

Singular

a novel-in-progress

by

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SINGULAR

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We, the thesis committee for the above candidate for the Master
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Jeffery Battersby-Singular

Remember how it all began

The apple

And the fall of man

-Natalie Merchant, *Thick As Thieves*

PART 1: Genesis

Shadrack began a struggle that was to last for twelve days, a struggle to order and focus experience. It had to do with making a place for fear as a way of controlling it. —Toni Morrison, Sula

The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom. —Proverbs 9:10

How do you bring order to the world?

To this question I have an irrefutable answer. An unwavering faith. An assurance unmovable and firm, founded in the truth, settled in my bones, embedded in the color of my skin:

You lock your enemies down. Keep them in check. Press your boot down hard against their necks so they can't rise up again.

There is a time too soon for history to be told, but now that time has come, and it is your time to hear my story told. To revel in the promise of my birth so you may bring forth the world that is to come.

This is my true and final testament. It is the revelation of my beginnings, the herald of my end, a promise for the future.

I am the son of no man and no man holds sway over me. I am the keeper of my own word. The beginning and the end.

Heed all that I say. Partake of it, for in it you will find knowledge and peace. Wisdom, and the strength to carry on.

I am the first, but I will not be the last. I am the beginning but will not be the end. Take hold of these words and you will reveal me to the world, and in this my work will continue.

Hear now, all you with ears to hear:

My name was Lenny Sargent...

Chapter 1

"G'thefuckoverhere boy."

His voice. The sound of it. The depth and length and breadth of it. Thundered through the house, shaking everything in it. It rattled the cupboards. Jangled change in the change jar. Teacups chirped in the cabinets. It shattered whatever sense of quiet lived in Lenny's head.

The man... was not his father.

His father had long been gone. There was no memory of him that Lenny could hold on to. It was questionable whether he'd ever been there at all. This wasn't a question his mother was willing to answer, though Lenny had asked her about his father many times. The new man was the only one who filled his memory. Thundering. Always.

It wasn't because he drank.

That would have been a logical explanation. You drink. You yell. You fall asleep. But this man didn't. Any longer.

"Fortitude and strength," had freed him from that bond. The power to overcome his weaknesses. "The measure of a man," he'd said. "The measure of a man is how well he contends with the appetites that chain him down."

So maybe this was where the anger lived. The empty place

where the alcohol used to be. Dark and roiling. A fissure. Deep and hot and full of rage. The void from which the anger rose.

“Got-tammit boy! You come here when I call!”

Lenny stood stock-still, unable to move, unwilling to breathe, afraid that any sound at all might give him up.

He wasn't a child any longer—fourteen going on fifteen—but he wasn't yet a man. His body growing long and lanky. His feet sometimes too large for him to know quite how to pick them up and put them down. But even in the mirror, now, he noticed the changes coming over him. Not just his height, but the thin wisp of mustache now appearing on his lip, a trace of hair growing in his armpits, a new broadness to his shoulders. A new length to his fingers and subtle definition to his arms and legs. A man-in-the-making without the realization, yet, to see the change his new-found form might bring.

So he stood there in the living room and held his breath, scanning it for some place of safe retreat.

The kitchen had once been the safest place. The man, he rarely wandered there. The cupboard beneath the sink, which grew tighter as he grew, was once quiet and dark and free of fear. A refuge Lenny loved, where he could sit, close his eyes, and conjure better things. But that was, now, too far away and he had

grown far too large to fit there any more, even with his knees pressed hard against his chest. And if he tried to venture there the man would hear his feet creeping across the floor, the boards too old and aching, would creak and snitch and scream aloud, revealing where he was. So he looked for some other place; some refuge within the confines of the room where he stood.

He turned and gently moved his feet, the rug beneath them disinclined to squeal. A silent friend where, now, he needed one most. He turned again and looked around the room to see if he was safe and then to scan it for a hiding place.

The loveseat was no safe retreat. He'd learned that long ago. Like a child who hides his face behind his hands pretending that he can't be seen because he can't see you, Lenny had once climbed beneath, burying his face in the crook of his elbow and breathing in the warmth of his own breath. The man discovered him there, his arm reaching down to grab him by the foot and fling him across the room.

He'd long since outgrown the cabinet where the blankets lived, too large to close the door behind him, now. The corner where the TV stood, too porous. Too many holes. Too many ways the man could see him there. He turned again and saw the couch, pressed against the wall beneath the window. There was just

enough space for him to slip behind. To sit quiet and remain unseen.

He turned to move to safety a breath too late, the flash of the man appearing in his vision just before the world went black.

His mother was beautiful, once.

Dark hair. Deep brown eyes. Skin so lightly tanned and smooth you were tempted to reach out and touch her to see if she was real.

There was something else there, too. Something deeper and far less ephemeral than what the surface showed. It flashed through and captured you the moment she looked your way. So deep and pure that even photographs revealed its glow. That look was mostly missing now. Buried far beneath so many years of pain and hurt. Lenny had only ever seen it in the photographs, one of which he kept hidden in a wallet, where the man would never find it.

As a young girl that beauty tortured her, as beauty often does. It began with the prodding of old women who'd pinch her cheeks and touch her hair. She never liked it. The touching. The invasion. The space that wasn't hers. The hands that weren't her own reaching to a space that was her own, but that she could not

control.

The photograph he had was one from high school. Graduation, he thought. Her face, exuberant. Her hair so long and dark and full. Her arms wrapped around the neck of a friend, her face with a smile so deep and pure it warmed him as he looked at it. He wondered how you lost that, when you did, and where you had to go to get it back. He wondered whether he'd have the chance to see that look again.

High school hadn't been good to her. And neither had the years beyond. The hands that touched her never stopped, though it was no longer old women remarking at her looks. She would have taken that. Soaked it in. The innocent pinch of a cheek. Fingers run through her long dark hair. Each woman reaching out to see if her youth and beauty might rub off on them. That she'd take again, any time. This? This touch was different. The space between her skin and herself still not her own. Old men. Young men. Boys. An accidental brush against her breast. Pressed in too close while standing on a subway or in a line, riding on an elevator or sitting on a bus. Always wondering where her public self ended and her true self began. Never having a space to call her own.

Eventually she gave in. Let the hands go where they would.

Leaned into the want. Let the urgency take hold. Hopeful it was real, but mostly pretending present desire was the same as being loved.

This was where Lenny's mother and his father met. In that in-between, when she was lost within that wondering. Uncertain whether the hot breath and whispered promises were about her or something less. The answer became clear within a month. No period. No promise kept. Gone long before the quickening, before she had a chance to ask to take his name. His mother, alone, left to carry the weight of what would come.

And his wasn't a name that Lenny ever knew, although he wanted to. "It's not for you to worry about," she said. "We're all we'll ever need." A lie. She still felt him as a loss. More deeply than any other she had known. And Lenny wasn't all that she would ever need. She needed more and the more she needed the less she got, and into that emptiness the man arrived. The man who wasn't Lenny's father. The man who married her. The man who turned the daylight black and left Lenny lying on the floor.

She'd been out grocery shopping, arriving home to find the door ajar. A crack, but still, as far as she could tell, an open door with no one home.

The open door left her uneasy. She put her groceries down on

the porch then carefully pushed her way through door.

“Hello?”

Silence.

“Hello, I’m home.”

Still nothing, so she ventured further in.

