I love you, infinity.

Paul had been listening to Ram Daz, a popular Indian spiritual singer’s, recording of Amazing Grace. The music came as no surprise to anyone who knew Paul. He had been collecting renditions of the song since he first heard it when he was about eight. He had over a hundred favorite recordings of it on his Ipod.

She imagined Paul moments before the accident. The volume turned up on the stereo, his deep and rich singing voice raised with the joy that song always brought him. He saw the green light ahead, he shifted the gears into third, accelerating.

This was the part that haunted Lily. The collection of seconds when Paul turned to see the spinning big rig and confront his fate.

She fingered the blue velvet pouch at her neck—his ashes.

The police used the jaws of life at the crash site, a machine, like a giant crane, that pulls wreckage apart. Paul's body was mangled in the wreckage. The coroner's office eventually placed what comprised the remnants of Paul's body, most of which was somehow mixed up in the tires, into a shoe box sized container. She had his remains cremated and poured into the pouch.

The policeman said that Paul died instantly, but she didn't believe it. In her mind's eye she saw Paul turning and seeing the truck rushing at him. In his last moments he would have understood the tragedy waiting for her.

The one thing he always knew was how much she loved him.

### Pastor Simon

Pastor Simon made his way to the Merton's home on Brook Street. A thousand homes decorated the hills and cliffs of Laguna Beach. Each home had its charm, whether a mansion or renovated cottage. The Merton's home was no exception. The two storied white stuccoed house trimmed in turquoise blue sat between their neighbor's huge cement and glass monstrosity of a house, and an old fashioned tutor style home. Paul's grandmother had planted six liquid amber trees the year they moved in, three on each side, and these now mature giants towered over the neighborhood. A two foot high white washed and stucco fence surrounded the property, all but concealed by thick climbing

roses. A varicolored tiled bench and table, the creation of a local artist, sat invitingly in the center of their yard, this along side a bubbling water fountain full of water plants. Long grass, in need of a gardener's attention, created a carpet of green. Mexican pavers formed a path to the wide front door. Three round hyacinths lined the front of the house, each bursting with periwinkle blossoms as big as basketballs. The roof of the house served as a patio, one offering a spectacular view of the ocean a block away.

The older man barely saw any of it. The cliché that described how he felt? Going through the motions. Normally he'd enjoy the half mile walk to Paul's house, his mind ruminating on the day's events, perhaps contemplating tomorrow's plans or reciting passages from the Bible. Not so now.

Now he just went through the motions...

He was not unfamiliar with death. At a young age he had lost both parents to malaria, contracted on a missionary trip to Africa. Later, his beloved wife of ten years went to the doctors to discover why they were unable to conceive, returning with a diagnosis of advanced stage lymphoma. Indeed he knew death intimately.

As pastor to a fair size congregation, he had visited grieving parishioners hundreds of times. These visits took on various predictable patterns and while each death had an individual shape for sure, there were inevitably common themes. If the death was unexpected, expressions of shock characterized the visit. "I can't believe he's gone! He was just 63..." Anger eventually chased away this disbelief, but arrived variously; fury could manifest within five minutes or five years later, but at some point the unwanted emotion showed up. "I told him a thousand times to avoid that section of the 405..." Or,

when the bereaved were the caretakers of a terminal case, the living expressed their guilt. “Forgive me, but I prayed for an end. I did! I had too. He was in so much pain...”

Eventually Pastor Simon tried to lead them to touch, however briefly, the loss before they began to pray: God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea...

None of this would work for Paul’s mother, of course. Indeed Miss Lily Merton would not likely condescend to see him. He was going through the motions in more ways than one.

He made his way to the stepping stones which lead to the Merton’s wide wooden doors. At least two dozen gorgeous bouquets lay against the house: mums, chrysanthemums, red and pink roses, tuberose, several bunches of lavender, sunflowers, and daisies. The heartfelt collection of offerings demonstrated two things: how Laguna Beach, a town of thirty thousand, supported ten flower shops and the unnatural popularity of the deceased.

A memorial had sprung at the sight of the accident and in recent days it had begun to grow, spilling out into the street and along PCH for fifty yards. Signs and cards, flowers, both bouquets and potted plants, drawings, a living tree in a pot, board shorts, three boogie boards, two skim boards, a six foot silver cross made of cardboard and tin foil, a smaller two foot wooden cross, poems and messages and quite a few books, three of these Bibles.



With his own Bible in hand, he knocked. Paul's dog barked from somewhere inside. A queerly passive bark, laden with... disinterest. The poor beast no doubt missed his master.

Paul loved dogs—well actually, he loved all animals. One of Paul's countless girlfriends worked for a dog rescue organization and Paul was always helping her out, posting pictures of homeless animals on the church bulletin board, urging parishioners to adopt them. He remembered one such young woman. She had been the unfortunate victim of a violent rape and despite a half year of therapy, she still felt traumatized, her trauma taking the form of extreme fear. Paul finally heard of it from Ruth, and the next day he presented the young woman with a young and large bull mastiff. The dog literally served as a giant security blanket. She took him everywhere. The fear had been vanquished.

Eventually footsteps sounded against the tiles inside. The door opened.

Pastor Simon absorbed the sight of Paul's grandmother, the art professor—what anyone would call a handsome woman. Tall, with long silver hair tied into a loose pony tail in back, the color matching perfectly silver hoop earrings. Tan bare feet stuck out from long and loose navy blue velvet pants topped by a loose fitting red silk shirt. She always seemed to be wearing colorful clothes. He found Paul's brown eyes in her blue ones. The sight brought a surge of unexpected emotion.

He looked away, embarrassed.

"Pastor Simon," Clair said politely, taking in the black clothed man. She had only met the man a handful of times, all of these at a distance, mostly Paul's church performances. That her lovely and intelligent grandson attended what amounted to a

fundamentalist church was a constant source of both concern and amusement. Paul was deeply religious; he loved God like she loved... well, art, but Paul's ideology stretched as broad and liberal as the day was long. She wouldn't describe herself an antireligious, more like irreligious. Those few times someone asked what religion she was she answered, "Democrat." Since both she and Lily were disinclined to attend church, their old neighbor Ruth had started taking Paul with her. This was twelve years ago. The mistake she and Lily made was the assumption that Paul would outgrow the narrow range of this man's theology, but no such thing ever happened.

Now, it didn't matter...

Paul loved both the man and his church. While Paul might have preferred that his church more closely align itself with liberal causes, he never considered leaving. The whole congregation was like a second family to Paul. She remembered showing Paul a quote from the Dalai Lama, counsel to one of his Catholic admirers: "The core of every religion concerns love and compassion. Instead of switching religions, you will be better served finding this core where you are at." Paul had nodded and smiled. This was a bit of wisdom he had always known.

"Mrs. Merton. I came to express... my condolences to you and Miss Merton."

A jeweled hand came to her forehead. "Now's not a good time, Pastor Simon." She shook her head, her voice infused with sadness. "Lily's not ready to see anyone yet."

Pastor Simon paused. "Yes, of course. Please tell Miss Merton that I'm praying for her in this time of need. The whole congregation is praying for her, for both of you."

"I will," Clair replied, more curtly than she intended. "Thank you."

As she shut the door, she wondered why conservative Christians irritated her so much. Their anti-intellectual stance on everything? Maybe they weren't as bad as the Taliban, but ever since reading Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, fundamentalism in any clothe terrified her. She wanted to grab their shoulders and shake: How can you eliminate doubt? Don't you realize that if you were born in Taiwan you'd be kneeling in a Buddhist temple, or if born in Jordan, you'd be laying a prayer mat down five times a day? How can you possibly imagine there is only one way up? And who knows even if there is an up?

On the other side of the door Pastor Simon closed his eyes and drew in the perfume of the flowers. Cut flowers. Rotting flowers. A hand came to his mouth, a gesture of regret somehow. He should have reached a hand to Paul's grandmother, if only to look in those oh so familiar eyes a moment longer. He should have said how large a presence Paul had been in his life, how dearly the young man would be missed...

He made his way out to the street, suddenly tired and tempted by the pleasant sound of their fountain to sit for a moment. He looked back at the house. No one would know.

Returning to the spot, he eased his six foot two frame into the cool tile of the sitting bench.

Paul was just five years old when his mother first appeared in his office. He remembered what she wore, if only because it seemed so... incongruent with her beauty. She wore worn Levis, a red sweatshirt and old sneakers. No make-up, but then none was necessary. Rich dark hair framed her round and pretty face, deep set blue eyes beneath raven black brows and skin lightly brushed by the relentless Southern California sun.

Did she appear tragic then? He didn't think so...

Paul once said that his mother lived in her stories, and the haze of her fantasy life made her look upset, even lost, a strong impression people held until they heard her laughter. She never smiled during that first meeting as she explained the situation: she was a neighbor of Ruth's, and she wanted to make sure it was all right if the older woman took her son to church without her. She assured him that Paul would be well behaved.

"And why aren't you coming, Miss Merton? God welcomes all newcomers!"

Of course he knew the answer. She smiled slightly as she shook her head and muttered some excuse, as if the whole idea of church and religion were amusing, certainly they were beneath contemplation. She was one of these modern single moms. No husband necessary. He called Ruth as soon as she left. They both agreed; the child needed saving from his mother's professed agnosticism.

Ruth had tried to caution him, though. The child was touched, she said.

"What do you mean?" His curiosity peeked by the very choice of words.

"Oh, you'll see, Pastor Simon, you'll see."

Indeed he was struck the moment he laid eyes on the little boy.

Here at last was his great test...

### Jonathan

Jonathan sat at his desk, staring blankly at his computer screen. The dim glow in the otherwise dark room provided just enough light to read the calculus text book, opened to the night's homework, which he did by rote. Synonyms for rote: grind, rut, habit. A

half eaten TV dinner sat on his side along with a coke can. A brown paper grocery sac overflowed with the week's TV dinners, most of these untouched.

A pile of books created a crooked pyramid at his side. The AP economic, AP French, AP European history, and AP psychology texts with various binders served as the foundation for a thumbed copy of Conrad's *Heart Of Darkness*, Toni Morrison's *Paradise*—a brilliant, difficult book about the necessity of telling history—and ridiculously, a sign of both his loneliness and desperation *How To Succeed with Women*.

Loneliness: aloneness, forlornness, withdrawal...

He didn't know which made him feel more stupid: the relentless tears that began as soon as he found himself alone, or that some shallow sense of masculinity directed him to buck up. It took only the most fleeting thought of Paul to trigger the unwanted eye moisture: the prize of winning Paul's laughter, Paul asking about some obscure physics discovery, Paul offering up tips on popularity, this last simply because Paul worried about his friendlessness.

The most remarkable thing about Paul was the reach of his kindness.

"I don't get it," he had said to Paul just a month ago, "The popular girls, the pretty girls, the smart girls, even the stoner girls—they all love you, man. What's that about?"

There it was, Paul's smile, full of warmth and humor both. "I'm a nice guy."

"You're a nice guy—that's it?"

"That's it," Paul chuckled.

Leo Sebastian, Jonathan's stepfather moved so quietly as to trigger Sandberg's poem in his mind: *The fog comes/ on little cat feet...* Jonathan often smelled the stench

of stale alcohol and cigarettes before he saw or heard Leo. Suddenly the small man just stood there in the apartment, swaying slightly as he set down his keys and shrugged off his coat.

Jonathan quickly wiped his eyes, but it was too late.

“What the hell—are you bawling, kid?”

“No... No, man.” He manipulated the computer, as if preoccupied.

The short man swayed slightly as he absorbed the sight of Jonathan for several long seconds.

“Geezus. I forgot. Your buddy. What’s his name?” He rubbed his chin’s dark stubble, struggling to recall. “The Merton kid. Yeah, Merton. I remember the mom. Gorgeous, but cold. A god damned ice queen.”

Jonathan guessed the cold had to do with Paul’s mom not welcoming his stepfather’s advances.

The small, wiry man managed the three steps to the refrigerator and opened the door. The dim light illuminated an aging and ragged face as he made a study of the nominal contents within, looking no doubt for a beer.

Jonathan lived in fear the man would die before high school graduation next year. The Marine room on Forest Avenue, the town’s only bar that remained unattached to a restaurant, closed at 2:00 and his stepfather returned sometime after that. Lately Jonathan found himself waking at 2:00 and waiting, sleepless until he heard (or smelled) the drunk’s arrival. If he had to leave Laguna Beach High school for his senior year, he’d probably lose his chance for a scholarship.

He had made a brief study of alcoholism, discovering that his stepfather might be categorized as a serious alcoholic. Chronically unemployed, living off a disability check, the man began drinking when he woke, spiking his coffee with Jack Daniels. He continued alternating whiskey and beer throughout the day, consuming unknown, but vast quantities of the poison. The man's eyes and grayish skin had a yellow twinge these days. Most alarming, according to the research, was not long ago he showed little if any outward sign of drunkenness, even at the end of the day. Yet now, within minutes of the first cup of spiked coffee, he slurred words, lost most coherency, and stumbled.

Paul had just suggested he move into his home two days before the accident. They had an extra bedroom, he said, his mom and grandma would be fine with having Jonathan live there until they left for their individual universities. This incredibly generous offer had blossomed into a cherished fantasy, one lived in full color and intricate detail, details a shrink might find amusing, for they inexplicably centered on Paul's mom and grandma cooking huge family meals.

"Merton was your only buddy," his stepfather continued. "And he goes and runs into a fucking truck." He found a beer and opened it. Amazingly the contents drained in one tilt. "Geez kid," he said, not without sympathy. "You have the hardest luck of anyone I know. And if I know anything, it's hard fucking luck..."

He tossed the empty can into the sink and fell into his cot by the open window.

Jonathan stared into his computer screen, biting his lip.

Lily

Lying on the couch, Lily wore gray sweats and a black and red tee shirt that said: I love Hunting Accidents, one of Paul's girlfriend's discarded items. The thick dark hair appeared stringy and greasy, her pallor the palest gray almost, her eyes red, ravished now by tragedy. She looked like a drug addict, a person who would merit little more than a quick glance of pity.

Big Ben stretched out on the tiled floor within reach. He whimpered softly, intermittently. She didn't know if she should take him to the vet, or assume he absorbed and reflected her very own grief.

Clair's voice interrupted the profound quiet. "Lily, I'm going to see a psychiatrist, okay?"

The information caused a stir. Lily lifted the cloth from her eyes; the small movement appeared to require enormous effort. She found her mother by the doorway. Her mother wore attractive lavender prana pants and a loose fitting matching flowered shirt, her hair lifted into a bun.

She muttered a weak, "Okay..."

Key in hand, Clair lowered her sunglasses. "I just... I need to make sure... that, you know, you're going to be all right, that I'm doing everything I can to help you."

The sad eyes looked up at the ceiling. A lone tear slid down her cheek and she nodded. She understood her mother's desperation.

"Betsy should be here any minute, okay?" Lily's best friends, Betsy and Laura, had by unspoken agreement decided Lily should never be left alone. No one should cry alone. "I better be off."

"I love you, mom."



“I love you too, sweetie.”

Infinity had been dropped.

The door shut. Lily reached a hand to Big Ben’s head and stroked. He gently leaned in it. The poor, poor beast. Paul had taken Big Ben everywhere with him, becoming that happy cliché of a boy and his dog. To his friends’ houses, to church, even on church outings to Mexico to build houses. Every day he took him to the beach where they played catch or Big Ben watched Paul body surf. The two had always slept together.

The dog definitely seemed to be suffering grief.

Did her sorrow spell out Paul’s death? Did her grief have a scent that alerted Big Ben to what Paul’s absence meant?

Grief, relentless waves of it. She thought of the utter futility of seeing a psychiatrist. Paul’s death had sealed and locked their fate into before and after. The key was tossed away. No amount of wisdom or medicine could undo it.

She had once gone to a psychiatrist.

When she had found herself pregnant and it became clear that Paul’s father Gavin didn’t want anything to do with them, she and her parents decided it would be best if she moved back in with them. Her father, a heart surgeon at Hoag hospital, quit his job to take care of the baby while she worked. The move had surprised both her and her mom, then as her Dad and Paul’s relationship blossomed, it delighted them. Little Paul and her Dad were like best buddies, full of fun and shared secrets and laughter. She and her mother marveled at the transformation of her once upon a time type ‘A’ work alcoholic father; the baby had changed him.

Her father’s death triggered Paul’s plunge into religion.

Not yet two, Paul still wore diapers. “Where is granddad?”

“He died. He’s not with us anymore.”

“Where he go?”

“He’s not alive anymore. It is very sad. It makes your grandmother and I cry all the time. It makes you sad, too. You miss him, don’t you, sweetie?”

“You go get him.”

“I can’t, Paul, darling. He’s not here anymore. He’s gone.”

“Where is he?”

And so it began and just never ended; Paul’s questions never stopped. No matter where they took him or who he met, he’d bring it up. At the ice-cream parlor. “My granddad died,” he’d tell the teenager as she went about getting him an ice-cream.

“Oh, that’s sad! Do you miss him?”

The two year old nodded. “My grandma put him under the ground. She put dirt on top of him.” Those beautiful brown eyes stared intently at the teenager, watching for her reaction to these words, desperate for any nugget of information that might at last make sense of what happened to his much loved grandfather. After two months of Paul’s two year old Harold playing to her twenty something Maude, Paul’s pediatrician sent them to a psychiatrist.

After playing and speaking with Paul for nearly an hour, her Mom took Paul into the adjoining nursery, while she consulted the older doctor. Amusingly, he did indeed look wise: a large man, a head of white hair and matching beard and more than anything, large, expressive eyes that reminded Lily of one of her favorite all time characters: Merlin. The doctor even smoked a pipe.

“Ms. Merton, you have a very... unusual child here. Paul is exceptionally articulate for a two year old; he will no doubt need special education his whole life.”

She sat straight up, alarmed. “Special education?”

“For gifted children—”

Relief powerfully felt. “Oh... well—”

“Now, the etiology of this highly unusual obsession is plain. His grandfather’s death.”

She nodded. “They were so close.”

“You’re a single mom?” He drew on the pipe.

“That’s just it. When I found out I was pregnant, and after Paul’s father didn’t want anything to do with us, I moved back in with my folks. My books started doing so well that my Dad decided to take an early retirement from the hospital to watch Paul while I worked—“

“So he was not only the father figure, but Paul’s primary caretaker as well.” He released a small cloud of fragrant smoke and that she didn’t mind amazed her. “Now Paul told me you took him to the, ah, grave place. The cemetery?”

“We wouldn’t let him go to my Dad’s funeral, you see, we thought he was too young. I suppose he was, but ever since he keeps asking where his granddad is. I keep trying to explain. I said his granddad died, that his heart stopped and he’s not alive anymore, but that we will always remember and love him. But where is granddad, he keeps asking. So then I explained how when bodies die, they gradually turn into dirt. I showed him dead bugs. We watched a dead flower shrivel up. I finally took him to the cemetery. None of it has helped. Sometimes it seems as if death is all he thinks about.”

“Hmmm... And you have no religious affiliation?”

“I try to be agnostic.”

“Interesting choice of words,” he said, smiling for the first time as he knocked the used tobacco into a table high, large ashtray. “Well, this is the problem.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Paul very much needs you to convey the afterlife ideas of Judea/Christian theology. You need to tell Paul that he and everyone he loves, especially you and his grandfather will be happily reunited someday in heaven.”

“But I don’t believe that. I’ve never really believed that—”

“It doesn’t matter, Ms. Merton. Paul is struggling with the loss of his primary caretaker. He is living in terror that he will lose you and his grandmother next. He needs to know that it will be all right in heaven, that he has nothing to worry about...”

Lily visited the memory of telling her boy about this place called heaven. She didn’t remember the words she chose or how she said it, but the image of Paul’s little face relaxing for the first time in months remained vivid still.

“Let’s go, Mom,” he said. “Let’s go to heaven to see Granddad.”

### Clair

Clair sat in the outer waiting room shared by three professors. The plain room, done in benign shades of beige and rose, presented no clue about the owners. Three pastel watercolors of flowers in vases adorned the walls. Picasso once said that paintings were not meant to decorate apartment walls; rather they were weapons of war. She disliked

decorative art; she might even say she was passionately against it, except she always felt a little embarrassed to have strong feelings about such an innocuous thing. The chairs were standard issue, meaning uncomfortable. Students or patients might choose one of three magazines: People, Time, or Scientific America, all of which were stacked neatly along side the campus newspaper. Sitting next to an unattractive brass lamp, a pink pot of ivy offered lush green vines that spilled down the side of the table and brushed the floor.

Clair made a study of her sandals.

Dr. Hall came highly recommended. A professor of psychiatry at UCI's medical school, he maintained a private practice. Apparently he had an expertise in psychopharmaceutical drugs, research design and 'the grief process'.

She knew a professor who claimed there were only three subjects in life and literature: sex, death and narcissism. The narcissism she always grasped; people viewed the world through the narrow prism of their own eyes and at the most basic level it seemed it really was all about 'me.' This changed when someone you loved died and you discover just how much of your world was centered on the people you cherished.

The door opened and Dr. Hall appeared beneath the door frame.

Clair recognized the tall, thin man standing there at once.

The smiling man sported a neatly trimmed gray beard and curly hair. Kind brown eyes sat beneath bushy eyebrows. He wore much nicer clothes now: blue corduroy Dockers, a crisp blue shirt, and ubiquitous Birkenstocks. He often—daily?--walked through Hiezler park in Laguna, carrying giant bones in a fanny pack to offer dogs. Big Ben knew he was coming a half mile away.

“Professor Merton,” he said, his smile displaying unnaturally white teeth. “Big Ben’s companion.”

“Clair,” she said, won over in the instance. “I had no idea you worked at UCI.” Though in truth, it sometimes seemed as if half of Laguna Beach’s residents worked at the university. Or, at least they used to before the rising housing prices began moving professors to nearby suburbs.

“Please come in,” he stepped aside, motioning with a sweep of his hands.

The man’s office contrasted with the waiting room she just quit. A dark wood desk, two computers, overstuffed chairs and a huge window offered a lovely view of the gardens outside. She disregarded this in the instant; the art drew and held the eye. A scaled reproduction of one of Monet’s Cathedrals hung alongside a fine copy of Alessandro Triani’s Triumph of Death. The masterpiece of the Sieneese period painted in 1450 depicted rich nobles out for a picnic in the countryside, while a grotesque hag, representing the plague, slowly made her way towards them.



“This is quite a coincidence,” Clair said. “I once dressed as that very hag for a Halloween party. We had to all come as a person from a painting.”

“I heard the art department had the best parties on campus.”

“It’s a source of pride,” she smiled.

The doctor chuckled. “Though I must say, it is impossible to imagine you as Triani’s hag.”

The compliment went through her in a rush of feeling.

Dr. Hall indicated a chair and she sat down, staring at hands that nervously twisted a handkerchief. Determined not to cry, the small cloth served as an insurance policy just in case. She knew, of course, that neither she nor Lily would ever be the same, but she wanted reassurance that Lily would eventually be okay.

“So, I understand you’re a professor of art history here at UCI?”

Clair nodded. “My area is contemporary art.”

“I love contemporary art, if only for its amusement value,” he offered, a twinkle in his eyes.

Normally she was both comfortable and adept at small talk, but not now. She managed, “You’re not the only one.” She cleared her throat. “I’m here about my daughter, Lily. My grandson Paul just died, you see.”

“Oh, geez. Your grandson. That’s rough.” Sympathy infused his voice. “How did he die, may I ask?”

“A car accident.”

“How long ago?”

“A month, two weeks and three days ago.”

“A very recent loss,” he commented.

“Yes, but, well, I’m worried about my daughter Lily. She’s getting worse and worse. She barely eats; she’s lost at least twenty pounds. She can’t seem to stop crying.”

She even cries in her sleep. I've had to take her to the emergency room twice because she's become dehydrated from crying."

Dr. Hall nodded as he leaned forward. "How old was your grandson?"

"Seventeen." Helplessly, Clair said, "I have to help her, and I don't know how."

"Help." The doctor shook his head. "There's no help for the depth of this tragedy, I'm afraid. It's still a very raw and open wound, Clair. Research shows that indeed the most difficult type of death to overcome is that of the loss of a child, and the older the child up to about age twenty, or the longer one's history with the child, the more difficult and prolonged the grief process."

"Paul's age makes it... worse?"

"I'm afraid so," he nodded.

A long pause filled with her absorption of the information.

"Additionally, sudden accidents, the unexpectedness and shock of it, are far more emotionally difficult than say, death after a prolonged illness."

Clair nodded after a brief contemplation of the information. "That makes sense."

"Does Lily feel any guilt surrounding Paul's death?"

Clair shook her head. "I don't think so."

"That's good. Guilt paints a bleak picture over the grief process."

"But is there anything I can do to help her?"

The doctor's sigh held all the difficulty found in the question. "I assume you mean besides providing as much love and comfort as you can? As much as is possible, get her participating in the world."

"Participating in the world?"



“Eating, dressing, going to movies, reading. What kind of work does she do?”

“She’s a writer.”

“Oh?” he queried.

Clair had found that her daughter’s occupation earned a lot of status from just about everyone. Until they discovered what she wrote. There was no more disparaged form of writing than romance writing. Few people appreciated the fine, high art of setting a woman’s sexual fantasy in a castle with a recalcitrant Duke, or on a Caribbean Island with a wayward pirate, or in the Wild West with an overbearing Indian Chief.

Lily was the best in the business.

Lily started writing them in college, landed an agent her senior year, and was published the summer she graduated from UC Berkeley with a degree in history. They had been thrilled, though both she and her husband did not consider writing romance novels to be a career. They always assumed Lily would be an academic like herself and this kind of inconsequential writing maybe a diverting hobby at most.

In retrospect Clair had no idea why they felt writing romance novels wasn’t the perfect solution to Lily’s dreamy disassociation from the world. Earth to Lily, earth to Lily was a common refrain in their household for Lily’s whole life. All her teachers complained that the otherwise excellent student seemed to have a great deal of difficulty paying attention. To this day, if Lily wasn’t interested in what you were saying and sometimes even when she was interested, her eyes stared without seeing into the distance as she lost herself lost in one of her stories.

“Lily’s written twelve historical romance novels. She gets bags of fan mail from all over the world. Actually,” Clair confessed, “I’m her biggest fan. I love her novels.”

“You’re close to your daughter?”

Clair nodded. “We used to worry about it, about how close we were, especially since we live together. We’ve just always enjoyed each others’ company. We like the same things: the same books, theater, movies.” A contemplative pause followed. “Love is easy for us; it always has been.”

“She’s lucky to have you, Clair.”

“I feel lucky to have her.”

“Is she married?”

Clair shook her head.

“Just out of curiosity, what about that, about her love life?”

Clair’s next sigh managed to convey her concern, lifelong at that, over Lily’s love life or rather the lack of a love life. That was until recently when Lily suddenly developed a surprisingly adventurous love life. “She used to date all the time when Paul was young. She even had a couple of long term relationships. The longest relationship was with a biology professor here.” She waved her hand at Dr. Hall’s interest. “You wouldn’t know him—he left for Columbia several years back. Even though he wanted to marry Lily, I don’t think she ever really considered it. Then for two years she dated a fellow writer, someone she met at a book signing. A very nice man, but ultimately, there just wasn’t enough chemistry, or so Lily said. But you see, there was always a reason.”

She paused, wondering if she should even mention Max. Was that a relationship? If the definition included someone you meet in a hotel three or four times a year for a week of mad, passionate sex, then yes, Lily was in a relationship.

Ironically Max appeared to have walked off the pages of a steamy romance novel. A Green Beret in the Army, Max spoke six languages and worked undercover in various Middle Eastern countries, that was all Clair really knew about him. Lily had met him at a Starbucks in Seattle, of all places, where she had been speaking at a romance writers' convention. She had returned home starry eyed, full of smiles and dreamy sighs.

“She’s been seeing a man, an, ah, army officer for over four years now. They somehow maintain a long distance, intermittent relationship. Max sends her first class tickets to some exotic locals: Bali, Dubai, London, or South Africa and off she goes for a week.”

“I gather from your tone you don’t approve of this?”

