

Authorial Intent:  
A Novel in Progress  
By  
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PART 1

“People wonder why the novel is the most popular form of literature;  
people wonder why it is read more than books of science or books of metaphysics.  
The reason is very simple; it is merely that the novel is more true than they are.”

— G.K. Chesterton

Chapter 1: The Funeral

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“Death smiles at us all, all a man can do is smile back.”

— Marcus Aurelius

The body—Dr. Alden R. Foster—cremated weeks ago, was now a soft powdery dust poured into a receptacle. How do I know it was soft? Because I touched it. Last week, when the receptionist at the funeral home turned over his remains. She handed me a box.

The exchange went something like this:

Her: “Here he is.”

Me: “Thank you.”

Then Dad and I drove home. The cardboard box in the passenger seat. I thought about the day he taught me to drive.

“Ten and two.”

“I know.”

Traffic. Red light.

“Ease off the clutch. Give it some gas.” The pick-up bucked and stalled. “That’s alright. It’s good practice. Try again. Good. Okay, now the clutch and shift into second.”

Pulling into the driveway without a sound, I put the new white all-electric SUV in park and turned off the engine with the touch of a button. For the moment I sat there, alone with memory. He would have hated this car. “Do you have to change the oil? Does it even have oil? What do you mean there’s no key? I bet a new battery will cost you an arm and a leg.”

I reached over, picked up the box, and set it on my lap. I broke the gold embossed seal and lifted the flaps. The box was partitioned, on one side a small smooth stainless steel urn encased in bubble-wrap and on the other, a surprisingly small clear bag filled with—him—folded over and stapled shut. How does a 190 pound man only leave behind a pound of ashes?

I lifted the bag of gray—dust. The ashes shifted within the plastic conforming to the palm of my right hand. With my left hand I bent back the lone staple and mindlessly unfolded the flap. The moment realized . . . my tunnel vision faded away. I glanced up, left, and then right.

Still alone.

I reached into the bag and pinched a small amount between my thumb and forefinger. Cement gray, baby powder death.

The front row on the right side of the church is reserved for the family. It's empty. There is no family. I sit in the back row not wanting to draw attention to an only child of a recluse and widower. I guess I do take after him.

A gentleman in a blue suit sits perusing his notes in the front row on the left side of the church. A hired gun, armed with Wikipedia and *The New York Times* obituary notice. Should be an interesting eulogy. I wonder if I'll learn anything.

A blue-haired biddy sits behind an ebony Steinway softly playing *Canon in D*. Clouds shift outside the tall stained glass windows of the sanctuary, and a beam of light streams in highlighting small particles suspended in the air. Pollen. Bacteria. Pollutants. Smoke. Small bits of dirt or rock or sand. Tiny fibers. Disintegrated dinosaur fossils. Dried up dragon scales. Skin cells. Tiny fragments of humans. Missing links. Cavemen. Volcanic ash. Auschwitz. Dust. I take a deep breath and ancestry fills my asthmatic lungs. I exhale generations. Family.

A boy of about six years old sits down in the row directly in front of me. His accompanying adults are still signing the Celebration of Life Funeral Guestbook and Memorial Service Registry. Does anyone ever go back and read those things? I hear my father's voice echo in my head, "You call that Literature? It's trash. Who will read this? Don't ever become an author."

I say, "Hello. What's your name?"

Confidently, "My name is Cash."

"Well, it's nice to meet you Cash. That's a pretty cool name you have. Are you named after the singer Johnny Cash?"

Shrug.

"Yesterday, I saw a bumper sticker on an old pickup truck that said *God Bless Johnny Cash*." He looks up, stares at me for a second, blinks, then goes back to rummaging through his things. Small talk with a child. "Do you have a middle name?"

Without even thinking about it or missing a beat, he lifts his head and with his little chest puffed out, "Jameson, like the whiskey."

"That's awesome!" I laugh a full, deep belly laugh. A few people turn around and glare. I am still laughing when the boy's father sits down next to him.

"Mr. Cash, is this your dad?" I recount the entire story . . . Cash's dad, throwing his head back, laughs an even fuller, deeper belly laugh. More people turn around and glare.

The boy turns to his father, "I was right, wasn't I Daddy? It's whiskey, not beer. Right?"

"You were right Buddy, good job!"

A soft, tiny hand fist-bumps the warrior's paw.

“Sorry for your loss.” The dad’s calloused meaty mitt reaches out to shake my hand. I offer my plumpish prehensile appendage. The years of inputting prose into a computer with a QWERTY click-clickety-click has preserved my smoothness.

“Oh. Uh, thank you. I—.”

“You know, you look like him.” He produces a first edition of *Defiant Lemmings* by Alden R. Foster. It must have cost him a few weeks of blue-collar overtime. A motor oil lined index finger points at the black and white low-resolution headshot on the dust-jacket.

“I have a copy just like it. In my office. On the bookshelf above my desk.” I feel the corners of my mouth begin an upturn. I remember my father’s excitement as he opened a cardboard box he had received in the mail. I must have been about five. He was teaching high school English in Upstate New York, and at the time, he dreamed of being known as a published author. “Twenty-five copies of a self-published volume of poetry. You see that, Seth?” he laughed. “A class set. I can’t believe my Principal agreed to use school funds for these.”

The boy’s father opened the inside cover of his treasured possession revealing that it had been signed by the author:

*Your life’s journey begins with a single step, and everywhere is within walking distance if you make the time. Walk with me. - Dr. Alden Ransom Foster*

“Mine is not signed by the author though.” I did not tell him that his copy wasn’t signed by the author either. First, this was not my father’s handwriting. I know this because Dad never signed anything. The FedEx guy would be lucky to get a scribble when he delivered Dad’s bi-monthly case of Glenfiddich (and before you get too judgmental about dear old Dad, that “bi-monthly” case was once every-two-months, not twice-a month). Second, on the off chance that he may have actually signed a book for a persistent and adoring fan catching him off guard,

he would never have referred to himself with the title of Doctor. Even when he was named Professor Emeritus, he had insisted that the moderators of speaking engagements and those who set up his personal appearances simply introduce him as Alden Foster and refer to him as Mr. Foster if they felt they absolutely had to pay some deference when addressing him. Hell, Ransom wasn't even my father's middle name, just a pseudonym he used once for a lackluster novella, but most people don't know that he felt guilty for years after using it. Ransom was my parents' only other child. Well, if you can call a dead baby a child. Strange to think I shared a womb with stillborn twin brother. But we don't talk about that. A dead give away.

Cash takes a coloring book out of a WWE backpack. On the cover is a farmer sitting atop a tractor. Then a basic box of eight Crayola Crayons comes out of the backpack. He removes the BLUE and begins to—*scribble scribble scribble*. Sky.

A familiar smell in my nostrils. Clouds in my periphery. Tunnel vision.

“Cash, do you like cartoons?”

“Yeah . . .” Not even looking up from his masterpiece.

“Me too. Do you have a favorite breakfast cer—?”

The piano music stops abruptly, as though some other child's mandatory recital has come to end. No clapping though, just whispered voices that come steadily to an overly respectful hush. The preacher stands from his seat in the front row and walks to the front of the chapel, settling himself behind the heavy wooden pulpit. The room is perfectly silent now. All but the *scribble scribble scribble* of Cash's crayon.

In view of all, the man of God unfolds a few rectangular pieces of white paper, lays them on the pulpit, smoothes them out, adjusts the microphone, and speaks what I thought was going to be a familiar attempt at words of consolation to those in attendance.

The urn sits statuesque on a doily-covered table. Multi-colored flowers are nestled together with their olive green leaves encircling the rounded edges of the heavy receptacle. This small round table at the head of the aisle was usually reserved for the “Lord’s Supper.” Today there is no silver platter of small torn pieces of beige bread or small clear plastic cups of incarnadine communion wine. My father has taken the place of the body and blood of Christ. This would amuse him. Alden Foster, not Jesus . . . but then again, the Son of God may be fairly amused at all of this ritualism also.

Why do I project my father’s amusement? Because of his second book (and first novel), *The Cannibal’s Wine*. It was a thinly veiled treatise deconstructing the eucharist and the Christian doctrine of transubstantiation. Bread and wine. A benevolent deity. Wheat and grapes. Flesh and blood. A promised land and giants. A messianic figure and a cannibalistic last supper. A new creation and a wedding feast. An opus of sorts, but too early in his career to have the reception it deserved. It found an audience eventually, a kind of classic for the cultic following my Dad developed later in his career. During its manuscript development, it seemed like our family lived on bread and wine. My father and I enjoyed quite a few morning excursions to what seemed like every Jewish bakery in Brooklyn that year or so, for research purposes of course. Meanwhile my parents became obsessed with road-trips to the Finger Lakes to visit wineries. We were very happy then.

“Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord . . .” The preacher pauses and looks up, scanning the room, gaging his audience like any good motivational speaker or stand-up comedian might. When our eyes meet, he clears his throat and seems to go off script. “I never personally met the man that all of you have come to pay your respects to. I didn’t know the man, and as I



understand it, very few did. If we are honest with ourselves, we must admit that we are not here for Dr. Foster. We are here because of Dr. Foster. He, through his writing mainly, has left an indelible impression upon each of us. That is the mark of an extraordinary writer, an author.”

Indeed, he was an extraordinary writer. I can't say we have that in common. He, of all people, just had a knack for both the turning of a phrase and grandiose storytelling. Dad wrote, but he came to despise the title of *Author*, perhaps as much as or more than being called *Doctor*. If his apprehension to these titles ever came up in conversation, he used to pause pensively and ask, “How do I choose which better defines me, the one paper in a dusty frame hanging on the wall, or the three hundred and twenty-one pages sitting there on a bookshelf?”

These people were here for the author. Cash's dad was here for the author. The expensive, forged autograph proved it. I was here for . . . *Why was I here?* I begin to wonder. Before I could really ponder my own motives for showing up to this memorial service, the minister continued.

“Funerals are not for those who have passed. Funerals are actually for the living. We are here for ourselves. Some of us are here to remember, to reflect, yes . . . to mourn, to cry, and even laugh together, to wish we could go back and relive those memories we share. Each of us has our reasons for being here today. As we gather, many of you may not know exactly what to expect from a funeral service. Especially the children, or those that some may call the unchurched . . .”

While my parents were away on their winery tours, I would stay with my grandparents. My grandparents on my mother's side were what could be called practical atheists. They had a faith and they had a farm, so they prayed to a generic god for rain, but, in their practice, they proved their unbelief. They used to be churchgoers, but some gray area controversy decades ago caused a “church split”, they left, and in time the bitterness set in. They refused to set foot in a

church where their Hell-bound neighbors attended. Pa would sit and watch the TV evangelists while holding court, “This one here is full of horse—,” he’d look over at me, “full of, uh, horse defecation. Yeah, the last guy, at least he believed what he was peddling.” In their later years, the embarrassment felt over their slave owning family history caused them to help lead the charge of removing their own familial names from many of the town’s historical streets and buildings.

Gram was a direct descendant of both Hugo Freer and Louis DuBois, two of the twelve original patentees and founders of New Paltz, NY. In a matter of a few centuries the generational pendulum swing was great. From the pious French Calvinists, who had fled Europe as religious refugees having suffered severe persecution there, to adamant unbelievers that claimed our French Huguenot ancestors were just as bad as those witch-burning Puritans . . . of whom they never failed to mention my father’s parents were descendant from.

They too had long ago sold their religious birthright for less than a secularist stew. Before their divorce, my paternal grandparents lived on Cauldron Ct. in Salem, just across the street from Gallows Hill Park where fourteen women and five men were executed by hanging between February 1692 and May 1693. My dad was not much more than a mediocre student at Salem High School back then, but his education was sympathetic to witches and steeped in anti-puritan rhetoric. Hell, he went to Witchcraft Heights Elementary School for God’s sake, and he walked to the Dairy Witch for ice cream cones after school. Dad even liked to joke that Gampy Foster fooled around with Laurie Cabot for a while before marrying his fourth wife. Honestly, that wouldn’t surprise me. Once when I was little, not really understanding what fooling around was, I asked my Gampy if he had ever married a witch. His response was rehearsed, “Every single time.”

Dad was only married once. I was there actually, in utero. When I was born, my father was in the psych ward of the same hospital. I was born on November 28th, 1974, in Utica, NY. It was a Thursday. I only know this because it was Thanksgiving Day. I know this, because Mom always said the only turkey she had that day was me.

A nursing student of barely twenty years old walks down a quiet hall in St. Elizabeth's Hospital. Crayon-colored construction paper turkeys made from traced adult hands march along the tiled wall. As she enters the psychiatric ward, she overhears, "Shh. Do not make any sound. I am searching for wabbits. Huh-huh-huh-huh!" coming from the common room television set. Listless patients sit around the TV and stare at—.

She recognizes a patient . . . Well, no, not a patient. The boyfriend of a fellow nursing student is sitting on the plaid couch and watching cartoons alongside all the veritable vegetables clad in their flannel pajamas, hospital gowns, and robes.

"Um . . . Excuse me. I'm Lilly. I don't know if you remember me, but . . . You're Eve's boyfriend, right?"

"Oh, hey . . . Yes. Alden."

"Alden, you can't be in here."

"I'm sorry. Why? What do you mean?"

"This is the psych ward." Lilly explains in a whispered hush. "What are you doing here?"

Alden scans the room and begins to see his fellow cartoon enthusiasts anew. The bulb above his head is illuminated . . . "I guess I took a wrong turn at Albuquerque."

He stands and explains that Eve is in labor.

"Well, let's get you to the proper waiting room then."

The hospital labor and delivery wing is cold and quiet. Their footfall is almost imperceptible on the freshly waxed white linoleum tile.

They reach a waiting room. Alden stops at the threshold and peers in. He sees three other eventual fathers. One paces. One sleeps. One is reading a pulp paperback, entitled *Logan's Run*. Alden thanks Lilly for the escort, waits for her to disappear around the corner, then walks to the exit across the hall.

The snow crunches under his shuffling feet as he removes a pack of cigarettes from the inside pocket of his denim jacket. He smacks the pack against the palm of his left hand, removes a single cigarette with his lips, replaces the pack, fumbles for a matchbook, finds it, strikes a match, and lights up. Soon a frothy gray smoke ring floats away in the direction of the men on the loading dock transferring boxes from a panel truck to a pallet.

“Alden Foster . . . Please report to Labor and Delivery . . . Mr. Alden Foster . . . Please report to Labor and Delivery,” crackles over the PA system. Alden Foster takes a long drag, drops his cigarette, crushes it under his boot, and realizes that he is a father.