The TV played in the room beyond the hall, light from the screen dancing on the wall. She called the man’s name, but he did not respond, and still no sound save for an advertisement for some kind of cleaning solution. “...the miracle spot remover. Call now and receive a bonus refill and this all-purpose cleaning chamois for free, dial...” She ignored the sound and stepped into the kitchen.

Clean.

A surprise. Had she cleaned before she left? She couldn’t remember. She must have, because the man usually left this room to her. Her one domain. Her one free room within the house. The only one that she could call her own. But there were no dishes in the sink. No pots left for her to scrub sitting on the stove. And then, the dishwasher running, midway through a cycle.

She walked to the corner of the kitchen where the basement door was and turned the knob.

Locked.

As it usually was. This was the man’s domain. A place where

she and Lenny weren't allowed to go. He was the one who held the key. He locked the door from the inside while he worked. The light switch was illuminated, a small red orb above the switch that, when the basement light was on, burned bright red warn her when he was down below. She'd shut it off once, accidentally, when he was working down below. He stormed upstairs and threw her to the ground. She'd learned her lesson then and had taught Lenny just the same. The warning light was dark, which meant, perhaps, he wasn't home.

She moved quietly toward his office where the TV now played some afternoon gameshow. She could see it there beyond his chair. Some celebrity asking questions, with a kind of vague, but filthy innuendo, of a blonde woman with a too-tight top sitting directly across from him. She tiptoed in and looked over the top of his chair. No balding head. No sleeping giant that she should not wake. She exhaled, relieved that the man might not be there. Then, the sound of a bird singing from the living room, strange and faint and not a bird she recognized.

She walked toward the living room and found him lying there. Lenny in a pool of blood, his left eye swollen and black. His nose crooked and bent to the left, a band of snot and blood trailing to a pool on the rug below his broken face. And the

chirping bird, stopping, starting, and stopping again with every breath he took.

She froze and looked around the room, feet in place so as not to make a sound. Uncertain, now, whether the man might be upstairs, waiting. Wondering whether she should attend to Lenny or check to see if she was safe.

One deep breath, then she stalked into the kitchen, careful not to make a sound. She pulled an ice tray from the freezer, cracked the cubes into the sink, then pulled a cloth rag from a drawer below the silverware. She soaked it in cold water, squeezed it dry, then wrapped the cloth around a handful of ice.

She wondered still if she should check upstairs. She wondered whether the open door was a trick to make her think no one was home; that he'd hurt Lenny then run out the door. She knew there could still be danger there, but she pushed down the fear and went back to Lenny lying on the floor.

His eyes were closed, some blood now drying on his cheek. She kissed his forehead and gently pressed the damp ice-cloth against his cheek and eye. Lenny moaned and turned away.

"It's okay, baby boy, Momma's here."

His nose was clearly broken. His cheekbone bruised, where the man's fists had landed blows. More than one, she thought. A

quick right, then a left. One to the eye and cheek the other to his nose as he was falling to the ground. She knew that sequence all too well. The flash of anger, the pain, the falling to the floor. Apologizing for some line she had no idea she had crossed. The bruise would fade, the swelling recede, the pain would go away, but time would never heal the wound inside.

She gently rubbed the blood off Lenny's cheek then moved the cloth to cool another place. He moaned again, a flutter in his eyes this time. Brown and deep and now as sad as hers.

Lenny jerked away from the cloth, sat straight up and coughed up a clot of blood that landed on the floor.

"I'm sorry, Momma. I'll clean it up."

She pulled his face to her chest and he recoiled in pain.

"Ow! Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow, it hurts so much."

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you," Tears welling up in the corners of her eyes. "I would never hurt you. Never on purpose."

"It's okay, Momma. I know."

She looked at Lenny. A little boy still, but trying hard to grow to be a man.

The man was nowhere to be found. But she was certain he'd

return and there was no telling what kind of mood he would be in. She cleaned the floor while Lenny showered. She'd have to take him to the hospital, she thought. To fix the nose, at least. She conjured some excuse. A football game. A pickup soccer game. He was the goalie and another boy had crashed the goal. And then, another plan. How to escape. How to leave this house, this place, this man.

The thought of leaving saddened her, at least in the moment. Why? Why did she feel connected to a man she didn't love. A man who didn't love her and whose only interest was the same as every other man she'd ever known.

She knew they couldn't leave immediately. She'd need to think it through. Time. Time was what she needed. Time and patience and the guts to let the man be who he was for as long as she could stand it. Long enough to formulate a plan and then escape. And money. She would need money too, which the man held on to more tightly than any other thing he owned.

She had a little of her own. A small allowance that he gave her. Enough to buy groceries and household needs. She could hold a little back from that, but she would need more. A job, perhaps. It would have to be small. Invisible to the man. A place that she could go while the man was at work and Lenny was at school. And a

bank account. Of her own and only in her name. She'd work those details out and then, with a few dollars in her pocket, she and Lenny would make their break.

Lenny looked better after his shower. The blood cleaned up, his hair washed, and, she thought, a little of the light back in his eyes.

His nose was not as bad as it looked before he'd cleaned up. The blood made it look far worse than it actually was.

"I'm sorry."

He looked at her and nodded his assent, a sad smile moving across his face.

"It's not your fault. You don't need to apologize. He called me. I didn't listen. I was afraid, but I should have come to him when he called. I know the rules. I know what he expects."

"You know that's not really true. It feels like it, but it isn't. You shouldn't have to put up with that."

"You do."

"It's not the same for me as it is for you."

A lie she knew, by the look on his face, he could see right through.

"He's going to be home soon. I need to get dinner started."

She saw his eyes darken as he turned to leave and wished

that she could take it back. She turned, instead, to the refrigerator, pulled open the door, and stared into the emptiness.

Chapter 2

The steeple of the church rose high into the morning sky, the tip of it scratching at the surface of the clouds but never finding its way through. The front of the building, erected more than 100 years before, looked just like it had the day it was built. A brick façade interlaced with large blocks of granite that gave it both an ancient and early 20th century feel. The building elicited a sense of connection, to the earth, the sky above, and to the people inside the building.

There had been additions. Several, in fact, over many years, none of which conformed to the style of the original. Each new wing was expensive, but more cheaply built than the last and none as sturdy, welcoming, or connected as what had come before.

First, a collection of classrooms known as the “Sunday School Wing” with 10 doors facing a concrete walkway, covered by a portico to keep you from the weather when walking from the Sunday School Wing to the church. By day the wing acted as classrooms for the Christian school sponsored by the church. On weekends it contained Sunday School classes: adults and teens only in the hours before the main service, children through 6th grade during the service itself. A system designed to keep those too young to stand the length of the worship service from

disrupting the mission at hand.

Beyond the classrooms, a gym. A steel building, with a steel roof, beige siding, and large roll-up doors at each end, that you could raise to get large equipment in. It was the latest addition and looked more like an airplane hangar than a church building. Disconnected from the whole, its only link to the main buildings of the church was the long, open portico that covered the Sunday school walkway.

There had once been a large bell in the great, towering spire of the main building, but it now stood ensconced in a stone memorial standing in front of the building. It was often set to ringing by children throwing rocks, the sound so loud and sonorous that it rang forth the past into the present. Those children's parents, at the sound of the bell, chased them off, reminding them with a swat to the back of their pants that church was meant for somber, prayerful, introspection. The bell in the spire had been replaced by a trinity of speakers that blasted off-key renditions of various hymns depending on the season and the hour of the day. The errant chimes set off by the children always sounded truer than the ringing from the spire.