“Only because I worry that he keeps her from a normal relationship. But Lily just adores the man. Part time, of course, which is why I think Lily kept him from us, from Paul and I. Paul never even knew about him, let alone met him. And that never seemed right.”

“Was she... embarrassed?”

Clair’s pause filled with her contemplation of this question. “I don’t think so. Lily would not be embarrassed. I think it was more that she wanted to keep the relationship the way it was—a three or four times a year interlude. I don’t think she wanted it to become more serious. I met him for the first time last week.”

“Oh? Really?”

“He called about ten days ago. Lily wouldn’t or couldn’t speak to him, so... I had to tell him what happened. It is something I have to go through a dozen times a day; I became numb to delivering this devastating news.” Emotion infused Clair’s lowered

voice, conveying the agony of this painful task. “Anyway, he seemed... shocked and you know, naturally upset. I thought that was that, but he showed up at the door the next day.”

The man’s surprising image sprang in her mind: Max was tall and broad shouldered, rugged, in fact too hard wearing to be handsome, exactly like one of her romance heroes. Things about him were unexpected: the large round head as bald as a robin’s egg, bushy dark brows arched over darker eyes, how tall he was. He wore Levis and a black tee-shirt, steel tipped boots, unusual for Southern California. It was clear that he had traveled through the night, that he hadn’t slept or shaved in his effort to reach Lily. “It touched me so deeply.”

“Did it?”

She nodded, staring down at her twisting handkerchief. “How honorable he was to arrive on our doorstep, like some kind of knight in shiny armor, intent on rescuing Lily from the depth of her grief... If only he could.”

“Did Lily see him?”

The scene emerged in Clair’s mind. Max rushing to her daughter’s side. Lily hardly taking notice as he swept her into his arms and she buried her face against his chest. She left them alone, hoping, praying, Max might be able to help. She didn’t know what happened, but Max suddenly stood at the door. Without at first saying anything, he pressed a card with a number on it into her hands, and then gently folded her into his arms. “I’m so sorry, Clair,” he whispered.

The familiar use of her name came as both a surprise and comfort.

Then he left. Lily remained the same.

Despair filled Clair’s eyes as she said, “I’m just so afraid she will never recover.”

“It takes time. Lots of time, there’s just no way around that.” Unmasked sympathy appeared on his face as he leaned forward. “Considering that she is a writer, getting back to work will be a sign of returning health.”

Clair was already shaking her head with fear: “I doubt she’ll ever work again.”

“If she’s like other writers or artists, at some point she’ll remember how she escapes through writing. Let’s hope for it. Also, get Lily talking about Paul. Loved ones almost always have a desperate need to talk about the deceased, which sadly, often makes other people uncomfortable. ”

This resonated with Clair; she nodded. She knew just what he meant; she felt a near desperate need to talk about Paul, with people, even complete strangers. She especially needed to convey how special Paul was. Not just his academic achievements, his perfect 2400 SAT score, the fact that he was valedictorian, or the number of five scores in his AP classes, none of that explained the depth of his intelligence. And none of that explained his heart.

Paul was, hands down, the kindest person she ever knew.

She could not have loved that kid more; he was just some kind of bright light in her life. She tried out all her lectures on Paul, who not only listened attentively (unlike his mother) but he often offered up the most helpful criticism. Paul found her world of art and politics fascinating. In fact he had spent a whole semester in Paris with her—one of the best times of her life...

She and Paul shared a love of live comedy. About once a week he would get a copy of a live performance of someone: Seinfeld, Lewis Black, one of the Blue Collar guys, Ellen, it didn’t matter who; according to her mostly high brow friends, they did not

have discriminating taste. For some reason, she could not say why, they'd go into his car at night and listen. How they'd laugh with abandon! Sometimes they'd laugh so hard they had to turn it off to catch their breath.

“What about you?”

The question, quietly, intently asked, went through her like a lightning bolt; she froze. “Me?”

Gently: “You lost Paul, too, Clair.”

She slowly nodded as the room suddenly blurred. A hand went to her mouth, as if to contain the swell of emotion. She rose to leave, embarrassed by this demonstrative display in front of a stranger. Dr. Hall rose as well.

Clair never knew how it happened, only that it did. She was suddenly in his arms, her head against his chest, the tears quiet. She spent so much emotional currency trying to help Lily get through this, assuming ‘getting through it’ was even possible, a big if, that she neglected tending her own loss. A loss as unfathomably deep and infinitely more profound than losing her husband. And the problem was not just losing Paul, but she had to witness the daughter she loved more than life go through what all the world agreed was the worse possible fate.

### Big Ben

Clair methodically folded clothes in the laundry room off the garage. Nothing but tee shirts and sweat pants in the wash, Lily's new uniform. Though God knows, her daughter was never what anyone would consider a great dresser. She'd like to attribute

the jeans and tees to working at home, but it had more to do with being blind to appearance. Lily just never thought about it.

The noisy washer and dryer became the backdrop for Clair's troubled thoughts. She had taken a leave of absence from teaching. Working might actually be better for her mentally. Not that work, indeed anything in heaven or on earth, had the power to ameliorate this grief, but staying busy might serve as a small distraction from a sadness that was an elephant in the room. No matter though, because she could not leave Lily alone for any length of time.

There had been no change in Lily. The only thing different was her weight.

A long distance ocean swimmer, Lily carried an extra ten pounds on her otherwise incredible fit five foot seven inch frame. (Clair loved tall like most people preferred smart; Lily's father measured 6'5, she herself was 5'9", so Lily's height had always been somewhat of a disappointment, which always amused Lily. "Imagine not being tall enough to win your mother's approval!") Now, her beautiful daughter looked ravished; almost as thin as a holocaust victim, skin a ghastly pallor, laced with spidery blue veins, protruding bones, shrinking muscles. Nothing enticed Lily to eat, certainly none of her favorite foods: chocolate chip cookies, lentil soup, chili, not even coconut walnut cake from a favorite restaurant. Dr. Hall had explained that food deprivation caused serious chemical reactions in the brain, often resulting in delusions, or even more severe depressions.

"You have to get her eating soon, or I'm afraid she might need hospitalization."

The dryer went quiet. The sudden silence buzzed in Clair's mind as she thought of the doctor's warning. Just as her panic began to escalate, she froze. Footsteps came from upstairs in Paul's room...

Lily lay on the couch, lost in the dreamy fog of remembering in exquisite detail her last morning with Paul. The trick allowed her to escape, however briefly, his absence. The morning had gone like this:

Paul's alarm went off at seven. Lily had been sitting at the breakfast table, coffee in hand and paper open to the comics, which she read religiously. Paul's increasingly busy schedule often kept him from coming home for dinner, so the hour before school was their time together. Even when she was working, she'd stop to share a cup of coffee with Paul before he left for school.

She heard his feet hit the floor as he made his way to the bathroom. The shower turned on. Ten minutes later, he appeared downstairs. He wore a navy blue Beethoven tee-shirt over worn jeans, and even more worn out sneakers.

"Hey, Mom," he always said.

"Hey, mister," she always said.

He went about fixing a cup of coffee and pouring cereal into a giant blue bowl.

"You were up late last night," she said.

"Like one, one thirty."

"I woke and heard you talking to someone. Our local drama queen?" This was one of Paul's girlfriends, a poor little rich girl who forever kept Paul up on the phone, lamenting the daily trials and tribulations of being a billionaire's only child. She didn't



know what interested Paul more: the girl's beauty or the fact that someday she would inherit a significant chunk of change and might need help grasping the idea that you cannot take it with you.

“Jonathan,” he said, pulling orange juice out of the refrigerator.

“Really?”

“He doesn't have a phone, you know and when his computer crashed, well, I mentioned it to Dr. Soko—“

“Your physics teacher?”

Paul nodded. “He found him a used computer, and we set him up with some new hardware and voila, that night I discovered Jonathan is a serious insomniac.”

Lily smiled, as, unbelievably, she was able to make sense of the select sequence of events.

Bowl and glass in hand, Paul folded into a chair.

“How's he doing?”

Paul shook his head, sighed. “On one level his life sucks big time. I mean, he lives in that dank apartment. You know those beat up rooms behind the parking garage on Third Street?”

“I thought they were condemned?”

Paul shook his head. “They just look condemned. He got a job at Barnes and Noble, thank god, because his so called step dad makes him pay for everything. Rent, food, clothes, the works.”

“He's so young for that.”

“I know. But on another level... Mom, he's definitely in a brilliant class.”

Lily smiled. Coming from Paul, this was quite a compliment. “What is he interested in?”

“Physics, astronomy. You think I’m good at math? Jonathan is genius level. Last night he was telling me about this new theory.”

Lily was all interest.

“It’s complicated, but basically the information currently allowing us to understand that the universe is expanding will, at a certain point in time, have disappeared over the visible or perceivable horizon. What will remain will be, like, an island universe made up of the Milky Way and a few of its galactic neighbors. Everything else will be an overwhelmingly dark void.”

“Dark void? You mean... ignorance?”

“Exactly,” Paul nodded. “There would be no way to understand or know much about the universe. Just the basic fact that the universe is expanding will be forever lost to us.”

“Interesting,” she murmured, relating this principal to her novel, thinking of the limitations on what a person living in the middle-ages could know about the world.

“This naturally leads to the speculation on the possibility of similar limitations to our current knowledge.” He studied his mother’s face. “Mom, are you listening?”

“Yes, yes,” she lied.

“Anyway, Jonathan is always connecting me to the incomprehensible vastness of the universe.”

Lily muttered some platitude, she didn’t remember exactly what.

“Jonathan feels God, even the most grandiose and magnanimous concept of God is preposterously puny alongside the immensity of the universe.” A brief pause followed as Paul contemplated this, but he suddenly sprang up. “Oh shoot. I got to get going. I promised Sara I’d pick her up.”

The last sequence of these final moments with Paul played over and over in slow motion in Lily’s mind as she lay on the couch. At the moment, she had been still dwelling on the limits of her heroine’s understanding of the universe. If only she had known...

Paul bent over to kiss her cheek, his arm reaching casually around her shoulders. The slightest scent of the soap he used surrounded Lily and she drew a deep breath. His warm lips brushed her skin; he smiled as he pulled back a bit. Then it came. A moment lasting seconds too long, as he gently brought her against his chest and squeezed her shoulders.

He always did it. Not just to her, but to everyone. His grandmother. His friends. Old Ruth. As if to make sure the briefest of intimacies counted; it somehow let you know he really loved you, that he meant it.

Lily was completely lost in this not unpleasant fog of memory, but no matter how hard she tried, or how much she might want it otherwise, the moment never lasted. The world abruptly intruded.

She felt a rush of air as her mother suddenly appeared at her side.

Clair grabbed Lily’s thin hand in hers. Lily looked up at the familiar face. Tears waited in her mother’s bright blue eyes. “I have to show you something,” Clair said.

“Oh, mom.” This was all she could manage before her mother, insistently, pulled her upright. Dizziness washed over her in force, the desire to fall back strong, but it seemed more trouble to stop her mother.

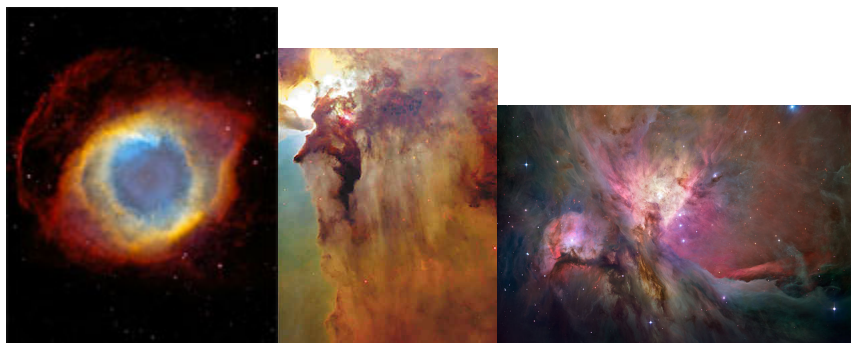


Clair led Lily up the stairs, passing the bright and cheerful Hundertwassers—one of Clair’s favorite artists—each picture, like most of their art, utterly incongruent to their reality. The older woman slowed to accommodate the younger woman’s extreme lethargy as she managed the stairs, pausing every third one to rest. “What is it?”

“It’s in Paul’s room.”

Alarm lifted in Lily’s eyes. Paul’s room? What could be in Paul’s room?

They turned down the hall and stopped at the doorway.



Neither Clair nor Lily liked any clutter and this trait had been passed down to Paul. He kept the space remarkably simple. A thick blue, red and green quilted bedspread matched the dark blue carpet. Oak book shelves lining one whole wall, floor to ceiling, stacked with books, music and school and family memorabilia: Karate trophy's alongside his black belt, a felt hat from the school production of Guys and Dolls, a framed copy of the first best seller list to have his mother's name on it, a Model United Nations award, another picture of the Alcaraz family in their new Habitat for Humanity home, and his grandmother's teaching award. An oak desk set against the window. A computer and chess board there. Three gorgeous glass encased posters of space art tossed brilliant color into the room, but...

The door to Paul's closet had been left open. Big Ben had pulled down one shirt after another and carried them into a pile on Paul's bed. The dog lay on top of the pile. He didn't lift his head, but he opened his small, round eyes, eyes filled with Lily's own grief...

## Lily

Clair screamed the warning into the dreamscape, but no sound emerged. Paralyzed with terror, she could only watch helplessly. Lily remained oblivious, or perhaps, more horrifying, indifferent. She sat at a familiar picnic table before a dark forest. A feast spread across the table, but Lily ignored the bounty there.

An old woman emerged from the forest and headed toward her daughter.

Clair woke in a panic and stared dazedly around the room, her gaze at first unable to settle on any one thing as her thoughts race ahead to the ending. The inevitable ending, she was going to lose Lily, too.



The covers flew back. Rising with urgency and purpose, she made her way down the dark hall bare foot, past a reproduction of Three Graces, beauty, charm and joy, all of which now belonged in another world, a different place than the one they occupied, and a large reproduction of Paul's favorite Turner seascape. She had argued for Turner's Ship Wreck and Slave Ship, but Paul swore he couldn't live with either picture—too tragic to see every day—and instead he selected Turner's more transcended painting The Grand Canal.





She opened Lily's bedroom door.

A cool breeze blew through the open window, lifting paper thin periwinkle curtains, material originally meant for an Indian woman's Sari, but seized by Lily for the unconventional purpose several years ago on one of her first trips with Max. The faintest light filtered in the dark room from the yellow street light outside the window, casting the room in slow moving shadows. Two bamboo night tables framed one of the last king size water beds in the nation, and Lily's now slight form all but disappeared in the giant space of the bed, hidden beneath the thick blue comforter and oversized matching pillows. A plush carpet of sea grass covered the pavers and scratched Clair's bare feet as she tiptoed to the bed. Lily's room was relatively bare—like some kind of monk, Lily could never work or even think among clutter. The digital clock spelled out the time in bright red numbers: 5:15. A large modern seascape hung across from the bed, very lovely, another present brought back at great expense from one of her many trips with Max. Chagall's Blue Violist hung over the bed and all but disappeared in the shadows.



The only other picture hanging in her room was a sketch of Paul at about age 12, a gift of one of Clair's more talented students. The marvel of the penciled portrait was how it had somehow captured both Paul's humor and his depth. The picture sat on the tiled floor, facing the wall.

Lily did not wake to her mother's touch. Tears had fallen over her hallowed cheek, draining into the dark hair and sliding off her chin to her neck. Clair's hand soothed it. She slowly opened her eyes.

"Lily," Clair beckoned, softly. "Lily, look at me."

Lily's gaze opened to see her mother's concern. "Mom?"

"You have to start getting better for me."



Lily's pause filled with her struggle, but she understood. She slowly nodded an acknowledgment. "Okay, Mom," she said, her sigh, swallow and long, somehow hinted at how difficult this would be. "Okay."

The younger woman rose and obediently headed for the shower. Sometime later she emerged dressed in clean Levis, a navy sweater and tennis shoes. After fixing a breakfast of oatmeal and orange juice, she grabbed Ben's leash and with the dog in toe, she headed for the beach.

Clair watched her closely all day. Lily was not normal, but a return to normal was no longer in the realm of the possible for them; they were paraplegics who would never walk again. Still, Lily acted as if she had stepped onto a narrow road to a partial recovery. She pretended to be okay and Clair took the pretense to be a sign of health.

Clair counted her blessings.

Days later Lily found the tape.

She sat at the kitchen counter, finally tackling the stack of hundreds of condolence cards, while Clair tackled a full inbox of university emails on the couch, portable on her lap. Still receiving flowers, every vase in the house held colorful and fragrant bouquets. Red and orange dried sunflowers in a bright blue vase decorated the Matisse coffee table alongside Clair's sandaled feet. The large windows remained open to the elements and a slight fall chill entered the spacious room. It normally took them till November to realize summer had many months passed. Despite the cataclysmic upheaval in their lives, this year proved no different.

"There must be over a hundred cards here," Lily commented. "I had no idea we knew this many people!"

“I’m always amazed,” Clair nodded, “Somehow we’re always collecting friends. For life.” Musing out loud, still trying to make Lily laugh, “There doesn’t seem to be any returns. Believe me, I’ve tried.”

Clair was rewarded with a smile.

Momentarily overwhelmed by the small mountain of love, concern, sorrow, Lily exclaimed, “So much kindness!”

Clair nodded sagely as she wrote a letter of recommendation for one of her students. Instead of writing I would like to recommend Jackson Naylor, she would love to tell the truth: While this kid is a serious procrastinator, he makes up for chronic tardiness with a keen eye for the good stuff and a deep appreciation of everything art... “There’s a lot of love in this world, if you can only ignore all the unpleasant stuff that surrounds it.”

Lily continued reading the cards. “Now, that’s ironic.”

“What?”

“A get well card...” Lily silently read it.

“Right,” Clair remembered. “From Ruth. I couldn’t bear to read it, terrified that she’d somehow turn Paul’s death into something about her.”

“It’s actually very sweet. She wrote: When I heard about Paul’s accident...” Lily looked up and sighed, “The word accident has become euphemistic for death, have you noticed?”

Clair nodded. “More than once. Go on.”

“When I heard about Paul’s accident, I got this idea that I should get you a card, that somehow a card would have the heaven sent power to set things right, but of course I couldn’t think straight. Nothing can set things straight, certainly nothing in this cruel

material world. Just know, dear Lady, that I love Paul. He was the most special person in my life and I will miss him every day that I have left.... Oh mom, that's so sweet."

Clair didn't appear convinced; her drawn brows signaled mischief. "I suppose it would be absolutely hateful to point out that the reason she loves Paul is because he drove her to the supermarket every Sunday—"

"Yes, it would be," Lily agreed.

"It would probably also be ungrateful to mention she brought us, a house of mourning vegetarians, a chicken pot pie. That old woman is no chef, either. Even Big Ben turned his nose up at it—"

"Mom!" Lily scolded. "Ruth is just a lonely old woman."

"I know," Clair sounded a contrite note. The silence returned as Lily read the cards until—"I never told you but Paul asked me to... I don't know. Befriend Ruth."

Lily turned to study her mom, assessing the veracity of the statement in her face. "Did he?"

Clair nodded. "He felt sorry for her. He said something about that she had spent the whole of her life waiting for the next one."

"Oh," Lily nodded. "When we were looking for a poem for that school project we came across an Emily Dickinson verse and he said, Mom that reminds me of old Ruth." Lily rushed over to the crowded book shelf. The blue eyes made a quick search of the titles. "Here it is." She quickly found the treasure within the pages. "It does suit perfectly."

Lily had the loveliest reading voice. Listening to Lily read to Paul as a young boy was one of Clair's greatest pleasures; her daughter employed that same voice now:

A death blow is a life blow to some  
Who, till they die, did not alive become;  
Who, had they lived, had died, but when  
They died, vitality begun.”

Clair’s nod came with a sigh. “Fits like a well worn coat. All she has is church and her garden.”

Lily returned the book to its place before returning to the cards again. “What did Paul want you to do?”

“Befriend her; change her; make her happy, I suppose. You know how he would flatter you before he asked you for a favor?”

Lily smiled as she remembered this. “Oh yeah.”

“He told me he didn’t know anyone who knew how to live more fully than me: all my traveling, the artists I know, teaching... he thought I could show that poor old lady how to start living.”

“Did you agree?” The question held uncertainty, as Lily could not imagine her mom agreeing to befriend the old woman.

“I told him that, like all wise people, I prefer to keep charity and friends separated... But then he gave me one of those Paul hugs, you know, the unhurried kind, as if we had all the time in the world...”

Clair drifted off, remembering this hug.

Long minutes passed as they both lost themselves to reverie of these embraces.

Clair emerged from the dreamy haze first. She thought now might be a good time to prod Lily. “You’ve got to tell him.”

Lily pretended not to hear.

“He deserves to know,” she added.

“He doesn’t deserve anything.”

“Lily Merton.”

Pause. “I’ll write him.”

“Lily. Please. You cannot drop someone a note: Your son has died... This is an in person event if ever there was one.” Yet her daughter made no response, and this brought a sigh of exasperation. “If you cannot manage it, I’ll be inclined to go for you.”

“Let me think about it, okay?”

“And what about Max? I’m sure he would like to hear from you.”

“Mom, I’m not... ready for that, for Max. It’s hard just getting through a day.”

She looked over to the couch and met her mother’s sympathetic gaze, finding understanding there. She still did not know if she would ever get through this, whatever getting through it actually entailed, but she knew with utter certainty she would not manage the feat without her mom with her.

The CD sat unobtrusively between their doctor’s condolence card and Tom’s, an older man she often swam with. “What’s this?”

“Oh that. The principal, Mrs. Pickering brought it over some time ago. Someone recorded a debate Paul was in with one of his friends—did you know about it? She said it was some kind of big deal at school.”

“The debate with Jonathan Knowles.”

Clair looked up with surprise. “Jonathan Knowles, our poor local genius? The other elite member of the 2400 SAT club. Are Paul and he still running neck and neck for valedictorian?”

“They were. The two of them were becoming close this last year.”

“Paul had him here for dinner, right? You were with Max and I was teaching, if I recall.”

Lily examined the CD as if it were the key to a puzzle. “And they started studying together on Monday nights--AP English, I think.”

Clair stared distantly at the short yellow petals of the sunflowers artfully arranged in a blue vase on the coffee table, thinking instead of Jonathan Knowles’ mother. Gossip, and plenty of it, had always surrounded that poor lady. Anyone who imagines a woman’s greatest asset was her appearance never contemplated Jonathan’s mother’s unfortunate fate. A popular men’s magazine began mining college campuses for beautiful coeds, finding Jonathan’s mom, a senior biology major with a full scholarship to Yale medical school. Earning nothing more than a short lived fame, she had married twice before Jonathan saw his sixth birthday. She had become increasingly wealthy by squeezing her way into various portfolios until finally, comfortably settled, she married at last for love. Only to lose her hard won fortunes to Jonathan’s current stepfather, a serious drinker and even more serious gambler.

That’s when she ran off with, depending on who told the story, a Peruvian General, a yacht salesman, or her divorce lawyer. Scandalizing the whole town, she abandoned the chubby, sweet faced boy to the drunk. No one knew who told Jonathan his

mom had died, but someone had and no one had the cruelty necessary to correct a small boy's understanding.

Thinking of the poor kid's unkempt appearance, the myriad of signs of his general neglect—mostly complaints from Paul's teachers that Jonathan never had any lunch and rarely wore clean clothes, Clair asked out loud, "I wonder if he still thinks his Mom died?"

"I have no idea," Lily said, taking a card from the unread mountain of cards, perusing it and placing it in the other pile. "I haven't seen him or his stepfather since 8th grade graduation."

"Didn't Paul say it was a bad situation, though?" Clair felt a twinge of regret, wondering why she and Lily didn't pay more attention to these circumstances. Too late now.

Now they had their own problems.

Lily nodded. "Jonathan's stepfather rarely shows up in the apartment, Paul said, and that Jonathan worried the man would forget the rent and they'd get evicted before high school ended. I think Paul had invited him to dinner with us the week..."

Lily's voice trailed off; she never finished. She didn't have to.

"Paul was always bringing home the strays."

Lily nodded. "Remember his homeless phase?"

"Thank you Mother Teresa! I think every homeless person in the city went through our house until Pastor Simon finally agreed to start the soup kitchen at the church."

The memory made Lily laugh, a bright and beautiful sound.

Clair froze upon hearing it. Unexpectedly a warm tug of melancholy carried her back to the first time she heard the sweet sound of Lily's laughter as she held her four month old baby in a pool in Hawaii. People always prepare new parents for their baby's first smile, first steps, first word, but the biggest joy arrived with that happy sound a child's first laugh. So, she had been waiting for the sound of baby Paul's laugh. He had been six weeks old, held in his grandfather's arms as she tickled his bare feet.

The memory washed her in feeling...

"Remember that man Pete who poured whiskey right into my chili?" Lily asked, on a different page of Paul's life.

Clair nodded. "The fun we had trying to get them to leave!"

Lily shook her head slightly, her eyes twinkling. "Paul was so kind to them..."

This was true. Paul's kindness was a defining characteristic.

"So," Clair asked. "What was this debate about?"

"Something about God and transcendence," Lily remembered, greedily clinging to the memory of helping Paul find a poem to use in the debate. They were searching through Emily Dickenson again...

She closed her eyes, reliving every detail.

Paul's lanky six foot three framednk into the couch as he read through the Treasury of British Poetry, searching for this special poem on transcendence. As she settled next to him, she caught a glimpse of his size seventeen feet. The kid's shoe size had matched his age every year of his life. The amusing idea that it would never end became the source of jokes and teasing...



Thick curly hair crowned Paul's head, softening the sharp and angular lines that drew his face: he had a square set jaw, a large, prominent nose, high cheek bones, wide forehead and wider set brown eyes set beneath jet black brows. His appearance might be characterized as harsh or at least dramatic, but it was saved by the warmth in his eyes, the ever present kindness and curiosity there, a smile that revealed comically large white teeth.

He had not an athletic bone in his body, and his clothes always hung loose on his thin frame. Like now, he wore baggy cut jeans, a large black tee and red canvas high tops. She never could interest him in sports, though she tried, she did try. Just for physical fitness, she made him take Karate. Of course, he was far more interested in the martial arts philosophy and Buddhism from which it sprang than he was in practicing. Philosophy, poetry, religion—not your average seventeen year old, for sure.

“Here, how about this one,” Lily read the famous poem, her voice artfully infused with both emotion and cadence:

“Because I could not stop for Death—  
He kindly stopped for me--  
The Carriage held but just Ourselves--  
and Immortality.”

“Death as a living character,” Paul commented.

“Not living,” Lily corrected. “More like a very present character.”

Paul recited the next stanza from memory:

“We slowly drove--  
He knew no haste—  
“And I had put away  
My labor and my leisure too,  
For His Civility—”

“She’s leaving life,” Paul said. “Setting down both work and play. But why is she doing it for his civility?” he wondered. “Why or how is death civil?”

“Because life would be horrible without death. The civility is that Death has stopped to take her away.”

Paul nodded slowly at this, but otherwise made no comment. She resumed reading:

“We passed the school, where children strove  
At recess, in the ring;  
We passed the fields of gazing grain,  
We passed the setting sun.”

“They are passing by life, the living,” Paul said, again thoughtfully.

“But ultimately death is cold,” Lily said, moving to the next stanza.

“Or rather, be passed us—”

“Very nice,” Paul smiled.

“The dews grew quivering and chill,  
For only gossamer my gown,  
My tippet only tulle.

Lily sighed, “Editors used to leave that stanza out.”

“I can kind of see why,” Paul admitted. “Though God knows, it takes an insane kind of arrogance to edit ole’ Emily.”

Lily agreed wholeheartedly. After clearing her throat:

“We paused before house that seemed  
A swelling of the ground;  
The roof was scarcely visible,  
The cornice but a mound.”

“That’s a grave, isn’t it?”

“There are a number of interpretations,” Lily said.

“She’s trading her house for a grave, enumerating the similarities.”

“Now, you’re getting somewhere,” Lily smiled:

“Since then 'tis centuries, and yet each  
Feels shorter than the day  
I first surmised the horses' heads  
Were toward eternity.”