He hurries down the empty hallway at a light jog passing the proper waiting room and leaving a trail of black scuff marks as he goes . . . marring the once sterile corridor. He approaches the nurses' station where a haggard old nun stands glaring at him.

“I'm Alden Foster.”

“I know who you are, you hellbound wretch. You're the asshole that impregnated the most promising nursing student on my floor,” pointing a single decrepit finger in Alden's face.

“Sister, is that any way for a nun to talk?”

“Shut your godforsaken trap, you . . . you . . . debauched drunk! I can't believe they are going to let you walk out of here with those babies. If it were up to me—.” At this, she clutches

at her chest with her other hand, which was already wound tight with a wooden rosary, turns, and walks away.

A young nurse replaces her. “Mr. Foster?”

“Just Alden.” He corrects her, and then, hesitantly, “Did she say ‘babies’?”

“We will take you to Eve’s room in just a moment. The Doctor will answer all of your questions. First, we will need you to fill out some paperwork.” She lays two forms on the counter in front of him. She begins to hand him a pen, but then withdraws it. “We are also going to need you to wash your hands.”

I was brought home later that day in the backseat of a baby-blue Volkswagen Beetle to a small apartment just outside the Airforce base. My brother Ransom was not. My mother, Evelyn Jeanne Freer, was a student at St. Elizabeth College of Nursing in Utica, NY. My father, Alden R. Foster, was a Media & Communications Journalist stationed at Griffiss Air Force Base in nearby Rome, NY.

They had met at a function. A dance really. On the first Friday of every month, a bus full of nursing students would arrive at the Air Force base from St. Elizabeth’s seventeen miles away. Free beer and music. They were married in early June, and I was born in late November. It doesn’t take a genius to figure out I wasn’t—planned. Is it out of the realm of possibility that they may have been in love? No, but does it matter? No, again. I’m here, and the Mom and Dad I knew were very much in love. I was most likely the result of simple biology coupled with free beer and music supplied by the good ol’ U.S. of A’s Military at a St. Valentine’s Day dance for lonely nurses and horny airmen. I have accepted that sometimes nature just takes its course. Could they have had some chemistry thrown in there too? Sure, why not?

Does it matter? No again, I'm here. The simple fact that I was not a casualty of the *Roe vs. Wade* decision (which took place on January 22, 1973 - just over a year before I was conceived), is enough for me to breathe a sigh of relief. Well, to breathe at all I suppose. If I think about it, I'd say I am actually pretty ecstatic that Eve chose to do what she chose to do.

So, I was born on November 28th, 1974, in Utica, NY. That's Upstate. It was Thanksgiving Day. And yes, my father was in the psych ward that day . . . and I have spent a good deal of my adult life doing everything I could to keep him out of another psychiatric ward.

Chapter 2: Seth

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“Death is not the opposite of life, but a part of it.”

— Haruki Murakami

The Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade meanders the streets of New York. A twenty story high Woody Woodpecker floats by windows. The hospital television drones and suddenly—a memory. CLARITY.

Saturday. Morning. Cartoons. Those three words bring me joy.

Summer 1984. I’m 9 years old.

I roll out of the bottom bunk wearing flannel pajamas. I walk down the hall and turn the corner to the living room. I’m the first one up—shhh . . . A quick glance at the blue digital 7:56 on the VCR tells me I have time to make a bowl of cereal.

The transition of my bare feet from mottled-brown shag carpet to linoleum makes enough noise to cause me to tip-toe over to the counter—shhh . . . I grab a plastic bowl from the kitchen cabinet. Another cabinet opened reveals Cheerios, Corn Flakes, and a box of Cap’n Crunch. I pour the yellow rectangles. I turn and open the heavy door to the olive green fridge taking a moment to glance at the multi-colored crayon drawings held on by souvenir magnets from family trips. Milk. Milk from my grandparents’ dairy farm across the street. I grab the jug from the shelf and shake it to reincorporate the separated cream. I pour, then replace, then close the refrigerator as quietly as I can.

I open the utensil drawer and rummage for MY spoon. I whisper aloud, “It’s mine. Don’t use it.” The thought is fleeting, but I remember—I sent away “proofs of purchase” . . . I tore each of them from the back of the Nestle Quik canisters myself . . . I sent away for it . . . I had to beg mom to write the \$2.89 check that had to be included . . . and I sold Pa’s cucumbers for 5 cents each to the neighbors to earn that \$2.89—It’s longer than the rest of the spoons, shaped perfectly for the job, and is crested with the iconic Quik Bunny. [38 years later, it’s still the only spoon I’ll use . . . chili . . . soup . . . yogurt . . . coffee. ]

I make my way back to the living room. 8:00 exactly.

I pull the “ON” knob on the family Zenith, making sure the volume is all the way down. It’s a 25” floor console. There is an audible—*POP*, and the screen begins to glow a faint green as it warms up. Wavy rainbows color the lines traveling across the bowed glass. I wipe the dust from the screen with my sleeve and—*ZAP*. The static electricity sparks. The dial is turned to Channel 2 (ABC)—*CLUNK CLUNK CLUNK*. I rotate the volume knob to the right until the faint “Challenge of the Superfriends” opening music reaches my ears . . . but the other kind of static is too much, so I put my cereal bowl down on the heavy, pine coffee table and adjust the rabbit ears, “C’mon, c’mon . . .” With the antenna finally zeroed in, I can see Superman, Batman, Robin, Wonder Woman, Aquaman, Apache Chief, the Wonder Twins, that stupid monkey Gleek, and of course my favorite, the villains—The Legion of Doom.

It’s still a little chilly in our trailer. The heat has kicked on, so I wrap myself in what my mom has deemed the “calf-crap-yellow” afghan knitted by my Gramma Lorrie and sit Indian-style overtop the heat register. The hot grate would probably burn my thighs if my bare skin was exposed, but with my flannel Dukes of Hazzard PJs I have a tolerable barrier between flesh and metal. I deftly balance my bowl in my exposed left hand while my clenched right hand



holds the afghan closed while simultaneously gripping my bunny spoon. The hot air begins to fill my crocheted cocoon. The sweet sugary crunch of breakfast tears at the tender roof of my mouth, my nose and cheeks are still cold but my body is warm, and I am a mere three feet from the action of superheroes outsmarting supervillains.

I spend all morning in front of that electric box of joy with *He-Man*, *Muppet Babies*, *GI Joe*, *Dungeons and Dragons*, and of course the occasional *Schoolhouse Rock!* video between the regularly scheduled programming. A sense of anticipation builds as the morning inches closer to noon. The innocence of Saturday morning cartoons fades away . . . 12:00.

The colorful cartoons give way to tights and turnbuckles, muscles and masks, choreographed violence and shiny-gold championship belts lifted high into the air after each match. Tag teams and steel cages. Before the term “sports entertainment” came to be, there was simply—wrestling. Grown men body-slamming, head-butting, and pile-driving their way into the hearts of little boys. The dramatized storylines of babyfaces and heels. WWF Superstars Of Wrestling. This was the highlight of my Saturday Morning. I looked forward to this all week. Hulk Hogan, saying his prayers and eating his vitamins. “Superfly” Jimmy Snuka climbing to the top rope. “Rowdy” Roddy Piper clad in a kilt and spewing insults. Andre the Giant and his nemesis Big John Studd. The Junkyard Dog with collar and chain. A green-tongued George “The Animal” Steele. As soon as the show is concluded, I drag a cardboard box full of plastic toys all of the same names out of my bedroom. I leave again and return to the living room floor a moment later with a plastic wrestling ring, to recreate what had just been televised. Word for word and punch for punch. No articulation is needed for rubberized hand held grappling.

“Seth.”

“Whatcha’ gonna do when Hulkamania runs wild on you, Brother?”

“Seth? Seth, do you hear me?”

“What? I’m sorry, I didn’t hear you.”

“Baby, it’s a nice day. The sun is out. Why don’t you go out and play?”

“But Maaaa . . . I’m playin’.”

“You’ve been inside all morning. Go put on some play clothes and go outside.”

“But . . .”

“Now.”

I stand up slowly, looking at my muscular plastic people lined up, leaning against their beat up cardboard box, two in the ring, and others laying on the floor. “Please don’t move them. They’re . . . They’re all set up now.” My heavy steps thud all the way down the hall to my bedroom.

I step out onto the front porch, eyes pained by the brightness. Now afternoon, pajamas have been traded for threadbare denim cut-off shorts and a gray tank top—play clothes. Toys instantly become a forgotten memory on an August day. The early morning chill has long passed and it is getting warmer by the minute.

My family’s trailer is surrounded by 350 acres of my grandparents’ farmland. Endless possibilities. The haymow, granary, pasture, woods, pond, the creek, or the cabin. Should I grab my BB gun or ride my bike? The trailer door opens behind me. My precious unmade plans are interrupted.

“Do you hear the tractor?”

“No.”

“Hey, do me a favor. Take this out to Pa. He must be done raking,” mom hands me a green Coleman jug with a flip-top spout. “He’s out in the third field.” I take it without question or complaint, and the slow walk begins.

The liquid inside sloshes back and forth and the ice cubes *TINK-TINK* as they shift against each other. Probably tea, the powdered kind. Pa had a sweet tooth, and he only drank water from the hose on the side of the house.

I leave our yard and start up the road. No cars. You could go most of the day without seeing a car on our road. I stop to pop a black tar bubble with the toe of one holey low-top Converse All-Star. Then I push hard to make sure an entire footprint is left behind. It’s not easy to pull away, but I have made my mark. Turning into the field and walking straight across, I begin to step over each of the windrows. They are a labyrinth of straw spiraling the field. My exposed ankles are scraped and stabbed by the sharp edges of each tiny punji stick stalk from the cut hay. Their dry and brittle *CRACK* under my heavy steps keep time with the *SLOSHING TINK-TINK*. I inhale the earthy summer. It is dry and dusty and familiar in my nostrils. I wave off the no-see-ums and peer across the field.

The hay was cut in this particular field the day before yesterday. It lay for a day in the hot, August sun drying. The second cut. Thank God for no rain. At this time of year, rain just slows the process, putting it off until another day. Sure, the farmer wants the rain in the spring, but at harvest, hot and dry is all that matters. Rain is frustrating. Rain holds back the work, almost as much as broken equipment. Today, he had made his way round and round the field

with the rake being pulled behind the old John Deere. The rake has lifted and sifted the hay with its rotating tines. Loose long piles stringing across the field. These long piles are windrows . . . and I have heard that term more than a few times growing up . . .

What the hell, can't you keep yer windrows straight?

These damned windrows.

Stay between the windrows.

There's a big ol' black snake in that third windrow over there.

Be careful you don't step in that damn gopher hole next to the windrow.

If you kids keep messing up my windrows, I'll have your ass.

The hay will be baled tomorrow if the weather holds, and I'll be walking this field, picking up bales by their baling twine, lifting each above my head, and throwing them onto the haywagon as it crawls along. That's what the grownups will see—a little kid doing a man's work. For me, I'll be grabbing hold of Andre the Giant's tights, lifting him high above my head, and body-slammng him as the crowd goes wild!

Pa is sitting in the shade on a stonewall at the edge of the hayfield. I don't remember ever seeing him in anything other than dark green Dickies' work pants, beat-up brown work boots, and a plaid shirt. He was down to his v-neck white undershirt, his yellow mesh trucker hat with the John Deere logo patch on the front barely resting atop his head.

"How's it going?" I ask, and I hand him the container.

"Hot . . ." is his deep, graveled reply. The mild frustration is his usual tone. He removes a grubby blue handkerchief from his back pocket and wipes his forehead. He never really was much for words but like most of the old timers, each syllable counted. He flips the spout open.

Then with calloused and wrinkled sun-spotted hands on either side of the plastic jug, he tilts his head back, wraps his lips around the spout, and drinks. *SLOSH—TINK-TINK-TINK—GLUG—GLUG.*

“Thanks.”

“No problem,” is my response. He raises an eyebrow. “I mean . . . you’re welcome.”

He grunts. Then—*GLUG—GLUG.* He replaces the spout. Sets the jug down on the ground. There was now no *SLOSH* or *TINK-TINK*, just the crunch of the dry stalks of cut hay. I stand in silence. He sits in silence. A grandfather and his only grandson looking out over a hayfield. He sees hay to be baled. I see supervillains to defeat and heels to be pinned. 1—2—3

At the end of that summer, he gave me a fifty dollar bill for my help with the hay. It might as well have been a million. I had never held that much money in my hands. I honestly felt rich. Mom complained that it was too much, but he said, “It’s my money, and I do what I want with it.” Picking up, loading, and stacking hay bales in the summer sun is back breaking work. No doubt about it . . . even if it was fun. But the real payoff was not the unexpected cash but his acknowledgment and validation . . . and I am sure that that fifty dollars was spent soon after on action figures.

I was asked to be a pallbearer when Pa died in ‘92. I said no. One of few regrets I still have. I was so angry. Angry that I really didn’t know the man. Angry that he was gone. I guess I just wanted nothing to do with him once he was gone. That was the year I graduated from high-school. Honestly, I don’t even remember his funeral.

I guess I was a bit of a troubled kid in elementary school, especially that year when Mom was diagnosed.

I remember one day during lunch walking out of the noisy cafeteria to use the bathroom. The empty hallway echoed my footsteps. There were no teachers, no other kids . . . no one. Ghost town. When I reached the bathroom, there was a piece of white copy paper taped to the door. It must have said OUT OF ORDER, but honestly, I don't even know if I could read yet. I just remember staring at the paper with its bold, black stencil lettering. I tried the smooth brass knob, but the door was locked. Since I really had to go, I went back to the classroom rather than the lunchroom. The heavy wooden door was propped wide open with a brown rubber doorstop. Empty. My teacher was not there, but the bathroom in the back of the classroom was. When I finished my business, I opened the door to leave, but instead of leaving, without any thought, I grabbed a box of Crayola crayons (the basic box of 8, not the 96 colors with sharpener included) from a nearby shelf and returned to the bathroom.

First, I took out the BLUE. I drew a large waxy HAPPY face on the wall. I remember no thought of being caught, no dread. There was no sense of right or wrong. I just did it. Next, I grabbed the RED, the ORANGE, and the GREEN. In my tiny fist all three colors scribbled. Wax on wax, overlapped and crisscrossed. That familiar smell in my nostrils. There were no pictures. There were no shapes, just lines and lines and lines and lines and lines. Jackson Pollock. When the crayons broke under the pressure—*CRACK*—I just grabbed new ones.

YELLOW—*scribble*.

BROWN—*scribble*.

BLACK—*scribble*.

WHITE—*scribble*.

Standing on the toilet seat—*scribble— scribble—scribble*. I reached as high as I could—*scribble scribble scribble*. Crouched low—*scribble scribble scribble*.