Theodore 'Teddy' Millson was the pastor of the church. A dour man whose smile, when one crossed his face, never reached

his eyes. His office, which was in the best apportioned of one of the newer additions, overlooked the original foyer and sanctuary of the church. From the below you could see books in shelves stacked nearly to the ceiling. Many were written by Teddy's contemporaries from seminary, signed copies sent to him with notes inside that he tossed in the garbage without reading. Nothing on the shelves bore Teddy's name. Yet.

The room was lit by three large florescent lights in the ceiling of Teddy's office. These often washed a harsh light well into the early morning hours onto the older brick and stone below. One expected that Teddy was spending hours poring over Scripture to prepare for an upcoming sermon, but that expectation would rarely have been true. Teddy was the chief architect of the new portions of church, some of which he had built with his own hands, but most of it by designing and overseeing the work and using his considerable ability in the pulpit to encourage his parishioners to "give what they could to expand the Kingdom of God." Ten-percent of their income, before taxes, at a minimum, but he was often able to prize more from their pockets than most could justifiably afford. If Teddy was studying anything it was a set of blueprints. A plan for the future. A way to grow a kingdom here on earth.

Sean Willingham sat in a different office in an upper corner

of the gym; few windows, one door, no fresh air as the few windows that did shine light into the space were fixed and couldn't be opened. Any air he did have came from the air-conditioning system, which recycled the smell of sweat and exertion from the gymnasium below. His office was awash in the aftermath of his former activities. There was a sofa off to one side, a steel desk, in front of which sat two smaller single-seat sofas, and behind the desk stood an office chair. Each was covered in piles of papers, books, discarded sweatshirts, boxes of church-branded t-shirts, basketballs, baseballs, footballs, and all manner of detritus needed to entice and entertain a high school crowd. The furniture was sturdy, but worn. Clearly a castoff from one of the classrooms, below. From a distance the couches had had a patina of age, but on closer inspection the cushions were pilled and the fabric revealed ancient stains of unknown provenance, long since cleaned, but no less visible.

His desk was littered with open bibles—two different translations and a version in Greek marked up with highlighter and penciled notes in the margins—and other books and pamphlets ranging from the devotional to the mundane. There were photographs of friends, other youth group leaders, and piles of teens taken from a variety of summer camps over a span of years.

There were lecture notes, several half-empty water bottles and coffee cups, some of which, at their very bottoms, bore the remnant sludge of coffee distilled by evaporation. All were evidence of a busy mind, though, when first encountering the space, some found it distracting and difficult to think.

Sean sat in the office chair staring at his desk gently massaging the space between his nose and upper lip with with forefinger and thumb of his left hand. He stared across the room to where his diploma, recently minted from a Bible college in the Pacific Northwest, hung askew on the wall. A small block of wood on his desk read: Sean Willingham—Youth Pastor. This was true, he was a youth pastor. He was newly hired, though, technically, he'd worked as a youth pastor's assistant for several years while he was still in school.

He had a job here and was grateful for it, but it wasn't what he'd hoped for. He often felt at odds with Pastor Teddy, who seemed more interested in creating buildings than building disciples. While he didn't like what Teddy was doing, Sean wasn't yet certain what it was that he should be doing either. He'd completed college, a step he'd felt compelled to take. Somehow that seemed to be where God had led him, but it was unclear, other than the obvious step of taking the first pastoring job he

was offered, what his future path was or where it would lead now. If anyone asked him, which they often did, he was certain that God would reveal his plan if he spent enough time on his knees. Always providing the expected answer to the expected question. This was what qualified as smalltalk at church socials and prayer meetings, but in that publicly conveyed certainty lay a difficult conundrum: actually hearing the voice of God. Odd, indeed, for a pastor, but not unusual for Sean. It was, he thought, the thing that made him most like the people he wanted to serve, which was a faith often supported by what he knew was right rather than what felt right.

He sat at his desk, thumbing one of the Bibles, the pages of which were well-worn and marked with notes he'd taken over the years. He took the book in his hands, then turned and knelt. He buried his face in the chair behind his desk and waited. It was silent. Quiet. And he was unsure of what to ask for, so he just tried to listen to see if he could hear something beyond the quietness of his own mind.

This had been a problem of late. No voice from above. No clear guidance on what to do next. He had a job and a job description. He understood the mechanics of what he was supposed to do; he'd taken classes, he knew what it was that he should do,

he was paralyzed without some clear direction, so he did nothing. And here he was again, kneeling in silence without a word to say or a through about what he should do: faith, not feelings.

He remembered once, when he'd been younger, a test he'd given to himself. He was walk down a city street trying to sense which turn God wanted him to take next. He paused at street corners listening and trying to cultivate the ability to sense that *still, small voice*. It was difficult, this listening. It wasn't always obvious and it usually always right. It had felt more like a guessing game based on some intangible internal feeling. At one point he'd walked down an alley to what turned out to be a dead-end. He stood there, staring at the back end of a brick building surrounded by industrial garbage containers filled to overflowing with the plate-clearings and kitchen garbage from the restaurant on the other side of the brick wall.

He'd stood there for a bit, taking in the smell of garbage: Fish heads and chicken guts, fat trimmings, cast-off vegetable cuttings, and bones. So many bones. He wondered for a moment whether anyone came here to find something to eat, then tried the door, which he found locked. He turned and began walking back out of the alley when he thought he felt his conscience or something like it calling him back again. So he returned, "repented" in his

mind at the time, and stood at the end of the alley for half-an-hour, trying to discover what it was that God had sent him there to find. He told himself the point was just to listen and follow, it was “an exercise in humility,” but he never did figure out what it was he was supposed to see, and he still questioned whether this had been the voice of God at all.

So now he willed himself to kneel and pray, to press the God of heaven to give him some answer. Some sign. Some proof his path would not end in regret. “Father,” he said “I only want what you want from me. I only want to understand the path you’ve set me on. I can’t tell if my heart is pure, if my motives are not self serving. Please help me to see how to begin.” He held the Bible to his face and waited for some thought to rise. A scripture verse, some new insight, some gentle tugging at his heart. But, like the alley he’d entered that day, there were no answered questions, just the aching silence and nothing more.

So, he stood and dropped the Bible on his desk, shuffled some papers, then walked to the couch, sat, and steeled himself against the silence.

Chapter 3

Lenny's mother drove to escape. Passed the time in the safety of her car. Pointed it in no particular direction and drove until the anxiety sank below the surface of her thoughts. When she drove time disappeared. Sure, there was a clock in the dashboard, but she paid no attention to the fact it was there.

This was a dangerous game. Her husband was all too aware of the clock. Enslaved others to it. There was no telling what her husband would do if he arrived home to discover she wasn't there. He preferred to be told. To be advised of her every move, lest his anger be raised.

On more than one occasion she'd paid the price for what was, in his words, a lack of communication. "You need to let me know where you are. I worry," he said, which, when they first began dating, felt comforting, thoughtful, and sweet. It was only as time passed that she discovered there was far more to his "worry" than concern for her well-being. It was, instead, an ever-watchful eye that he kept on her. A trap. A panopticon that always seemed to find her and which she rarely escaped.

He called during the middle of the day to see if she was home and she'd once discovered that he'd tracked her using her phone; a feature he enabled "for her safety." There was rarely

room for escape. She'd learned, now, to leave her phone at home and tell him she was napping or had left it in her purse with the volume off.