“Haunting. The realization that she’s dead.” Paul got up, graceful for his height, and made his way to the refrigerator. “Altogether an arresting and fascinating bunch of words. But it’s not right.”

Lily gaze lifted from the book. “Not right?” Outrage widened the blue eyes. “Wait one minute, Mister. You might be smart, but you’re not smart enough to reject Emily Dickinson.”

Paul laughed as he poured juice into a tall blue glass. “Let me qualify my rejection. Not right for this project.” The glass tilted back, the contents drained in a single movement. “What’s that poem of hers you love—about imagination and God?”

“Oh, that one!” Lily flipped through book. “Here it is:” And unlike the last, far more difficult poem, she read this one straight through:

“The brain is wider than the sky,  
For, put them side by side,  
The one the other will include  
With ease, and you beside.

The brain is deeper than the sea,

For, hold them, blue to blue,  
The one the other will absorb,  
As sponges, buckets do.

Lily' voice slowed:

The brain is just the weight of God,  
For, lift them, pound for pound,  
And they will differ, if they do,  
As syllable from sound.”

“Utterly, incandescently brilliant,” Paul realized after a thoughtful pause. “I need to borrow the book—Jonathan will love it!”

Jonathan

Jonathan stood at the podium, making a casual study of the crowd as he sipped a coke. They waited for everyone to arrive before Pickering introduced the unusual program. The debate had first started in AP French. The teacher Ms. Tomas had been so enthralled and entertained by the lively discussion between he and Paul, she convinced Pickering to present it to the whole upper class.

“This is just the kind of dynamic and creative learning experience we need!”  
Yeah, right. Whatever.

Thankfully they could debate in their native tongue this time. Paul spoke excellent French after having spent a semester in Paris with his grandmother, whereas he had no aptitude for speaking foreign language. While he could read and write it easily enough, speaking it was a difficult and embarrassing experience. He suspected this would always be the case.

Kids streamed into the auditorium. General chaos ensued; the frenetic energy and deafening noise level of two hundred teenagers packed into a small space. The very idea of high school always seemed to fall somewhere between ill-advised and disastrous. Evolutionarily speaking, when kids hit puberty, they needed to be brought into the adult world, not kept separated from it. Packing confused, scared or scary, hormone laden teenagers together in a small space was clearly a recipe for trouble, but no one seemed to realize the gravity of this mistake.

He brought the coke to his lips, watching Paul flirt with Jenna Christianson in the first row. “Starbucks is on me if you managed to stay awake for the next hour.”

“Very funny,” she laughed, her smile announcing a serious crush, an affliction found in exactly half the student body. “I need the coffee first....”

Jonathan spotted Carl Walker in the back with some other varsity football jocks.

The freshman memory still played in his nightmares. That day he had been walking home after school, fuel by an excitement over Pickering’s offer to put him on the school district’s official tutor list. “I’ll even post a letter of recommendation, Jonathan.” The money meant everything. His stepfather wanted one hundred and fifty dollars for rent and if he got two tutoring jobs a day, at twenty-five dollars a shot, he’d have more than enough for rent, food and clothes, maybe eventually a new computer.

Such was his heady calculations when he heard, “Hey! Jonathan Knows Shit!”

He pretended not to hear them.

“Hey, dumb fuck, are you wearing a polo shirt?”

The Laguna Beach Breakers Water Polo team tee shirt. Purchased for fifty cents at the local thrift shop, the only shirt there in his size, a treasure, now possibly becoming a regret. He ignored them, of course. He always ignored them. Two out of three times ignoring his tormentors, like a bothersome flies, worked.

But this time Walker wanted more sport. “Hey! Jonathan Knows shit. I’m talking to you fuckhead!”

Hiking his back pack up, Jonathan walked faster. The tall red head rushed from behind, grabbed Jonathan’s arm and swung round in front of him. They were of a height, about six foot one at that point, but a decade of serious athletics covered Walker in muscle, where as all he had was old fashioned fat.

Jonathan stared into the gold eyes, unnaturally lit with both glee and malice, a plainly terrifying combination. Fear, [alarm](#), [apprehension](#), [dread](#), [fright](#), [horror](#).

His heart began a slow steady escalation. What were words for a physical manifestation of fear: [panic](#), terror... He jerked his arm free, started to back up, searching the field for help. In the far distance, about a quarter of a mile away, a lady walked a small dog.

He abruptly bumped into Derrick Bowers, who had come up behind to block his escape. He dropped his back pack.

“Yeah, Knows shit,” Craig Marcus, Walker’s other buddy, appeared on the side.

“Take off the fucking shirt, Knows shit.”

Jonathan shook his head. “An unreasonable request, one I must deny. I’ll tell you why too, though you do not deserve the favor, but first, answer me this: What has my shirt got to do with you anyway? My imagination has an enormous reach, just enormous, and yet I cannot imagine how or why you care about something so small and inconsequential as my shirt. You don’t even play polo—”

The first punch doubled him over.

“You never make fucking sense, Knows shit.”

Jonathan tried to stand up, managing somewhat. “You’ve got it all wrong, which, considering the limits of your meager intelligence, is really no big surprise. I guess the Special Ed isn’t really working, is it?”

“Shut the fuck up!”

“Exercising our wit, are we? Shut. The. Fuck. Up. Very articulate. Straight to the point, direct, but, lacking, should we say, originality? And like so many banalities, deficient in depth—”

He heard the sickening sound of his jaw crack beneath Walker’s fist. Doubled over, the hard kick meant for his groin connected instead, mercifully, to his hip. Pain shot through his mid-section. Someone else—Derrick?—lunged for him, sending him flailing to the ground. More kicks. The world became a blur made up of black streaks of football shoes and red dirt from the track.

Suddenly, “Walker, Derrick! Geezus! What are you doing?”

“Teaching the fuckhead a lesson.”

“My God, stop!”

“Mind your own fucking business, Merton.”



Jonathan's eyes, squeezed tight, opened at sound of Paul's voice. Only to see Marcus's foot swinging back, aiming for his face. Paul's foot intercepted this unconventional weapon. Marcus went flying onto his back side, landing with a satisfying thud.

"I'll kill you Merton!"

"You'll kill me? I won't—"

Paul managed only that much before he became fully engaged.

Jonathan needed ten breaths before he could move and he got to his hands and feet, but stopped there. Walker swung hard at Paul, but Paul, shorter then and maybe half the weight of Walker, stepped smoothly back. Walker stumbled awkwardly forward. The tall boy recovered quickly, his face reddening dangerously as he rose and rushed at Paul. Moving with an unnatural speed, at the last second Paul stepped aside.

Walker stumbled onto his knees.

Recovered, Marcus swung back wide, throwing a punch at Paul. This was not possible. Paul knocked the fist up and around. Marcus threw another punch. Paul grabbed that fist and with a weird twist, he brought Marcus to his knees. The young man looked many years younger as fear entered his eyes, and he cried out in pain.

Despite the pain, Jonathan smiled. So Paul Merton, the second smartest kid in the school, knew something he didn't: Karate. Jonathan had no TV, leaving him only video games by which to watch karate fights. He had much less exposure to fighting than most boys his age, which meant he had seen only hundreds of hours of martial art fights as opposed to the thousands his contemporaries had enjoyed. No doubt at least a decade of near daily lessons went into Paul Merton's special talents.

Paul had never mentioned it; Jonathan had never known.

He remembered breathing heavily, and managing to come to his feet even as he mentally began generating synonyms for brave: intrepid, fearless, audacious, gallant, valorous...

Within ten minutes, Walker and Marcus lay on the ground in pain or trying to catch their breath. Craig, maybe twenty-five safe feet away, bent over and watched Paul wearily.

Paul, breathing deeply, but in no way impaired, came to Jonathan's side. "Hey. Are you okay, Jonathan?"

"Yeah, yeah," Jonathan said but his thoughts remained focus on the most amazing aspect of Paul's special talent. "Man, you never threw a punch?"

Paul grinned with an easy shrug. "Maybe next time."

Paul Merton had no doubt bought some lame passivism pabulum about non-violence.

Jonathan thought he better seize this chance. He approached Walker, and with the same murderous glee in his own gaze now, drawing on all his strength, he swung his fist hard into Walker's face. A satisfying crack filled the air, a pain filled cry sounded.

"Ouch," Jonathan said, shaking the pain ricocheting up his arm.

This was the first time Jonathan earned the treasure of Paul Merton's laughter.

"I guess he deserves it," Paul admitted.

"Why wouldn't you hit them?" Jonathan asked as he grabbed his backpack.

Paul shrugged. "My sensei would kill me," he explained.

"Have you read Lord of the Flies?"

“Twice,” Paul said.

“Twice?” Jonathan whistled, impressed. He had known Paul Merton was smart, of course. The school had both of them visit an ‘education specialist,’ someone who was supposed to help keep their intelligence ‘engaged’ by piling on extra work. The idea had always struck him as stupid. He needed a lot of help in many areas, but keeping his intelligence engaged was not one of his problems. Nor was this Paul’s problem. Up until that point he couldn’t really say they were friends, at least not close friends. There had been certain memorable encounters throughout their school years. He remembered Paul’s incomprehension when, in first grade, he had told Paul his step father insisted that Jesus was pretend like the Easter bunny.

“The first time I was in third grade,” Paul explained as they walked away. “It was the only time my mom ever said I was too young for a book. So naturally, I read it the next day. She was right, of course, so I read it again just last year.” His brow arched over his eyes, somehow emphasizing his words. “There’s a frightening book.”

“Adolescent males,” Jonathan agreed, “Little more than barbarians....”

And so their real friendship began...

At last all five feet of Ms. Pickering elfish frame finally showed up on stage. Paul helped adjust the old fashioned microphone to the older woman’s diminutive size. She did look like an aging elf: a graying bubble of pale red hair, crinkly blue eyes behind glasses knocked straight out of the fifties, an easy smile, and bright green suit.

“Hello,” she beckoned tentatively. “Good morning, people! Settle down, please.”

No response; the threats would come next, Jonathan knew.

“Harold! Sam’s head is not a drum—stop that.”

With a roll of eyes and a guilty grin, Harold stopped it.

“Melissa, make that cell phone disappear or I’ll add it to my collection.”

Melissa slipped the cell into her purse, even managing to look contrite.

The noise level plummeted.

“Okay, okay. Better. Now, students, faculty. We have gathered everyone here today to listen to the debate between Paul Merton and Jonathan Knowles. The debate concerns the true nature of... love.” The older woman grinned, as if the topic were somehow illicit. “Each young man will present his opening statements. A coin toss put Mr. Knowles up first.” She turned to him, “If you will Jonathan.”

“Greetings and salutations my fellow prisoners,” he began, exercising a deep and rich voice. “I am here to convince you, the marching morons of the world, that this emotion we call love in all it’s nutty manifestations: as the driving force between the sexes, all of Shakespeare’s works and every sappy country western song; this potent energy that makes otherwise perfectly sane people sacrifice most of their lives and all of their wealth for their almost universally ungrateful children, this overwhelming ‘feeling’ that compels Americans to spend 20 plus billion of hard earned dollars a year on their pets; this one word that has the awesome ability to cause wars, murder, and suicides; I am here to demonstrate that this whole shebang of love is no more than a chemical reaction in our brains.”

People booed, of course. He had never been popular. In the early grades he had seemed too different. His clothes, bought at the local thrift store, were always too big or too small and rarely clean. The teachers would sometimes call and leave a message or send a letter home with him, which he would usually toss in the garbage without reading.

He had no money to play little league and had no rides to the fields or gyms in any case. Teachers knew that he was smart, even very smart—a perfect score on every test—but they didn't know how smart until junior high when it was assessed. Then, his intelligence only seemed to separate him more.

From everyone but Paul. His first friend; really his only friend.

Jonathan mentally imagined loser tattooed on his forehead. Loser: underdog, failure, washout, turkey.

“Jonathan Knowles,” Paul said his name in a pretense of being appalled. “How did such a smart, even brilliant seventeen year old guy become so friggin' cynical?”

“Every ounce of my colossal cynicism is born from my keen observation of the world, Paul.”

“You mean jaded observation. Otherwise you'd know love, and its awesome power; you'd be drawn inexorable to the sole conclusion that love is a gift from God...”

Pickering had wanted rules for the debate, but both he and Paul refused. Theirs were free wheeling thought processes. They would always vote against restrictions on it.

“Whoa! God. The most ambiguous word in the dictionary. Okay, before we even start this debate I need to clarify what you mean by that all powerful word: God. For me God is characterized by these words: inscrutable, invisible and unknowable, which means a being who basically doesn't really exist, except in fantasies. But, how do you define him, Paul?”

An unseen girl shouted from the audience: “God is female!”

The audience laughed.

Paul laughed, too. “I don’t think God fits into any words; God certainly cannot fit into any pronoun. And while defining God might be an interesting intellectual exercise for bored academics, I personally cannot convey God in words; it’s the difference between a painting of a sunset and the thing itself.”

Tim Hennessy shouted, “Jesus loves you, man!”

More laughter followed that remark. “Ms. Pickering,” Jonathan complained. “You promised, didn’t you, to separate the dimmest wits from the rest of the morons?”

Ms. Pickering scoffed. “Now, now, Jonathan—”

“You missed one, that’s all I’m saying here.”

Now Jonathan earned the crowd’s laughter. They were on a roll.

“That’s enough, people,” Ms. Pickering shouted. “One more interruption and you’ll start losing lunch time.” She turned to Paul, “Go ahead, Paul.”

“Mankind has always struggled with how to define God, but this has never mattered to me. It’s certainly less important how we define God as it is having God’s presence operating in our lives—”

Jonathan shook his head. “Did you just say operate?”

“Oh yeah.”

Jonathan hit the first picture on the big screen. He had no doubt it would come up sometime. Teenagers were the most visually stimulated and therefore, jaded humans in history, and he knew they required something more to look at than just Paul and he. They both planned to hit certain points with power points. Michelangelo’s depiction of God appeared in the over head screen.



“Can’t go there, man,” Jonathan said. “The idea of God as the old white haired man-being seated atop a throne made of clouds, dispensing lightning bolts, wars, plagues and... occasional warm fuzzies to his human subjects is offensive to me.” He warned to the subject, “See, either God is responsible for everything—”

Paul nodded, “The holocaust.” A picture of the holocaust appeared on the screen.

“The Rwandan genocide—” The screen displayed a pile of human skulls.

“Torture in any number of prisons.” A nightmarish picture of a prison cell and various stultifying mechanical devices used for this purpose popped on the large screen.

“The ravages of AIDS,” Paul said as a picture of a dying child manifest there.

“And that really great parking space you just got,” Jonathan said, the last picture drawn from the local mall.

Paul nodded, smiling. “The parking space God. Most prayed to deity in the history of mankind.”

The laughter sounded loud, full of unmistakable relief.

Jonathan cleared his throat. “Let me illustrate the difficulty in assigning omnipotence to God. Has anyone heard of the Ghana worm?”

Paul collapsed in amusement. “No, please, I thought we agreed to skip the worm this time.”

“Are you kidding? It’s far too compelling. You see this tiny worm has the awesome power to disprove God’s presence on earth.” To the audience, “Paul’s familiar with one of my favorite little beasties.”

“Jonathan,” Paul explained, his tone infused with affection and humor both. “Has a fetish for ah, parasites. All I can say is it’s a good thing lunch is ahead of us.”

The big screen showed a picture of a pond of water in a jungle, a couple of Africans dipping cups and bowls into the water. “That’s fact. The Ghana worm’s larvae hang out in fresh water until the unsuspecting human inadvertently swallows it. It hatches and begins to feed on flesh, eventually growing into a foot long worm.”

Groans sounded loud from the audience in the auditorium. Even teachers and Pickering exclaimed, moaned or covered their eyes from the gruesome sight.

“Soon the worm begins secreting acid, which its victims say is the most painful affliction known to mankind. Host humans writhe in agony for months, praying for death. The acid finally bubbles up and makes a hole in the skin.”

The screen showed a man with the Ghana worm emerging from his flesh. More groans erupted from the audience. “The worm uses the hole to escape. Now, the human doesn’t usually die; they only wish they were dead. The poor victims can’t work, of course, while this worm completes his life cycle inside of them. No work often translates to starvation, starvation sometimes of whole families. Now this nightmare is a not uncommon African scenario—”

“You’re one sick puppy, Knowles!”



“No, not me,” Jonathan protested. “I didn’t create these murderous worms. I didn’t set them upon innocent people. God did. That’s the point: if you believe that God creates and orchestrates the stuff that happens on earth, and you worship Him, then you are worshipping one sadistic mother f—“

“Jonathan,” Ms. Pickering stopped him.

“Can I say SOB then?”

“No, keep it clean,” she said.

“Too late. Got to be fast in this world, Ms. Pickering. You see, no matter how you look at it, if God could intervene to prevent a child’s slow and painful death and yet He doesn’t, why the heck would we worship Him?”

A bemused expression came to Paul’s face. “Let it rip, Jonathan. Explain why human beings have this proclivity to imagine an omnipotent, omnipresent being who watches over them...”

Lily

Lily clicked the CD of the debate off. She had watched the beginning six or seven times. She would not view the whole tape. Like Paul’s journals, she had to save it and savor it in small slices. This was the last she had of Paul.

Big Ben looked up as Lily stood and began pacing.

She would give anything for Paul’s faith. To truly believe in the transcendence of the soul, that at some point she and Paul would be reunited....

That belief had the awesome power to melt away her grief.

She couldn't go on like this, she just couldn't. Reliving memories. Playing these treasured memories in her mind, going over and over them, so as to be certain not to forget anything: The first time Paul heard Beethoven's Ninth, the startled concentration on his face as he listened. The day Paul left kindergarten and took the bus to the library. They found him four hours later when the city librarian finally noticed him between the rows of books—Paul could be unnaturally quiet. Paul swore that he had told the teacher he was bored and was going to the library. Of course she thought he meant the school library, but "I already read all those books," he told her. The time even before that when Paul saw a wheelchair bound man with no legs. "Where did your legs go?"

Without missing a beat, the man said, "They ran away."

"Oh," Paul answered. "When mine run away, they take me with them."

She relived each memory from the beginning to the end, summoning more and more details from the endless recesses of her mind. While she saved everything Paul ever wrote, she never took many pictures; she had never used a video cam in her life. What a mistake! If she could do it over, she would have taped every breath he took.

For some long moments she struggled not to cry.

Yet, the battle in her mind faded, as she realized she now stood staring at the bookcase. An unconscious means to save herself. Books. Writing. She needed to escape; if anyone knew how to do this, it was her.

The beginning came to her immediately. A modification of the novel she had been researching before Paul's death. She opened her laptop.

The setting? Somewhere in France, 1400s

*This couldn't be happening, it just couldn't!*

*Condemned by the ecclesiastic court to die at the stake. Not her! Not Rochelle of Savauge!*

*Three ropes bound her to the pole, one at her shoulders, one at her waist and one at her feet. The kindling sticks formed a small mountain below her. She looked across the courtyard to see Bishop Comte de Berry. The man's gaze, with his one hideously white blind eye, stared up to the heavens. A crimson cap covered his balding head, matching the rich robes that draped his stocky frame, all of the finery splashed with mud now and pressed against his frame by a goodly breeze. His hands held the parchment where the edict was writ. She and two others had been condemned to burn at the stake. A half dozen priests and monks followed behind him. Two of the brown robed monks held torches, while one held the noose.*

*They had all witnessed her short trail.*

*After a cold, sleepless night held in the stables, they brought her into a small, stone room in back of the church. A fire and a glass encased lantern threw dim light inside, but neither managed to offset the pervasive chill. As she entered the darkened space, she caught sight of the instruments of torture, ropes and strange contractions found in nightmares, all of these pushed into the back corner. The scent of spilled blood mixed with dampness and mold.*

*No sunlight ever touched these stones.*

*The guard's gloved hand pushed her to a kneeling position before a wooden table and three chairs where the Bishop sat with his priests. The wall behind them held a wooden cross, that was all.*

*"Do not be afraid, my child," the Bishop first said, his voice and manner calm, even comforting. "I will not hurt you."*

*She shook her head, pushing against the rope that bound her hands behind her. The stones cut sharply into her knees. Hunger made her faint, and thirst scratched at her throat, her lips were cracked and swollen with it. She eyed the pitcher full of water or wine greedily before confessing, "I am not strong, my Grace."*

*"God does not allow his children to be tested beyond their power to remain firm."*

*The girl's blue eyes widened in outrage. Only a man would say such a thing!*

*She did not believe in his God. She did not believe God was an old man sitting upon a gold throne high in the sky, a cruel God who orchestrated people's grief and misfortune, and played with Satan for the prize of mans' souls. Who could believe the Christian's stories, especially the favorite? God breathed his seed into an innocent maid. She then gave birth to a half man, half god. This Lord had been sent to save mortals. First he died and then he came alive again, before he was finally carried up to the heavens. It was suspiciously similar to yarns spun by the Romans about their mighty Gods. A stolen story, for sure, one told throughout the ages to bored or sleepy children for their amusement, but not a story to be believed. No, she did not believe in the cruel God of these men.*

*She believed in the earth that held and nourished her, in the fire that kept her warm and cooked her food, in the wind that brought each new day's weather and the rain that washed away her sorrows. She believed that fate was a seed you were born with, that the nature of the seed was set for all time, but that elements affected how high it would grow, the reach of its branches and the sweetness of its fruit.*

*Still, she knew to keep her tongue and she replied demurely, "Aye, my Grace."*

*"You are called Rochelle of Sauvage? You have no surname name?"*

*"Nay, my Grace."*

*"You belong to no man then? You are a bastard?"*

*Shame lowered her head. "Aye... My Grace."*

*"And here you are. You have no decent dress, no hat, no cloak to stop the sting of our cold wind. My God, you do not even have shoes upon your feet."*

*Rochelle made no response. Surely he must know they took her modest shift and cloak from her, replacing it with this potato sack? The thin garment offered no protection from the chill, and only gooseflesh covered her skin. Where the weight of her plait pressed the cloth against her skin, it scratched.*

*Oh, she had a litany of complaints!*

*"You are no one, a mere peasant. Yet you dared to question the authority of God's own church?"*

*"Nay, I would not."*

*"Do not lie more. You cried out as I pronounced the sentence, this I heard!"*

*Rochelle struggled to answer. "'Tis just that I cannot believe God would ask you to sacrifice poor Mistress Wonslot—"*

*The Bishop slammed his fist into the table as he rose, nearly upsetting the pitcher there. “You do not believe? The insolence necessary to imagine you, a mere slip of a girl is more familiar with God’s will than a man wearing the pectoral cross and the black and red sacramental vestments of a Bishop! God demands our obedience! We must burn the heretics; we must separate ourselves from the damned forever and by God’s mercy —“*

*“Nay, nay! Mistress Wonslot is no heretic! Innocent to her bones, she is touched is all!”*

*“Touched by Satan! Her madness bares the markings of the evil one!”*

*The priests nodded in agreement.*

*“Not Satan! Nay! Mistress Wonslot has been not right in the head since her little boy’s death.”*

*“God gave her the child and God took it away. She lost her faith, succumbing to the devil’s mischief in her mind. She is damned, I say!”*

*Rochelle shook her head. “God would not be so cruel!”*

*“Indeed. God gave Mistress Wonslot the strength to endure this tribulation—“*

*“He did not! Her grief ‘twas too great to fit in her heart; it spilled over into her mind and made her go mad. Everyone knows this.”*

Big Ben barked and lifted his head to stare at the door.

Lily’s fingers lifted from the keyboard and she looked up, as if to see what the dog heard. A shuffling sound came from outside. Big Ben came to his feet and moved to the door, offering one more bark. She knew that the dog felt no alarm.

Rising, Lily turned on the porch light before looking out the window. The darkened street created a still and quiet background; the only sound came as the distant ocean. The surprise brought a small gasp. She rushed to the door and opened it.

“Jonathan Knowles. I haven’t seen you since 8th grade graduation.”

Big Ben step in front of the tall young man, sniffing curiously. “Ms. Merton. Hey.” Jonathan managed to free a hand from the pile of books he carried to pet the dog’s wide head. “Hey, Big Ben, remember me? We met a while ago, when Paul invited me to dinner here. Oh yeah, you remember. Geez, you must miss him. Me too, buddy, me too.”

Big Ben leaned into Jonathan, as if soaking up the sympathy.

The easy and sweet tone the young man employed on Big Ben struck Lily in the heart, for a long moment she just stared. Jonathan Knowles stood as tall as Paul, maybe six four, something she might have realized from watching the debate, except Jonathan generally stood hunched and bent. Thick shoulder length ash blonde hair framed a round large face and head. Acne spread across his forehead. His eyes were large and unnaturally pale. No one would say he was handsome, and yet that he was a person of consequence, she had no doubt. The intensity of his gaze alone seemed to spell that out.

“Lily, please,” she corrected him. Then, lamely: “You’ve grown!”

“Yeah. Well,” he shrugged. “It happens.”

Paul had mentioned Jonathan’s sarcasm, which Paul found hilarious, but then Paul, unfortunately, like her mother, found so many improbable and ridiculous things hilarious. “I was just watching that debate you had with Paul.”

Jonathan nodded, “Ms. Pickering said she was going to send it to you.”

“I haven’t finished it.”

Nodding again, Jonathan's gaze traveled from his worn sneakers to an older feminine version of Paul; the resemblance was strong and discomfoting. He remembered once starting home from Thurston Middle school in the rare Southern California rain. A bus pass cost three hundred dollars, out of the question. Paul's mom had stopped to offer him a ride. She looked the same now, just as beautiful, wearing worn Levis and Paul's gray sweatshirt.

Jonathan motioned with the books. "I was returning these. Paul was always giving me books and well, I held on to them for awhile, but I thought you might want them."

"Please come in," she said.

The invitation seemed to surprise him. "Are you sure?"

"Sure." She stepped back.

Big Ben plodded alongside his new friend, before collapsing near the couch. Lily motioned to the coffee table. "You can set the books down there," she said, but realized he didn't hear. He stood stock still, staring at the pictures.

"I remember the art. It is incredible."

Lily smiled, accustomed to the response. "My mom is quite the collector. Though most are just inexpensive prints, of course."

He nodded, still staring. "Paul always went on about his grandma. One night we went through a bunch of art books; I think Paul was always a little appalled by how little I knew on some subjects. Anyway, it was real interesting." He added as an after thought, "We tried to figure out why schools don't incorporate more art history into the curriculum."

"My mom would love you," she smiled.



“Paul’s had me over for dinner a few times.”

“Did he?”

“No one was ever home, though.” Jonathan didn’t add that Paul started having him to dinner after inadvertently inspecting the inside of the apartment’s small refrigerator; he still recalled the look of incomprehension on Paul’s face. He might have felt bad about being one of Paul’s many charity cases, but for two things: Paul had a way of making the gift of his generosity go down as easy as warm milk on a chilly day, and the extent of his desperation forbid anything remotely resembling pride.

Jonathan finally tore his gaze from the art, and set the books down at the coffee table.

Lily took a moment to inspect the titles.

“Paul and I are huge science fiction fans,” he said, but instantly regretted it.

Lily’s frank blue eyes shot up.

“Oh shit. I mean Paul was—“

“I know he’s dead; the present tense is not going to confuse me.”

Jonathan jammed his fists into his front pockets and nodded. “I bet that happens a lot. People talking about Paul in the wrong tense.”

“Actually people don’t talk about Paul in any tense. Even my friends, especially my friends. And the trouble is that he is all I can talk about.”

“Harsh,” he said quietly.

“There’s no escaping that.”

He found his feet again, struggling through an awkward pause as Lily continued to peruse the books. “I didn’t think anyone would be up,” he finally said.

“Insomniacs are us,” she answered in a pretense of cheer.

“Hey! Me too.”

Drily: “And here I thought you were just pretending.”

Jonathan almost whistled. Okay, the lady was sharp and obviously unconventional. “Paul told me you’re a writer? I asked what you wrote, and Paul kind of laughed and told me a crazy title, like, *A Kiss in the Night*. Hard core ladies’ fiction. I was like, wow! He said you have dozens of books, and like a million fans, that you get letters everyday and that the guy Fabio is on the cover of your books, and—”

“You need to know when to stop.” Lily resisted the urge to smile.