Each little crayon nub thrown in the trash can along with the empty Crayola box. I then casually opened the bathroom door and walked across the room, between the desks, out of the classroom, and down the hall. My footsteps echoing. Not a soul to be seen. I returned to my seat in the chaotic cafeteria. Sarah Billings, the little redhead girl, offered me a Little Debbie's Star Crunch. I thanked her. I opened the plastic wrapping and I ate the chocolate-covered caramel and rice crispies.

We walked single-file back to our classroom.

Mrs. Preston was not HAPPY.

Her face was very RED.

I was silent . . . *shhh*.

After Mom died, I would lie awake at night and just think. I would wonder where she went. I knew she was gone, but somehow I knew she still existed somewhere. It was strange how her presence seemed to linger, but I had to accept that I could never see her again. Some nights I would stand at my bedroom window and stare out into the darkness for what seemed like hours. Everything was so far away and still so close. My heart would race and then slow. Life contracting into a narrow corridor of time and then immediately expanding, leaving me to teeter on the age of an infinite abyss.

When basketball came into my life, I began to sleep much better. Whether it was the physical exhaustion from two-a-days or a sense of purpose, I couldn't say. At the time, it was needed though. Something to occupy my mind, or rather (if I'm honest, and I have no reason not

to be) obsess over. If I didn't have that . . . Well, if I didn't have basketball, I suppose life would've turned out—differently. My friends and I used to mess around with basketball from time to time growing up, as much as with any sport I suppose, but we really didn't know what we were doing. When seventh grade came to a close, I left my private school and my friends to go to the local public school. My eighth grade English teacher Mr. Arken saw me playing basketball at recess. I was adjusting. It was the first week of school. I didn't have any friends really, so it was just me shooting around. He came over, struck up a conversation, and gave me a few pointers. He taught me some basic fundamentals. Feet shoulder width apart. Balance. Elbow in. Eyes on the target. Knees bent. Hips square. Back straight. He corrected my hand position on the ball. Fingertip control. He taught me to rise up on my toes as I flicked my wrist when I shot. Extend the elbow. Follow through. AGAIN. Remember shooting is a science as well as an art. AGAIN. He asked me about my life, my previous school, and if I enjoyed playing basketball. AGAIN. He told me that he coached the eighth grade basketball team, and if I continued to practice, I had the makings of becoming pretty good. AGAIN. So, I practiced. Everyday at recess. Everyday at home after school.

I did end up trying out for the team . . . two days of running drills and playing full court pickup games. All under a microscope. Friday was the last day of tryouts. The names of those who made the team were going to be posted on the locker room door first thing Monday morning.

I was nervous all weekend . . . Did I do enough? Did the coach see when I made that one shot? Did the coach see when I missed all those other shots? I hope I make the team . . . I don't know if I want to make the team . . . I hope I get cut . . . I hope I make the team.



Monday morning. The bus doors open. Inside. Down the hallway. Turn the corner. Down the next hallway. Locker room doors. A single sheet of white copy paper taped to the heavy wood door. A list of 12 names. A small crowd of hopefuls. Ed Hasbrouk was sobbing. Dave Shields, Hans Meyer, and Mikey Schmidt were giving each other high fives. Sweat. Lump in my throat. Weak knees. The names of those that would play. I didn't have to read it.

"Seth, you made the team!" Tim Trace yelled.

Sure, I didn't have to read it. I did though. I stood there with middle school boys just like me all around, and I stared at my name . . . Fourth from the top in bold, black stencil lettering - SETH FOSTER. Under the list of names it read: Report to the Locker Room today after dismissal.

We were sitting in the locker room waiting. Brian Easton and Joe Patel dragged a giant cardboard box into the room. Buddy Arken was a few paces behind. He walked in and just stood there with a wooden clipboard, a whistle, short-shorts, a white polo, knee high tube socks, and high-top Reeboks.

"Congratulations . . . Now the hard work starts."

CHEERS. High fives.

"Practices are every day from 2:45 to 4:45. You'll be taking the 5 o'clock bus home. I will be giving you a schedule of home and away games later this week. Now that you have made the team, I will expect nothing but the best behavior from you in your classes. You must maintain a passing grade in all of your classes. Any failure to do this and you will be put on probation. Probation means you still come to practice . . . but you do not play in games. We will begin conditioning today. Conditioning will be the first hour. We will do skills training for the second hour. We will begin to go over plays next week in preparation for our first game."

Tunnel vision. What did I get myself into?

“Here’s a box of uniforms. When I call your name, come up and pick out a pair of shorts and a jersey. Then, go try them on. Make sure they fit.”

Dave. Mikey. Pierce. Tim. Jason. Brian. Joe. Hans. Seth . . .

I walked up and looked down into the box of tangled gone-through blue and white.

My first jersey. Polyester and itchy.

TEAM.

I stood there in the full length mirror—Number 33.

The Wilking family came to my first game. They were family friends from a local church my mother attended in her youth. Their only daughter Raven still attended the private school I had until recently. Her family were Lakers fans. Dad and I were Celtics fans. After Dad started dabbling in religion, I would sometimes go to the church youth group where she and I would toss around a football and argue about who was better, Magic Johnson or Larry Bird. Raven was of Native American descent but preferred the term Indigenous. One day I called her Indi-the-Genius... and the name Indi stuck.

I’ve always known Indi. I don’t remember a time when she was not in my life. Today there’s a photograph of Indi Wilking’s 5th birthday party on the mantle over the fireplace. It’s summertime, August 21st 1982, the party is outside, and Indi is opening a present. I’m 7 years old and standing in the background. Apparently my mother was invited, and she brought me along.

My father told me that there were two girls that I was not allowed to date. This was before I had ever thought about dating. The first one was Heather Dayton. She was Roman

Catholic and my first kiss, but I don't think the two are related. The second one was Indi Wilking, on account of her "permanent tan" and "savage bloodline" . . . Indi was my last kiss.

When I say my last kiss, I mean that our first kiss changed everything. We were no longer friends—everything changed. Some people celebrate their wedding anniversary, we had a kiss-aversary.

Thursday, February 1st, 1996.

As I left the house, I snagged a container of cinnamon buns from off the dining room table. My father was having some kind of get-together. A friend and I met up and went for a drive. That friend was Indi. She was a freshman in college. I was in my first year of dropping out of college. We were driving over the mountain to New Paltz on Route 44-55 in my Jeep, when we came to the scenic overlook just before the hairpin turn.

"Pull over."

"Okay."

We parked the car and got out inhaling below zero air and exhaling frothy pure smoky gray. It was a frigid, barely February night. The few puffy clouds in the sky began to give way to clear blue darkness and bright stars. We stood shuffling our feet on the crunchy snow looking out over frosted moonlit rooftops of cars at the lights in the valley. The soles of my Chuck Taylor's held no chance at insulated warmth. My feet were beginning to go numb. No gloves. My hands were beginning to shake. I took in a deep breath of nighttime and willed my hands to a calm for a second.

"Hey, come here." I wrapped my arms around her so as to warm her up. Indi was shaking worse than I had been, her whole body trembling.

"Let's get back in the car and turn on the heat." I suggested.

“Why?”

“You're shaking?”

“Not because I'm cold . . . I'm a little nervous.”

“Why?”

She leaned back, and we looked into each other's eyes. And then it happened. We were no longer friends. Our first kiss was at the coordinates: 41°44'9.1" N & 74°32" W.

How do I know? Well, everything changed that day, in that place . . . so, I received in my flesh a constant reminder. While inking the coordinates on my wrist, the tattoo artist said, “Tattoos are like scars; they're souvenirs you'll never lose.”

My father told me that there were two girls that I was not allowed to date. The second one was Indi Wilking . . . Well, Indi Foster. She was my last kiss. I think Dad liked her better than me anyway, and why wouldn't he? She gave him a grandson.

We pick my mother-in-law up from the Albany Airport. She has flown in from Orlando, FL to help prepare for the birth of our firstborn.

I ask my very pregnant wife, “What would you like for dinner?”

“Hooters.”

“Really . . . ?”

We drive to the Crossgates Mall in Guilderland. It is the largest indoor shopping center in the Capital District, and there are plenty of restaurants to choose from as well as stores to wander. I park the car, and we go inside.

It's crowded. Wall to wall. College students, sports enthusiasts, and half-dressed employees mill about. We stand in line, waiting for the hostess to take down a name so that we

can begin to wait for a table. The smell of beer, French fries, burgers, and buffalo wings envelop us. We are told there is a twenty minute wait. I feel terrible, nowhere to sit and my ready-to-pop, pregnant wife has to stand and wait for a table.

“Baby, we can go somewhere else,” I suggest.

“It’s fine, and now I really want their wings.”

Her cravings have actually been pretty subdued. Early on in the pregnancy she wanted mayonnaise. Mayo. Mayo on everything. Mayo in everything. Everything dipped in mayo. Everything shy of straight with a spoon like ice-cream. Lots of that cold globulous goop. Everyday for lunch, I would make the trek to Peter’s Market in Napanoch and order a ham and Swiss sub for her with extra, extra mayo. Each day without fail, I stood there at the deli counter, watching the thick and creamy condiment being slathered on the foot-long sub roll. I would then inevitably have to ask, “Sorry, could you put a little more mayo on?” The counter person would always look up from their craft and ask, “More?” as they cringed a bit. Then against their better judgment, they would dip the spatula back into the tub of emulsified eggs, oil, and lemon juice. Another layer went on. As the deli-person builds, closes, cuts, and wraps the sub, I watch as mayonnaise makes its way out of the sandwich. It is unavoidably messy and wetting the butcher paper. I would then drop the sandwich off to my wife and return to work shaking my head.

My mother-in-law rolls her eyes. She’s very accommodating, but it’s obvious that she is uncomfortable as we stand in the middle of the restaurant with exposed female flesh passing by every few seconds. I reach down and take my wife’s hand. I feel the sharp edges of her engagement ring between my thumb and forefinger as I spin it to align with her wedding ring. I train my eyes on one of the many large flat screen TVs above the bar. Baseball. Tunnel vision.

The pitch and swing, a large bearded ball player hits a high flyball down the third base line. Foul ball. I'm not much of a baseball fan. The Yankees are playing the—.

“Seth?” A young female voice from behind me calls. I release my wife's hand and turn to see a buxom brunette in a pair of skin tight blaze-orange shorts and a white Hooters tank top barely containing its cargo. “Seth Foster.” My heart races. I have no idea who this is. My face is suddenly warm, and almost immediately a bead of sweat begins to form on my forehead just above my left eye. I want to wipe it off, but I don't want to draw attention to my nervousness. I am frozen. Why do I feel guilty? I cannot place the face no matter how hard I try. I can't place—anything. I glance at the name tag pinned to the taut fabric just below her protruding clavicle. In bold, black lettering—**JEANINE**. I look away. I wrack my memory. Nope, no clue.

Before I can say, “I have no idea who you are.” I am wrapped in an embrace. My arms remain out to the side and I begin to slowly raise my hands like a bank patron during a holdup as this waitress presses against me. Oh God, please HELP. I look at my mother-in-law. I look at my wife.

“Indi?” the waitress exclaims, releases me, and wraps my wife up in a bear hug. My wife's eyes are huge. She is speechless. Jeanine takes a step back and takes in Indi's pregnant belly, “Oh my goodness, when are you due?”

“Next week,” she answers uncomfortably.

“Aww . . . congratulations! I didn't know you married Seth!”

I am an amnesiac.

“Yeah, a year and half ago—”

Jeanine cuts her off. “Yeah, I'm attending the University of Albany now. Dating a doctor. He paid for these—.”

“Seth, table for three?”

“That’s us!” I interject and begin walking away.

“Well, it was great seeing you guys . . . Tell everyone I said hello. Congratulations again.”

My mother-in-law, Indi, and I are seated by the hostess.

“Umm . . . who the hell was that?” I ask.

Indi laughs and explains that she graduated from high school with Jeanine, but she definitely didn’t look like that back then. They were freshmen when I was a senior. Probably why I didn’t know her.

“Were you scared?”

“Ya think? Just a little!”

Our waitress arrives. Thank God it’s not JEANINE. I don’t even look up.

“Can I start you guys off with something to drink?” she asks.

“Do you serve whiskey?”

Everyone laughs.

After a few plates of wings and celery, we walk around the mall. Indi sits down to rest on a cushioned glider on display in Eddie Bauer Home. Suddenly, her stomach tightens. She winces. She holds her breath. When the episode is over, she says matter-of-factly, “Oh, boy. We have to go home now.”

“What’s going on? Are you okay?”

“That was a contraction . . . Start timing them.”

We were an hour and half from home. She is in labor. Together we time them. *20 minutes apart.* We’re excited. So many cars. *How are you doing?* Traffic. *I’m okay.* The contractions are

getting closer and closer as I drove faster and faster. *15 minutes apart.* Red lights. *Go, go, go.*

The New York State Thruway. *I hope your water doesn't break in the car.* Speed limits ignored.

Another contraction. *15 minutes apart.* Green exit signs a blur. Tolls. *C'mon, c'mon, give me my change.*

As we exit 87 at Kingston, I ask, "Should we go straight to the hospital?"

"No, we need to get my bag, and I want to shower."

"What if we don't make it back?"

"We have time."

With every contraction she winces in pain, grimaces, holds her belly, and reacts with a, "Ow! Ow! Oh man!" As soon as it subsides, she begins to giggle. "That was awesome! This is so cool!"

"What is?"

"My body. It knows exactly what to do."

She enjoys every contraction.

7.15.2001 | 7:15 AM | 7 Pounds 15 Ounces | Cesarean section | Kingston, NY

Simon Thomas Foster

—From his mother's womb untimely ripped. "Here he is."

And, there he goes.

Kindling crackles. Cardboard ignites and a moment later—ashes. Our cozy fire's smoke mixes with the hazy pink and gray of an August sunset disappearing over the rolling hills of soft, white winter wheat soon to be harvested from the deep, rich soil of the Idaho Palouse. Our host



explains that wildfires are common in Washington this time of year. This is our first time out West.

We sit around the backyard of a small family ranch. A casual, social gathering for exclusive platinum-tier membership holders. It is their monthly contributions which are financing Simon's scholarship.

Firm handshakes are given as more deep pockets wearing cowboy boots arrive. Women huddle. Children play with barn cats. Cigars are distributed. Bottles of wine and whiskey are placed on the lone folding utility table of white plastic resin situated under the kitchen window on the splintered wooden deck. Scotch is poured into clear plastic cups, the kind that crack audibly with the slightest pressure in a nervous hand.

My first-born puffs away on a cigar bearing the foundation's logo on the band. He is 18 years and 28 days old. He stands 2,633 miles from home. He is confidently at ease, telling stories as alumni, businessmen, and donors laugh loudly. He is in his element.