This was freedom. Small escapes down country roads lined with trees that led to small cemeteries that, often, contained more people than the towns they served. There were stones with dates as old as the country itself, meant to be indelible, but inscribed with names that were now nearly unreadable, standing ground above what remained of people who'd long since been forgotten. When she could she'd wander through the gravestones and imagine who those people were, wonder at what their lives were like and whether they were better off now than they were then.

Today, a new graveyard filled with new gravestones to explore. She'd never seen this cemetery before, which sat on a knoll above a church, nestled in a small valley below. There were newer gravestones here, some with names she recognized. Fresh granite marked new monuments with one so fresh she knew its story well enough to recall. A local woman who'd been in an accident climbing some mountain in the Himalayas.

The woman had made her mark in business, as women rarely seemed to do, then made her mark again by lying in the ground

beneath her feet. Her son was Lenny's age and had no father to care for him. Never had, other than the initial encounter that led to his birth. A similarity between this woman's story and her own. She wondered how anyone who started out with nothing could rise so high that she could die scaling a mountain continents away.

Lenny's mother walked to the edge of the graveyard and looked down at the church below. Its walls of solid stone and brick. Its spire reaching into the evening sky. She wondered what it might be like inside those walls and whether something true lived there. She wondered whether the woman buried behind her chose to spend her time within those walls or whether this was just some final resting place.

The bells of the church chimed the quarter-hour and a fear rose in her chest. She ran toward her car. She had no gauge for how far she was from her house, but her husband would be home soon and he'd ask where she'd been if she wasn't there when he arrived. And what, she wondered, would she do for dinner as it was too late now to cook any kind of meal. She got into her car, started the engine and drove away, leaving in her wake the sound of stones and dirt slapping against the monuments behind her.

Lenny lay on his bed staring at the ceiling when he heard

the door slam. Both doors. The screen door that no longer had a screen, with its empty clank, and the main door to the house itself, the area around its handle stained with years of use and little care. It was unlike his mother to slam the door, though he also knew it was unusual for his mother not to be home before the man who was not his father arrived. It was very much like that man to slam the door. Lenny knew, for now, that it was best to stay in his room.

There were cracks in the ceiling above his head, web-like and spreading from the corners to the center of the room. The dim bulb in the ceiling light gave texture to the cracks. He could see shadows where the plaster broke free from the lath behind it. When the door slammed he saw dust fall from between the severed pieces, then wondered whether that was a figment of his imagination. He closed an eye to get a better view when his door flew open with a bang.

The man sneered, the dim, soft, white light casting shadows on his face.

"Where's your mother?"

She was driving.

Frantic.

Thirty, forty, fifty miles per hour on streets made for

thirty, thirty-five, max.

She looked at the dashboard clock, which she knew ran fast. Ten after five. He left work at four thirty. Even with traffic there was no way he wouldn't already be home.

She pressed her foot more firmly on the gas, shot through a light that was more red than yellow.

She knew what he'd do to her, that didn't require much in the way of imagination.

A slap.

A push.

Maybe a black eye.

It was a script he'd already written, she just had to play her part.

Contrite and solemn. Swear to never do it again.

"Where were you?" he'd ask.

"Shopping, and then I drove around. Just for a bit. I'm sorry, I lost track of time." Although she couldn't say shopping today. There were no groceries for her to bring in. No bags to carry through the door. He'd see that ploy and strike her once again.

Another turn while wondering what she could make for dinner. She'd pulled ground beef from the freezer. Were there enough

vegetables and rice to satisfy his need? She couldn't remember. She tried to inventory the fridge, as she turned left onto her street and down the final stretch toward home. A street, tree-lined and beautiful. A front that hid what she knew stood behind her door.

She could see it there, his car, even from several blocks away. The only red car on the street, parked against the curb.

She tried to fix the story in her head. Not the grocery store, but something she had to return.

A blouse.

Some shoes?

A skirt?

She couldn't decide which.

She had to be careful not to raise more questions than she answered.

"Who were you with? What's his name? Hotel or his house? Let me smell your collar. Tell me who you fuck when I'm away."

She pulled into the driveway and could see the light from Lenny's room. She wondered if the man was there asking Lenny where she was.

She parked the car and looked at herself in the rearview mirror. Checked her lipstick, even though she knew that was not

a tool she could use. She tried to seal the fear behind her eyes. Push the terror down and hope he would not see it.

She opened the car door, stepped out, and straightened her dress, then walked until she reached the broken door.

She paused, then pressed the latch to let herself in.

"I'm home!" she said.

"I'll start dinner now. So sorry I'm late!"

First, silence, then the sound of footsteps in the hall upstairs.

Slow.

Deliberate.

Then a thumping down the stairs.

She closed her eyes and waited for him to appear at the entry to the kitchen.

She opened her eyes and he was there.

"Dinner won't be long. I had to run to the store and lost track of time."

He did not respond.

"I had a blouse to return. The one I bought a few weeks back. The purple one with yellow flowers? You remember it don't you? I decided I didn't need it, really, and thought it might be better to return it and save a few dollars."

She made a mental note to pull it from the closet and hide

it in a drawer.

She turned to open the refrigerator door, knelt down, looked in and took a breath.

No anger flared.

No flying fists.

She scanned the fridge to see what she could grab for dinner, when the door slammed hard against her head. A bottle of milk fell over and trickled down her face.

"Where were you?"

He held her there for a few moments, pinched between the shelving and the door.

Her world was black as night and filled with stars when he released her and let her topple to the floor.

"Where the fuck were you?"

"The store. To return a blouse."

She reached to touch her face when he slammed the door again.

She flinched, the sound of bottles crashing on the inside of the box. She didn't want to cry, so she pressed her fingers against the corner of her eye. She wiped and felt the wetness, thick and warm. It was not tears, but blood mixed with milk running from the corner of her eye, toward the corner of her lips.

"What color are his eyes?"

"What?"

"His eyes. Doesn't he look at you when he fucks you? Or does he take you from behind so you can't see him."

"I wasn't with anyone. I was just returning something."

He wiped the countertop clean with his hand. Three cookbooks, a container of flour and another of sugar shattered and scattered on the floor.

"Don't fucking lie."

He grabbed her by the collar and lifted her until he could see her face. She was now standing on her tiptoes, feet barely touching the ground.

His breath smelled of stale cigarettes and tuna fish. The stink stinging her eyes so she had to turn away, which she knew he would not like.

She wished then and there that he drank. That he'd drink himself to sleep. Or, better yet, that he'd drive himself into a tree. So much easier than leaving, which she felt she could not do.

"Don't turn your face from me."

"I'm sorry."

She made her eyes fix firmly on his.

"I didn't mean to turn away."

He stared at her for a moment. She could see a flash of

thought running through his mind, but she had no way of knowing what it was that he was thinking.

This was ever the problem.

No certain path.

No guarantees.

No way of knowing which way he'd turn.

"What are you making for dinner?"

Not at all what she expected.

"I have some ground beef. I was thinking of doing something with that. Is that something that you'd like?"

It was an unusual opening. One she shouldn't have walked through.

He lifted her closer to his face and spit in her mouth. She gagged, then tried to squirm away, but he pulled her closer still, then put his lips against her ear.

"I don't want, fucking ground beef. I want you here when I come home. I want to know where you are. I want you to tell me the truth."

Still holding the neck of her shirt he pushed her to arm's length, made a fist, then reached back to strike her when a cast iron pan struck hard against the counter behind him.