“I know,” Jonathan nodded. “It’s a big problem. It’s just that I don’t get to talk to many people, you see and it’s like a pressure cooker in my mind and when I meet someone, ideas, thoughts, words just start spilling out of me. Paul really helped me tone it down; for some reason I never did it with him. Anyway, I’m real sorry.”

From this short speech Lily understood Jonathan’s loneliness; it swiftly broke her heart. “Oh, well, normally, I’m just as verbose—”

“No, I meant I’m real sorry about Paul. I’ve known Paul since the onset of my memory; basically forever. Paul was... special.”

“He was special...”

“I always loved Paul, but then everyone did, just everyone. The popular kids, the jocks, the nerds, even the stoners liked Paul. And girls.”

Lily smiled, delighted with this conversation. “Girls?” She knew about his girlfriends, but it was fun to hear about them from someone else.

“Especially the girls. All the girls liked him, even the ones that didn’t ‘like’ him liked him. I asked him, Dude, how do you do it? And you know what he said?”

Amused, Lily shook her head. “What?”

“He said, Jonathan, it pays to be a nice guy.”

Lily laughed. “He was a nice guy, wasn’t he?” she asked rhetorically.

“Oh yeah. You know Paul came over on Monday nights. He wanted me to come here, but he only had an hour and a half and well, I don’t have a car. Anyway,” he started over. “We practiced our weekly SAT vocab words. I don’t know how it started, but we’d play this game with the lists. Three minutes. That was all we’d get to study thirty words and then hold a conversation. First word Paul had to use in a sentence, second word I’d have to use, while simultaneously generating a coherent and logical response and so on, all the way through the vocab list.”

Paul had in fact told her about it. “I bet those were pretty interesting conversations!”

“World class actually. You’d be surprised.”

“You and Paul were always so bright.”

Jonathan nodded. “I miss him,” he said with unmasked feeling. “This last year we were getting...” The young man’s pause filled with meaning. “Well, I really miss him.”

She felt his sadness, mirroring her own, threatening to bring back the relentless, unwanted tears. “Me too,” she managed. Silence arrived and stayed too long, an unwelcome guest that neither party knew how to get rid of.

“I guess I’ve bothered you enough,” Jonathan finally managed quietly.

Lily didn't trust herself to speak yet, and helplessly she watched as Jonathan headed to the door. Suddenly, "Wait. About the debate. I have a question?"

"Sure, sure." He tried not to sound too eager. "Ask away."

About metaphysics, this was her favorite question: "Why is there something instead of nothing?"

"That's a great question, perhaps the only one that matters. It has to do with the quantum properties of a vacuum—"

"A vacuum?"

"Have you heard of Heisenberg's uncertainty principle?"

Lily shook her head. "Tea or soda, Jonathan?" The enthusiasm with which Jonathan leaped into the question left no doubt in her mind she was looking at a future professor. She recognized the signs: Just ask her mom about Matisse's cut outs, or how a blank canvas can be art, or why so much of contemporary art seemed inconsequential and her mom was off like a racehorse out the gate.

"Oh wow. Soda'd be great. The uncertainty principle holds that matter constantly comes into and out of existence, like, I don't know, winning lottery numbers. In this way a vacuum has matter. Does that make sense?"

Lily shook her head as she poured diet soda, left over from a long ago party, into a glass full of ice. None of this made sense. Poetry made sense to her; physics almost never. (She barely passed the subject in high school.) Paul used to tease her about the depth of her ignorance for an otherwise intelligent person.

"Put another way, time answers the question."

"Time?" Lily asked.

“Yeah. See, if time is infinite—and hey, what is time, is it real and why does it appear to move in one direction, these are all great questions, too—but the more it is infinite, the greater the probability that eventually something happens.”

“You mean the Big Bang.”

“The biggest bang! Imagine it! 13.8 billion years ago or thereabouts, the whole friggin’ universe was compressed into the confines of a point billions of times smaller than a... a period. Utterly impossible to imagine. We call it a singularity—the moment before creation when space and time did not exist.”

“But you just said time was infinite, that it always existed—”

“Oh sure. It depends on how you measure it. Before anything—matter—exists to mark time, does it exist?”

“The old adage if a tree falls in the forest, but no one hears it, did it really happen?”

“Exactly.”

“Go on,” Lily said encouragingly.

“The ineffable explosion of infinitely dense material heated to trillions of degrees —”

“Why ineffable?”

“We can never know exactly what transpired in the first few seconds before the bang. Stephen Hawking calls those milliseconds the mystery that he calls God.”

Jonathan smiled, “Paul always loved that definition. Anyway, we know exactly what happened afterwards. The universe expands from the size of an atom to a softball. Now

we're looking at a hot soup of electrons, quarks and other particles. The cooling begins; quarks clump into protons and neutrons in a super hot fog..."

### **Ruth**

Shadows lengthened in mid afternoon as the sun sank over Catalina Island on the distant horizon and Ruth made her way to Bluebird Park. Southern California's fall season merely muted summer's vibrant colors, and the familiar gardens along the way still bloomed with flowers, all kinds: wild roses, begonias, lupus, gardenias, impatiens, though these were getting scraggly and thick stemmed, and of course dark rose and orange bougainvillea. Even the liquid ambers and sycamores were still leafy and green. A wire gate surrounded the park to keep dogs out, but it served more as an eye sore. She made her way through the wire door and to her favorite bench, near the two story metal rocket, a fabulous contraption children loved to climb. She loved watching children play.

Mothers and nannies collected in small groups, trying to keep an eye out. Two dozen kids populated the play area, their noise happy and animated. The only bad thing about this park was in fact that there were no dogs allowed. She loved dogs, almost as much as she loved children. When Paul was finding homes for homeless dogs, she came so close to getting up the nerve to ask Pastor Simon if she might have a dog in the church house. Children and dogs went together...

Paul had been six the first time he had asked her.

She had been weeding in her yard.

Paul had appeared from down the street with two friends, looking ridiculous with his oversized baggy board shorts hanging on his skinny frame. “Miss Ruth,” he said, “It’s hot! May I play in your sprinklers?”

“Where’s your mother?”

“She’s working,” Paul said. “She works until the afternoon. Then she goes swimming with her friends.”

“And your grandmother?”

“She won’t take to me to the beach,” he said by way of answering.

Of course she had said yes. Within minutes a half dozen neighborhood children played in her sprinklers, laughing and squealing, having a grand time. She went inside to fix some cookies and lemonade.

Only later she found out Paul had asked his grandmother if he might play in the sprinklers minutes earlier, but she had said no. Clair had planned to take him to the library. She remembered when Clair found young Paul, wet, muddy, covered with grass and leaves, but happy. His grandmother’s laughter came as a shock. Had she deceived an adult at Paul’s age, her parents would have put the belt to use. A Baptist minister, her father had been as strict as the day is long!

Still, before Clair had showed up, Paul followed her into small, empty kitchen. That’s when he first asked.

“Where are your children, Miss Ruth?”

Ten years later he asked her again.

They were driving home from a church barbecue. Paul studied music, all kinds, especially classical music and rock. He often commented on how lucky he was to have

the world's music at his keyboard; the ability to listen to all the very best recorded music. That night he wore a tee shirt that said Pink Floyd, which when she asked about it, he promised he'd play the band for her. First, a new version of Amazing Grace.

“Oh, it is so beautiful. Just the instrument,” she commented after several minutes.

“It's by an artist, Charles Littleleaf. He's playing a type of flute...”

“It's quite lovely. Haunting really.”

The song ended, and suddenly a rock and roll song blasted through his small car's loud speakers. His speakers were more expensive than the car, he once teased and now she believed him.

“Oh my,” she laughed, “Quite a change of pace!”

“Don't you love the Stones?”

“I don't know. I've heard of them, of course, but I can't say I ever listened to them.”

He first seemed taken aback, but then laughed. “Miss Ruth, you say the most amazing things.” He absorbed her expression. “Wait a minute. You're serious, aren't you?”

“Oh, yes. I'm afraid so.”

“So, where were you in the sixties?”

“Why I was right here. Living on Oak Street and working in the church.” His face register shocked, which she noticed. “You're shocked, I see.”

That easy smile of his. “I didn't know that much stability was possible.”

“I am the very word stable. Always have been that.”



A moment passed as he contemplated this. “But your high school graduation picture on the mantle? I can tell you were one pretty girl.”

The compliment caught her breath. Was she once pretty? She didn’t know, didn’t know how she could know. She felt herself blushing at the thought.

“And hands down, you’re one of the kindest people I’ve ever met.”

“Bless you, Paul. I can easily say the same about you.”

“So, why haven’t you ever married? There had to be a lot of guys asking?”

“Of course, I always wanted to be married, and good lord, but I do love children! You know I do.”

He looked at her curiously, as if he really wanted to know. “So...?”

“I never got around to it, I suppose.”

Gently, as if sensing the import, “There must have been a reason?”

Of course she couldn’t tell him about being... forced. Oh, no. She barely remembered it herself. It was her teacher, Mr. Tyson, her eighth grade math teacher. It happened after school. At first she had been thrilled for being kept after class. She imagined he wanted to congratulate her for maintaining a first place standing in the class, for beating all the boys. She only remembered her confusion giving way to fear. The fear just swallowed her up inside. And then it was as if it never happened...

### **Pastor Simon**

As Pastor Simon looked out over the familiar sea of faces, he remembered the day Paul had presented Satan and hell as a myth. Apparently his mother pressed books on

mythology into the young man's hands, books that had hugely impressed the boy. He had even come armed with a picture from one of his grandmother's numerous art books:

William Hogarth's painting, Satan, Sin and Death. That intense conversation inspired this very sermon he now gave, the premise of which Paul had strenuously objected too.



No matter. Paul no longer sat in his pews.

Don't think about that now...

The older man's booming voice filled the church as he recited it from memory:

“Satan loves the intellectual! Loves him! What consumes intellectuals? Doubt. And doubt is Satan's garden. These days it is fashionable to imagine there is no such thing as the devil. The idea of Satan orchestrating evil on earth is ridiculous, and as such, it is subjected to ridicule...”

Pastor Simon knew each face intimately in the nearly full pews. The knowledge normally brought comfort. Though in truth many of the parishioners traveled from the inland cities to his church less to join him in worship and more to visit Laguna Beach, adding church attendance to a list of weekend frivolity: brunch, a day at the beach,

gallery shopping, and maybe a movie. If not for the seaside setting, he had little doubt he'd lose over half of the parishioners.

He continued: "People pretend that there is a rational explanation for the orderly and systematic murder of six million Jews during WW2. I have even heard explanations made of the Rwandan genocide: that given the population density and the scarcity of food, the slaughter of 800,000 people is perfectly predictable. This is in fact Satan's greatest triumph, his ability to first create doubt and then strip away the very belief in him.

"Once people are disbelieving, they embrace secularism, moral relativism, liberalism. Anything goes. Absolutely anything. While TV, movies, and even music feed our citizens and especially our children vile filth, salacious immorality and horrific violence, these people worry that the Ten Commandments could have a pernicious effect if posted in a public forum; they find themselves deeply concerned that our children might be taught the words one nation under God; the very idea of a creator cannot be mentioned in public.

"Oh yes, Satan is mightily amused..."

Pausing, suddenly feeling the intensity of the hot Santa Ana winds, he wiped his brow and took a sip of water from his glass. As he set the glass back to the pulpit, he found himself examining the people before him. At first, he didn't grasp the danger in doing so...

He abruptly realized he stared at the spot Paul normally occupied: the aisle seat in the second row, right hand side. The spot remained empty. Was this a conscious decision on the part of the parishioners or an accident of fate?

It had been empty last week as well.

Paul's absence was still felt. He still felt it. He understood he would always feel it.

A strange panic reached deep inside. He swallowed and desperate, he sought a distraction, finding Mrs. Hitel and her bored teenage daughter occupying the next spot over. The woman's stout frame carried an extra fifty or so pounds. He read that a Jewish owned firm that sold weight loss products had begun adding Baptist religious material to their products; market research showed the overwhelming percentage of obese people were fundamentalist Christians. He could imagine no explanation for this. The woman's extra flesh spilled from the too tight flowered dress, her mouth agape, as if suffering a cold; she looked uncomfortable.

Against his advice, the woman had forced her daughter to attend church as a punishment for various adolescent crimes: poor grades, smoking, missed curfews. Thin blonde hair and black roots covered half her face, the girl's boredom had predictably given way to open hostility. She even wore a pink tee shirt that advertised: Bad to the Core.

Paul would have somehow reached out to that girl, he knew...

His next breath washed him in a wave of mounting despair.

In the weeks and months after Paul's death he had discovered just how much he had come to depend upon the young man. Even now, while standing at the pulpit Paul's unmasked expressions served as a meter of the sermon's success, the familiar face accurately reflecting how the parishioners received these orations. He knew exactly when he hit the high note, when he went too far, or more rare, not far enough, when Paul registered disapproval or sympathy or interest.

Now, he was gone, absent, the space he occupied empty...

He looked up, finding the overhead fans and becoming momentarily transfixed, as he patted a handkerchief across his damp brow. The damn Santa Ana winds, this hot dry air that blew from the desert out to sea, reversing the natural course of things and inevitably triggering horrible fires. The blighting sunlight painted everything unnaturally bright, bringing the world into a sharp focus—

Paul was gone...

The silence, many minutes too long now abruptly crashed into his consciousness just as Bob Cunningham beckoned from the fourth row. “Pastor Simon?”

“Oh... I’m sorry. Forgive me. I... I feel suddenly... not well.” He found the church coral leader. “Mr. Billings, would you mind leading the congregation in song?”

Steve Billings leaped at the opportunity to lead the church. Whispers of concern and confusion followed Pastor Simon to the vestry, where he kept his office, but gave way to the pleasure of raising their collective voice in song. Thank heavens.

Pastor Simon shut and locked his office, almost eliminating the echoes of the familiar chorus filling the hallway. He leaned against the door and closed his eyes as if in prayer.

His heart raced too fast, his breath came quick and shallow.

He made his way to his desk chair. It was the kind of thing he reserved for celebrations and unspeakable calamities. The last time had brought out the cask had been upon hearing the incomprehensible news of Paul’s death.

He removed the Irish whiskey and poured a shot. The hot liquid slid down his throat with some kind of relief and he leaned back, closing his eyes.

“Please, I don’t like the nursery,” the five year old announced.

The first thing he had noticed about the boy—unnaturally large eyes framed by impossibly long lashes and a head of dark curls—was that his smile did not belong to a five year old. It seemed somehow sophisticated far beyond his time. He could honestly say that over the years, Paul’s presence in his church incited him to begin each prayer with: Blessed are those who endure when they are tested...

“You don’t like the nursery?”

“I want to be in the church.”

“I see. And why do you want to be in church?”

“Because that’s where God is.”

He had of course explained that God was also in the nursery, only to discover the most astonishing thing about the boy. He felt perfectly comfortable arguing with adults.

“I promise to be very, very good!”

Pastor Simon poured another shot.

Ruth brought Paul to church faithfully every week. All too soon the questions began: “Where is heaven?”

“In the skies above,” he explained, watching the expressive eyes look up, as if trying to see heaven’s very gates on his office ceiling.

“Yes, but where exactly?”

“No one knows... exactly,” he replied.

Even then, as a little boy, Paul was cunning fomenter of doubts.

“My mom thinks heaven is pretend, but she doesn’t know positive. I think she’s wrong.”

“Indeed she is. Heaven offers eternal life alongside God to all believers.”

“And good people...”

“Being good is very important, but it is not enough, not nearly enough. You must love Jesus Christ—”

“I love Jesus!”

“As well you should, young man! As well you should, for he has washed your sins in his own blood—”

“I know! I will give a letter to the man at Mount Wilson. Do you know him, Pastor Simon? He has the biggest telescope in the world. He will find heaven! Then, my Mom will believe too...”

He had tried to ignore the boy for most part, irritated that one so small took up so much space, but ignoring Paul proved difficult. In any case Miss Merton indulged the child’s every whim. Dr. Wilson himself, the famous astronomer, submitted Paul’s letter to some high brow literary magazine.

Pastor Simon’s gaze found the book on his shelves and he rose. The frayed and yellowed copy of the printed letter sat in a book of sermons. He brought it to the window and read it, though he knew it by heart:

Dear Dr. Wilson:

My name is Paul Merton. Can you use your telescope to find heaven, please? If you found it you would be on TV! They would put your picture in the newspapers! You would be great like the old Presidents. There would be no more bad guys, too, because everyone would want to go to heaven...

He shut the passage back in the book and leaned against the sill.

People began pouring onto the street, heading to their cars. He should return to them, apologize and say goodbye, but he remained motionless, queerly dispassionate and uninvolved in the demands before him. Instead memories flooded his consciousness...

“It’s almost as if that precocious child is mocking me—”

“Oh no!” Ruth had replied. “Surely you’re imagining things!”

“Perhaps you’d understand if you heard his response to old man Bryan’s explanation of when dinosaurs really existed. The boy laughed at his elder!”

“You’re being silly, Mr. Bryan,” Paul said, as if being teased. “Everyone knows the dinosaurs lived 180 million years ago. People weren’t even invented till 2 million years ago!”

“It was less the boy’s content and more his outrageous tone. The unnatural confidence...”

“His mother and grandmother constantly read to the child,” Ruth nodded.

“Believe me, I see the fruits of that already. Iconoclastic ideas that, if left untempered, will inevitably lead to the profane. Mark my words about that!”

“I hope not.”

Later he found himself returning to the subject. “Then the boy wanted to know if his friend could go to heaven, even though this “friend” didn’t believe in Jesus. I assumed the problem was the Jewish one, in which case naturally I would have explained that, but apparently not. Oh no. Paul’s friend’s stepfather—atheism and agnosticism are inevitably the product of divorce!—is what Paul deemed, ‘not nice’. This not so nice stepfather had



the audacity to tell his step son that our lord Jesus Christ was as make believe as the Easter bunny. May the Lord God forgive him! God's invisible hand holds that poor soul over the red hot flames of hell—”

Hearing this last, Ruth looks up with alarm. “What did you tell Paul?”

“The truth! The universal and sacred truth of the Word. I explained Jesus not only wants everyone to believe, He absolutely insists upon it. We must believe in order to be granted eternal life with God on judgment day.”

The five year old then asked, “Jonathan is not going to heaven?”

“Unless he finds the Lord Jesus and believes He is the one and only son of God, no, he will not be going to heaven.”

“Where will he go when he is dead?”

He had paused uncomfortably. “He will be going to hell.”

With dawning trepidation: “Hell is where it is very hot?”

“Yes. Hell is a place of eternal darkness and damnation, where lost souls are forever separated from God and instead forced to endure... the tortures of the flesh like fire.”

“Jonathan is going to be set on fire?”

He was caught off guard. “Well...”

“But God loves Jonathan! Jesus loves Jonathan! God loves everyone!”

He remembered saying something like that no one can know God's plans for everyone, and that we must pray for Jonathan's soul, that perhaps God will save the boy yet. The whole conversation was a mistake; he ought to begin tempering his instruction to the curious boy.

Too late. Unfortunately young Paul's over active little mind seized upon the idea of hell: "Where is hell? Is it next to heaven?"

"No, it is not."

"Is it in the sky?"

"I don't know where it is! Only God knows!"

"No one has ever seen it then?"

"I give up!"

Little did he know then, that was only the beginning...

### **Jonathan**

A black metal light hung above Jonathan's computer where he played Grand Theft Auto, a fast moving game where there were no good guys. Even the cops were corrupt. Morality was stripped to bare bones survival. Absolutely no thought required.

Paul sprawled out on the worn gold couch, rifling through a stack of video games. Poor lighting, a low speckled ceiling, grayish green carpets kept the apartment dark. A small window looked out over a four-way stop intersection. Neither young man noticed the continuous traffic noise. Indeed Jonathan never thought of it.

Jonathan's dexterity appeared in the speed by which his fingers traveled over the key board. "I'm not trying to be obtuse, but I don't get it. What is the attraction?"

Paul shrugged, smiled. "I don't know. The people at church. They're the best. Sometimes when we're all building houses in Mexico, or singing some old gospel number, I get this poignant and powerful sense of..."

Jonathan exploited his friend's brief pause. "Of what? Sound like you're having trouble elucidating the experience."

Paul laughed, "Ah, no, I wasn't, but that was good. Exploiting pauses for..."

"Fortuitous interruptions?"

Paul laughed again, and this time Jonathan joined him. "Very clever," Paul said. "Time out. It's too darn easy if the conversation becomes about the vocab words."

"Agreed."

Paul paused a moment before asking, "So where was I?"

"The poignant and powerful sense of something you get from your church. The next word, an utter slam dunk, is comity."

"Right," Paul nodded. "Let's just say it is a good deal more than simple amicableness or comity. It's this more profound feeling of being in the same boat with everyone. That we're all reaching for the same thing. Something better than all of us..."

"Probably some type of ecstatic derangement. I was just reading about it in a science magazine. Humans that pray or meditate together, or even people that exercise together generate brain chemicals, a type of endorphin, that triggers bonding emotions, even love."

Paul cast his friend a look of equal parts skepticism and humor. "Explaining a phenomenon does not in any way extenuate it." He set the CDs down and got up to join Jonathan at the computer.

"Extenuate; brilliant," Jonathan nodded. "Though I wouldn't know, bro. I have the exegesis, but not the experience." He thought of the town's paper, how they printed

each church's sermons, which he read in full. "What I don't get is this Pastor Simon. Every time I read his weekly sermon in the local paper—"

"Whoa!" Paul interrupted. "You read Pastor Simon's weekly sermons? Jonathan, Jonathan, that's... pathetic." His voice held amusement and affection masquerading as dismay. "We need to get you a life!"

"The word is ludicrous!"

Paul shook his head. "Ludicrous was too damn wieldy."

Jonathan shrugged as he shot a Russian gang leader and stole his Porsche. "I read everything, dude; it's all I have. Anyway I enjoy reading those ah, sermons and imagining you sitting in a pew, listening to that shit. I'm like, what century is this? Please. Someone wake the man up, and tell him—" Jonathan's flying fingers lifted from the keyboard momentarily, and he slapped his forehead. "Shit. What's the next word?"

"Superannuated," Paul supplied. "Which obviously should have replaced the ever odious word 'shit.' You should have said, I imagine you sitting in a pew, listening to those superannuated ideas."

"Superannuated shit has way more voltage," Jonathan explained.

"Agreed. But to the point: Pastor Simon's not bad. He's actually pretty sharp—Harvard Divinity School, you know. He's got a good heart; he's just a little behind on ah," Paul smiled, "let's just say modern ontology."

"Not to be too supercilious, but you think? I mean he actually believes in a place called hell."

“Wait. Time out.” Paul smiled at a distant memory. “I just flashed on something. When I was a little kid, I was worried when you said you didn’t believe in Jesus and I asked him about you.”

“Dude,” Jonathan laughed. “We have known each other a long time!”

“Oh yeah.”

Curiosity entered Jonathan’s pale eyes as his head tilted with the question. “So what did good ole’ Pastor Simon say?”

“You were cooked.” Laughter filled the small space, but in the next breath Paul shouted, “Shoot! Shoot!”

Jonathan shot, but it was too late. He gave the keyboard over.

Keyboard beneath busy fingers, Paul began racing various villains, shooting at them from a super charged motorcycle. “I just asked him again as a matter of fact. My mom had me read on the origins of myths. Joseph Cambell—”

“The Star Wars’ guy,” Jonathan nodded.

“Exactly. My mom loves mythology. It appears every Biblical story can be traced to an earlier source or culture. Anyway, I told Pastor Simon I came across the origin of the concept hell, that the idea grew from attempts by deeply religious people to convey to Average Joes what life is like without God. Burning alive being the worst imaginable fate, they related it as such.”

Jonathan nodded, somewhat impressed with how well Paul played the game.

“Amped it with eternity.”

“Exactly.”

“You forgot to employ the word.”

“I thought we were still in a time out?”

“Ten words to go,” Jonathan replied.

Paul concentrated on the corrupt police now in furious pursuit. “What one are we on?”

“Concomitant.”

“Oh. It’s hard for you to reconcile that my love of God and my deep appreciation of science are concomitant.”

“Meritorious effort. So,” he wondered, “How did the old sky pilot handle the etiology of hell?”

“He said he suspects intellectuals will have the most to answer for on judgment day.” Again their laughter sang in the small space. “Then he went and made a sermon out of it.”

Jonathan shook his head. “Shoot. I must have missed that one. The way I see it—Satan isn’t half as scary as the people who believe in him. A horned God! The king of evil. Man...that’s so friggin archaic.”

“Is it?” Paul aimed a man pod rocket launcher and blew the crooked cops’ car to smithereens. “Granted, a literal Satan as the purveyor of evil does seem distressingly simple, but as a broad metaphor, even you would have to concede its usefulness.”

“Not to be too contentious here, but hell no. Why isn’t bad bad enough? What does evil have over bad anyway?”

“I suppose if there is no metaphysical reality to evil bad would be enough, or the difference between bad and evil would be one only of degree. But doesn’t there seem to be a malignant force that periodically emerges, spreading violence and chaos and

suffering before its beaten back and disappears? Just as there is an opposite, antithetical force?”

Jonathan cast his friend a look of pure glee “You mean like... Star Wars again? The force and the dark side?”

“Exactly!” Paul exclaimed. “In every culture and in almost all stories throughout history, the most common theme is good vs. evil—”

“Maybe, but what form does each take, what are the rules of engagement and where do they intersect, overlap, and effect each other? Storytelling has evolved in two thousand years. If this hackneyed idea of a good God battling a horned one for the spoils of earth—”

“The stakes are way higher. People’s souls—”

“Whatever. If it were a science fiction novel, it would never be published. Too lame, too inane—”

“We forgot the vocab words again!”

“What is wrong with us? What word did we leave off at?”

“I think it was...” Paul checked the sheet and laughed, “Yes. Sedulous.”

“Coincidence or something else?”

Paul chuckled, rolled his eyes, and then blew up the drug lord’s headquarters.

“Wow! Nicely done!” Jonathan conceded.

## Ruth

Paul stayed to help clean up after Bible study.

Ruth and he went about straightening chairs, and collecting cups and papers plates.

“You were a great discussion leader, Ruth.”

The complement momentarily overwhelmed her.

She tried to hide her sudden flurry of emotions in a rush of busyness. Tentatively, she asked, “Do you really think so?”

Paul nodded. “You deepened my understanding of Job.” He sighed with a contradictory smile, “Unlike most Wednesday nights, the discussion was lively and interesting.”

“Thank you for asking me.”

“I knew you’d do an excellent job.”

With hands full of plates, she stopped. “Did you? But why?”

“You really know your Bible for one thing, but also... well, I know you’ve been through a lot; that you’ve struggled far more than most of us.”

The young man’s sensitivity was a thing of wonder. No one else on earth knew this about her; no one else had ever cared enough to ask. Sometimes she felt that if individual lives were symphonies, hers was the sound of silence. Hers was a dull and uneventful life.

“Dear me,” she finally said, wiping her hands on a dish towel. “I suppose I have. I never like to think about it, you know. But sometimes when I think back on my life... on the sheer weight of the hurt and disappointments...”

She must have looked ready to cry, for Paul, suddenly all solicitousness, came to her side and gilded her into a chair.



“What happened?”

She just shook her head as memories flooded into consciousness from the dark space in her life, a time and place she never visited. She still didn't like to think of him, of her father... He was strict, but God knows, he had loved her. Before at least... He used to call her God's blessing in his life. “Willa,” he'd say to her mother, “Our little Ruth is graced with the strongest Christ spirit...”

While their lives might have revolved around Jesus, her father was the one who walked on water; her mother, the family and indeed the whole community respected, even revered him. He officiated at weddings, baptisms, funerals, and the town fair. Everyone sought his advice. Why, both the Sheriff and the mayor often stopped by just to solicit his opinion on this or that civic matter. She grew up with the idea that her father was the greatest man in the world.