A gentleman with a tattered, purple LSU hat hands me a delicate receptacle, "Would you like a drink?"

"Thank you." I peruse the skyline of bottles which reflect a string of draped exterior lighting. I used to drink whiskey . . . cheap whiskey. Now, after a 19 year dry spell, I ask, "Any recommendations?"

"This is the one I brought," he says, "bought it in New Orleans last week. I think it's my new favorite."

It is smaller than those that tower over it. I place the fragile party cup on the table, and I pick up the simple, smooth bottle. Rounded edges fit easily in my hand. My right hand's palm conforms to its paper-weight thick bottom as my left hand naturally cradles it just below its neck.

It is heavy for its size but easily balanced. The amber liquid's viscosity clings to the interior of the clear glass as I roll the bottle to view the bold, black stencil lettering on its convincingly faux-aged paper label.

**WIDOW JANE  
AGED 10 YEARS  
IN NEW AMERICAN OAK BARRELS  
PURE LIMESTONE MINERAL WATER  
FROM THE LEGENDARY ROSENDALE MINES OF NY  
BLENDS OF STRAIGHT BOURBONS**

Distilled in NYC. Brooklyn.

Proofed with pure limestone mineral water from the historic mines of Rosendale, NY.

This unopened time capsule contains what the Scottish called whisky or "water of life".

Another bit of knowledge handed down from my father, a Glenfiddich man. But that was Scotch, yes, he also knew his bourbons. This spirit had its beginning in an Iowa corn field. Other grains were trucked in from the Midwest, and along with the corn, turned into a mash somewhere in the Kentucky hills. This mash fermented with added yeast under the careful watch of master craftsmen. Once distilled to 80% alcohol, this clear liquid would be aged for ten years in charred American white oak barrels imparting both flavor and color.

From the Bluegrass State, this now dark drink was transported to The Big Apple. These rare bourbons were then blended in Brooklyn, being proofed with pure mineral water filtered through layers of limestone from the historic mines of Rosendale, NY. The limestone cement from the Widow Jane Mine was used in the construction of the Brooklyn Bridge, the Empire State Building, the base for the Statue of Liberty, parts of the White House, and roads all across the US.

Bottled, branded, boxed, crated, and shipped back down South, this whiskey was on the road again, this time to a Louisiana distributor. Handwritten in RED, this particular bottle is

enumerated with Batch # 253 | Bottle # 399 | DATE 2020. I wonder how long this product produced during the pandemic sat on a shelf in some a hole-in-the-wall liquor store not far from Bourbon Street before being selected, purchased, packed up, and driven to Idaho in a family sedan.

“Rosendale, NY.” I chuckle and turn to my new Cajun friend, “Simon’s mother and I brought him home from the hospital to our first apartment over the barber shop on Main Street in Rosendale.”

“Really? That’s right, y’all are from New York.”

I remove the cork stopper and pour a small amount into the cheap, plastic cup.

I raise the cup and—that familiar smell in my nostrils.

I take a sip.

“It’s good.”

“It’s yours. Call it a souvenir.”

Simon Thomas Foster

## Chapter 3

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“You only live twice: Once when you’re born And once when you look death in the face.”

— Ian Fleming

After the Air Force, when Dad began his academic work. He loved studying philosophy and theology, but that was all it was, an academic endeavor which at times served to inform his writing. He had followed in my grandparents’ non-practicing, non-religious footsteps up until Mom died. That was his great tribulation. Without her, Dad experienced what he and I lovingly referred to as “a bit of an existential crisis.” Eventually it proved too much. Even his longtime therapist ended up leaving the practice after Dad began making her actually earn her hourly fee. Instead of dealing with thoughts, emotions, trauma, coping . . . He refused to be prescribed meds and demanded answers, asking her increasingly difficult questions that must have caught her off guard. Questions about “death,” the “afterlife,” and “sin.” Everyone had their concerns. His colleagues whispered about what was most likely the beginnings of a nervous breakdown, all the while quietly petitioning the University to limit his course load, to subsequently place him on forced sabbatical, and then ultimately pressing the Dean to put him out to pasture (regardless of his tenure) when his parking spot went vacant for three straight semesters. Rumors of his increasingly strange behavior caused his readership to begin hoping it would result in a new novel, or better yet, an autobiography. Dad just disappeared from public view. That’s about when he started dragging me on his pilgrimages.

I, therefore, was not among the unchurched. From the age of eleven I visited religious buildings of all kinds all around the globe: small Evangelical chapels, Southern Baptist

mega-churches, Presbyterian parishes, Charismatic strip mall pop-ups, Non-denominational home-churches, Pentecostal tent-revivals, Roman Catholic cathedrals, Jewish synagogues, Islamic mosques, Mormon tabernacles, Jehovah's Witness kingdom halls, Sikh gurdwaras, and Buddhist, Hindu, Shinto, and Jain temples, as well as countless monasteries, convents, abbeys, pagodas, sacella, and shrines. I was always a spectator, never a participant, congregant, or true worshiper.

At first, Dad began to find newspaper announcements of weddings or funerals. We would mark the calendar, dress nicely, and then attend the most joyous and/or despondent occasions, sharing them with perfect strangers. "Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn," he would say. Funerals were easy, we just walked in and sat down. Sometimes we gave the customary, "Sorry, for your loss." No one ever seemed to mind having an extra mourner or two that they didn't recognize, and no one ever cared how we knew the deceased. I look around now and doubt that Alden R. Foster would care why any of these people were here attending his funeral. Weddings were just as easy, smile at the usher and pick a side. "Friends of the Bride or friends of Groom?" Once in a while, we would even be asked to attend the reception without an invitation. Dad really enjoyed it when this happened. After a few of these instances, he started bringing the happy couples a gift (usually a toaster) . . . just in case. He was in his element, he could conga-line with drunken groomsmen just as readily as he could shed a tear alongside a grieving mother. On the ride home after a funeral, he would turn to me and say, "It's cathartic, isn't it?" and after a wedding reception, "Better than sitting at home watching Jeopardy, huh?"

My response was always the same, "Sure. Do we have to do this again next weekend?"

After a while, we started attending actual services and observances. The funeral services had become too somber, too reminiscent, and honestly, the death rate just wasn't keeping up with

Dad's need for—whatever it was that he needed. The weddings also dropped off with colder weather creeping in, many opting for cohabitation, and, besides, you start to get a bit pessimistic hearing those same old vows when you know the current divorce rate among even the best intentioned couples. Dad said he wanted to, “hear some real old-timey religion. Maybe we'll get lucky and find some sweaty, red-faced fire and brimstone preachin' types.”

We found that normal worship services are vastly different from funerals and weddings. Regardless of the religious or denominational bent, anytime a regular body of like-minded faithful believers gather to hear their own sacred scriptures taught and explained verse by verse and word by word by a learned clergyman, cleric, pastor, or shaman, there was bound to be something Dad would take away and ponder for the next week. Sometimes we would remain seated and wait for the others to file out of the building on their way to Baptist buffets, Presbyterian home fellowships, and Jewish shaleshudes. Dad would wait to be approached. Often the one who taught or preached would greet him and ask him if there was any way they could help him. “Yes, I have some questions.” A conversation would then ensue that could last all afternoon. Sometimes I listened, other times I went outside and played, but most times I found the most comfortable place I could and napped. I woke many times to an adamant religious man and a very inquisitive father. There were a few times when I woke to a soft sobbing and a gentle prayer. Still, other times I was aroused from a dead sleep by a thunderous, “We're leaving, Seth!” and an apologetic priest, rabbi, or pastor at his heels.

He was given a Bible, a Koran, a Tanakh, a Tipitaka, a Bhagavad Gita, and other books, pamphlets, and writings. All of these my father poured over with the zeal of man examining a treasure map. He studied. He compared. He researched. He found practitioners to interrogate. Sometimes they found him . . . those poor Jehovah's Witnesses never knew what hit them. They

say a Jehovah's Witness starts a knock knock joke . . . but no one ever answers. Well, that wasn't Dad. Dad always answered because he already knew the punchlines. He would ask three questions: How am I made right with God? Who is Jesus Christ? Do you worship Him? After he heard their answers. He would say, "Tell me about Doubting Thomas."

Doubting Thomas, he had learned, was one of the Disciples of Jesus Christ. As the account went, Thomas knew that Jesus had been crucified, but he had doubted the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Of all the people Dad had read about, he identified most with this follower-skeptic who refused to believe without direct personal experience. My father read *John 20:24-29* in the *Bible* gifted to him:

The other disciples therefore said unto him, We have seen the Lord. But he said unto them, Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe. And after eight days again his disciples were within, and Thomas with them: then came Jesus, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, Peace be unto you. Then saith he to Thomas, Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing. And Thomas answered and said unto him, My Lord and my God. Jesus saith unto him, Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed.

It wasn't Doubting Thomas' need for physical proof so much that ultimately caught Dad's attention. It was more the willingness of the risen Jesus to provide Thomas with what he needed to believe. "Seth," he had said, "do you see how he offers His hands and His side to this skeptic?"

Once in a while, we would happen upon a baptismal service, where we would hear a regular practitioner relay for all in attendance what their version of the Man Upstairs had apparently done in their life, and then the others would collectively welcome them into the membership and fellowship of the local assembly. There was something greatly appealing to my father about this type of acceptance. He likened it to enlisting in the military, pledging a

fraternity, and running off with the circus all in one. “That. That, right there. If there is a God in Heaven, why wouldn’t he be pleased with that?”

Holidays were his favorite though. He enjoyed the special liturgies, music, productions, and hymns. The only drawback for him was that these special services typically had an influx of guests, family from out of town, and even those that may not have been inside a church since the last holiday, wedding, or funeral. We found that the Catholics had an acronym for these people. They whispered their slanderous gossip about CAPE’s (those who attend church on Christmas, Ash Wednesday, Palm Sunday, and Easter only). Dad became quite adept at spotting what he had begun calling “Moralistic Therapeutic Deists” (MTD’s for short). They were obviously not regular attendees, but all the regulars knew them. They were either entering the opiate den of the masses while genuinely looking for a spiritual fix to their religious jonesing, or they were appeasing their loved ones by falling off the worldliness wagon for a single day with the full intent of going back to their regular irreverent lives. Dad had a true contempt for these people.

We were leaving a Presbyterian Church’s Holy Saturday service. The night before we had attended their Good Friday service. The next day would be Easter, or as they referred to it “Resurrection Sunday.” We descended the steps and navigated our way through smiling faces and small talk. We walked along the sidewalk, heading to our car. He scoffed, “These MTD’s show up and play church. Have they no fear? No reverence?”

“But Dad, how are we any different from them?”

“The difference, Son, is that they believe in this . . . but they are unwilling to commit themselves to it. They are hypocrites; I am merely a faker. I want nothing more than to commit my life to the true, the believable, the trustworthy . . . but there is nothing that has proved itself worthy of my faith. It terrifies me that there is no such thing as objective truth.” Just a few steps



from the car, he stopped walking and turned to me, “I believe that I have been provided all I need to believe, but what if I am blind to it? What if eternal life is possible for me, but I miss it?”

“But you listen, and you study. You ask so many questions.”

“I am a blind man, Seth. I want to see. I want to be convinced. I am beginning to think that I need God Himself to open my eyes, like those who were healed by Jesus.”

“So you believe in God?”

“Believe? No, I *hope* that there is a God. I do, with every fiber of my being I do. It’s not the same thing though.”

“Do you do what they do? You know, pray?”

“I can’t. I’ve tried. All that I can ever utter is, ‘If you are there, have mercy on me.’ But then I always think, ‘Why would He?’ I don’t even believe that He exists.”

“If He is there, won’t he answer your prayer and have mercy on you?”

“I don’t know. What if there is no hope for me? What if there really is a God . . . and He hates me?”

“Dad, why would He hate you?”

“Seth, if there truly is God . . . He is infinite. You know what infinite means, right?”

Twelve year old me just nods.

“If God is infinite—This is like *Theology 101*, Son—He is not simply infinite in His power - that is called His omnipotence. He is not simply infinite in His knowledge - that is His omniscience. He is not simply everywhere at the same time - that is His omnipresence.” He was getting excited now. Leaning over me. His arms outstretched to show the enormity, the vastness of these ideas. His sky blue eyes were wide and tumultuous, staring into mine.

“Dad, I understand . . . ”

“No. Listen, to me. All of his attributes, each is infinite. All of His character is perfect and holy. He is infinite goodness. He is infinite justice. He is infinite.” His gaze turned away from me. He began to look up to the sky, then as if his head was too heavy, his chin fell to his chest.

“You okay?”

“I am not a good man.” A single salt of the earth tear fell to the sidewalk between my feet. I imagined the two of us standing outside a large wooden boat and the first drop of rain falling. A flood was coming. He wanted to be in that ark with Noah.

## Chapter 4

---

“O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?”

— 1 Corinthians 15:55

Here I am at another funeral, lost in thought. This one is so different. I suppose this is the only funeral I have attended alone. My funeral-going partner is here, but he's not.

He was with me at my first funeral, my mother's . . . his wife, or maybe I was with him.

He was with me at my last funeral too, my wife's.

Indi's funeral four months ago was the last I attended.

My wife's funeral was Dad's last contact with the outside world before his death. It was all I could do to get him to come out of seclusion that isolated day out of obligation to me and love for his daughter-in-law, but that day's toll was taken on both of us. For him, the crushing societal expectations and pressures of perception. For me, a loss that begs an explanation. For him, a question of, “Why am I here right now?” For me a question of, “Where is my wife right now?” I do take after him, but we are not alike.

I feel eyes on me and realize the preacher has directed the attention of the funeral goers to me. There is expectation in their eyes.

I look down at the freckled face of Cash Jameson, “You gonna talk now?” He asks.

The preacher steps from behind the pulpit, holds a microphone aloft, and offers it to me from across the sanctuary. As if for my sake alone, he repeats what I had not heard, “Dr. Alden R. Foster's son Seth may be able to give us further insight into the man behind the authored works.”

A twinge in my stomach. I breathe.

I look down at my oxblood wingtips. I am immediately transported to a vivid memory.

I am sitting in a pew in a little white chapel at the outskirts of a rural southern town. The bulletin in my hands is a folded single sheet of white paper.

Rogue Harbor Reformed Baptist Church  
Reverend Wilbur C. Harlon  
Welcome and Announcements  
Hymn #1: The Old Rugged Cross  
Hymn #2: Amazing Grace  
Prayer  
Sermon: "Infinite Mercy"  
Doxology & Benediction

The windows are open, but the sundress-clad women fan themselves and the men have loosened their ties. A red faced and sweaty preacher booms a baritone from the pulpit. I stare at my black shoes covered in dust from the red dirt road outside. Sweat beads on my forehead also, but it is not the heat. I am cold. A fever maybe. Body aches. Nausea. Maybe food poisoning. What did I eat? I shiver and watch a single drop of sweat hit my shoe. It leaves one perfect shiny clean circle surrounded by the remaining filth.