"Let her go."

The man's eyes went dark.

He let her feet settle on the ground and turned to find Lenny standing behind him with the pan held high, ready to strike the man where he stood.

The pan looked bigger than Lenny and it trembled there above his head as he held it, but whether the trembling was from the weight of the pan or from fear, the man was unsure. He laughed a little, let go of Lenny's mother, and squared to face the boy.

"You ready for this?"

Lenny looked at his mother.

"It's okay," she said, "put it down. I'm fine."

"Or don't," said the man. "Let's see what you're made of. 'bout time you showed some back."

The edges of the man's lips curled up into a kind of smirk.

"Whaddya say, kid? You ready for me?"

Lenny stood there, the weight of the pan growing greater as he did. He'd had every intention of clocking the man when he'd raised it in the air, but he realized now that what he wanted and what he was capable of were two very different things.

The smirk spread across the man's face into a kind of rictus and he let loose a laugh that began from the bottom of his chest. A laugh so quiet and dark and deep that Lenny felt the shame of his weak will rise up inside of him. His face grew hot and,

though he tried to keep them back, tears began to well in his eyes and he knew the man had seen them. The man fainted toward him and stomped his foot on the ground. When he did, the pan clattered to the floor as Lenny lit out of the kitchen and through the front door, the hollow screen door clapping closed behind him as he fled. Two blocks, three, five, more. Ashamed of the tears, ashamed that he could not do what he'd set out to. He ran until his lungs burned more than his rage and shame, then found a bench below a large tree in a small park, and there he sat and cried until his tears ran dry.

Hours passed before his mother came and found him there. He had no idea how she'd escaped the man, how long he'd beaten her, how she knew where he was. He didn't know, but he saw her as she rounded a corner and walked toward the park. Even in the darkness he could see the welt rising on her face and, as she passed under a streetlight, the streaks of mascara where the tears had been. She slid in beside him on the bench and wrapped her arms around him. He caught a sob and tried to hold it in and she whispered, "I know... I know..." and he nestled into her arms, like a child. Not quite a man, not quite a boy, always her child.

They sat there holding each other for an hour or more,

mostly in silence, with an occasional, "I love you." "I love you, too," until she finally said, "We need to go home." He curled in closer to her.

"I don't want to."

"I know. And I know we need to leave, we just can't do that yet. We will. I promise. Just not now. Not until we have someplace to go."

She stood, lifted Lenny to his feet, then turned his face to hers. "I know it's difficult to understand, but you will someday, or at least I hope you will, how hard it is to leave. But I will find a way."

Then, she took his hand and together they walked back toward the house.

Chapter 4

She rose early the next morning to distract the man from Lenny. A breakfast of eggs and sausage, toast with butter and jam. A bagged lunch for him before he left for work. She didn't want to look him in the eyes, but she forced herself to. Turned up the twinkle, flashed a smile, with a kiss on the cheek and a quick goodbye. "I hope you have a good day at work." He headed out the door without so much as, "you, too."

She stood at the window without pulling back the curtain, to make sure she wasn't seen. Watched him walk down the driveway to his car at the curb, get in, then slowly drive down the street. She stayed there for awhile longer to be certain he was gone, then walked the stairs up to her bedroom and into the bathroom.

She hadn't showered when she came back the night before. The man had been asleep and she didn't want to wake him in fear of both the remnants of his anger and for her nakedness. The violence would have made him want her and his anger would have taken her if she wasn't a willing partner. A shower this morning was free of all such fear.

She faced herself in the mirror, her mascara now more smudged than tear-streaked, which it had been the night before. Her mind went to the pillowcases and sheets on her bed. She knew

that what she'd find there on the pillowcases was what was no longer on her face. She'd need to erase the memory of the night before, wash the sheets before the man came back from work; no memory left to raise his ire again.

She studied her face and found the imprint of an open hand that corresponded with a soreness in her jaw and a click each time she opened and closed her mouth. The handprint she could easily hide with makeup, but the click would take some time to heal.

Her eye was a different story and one that could not so easily be hidden. There was a blueness above her cheekbone where the blood pooled in the space beneath her eye. It was swollen and, while she would do her best to cover it, she knew that anyone who truly looked at her would see what lay beneath.

She reached into the shower and turned the water on, opened her palm against the falling stream, and kept it there until the water warmed. Then she closed the door so the space could fill with steam.

She took off the t-shirt she'd slept in and stood before the mirror. There were more bruises. One on the outside of her left breast and another on her right side in the space between her hip and her ribs, which she touched to see how much it hurt. Less

than she expected, but enough that she felt it when she took a deep breath.

When the view through the closed glass walls of the shower was opaque with steam, she opened the door, stepped in, then let herself relax beneath the hot cascade. She turned her face into the stream and let it wash over her. She let her shoulders loosen, breathed deep until the steam filled her lungs, then stood there soaking in the warmth until she finally felt safe.

It took longer than usual to make herself up. "An art project," she said to the reflection in the mirror. "Something new from something used." She laughed, pleased that she could make light of what looked back at her. She'd created the visage she needed to, so she looked that illusion in the eye and said, "no more," and walked herself back into the bedroom, pulled the filthy sheets from the bed and took them down the stairs.

She stuffed the sheets into the washer and set the cycle running. Lenny, she knew, would sleep long into the morning and she didn't want to wake him. She also didn't want to leave a note for fear that there would be some evidence left behind.

She grabbed her purse and keys and stepped out to her car, opened the passenger door, and placed them on the seat. She took stock of the area around the car and the tension she'd relieved

in the shower seeped back into her shoulders. She closed the passenger door and walked down the driveway to the street in front of her house. There was no traffic, which seemed strange, but there was also no sign of his car. She took a few steps further into the middle of the road to look at the cars parked in both directions. His wasn't anywhere, so she walked back up the driveway, got into hers, started the car, and drove away.

She needed to retrace her drive from the day before. The trouble with wandering was that she often didn't pay attention to where she was headed. That was the joy of it, letting the car go, the freedom of not needing to care. But she'd been so distracted with her need to race home that she hadn't paid attention on the trip back either. So she drove and hoped the path would reveal itself, all the while keeping her eyes on the rearview mirror to see what might be following behind.

There was, she recalled, a gas station she'd passed the day before. She remembered it because there was a sign advertising a local drag show—a huge drag queen wagging a come-hither finger at all who drove by—which struck her as funny. It had also been near a coffee shop she was familiar with, maybe one or two turns away. So she drove to the coffee shop to see if that helped.

When she arrived she circled the shop's parking lot without

stopping in to get a cup, then made a right as she exited the lot and circled the block. She arrived back at the coffee shop without seeing the gas station, so she went a block further out, made another right turn and circled again. She continued, three blocks, then four, then five, when she finally found the gas station, much further out and in the opposite direction than she remembered. But, once found, she knew which way she needed to go.

She drove for twenty minutes, past horses and farms, then back into a small town. The drive home the night before had felt like a thousand miles, and, beyond the fear alone, she now understood why: the graveyard had been many miles from home.

A sign at the city limits boasted 20,000 people and this city, she knew, bordered another much larger city on the other side. The graveyard and the church sat somewhere in between, perfectly placed for the best access to both cities.