That school girl idolization marked the time before all the changes.

She hadn't a clue what was happening to her physically. Her mother finally realized and became terrified—that first awful hour when she fully understood the nightmare thrust upon them. Her beautiful mother went from warm to cold, talkative to silent, loving to cruel.

“My God,” she cried, “I cannot even pray anymore! Look what you've done to me!”

“I'm sorry, Mama! I'm sorry! I never meant to—”

“It will kill your father, kill him, do you hear? As God is my witness!”

More than a week passed before her mother finally managed to tell her father.

That night he appeared in her room.

She saw the space that soon became her prison in every detail: the pink and lace canopy bed, the wood floor, shelves lined with dolls and a small smatterings of books, mostly the fables, bible stories, and school books. A set of drawers leaned against the wall across from an old desk and chair for study. A small wooden cross hung over the fireplace. Her mother, one of eleven children, constantly reminded her of how lucky she was to have a room all to herself. Until now she had always believed it.

She never saw her father like that. Crazy with fury! His face red, his breathing labored, his fists clenched before he jammed them into his pockets. Anger trembling through him. He couldn't look at her. The shame. Feverish eyes swept the room, looking for something, anything to settle on. He found the cross.

“May. God. Burn. You. In hell!”

He ripped the cross from the wall and flung it against the fireplace.

“No, Daddy! No. You don't understand—”

Too late. He closed the door. A key turned in the lock, a lock that until this moment had never been used. Weeks later, they took her to a veterinarian's lab far away. Another county, maybe even another state. She remembered the smell. Animals and medicine and cleaning fluids. The operation didn't go... right. The bleeding wouldn't stop; not even later in the hospital.

She began to pray that God would take her, but no, that would be a mercy.

Even after she recovered, she was never allowed back in school. She was never allowed to have any friends or go on a date. She was damaged; marriage was absolutely out of the question...

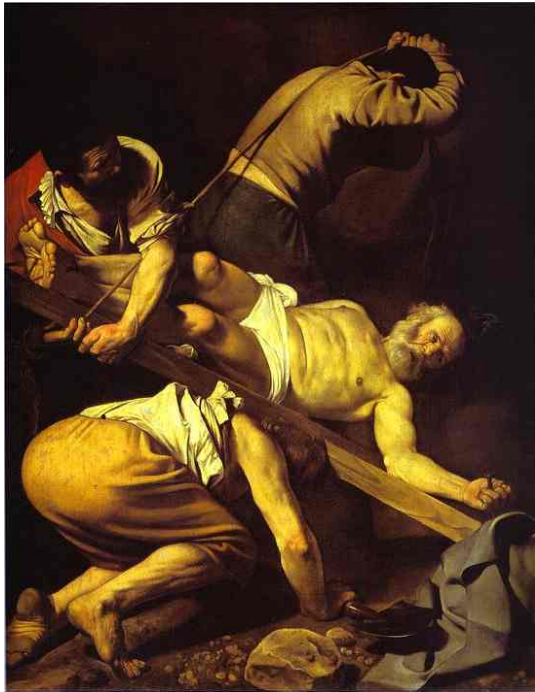
The silence began and with it, her life of empty space and stillness. Her father never spoke to her again. Her mother had tried to ease the pain of this as much as she could, but the fact was her father couldn't even look at her.

He died just before her twentieth birthday.

### Clair

Dr. Hall sat across from Clair, listening intently.

She had a book open on her lap opened to one of her favorites: Caravaggio's painting of The Crucifixion of Saint Peter. After a lifetime of studying art, she had learned to express her feelings through pictures. No matter what the emotion, somewhere in the world an artist had set it to canvas or carved it from stone.



She had been secretly hoping Paul would go into Art History, a shared interest. Since Paul first realized that every picture told a story, he loved pictures. They had gone through dozens of art books together. Many of her memories of Paul were now linked to specific pictures.

“Paul placed it front and center in a school report he had done on Caravaggio.”

“What an unusual subject for a young person!”

Clair nodded. “He was only eight. I began introducing him to religiously themed paintings, hoping I guess, to broaden his understanding of the subject. This picture stood out. Paul never understood how mean it was.”

Apparently, neither did her doctor. “Mean? How so?” he asked.

“Well, look at it,” she turned the book. “It’s ironic. Poor Saint Peter. The holiest of men. Christ’s favorite. The rock of the church. But what does all his precious holiness get him? His death is so retched and ordinary!”

“And meaningless,” Dr. Hall added.

“Yes, and meaningless,” Clair agreed quietly. “Sometimes I wake up in the middle of night. For a full minute, maybe longer, I have no memory of what happened. I feel light, and then strange. The strange feeling is... why, it’s happiness! But, why in heaven, is happiness foreign to me?”

“Almost immediately the question is answered.”

Dr. Hall reached a hand to her and squeezed.

His comfort filled the silence. A hand covered her mouth as if to contain the emotions swelling through her. For several minutes she didn’t say anything as her thoughts raced unhappily to the morning’s awful incident.

“Today that old woman, Ruth came over with a copy of the Rainbow Bridge. For the life of me, I can’t figure out how she found out Big Ben died, but there she was, assuring Lily that Big Ben was now with Paul at the Rainbow Bridge.” Clair looked up and in a solemn and frightened tone: “It’s the first time I’ve ever seen Lily be unkind to anyone. She practically screamed at the poor woman...”

Lily’s voice, so full of pain and grief, emerged in Clair’s mind: “I’m glad Old Ben died! I can’t help it. Those small round eyes, so full of grief, merciless grief. I couldn’t bare it a single day more; it’s a friggin wonder I didn’t dispatch him myself to the god damned Rainbow Bridge...”

Poor old Ruth bursting into tears...

“I don’t know why I’m crying,” Clair said. “I guess I’m just scared. My poor Lily. Even though on the surface she seems better, sometimes I think we just sink a little more each day...”

### **Lily**

A fantastic picture of the cosmos appeared on the giant screen behind the two young men at the podium. Now Lily marveled at the two young men’s similarities. They found an unusual friendship in their shared attributes and interests.

“From dust and rock particles pulled together by gravity, our precious planet formed about 4.6 billion years ago. The earth became a swirling ball of molten metal and rock.” Jonathan became more excited as he talked, “Giant meteorites plummet the surface. One of these is the size of mars. It knocks the moon into our space, into the

earth's gravitational pull. The earth begins cooling. Icy comets continue to crash into the Earth, depositing water and hydrocarbons, which eventually form oceans. Water molecules broke down into hydrogen and oxygen, producing an atmosphere and even the protective cloud cover around the Earth—”

Paul interrupts, “Get ye to the point, Jonathan!”

Jonathan looked to the screen as lightening flashed from a darkened sky: “Add a little lightening and we now have the ingredients for life.”

“Yes? We’ve all had our basic science classes, and some of us even remember the contents of them.”

“The point is that from this primordial soup, life forms; our evolution begins.”

Some kid in the audience shouted, “Life can’t come from nothing!”

“Actually a graduate student from Chicago University, Stanley Miller, first managed to create the basic building blocks of life from just these conditions.”

“One of the most brilliant experiments of all time,” Jonathan continued. “Hundreds of similar experiments followed.”

“But the point Jonathan, the point before I say it for you.”

“If there is a God, a big if, God is part of the universe rather than creator of the universe. Basically, God is no longer needed as an explanatory system.”

“Finally!” Paul collapses in a pretense of relief. “Now, I personally do not feel it is worthwhile to comment on those people who, because their science education is often centuries out of date, they still need to employ God as an explanatory system. Nor would I care to comment on those people who, while understanding the science, still find it necessary to employ God as the first cause—”

“What?” Another kid in the audience complained. “I don’t get it—”

“Some people imagine God orchestrated the physical events that put life on earth. Fine. Whatever. No comment. I personally have never seen God as an explanatory system; God is so much more than that...”

Lily turned the TV off.

The distant sound of waves interrupted her own soft breaths. The tape had become like a tonic, or even a drug and she the addict. She first tried to resist playing it forward, knowing this one tape was all she had of him that was fresh, unknown, new. Once she viewed it, it became a memory like everything else. Still, the joy of seeing him alive, happy and so engaged often proved irresistible.

She was already about a third of the way through it.

She turned to the plight of her heroine.

*Flames leap into the darkened sky and screams sounded throughout the village, drowning out the prayers of the priests, but all Rochelle could see was the noose. If you confessed your belief and begged God’s forgiveness, they would snap your neck before the flames licked at your skin.*

*She dropped her head to the small mountain of kindling sticks at her feet before lifting her gaze to heaven.*

*Only to see smoke filling an empty space.*

*Twice as many knights as priests followed behind the imperial man. They were knights of the Bishop’s guard, the Jesuit priests, here to fight the advancing menace of the Arch Priest once and for all. More knights manned the feeble battlements that*

*surrounded the abbey walls. The village of Sauvage beyond the walls already burned. Thick smoke filled the air as the people wailed against this senseless loss. The outlawed army—made up of fifty demons wearing men’s skins—had demanded the Bishop's coffers and treasures, or promised death to everyone and everything with a heart.*

*The foolish Bishop had refused. He had sent word to far away Gillard, and Rouergue, begging the Lords of these places for knights to fight the Arch Priest who had terrified the French countryside for two years now and had eluded even the royal knights of Frances sent by the King.*

*As he waited for these knights to rescue him, the Bishop thought to pacify the peasants and God by the burning of the unfaithful in return for His mercy. Fingers had quickly turned to her, fingers had always pointed at her. The common folks fanned in a perfect half circle behind the priests and knights, shouting curses and prayers to the condemned.*

*“She is the devil’s mouthpiece, full of vile mumbling day and night!”*

*“Save us Lord, save us. Let her burn!”*

*“We are doomed!”*

*“The apocalypse has begun.”*

*“The gates are aflame!”*

*“Our Father which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation. But deliver us from evil. Amen.”*



*Black smoke poured from the burning village nestled along the hillside outside the wooden stakes of the abbey walls, and billowed into the sky above. The outlawed Brigantine army shot flaming arrows over the battlements. They were close.*

*Screams sounded in the distance there. A baby wailed furiously trying to escape the safety of her mother's arms as the new mother knelt in prayer. The smell of fire filled the creatures with fear: the hounds bayed angrily, tugging at their ropes in the kennel, horses neighed and kicked helplessly, and the pigs, with their eerily human-like screams, called out from the pen. Two goats raced across the courtyard, searching for an exit.*

*The Bishop and his priests stood before the old woman first. She too, was tied to the pole, kindling sticks piled beneath her bare feet. The gray hair formed a perfect halo about her head; the old dark eyes were blank and unseeing with the ignorance of the truly mad. Unaware of what was happening to her, she smiled down at the audience of priests, who appeared as black and brown silhouettes against the gray sky. She nodded at the familiar faces among them, mumbling bits and pieces of the rosary that she remembered.*

*Rochelle knew the old woman well; everyone in the Sauvage Valley knew her. Old mad Mistress Grilldue. Long ago, when Mistress Grilldue had been in the first blush of her beauty, she had caught the eye of the late Charles De St. Pol, a minor land baron of Sauvage. She had given him a cherished son and he had given her a sturdy stone house on the hillside and all the land to the river. It was true what she told the Bishop: The poor woman's grief upon witnessing her son's death was too large to fit in her heart; it spilled into her mind and had made her go mad. The witless common folks were easy prey for the church's voracious appetite for land. After convening for less than five*

*minutes, the court decided her madness was a demonic possession and her punishment was death at the stake.*

*Rochelle had clacked her tongue and shaken her head when Fanny, the old serving woman, told how the Bishop had claimed if the church rid the Sauvage valley of the unfaithful, God would see to it an avenging army of righteous knights reached them in time to beat back the outlawed army at the abbey gates. "Such a foolish old cock!" she had thought. "Prancing about in his fine crimson robes, screeching about the devil and damnation, scaring the poor folks with promises of doom."*

*Now the old woman's eyes, feverish from the light of the fire, focused on the Bishop's crimson robes as he called up to her: "Do you renounce the pact with Satan and accept Christ, as your Lord and Master, Savior of all sinners?"*

*The old woman look to the darkening sky and coughed.*

*The Bishop repeated the words as if it were a question of deafness. "Do you..."*

*The crowd shifted nervously, waiting for her Aye. A terrified, squawking chicken flew into the midst of the people. A shuffle ensued as they attempted to shoo the bird. A man grabbed it and snapped its neck.*

*Rochelle felt it as if it were the snap of her own slender neck. As if she too had suddenly woke in a nightmare played in the light of day. Her heart pounded wildly against this destiny.*

*She did not want to die! She was too young by half! She wanted badly to live!*

*Rochelle watched in horror as the Bishop motioned to the priest who held the deadly torch. The priest dropped the torch to the sticks. Red flames washed up the pile of sticks. "Mistress Grilldue! Mistress please look at me!"*

*The weary eyes turned to Rochelle and found something familiar about those silvery eyes. "Say aye!" Rochelle cried to her. "Aye!"*

*The old woman suddenly gasped in fright as the flames consumed the mountain of wood beneath her, leaping over her feet and starting up the pole. The weathered gray head pressed back against her pole with her first moment's alarm.*

*Her eyes went wild with panic.*

*Rochelle screamed again, "Say Aye!"*

*Shocked, as if waking from a long sleep, the old woman nodded, a weak whisper of the extricating words sounded at last, "Aye..."*

*Relief swept the crowd; nearly everyone dropped to their knees with praise to God. The Bishop motioned to the priest holding the noose at the end of a long pole. The priest slipped the noose around the old woman's head. A guard stepped forward and laid hands on the pole. The two men jerked the noose upwards. The old body convulsed with an instant painless death. Smoke lifted over the old woman's form. Flames licked at her feet, greedy for more.*

*Rochelle collapsed with relief.*

*From over the wall, a flaming arrow landed on the stables. The thatched roof exploded with flames. People screamed in terror before three men rushed into the burning building to free the trapped animals. Two dogs and a horse raced out. Another hound hurried out with yelps and whimpers. Two more horses followed. A line of men and women formed to pass buckets from the well. The nearby fence of the pig pen caught flames. A kitchen servant rushed round to open the gate for the crying pigs. The terrified creatures rushed screaming into the courtyard.*

*A great crash of noise came from outside. For the first time fear worked into the Bishop's face. He stared straight ahead at the burning body of the old woman, no doubt facing squarely the idea that the burnt bodies would not be enough to save the abbey.*

*The gates would have to be opened soon. The outlawed army would sweep inside and slaughter everyone and everything that had a heart. Horses might be spared if the men could stop their blood madness. Most often they couldn't. The Bishop's head would be a prize.*

*Instead the Bishop turned to the second victim, turning his blind eye to the face of his death in order to watch another's. The old Jew was known as Saul, the finest boot maker in the whole valley. Rochelle knew him well too. He was in his fifties. His hair was short, curly and still black, unmarked by gray, giving him a much younger appearance. His beard touched his naked chest. Only a loin cloth covered his thin frame. Red welts from the lash of whips marked his chest. He did not mind renouncing his faith, for he had done so many times to save his life, but the court had had to torture him repeatedly to get his confession of collusion with Satan.*

*They had been friends since she was twelve, shortly after she had settled here at the Sauvage Valley. She had sought his skill for her first pair of Lady's slippers. How she had wanted those slippers, a red pair, she had explained, the fashionable kind with the toes curled up in a loop. He had made them, then laughed at her foolishness when she bemoaned the fact that they made her large feet look even larger. They had often broken bread together after that. He was a simple, good and kind man who had suffered enough in his life, God knew. Enough. He had lost a wife, his sister and brother-in-law to*

*the stake after being indicted by the Spanish inquisition. He had fled to safer shores of France. Only to finally face the same death here.*

*Anger suddenly overwhelmed her fear.*

*Merciful Madonna stop this mad man!*

*The stable roof collapsed. Flames shot up thirty feet from the burning stables.*

*"Open the gates!"*

*The shout came from a man in the water line. Fire licked the sides the building. They began collapsing on each other. The man dropped the bucket and fell to his knees, "We are doomed!"*

*Screams sounded from all round. More people dropped to their knees. Guards turned to the gate and back to the Bishop, waiting his orders. The fire leaped to the stone wall of the Abbey keep, scorching it. Red sparks flew about in the breeze, landing at last on the roof of the gate house.*

*"Tis the Armageddon come at last!"*

*"The antichrist is among us!"*

*The Bishop ignored the pandemonium, the pleas, everything but his purpose. Rochelle cried as sad resignation lifted on Saul's face as the Bishop commanded him to renounce his God and religion in the name of all that was Holy. Saul did, nodding with a loud, "Aye!"*

*Rochelle squeezed her eyes shut as the noose slipped over his head and his neck was snapped. Hot tears fell down her cheeks, brought from the sting of smoke.*

*She could not breathe. For one wild moment she thought she was on fire already. She fought furiously with her binds.*

*She closed her eyes, squeezing tight against the fear, but opening them to see the noose in front of her face. She shook her head frantically, sending the long plait of dark hair swinging wildly over her young breasts. She cast her gaze to Saul, hanging lifelessly from the pole as flames spread upwards over him. Flames shot heavenward from the wood beneath the old woman. The air filled with the sick scent of burnt flesh. She cried out as Saul disappeared in the smoke.*

*"Accept Christ as your Lord and Master and Savior of all sinners, you will feel the mercy of a noose before the flames consume your flesh..."*

If only she could save herself with these words!

The scene shifted and changed and Lily woke on the large red leather couch. For a moment she wondered what she was doing here, and then she spotted him...

Paul. He stood feet away, looking down at her.

Her heart leapt at this most fervent wish come magically true.

She reached out her hand to touch him.

Only to see that his face had changed. There was so much love there, and... sadness. A rush of emotion came at her with the realization that if only she could touch him, hold him, everything would be okay. She knows this inevitability as surely as she knows her next breath.

She starts to reach out her hand, when abruptly she grasps the trick of this. Like a dream upon waking, she knows if she touches him, he will disappear.

Tears filled her eyes as she tried to resist, but...

Clair rushed into the living room, spotting her daughter crying out in her sleep. Racing to her side, she lifted her upright. “Lily, Lily!” she takes her against her heart.

“Oh dear. Sweetie, it is okay. I’ve got you. I’ve got you.”

“Mom, I saw him. I saw him.”

Clair drew back in worry and alarm. “You saw... Paul?”

Lily nodded, still crying. “I saw Paul. I woke up and he was sitting right here. There was so much love and...sadness.”

“My poor girl.”

“I had this overwhelming feeling if I could just hold him one more time; if I could just touch him one more time, it would be okay. It was as if I knew though, and I resisted as long as I could. I just stared at him. Paul, Paul! Finally I reached my hand out and he... faded...”

A soft knock sounded at the door.

“Oh my God, who could that be at this hour?”

“It’s Jonathan.” She shook her head. “I can’t talk right now. I can’t.”

“We won’t answer. He’ll have to understand.”

“Mom, I don’t know how I can go on. I can’t seem to go through this...”

“You have to. For me, Lily, for me.”

She nodded, but said, “I miss him so much...”

### Jonathan

After shoving the book under his arm, Jonathan folded his arms tightly across his chest for what little warmth this afforded him. The air felt refrigerator cool, the temperature unseasonably cold. The chilliness even reached through the thin soles of his sneakers.

It wasn't really Paul's book. He just used it as an excuse to talk to Lily again.

He stared without seeing out onto the darkened street.

Last night he had a really intense dream about Paul. Normally he didn't remember his dreams; he regularly woke with a clean slate and no memories of any time passed in sleep. Not this time. The strange dream felt more vivid than any other dream in his life.

He woke to find Paul sitting on his bed.

There Paul was! He was like, Wow dude! I can't believe you're really here. So, hey, is it all you thought it was? Paul somehow, not with words, cause there weren't any words, but somehow he conveyed that it wasn't at all what he was expecting, which was so... intriguing. Unfortunately, just before Paul could delve into this, he suddenly saw that Paul had a treasure. In his shirt pocket.

In the dream Jonathan understood that the treasure was the most important thing in the world, that Paul was going to give it to him.

He felt so friggin' honored, man!

As Jonathan stood there staring numbly into space, he reached a hand to his shirt pocket, as if he might feel something there. In the dream he had waited for the treasure,



excited, expectant, until he suddenly realized there was nothing there. The treasure was invisible...

He wanted to tell Lily about this dream.

Abandoning all hope, Jonathan finally made his way past the fountain, hedge and on to the street. It was about a mile back to the apartment. His stepfather had neglected to pay the utility bill again, even though Jonathan had given him the money, and with no electricity, the small, dank space felt even colder than outside.

He should have known that Lily wouldn't want to talk again...

### Lily

Lily raced to the house, opened the door and slipped inside.

Upstairs reading in bed, Clair heard Lily's return. With book still in hand, she made her way downstairs. "How was dinner and the movie?" The older woman stopped half way, staring with mounting alarm. Lily leaned against the closed door, obviously distressed and trying to collect herself. "Lily?"

Still too thin, but no longer emaciated, Lily actually looked beautiful. She wore Levis, a periwinkle silk shirt and matching turquoise and silver sandals, but pain marked her face and her eyes danced with anxiety.

"Mom," she said her name as a plea for help as she fell inelegantly to the floor and covered her face in her hands.

Clair set the book on the counter and rushed to Lily's side. "You're as pale as a sheet..."

Looking up, Lily's hand went to her mouth as if to contain her emotion. The evening had been perfect and perfectly simple: She, Betsy and Laura went to a movie, the rare well reviewed adult comedy and then had dinner at their favorite restaurant.

"We thought it would be okay," Clair said softly. "Betsy, Laura and I thought a light comedy and dinner—"

Lily shook her head as the frightened words rushed out: "That's just it. It was okay. For long stretches I forgot. I actually laughed throughout the movie—it was hysterical. At dinner, I managed to enjoy myself, and I, I ate like a starving person. All of a sudden I realized it. I was laughing, enjoying myself. I was, oh Mom, I was... letting him go."

Clair shook her head, "No, no."

Unshed tears made Lily's eyes larger and more luminous. "I'm not ready to let him go. I can't yet."

"No, of course not," Clair whispered as she took Lily into her arms. "Of course not. We'll never let him go," she promised. "Here, here," she first brought Lily to the couch. "You sit right there. I know just what you need."

Clair headed into the kitchen, returning a few minutes later with two shots of whiskey and a plain brown notebook. She slipped alongside her daughter. A thick navy blue sleeping bag, always ready on the couch, covered their laps.

"Paul's last journal," Lily said with a hint of awe.

Reading glasses in place, Clair opened the covers of Paul's collection of newspaper clippings, poems, correspondence. "Everything that was important enough to him to save," she said. "It's like a package of Paul. Have you gone through it yet?"

Lily shook her head. “I glanced through it, but thought it would be too painful. But now—”

“Now, is the right time.”

True enough. Right from the start, the first page was a treat and Clair smiled. “Look. The poem he gave you for Christmas. *Entrance* by Rainer Rilke. Read it.”

Lily loved the poem.

*Whoever you are: in the evening step out*

*Of your room, where you know everything;*

*yours is the last house before the far off:*

*Whoever you are.*

*With Your eyes, which in their weariness*

*barely free themselves from the worn-out threshold,*

*you lift slowly one black tree*

*and place it against the sky: slender, alone.*

*And you have made the world. And it is huge*

*and as your will seizes on its meaning,*

*tenderly your eyes let it go...*

Clair took a sip of the gold liquid and sighed with appreciation. “I love that poem.”

Lily nodded, her face starting to relax. She turned the page.

“Here’s that newspaper clipping. Paul was so excited about it—proof, he said, of the historical movement toward social justice.”

This too, Lily read out loud. *“Forensic anthropologists have determined that throughout most of human history between 10 and 40 percent of humans died by violence. Today the figure rests somewhere around one percent of all people die by violence.”*

“That kid was so optimistic,” Clair smiled.

“My birthday poem. Remember?” Lily asked, receiving her mom’s nod.

*The Muse* by Anna Akhmatova.

*When in the night I await her coming,*

*My life seems stopped. I ask myself: What*

*Are tributes, freedom, or youth compared*

*To this treasured friend holding the flute?*

*Look, She’s coming! She throws off her veil*

*And watches me, steady and long. I say:*

*“Was it you who dictated to Dante the pages*

*of hell?” And she answers: “I am the one.”*

Lily declared, “He was so thoughtful! How many people that age would grasp that their mom loves poems about the power of the imagination, and then find them for her?”

Clair shook her head. “Only one Lily, and he was all ours.”

Lily leaned her head back and smiled. Clair turned the page.

Pasted and laminated on the page was the famous Eddie Adams photo of Mother Teresa cradling an armless baby girl, love written large on the old woman’s weathered face.



“That’s a beautiful picture,” Lily said quietly.

“Here’s one of Paul’s all time favorites. Robinson Jeffer’s *The Excesses of God.*”

“It’s so beautiful,” and surprising even her mother, Lily closed her eyes and recited it from memory:

*Is it not by his high superfluousness we know  
Our God? For to be equal a need  
Is natural, animal, mineral: but not to fling  
Rainbows over the rain  
And beauty above the moon, and secret rainbows  
On the domes of deep sea-shells,  
And make the necessary embrace of breeding  
Beautiful also as fire  
Not even the weeds to multiply without blossom  
Nor birds without music:  
There is great humaneness at the heart of things,  
The extravagant kindness, the fountain  
Humanity can understand, and would flow likewise*

*If power and desire were perch-mates.*

Lily deep sigh filled with emotion. “The last line moves me so.”

Clair nodded and turned the page on Paul’s thoughts. “Humm... This looks like something about old Sam, that yappy little dog next door. Remember? The one that drove us—pardon the cliché--crazy.”

The unpleasant memory triggered a groan. “That poor little beast!”

“And then finally he died.”

Lily’s thoughts tumbled in confusion as she looked up. “What would Paul have to say about him?” She took another swallow and leaned her head back again. “Read it.”

“It starts...” Clair read a few sentences, enough to realize: “Oh no.”

“What?”

*“Yesterday I killed my neighbor’s dog. I had planned it for weeks. Sam was a year older than me, but blind, deaf, arthritic, and unfortunately, incontinent. This last meant that the Hammond’s couldn’t let him in the house and instead kept him in a small and foul smelling dog run in the backyard. This was Sam’s problem; our problem was that Sam barked incessantly.*

*“Though it drives my Mom and Grandma nuts, I don’t think the barking would bother me, except that it is the sound of a helpless creature suffering and therefore, it is literally unbearable. At night he just whimpers, which has become the saddest sound I have ever heard.*

*“My Mom has talked to the Hammond’s about the big euphemism, but they claim that they simply cannot bear to let Sam go. The grief threatens to overwhelm them, they said, which made my Mom go berserk. She told them that they bought that grief the day*

*they opened their hearts to the dog, that it is the price of love. What I cannot understand is how suffering is easier to bear than death. I'll never understand that.*

*So, when everyone was at work, or gone, I unlocked the fence and opened his door. As soon as the little guy realized what was happening, he literally jumped for joy. He seemed unable to walk far, so after half a block, I picked him up and carried him to the very edge of the greenbelt, the open country populated with coyotes, snakes, and even big cats.*

Lily's eyes went wide, her tone one of outrage. "Paul, you didn't!"

Clair's brows lifted, "He did."

"But remember? He told us he found Sam dead in the Hammond's back yard after hearing a cry, and that an Animal Control officer took away the body."

That's not what shocked Clair. "I never imagined he could be so adept at lying, did you?"

Lily shook her head, "Not a clue. Is there more?"

Clair read the last: "*I told old Sam to be brave. After all, I explained, 'Billions and billions of us animals have done it, so it can't be that bad!' After aiming him in the direction of never land, I set him free. As he literally walked off into the sunset, his tail wagging; this was the only time I ever saw him happy. It was a true Viking death, a good death.*"

Clair laughed at the conclusion. "I hope I'm that lucky."

"Thank God I didn't know about this!" She felt curiously suspicious now, "What else is in here?"

Clair flipped through the pages. “More poems, an essay. Here’s a quote from Epicurus: *Is God willing to prevent evil but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence, then, evil.* Paul answers here that obviously no thoughtful person can believe that God orchestrates fates on earth.”