I listen to cutting words and each phrase stings. The baritone sounds, "You are made in the image of God."

"Amen," someone says, and the pit in my gut grows heavy.

"When you sin, you mar His image. Even a little white lie. You do not simply sin against your fellow man when you lie to your neighbor, you sin against the infinite Truth, the infinitely Trustworthy One."

"That's right." says a deep disembodied voice. I wince at a slight sour searing and I swallow hard.

“You mar His image. He is your victim. God is the infinitely Faithful One; we are adulterous, faithless, and unbelieving. God is the Giver of All Life, and we have murderous thoughts against those made in His image. He is your victim. God the infinite Provider, and we covet the baubles and shiny things of this world. We covet what He has not seen fit to give us, and we cheat and rob those He gave to.”

Another, “Amen,” from over on the left side of the church.

“God is infinite.”

“Glory to God!” cried a woman in the back.

I look up from my shoes to see the Reverend Wilbur C. Harlon in his navy-blue three-piece suit, his lean six-foot-five frame commanding attention as well as respect. He commands his audience as a teacher with authority.

“God is your victim. Every time you sin . . . it is a single instance of breaking His law. Every sin is an infinite crime. An infinite crime against an infinite God which is only deserving of an infinite penalty.”

“Preach it!” three or four people shout out in unison. I look around to see the congregation mesmerized by his exaggerated gestures. They were caught up in an ecstatic spiritual experience that held them captive. I was lightheaded and the room tilted slightly.

“An isolated sin is enough to damn the world to Hell. A single sin. Your sin. My sin. And how many of us sin repeatedly, continually, and without remorse?” The preacher pauses. “If you can’t say amen, you better say ouch.”

“Ouch . . .” from a whispered familiar voice sitting next me. I look at my father. He is absorbing each syllable, every word. He rides atop each inflection, being buoyed by locution and then sinking under every weight of each immense iteration of the human condition.

Wilbur C. Harlon continues a frenetic colloquial delivery. He presents biblical passages in rapid succession speaking of Hades, Tophet, Gehenna, Hell, the Lake of Fire. I begin to resent his finger pointing. Sin and judgment fill his fiery sermon. I begin to hate the man for calling my father a sinner. Punishment. Eternal death. Wrath of God. I hate this man for calling me a sinner. My stomach knots and I feel the need to vomit. I hate this God.

“If you feel the point of the spear of conviction pricking your heart today, do not pull back, do not recoil . . . lean in.” My father shifts in his seat. His body weight forward.

I want to cry out. To scream, “No!” but my throat is swollen, blocked. I thought this sermon was entitled *Infinite Mercy* . . .

“Lean into it. Take it. Let it pierce you. In Hebrews 4:12, it says:

‘For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.’”

“Praise God!”

My father reaches over to me and takes my hand. His grip is tight. We are seated in the front row of a looping roller coaster. Click-click-click. We climb. *God is infinite*. The view is glorious. *Your sin is an infinite crime*. We descend. *Against an infinite God*. We are weightless. *Deserving an infinite penalty*. Stomachs in our chests. *You are finite*. Holding our breaths. *You cannot pay an infinite penalty*. Thrown and thrashed mercilessly left and then right. *You need a substitute*. A screeching halt. *Only God can pay an infinite penalty*. Please release the harness. *God took on human flesh in order to pay your infinite penalty*. Exit to your left.

“Amen, Praise Jesus!”

My father is crying. He shakes his head in disbelief. He releases my hand and covers his face with both of his hands.

The pit in my stomach is gone. My cheeks are wet. I am light as a feather. I am Ebenezer Scrooge and it is Christmas morning.

“God Himself stepped out of Heaven and clothed Himself in human flesh. He lived a sinless life. The life we could not live. He obeyed His Father’s law perfectly. And the spotless Lamb of God was sacrificed. He took the Father’s undiluted and infinite wrath on your behalf. He died a death He did not deserve. As proof that the Father accepted this wrath satisfying payment, He was raised to life three days later.”

“Glory.”

My father is sobbing.

“The exchange is this, God is willing to pay your debt . . . to give you His infinite righteousness in exchange for your infinite sin. His command is repent and believe. Turn from your sin and believe that He has paid your penalty. Put your faith in Christ.”

“Amen.”

“You are commanded to believe. If you do not obey your Creator’s command it is sin. Unbelief is sin. Turn from your unbelief. Put your faith in the risen Christ. Let’s Pray.” At this, everyone bows their heads, and Wilbur C. Harlon prays. When the prayer is concluded, I open my eyes to see that the dust on my shoes is completely washed away.

The people stand and begin to sing what the bulletin has labeled as the Doxology. I stand without thinking. My father does not stand. Instead he remains fixed, hands covering his face.

*Praise God from whom all blessings flow / Praise Him, all creatures here below /  
Praise Him above, ye heavenly host / Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.*

“Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be the glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever . . .”

The entire congregation shouts, “Amen!” Apparently this is what they always do at the conclusion of what I found out later was called the Benediction.

“You are dismissed.”

The congregation begins to file out. Some stop to shake my hand. They greet me with a friendly, “It’s nice to have you here.” They glance at my broken father. They smile knowingly and continue on their way. I sit.

“Dad, you okay?”

He nods, but his hands remain.

“Hello, I’m Will. It’s good to have you with us this morning,” I turn to see Wilbur C. Harlon. He towers over me. He is now calm, no longer animated. He offers his hand, and I shake it firmly the way Dad insisted I should shake a man’s hand. “This is your first time with us, correct?”

“Yes, sir,” I look over at my father. I am ashamed and feel as though I need to give some explanation, “He needed this, I mean, I think he has prayed for something like this.”

“I understand. Well, let me say this, I know for a fact that God answers prayer.”

My father lowers his hands and inhales deeply. His eyes are puffy and red, but he has stopped crying. He smiles. He smiles a smile that is new to me.

“What’s your name?”

“I’m Alden. This is my son, Seth.”

“Seth,” studying me, he says, “the third son of Adam and Eve. Your name means ‘appointed’ or ‘substitute.’ Did you know that?”

“No, sir, but my mother’s name was Eve.”

“Is that right? Alden and Eve.” He smiles a big disarming smile.



“Evelyn. But, yeah, we all called her Eve.” Dad explains, beginning to talk a bit more.

“Yeah, Adam and Eve’s first son, Cain, was a murderer, and he killed their second son Abel. Abel was a righteous man. Eve named her third son Seth, because he would take the place of Abel as their heir. Do you know what an heir is, Seth?”

“Someone who gets everything their parents had?”

“That’s right! You’ve got a smart boy here, Alden.”

“Let’s see if you know this one,” He sits down in the row in front of us; he thinks for a second, then asks, “do you know who God’s heir is?”

I remember thinking hard about this, wanting to get the answer right.

“His son, Jesus?” a total guess, but an informed guess. I had heard enough about Jesus in our church hopping. I look over at my dad. He raises his eyebrows as if to say, “Sounds good to me, kid.”

“Ooooh, close, but no cigar,” he chuckles slightly, “actually it’s a trick question. Yes, God the Father gives everything to God the Son, including all authority in Heaven and on Earth, but did you know that God adopts children?”

“Really?”

“Really. The Bible says that all people are sinners and of their father the Devil. But when God saves a person from their sin, they become His children. He adopts them as his own. Because God the Son’s infinite righteousness is applied to them, the Father looks at them the same way He sees Jesus. Perfect. Holy. Righteous.”

“Wow. That’s amazing.” I hear my dad say over my shoulder.

“And since we are found in Christ and identify with Him, we become co-heirs with Him. That means that if we are in Christ, we get all the eternal benefits that He has. Including a right relationship with a heavenly Father that will never die.”

“That is what I want.” My father tells Wilbur C. Harlon.

“Well then, I see no reason why it will not be yours.”

“When?”

“Soon. Later. Now. Most people never really can pinpoint the time that their souls are regenerated, but I would encourage you to continue crying out to God until you know that God has done that work in you.”

“Thank you, Sir.”

“Will. I’m just Will.”

My earthly father is dead. All eyes are on me. I disengage from the back row. One foot in front of the other. I make my way to the front of the church. I take the microphone in hand and my place behind the heavy wooden pulpit.

Looking out on those paying their respects, my eyes meet Cash Jamison’s.

Innocence among a sea of hangers-on.

“My name is Seth Foster. I am Alden Foster’s son. I loved my father,” the thought *What would Wilbur C. Harlon say?* rushes into my mind and forces out everything else.

“I am no preacher, pastor, priest, reverend, shaman, therapist, or guru. I am merely a little boy at my father’s feet. I am finite. I am dust—”

With my speech done and the guests slowly beginning to file out of the chapel, I lift the urn from among the colorful flowers and greenery. Ashes shift inside as I cradle it against my arm.

The young preacher in the blue suit approaches carrying a leather bound Bible. “Thank you for that. I am sure your father is smiling down on you at this very moment.”

“You said you didn’t know my father.”

“No Sir, I did not.”

“I did . . . And you can rest assured that given where he is currently, he has no concern for what took place here today.”

“I’m sorry? I don’t follow.”

“Do you believe that book in your hand?”

He glances down casually, apparently forgetting the sixty-six, inspired books of law, history, poetry, wisdom, prophecy, gospels, and letters, “Well, yes. Yes, I do.”

“Well, if you believe that book in your hand, you know that my father is in one of two places. He is either experiencing his earned and well deserved eternal torment at the hands of Almighty God, which is what holy, infinite justice demands, or he is face to face with his Creator, his Savior, and his Lord experiencing eternal joy and undeserved benevolence out of mercy and grace because his infinite penalty was satisfied by another.”

“Mr. Foster . . . He was a good man.”

“Don’t. He was not a good man, and he would be the first to tell you so. Besides, you didn’t know my father.”

“Well, I am sorry for your loss.”

“I suggest you reread that book.” I turn and head toward the back of the church to leave.

A solitary figure is standing in front of the door, his back is to me, and he is in the way of my intended exit route. I assume this is merely the end of the line of funeral goers, but I am mistaken.

“Excuse me Sir, may I get by?”

“We need to talk.”

“And you are?”

“Seth, I am your father.”

The figure turns and our eyes meet.

“My father? This was his funeral. And with all due respect, whoever you are, I am not in the mood to play these games. My father is dead.”

“No, your father is Death.”

There is a pause, as though in time.

No sound.

There is peace in his eyes. I am completely at ease. I forget about my surroundings. There is a poignancy in this moment that I am keenly aware of. His eyes are deep as the sea but calm as a puddle. Familiar.

“Seth, I am your father. Now that Alden has gone on, I am finally at liberty to reveal myself to you.”

I nod. I accept this.

He turns, walks out of the chapel, and I follow him without question.

He is a broad shouldered man and he makes his way through the straggling crowd of onlookers. As I slowly come to my senses, I realize that this man was not present at the funeral, or at least he somehow went unnoticed.

“Get in.”

A black SUV is double parked on the street with a long line of cars behind it.

A small man opens a door for me.

PART 2

“ . . . all stories, if continued far enough, end in death,  
and he is no true-story teller who would keep that from you.”

— Ernest Hemingway

Chapter 5

---

“The meaning of life is that it stops.”

— Franz Kafka

Death is sitting in the passenger seat of the SUV with the window down. I stand frozen on the sidewalk staring at my reflection in his door, the stainless steel urn cradled in the crook of my arm gleaming in the sunlight.

The small man stands waiting, stroking his jet black beard with one hand and holding the door for me with the other. I can't tell if he is a dwarf or merely of short-stature; his earth tone tweed attire is perfectly fitted and there is no hint of disproportion in his physicality.

“He said, ‘Get in.’”

I slide into the back of the SUV and find myself sitting next to a man in a hooded sweatshirt who seems to be sleeping.

The small man climbs up into the driver's seat and shuts the door. He can't reach the pedals and can barely see over the dashboard. He closes his eyes and begins to speak in a foreign tongue. His language has a hint of the familiar, but I understand nothing. As he speaks, the keys in the ignition turn on their own, the engine roars, gears shift, the steering wheel turns, and the SUV begins its forward motion. I think *So much for ten and two, Dad.*

“Alden Foster was not your Father, Seth.”

“Yes, you said that. But I really need you to explain something to me . . . Did you just read my mind?”

“Take us to the overlook, imp.” The whispered command is given to the driver.

“Yes, Sir.” Before his response is uttered, the SUV begins to speed up. It then takes an immediate right turn.

“Seth, I will answer all of your questions when we reach our destination, but there are priorities. Before you are given any more information regarding the future, your past must be correctly viewed. Imp...”

The driver lifts his right hand, and my eyes grow instantly heavy. I close my eyes and drift off into a deep sleep.

New Paltz, NY.

I am in college.

He was standing on the sidewalk in the falling snow speaking with two older gentlemen who were holding pamphlets beneath the window of our corner booth at The Plaza Diner. He was speaking calmly but with a volume that reached our ears inside. I continued to hear him repeatedly question these men as if he was their authority. “Granted,” he would say, “but do you worship him?”

Although our college study group tried to focus on our reading, my fellow education majors would in turn glance outside, roll their eyes or shake their heads, and return to the printed page. I, on the other hand, was incapable of tuning this out. So, I simply closed my laptop and took in the spectacle. Two against one.

This young man was animated yet controlled, passionate but respectful. He was a shabby fellow of medium-build, possibly of Dutch or Irish descent given his paleness. A paleness that was not simply due to lack of winter daylight hours but a dearth of melanin. He seemed to be in



his early twenties like most of the residents of this college town. He wore a scruffy beard and a woolen hat that had begun to gather fragile snowflakes. A tan scarf was around his neck, but he wore no jacket this particular night over a threadbare, black t-shirt. His denim jeans were torn and frayed at the knees and tucked into his muddy military boots.

He stated zealously, “You do not even know this Jehovah you speak of.” His cadence was calculated. “The name of ‘Jehovah’ is a Latinization of an unarticulated Hebrew word. It is merely one potential vocalization of the tetragrammaton.”

The men looked confused, but neither offered any rebuttal or even a question.

“The quadri-literal name of God,” John continued correctively but without acerbity or disparagement, “which is referred to in Josephus, in the Church Fathers, in the Papyri Graecae Magicae, and in the Palestinian Talmud, from which it has since passed into the contemporary languages and modern discourse. Aliases for it, such as ‘Ha-Shem,’ ‘Shem ha-Meforash,’ and ‘Shem ha-Meyuḥad,’ have commonly been discussed by recent scholars.”