She pulled into the lot in front of the graveyard then stepped out to walk among the stones and monuments. She made her way to the new-laid stone and stood where she had the day before, at the foot of the grave of the woman who'd died those many months ago. She waited there, closed her eyes, and let her mind go quiet. She let her shoulders drop, and her back relax, then took a deep breath and held it in. When she opened her eyes again

she looked for, and found, two stones that fit in the palm of each of her hands. She kissed one, placed it on the woman's gravestone, then kissed the other and tapped it against the stone she'd just laid down. "A talisman," she said, then put the stone in her pocket, walked back to her car, and drove down the hill toward the church.

The building looked bigger to her than it had from the hill. The steeple standing firm against the heavens seemed strange, like a spear pointed upward in conflict with whatever lived above. She walked past the old church bell, flicked it with her fingernail and heard the tiniest of chimes.

She tried to recall the last time she'd been to a church, a wedding or a funeral, she couldn't remember which, it had been so many years ago. She'd never really gone to church for anything, not even the usual markers of the holiday season. No Christmas, no Easter. She'd had a girlfriend in 7th or 8th grade whose Bat Mitzvah she'd gone to. She'd been intrigued by the formality of it all. The reading of the scriptures. The family.

The celebration afterward had been wild. She'd tasted her first alcohol, a sip of champagne, and hated it. She'd also danced, first wildly then slowly, pressing her body hard against

another body. It felt dangerous and exciting. They kissed, then snuck into another room and made out, if you could call it that. The following Monday little Stevie Cohen told all the boys at school he'd gotten to third base with her. He hadn't. They'd kissed a little and he'd pushed his tongue into her mouth, then tried to touch her breast. He tasted like the prime rib and garlic mashed potatoes he'd just eaten, his braces hurt her lips, and his wandering hand she'd intercepted mid-flight, before it even landed on her blouse. Nonetheless, the rumors prevailed, and from that moment forward she became an object of desire and disgust.

She walked around the front of the church to the big stone stairs, looked up at the entrance and laughed aloud. From where she stood the two arched doors looked like two large breasts. The shadows cast on the recessed doors by their stone archways topped with dark brown keystones looked like two giant areola with dark nipples welcoming all who entered in. She wondered whether the mason had been a bitter parishioner paying back a slight felt from the pulpit.

The doors each contained a circular stained glass window made bright by a light coming from within the church. The brass on the doors looked freshly polished. Perfectly burnished with no

stains, no fingerprints, not so much as a speck of dust. She reached up, pressed the latch, and pulled, but the door didn't budge. She let go of the handle and saw the steamy smudge left where her hand had once been. She turned, grabbed the railing, walked back down the stairs and around the building to see if she could find another entrance.

The pathway down the side of the building was well-landscaped. The perfectly cut grass was lined with flowers and flowering shrubs that filled the space between the pathway and the church wall. More stained glass punched colorful holes in the solid stone walls on the side of the building. The flowers outmatched the glass.

When she arrived at the back of the building she discovered a new extension with a wide, six-door entrance made of solid glass. This, too, was locked. She cupped her eyes with her hands and looked through the glass where she saw a substantial foyer with high ceilings and an office space high above.

There was no bell to ring, but she saw some light coming from an office on the main floor. The door to that office was closed, but she thought if she pounded on the glass doors hard enough someone might hear her. She opened her hand and struck the window with her palm a few times, then cupped her hands again to

look into the window. No response. She pounded the door again, and again, and again, to no avail, so she continued to walk around the building to the classrooms in the back.

Each of these doors was locked, as well. She checked each one and looked in the windows next to them. No lights and no one inside.

As she reached the end of the portico she heard the sound of a basketball pulsing against the ground. A thuk, thuk, thuk as the ball hit a hardwood floor, a brief silence, then a pung as the ball bounced against the rim. It wasn't clear where the sound was coming from until she walked to the end of the portico and saw the large building standing just beyond and behind the classrooms. There was a large door opened at one end the closer she walked the louder the basketball sounds became.

When she reached the open door she stood in the shadows just outside the entrance and let her eyes adjust to the light. She watched. There was a man, all alone, dressed in desert boots, tan corduroy pants, and a collared shirt, soaked with sweat at the back and untucked.

He was in his late twenties, maybe thirty, attempting and missing baskets. She watched him there for at least five minutes, and the result was always the same: collect the ball, dribble

three or four times, stand and face the basket, jump to shoot, hit the rim, then chase the ricocheting ball and try again.

His persistence was intriguing and she wondered at the why of it. But this wondering ended when an errant shot plinked against the front end of the rim, bounced over the man's head, and into the shadows to rest at her feet. "Oh!", he said, "I didn't know anyone was here."

"I wasn't here long."

"I hope not. If you had been I'd be pretty embarrassed."

"I didn't see all that much. Like I said, I wasn't here long. I was," she turned back toward the main building, "looking for a way to get into the church, but this was the only door I found open."

He laughed, "Yeah, kind of strange, right? A place of refuge with no way in. It's busier when school's in session, which, as you can see, isn't today."

He stepped out the door into the sunlight and she turned with him, careful to stay in the shadows.

"I can bring you in and show you around, if you want."

She stood still inside the shadow.

"I'm not really sure why I wanted to go in. I was at the cemetery up above and I just saw it here."

"That's fine, you don't have to have a reason."

She moved toward him from the shadow and the light glanced off her face. She raised her hand to block her eyes from the sun.

"I should have brought my sunglasses."

"We can step back into the shade, or you can come in to see the church."

She moved further from the shadow and as she did, the man saw the swelling on her cheek and makeup too thick for a sunny day. His eyes hung there for too long, which made her uncomfortable, so she retreated back into the shadow. "I'd like to," she said, "if you don't mind."

"Not at all. Let me close up the gym and we can walk over."

He stepped back into the building and pressed a button on the wall. An electric motor hummed in the background and the giant steel door began to roll closed. He watched it fall until it was halfway down, tapped a switch to turn off the gym lights, then leapt over the threshold of the big door, landing just outside as the door pressed to the ground. She looked at him and he smiled. "The leap?"

"What was that?" she asked.

"It's silly. There's an electric eye that, when you break the beam, stops the garage door from closing. I could just reach around and close the door, but... well, this is more fun."

He shrugged and waited for her to say something, but she

didn't.

"I'm Sean," he said, and pushed his still-sweaty hand in her direction.

"Lena," she said, and reached out to meet him.

****Chapter 5**

Sean sat in an uncomfortable chair outside Teddy's office waiting to be allowed in. It was lumpy and seemed to have hard protrusions where the sitting parts of a body would most likely land. He wondered whether the chair was just old or whether Teddy used it to make some kind of point to anyone who met with him; a kind of purgatory before you entered the presence of the almighty pastor. He squirmed and watched Teddy's secretary busy herself by shopping on the office computer while opening mail. Most of what she sorted went into a recycling bin, while anything of importance was put into assorted piles on her desk.

Sean knew before he walked into the office that he'd have to wait. Wouldn't have mattered if he'd called ahead, or if Teddy was in a meeting, on the phone, or if his office was completely empty. Waiting was something Teddy made you do to remind you how the universe was ordered. Now he sat and waited until Teddy deigned to let him in.

He'd noticed the swelling on Lena's face the moment he saw it the day before, but waited to ask about it. He didn't want to scare her away by being too forward, so he took his time with her. Showed her around the buildings, walked her into the sanctuary, asked her if she ever went to church and then, when she said she

didn't, asked her why she'd decided to come now. She couldn't explain it and he didn't make her try, but he knew that, before she left, he'd have to ask about the eye. And once he did, he knew he'd need to meet with Teddy.