“That was in the debate,” Lily said.

“Yes, but read this. He added a quote from Coetzee’s most difficult novel—”

“Elizabeth Costello,” Lily knew. She had tried to discourage Paul from reading it, they had both tried, but he insisted on reading any novel his grandmother and mother and their book clubs kept talking about, no matter how difficult it was.

“He says: *Elizabeth’s brilliant philosophical treatise on the equality of animals and human beings might serve also as a caution against employing logic to the understanding of God. Elizabeth discusses at great length why using reason as the grand distinguishing feature that separates us from animals, and thereby grants us this special moral weight is a tautological and therefore, fallacious distinction. “Of course reason will validate reason as the first principle of the universe—what else should it do? Dethrone itself?”*

Clair laughed outright, shaking her head. “Too deep for my meager faculties.”

“I can barely make the connection,” Lily agreed. “He has needed a university philosophy department since he was ten.”

Clair turned the page. “Oh, look here. He kept his correspondence with that Indian doctor who investigates the millions of reincarnation cases in India.”

Suspicious vanished, replaced by a healthy chuckle. “Paul’s reincarnation phase.”



Clair nodded. “At the end of the things that go bump in the night stage: UFO’s, hypnosis, magic and magicians, all that psychic stuff, including, remember, out of body experiences.”

“The out of body experiences!” Lily laughed, pleasantly buzzed now. Suddenly she felt a burst of gratitude, thankful that her mom was here to share these happy memories. “That one stupid book suggested that fasting triggers religious experiences, and that apple fasts generate out of body experiences.”

“Well, it worked,” her mother reminded her. “He had one.” She laughed, motioning with her hands, “Remember how he floated up to the ceiling and eyed his sleeping body. I thought for sure he would take it as proof of a soul; proof of transcendence, but he never did. He thought it was probably a hallucination.”

Lily grew quiet, reflecting on this. “Paul never needed any proof. Oh, Mom, his faith! Where did it come from?”

### **Pastor Simon**

Pastor Simon looked at his watch. 3:20 am. He rubbed his sore neck. The profound quiet of the hospital’s graveyard shift rang loud in his ears, a hushed stillness interrupted only by Henry Kaufman’s small shallow breaths and the steady beep of the heart monitor. This was not the first death vigil he had kept and he supposed it would not be the last.

The old man had once upon a time been the church’s bookkeeper.

Pastor Simon hadn't heard from him in some time, not since ole' Henry had entered the nursing home several years ago. Truth be told, he hadn't thought of the man in all that time, not until the phone call informing him of the man's congestive heart failure and the imminence of his death. With this sad information, came the shocking fact: Henry Kaufman had willed his rather surprising estate of just under a million dollars to the church.

Unfortunately, this charity left his three children and eight grandchildren nothing. No doubt spite marked Henry's gift. The old man must have been deeply wounded that his children never visited.

Pastor Simon's sigh sounded his deep regret. He wished he had stopped by to see the old man. Surely he could have involved Henry's children in his life and if not, eased Henry's troubled heart...

For a long moment Pastor Simon stared down at his large black loafers set against the cream tiled floor of the hospital room. He sat on a beige chair, steadying the open Bible on his lap. His other hand gently covered the patient's cold and frail one, its translucent skin dotted with fading brown spots and errant hairs, but as soft as a kitten's underbelly. The doctor had opined that Henry would not likely live to see another sunrise and indeed he had now been unconscious for nearly twelve hours. While the doctor thought it unlikely the old man would wake again, unlikely did not mean impossible.

A yawning weariness beckoned, but as tired as Pastor Simon felt, the thought of the old man waking and dying alone kept him in his seat.

The door opened finally and the night nurse Shelia appeared. The tall statuesque black woman offered him a warm smile as she went about checking the patient's vital

signs. “How’s our patient doing?” she asked rhetorically. “And how are we holding up here? Can I get you a cup of bad coffee?”

“I’m fine,” he said, smiling.

She ended her ministrations by adjusting the blankets. “Now, that is one beautiful book mark,” she said, her eyes alit on his Bible.

He followed her gaze to Paul’s Christmas gift. He handed it to the kindly lady for a closer inspection. “It’s a reproduction of Alessandro Botticelli’s St. Augustine.”



A curious brow lifted over her kind intelligent eyes. “A Catholic saint?” In a pretense of discovering something scandalous, “Is that allowed Pastor Simon?”

“It was a gift,” he explained, “A reminder of a conversation.”

She handed it back. “My favorite saying comes from Augustine,” she said.

“Oh? What would that be?”

“To sing once is to pray twice.”

He nodded with a chuckle.

“Would you like a cot to rest on?” The question was asked as she started to leave.

“These kinds of nights can get awfully long.”

“I would be ever so grateful,” he said, taking the bookmark back as the door closed behind her. His gaze returned to the picture of Saint Augustine. That day Paul came across him reading an obscure text on the Catholic Saints. Laguna Beach’s Saint Margaret Catholic Church had finally received a new priest after a year long search. The young and handsome man was full of... fun on Sundays, performing mass with a guitar and folk songs, full of all manner of modern nonsense! All the churches began losing young parishioners to the charismatic priest.

He had intended to set his parishioners straight about this bunkum before he lost any more people to the Pope. He happened to be on Saint Augustine when Paul had arrived early for once for his youth group.

The young man came up behind him and looking over his shoulder, he said, “Saint Augustine?” A teasing light came to the brown eyes. “I love his quote: Love and do what you like.”

The idea startled him. “Love and do what you like?” He looked up. “Wrong on so many levels.”

“Wrong?” Paul questioned. “How so?”

“First of all, the actual quote is: Believe in God and do what you will.”

Delight softened Paul’s features. “Is it? Many people might say it’s the same thing. Love and do what you will equals believe in God and do what you will.”

He waved his hand violently. “Ignoramuses, all! Love and God are not synonymous! Despite how desperately all these new age, mumbo-jumbo, wishy-washy practitioners want God to be no more than a warm and fuzzy feeling like love, God is not.

Nor is God some vague, ill-defined nirvana just waiting to be discovered inside you. God is not located in elephants or candles or prayer mats pointing in a specific direction.

“God is immeasurably more. To say that all you need is love, or even a belief in God in order to be on a righteous path, is to discard scripture, the entire sacred word, its history and meaning, in short, everything.”

“You really feel strongly about this.”

“Indeed! In the same way you voiced your objection to animal lovers—”

Paul cocked his head slightly, confused now. “Animal lovers?”

“I overheard you reading something to a friend—I was struck by the logic. It was about how people will profess a love for animals—Oh, I am the biggest animal lover, they say!--but then have no compunction about eating them, despite all the cruelty inherent in meat production.” In fact, he only knew about this from Paul, who had unfortunately brought him literature on the subject and totally ruined his appetite for meat. “Apparently these so called animal lovers do not love animals enough to make the smallest personal sacrifice. Now,” he explained, “We’re talking an infinitely larger scale of course, but God solicits the very same hypocritical adoration. For Christians, professed love of God is just the beginning. You need to dedicate mind, body and soul: you need constant supplication and application and yes, sacrifice. You need to obey scripture and serve the poor...”

Paul haunted both his thoughts and his prayers now. Of course prayers for Paul always turned into prayers for himself—there was just no way around that...

**Jonathan**

“Let’s take a look at Santa Claus.”

A picture of a giant Santa Claus appeared on the screen behind them.

Chuckling, amused, Paul shook his head. “No, please.”

“Ah, but yes!” Jonathan continued, his tone confident and amicable. “The similarities between Santa Claus, Zeus, and God, or what I like to call the anthropomorphizing of deities, illustrates an important point.”

A click of his remote brought the audience a giant picture of Santa Claus, Zeus and Michelangelo’s God on the screen. Each bearded, older white man looked like the other, except each wore his own costume. “We can scarcely tell which is which,” Jonathan began.

“I suppose I ought to help enumerate the similarities,” Paul said.

“Go for it,” Jonathan said.

“First, the obvious: God, Zeus and Santa are males and indeterminately old.”

“Minus the jolly, I bet the images in people’s minds of these three characters are completely exchangeable. There’s way more: All three propel themselves through space without employing any known means of air travel. And they each reside over kingdoms,” Jonathan’s said the word with amused contempt. “And they all have an ‘army’ of lesser beings working for them.”

Paul added, “They each know who’s been naughty and nice.”

The audience laughed, but nervously now as the subject—for the uninitiated—brought a level of discomfort. Many people never noticed these striking similarities. Few

people thought of God in the same fanciful light as that which surrounded Santa Claus and Zeus.

“And this special knowledge is used to judge and pass sentence on us mere mortals. There are more similarities, but I will spare you...”

### **Pastor Simon**

Darkness and silence enveloped the church where Pastor Simon knelt in prayer, a familiar prayer. Still, his thoughts betrayed him, carrying him to a memorable day long ago when Paul had been about ten years old and he had first found out about the boy's... ah, visions. He almost never knew where Paul got his ideas or his questions. They were just on his mind week after week. True, every once in a while his mother was obviously the culprit—they were always ‘discussing’ things. One time...

“Young man, it has come to my attention that you took it upon yourself to inform our youth group that praying to God for things, for anything really, doesn't work. How do you know this?”

Paul nodded sagely and cleared his throat, as if he had rehearsed answering the question. “Well, Greg Holmes' grandmother got very sick and he prayed she'd get better, but she died. Lorilee prayed for her father to win the lottery. I told her that was stupid 'cause lots of people pray for that and it obviously doesn't work any better than if no people prayed for it, but I asked my mom and she said praying to God for things or favors was like making a wish list for Santa.”

“Quite right,” he said, impressed. “God hears our prayers, but He cannot answer all of them.” Still, the boy looked dissatisfied. Paul wanted to know the subject of his prayers. The intensity of the boy’s stare revealed that judgments were definitely being made.

“My dear boy, I pray for many things—”

“Yes? Like what?”

“Like... I often pray for a troubled parishioner’s well being or a sick parishioner’s health. I sometimes pray for the resolution of a problem, or sometimes just to better know God’s will.”

Paul cocked his head with sudden interest. “God’s will? Like what God wants from us?”

“Exactly.” He knew he hit the jackpot at last. The boy liked that idea immensely.

For over a year apparently Paul had done just that—prayed to know God’s will. One Sunday morning he spotted Paul standing to the side and behind as he shook hands and said goodbye to his parishioners. Surrounded by sunlight, the boy stood there, feet apart, hands behind his back, occasionally adding his own goodbye to a friend. He wore blue corduroys and a lighter blue shirt. For once the clothes fit him—his mother seemed determine to buy him clothes several sizes too big—and accented his height. When it seemed they were at last alone, he turned to Paul.

“Yes? What is it, Paul?”

“I wanted to share something with you, Pastor Simon.”

“And what would that be?”



Paul described how he prayed to know God's will for this last year and how he had a dream while he was awake. It took several moments to absorb what the boy was saying and as it dawned on him, his heart began a slow, rising escalation; he even stopped breathing as he waited to hear of this. Paul was just a boy; his so called 'vision' no doubt ridiculous, make-believe, nonsense, and yet...

Paul couldn't describe it; indeed he couldn't even speak of it, except to say that God didn't hear prayers.

"What do you mean God doesn't hear prayers?"

Paul struggled to answer. "God is... blind. God doesn't see us—not me or you or anyone. God isn't like that."

He tried to help the boy clarify this, wasting several minutes. Finally:

Paul whispered, "There is only one reason to pray."

"And what would that be?"

"To be closer to God."

### **Jonathan**

"Spare us?" Paul said. "You mean you finally reached the substance of your argument, assuming, of course this is substance?"

Principal Pickering bristled. "Paul Merton! I've never known you to make a sarcastic remark!"

"I'm just on the offensive, but please, let's not interfere with Jonathan as he, at last, imparts something of import."

“Very funny.” Jonathan scanned the audience, selecting one of his reliable tormentors. “You, Mike Hall.”

The boy looked wearily askance. “Yeah?”

“Do you believe in Santa Claus?”

Weariness changed to outrage. “No!”

“See? Even Hall doesn’t believe in Santa Claus. The point is, by the time we’re six we’ve outgrown the utter preposterousness of the fantasy; we are mature enough to grasp our parents’ ruse. Yet, the reality is, we merely substitute one fantasy for another. Santa Claus becomes training wheels for a belief in God.”

Paul interjected, “Jonathan views religion through the paradigm of sociobiology —”

Someone in the audience shouted out, “I don’t get it!”

Another kid answered, “Join the crowd.”

Another girl rolled her eyes. “I only understand about half of what they say.”

Jonathan clicked on the next picture. The screen showed the common symbol of evolution: the progression from ape to man as Paul explained, “Sociobiology is the study of the evolutionary basis of behavior—”

“And that makes sense?” The first student asked out loud.

Jonathan knew how to explain this, and he knew Paul would follow.

“Sociobiology looks at the really fun questions about human behavior.”

“There’s a million of them,” Paul nodded.

“Like why do chicks like men with big bucks?” Jonathan posed the question.

“During the bulk of our evolutionary history, women acquired resources by attracting men who had food, clothing, shelter and wanted to share with them. Men, in general, attracted women by acquiring these resources.”

Jonathan used plain language. “The rich chick’s kidlets have a greater chance of surviving.”

A young lady objected. “That is so yesterday!”

“Well, yeah,” Jonathan agreed. “Today women are equal; we want women to make as much as men for the same work, blah, blah, blah. We might have changed, but our biology hasn’t. Chicks still dig men with big bucks.”

The audience laughed, even the teachers, Jonathan noticed. “Why are men attracted to long hair, big breasts, curvy hip to waist ratios?”

Marcus shouted out, “Cause it’s a turn on?”

“Yes, but why those things and not big ears, long arms, or buck teeth? Because, you see, long hair, breast size and curvy hip to waist ratios are all signs of a females’ fertility. Sociobiology investigates all this stuff. Those are the easy ones, but believe me, it can become complicated.” He had spent several days reading various theories on why human females have periods; these discussions were long and complicated. The subject would never do for a high school audience. “Let me ask you this: who here has trouble waking up at seven in the morning?”

Hands went up with enthusiasm, a meter of the daily agony surrounding the issue.

“Adolescent physiology. But the question is why do teenagers’ brain chemistry start keeping them up late at night and sleeping in late?”

The noise level rose; Paul tried to warn the now enlivened audience. “Before Jonathan elucidates, it is no doubt helpful to imagine millions of years of evolution transpiring in a small clan made up of various aged humans.”

“Yeah. Imagine all the teenagers wide awake and ready for fun, while the old people sleep. What happens in the ole’ cave?”

Paul thought to control the language before it erupted. “Shall we just say mating opportunities?”

“Better known as sex! When the old guys were sleeping, the teenage guys finally got a chance with the girls.”

Everyone laughed. Nothing wakes up a crowd like sex, Jonathan thought.

“Sex! Explain that!” Hall said triumphantly.

Jonathan scoffed, “Sex? I suspect sex will always remain a mystery to you, so no worries.”

Paul had to wait through a full minute of laughter before he could speak. At least a dozen kids started throwing stuff at Hall, but he laughed with the rest. This was all good fun.

“As it applies to us and our discussion here,” Paul finally began, “Sociobiology might ask why humans, with few exceptions, believe in God and why do we create religions that celebrate this belief. Jonathan will concede that throughout human history the belief in God is not just universal, but extremely powerful; it is one of the most potent of all human forces.

“It has been argued that the very belief in God enhances our survival. Religion itself presents a rich smorgasbord of beneficial stuff for us mere mortals: it creates group

cohesion and binds us to each other. This can be a powerful force for good, especially as the one universal aspect of a belief in God is the understanding that God wants us to exercise compassion and help each other as much as possible.”

Jonathan watched the teachers, collected along the sides. Some stood, while others sat in the aisle seat, ready in the event that they were needed. Paul had every one of them nodding.

“Yeah, yeah. That’s all true,” Jonathan said dismissively. “But it’s not the main function of religion at all.”

Paul’s smile seemed somehow indulgent. “Jonathan will now tell you that the main purpose of religion is to mediate between us and the inevitability of our death.”

“Exactly! The hammer didn’t just hit the nail’s head, it drove it home! We’re talking the big pie in the sky. I guess for human beings the ultimate terror is not Al Qaeda, the dire consequences of climate change or another boy band.” He clicked on a picture of an idyllic version of heaven. “It is death. Our minds more easily embrace this most fantastic scenario: that a benign, invisible, all powerful king rules over the big pie in the sky place of clouds, winged fairies, and the biggest of all sellers, the never ending happily ever after...”

## **Ruth**

Ruth thought of this very thing as she knelt in her garden, toiling in the rich soil, pulling weeds from the newly planted flowers. The winter sun felt heavenly on her back,

but the weeds fiercely clung to the earth and she breathed deeply with the exertion.

Pausing, she wiped her brow.

She had always felt that if she were very good, if she never spoke up, wore loud colors or took up a lot of space, if she stayed quite still and very quiet, then ultimately one day she would wake up in heaven.

Everything would be all right then. Being in heaven meant that God not only forgave her, but that... He loved her.

She stopped, watching a small spider drop from a dying sunflower. The tiny beast seemed to pause midway, swaying slightly, as if trying to determine which way to go—up or down. Frightened of the unknown, he scampered back up...

Yet why then was she so terrified of dying? Why oh why?

Last year Sara Climes, one of their parishioners, had a sudden aneurism. Her husband rushed her to the hospital. Just in time. She almost died, but the doctors managed to save her. Still, she had fallen into a coma and there she remained. The doctors said barring a miracle she would never come out of it.

Poor Brad Climes! The doctors suggested he take her off life support.

They wanted Brad Climes to agree to kill his beloved wife!

Ruth kept returning to this thought: if she were in a coma, poised between life and death, she would rather be alive and unconscious, than dead and not in heaven...

**Jonathan**

Jonathan invited the audience to ponder, “How likely can that be? A never ending happily ever after?” He shook his head. “It is easier to believe that crap than it is to confront the inevitability of our future nonexistence. And this is what just blows me away! Why is nonexistence so difficult for people?”

At last Paul stepped up to the plate. “Because existence is all we have. Death without the promise of transcendence negates everything we hold dear in our lives: our families and loved ones and all our memories, gone, swept away as if they never were. Death stamps our lives with utter futility. Of course intelligent, imaginative creatures would transform this futility into something grand and magnificent. Of course!”

“Paul, you actually believe in heaven?”

“Why wouldn’t you?”

“Because it is not real?” Jonathan suggested.

“The hope it promises is as real as your next breath. I would not choose to live without it. The idea that at the end of life we are united with God is indeed universal among humans and all our varied cultures. Different religions enhance the idea with earthly comforts in order to convey the beauty of it: easy living, good food and even heavenly music—“

A kid named this music, “The Stones!”

“Van Morrison, Red Hot Chili Peppers!”

“Nirvana!”

Laughing, Paul held up his hand up for silence: “The point is throughout the ages, people have dressed up the idea of being one with God in all manner of human pleasures.

This makes it easy for you, the avowed atheist, to point and say, Absurd! Stupid even. The reality is, the idea of transcendence is not just absolutely necessary, but the most beautiful and profound concept we have...”

### Lily

A knock sounded at the door.

Lily clicked off the debate and rose. She peeked out the window to see Jonathan on the front porch. The timing seemed auspicious. After a good day’s work and even a swim—wearing a spring suit against the chilly winter waters—Lily had thought to reward herself for the healthy behavior by watching five more minutes of the debate. She felt it was a good sign, that she allowed herself to watch the debate only as a reward for... participating in life.

The door opened. “Jonathan,” she smiled. “It’s you.”

He paused for the briefest second. “Is it? I wasn’t sure. I came for clarification.”

Lily laughed. “Exercising our wit, are we? Well, this is so strange. I was just watching the debate.”

“Oh. Wow. Actually I found another one of Paul’s books and I thought I’d run it back to you.”

She looked at the title and smiled. “Paul loved the Dalai Lama.”

Jonathan nodded. “He made me read it. We talked about it in one of our vocab sessions.”



A long pause filled with the awkwardness of two people who had so much to say to each other, but no where to start. Lily's natural politeness, to say nothing of her kindness, might have leapt in to ease this uncomfortable lull, but she was lost in memories of the long list of Paul's heroes and loves.

For she could never predict who or what would trigger her son's adoration or admiration. Historically, it was not Thomas Jefferson, but Ben Franklin, not Abe Lincoln, but Harriet Tubman. He maintained an eclectic taste in literature: Atwood's difficult *Oryx and Crake*, Morrison's more difficult *Paradise*, all of Dickens and then Harry Potter. His favorite novel would probably always be Hemmingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* and similarly, his favorite movie was *Life is Beautiful*, which he reserved for their family's annual Christmas evening viewing. The list of Paul's loves was long, and the Dalai Lama sat on top.

Unaware of Lily's thoughts, Jonathan finally went for broke and ended his struggle with a confession: "I guess I just wanted to talk to you again. I was thinking about Paul. I remember you said no one would talk about him, but that you could only talk about him and—" He shrugged, falling silent, his vulnerability plain.

The admission touched Lily deeply. "Jonathan, that's so sweet." She opened the door as he stepped inside. "Please come in. My mom and I were just fixing dinner..."

Jonathan didn't dare hope for an invitation, of course. Surely she mentioned it, so he understood the visit would be short, that was all.

Clair appeared in the kitchen to start the salad and she looked up after popping in the garlic bread alongside the lasagna in the oven. "Jonathan Knowles." The oven door slammed shut.

“Hey, Mrs. Merton.”

Clair’s brows drew a line of disapproval. “Hey? What does that mean?”

Lily explained to Jonathan, “My mom’s a stickler for grammar.”

“Southern slang for hi,” Jonathan explained.

“I didn’t know you were from the south, Jonathan?”

“I’m not,” he said.

“I’m so confused,” Clair said, but not like she meant it.

“Welcome to the human race,” Jonathan said, adding. “Perpetual confusion is about the only thing I have in common with other people.”

“Jonathan’s going to stay for dinner, Mom.” Lily went to set an extra plate at the table.

“Maybe if we feed him, he’ll make more sense.”

Jonathan tensed with a small gasp upon hearing of his good fortune. Dinner with Paul’s famous mom and grandma? Oh, boy.

Lily looked curious. “Are you blushing, Jonathan?”

“No, no.” He tried to appear calm, nonchalant, trying to think of something normal to say. “It smells wonderful. I’m, like, real grateful.”

“I’m, like, hoping you don’t use that obnoxious word again,” Clair said. She offered the same suggestion to all her students.

“I promise,” Jonathan swore.

Smiling, Lily directed him to a chair at the oak dining room table as she went to get him a soda. “Lasagna, garlic bread and spinach salad coming up.”

“I haven’t had lasagna for years.”

“Your stepfather?” Lily asked, now opening the wine as her mom made the salad.  
“Does he cook sometime?”

Jonathan shook his head, absorbing the scene before him. Lily and Clair going about fixing dinner. A normal sit down dinner at home, like something one sees in the movies or on TV. The artfully arranged table setting completed the happy picture: bright blue and white china, red napkins and place settings, red and blue silverware. Blood red roses popping out of a colorful ceramic vase. Most people would probably view the table setting as both casual and elegant, but it struck him as exotic and sensational. Something he might find in an upscale magazine or store window. That he sat here seemed nothing short of miraculous. “I don’t ever remember him being home for... ah, dinner.”

“Is he still a big drinker?” Clair asked.

“Mom, that’s rude,” Lily scolded.

“I don’t mind,” Jonathan said. “I don’t see him that much, but when he does come home, it is usually with a stumble and a pretty serious stink.”

“I’m so sorry. That must be hard for you.” Lily said the words, while wondering why someone didn’t bother to look into Jonathan’s situation more closely. Laguna Beach was such a small town, really. Surely someone noticed that the young man needed help! But...

But did he need help?

Jonathan seemed nonplussed. “Not any more. It used to be after my mom died—”

Trying to hide her surprise at this, Clair set down the salad on the table as she took a seat between Lily and the young man. “After your Mom died?”

“Yeah. She died when I was just seven. Didn’t you know?”

“Actually. No.” She exchanged a nearly imperceptible look with her mom. “We didn’t.”

“Yeah. I used to imagine that my real father, whoever he is, would come to find me. In this little imaginary world he was some hot-shot doctor or lawyer and he had a nice wife who... well, this sounds sexist, but in my fantasies, she pretty much only cooked.”

Lily considered this as she served the salad. It made perfect sense; food and nurturing were interchangeable in a child’s mind. She searched her memories of Paul’s schools for pictures of Jonathan: They were there, vague and distant. She remembered the other “smartest” boy always appearing slightly disheveled, unkempt, his pants always too short. He seemed to always be standing slightly apart from the other kids. Like Paul, he was often found reading at inappropriate times. “It can be a real challenge, getting those two to put down their books,” she remembered some teacher actually exclaiming.

Clair asked, “You don’t know who your real father is?”

“Not a clue.” He tried to remember what came first. His gaze came to the bright red napkin. He unfolded this on his lap, and took up his fork, watching to see if Lily or Clair looked alarmed by his choice. Both ladies looked concerned, but it was by what he was saying. “I once asked my step-father if he knew. I mean presumably he slept with my Mom and one would guess he’d have asked where the kid came from. He just said he assumed I knew that I had been spawned by the devil.”

Jonathan missed the looks of horror crossing his hostess’s faces.

“That’s terrible,” Lily said.

“No, no. He was just kidding. He’s not a bad man, just an indifferent and drunk one.” He noticed, “The salad is delicious! Anyway, the man set the bar of my expectations so low, I’ve never been remotely disappointed.”

“Apply that advice universally and you’ll be set.” Clair guessed, “I bet he also told you to be grateful.”

“Yeah. Wow.” He looked at Clair, the older woman’s sensitivity surprising him. “He said all I’d get from him was a roof over my head and food, but that it was more than a lot of kids in the world had, and if I was half as smart as everyone said I was, I’d be grateful for it.

Clair shook her head, murmuring as she rose to get the lasagna and bread. “The bastard.”

“Paul never knew his father either,” Lily said.

Jonathan nodded, watching wide eyed as Clair served him a giant portion of steaming hot lasagna. “We talked about it a few times.”

“Oh?” Lily could not hide her interest. “What did Paul say about him?”

“Just that he’s was some kind of hot shot neurosurgeon and that you and he were real tight, but well, when you got pregnant, he just didn’t want to be a part of Paul’s life.”

“I guess that pretty much sums it up.”

Clair said, “Lily still has to tell him.”

“About Paul? That he died?”

“My Mom insists that I tell him in person.”

As the rich food melted in his mouth, he realized he had somehow landed in the midst of his most cherished fantasy. “That’s really weird. You have to give the most important news of your life to someone who doesn’t care. An irresolvable dichotomy.”

Amazement sat in Clair’s lifted brows. “I heard you were some kind of smart.”

“So was Paul. Boy. Our conversations. Sometimes I felt like he was the only person who really understood everything...”

### **Jonathan**

Handel’s Water Music played on Paul’s stereo.

Jonathan had taken to listening to classical music back a few months—desperate to relieve his ignorance on the subject—but without an ipod or any kind of even mediocre sound system, this ambitious self improvement endeavor resulted in failure. The difference between Paul’s sound system and what he heard on his computer was the difference between static and Handel’s symphonic masterpiece.

After setting two places with silverware and napkins, Paul served two steaming bowls of bean and vegetable soup, a chunk of corn bread and glasses full of chocolate soy milk. They sat at the counter in the kitchen.

The bright, sparkling tile counter created a stunning picture of a sunrise.

“My grandmother’s friend made it,” Paul said, noticing his friend’s stare.

“It’s really something.”

Paul nodded, “Sometimes you forget how gorgeous it is, seeing it everyday.”

Jonathan could not imagine becoming complacent about a house full of beautiful things, but he took Paul's word for it. Just being in the spacious home, packed full of color, great music, a big ole' dog and home cooked food threatened to overwhelm him. It was a wealth of riches.

Paul had the new game, which played on his lap top in front of them. Hell Gate London: The Free Mason's fighting Satan's army of demons. Hundreds of thousands of people around the world were logged on to play. Now there were two more.