The men were getting anxious now. They took glances at one another. Frozen feet shuffled in the snow. They knew they were outgunned; John’s humble but dizzying intellect was not going to be matched. I felt myself smile slightly as I witnessed their discomfort.

He paused to see if the men were tracking with him. Then persisting, “The term arose in contradistinction to the divine names containing respectively twelve and forty-two letters and formed likewise from the letters Y, H, W, and H. It is only in this manner that the designation is even intelligible since ‘Adonai’ also has four letters in Hebrew. Your so-called ‘Jehovah’ is a made up word consisting of the consonants in the name Yahweh and the vowels of Adonai.”

After a moment, I declared to myself more than to anyone around me, “Man, quite the intellectual . . . He must actually believe that stuff.”

Maria, the brunette sitting across from me, looked up at me in astonishment. “You haven’t met the ‘freed man’ yet, have you?” The others audibly showed their disgust for what they deemed a fanatic of the highest order.

“The ‘freed man’?” I chuckled, “Him? No . . . Why?”

“He doesn’t believe in anything. He just . . . You know what, you’ll see. If he comes in, I’ll introduce you to him.”

Maria had a strong personality. A small-town, but well-traveled, country girl that could hold her own in any situation. She commanded the room everywhere she went. She seemed to know everybody. She cared deeply for people, but she loved animals and nature more. More than anything, she would rather be shoveling out the stable where she had her horse boarded near the campus or taking her Jeep for a ride into the mountains with her German shepherd Cormac, named after the author Cormac McCarthy. She was formidably well read, and men always found her attractive. I did not. There was nothing about her physical appearance that should cause me to desire her. Not that she wasn’t good looking, I suppose she was, but she was just “Maria” to me. I counted her among my closest friends and someone I could turn to if I needed anything. Once, a flannel wearing good ol’ boy that had had a few too many PBRs at McGillicuddy’s, took offense to something he overheard me say about the Jewish historian Josephus. Apparently, he thought I said Bocephus was a Jew, and he took a swing at me. As I discovered later, Bocephus is the popular nickname for the iconic country singer Hank Williams Jr. The redneck’s fist barely missed me, but before I could gather myself, Maria was leading this mountain man off to the dancefloor. He was so taken with her that by the time they returned to the bar, not only were they an item, but he was hugging on me like we were Bo and Luke Duke. Maria could take you home or take you out at the knees . . . not my type.

When I looked out the window again, I saw the two older gentlemen whom John had been speaking with beginning to walk away from the diner toward the parking lot. He looked down at their footprints in the newly fallen snow. He did not follow, but he called after them, “Have you not read?”

He turned away and ascended the diner stairs seemingly unfazed by their rejection. The familiar jingle-bells rang as the door opened and then shut. He brushed off the snow from his shoulders, stomped his boots, and removed his hat, revealing unkempt short blonde hair. Without even a look around, he quietly took a seat at the counter.

Maria turned to me, “You ready?”

“For what? No, no . . . Not yet. Let him order . . . Let him get warm.”

“He won’t care. Trust me, c’mon.”

Maria stood and beckoned me to follow. I took a deep breath, placed my laptop in my leather messenger bag, stood, and followed her.

She approached from the left side and nonchalantly spoke. “Hey, John.”

John glanced in her direction, turned to take her in, and then he smiled. A real smile. Nothing was feigned. He stood immediately and embraced her. It seemed natural for him, but Maria was rigid . . . guarded.

“I’ve missed you, Maria.”

He said this with unwary emotion. He released her, sniffled, and wiped at his cheek. He then took notice of me. “Good evening. I am sorry. We have never . . . um . . .” His gray eyes were searching me, “No, we have never met. I am John.”

Again, he was smiling a genuine smile, as though he was truly pleased to meet a new person.

“Seth.”

“Seth.” He repeated as if trying out the feeling of my name on his tongue.

There was a pause. I wasn't sure why, but no one spoke. It was not awkward in the least; I was at ease. There was peace in his eyes. I forgot about my surroundings. There was a poignancy in this moment that I was keenly aware of. His eyes were deep as the sea but calm as a puddle. The thought began as an observation, but it kept rolling. The words were waves, and they kept coming to my shore:

For most . . . for most moments, minutes do not describe the actual act of thought with the giving that arrives. It is but allowing the reality of truth to be our pattern of unconditioned sooth, as if flowing water, laughter, wind, or rain. Conscious freedom is implied, passionate pleasure or pain. The noetic poet and his idiom are on the road less traveled by. They pick up each hitchhiker. Weaving back and forth, they drive. No minute describes the moment of life or the thought that goes into gifts. As if floating on water, wind, rain, or laughter, each is out of reach of our fingertips. Therefore, whether in the arms of a stranger or friend, the purity among us is what matters, a connection of respect and honesty, indifferent to the happy and the sadder—

Suddenly, I realized how quiet the diner was. Then Maria's agitated voice, “It's not a hypothetical question.”

“Sorry, what?” I felt strange. Confused. I heard light laughter from the table behind me, but I was not embarrassed.

John was speaking now, and I began to focus. “It's okay.” He waved off Maria's agitation. “I had asked, ‘How are you?’” He explained, speaking slowly and softly, nodding as he

directed my eyes to the stool next to his with that same genuine smile that spoke volumes. I sat down without thinking.

“I guess I’ll see you later?”

“Oh. Uh . . . yeah. Sure.” I answered without even looking at her.

She went back to our table, I think. By the time John and I would leave the diner that night, the corner booth would be empty, and I would not have even noticed the others leave.

“So, how are you?” John asked for a third time now.

“Yeah, sorry about that . . .” I was about to explain, but nothing came to me.

“It’s okay. No worries. So?”

“Oh, how am I? Good. I’m good.”

John had the waitress bring me a coffee and a slice of apple pie. “Extra cream,” he had told her, and I didn’t object.

“You’re good?”

“Yeah, you know . . . I can’t complain.”

“You can’t?”

I chuckled. “Well, I guess I could, but what good would that do, right? I’m doing fine . . . considering.” As soon as I heard myself saying it, my heart began racing and my mind grasped for a way out.

“Considering? Considering what?”

“Oh, nothing . . . Don’t . . . I don’t . . . It’s nothing.”

“Listen,” John said, “talk, don’t talk. Either way, I’m quite adept at reading people, and I believe I have already identified you and your dilemma.”

He took a sip of his coffee.

There was a flicker of outrage, but it died out almost immediately. He was not arrogant in his statement, just matter-of-fact. Besides, I believed him. He probably could see right through me. I just nodded.

John turned on his stool now to face me. “Are you capable of reading people, Seth?”

“Umm . . . No. Not really. No, I don’t believe I am.”

He smiled almost . . . slyly. “That is a truer statement than you are aware of my friend.”

I had no idea what he meant, so I just remained silent. I was just listening now.

“Seth, our first of what I presume will be many conversations, began with you and I divulging our names to each other, correct?”

I nodded.

“That is one of the most personal of interactions that can be shared between two people without physical contact. Something has begun tonight. Would you desire to see this through?”

There was a fleeting thought. Is he coming on to me? No, it wasn’t like that.

I just stared at my coffee. I began to play the mental chess game in my head: where is he going with this? If I respond, what will be his next—?

“Why are you guarding yourself? Do not be afraid. You have nothing to fear from me.”

“I just . . . you see, I . . . uh . . .”

“Seth. Talk, don’t talk. Remember, I have already identified you, but I would like to introduce you to . . . well . . . I would like to introduce you to yourself.”

“What? I’m sorry, I don’t understand.”

“You have already said that you don’t believe you are capable of reading people, and I can tell you don’t know yourself very well either.”

I closed my eyes tightly. It was decision time. I resigned myself to the fact that, yes, I indeed wanted . . . something. I could not quite put my finger on what it was I wanted, or perhaps needed. I would have to allow him in. I felt as though I could trust him, but I wasn't sure whether or not I could trust myself.

I turned my stool to face him, and I opened my eyes.

“Thank you, Seth.” He was smiling that genuine smile again.

The parking lot was filling up with snow and the waitress kept wiping down tables as patrons trickled in, sat, ate, and left. We sat at the counter talking.

“So, after you introduced yourself, I asked you how you were, and you returned with a curious response.”

“I did?”

“Yes, you stated quite confidently that you were ‘good’. What makes you think you are good?”

“Good? You know, things are going well. I’ve adjusted to the new semester’s classes. I don’t have any real . . . you know . . . Life, it’s good.”

“I wholeheartedly agree, ‘Life’ is good, but I did not pose the question, ‘Are you well?’ My query was ‘if you are good?’ Are you a good person, Seth?”

The question pierced my childhood. I heard in the recesses of memory the echo of my father’s voice, “I am not a good man.”

Good . . . I thought about that word. *Am I a GOOD person? What is the meaning of Good? Good as opposed to bad? What does it mean to be a good person?*

“Well, you know, I think I’m a pretty good person. I try to treat everyone with respect and kindness. Sometimes I donate to charity or give homeless people some change. I mean, I’m not a terrible person.”

“Okay, granted, there are terrible people out there in this world . . . even those that might be considered evil people. And you, you are not as terrible a person as others. Most people actually think that they are pretty good when they begin to compare themselves to others. However, most of us differ on the denotation of ‘good’. I suppose everyone differs when connotations begin to enter the conversation. What are you basing your ‘goodness’ on?”

I paused. “What do you mean?”

“Well, you have this subjective notion of some horribly evil person out there somewhere from which you derive a sense of ‘I’m not *thaaaat* bad’ from . . . you think yourself better than, say . . . an Adolf Hitler, Judas Iscariot, or Jeffrey Dahmer for instance . . .”

“Okay.”

“So, do you have some objective standard of goodness? A measuring rod, if you will. On one extreme, perhaps Joseph Stalin and on the other, perhaps Mother Teresa. How do you delineate the difference between true or false, right or wrong, or good or bad? Do you see what I mean? A standard.”

I was momentarily aware of my situation. Here I am involved in an intellectual conversation, and I was suddenly being challenged. I refocused. “I’ve never really considered it quite like that, but I guess I just kind of know . . . based on . . . how it makes me . . . um, you know . . . how I feel inside.”

“Are you familiar with the German philosopher, Immanuel Kant?”



“I am, but to be honest, I haven’t read much by Kant. Some basics maybe, I know my father—”

“Your father?”

“Yeah, my dad is a professor and is quite well read. I mean he studies that kind of thing and even writes some.”

“Well, Kant famously said, ‘two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and reverence . . . the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me.’”

“The moral law?”

“Yes, the moral law . . . what is right and wrong, good and bad. It is within us.”

“Interesting. Okay.”

“And what about the heavens above you Seth? Do you believe in a transcendent supernatural being . . . of any sort?”

“Like God? No, I do not believe there is a god.”

“There is no ‘god’ in the starry heavens above or anywhere else?”

“No, I don’t see it that way. When I was younger, I entertained the thought that there may be a ‘supreme being’ but it just never really checked out for me. I guess you might say I am pretty much an atheist. But my father—”

“Really, I have never met an atheist before. I didn’t think they existed. Yet, here you are. I admit, this is a first for me.” Again there was a knowing upturn in the corners of his mouth.

“Well, I just—”

“I get it . . . You have absolute knowledge. You are omniscient.”

“I’m sorry? What? No, I . . . I don’t.”

“But as a professed atheist, you would say that God does not exist.”

“Well, yeah.”

“To say that ‘God does not exist’ would lead me to believe you know that God does not exist anywhere . . . Are you capable of making that absolute statement? Do you in fact know that there is no ‘god’ at the bottom of the ocean? Have you been there? Is there a ‘god’ outside of our solar system, for instance? How about our galaxy or universe? Does a deity exist in another dimension? To say that ‘God does not exist’ is an absolute; to say this, would suggest, at least to me, that you have absolute knowledge.”

“Okay, I see what you’re getting at. No, I do not have absolute knowledge. I do not know ultimately if there is a ‘god’ or not.”

“So, you are in actuality an agnostic. You are not an atheist. That is disappointing; just as I thought, they don’t exist.”

“Okay, okay,” I laughed a little as this conversation was good natured and I felt no threat, “I understand. I believe in . . . I mean, I can conceive that there is possibly something or someone out there bigger than us. You know, a superior being, a higher power, or a force of some sort. I’m just not sure if I would call it ‘God’ though.”

“Interesting. I do appreciate your candor. Let me ask you this though,” John looked me in the eyes. “So, in your estimation, does that ‘higher power’ have any say in the determination of what we call good or bad, or even moral?”

“I suppose, for the sake of the argument.”

“Okay. Would it then follow that this being also be subject to the standard which he, she, or it set forth or put in place?”

“You mean . . . does it have to be ultimately good if its standard is goodness?”

“Exactly. Okay, now you are starting to track with me. The short answer has to be ‘yes’ if it is to be consistent. The argument would be that if there is a superior being or higher power completely independent of humanity to which our thinking and actions must correspond . . . if our ideas and actions are to be true, right, and good, and therefore of practical use in living our lives, then said ‘higher power’ or ‘superior being’ must be absolutely true, right, and good.”

“I see what you are saying. Whether I agree or not remains to be seen.”

“No problem. The way I see it, is that this ‘superior being’ must be our standard for what we would see as an ultimate good. I suppose that would be inherent in the term ‘superior’. It must be absolutely perfect to be the most . . . real.”

He paused. I thought. No, I contemplated.

“You see, everything is what it is and acts in accordance with its identity, or character. We may perceive or even define our ‘self’ by our actions, abilities, desires, instincts, character, appearance, traits, feelings, orientation, gender, sex . . . which all tend to be quite fluid. But there must be a fixed point of comparison, an unchanging constant by which everything other must correspond.”

“God is good.”

“Exactly. ”

“And I am . . . not.”

Again I hear my father’s voice, “I am not a good man.”

John did not react. He knew. He sat on his stool at that diner counter, and he knew. He understood . . . my condition.

“Seth,” he said, “I would like to introduce you to yourself. You have begun to know yourself . . . nosce te ipsum.”

“Is that Latin?”

“Yes, it simply means ‘know thyself’. It’s good advice. When you truly understand or know yourself it is freeing. I thank you for the reminder.”

I chuckled a little to myself. Then I said, “Maria said you are ‘the freed man’.”

“She is a very perceptive young woman.”

“Yeah.”

“I am going to head out . . . but I hope we get to talk again soon.”

“Absolutely. Thank you.”

“Have a blessed night.”

“You too, John.”

John drank down his last swallow of coffee, stood, and left without looking back. I turned to the back table. It was empty; everyone had left.