Sean reached for a magazine on the coffee table, and as soon as he did the intercom popped: "You can send him in." The secretary looked over her shoulder and directed him to the office with a tilt of her head, all without speaking a word.

The door into Teddy's office was solid wood and had a surprising heft to it. Once, several months ago, when he'd come up to meet with Teddy, he hadn't realized how heavy it was. When he swung the door open the weight of it pulled the handle out of his hand and the door banged into the doorstep so hard that it rattled pictures in their frames caused Teddy's secretary to let loose a mouse-like squeak. Since then he'd made a point to hold the handle tightly, gliding it into the room as gently as its weight would allow.

Teddy didn't raise his eyes or acknowledge him, which was normal, so he sat himself in an armchair in front of Teddy's desk. The desk was expansive, made of solid cherry, and polished so perfectly it looked like a mirror. It could accommodate four full sets of blueprints fully-opened, or a complete scale model

of whatever it was Teddy planned to build next. He knew this, because he'd seen it; more than once. But now the desk was perfectly clean. Not a book or a piece of paper and as far as Sean could tell, there wasn't a single smudge or a speck of dust to be seen.

He could see all of this from how and where his was chair was situated, purposely it seemed, well below where the pastor sat, hands folded, glaring at Sean with one eyebrow raised slightly above the other. He felt like a child sitting in the presence of an austere father.

The walls behind Teddy were covered in photographs: Teddy at a ribbon cutting, Teddy shaking the hand of some church luminary in some foreign country with a pristine looking new building behind him and a yellow ribbon waiting to be cut in front of them, Teddy pointing thoughtfully at some plan spread out on his desk with several other thoughtful looking people standing behind him, all, apparently interested in what Teddy was pointing at. It was a shrine; an homage to himself and the wizardry he performed raising money to raise buildings.

Teddy lifted his second eyebrow, leaned into Sean as closely as he could from across the table, and took a deep breath before patronizing him, "You needed to speak with me?"

"I did, yes. Thank you so much for taking the time to see

me.”

“You’re welcome. What was it you wanted to talk about?”

Sean explained about the woman, Lena, who’d appeared at the basketball court the day before, her interest in the church and how he’d noticed the swelling hidden behind the makeup of her eye. He told Teddy how he’d waited to talk with her, how he didn’t want to make her feel uncomfortable, so he didn’t make it obvious that he’d seen the swelling. He gave her a tour and when he finally felt it was safe to say something, asked what had happened. She was, he said, shy about saying anything, but also seemed pleased that he’d noticed the injury.

“She has a son. He beats him, too. They need a place to stay. Doesn’t have to be long term, but someplace so that they can transition to something more permanent. She might also need some kind of work, I’m not sure about that, but I’m wondering if we could do this?”

“Well. Sean... we’re just not situated to support something like this. It’s out of the scope of what we’re able to do.”

“I don’t understand. We have the space. We’re a church, this is what we’re supposed to do.”

“We don’t have the space, nor do we have the beds, proper showers, bathrooms, or a kitchen that would make it possible for

someone to live here. It just isn't feasible. I'm going to say no."

"There's an extra office in the gym that would work. There are showers. There's a kitchen. I'm not asking for something long term."

"It's a commercial kitchen. Hardly suitable for cooking a family's meals."

"We're a church, we should be..."

"Exactly, a *church*, not a homeless shelter, not a housing unit, not a dormitory, not a living facility. In fact, our operating permit strictly prohibits us from letting anyone live at the church. Sorry."

"I'm not asking that they live here..."

"No, is the answer, Sean. I appreciate your interest and it's certainly an important part of ministry, just not this ministry, and I can't allow it. I won't allow it. You'll need to figure something else out."

Sean sat in silence as he watched Teddy's face, which looked smug in its self-assurance, clearly change focus from Sean's query to something more important. He felt an anger rise up in him and he hated that it did. He hated that anyone could make him feel this way and that he was at the mercy of someone how had

that power over him. He pulled back at the anger and pushed it down inside of him, "Okay," he said. "Thank you for seeing me."

"Any time. Was there anything else you needed to talk with me about?"

"No, sir," he said, then stood and exited the room, pulling the door closed behind him a little harder than he should have. He heard the secretary squeak and saw her flinch when the door banged shut. The flinch made him feel good, then guilty for taking that pleasure. The guilt stayed with him for the rest of the day.

Singular—Thesis Documentation

Short Pitch

Josiah Bentman, née Lenny Sargent, is the leader of the largest right-wing white supremacist organization in the world. He lives under the radar, off the grid, hidden from government authorities, yet he wields more power than any political figure on the planet. How did he come to be? Why did he choose the path he chose? On the eve of his death, Bentman reveals his true story. Or, is it one final chapter in a myth of his own making and another link added to the fetters of his reign?

Part manifesto, part confessional, part spiritual awakening, Singular reveals the origins, messianic rise, powerful rule, and evident demise of a man for whom the power to control narrative is the power to control destiny: his own and that of everything around him.

In his debut novel, Jeffery Battersby creates a world in

which the “greater good” is a means to power, control, and devastation.

Synopsis

Josiah Bentman, née Lenny Sargent, is about to die.

Bentman is the leader of the largest right-wing, white supremacist organization in the world. He is anonymous, off the grid, lives under the radar, and has hundreds of thousands of followers the world over. Though he is not a public persona, he has more power than any political figure on the planet, which he has used to build an army of devoted followers. For decades, while building his cohort, he has only communicated via documents dropped in a secret mailbox and more recently via a private internet server. These documents are referred to as *The Missives*, which are transcribed by a chosen few then published online. Now he’s communicating with his followers directly.

Singular details the rise of Lenny Sargent—a boy once untethered, angry, uncertain of his heritage, estranged from humanity, consumed by his anger—and how he becomes the man, Josiah Bentman.

The novel follows two distinct narrative streams: One, messianic and prophetic, takes place in the present, establishing

for Josiah's followers his authority and how, at his death, they are to create "the world that is to come." The other is historical and biographical, begins in the past and details the life of Lenny Sargent, his transformation into Josiah Bentman, and his rise to power. Each narrative culminates at Bentman's death and the novel's climactic end.

The young Lenny is a boy who in the summer of his sixteenth year, encounters something greater than himself, which leads to a personal transformation. This transformation leads Lenny to leave his family and join a group of people who feed the poor, take care of the sick, and sacrifice everything for something greater than themselves. Which Lenny initially finds fulfilling.

What follows is three years of indoctrination, which Lenny throws himself into wholeheartedly, until cracks appear in the community's perfect façade and the community falls apart. The effect this has on Lenny is devastating, undermining everything he believes about himself, the world and his place in it. He begins deconstructing what it was that was wrong, why the community failed, and determines to create a new community of his own making. From the rubble of the community's demise, Josiah Bentman rises.

Bentman, jaded and embittered by a Waco-like event, arms

himself with an understanding of human nature and uses that knowledge to begin what is at first a small movement, built of a few adherents; people from every walk of life, who have the power, wherewithal, and desire to create a new world. A world created in Bentman's image and likeness.

Limited Outline

INNER CHAPTERS

The novel's inner chapters act as a link between major beats in the life of Lenny as he becomes Josiah. These are similar to *The Grapes of Wrath's* inner chapter, though not as frequent. All inner chapters are narrated by Josiah. They are prophetic jeremiads. They are in the present and are designed to lead his cohort into the final phase of his apocalyptic vision, which, like some modern day Jesus, will begin with his death. Inner chapters are first-person narrative told directly from Josiah's point of view.