Trying to act nonchalant, not wanting to embarrass himself, Jonathan watched Paul for cues on how to properly proceed.

With one hand on the keyboard, Paul picked up the spoon and went for it.

Jonathan followed suit. The first taste caused a grasp. "Wow. This is spicy."

Paul smiled. "My grandma loves her spices."

A coin toss had put him up first. "I read that Dalai Lama book you gave me. It had a certain piquancy."

"Piquancy? I'm stupefied. Piquancy means a pleasantly pungent taste—"

Jonathan shook his head, "Second meaning. Engagingly stimulating or provocative. I especially like his comments on the excesses of consumerism." He ate slowly, to make the pleasure last, watching the game unfold before him. "Hey! Watch the zombies!"

"Got 'em! There does seem to be a plethora of greed in our country."

"Yeah," Jonathan nodded. "It made me think of this neighbor downstairs. She's always going to Walmart and buying literally shit loads of excrement or, as might be said more conventionally, boat loads of crap. Makes three or four trips to get all of it inside

her apartment. Then, religiously on Saturday and Sunday she has a garage sale. It's like these relentless tidal waves of consumer goods coming and going—”

Paul nodded. “Probably with no thought of the ecological calamity this type of consumerism precipitates.”

“Not a friggin’ clue.” He followed Paul’s lead and dipped the corn bread in the soup. “Whoa. Sweet. Anyway, it’s a case of genetics gone bad. Having evolved in a paucity of goodies, we literally never know when it is enough; we are programmed to always want more, to think more is better.”

“So true—”

“But, in some kind of grand omission, the Dalai Lama never actually mentions God. So, what’s the deal with Buddhists and God?”

Paul shrugged with a smile even as he blasted the menacing monster on the computer screen. “There’s dozens of Buddhist sects and I suppose each one would answer the question differently. When people asked Buddha: Is there a God? Buddha answered with a long and deep silence.”

With his cup midair, Jonathan paused, intrigued by this. “Really!”

“However, one time he told a story—”

“Which I am hoping like heck you know.”

Paul chuckled even as he hit pause on the computer. “Okay. There are many variations of the story, but here’s the basics: A man was shot with a poisoned arrow. When the doctor arrived to remove the arrow, the man grabbed the doctor's hand and asked, “Doctor, tell me, who was it that shot me? Was he of warrior class or some other



class? Was he tall or was he short? Was he young or was he old? Was he dark skinned or light skinned?

“The doctor ignored the questions and removed the arrow. Had he taken the time to answer the questions, the patient would have died. For this reason, said the Buddha, I will not answer your question about God. If I did, you would just spend your time in endless ruminations, and never awaken from your current state.”

Paul waited for his reaction, which was a long time in coming.

“Can you believe my word is circumvent?”

“An uncommon kind of luck; almost as good as mine. I have extraneous.”

Their laughter built, the more they thought about it, the funnier it became.

“Go for it,” Paul finally managed, returning to the computer game as well.

“Buddha sure knew how to circumvent answering the question.”

Paul answered gamely. “I think that Buddha felt the question was extraneous.”

Jonathan scoffed. “Not to the people who asked the question! Me thinks Buddha be a very crafty evader of difficult questions.”

Paul laughed, “And you’re missing the point.”

“That would be a first! The way I see it, Buddha is asking people to set aside their curiosity for some greater benefit. Not a good plan. Never a good plan.”

“Good point, but—”

“We forgot the vocab words again! And get the grabblies!”

“I’ll start over,” Paul said as he used the hook like weapon to pull the horrid looking creature close enough to decapitate. “Did you like the Dalai Lama’s irrefutable

argument that human happiness can only be bought through exercising our compassion and helping other people?”

“It was interesting, if only because it was a thought I never had—”

Paul was trying not to laugh now. “Your arrogance is—”

“Justified?” Jonathan suggested.

“Very funny! Hey, do you want some more?”

He didn’t dare.

Paul insisted, “We have this whole giant pot in there. My grandma always makes too much. She ends up making vegetarian dog food.”

Jonathan hesitated still, wondering if this could possibly be true.

Paul was already serving him another portion.

“I’d love some,” Jonathan said and in the same breath, “Hey! The gun!” Four demons swarmed onto the roof top. “Shoot!”

Paul swung into his chair just in time. “Oh! Got ‘em. The only other contemporary person so exalted in my mind is Mother Teresa.”

This at last, Jonathan understood and only because, “You know Potts?”

“The social studies teacher?”

“He showed us a documentary on Mother Teresa, all her good deeds and what not. But at one point, here was this tiny, diminutive creature surrounded by dozens of reporters and someone asked her if she had one wish, what would it be? I’m like, can we imagine a more lame question? I’m sitting back, bored, certain she would say something trite, some stupid platitude, I wish for world peace or an end to world hunger—”

This landed the prize of Paul's full attention. Surrounded by monsters, he stopped playing. "But she didn't, did she?"

Jonathan shook his head and smiled. "She said I wish people would smile at each other more."

Paul nodded, "It's brilliant. The opposite of tenebrous." He started playing again and seemed satisfied, not just by Mother Teresa's statement, but by Jonathan's understanding.

"Nice save, dude!" Jonathan nodded, "I had to think about it. How we are woefully ineffectual at stopping the big stuff—war and famine. But the one thing every one can do is smile more."

"And smiling is surprisingly efficacious. Apparently the act of smiling releases a small, but traceable endorphin, which triggers happiness, even health and produces good will."

"No shit! Now that I started smiling at the neighbor and we're 'friends,' I'm constantly lugging bags of Walmart crap into her apartment."

Paul laughed. "My favorite Mother Teresa story: Mother Teresa and Bono stood before a line of hundreds of starving refugees, each patiently waiting for their bowl of food at a relief center in Africa. Bono said, 'When I look into the ravaged faces of these people, I see an indictment of the entire human race.'"

"Oh yeah," Jonathan nodded. "I concur 100 percent."

"You and all the rest of us, a near universal or regnant response." He caught Jonathan's confused look. "Third definition."

“I’m not sure that is correct usage, but—” He pointed at the advancing demon.  
“Shoot, shoot!”

The two young men exploded with groans of lament as he missed.

“Anyway,” Paul continued. “Mother Teresa had a different response. She said that when she looked into the faces of poor people, she saw the face of the Lord Jesus.”

Jonathan studied his friend. “Okay... I want to follow you, but that’s a pretty abstruse anecdote.”

“Look out!”

“Got ‘em! Purple blood. Very cool.”

“My mom showed me this newspaper article about some brain research: apparently the same area of the brain lights up when Buddhists monks meditate on compassion and when mothers hold their newborn babies.”

“Yeah. Okay. Interesting.”

“See, you just know that was the strongest part of Mother Teresa’s brain; she knew only love, which took the form of Jesus—she saw him in every human face. Her love, so authentic, fueled her avidity to aid people. I imagine when I see a homeless person, if I thought of them as I do of, say, my mom, my munificence would know no bounds.

Jonathan was nodding now. “Okay I get that. Brain wiring. Repetitive thoughts or ideas become ever more strongly wired in the brain and therefore more accessible and easier to exercise. Works disastrously for porn as well as it does for religion. Muslims who supplicate and pray five times a day; Christian no fun mental cases who direct every thought to “What would Jesus do”—it triggers the accrual of their religiosity.”

The young man's face changed with concentration. "Wow! Think about it. I feel as if I could be religious. As if there is a dormant section of my brain, and I just have to concentrate, or pray, or even just imagine God and this part of my brain would be activated. I could make it stronger and stronger by repeating the process. I'd soon have a powerful feeling, becoming a certainty, that there is a God.

"Damn, we are so hard wired for God. The experience is like a seed, waiting for the slightest encouragement to bloom. A deep silence, a full moon, a perfect night..."

"Amazing Grace," Paul whispered, nodding with a knowing smile.

### Lily

Lily knocked on the door and waited.

Hand carved, double wooden doors marked the four corners of the plush hallway. Expensive potted plants grew from large black and gold ceramic pots, these decorating the thick gold and black trimmed Berber carpet. A paler gold color covered the high ceiling walls. Gilded mirrors adorned them. The multimillion dollar apartments were far too ostentatious for Lily's tastes. Her mother too, would not approve, she knew.

The doorman had announced her name; Gavin should have opened the door by now. Her impatience fueled a louder, more insistent knock.

The door abruptly opened.

There stood Paul's father Gavin. She had not seen him for almost two decades. Still handsome, the man's frame and height matched perfectly his son's. As did his dark curly hair, only Gavin's was edged in attractive silver. A surgeon's pale skin contrasted

with Paul's bronze color, but he had Paul's same sharp, angular features and widely spaced brown eyes, currently filling with a strange, darting anxiety as he stared back. A fine prominent nose over thin bloodless lips, these bracketed by deep crevices on either side—that and his graying hair were the only signs of his age.

He looked so much like Paul! The striking similarity brought momentary tears. She resisted the urge to fall into his arms with the desperation born of her grief. But an illusion drove the desire, she knew and she managed to resist any such urge. She blinked and drew deep, even breaths.

“Gavin,” she said, her voice uncertain.

“Lily, you look beautiful.”

The blue eyes widened with surprise. His gaze traversed over her figure and clothes, the Levis, soft violet turtleneck and sandals. The compliment seemed inappropriate in the extreme and she felt her fury rekindle. She struggled to suppress it, but found the effort taxing and gave up. A distressed hand went to her forehead; she started to speak, but then stopped.

“Please, come in. Have a seat.”

He stood behind her as she made a brief study of the surroundings. Black and white marble floors, black couches squaring off against each other, matching lounge chairs in between, a shiny black coffee and cocktail table, both topped with glass. Modern paintings. No one she recognized, though; they must be local talent. Not a soft touch anywhere: no flowers, knickknacks or personal treasures. She wondered what her mother would think.

She knew immediately: The interior decorator was overpaid.

“Can I get you something? Tea or coffee?”

“Whiskey,” she said, uncharacteristically.

“I see,” he said.

Just what he saw, she had no idea. He disappeared behind the wet bar, returning shortly with a brandy snifter full of precious brown spirits. He took the seat across from her, keeping a meaningful distance. Just as she started to speak, his beeper went off, like some improbable cue in a movie. After checking the number, he excused himself.

Doctors were never safe from interruptions, she knew.

A pensive look rested on Lily’s face as she sat there waiting, thinking about last night. It had been difficult, there was no way around it. Jonathan had become their thrice weekly dinner guest, and her mom started taking him to her Intro to Art class on Monday night. Both she and her mother were coming to care for the young man. But last night, squeezing in a last dinner before her mother and Jeremy, her therapist and now her “friend” left for Paris, they were reviewing the bounty of Jonathan’s college acceptance letters from Harvard, Yale, Princeton, UC Berkeley, Stanford and UCLA, all in an effort to determine which school offered Jonathan the best deal.

Jonathan wanted to study cosmology and physics. Berkeley and Harvard had the best programs. Harvard offered the most money, but her mom explained that whichever school he choose for undergraduate studies, the other one would in all likelihood become his graduate school. Of course her mother had an opinion about any young person choosing a life’s course at age seventeen and as the conversation became heated, Lily suddenly realized she would have been doing the same thing with Paul...

The grief and sadness returned in force then.

This morning she had awakened to change. She still felt the unremitting yearning for her son, the intensity of her desire the very word hell, but she was suddenly no longer inconsolably sad. The relentless waves of grief and despair had subsided somewhat. Replaced by the bright liberating force of anger.

As if with intent, the weather reflected Lily's seismic emotional shift. Two different wild fires raged across the Southland, born from the cursed Santa Ana winds now arriving six months early. Her mother left on her European adventure and she was alone. She threw on her wet suit and sought the cold Pacific waters to ease the discomfort brought by hot, smoky air.

Somewhere in the middle of the big blue she knew what she wanted.

She wanted to kill someone. Someone deserving of the favor. She thought of Paul's father immediately. Indeed he deserved to know, and it was her unpleasant responsibility to tell him.

Once she finished swimming, she dressed and drove to the airport.

Gavin returned, apologizing as he resumed his seat across from her.

Lily took a sip from the snifter. "I won't be long. I just came to tell you... I have some..." She turned away, a hand coming to her mouth, suddenly aware of how hard this was. "Oh my God. Gavin. I can't say it. The words won't manifest..."

Softly, cautiously, he offered, "You mean about Paul? That he died?"

The shocking words ricocheted through her mind, the snifter hovering half way to her mouth as her eyes desperately searched the handsome face. "You know?"

"Your cousin sent me a notice."



Her father's older brother's daughter Maureen. She lived fifty miles away in a suburb of San Diego and she was a teacher, wife and busy mother of three and yet upon hearing of Paul's fatal accident, she showed up at the doorstep. The visit became a blur in Lily's mind; so dark were those first few weeks, she had almost no memory of this. Her mom said Maureen did an admirable and much appreciated job of orchestrating the chaos that surrounded them.

Apparently she even thought to send Gavin a note.

Lily couldn't believe it, she just couldn't. "You knew. All this time. But... but you never called?"

He grimaced. "I feel terrible, Lily. Devastated really. I meant to call. Janice—"

"Janice? Your third wife?"

"Something like that. Janice kept mentioning it, but I kept putting it off, thinking you would be preoccupied—"

The snifter slammed on the glass table top; Lily's eyes went cold. "Preoccupied with my son's death. What imagination and sensitivity! Did you work that out all by yourself, or did Janice help there too?"

"Lily, please. I kept thinking you were dealing with so much, that it would be hard to talk to me, of all people, about Paul."

Lily just stared as emotions rushed through her, one after another, so fast, so powerful, she could hardly make sense of them.

"I'm so sorry, Lily, for your loss."

Lily hands lay across her heart. "My heart is racing, I feel almost faint or... sick, I don't know." She stood up, her eyes darting this way and that, a panic stricken animal.

“Lily, please sit back down.”

Lily managed to shake her head. “I don’t understand how you could know that your son died and somehow not bother to convey condolences to his mother. I... What’s wrong with you, Gavin?”

“What’s wrong with me? Oh, that’s ripe. That’s the Lily I remember, always playing hardball. Nothing’s wrong with me. I told you from the beginning, I didn’t want a kid—”

“But you got him. He was born—”

“And I offered to pay child support—”

“Child support? Money? What has money got to do with it? All the money in the world in no way mitigates the fact that you had a son that you never bothered to... see, or hear or... touch.”

Gavin swung around to hide his anguish.

Sudden silence descended between them as memories of Paul’s struggle flooded into Lily’s mind. Paul was only three when he noticed every one had a dad. Even his mom had a Dad, but not him. Where’s my Dad, Mom, he asked, as if expecting her to pull a dad from a closet. She always told him the truth. “Your father lives in San Francisco. Sweetheart, Paul, this is a sad fact—your father doesn’t want to be with us. And that’s just crazy, right? Since you are the most lovable kid in the world!

“So obviously the problem is not with us. Oh no. You see there is something wrong with your father; like a broken foot, or being blind, but something in his heart. He does not have enough love in his heart. And that is a very sad thing indeed!”

Still, because it was Paul, the questions began: Why doesn't he have enough love in his heart? What's his name? He's a doctor like granddad? Can we surprise him, 'cause if he sees us, he will get love in his heart. Right Mom?

She could only keep answering the questions.

The memory became an epiphany.

It was as if she was seeing Gavin for the first time.

"I feel really stupid saying this, but Gavin, your son was the most beautiful person I have ever met." She paused as she stared wide eyed at his back, a hand coming to her mouth to contain the emotions. "Yes, I lost Paul, and somehow I am going to have to find a way to live without him. But at least I had the treasure of his love for seventeen years; at least I knew him." Her eyes simmered with unshed tears and pity both. "But you." She shook her head, whispering, "I have never felt worse for someone."

Lily moved to leave. Just as her hand touched the door knob, he made the confession.

"Paul wrote me letters," Gavin whispered.

### **Jonathan**

The tiny clock at the edge of his computer screen read Saturday, January 19<sup>th</sup>, 12:30 PM as Jonathan finally read the last page of Henry James' powerful *Beast in the Jungle*, which Lily had pressed into his hands to explain what had happened to Paul's father. He closed the book, momentarily stunned by the dramatic ending.

Lily had tried to explain what it was like meeting with Paul's father, but all she said was that, after handing over the letters, he had started crying, confronting a sudden tidal wave of regret. Regret that had come far too late. Lily said it was a scene drawn from a famous Henry James novel, *The Beast in the Jungle*. He had never read that book, so Clair gave it to him to take home. He picked it up in the morning and had plowed through.

Wow. *The Beast In the Jungle*. Nothing happened in the whole story, which for a science fiction fan made for a kind of... challenging read. The story centered around the protagonist, John Marcher and his big secret. Only one other person knows his big secret: May Bartram. The big secret? Marcher believed that something extraordinary was going to happen to him; some giant catastrophic or spectacular event, he doesn't know which, waited for him like a beast in the jungle.

The conceit was that the dude couldn't live until it, whatever it is, happened. Really. He spent his whole life waiting for something to happen to him, overwhelmed by this weird sense of foreboding. He couldn't marry May; he could never subject her to this mysterious, possibly terrible fate. So, he keeps her at a distance. Their lives pass by. The lady was the first to grasp what the beast and its tragedy were, but she died before telling him.

The end packed the wallop. The dude was a very old man, and unbelievably, still waiting for this terrible thing to happen to him. He was at May's gravesite when he spied a man and two sons mourning a loved one at another grave. At this moment the beast sprung upon him, devouring, more horrible than words can convey. Marcher would never feel that grief.

The novel ends.

Jonathan leaned back in his chair, his hands combing through his hair as he thought of how brilliant it was. Lily...wow. He got it. He really did. Paul's father? Bummer. Totally tragic in a John Marcher way, but amplified.

Lily, Clair and he had known Paul; they knew what Gavin had missed.

That made Jonathan one lucky SOB.

A hard and quick knock sounded at the door.

Disoriented, his mind still stuck in the labyrinth of the novel, he suffered a long moment's confusion. He never had any visitors. He looked at the door, as if to see through it before he rose and answered it. Two sheriff deputies in pressed gray uniforms stood before him. The woman looked short and Hispanic, while the tall man looked too old for a cop.

Jonathan's heart began a slow and steady escalation.

The lady held out the eviction notice. "Mr. Sebastian?"

"He's not here right now."

The lady read the name. "Mr.... Sebastian, your father?"

"Stepfather," Jonathan said.

"So, where is he?"

That was a good question. Jonathan supposed his stepfather had died three months ago because exactly three disability checks had piled up on the counter. His stepfather had never let one of those checks sit uncashed an hour, let alone a month. He had considered calling around to the mortuaries, but he was afraid of getting stuck with the funeral costs or being found out. He was six months shy from his eighteenth birthday,

and five months from graduating. His acceptance at Berkeley and his scholarship were contingent upon the completion of all his classes with an A. He could not enter the foster care system now, he just couldn't. He had looked into emancipation, but the process was crazily expensive and even worse, Laguna Beach High School prohibited emancipated students from attending classes.

As the days and weeks and months pass, he half thought he might escape.

He saw now how stupid that was. He should have been figuring something else out.

“Work. He has another place lined up starting next week.” The lie came effortless. “How long do we have?”

They exchanged glances. The man spoke for the first time. “We can give you a few minutes to gather up your things.”

“A few minutes? You mean I have to leave today? Right now?”

The lady nodded. “I’m afraid so.”

Anxiety filled his eyes as he looked around the room, surveying his modest belongings. He swallowed his panic. He refused to cry. Managing a nod, he turned to gather his things.

He had never felt grateful for having so little before.

Jonathan maneuvered about the small space, cramming his modest belongings into three grocery bags. His books slipped into a back pack. Shampoo, toothbrush and comp tossed on top. Clothes slung over his arm, thankfully hiding the shake in his hands from any interested gaze.

The deputy stepped forward suddenly. “Here let me help you get that.”

The small act of kindness brought an avalanche of emotion, but Jonathan managed to push it down. The tall man moved his computer and screen and set them just outside the door. Jonathan crammed the keyboard into the backpack. He grabbed his worn out sleeping bag and pillow and set these too, outside the front door.

“Have you got everything?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

The lady held the landlord’s lock in her hand as she looked him over. “You got a place to go kid?”

Few adults used kid to address him these days, not since he reached six foot four. “Sure,” he lied. “I’ll just call my friend. Like I said, my stepfather has a new place lined up.” He thought to add specificity, “On Wednesday. We’ll probably just hang with friends until then.”

The tall deputy’s radio buzzed to life. He stepped aside, speaking into it.

Glancing at his three bags of modest belongings stuffed into grocery bags, she studied him a moment with rising suspicion, but after a sigh and a shrug, she must have decided it was not her problem. He was never anyone’s problem, boy, did he know that. She secured the lock on the door, forever separating him from the only home he had ever known.

“Okay kid, okay,” she said hastily. “Take care now.”

Her partner was half way down the stairs now, responding to something on the radio.

Jonathan watched the sheriff’s car slide into traffic.

He sank to the cement steps to work out a plan. He could probably manage homelessness for three months. Hotels, even the cheapest ones were too much money. He made 96.00 a week, which would be enough for food and washing clothes. He'd hang out at school, using the computers in the school library, pass time at the bookstore where he worked, the city library and parks. He could shower in the gym before classes and sleep on the beach, or somewhere.

The two difficulties were his computer and escaping the cops for three months.

He needed to store his computer somewhere until he could buy a USB storage device and download all his files—hundreds of them. He thought of Lily; she wouldn't mind. They had a whole garage and everything. Maybe he could leave everything there just until he got set up somewhere safe from the cops.

Okay, no need to panic. He could do this.

Leaving everything else on the doorstep for now, but unable to risk losing his computer, he lifted the hard drive and made his way down the cement steps. He'd call Lily at the gas station on the corner. He had a couple of bucks left for food this week. He hoped Lily was home, so he didn't have to spend any more money on the phone calls. For the next few months every quarter counted.

He reached the phone booth at the gas station and set his computer down. Covering one ear against the traffic on PCH, he punched out the familiar numbers. To his relief Lily answered right off.

“Lily, it's me, Jonathan.”

“So it is. Hey. How are you, mister?”



Somehow mister had become Lily's nickname for him. Hey, mister! Good morning, mister! He never had a nickname from anyone before; he discovered he loved hearing it. Nickname: endearment, affection, warmth, comfort...

"Hey, Lily. I was going to ask you and Clair a favor."

"A favor?" The now familiar voice sang out, filling with a hint of laughter. "Does this favor have to do with dinner tonight? What are we having Mom?" There came a pause. "She says Chinese take out. How does that sound?"

"Oh, wow, that sounds great, really, but I have to work tonight."

"Shoot! Then what's your favor?"

"I was hoping I might store my computer, and I don't know, a few things at your house for a while," he added, "If you have any room. Just until I can download my work and well, I'll try to sell my computer, to get enough for a laptop or something."

He heard a long pause. "Lily?"

"Jonathan, is that man stealing your things?"

That man referred to his stepfather, he knew. He noticed Lily had many curious habits. For instance if she didn't like someone, she either couldn't remember their name or couldn't bare to say it out loud. His stepfather fell in that category. "No, no, nothing like that. I just, well, we got evicted from the apartment and I can't take my computer with me, you see. It's just too heavy to carry around. I was hoping like heck I could store it at your house. Like in the garage or some—"

Anger entered Lily's voice. "Where are you, Jonathan?"

"Oh, I'm at the gas station on Legion. But I can carry it over—"

"I'll be right there."

She hung up on him. He waited for maybe five minutes before the silver Prius arrived. He felt momentarily overwhelmed by Lily's kindness as he popped the hatch and set the heavy burden inside. "The rest of it's at the apartment. I can get it—"

"Get in, Jonathan."

The Prius drove the half block to Jonathan's apartment building. She pulled into the tiny parking space when the questions began. Jonathan learned the difference between Lily as his friend and Lily in a mom mode. He had never witnessed the latter before and it was disconcerting to say the least. Disconcerting because he had never known a mom that he remembered; he never knew how incredibly, embarrassingly comforting it was.

"Where is he, that man?"

He hesitated before telling her, "I haven't seen him in a while."

"A while? How long is that?"

"I don't know. Three months maybe."

She tried to keep the outrage from her voice, he could tell, but the emotion appeared loud and clear in her eyes. "Three months!"

Jonathan nodded. "To tell the truth, I think, well, I think he's gone for good."

"You mean he just left you to fend for yourself for three months?"

"I think he has probably died."

The blue eyes searched his face, as if to ascertain the truth of this. "Ohmygod. Died." The whole situation became clear in the moment.

Jonathan added quickly. “I just can’t leave school now, you know. I know you and Clair get that. My scholarship and everything. So, I was hoping I could leave my stuff at your house just till the summer and when the dorms open, you know.”

The young man came into sharp focus suddenly. “Where are you thinking you’ll be staying?”

“I don’t know.” He shrugged, trying to appear nonchalant. “I’ll get by. I have a job and everything.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Jonathan. You’re staying with us.”

“Oh, wow, Lily, that’s a lot to ask for—”

“Of course you’ll be staying with us! We’ll love it!” She wondered if she should tell him the rest. Paul had inherited a sizable college fund from his grandfather, and she and her mom thought it would be a great graduation present for Jonathan. So, Jonathan will never have to worry about funding his, no doubt, lengthy education. He’ll be at least thirty by the time he finished his post doc.

Somehow they knew nothing would have pleased Paul more.

She looked over to see Jonathan’s changed expression. “Are you okay? What’s wrong?”

But Jonathan couldn’t speak. Not now. He shook his head.

Seeing this, Lily’s eyes went soft.

Jonathan still couldn’t speak even after they reached the house and Lily and Clair both helped him bring his things into the guest bedroom. After they left to fix lunch and call the school to explain his changed circumstance and new address, he stood there staring at the spacious room. There was a chest of drawers, a desk, a large bed covered in

a dark blue quilt, the artful arrangement of books and the large reproduction of Van Gogh's *Starry Night*.



His changed fortune kept him speechless for some time. His hands trembled slightly. His breath came hard and shallow. Overwhelming emotion can do that, he knew.

The gratitude finally appeared in his eyes.

Gratitude: Gratefulness, joy, bliss, elation...

He was home.

### Clair

Steep mountains enclosed Laguna Beach to the Pacific shore line and offered spectacular views to residents and hikers alike. Clair fully intended to enjoy the breathtaking vistas as she began the two mile walk up to the neighborhood aptly named Top of the World. Jeremy lived in this lofty and charmed area. A shower and a change of clothes waited at his glass and wood house. Afterwards they'd go see a movie and out to dinner.

The winter's day warmed by degrees, as if blossoming too early into springtime—one of the many benefits of living here. The strong sun felt heavenly and the blue sky stretched endlessly to the horizon. Catalina Island appeared in the distance.

Clair slowed as she approached Paul's old church. The steeple of the quaint white building jutted into the empty blue sky, like a manicured finger pointing up. The building looked worn and architecturally uninspired: a rectangle box, square windows appropriately spaced throughout, all white.

The garden more than made up for the plainness of the building. Heliotrope, with its clusters of light purple blossoms, grew along the fence on one side, while the opposite side sank beneath the weight of white climbing rose vines—a Laguna Beach favorite. Trimmed evergreen shrubs and holly lined the path leading to the two door modest entrance, but what made it stand out was the profusion of floral wealth—callas, violets and azaleas—growing in between.

She saw old Ruth's signature in the colorful array of flowers there.

As if conjured from the thought, from around the back of the church, the old woman appeared in a paper thin pink dress that matched the azaleas. Wisps of gray hair reached out from a worn straw hat. Large white sneakers sat comically on her too large feet. She seemed lost in thought, her head lowered.

Clair suddenly remembered Paul's request, "... be her friend. I don't know... show her how to live. You do it better than anyone else, Grandma..." That kid must have really cared for ole Ruth.

The next realization crashed into consciousness.

Why it must have been Ruth! She and Lily had spent an hour trying to figure out who had helped Paul write those letters to his father. Who else would Paul have approached with something so personal and private? And hadn't he always in fact loved the old woman?

Ruth finally looked up and spotted Clair. First, her hands came to her cheeks, as if Clair was as surprising a presence as a ghost. A smile spread across her plump and kind face as her arm waved a greeting.