Chapter 6

---

“Death smiles at us all, all a man can do is smile back.”

— Marcus Aurelius

My eyes are heavy, but I am awake. I manage to open my eyes slightly and realize my surroundings. I am still in the SUV as it begins to climb the steep grade up a mountain. I look out the window and recognize where we are. I know this road, and I know the destination. He had said, “the overlook.” We are moving quickly as we take the hairpin turn, and the still-sleeping gentleman next me slumps over, his hood falling to the side revealing his face.

“John?”

The Imp glances over his shoulder, waves his hand, and I am asleep again.

State University of New York at New Paltz.

I am sitting in Contemporary Literary Theory the morning after meeting John Freedman and I begin to feel uneasy. I am tired. It is my first of three scheduled classes that day, and the professor is droning on about how texts of literature function as self-contained, self-referential aesthetic blah blah blah . . . when I am suddenly met with the thought, *You are not good*. I glance left and right, checking to see if it was obvious to the others . . . *did they know that I was . . . not good?* Then the thought trickled in . . . *They are not good either, but they have no idea*. Suddenly, my stomach knotts, and I want to vomit.

I gather my things and make my way out of the darkness of the lecture hall. No one notices, no one cares. I enter the empty corridor and turn to face the floor-to-ceiling windows

which overlook Sojourner Way outside. It is beyond bright in the corridor. The gleaming sun reflects off of the newly fallen snow which covers the landscape in a blanket of purity. I wince in pain, and I shield my eyes. Somewhat disoriented, I reach into my bag and grope for my lunch, hoping that something would settle my stomach. My hand returns with a McIntosh apple. As my eyes adjust to the brightness, I notice the red and green mottled skin of the fruit in the sunlight. It is pleasant to the eyes, so I take a bite. Chew. Swallow. Although it is good for food, I can't eat any more of it. With my eyes adjusted now, I look to the left and right for a trashcan. Now, I feel as though I am being watched but no one is nearby. If there are eyes to see me, they will know instantly that there is no good in me.

I turn away from the bright windows and walk to the nearest stairwell. I descend, spiraling down. With each step the echoing rhythm increases its cadence. As I reach the ground floor, a young female student wearing a scarlet Erie Community College hoodie enters the stairwell. I begin to pass her by, and she asks, "Excuse me, is this the Fine Arts Building?" She has to be a transfer student, probably looking for her art major boyfriend. I wonder why so many of the girls here are from either Erie County or Long Island. I pause for a moment in the doorway. I don't answer. I simply turn and hand her my bitten apple . . . She takes it without thinking.

I exit the building and head toward my car when I notice a group of a dozen or so students standing around a wood table. As I get closer, I notice they are gathered around one person that is sitting cross-legged on the table. It is "the freed man".

"If the whole universe has no meaning," I hear him say, "then, we should never have found out that it has no meaning . . ." He trails off when he notices me passing.

“Seth! Hold on,” John calls after me. I turn to see him stand atop the picnic table. “Seth, join us.”

“I can’t.” I stop walking, and I feel his disciples' eyes upon me.

“Are you okay?”

The word seems to mock me. *Okay?* How could I possibly be okay . . . ? I am not even *good*. Again a pang within my gut. I can feel the searing bile at the ready. I turn away from the audience and begin to retch. Through watering eyes I can see the ruined snow, the greenish-brown steaming through the acidic melt.

“Is this the Fine Arts Building?” reverberating in my head. I heave twice more. I remember a Jackson Pollock documentary. The apple peel remnants stare up at me. I wipe my mouth on my sleeve and straighten up. Dizzy. Weak.

“Seth,” I feel John’s hand on my shoulder stabilizing me, “Are you okay, Man?”

“No . . . I’m sorry . . . I can’t . . .” I don’t look at him. I can’t look at him.

“I was looking for you. Here, I want you to have something.”

He hands me a small leather-bound journal. I stuff it in my bag without looking at it, and I walk off in the direction of my car. I hear voices behind me but pay no attention.

I reach my car, unlock it, open the door, throw my messenger bag on the passenger seat, and get in. The windows are covered in a thin layer of snow that filters much of the light and shuts out the world. I am alone. It’s cold. I put my seat back, and I close my eyes.

Overlook.

The SUV comes to a stop. I wake but keep my eyes closed.

“Wait . . .” The Imp’s voice becomes a whisper, “He is awake and listening.”

“It doesn't matter. Has there been sufficient time for the history to be imparted?”

“No, more time is needed. It may be that he knows of the first, but not of the other.”

“Does he know about her?”

“No.”

“Are you sure she will be here?” Asks the Imp.

“I am sure.”

“Her testimony should be enough then?”

“Enough? Perhaps. It will be enough to confirm the history, but she does not know our purpose for the rest. That will take seeing.”

“Is there time?”

“Yes, restore what is hidden.”

I fall asleep.

I shiver and jolt awake. I open my eyes to see the cave-like interior of my car. I know the sun is setting because the snow covering my windows has a faint pink hew. I grab my keys, start the car, and crank up the heat and defrosters. It is then that I taste the residual hint of vomit in my mouth. I reach for the water bottle in the cup holder. Frozen solid.

I remember the journal John gave to me . . . I grab my bag, take out the leather-bound journal, and open it. Each page looks to be typed as if on a vintage typewriter and the folios individually secured with twine. I open it and read:



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As I write this letter, I do not know if I will ever see you again. Perhaps on my last day. I do not know how old you will be when it is finally given to you, my prayer is that somehow you understand.

If you ask the locals, Raven Hill Reformed Baptist Church was not always what it is today. Although it began as a church plant more than a decade ago, most people around these parts still think of it as that same old church that has always been there.

The little white chapel at the outskirts of Rogue Harbor was donated by a Methodist congregation from up on the ridge. They say it was brought down by ox cart in 1857, twenty-three miles to where it now sits along the creek. The fact that the building was filled to the busting with churchgoers for decades may say something for the town at the time, but Pa says it was more about human oration than it was about orthodoxy.

Pa was a deacon back in the day, and he even spent a few years as the Sunday School Director. It was a completely different church then, and it had a very different doctrine and practice. What most people don't know is that Pa was the one who began the process of handing over the buildings, property, and assets to the church that came from Down South. But he was not the deciding vote. That was Doc Masters, the town's only dentist.

In the old church's supposed heyday, it went by the name of Unity Chapel. It had only one minister, the Reverend Wilbur C. Harlon. Harlon apparently was from the Billy Sunday school of evangelistic fervor. He initially arrived as a traveling missionary filling in for an ailing minister, but upon the minister's unsuspected and untimely death, Harlon was ordained as the tiny congregation's replacement. The membership grew quickly upon Harlon's installation. In his

customary navy-blue suit, his lean six-foot-five frame commanded attention as well as respect. Many came to hear his booming baritone and to be mesmerized by his exaggerated gestures. Their hopes of being swept away in an ecstatic spiritual experience held them captive. Harlon's frenetic colloquial delivery presenting the biblical accounts of Old Testament saints and the rewards of Heaven and the penalties of Hell filled his fiery sermons, but it was in fact the three-ringed spectacle which each Lord's Day audience clearly enjoyed. Every Sunday culminated with an altar call which had grown men groaning, women weeping, newcomers repeating the Sinner's Prayer, and children asking Jesus into their little hearts. Revival you could set your watch by... just didn't seem like any of that kinda religion stuck to them come Monday morning. But after a week in the fields and factories, cussing, brawling, and Saturday night carousing, they'd all be back to get some more.

When the new church was created, some parishioners stayed and some left. The widow Beulah Quinn used to play the piano while the congregation sang the hymns. She left when the new folks came from Georgia. She said she wanted to perform "special music" that would bless people, but on account of what the new parson called "the regulative principle," it simply wasn't going to be allowed. Widow Beulah simply couldn't understand, or for that matter agree with, the practice of only allowing what was prescribed and commended in the Holy Scriptures to be practiced in the new church. She was a no-show some Sundays, and we just sang acapella. Then she stopped coming altogether. The buzz in town is that she still performs at some false churches nowadays.

After the vote was tallied to relinquish the buildings and property for the new church, Miss Margaret was told by Old Man Lawrence that if she ever stepped foot in that chapel again he would disown her. I'm not particularly sure why though. It wasn't like he ever went to church

anyhow. He just sat at his kitchen table drinking his Old Grand-Dad from a coffee cup and smoking those Prince Albert hand-rolled-cigarettes. I heard it said he had his suspicions and didn't want his only daughter of marrying age to be fraternizing with the reformed-type. Guess that was good enough for him, even though there wasn't another baptist church for miles and miles. Miss Margaret still comes to the Wednesday prayer meetings though, and we all pray for Old Man Lawrence's soul. I've heard tell that there are some TV preachers he won't even tolerate no more on account of their wrongheadedness. We just keep praying he repents of his wrong-heartedness, before the whiskey and tobacco take him up yonder.

Uncle Norland, he's not really my kin; everybody just calls him Uncle. He used to be an elder there, they say. Right up until he was forced out. Everyone in the town and half the congregation knew he was seeing that white woman behind Talia's back. He had to step down on account of his repeated infidelities. I really can't imagine that wretched soul standing in the pulpit, but, you know what they say... "your sin will find you out" and "what is done in the dark will always come to light."

After serving as a deacon and the Sunday School Director, Pa was asked to be a fellow pastor. He declined, citing his advancing age, but he still would fill the pulpit when needed and begged to do so. He was a god some people say. He did things that just didn't make sense these days.

Apparently, one Sunday evening, there was a healing service, and Pa preached. People came from all around. There was even a van from an orphanage that pulled in while the ladies were still out front smoking their cigarettes and discussing their medications. In that van, there was a boy, a cripple. Not some kid with a limp, but a little boy who had a foot that was rounded off. Those that are around still will tell you that his foot, if you can even call it that, didn't even

have any toes. After Pa preached that evening, they brought that crippled boy up front. Now, they say it wasn't like healing Joyce's gout or Arnold's rheumatoid arthritis. This boy didn't have a real foot. The old folks, they say they Pa took hold of this boy's stump, and he looked up at the ceiling like he was looking through the rafters, through the roof, and into the eyes of God. Pa began praying. People had their eyes closed and their heads bowed. Every time I hear the story though, I think, *Wasn't there someone that was looking? I would've been looking.* When Pa had said his amen and the congregation opened their eyes, that boy had a fully functional foot. When I say, fully functional, the old folks say that boy could walk, skip, and jump. Glory to God.

Now, do I believe that? I'm not saying that all those old folks are trustworthy, but that wasn't the only story about my Pa.

I went off to college at St. Elizabeth's to pursue nursing straight out of high school. I was only there three months when Pa got sick, and I had to come home to tend to him. That's when I met your Father. He was there with Pa and he had taken a liking to him. He had told me that he was there to escort Pa home, but we ended up falling in love. He stayed a while. Then we found out I was with child . . . well, with children. Twins. You and your brother.

This was highly unusual given your father's line of work. Your father is the Angel of Death. He has taken so many lives in righteous service to our God. he has been granted one life. A child of his own. A reward for his unique service, and specifically for a single mission accomplished years ago.

But the original agreement was for one child only. Only one. That's where you come into the picture. One child is to continue in this life. Your brother Seth has been chosen to live a normal life as a mortal. You, my precious child, will serve Death. Your death is to be the ransom

price to pay for your brother's life. Your father has paid this ransom to allow your brother to live. At least that is my understanding. Perhaps your father will explain further some day.

Pa has been granted a temporary reprieve from his own death in order to see one of his grandson's grow up. This brings me joy, but I am also filled with sorrow, as I have not been granted the days to raise you as I will with your brother.

John, I know that I will see you when you and your father come for me on my last day on Earth. But I will quietly petition our Lord that I will be gifted just on day with you before my days are done.

Forever Your Loving Mother,

Evelyn Jeanne Freer

---

I set down the leather-bound journal. *Have I read this letter before? How is it that this has escaped me for so many years? I am an amnesiac . . . Has this all been repressed or has it been kept from me somehow.*

“Wake.”

Chapter 7

---

“What do we say to the Lord of Death? ‘Not today.’ “

— George R.R. Martin

Overlook.

The backseat of the black SUV.

“My apologies for the sudden restoration of what was taken long ago and kept from you until this day.”

“So this is true? This is really happening? You are—” I look over at the seat next to me. My backseat companion still sleeps, or maybe not. And I recall a Shakespeare play, *To die, to sleep—To sleep—perchance to dream. Ay, there’s the rub! For in that sleep of death what dreams may come.*

“This is my brother. John? John Freedman is my brother. My brother Ransom! My brother that . . .”

“Seth, I cannot begin to comprehend what a change these realizations must be to the world you have wrought in your mind over these many decades. But I assure you that the high places which are torn down and leveled will only serve to build a new foundation which shall prove to never fade away, even once time itself ceases.”

“What are you saying? I don’t understand your cryptic, vague assurances. Just speak plainly. Who am I?”

He casually turns to the Imp in the driver’s seat, “I will never understand the mind of man. How their flesh overrides every other . . .”

“Who am I?” I scream.

His red molten eyes turn and meet mine, “I am Death.” His eyes fade to gray again, and the calm returns to what I can only refer to as my spirit. “I am your father. You are my son.”

“How? How is this possible?”

“Possible? Child, you are too finite to contemplate what is possible. I believe it would be best to hear it from a familiar though.”

I hear the handle to my door. As the door opens the bright sunlight floods in blinding me. From squinting eyes a face is recognized.

“Seth.”

“Mom? How? You died.”

“Yes Baby, I did. It’s a nice day. The sun is out. Why don’t we take a little walk and I’ll try to clear up some things for you.”

I climb out of the SUV, setting my feet on the gravel covered pavement. My mother takes my hand. Her hand is surprisingly warm and soft for a dead woman. She wears a white sundress and her hair shows no gray. I try to place her age, as she seems younger than the last time I saw her. She looks to be in her mid-twenties, but ageless is a more fitting descriptor.

We walk without speaking over to the stone barrier wall which keeps the tourists from falling over the edge. She sits and I do the same.

“Baby, I know this is crazy. I know this must be confusing.”

“It is utterly surreal.”

“Yeah, I remember when your father first revealed his true identity to me. I was skeptical, but it didn’t take long before everything was clearly confirmed.”

“He is Death . . .”

“Well, yes. He is the Angel of Death. But Mortimer is—”

“Mortimer?”

“Oh, yes, that’s what I have called him. It would have been strange to refer to him as Death all the time, ‘Death, dinner’s ready.’” Then she laughed with her simple innocent laugh.

I just looked at her. I missed that laugh. I missed my mom. And I missed my dad.