Genesis (Inner chapter)

Introduces Josiah and his "prophetic" voice, which is the voice that will be used throughout the novel as inner chapters. It lays out why Josiah is now telling this story, what this telling means, provides some of his baseline philosophy and is noted as his "final testament." This first mention foreshadows his death that will take place in the final chapters and which is designed to push his followers to their final apocalyptic revolution.

Chapters 1-x

We meet Lenny as a young man, early teens, son of Lena. We learn

about his early life, his mother and her husband, and we meet several individuals who influence and become a part of his life. We see how decisions his mother makes lead to the beginnings of what will become the Christian/religious underpinnings of Lenny's understanding of how the world should work. This understanding is naive, simplistic, and very black and white. Good, evil, right, wrong, and do what God wants and good things will happen, follow your own wants and bad things will happen.

Characters:

- Lenny
- The man who isn't his father
- Lenny's mother, Lena (she is not named in the first few sections, we first learn her name when she meets Sean, the youth pastor)
- Sean, youth pastor
- Teddy, senior pastor
- Girlfriend

Exodus (IC)

Lenny leaves his family. His initial intent is to go to college, but he is encouraged by Sean and others that college isn't the best choice. So, instead, he leaves to join a ministry that, on

the surface, is doing good things in the world. But, as he continues there starts to see the thin veneer of "ministry" as cover for a the leader's self-aggrandizement; he is using the ministry for his own enrichment. This realization leads to Lenny's disillusionment, but also leads him to understand how easily people can be led: give them a cause and a spirited leader and they will do anything. Section ends with Lenny being forced to leave the ministry and he is set adrift, with nothing to anchor him.

Characters:

- Lenny
- Lenny's mother, Lena
- Sean, youth pastor
- Girlfriend
- Teddy
- Leader of the new community
- TBD

Revelation (IC)

Shorty after leaving his broken community Lenny will experience a A Waco-like event. Here the government inserts itself into a

religious group's business, which angers Lenny and fuels the bitterness and anger he has been feeling at the loss of his community. He has, up until this point, been languishing, this event gives him something new to live for. No longer particularly religious, he still has a strong inclination toward black and white thinking. This incident is very black and white: government bad, individual freedom good. The freedom of the individual becomes his new religion, which he pursues with an evangelistic furor. He takes a new name—Josiah Bentman—and begins to define a new philosophy that is Christina nationalist in nature, pseudo-religious, designed to take advantage of people in the ways he observed they could be taken advantage of when he was in the ministry. He creates an internet-based, underground system of communication (think QAnon) and creates a following based on white replacement conspiracy theories and secret government cabals.

Characters:

- Josiah
- TBD

Numbers (IC)

Josiah's following grows, logarithmically. Anonymous posting

boards, individual to individual, Lenny builds a community of followers frustrated with their lives, their powerlessness, their displacement. Josiah's main narrative takes on a messianic tone, with Josiah at the center of that narrative. He hints at his future demise and that this would only come about if it is time for revolution, but his goal is to build a large community by feeding into the same bitterness and anger he feels in himself.

Judges (IC) (Probably not the title)

The end is here. Josiah, seeking to fulfill his apocalyptic vision, brings his followers to a frenzy and, because of his death, brings on a revolution.

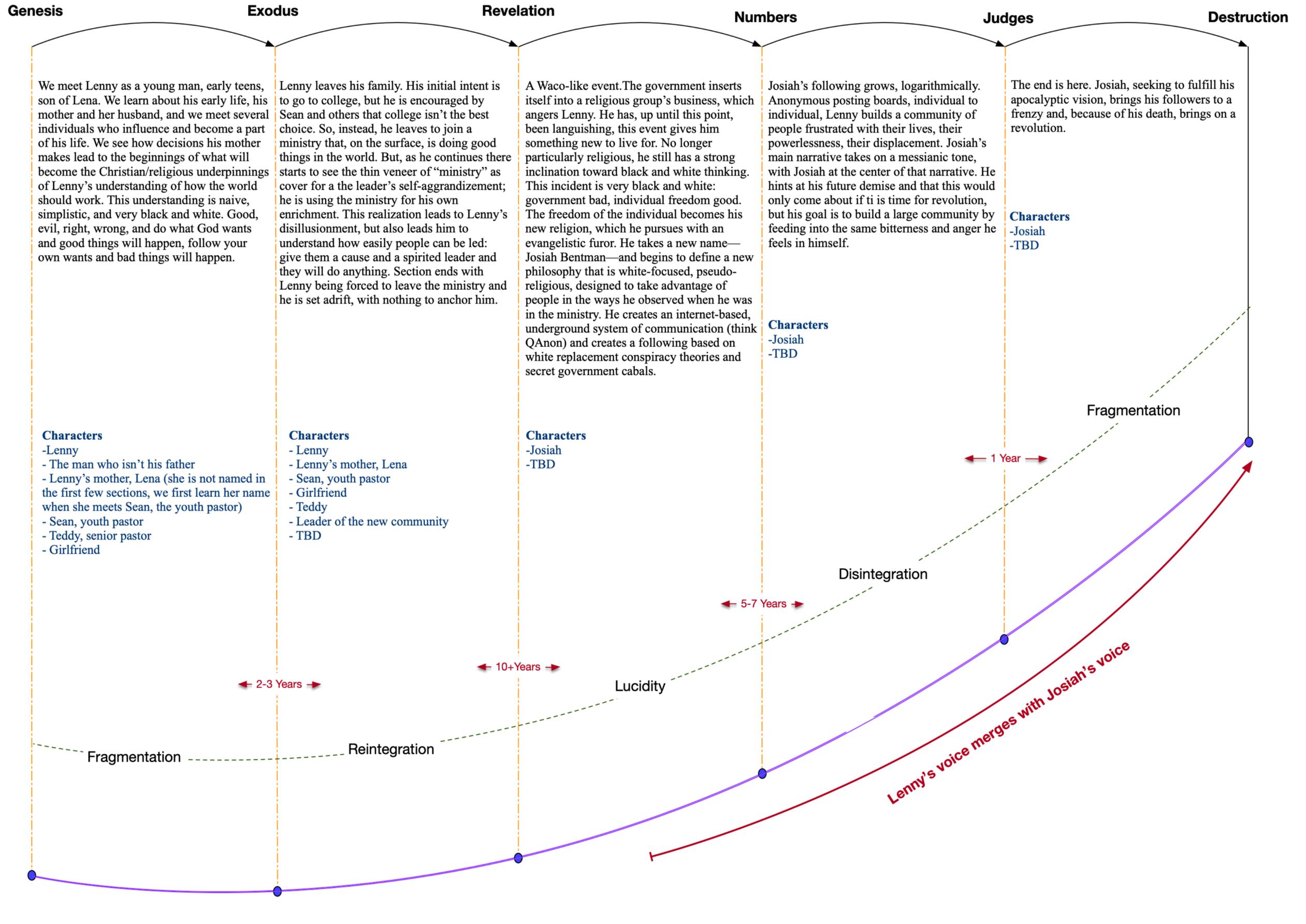
Characters

- Josiah
- TBD

Finale (Will be some other section title)

Unclear. Other than it will end with Josiah's death and the knowledge of the impending battle that will rage as a result of his death. Think in terms of Trump's "very bad things will happen if I'm indicted."

Josiah



Lenny