“Ruth,” Clair smiled back. “How are you?” The exchange of pleasantries took several long minutes and followed a predictable script: the beautiful weather, the blooming winter gardens, both parties excellent health. “By any chance do you have a minute? I have a question.”

Clair called Jeremy to tell him she would be late as Ruth happily led her into her small home adjacent to the church. Minutes later she was seated in the modest and austere space, hands around a warm cup of tea. After telling Ruth about Lily’s meeting with Paul’s father, she finally mentioned the letters.

Ruth spiked her tea with generous doses of sugar. “Oh, I remember, Clair. Paul came to me. I think it was just before his fifth birthday. He said he had a big secret—he had written a letter to his father. He wanted to know if I would help him mail it. He only knew his father’s name and the city.”

Clair smiled, “I thought it was you.”

“I probably should have told Lily, but he made me promise to keep it a secret and honestly, I assumed it would eventually lead to a reconciliation between Paul and his father. I just couldn’t imagine anyone on earth resisting that boy...”

Clair shared the sentiment, especially considering the actual content of each letter.

*Dear Mr. Dad:*

*My Mom said you have a broken heart. I want you to know it's okay. I don't mind. I still want to see you.*

*Your boy,*

*Paul*

*PS: Do you think Brontosaurus were afraid of T Rex?*

There were seven letters in all, each the same: Paul had offered a naked, heartfelt request to meet Gavin, and then, like a worm on a hook, he presented a tidbit of himself, something he knew adults got a kick out of; he got a giant puppy named Big Ben, he won the regional chess title, he skipped three grades in math, he just finished War and Peace, he went to China with his grandmother, he's taking a world religion class at the junior college, etc. Clair and Lily had read each treasured letter slowly, once, then again, as if their souls depended on the information.

Gavin never did take the bait. Broken heart indeed; more like a missing heart. It reminded Clair of Pavel Filonov's Beast (Wolf Cub), where a monster emerges from the ordinary fabric, the bits and pieces, of life. Paul must have understood this as well, for the last letter had been written shortly before Paul's death.

It was mercilessly short:

*Dear Gavin:*

*This is probably my last letter to you. I have been writing to you pretty much my whole life, my desire to meet you fueled by a kid's desperation. I know that you know there is absolutely no financial obligation, so I can never imagine why you wouldn't be*

*willing to spend a dinner or even lunch with... me, your son. I was especially looking forward to it, since neurology is one of my favorite subjects. In fact, my friend and I had the most interesting debate on whether love is anything more than a chemical reaction. (I certainly could have used some tips.)*

*For whatever reason, you have never bothered with the courtesy of a reply. To tell you the truth, I would have given up hope of meeting you, except that, at one time, my mom loved you and because this gift is given neither lightly nor carelessly, I assumed I was addressing a person of some substance. And it is for that very reason I write. I am going to further infer that at some point in your life you'll regret not meeting me.*

*Please do not feel bad about this. Especially for me. The one thing life has showered me with is love.*

*Paul*

After a deep sigh and a sad shake of her head, Clair found herself staring at the older woman across from her. There was such innocence about Ruth, despite her advanced years. She suddenly wanted to honor Paul's request; she wanted it more than anything.

"Ruth, I have a present for you."

"For me?" The bright eyes lit with confusion and curiosity both. "A present?"

"It's from Paul."

"Paul?" Her hands came over her heart as if to underline the emotion there. She spoke slowly, "Paul left me a present?"



“He did,” Clair nodded and with humor entering her tone, she added, “Now Ruth, I am going to speak to the point and with bluntness, because if I have learned anything from Paul’s death it is that life is so precious; we’re not to waste a moment of it on superficial concerns.”

“Oh!” Ruth went all a flutter at that.

“Paul was worried about you.” She tried to think how best to say it. “Paul worried that, even though you’re getting on in years, that you didn’t have enough life packed into them.”

A pained expression crossed her face. “Did he say that?”

“Yes. Paul wanted me to take you on a trip and... well, teach you to have fun.”

“Fun?” She said the word as if indeed it was an unfamiliar concept.

“I know it would make Paul so very, very happy. His special present to you.”

The old woman’s gaze looked away. “This is so strange! The very last conversation Paul had with me, he told me that. Well, not that exactly. He said that he felt certain God didn’t want me to sacrifice so much of my life. I didn’t know what he meant at first, but I kept thinking about it. I knew Paul was right, because anyone who knew Paul knew how close he was to God and if Paul said so—”

“Have you ever been to New York?”

“Oh no! I’ve always wanted to though; I’ve seen New York on TV and I always thought—”

“I have to go to New York for a week. I was thinking you could come with me. We’ll do a little sight-seeing, we’ll go to the theater, maybe the ballet—”

“A ballet! Oh, I’ve always wanted to see a real, live ballet!”

“I have an art opening at MOMA I have to attend—”

“MOMA?”

She said the museum’s name with a question mark and Clair laughed. “You have a lot of catching up to do. We leave this Friday—”

“Friday?” A hand went to her forehead. “Oh, but the church—”

“Oh, for God’s sake! Enough about church and God.” Clair reached across the table and took Ruth’s warm hand in hers. “Let’s just have some fun!”

Ruth’s smile made her look far younger than her years. “Fun. What a marvelous idea.”

### **Pastor Simon**

Late Sunday afternoon Pastor Simon sat at his desk, reviewing his Sunday sermon. The church had been packed this Sunday after Easter, full of new and old parishioners. He felt the sermon had gone well; he presented the argument against deism by offering various theologians’ powerful experiences of God.

He felt he should be pleased and yet...

Ruth prayed in the church and he needed to take the old woman home, but the quiet surroundings of the nearly empty building became a backdrop for his troubled feelings. At first he barely noticed the play of light and dark on the floor before him. Sunlight streamed through the paned glass window, creating a bright square of light on the hard wood floor, but as his uneasy thoughts searched for meaning in Paul’s recent memorial, he found himself riveted to the changing scene played out on the floor. Wispy

hints of fog rolled over the landscape, obscuring the sharp lines of the window's shape. The square blurred more as the fog thickened billowed over the church outside, becoming at last a the most vague impression before disappearing altogether.

He was lost like that...

Last week, the city and high school had organized a tree planting ceremony at Heizler Park to memorialize Paul's death these many eight months later. The move's impetus lay in necessity, a desperate effort to relocate the burgeoning street memorial to a safer and more appropriate place. For the haphazard and chaotic street shrine continued to expand long after Paul's accident.

How many people had loved this young man!

Over two dozen signs leaned against the base of the small cliff that edged the busy highway. The signs were stacked three deep in places, each a billboard advertising its creator's love for the young man. They came in all shapes and sizes too, some made of cardboard or pressed wood, others of surf boards or skim boards. These were either painted, decorated in layers of construction paper, or colored with crayons. We Love You Paul. You'll Always Be In Our Hearts and Prayers! Say Hi to God for me, Paul. It will be a happy day when we see you again in Heaven, Paul! I miss you, Paul.

Beneath a paper mache eagle, a sign read, Your Wings Came too Soon! Pins, staples and masking tape stuck personal letters, notes and drawings to the wealth of boards. A Bible wrapped in red silk and another leaning against a board with bright blue letters that said simply: Paul = Love. Someone or some group of people regularly tended the assortment, for the flowers were all fresh. A half dozen crosses lay against the boards,

all kinds, large, small, made of wood or cardboard, painted or left modestly unadorned. One cardboard cross had been wrapped in tin foil.

He slowly perused the dozens upon dozens of notes, poems, Bible verses and students' art work. A boy named Josh drew an astonishing good abstract picture of Paul. Lisa left a whole book of drawings; the simple note attached to the cover explained they were drawn in sixth grade when she and Paul shared not just a table in Ms. Dove's class, but also their young dreams and secrets. Kerry had created a dolphin out of sea-shells, poised atop a small pyramid of rocks. A small note explained the statute's inspiration: Kerry once happened upon a fantastic sight while walking her dog on the beach; she spotted Paul body surfing with one of those magical creatures.

There were countless other personal tributes to a boy everyone loved and so dearly missed.

Yet, at some point the memorial started to change. The sheer size of the public display began to attract strangers. People started leaving things. A lucky charm bracelet of a sick child, a favorite prayer or poem, and then, in a dawning collective understanding of what the space meant, pictures began appearing of other lost love ones. First a soldier's picture was hung from the tip of one of the largest crosses, the picture of a beloved wife and mother lost to breast cancer, a grandfather, the name and baptismal date of a still born child. Motorist continued to complain because cars slowed and sometimes even stopped to look.

The city decided to try to move it.

The light streaming through the window disappeared altogether.

His whole life, since the dawn of his memory, every minute of every day of every month, year in and year out, he felt God's presence. God's presence both defined and drove him. When Paul died, he had felt a curious numbness creeping over mind and soul, exactly like a mist clouding a vision. Some large part of himself was quite simply unable to absorb this shock, leaving him feeling so queerly vulnerable, uncertain and in the dark.

Of course, he began to pray. Praying for Paul. Praying for Paul's family. Praying for himself. Second Chronicles 32:31 says, "God withdrew from Hezekiah in order to test him and to see what was really in his heart."

How ironic! All this time he had thought Satan was testing him through the innocence of a child. Paul's relentless questions probed and pushed and prodded his faith. The devil was challenging him; the devil was probing, pushing and prodding his faith.

But it wasn't the devil after all...

Disheartened, sad, he finally rose and made his way down the hall and into the church. Ruth sat in the second pew, Paul's old seat, draped in the new clothes that Paul's grandmother, had bought her on one of their many trips to San Francisco, New York and once even to London. At first he didn't realize anything amiss, but as he made his way to her side, he suddenly saw that she was shaking with tears. "Ruth, Ruth, what's wrong?" He rushed to the old woman's side, lifting her up from a kneeling position in order to better see her face, which he searched with worried eyes.

Only to realize the strange joy and love radiating on the familiar face.

"Pastor Simon, take me to Lily."

**Ruth**

Clair, decked out in dark silver loose fitting velour pants and a matching silk shirt, answered the energetic knock. “Ruth and Pastor Simon! What a pleasant surprise!” The two people stood on the porch against the backdrop of a familiar fog.

“I am so sorry to bother you, Mrs. Merton,” Pastor Simon began, feeling awkward and nervously soothing the folds of his black cloth. “Ruth insisted I take her to see Lily, ah, Miss Merton, at once.”

“Did she?” Clair smiled indulgently at Ruth, until she saw the strange fervor in her friend’s eyes, as if the old woman had a fever. Ruth wore the familiar bright red pants topped with a print shirt of vivid red poppies, inspired by Millais’s Ophelia, a picture Ruth had loved in the Tate Britain. She had taken her to see it after they had seen Hamlet at the Old Globe.



Ruth fell in love with it. She had purchased and framed the poster, perhaps her favorite picture after Matisse’s giant paper cut outs. That had been another wonderful experience. They had walked in on an inspired docent explaining Matisse’s masterpiece; the vibrant colors and poetic symbolism of the freedom water brought an aging body and both of them had been moved to tears. Ruth confessed how very much she loved

swimming, but that she had not been in water since she was a girl. Within the hour they were floating in the warm mineral waters of a famous spa Clair often frequented.

Ruth claimed that day had been the best day of her life.

Clair still didn't know what surprised her most about her travels with Ruth. The old woman apparently was made for travel. Ruth experienced everything through the eyes of an excited child discovering the world and she loved art, all of it: contemporary, modern, African, Chinese, ancient, Renaissance. They were always the last ones out of the museums; Ruth's stamina was a thing of wonder.

Presently Ruth's cheeks were infused with the same fantastic shade of red as the poppies.

"Here," Clair said, stepping out of the way and opening the door wide. "Won't you come in?"

Hands clasping her heart, Ruth stepped inside the large and spacious living room. Pastor Simon followed. "Lily!" Clair called up stairs for her daughter, who was working in her room, before she turned to introduce Jonathan. The young man sat on the couch reading a biography of Ben Franklin for an AP history book report due next week. "Jonathan, this is Paul's Pastor Simon, and Ruth, the lady who sometimes travels with me —"

Jonathan rose and extended his hand simultaneously. "Hey Pastor Simon. Ruth. Pleased to meet you."

The young man's presence came as a shock to Pastor Simon. Ruth had mentioned Lily Merton had invited a homeless teenager to live with them, but he suddenly wondered

if this was the same Jonathan whose soul so concerned Paul as a young man? Could it be?

Lily rushed down the stairs. She wore Paul's Laguna Beach High School navy blue sweats and sweatshirt. She confronted the scene, absorbed the strange emotions on Ruth's face and she knew caution. "Ruth? Pastor Simon?"

"I'm very sorry for interrupting you," Pastor Simon began again, "But Ruth insisted I take her here at once. Nothing else would do. She wouldn't tell me what—"

Shaking her head, as if unable to listen to anything now that she saw Lily, Ruth rushed to the younger woman. "Lily," she turned briefly to Clair, too, "Clair, I saw him!"

"Who?" Lily asked stupidly.

"Paul. In a dream. Or maybe it wasn't a dream."

This last confession flooded Pastor Simon with embarrassment. He should have made the old woman explain before thrusting her upon these people. "Of course it was a dream!"

"I don't remember falling asleep—"

Pastor Simon's hand waved in dismissal. "Ruth falls asleep as frequently as a newborn these days—"

"But Paul seemed so real." The old woman's voice was calm, but rang with emotion. "I was sitting in church, you see, thinking of all the fun I've had this last year with you, Clair. New York, San Francisco, London! All the art, movies, and the plays and I can't describe it really, except that all of a sudden I felt all my anxiety and worries disappear. They lifted from me and I looked up and there he was, smiling that beautiful



Paul smile. I, I was so happy to see him! My heart started pounding; I started crying...

Paul, I whispered, oh Paul.

“I felt his love, Lily, it poured over me.”

The touching words brought silence. The emotion Ruth spoke of appeared on her changed face and seeing it, recognizing it, brushed Lily’s eyes with tears. Clair’s arm slipped protectively around her daughter’s shoulder.

“Whoa,” Jonathan broke the spell. “Are you saying you saw Paul’s ghost?”

“Well, I suppose I am, but that’s not all. You see, suddenly a great big book sat in Paul’s hands and he pointed to a page. I didn’t see it, exactly, but I realized it was page 108.” The edge of hysteria crept into Ruth’s voice, “He wanted me to show it to you, Lily. Oh, it was ever so important!”

“Wait one minute,” Jonathan shook his head adamantly, leaping into this story, as if it were an argument. “Let’s get real, okay? There is no such thing as ghosts. We’ve all heard of false memories; just apply the concept to the idea of ghosts. I mean seeing Paul or your dead Aunt Betty, or say, a little green dragon, doesn’t mean it is actually there, right? In fact, allowing any experience to dictate reality is a big mistake; the mind is perfectly capable of generating even memories of things that never happened—”

Lily finally managed to tear her gaze from Ruth. “Jonathan, this is one of those times.”

“Oh, sorry.”

“So, you think it was a dream?” Clair asked her friend.

“I don’t know,” Ruth said. “I only know he wanted me to tell you, Lily. Page 108 in a big book.”

“What kind of book?” Clair asked the logical question. “The Bible?”

“No, no. It was much bigger.” She found the floor to ceiling bookcase and began searching it, as if the book might be found there. “Just a huge book—”

Pastor Simon lost all patience. “This is ridiculous.”

Ruth’s frantic gaze miraculously came to rest on coffee table where Clair’s giant art book sat.

“Like that one right there.” She pointed. “That’s it. That’s the book. Oh, oh! Open it to page 108!”

Clair and Lily exchanged pain filled and confused glances. Clearly the older woman had lost her mind. Still, to placate her, Lily nodded and Clair went to her book. She picked it up and with curiosity she opened it to page 108.

She stared at the familiar picture. “Caravaggio’s Doubting Thomas.”



Shocked, Pastor Simon came to Clair’s side. “How very... curious!”

“Doubting Thomas?” Jonathan question, trying to remember the story. “The biblical dude who doubted Christ’s resurrection and so the man himself appears before him as proof? Am I on the right page?”

Lily stared at the picture for a long moment before turning her gaze to Ruth, confusion shimmering in her eyes.

“Paul’s telling you not to doubt, Lily,” Ruth said, understanding everything now. “He sent us the message to ease your pain, so you know he is with God. You haven’t lost him, Lily; you haven’t! We’re saved Lily, we’re saved!”

### Clair

Clair and Jeremy sat alongside each other on the couch, the art book opened to the page of significance as she described Ruth’s funeral to her lover. “I don’t know which is stranger: Ruth’s vision of Paul or that she died the very next day, I really don’t. She just passed peacefully in her sleep.”

“She deserved a peaceful end.”

“So true,” Clair nodded, brushing back a loose strand of gray and pausing as they contemplated the miraculous and momentous departure of the old woman. “Pastor Simon’s eulogy was brief and rather touching.”

“Was it?” Jeremy smiled.

Meeting his gaze with a nod, Clair reached for his large, weathered hand. Perhaps the best thing about Jeremy was how well he listened. This wonderful talent owed itself to his decades as a therapist or a personality attribute or both, she didn’t know, but she had come to both depend on and appreciate how well her friend listened. As if every word mattered and it did, it did.

She knew that now. Lily knew that now too. Lily and Max were becoming close; there was even talk of marriage. Jonathan was considering becoming a big brother. She had started to give art history lectures to old folks' homes. These small changes merely reflected the larger change in their hearts. Death underlined in bold the sanctity of life; Paul's death made everything count. Nothing seemed without consequence or meaning: Not rainbows flung over rain or the secret ones on the domes of deep sea shells, or even the invisible pot of gold at the end of a rainbow. It all mattered.

"Pastor Simon surprised everyone—he opened a bottle of cognac that was the exact same age as Ruth. I got a very pleasant buzz from that!"

Jeremy chuckled.

Clair's finger traced the contours of Doubting Thomas. "Remember Paul had written a report on Caravaggio?"

"I remember you mentioned it."

"Maybe he had shown Ruth the picture then. We never said anything that night, of course. Lily just hugged Ruth and sent her home; she never said a word. Neither did I. Who knows?"

"Ruth had a huge heart. She always knew Lily's doubts made it harder to accept Paul's death. Jonathan said Ruth put the whole thing together in her subconscious, but he said it dismissively, you see, and that's just it. It is still a miracle.

"How much we love each other; how much we want to help..."

**Paul**

On the first year anniversary of Paul's death, Lily, Clair and Jonathan—home for the weekend from Berkeley—gathered for a special dinner. The bright colors of red and blue still decked out the table: red place cloths and blue and white china, red and blue napkins. The delicious scent of Clair's famous stew filled the house, mixing with the steaming hot bread she placed before Lily and Jonathan as Lily poured the wine. Afterwards, upon Lily's request, they planned to finally watch the conclusion of the debate together. Clair had viewed it, Jonathan of course had lived it, but because Lily had saved what would be her last memory of Paul, both Clair and Jonathan wanted to be with her. Until then, by unspoken agreement the auspicious night called for light conversation.

Clair knew just how to do this. "I finished reading Lily's new novel, today," she told Jonathan as she sat down. "It was excellent! I honestly think it was my all time favorite."

"You always say that, Mom."

Jonathan turned to Lily. "You really finished it?"

"I even sent it off today," Lily nodded.

"Wow!" Jonathan's gaze filled with amazement. "That's great. So what happened? Last I heard the beautiful lady Rochelle was about to be cooked?"

Lily laughed. "That's just when she realizes how very much she wants to live." .  
"Yeah, so what happens?" Jonathan prodded.

"Well, let's see. As the flames shot up all around Rochelle, screams sounded, animals cried, and like millions of other people in her circumstance, she began to... pray." She thought of the poor virgin's exact words—and they were always virgins, these

romance heroines—like a prayer or incantation, as the flames began shooting up around her feet: I am unmarried still, a virgin. I have never felt a man’s lips on my mouth or his flesh in my womb. I have never seen my child’s face or felt a mother’s love. A hundred as yet unlived events pile up in my mind: I have never worn silk, or tasted an orange, or played a harp....

“Ah huh! She finds religion just in the nick of time,” Jonathan said, disappointed less in Lily’s heroine and more in the way of the world. Self-serving, convenient, expedient. “Now, that’s an age old story for sure.”

“Actually she began to pray to Mary who at the time often served as the secret conduit to the Catholic Church’s main competitor.” Rochelle’ comically exaggerated plea emerged in Lily’s mind: Mother Mary! Save me! Oh, please save me! I am too young to die, too filled with life yet! I want to live to know a man and bare his child! Oh please, let me live!

A strange tingling shot through her limbs. Rochelle opened her eyes to see the noose in front of her face. She shook her head frantically, sending the long plait of dark hair swinging wildly over her young breasts. She cast her gaze to Saul, hanging lifelessly from the pole as flames spread upwards over him. Flames shot heavenward from the wood beneath the old woman. The air filled with the sick scent of burnt flesh. She cried out as Saul disappeared in the smoke.

“Do you renounce your pact with Satan and accept Jesus Christ as Savior?”

She knew the words. "Aye! Aye! With all my heart!"

The priest moved the noose to her head and she screamed, "No! No!" She shook her head in terror, the movement tearing the strap that held her tunic in place.

"Please! I do not want to die! For mercy sake! I'll take each moment more of life given by the torture of the flames! Let me burn alive!"

Because in the end, no matter what you suffered, Lily knew, life was just that precious.

"The pagan religion?" Jonathan queried.

"I just couldn't abandon all possibility of a transcendent existence," Lily confessed.

"Yeah, but did it help?"

"Not in the least. What helped was that at that very moment, through the most amazing, though some might say contrived circumstances," Lily smiled, "Christopher, a handsome knight riding a magnificent stallion, crashes through the gate. He spots the beautiful maid tied to the stake and well, he rescues her."

Jonathan almost lost the bite of food in his mouth. "Is that it?"

"Oh, no, that's just the first few pages. Christopher rescues Rochelle."

Jonathan's eyes sparkled with merriment. "How does that work?"

"Okay, if you must know. Filled with battle lust and a near death experience, Christopher and Rochelle make mad, passionate love. It is good to keep the heavy sex scenes up front, to capture people reading the first chapter in the bookstores or online."

"Sex really does sell?"

Lily nodded, "I have the royalties to prove it. Anyway, circumstances then contrive to keep them separated for the next four hundred pages. Finally though, the end. A white picket fence."

"Actually Lily, it's a castle," Clair said.

The conversation on the auspicious night remained both light and lively, and Lily knew it was no accident, but rather a tribute to her mother and Jonathan's extreme care. Jonathan even had a big surprise for her tomorrow. Diligently keeping it a secret, he kept teasing her, emphasizing the word big. She had guessed before she managed to pry it out of her mom.

Jonathan had found a giant puppy— conveniently homeless, no doubt.

She smiled every time she thought of it.

Once the table was cleared, Clair went about fixing tea, while Jonathan adjusted the CD player, and she waited patiently and a little nervously on the couch. She toyed with the small velvet pouch around her neck. She knew now she would never let go, or say good-bye. She couldn't. She didn't think anyone who knew Paul could.

Paul's ashes would always remain over her heart. Every time she touched them, or her consciousness brushed the blue velvet pouch, she stopped and relived a memory of Paul. Each memory became his way of reaching her. More and more the memories became warm reminders of the love he had brought to her life.

"I almost have it," Jonathan said.

Clair set the tea cups down and sat beside Lily, taking her hand in hers.

"Okay. Ready." He turned solicitously to Lily. "You're sure now?"

Lily nodded, and Jonathan turned on the final moments of the debate before sitting down next to Lily.

He and Paul appear behind podiums on stage.

Lily watched with rapt attention as Jonathan gave his closing argument.

"...If there is no God,



Not everything is permitted to man.

He is still his brother's keeper

And he is not permitted to sadden his brother,

By saying that there is no God.

Jonathan paused before announcing, "Now, that is some superannuated shit."

Ms. Pickering sounded from backstage, "Jonathan Knowles!"

"Well, it is; I make no apologies. The poem says the truth doesn't matter and boy, the day we start believing that is the day we fall to our doom. The truth is the only thing that does matter.

"And this is a small sliver of the truth, reality as we know it: There is mounting evidence that an infinite number of universes exist. Emphasis on the word infinite. This means the number of universes goes on without end. Our own universe has billions upon billions of galaxies, a number that, considering the limits on our minds, is literally incomprehensible. And each average size galaxy is packed with billions upon billions of stars.

"Our own relatively modest Milky Way galaxy has 100 billion stars in it, one of which is our relatively modest sun. Our average star and its solar system sits on the outer edge of the galaxy. The sun's enormous mass accounts for ninety-nine percent of our solar system's mass; about a thousand earths could fit inside our sun.

"Okay, now think of this: In every human brain there are many more neurons than there are galaxies in the universe—about 100 billion, each drawn from about 10,000 different cell types and woven into a tapestry of neural interconnections that number in the trillions.

“You heard that right. Trillions! The whole universe exists inside these neural connections that make up our consciousness. What else exists here?” He pointed to his brain before answering. “Love. Love in its chemical form exists right here in our brains. And so, I think, does God.”

There came a silent break, interrupted at last by polite applause before the camera turned to Paul. Lily’s heart leaped to greet the sight of him. Clair squeezed her daughter’s hand, flooded with her own emotion.

“I would not dispute anything Jonathan said. Science is the mechanism from which we view the world, and this world is an astoundingly, spectacularly magnificent. All I know about God is that God is a mystery; a mystery that is both profound and deeply compelling to us humans. God is the mystery that a physicist finds in the immutable laws that govern the universe, that a cosmologist finds in the contemplation of the unfathomable numbers of the universe’s immensity, a vastness Jonathan attempted to outline just now, but one that is indeed well beyond our imagination. God is the mystery that a biologist finds in the studying the scale of evolution that went from a simple single celled animal to the saucer size eyes of a blue whale, or that a neurologist finds in the everlasting search for consciousness. God is what an arborist discovers in a redwood forest, or a preacher reveals in the inspired words from a time long ago...

“To make any further declarative sentence about God is to separate someone from this mystery. I would not want to do that. Except to say this one last thing: Just as God is a near universal experience among humans, so too is love. Love connects us to God just as powerfully as God connects us to love. And in this mysterious way, love does indeed become God’s gift.

“And here then is my poem to Jonathan and all those who view science as opposing religion. It is titled On Prayer, and it is also by Czeslaw Milosz:

You ask me how to pray to someone who is not.

All I know is that prayer constructs a velvet bridge

And walking it we are aloft, as on a springboard,

Above landscapes the color of ripe gold

Transformed by a magic stopping of the sun.

That Bridge leads to the shore of Reversal

Where everything is just the opposite and the word is

Unveils a meaning we hardly envisioned.

Notice: I say we; there, every one, separately,

Feels compassion for others entangled in the flesh

And knows that if there is no other shore

They will walk that aerial bridge all the same.”

At the conclusion the three sat silently for several long moments.

First Clair hugged Lily. “I love you, sweetie.”

“I love you, too, Mom,” she managed to say as her mom left.

Jonathan handed her the remote. “Are you okay, Lily?”

“I’m okay,” she answered quietly.

“Are you just going sit here, replaying it over and over?”

“Maybe once or twice.”

“You want some company?”

Lily squeezed his hand affectionately. “You are a very kind young man, Jonathan.” Her tone infused the simple words with a profound sincerity.

“That’s probably the nicest thing anyone’s ever said to me.”

“I mean it, and really, I’m going to be okay. I know that now.”

Jonathan said goodnight, and he made it half way up the stairs before he stopped.

“Lily?”

“Yes?”

“You know... I can never replace him.”

Lily knew this of course. That he felt the need to say it out loud said much. He had grasped this basic truth, that no one could ever replace Paul, but he worried that the depth of her grief might create just such an idea. He understood that if she were to cast him as Paul’s replacement, it would doom both of them to heart breaking failure.

She turned to find him on the staircase. “I know,” she assured him.

The young man’s face relaxed, he nodded. “Okay,” he answered, and in a changed voice. “Don’t forget tomorrow is your big surprise.”

“Emphasis on big,” she smiled.

THE END