“What about Dad? Dad . . . um, Alden Foster”

“Alden was a good man. He raised you well. He took care of me when Mort couldn’t stay with us.”

“Did Dad know?”

“About Mort? Oh no, of course not. Mort is the one who found Alden though. He thought Alden would be a good fit for us. I went back to school and Mort had kind of arranged for Alden and I to get to know each other. And with Alden being sent here and there with the Airforce, he really didn’t suspect the few weeks difference in the time I said we conceived.”

“Mom . . .”

“It’s okay Baby, we did what we had to do. And Mort made sure we would have a nice life. And when it would end, it would be even better.”

“So, my father really is the Angel of Death? How is that even possible?”

“Do you remember when I used to read to you?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“What do you remember?”

My mind is carried to a memory:

A memory of a big, old book, laying in my mother’s lap. She flips through the pages and stops at an underlined passage. I look at my mother’s smiling face. She sits in her oversized chair



and reads to me. I see her lips moving. I turn and see words upon the page as her finger slowly traces them.

"And when the angels, the sons of heaven, beheld them, they became enamored of them, saying to each other, Come, let us select for ourselves wives from the progeny of men, and let us beget children." — 1 Enoch 7:2

"What am I, Momma?" She flips through the same book and comes to rest near the beginning of the book, and reads:

"The Nephilim were on the earth in those days, and also afterward, when the sons of God came in to the daughters of man and they bore children to them. These were the mighty men who were of old, the men of renown." — Genesis 6:4

"What does that mean for us, Momma?" She turns the pages. She turns almost to the end of that now familiar volume, and reads:

"The angels too, who did not keep to their own domain but deserted their proper dwelling, he has kept in eternal chains, in gloom, for the judgment of the great day. Likewise, Sodom and Gomorrah, and the surrounding towns, which, in the same manner as they, indulged in sexual promiscuity and practiced unnatural vice, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire." — Jude 6

"I do remember you reading those passages. I remember thinking I was something special, like a—superhero. That I would be a mighty man, a man of—renown."

"You are special, Seth."

"But those judgements. Those horrible images of eternal chains, in gloom . . . punishment of eternal fire. Is that what we have to look forward to?"

"Seth. You are different. Your Father is different. He is not a fallen angel. He serves the living God. He was rewarded with offspring. His own seed."

"My brother, Ransom. And I knew him. I knew him in college. But I knew him as John Freedman."

“Well, yes. Your brother, but also you. We thought we would be given one child, but the Lord granted twins, abundantly providing far more than all that we could ask or think, according to his goodness.”

“Why? To what purpose is all of this? Why am I here now? Why are you—?” I hear his voice behind me.

“Alden was chosen because he was a writer. He raised you to be the same. You will write my story.”

I turn and see my father. He is Death. “Your story?”

All goes black.

Chapter 8

---

I wake.

This time to the sound of rain, but something is palpably different this time. Long finger strikes of lightning ignite a hospital room in bursts of vision. The rumbling reports overhead are nearly verbal. In the bluish afterglow, the silhouette in the bed beside mine alongside me converts to a horizon's curvature. I contrariwise sit up straight to take pleasure in the weather. I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror with each flash of enlightenment. All of the drumming drizzle works its mysterious enchantment to calm my core. A flash of light is followed by a low, rolling conversing of clouds in which I overhear a whisper. My attention is grasped, and I await another flicker.

It is a few minutes later, when the room is illuminated for a moment to show a dim form at the foot of the bed. Darkness again covers the room. Unseeing, I peer into the direction of the figure at the foot of the bed.

“Dad?”

I wait.

Accompanying a peal of thunder, I hear a whispered, “Who will go for me?”

This was not my father.

After a few moments, there is another flash of brightness, but no figure is to be found. I wait for a moment, but although the storm continues, neither the apparition nor the voice returns.

I throw the covers to the side and step to the floor.

Abruptly, I am alone and elsewhere. The cloaked heavens overhead part to reveal the celestial sparks and orbiting spheres.

Yet alone, I move forward through this inhospitable landscape of folded and molded maps of yesteryear in search of a life less partial in realistic regards to that of revelation. The rewards for serving the sovereign outside the sensory with my wanderings are undetected to the corporal optics of wintry ice, but the softened heart of flesh is plainly truer than the hardened mountains on the rise beneath my unfettered feet.

I rise and rise scrutinizing the journey set before me, evaluating the expenditure I shall endure. The direct and constricted way, a less traveled by trail, leads not to the spacious gate of compliant souls but to the searched for, veiled entry set in the airy grazing land of the shepherd himself. This is a voyage of venerable sorrow with which I shall gladly give up a verve I may not maintain, gaining no more than the endless existence which I can by no means misplace.

While walking the walk, watching what has been wrought, I stride the streets of singular substance seeking the purity of suspended peace. I avoid the crevices of limitless depth, disregarding the stumbling road blocks closing off the way and slowly ascend the treacherous terrain vigilant and guarded. Although weary, I press on... until...

I glance back... seeing another pressing hard to match my gait. I bring to a standstill my progression and present myself to him. He approaches me without the least speck of cordial greeting, takes my hand as gently as a father to a child, and leads me quickly on further in the direction which I was before now headed.

When my wonder passes, I hear the soft, still voice of a form that goes by us heading quickly the opposite way. The figure says, "Where are you?" and is immediately gone.

I look around and much is different. The landscape is smoothly sloped downhill without a stone to stumble upon. The barely visible path is now a twisting thoroughfare wide and easy. Many are now accompanying us on the road: some are skipping as a child does on a warm summer morning, some are running past us headlong seemingly without control, others sprint forward with their eyes closed tightly, others simply walk forward at a snail's pace catatonic and expressionless, still others are reclining in the lush grass on the side of this meandering highway conversing with each other about a great many things mundane, and furthermore, I see a commonplace crowd gathered around one particular man who sits positioned in the center of this easy chaos with his legs crossed and his motionless mouth mumbling another language.

I become greatly startled, opening my eyes to these images, and try to tear free of my companion's grip. With a wilful wincing my hand is freed of the robust gripe.

He stands staring at me for a moment. He is wholly unreadable. Then with a voice that soothes my aching ears he says, "I was only trying to help."

I know not how to reply to this. His eyes confirm the hurt I had a moment ago caused. But as I begin to see deeper into his eyes, he promptly turns and melts into the flow of humanity moving along down the road.

Again, I look around.

I position myself in opposition to the onslaught of people and begin to move in the direction from whence I came. I am bumped, pushed out of the way, and knocked down. I struggle to my feet and surge forward again, only to find myself flat on my back gazing up at the mass of bodies streaming above me. Beyond them, I catch a glimpse of blue sky and a hint of sunlight.

I am immediately invigorated and spring to my feet. I lurch forward dodging bodies as hands grab hold of my garments. I rip myself free for a moment, but there are too many, and I drift along with the others in a direction unseen by my eyes. I falter in my struggle momentarily, and the flow grows faster as I rise to the surface. I am on top of a filthy, black river now. I look again to the sky, but cloud cover has rolled in, and I see no sunlight. A storm... it has become dark, flashes of lightning begin to strike down, and peals of thunder rule the night air. Fear grips me as the substantial blackness envelops me causing my joints to throb in horrendous pain.

Over the rushing of what sounds like water, I hear a whisper of a soft, still voice saying, "Are you in despair?"

I call out, crying, "Help me!"

Suddenly, I fall to the ground. The footsteps about me begin to dissipate, and what was the blackness of night lifts like a fog. I squint, trying to guard my eyes from the brightness presently chasing away the shadows. Searching my surroundings, I see no one.

"Where are you?"

"I am here."

"Where...? I don't see you."

"Do you need to see me to know that I am near?"

"No... But..., who are you?"

"I am... Is that not adequate?"

"Why did you help me?"

This time no answer comes from the voice. *Who was this? Why did he help me? It makes no difference. He saved me... that is what matters.*

I stand alone now at a great crossroads in the heart of nowhere. Looking across the even landscape, I see that each road seems to lead to a vacant horizon in all directions.

“Where do I go now?” I ask into the expanse ahead of me, partially expecting an answer from an ethereal voice. But again, no reply is given. In its place, the brief sound of a rushing wind breaks the stillness of the countryside. I turn in its direction, and where there was once a vast expanse of nothing is now a grand tree.

The tree is no taller than I, but each and every one of its branches is thriving with produce, hanging low and reaching near to the ground. A deep shade is caused by this youthful plant. The ground beneath its bountiful branches is darkened to the extent that the earth itself can no longer be seen under the tree. As I approach, I see the curious vegetation with which the tree is populated. Each individual leaf, each succulent orb making an exhibition of a different color, dimension, and shape; all entirely unlike any foodstuff I have ever set eyes on previously.

“Where has this provision come from?” I ask myself. As soon as the thought trails off, an echo follows whispering into my mind the word – *forbidden*.

Suddenly, a hunger I had not noticed before sharply rises in my center. *Forbidden...* I am doubled over as the pang takes over my stomach. *Forbidden...* As I kneel to assuage the intense twinge, I notice the dry soil at my feet begin to moisten. My saliva pools at my feet. *Forbidden...* I paw at my maw smearing the spittle, but the pouring does not cease. *Forbidden...* The levee has broken; there is no stopping the gush. *Forbidden...* My glands throb and heave in lust as the reserves are drained of each drop of sap. *Forbidden... Forbidden... Forbidden...* I look up at the nearest branch and reach out for a piece of fruit. Suddenly, the chiming echo halts.

A sign appears in my periphery, and I pause my previous purposes to turn away from the tree. My gaze settles upon a small wooden rectangle, hung by nails on a post set in the ground. It

reads, “Take. This is broken for you.” I readily move closer. For all intents and purposes forgetting myself. Footfall lighter as I ascend a slight hill. The hillside expands in girth but its height remains unchanged. My feet begin to fade away, transparent against the ever growing green. Once near the signage I am dwarfed by its stature. I am overwhelmed by a sense of some luminous presence, and a shadow begins to appear on the signpost. It is my shadow cast forward by a light source behind me. I feel the welcoming warmth against my back.

The shadow’s arms rise slowly and I feel the tension in my own appendages. Without perceived cause, they are lighter than life and begin their mutual levitating. My arms naturally rise as smoke from a fire. I watch the shadow arms stretch along the width of the sign before me.

I feel a slight twinge of pain in my hands. First the left, then the right. Something trickles from my hands, but I am fixed on the red that appears at the edges of the sign. The sign’s letters fade slightly, arrange themselves, and then reappear fixed and vivid; this time they form the words—SINE NOMINE.



PART 3

“A good novel tells us the truth about its hero;  
but a bad novel tells us the truth about its author.”

— G.K. Chesterton

MANUSCRIPT DRAFT:

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“Step forward.”

Under a black cloak, feet obey the command before the spoken word is even processed.

His feet move and he follows.

He has always been characterized by simple, immediate obedience and unwavering service. The slightest directive performed without quaver, question, or murmur.

His identity is that of singular focus and patient determination. Nothing deters him from following through. He accomplishes whatever is commanded of him. He is loyal to only one, the one who gives the commands.

That is not to say that the others are not loyal, but even among his peers his selflessness has been legendary. The others work in concert with each other, rarely are they left without a companion to accomplish their duties, but he works alone. Never has he been given a task that involved or required relying on another.

He, above all of his kind, was the most feared. This was rightfully so, as those in his company were susceptible to the role given him. All but one of course. The one who gave him his role. The one to whom his loyalty is owed.

He has gone by many names, but he has never taken on a moniker of his own making. All names have been given to him. Each has been earned. He has been called the Angel of Death by most. On the day of Israel's deliverance he was referred to as the Destroyer. He is Azrael to Ishmael's descendants. Dickensian literature hailed him as the Spirit of Christmas Yet to Come. Film gave him a reputation as the bald scythe wielding Grim Reaper. The Greeks told tales of Thanatos. Mexican lore exposed his feminine side in La Muerte, and the Norsemen's version did the same but called her Hel. All names for the same person ... Many names, as well as a host of others known and unknown. Mom calls him Mort, and I just call him Dad.

There was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Dad came also among them. Outside the throne room they all gathered and waited to be summoned.

“Father of Lies.”

“I hate when He calls me that.”

The great door opened, Lucifer stepped through, and the door was shut.

Dad says that small talk among angels is not very interesting, so I'll spare you what was discussed in line. Besides, Dad only listens; he takes these meetings deathly serious. Once I

asked about the others, and he said that sharing the others' comments and remarks would be hearsay, so he would refrain, and that it should suffice to say that the others long to look into things that only humanity can understand anyway.

No one heard the conversation between Satan and the LORD inside the throne room, but Dad said that the Holy Spirit inspired someone (again, it is not for him to say whom) to record for humanity's benefit what occurred. It can be read about in the Scriptures, more specifically in the Book of Job... There is the customary preface to lead into the account, "There was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD," and then a recounting of that day's conversation ... I say "day," but, as I write this, Dad wants me to specify that the term "day" or even "time" is a bit different when you are in the presence of the Eternal. He says we really wouldn't understand. Anyway—

And the LORD said unto Satan, "Whence comest thou?"

Then Satan answered the LORD, and said, "From going to and fro in the earth, and from walking up and down in it."

You can read the rest.

Dad says, you probably won't. So, just real quick: basically, at a previous meeting, the LORD asked Satan if he had considered His servant Job. Then Satan was granted permission to do whatever he wanted to Job, but he was not allowed to touch Job's flesh. Then during this particular meeting, Satan asks, and is allowed to afflict Job's flesh, but with one caveat: And the LORD said to Satan, "Behold, he is in your hand; only spare his life." So, basically Dad didn't have to get involved.

Well, he says, "Not yet."

So, while this is happening in the throne room of the Most High God, Dad is next in line.

I'll give you the lead in again: There was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD. Gabriel, Michael the Archangel, and the Angel of Death came also among them.

The great door opened. Satan walked out, and he was gone.

With the great door opened, Dad stepped through, and the door was shut again.

I need to be clear at this point. What comes next has never been inscripturated, and it never will be. This account is by no means inspired by the Holy Spirit.

“Step forward.”

And the LORD said unto Death, “Whence comest thou?”

Then Death answered the LORD, and said, “From going to and fro in the earth, and from walking up and down in it.”

And the LORD said unto Death, “You will take the life of Jesus, who is called Christ.”

Since the day of his creation, the Angel of Death had never spoken to the Most High God. Only a nod was ever needed in response to a command. Most believe Death is unable to speak, but at this decree the words uttered were, “Lord, I know not how to do this thing.”

He was told to do the unthinkable... the impossible. Kill God.

PART 4

"If you want to be like Jesus, remember, He had a wilderness, a Gethsemane, and a Judas."

- Leonard Ravenhill