

# Scrying Glass

By  
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All characters appearing in this work are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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This book is dedicated to Noah Andrew Pace, my nephew, who is not named after me, but whom I love nonetheless. Congratulations, Noah, on your first success, which was being born. I know more successes will follow.



# I

“And those who were seen dancing were thought to be insane by those who could not hear the music.”

— Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche

There was something about the house, he decided, but he didn't know what it was.

It was old.

It was white with green trimming, which was peeling from both age and rot, and the plants that adorned the lawn had been left unattended for the last several decades.

The house on Arch Street in Sunbury, Pennsylvania had been built back in 1901. Since then, the electrical system had probably been installed by people who had helped to invent electrical systems, and the heater expelled steam that smelled musty and aged.

Brad Anderson turned it on and swore that he could actually detect mold spores in the air, and he said so, out loud, when the house was being shown to him.

The realtor, sensing this was somewhat of a negative comment, pointed out that they didn't make houses like this anymore (built to last, they were) and also that the house was haunted.

Being a writer, which Brad was, the realtor hoped this would prompt the sale. It did, or at least it helped.

But it wasn't haunted. That was a lie.

Even still, Brad thought, as he imagined the look of his belongings inside of his new home, there really was something about

it that was charming.

Like an old man, he mused, that likes to impress children with the stories and magic tricks he's learned over the years. And that was fitting because the house did indeed have something up its sleeve.

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The liquor cabinet in the dining room was well stocked and well used. It was one of the first things he situated when he unpacked. That came before he hung any pictures, before he sorted his clothes, even before he set up his desk. The contents of the liquor cabinet were well used while he did all those things.

There was a lot to unpack.

There were books, art, collectibles and antique furniture, and it took days to put everything in its place within the three-story house. Some things didn't have places, and those things he piled in the corner so he could put them in the basement later. Then he got lonely, so he called Mike, his agent, to discuss his next book.

"Hey, Brad," his agent said, in that agent voice he had. "So how's the new house, huh?"

"Big," Brad replied. "Cluttered, and most definitely not haunted. Not even a little."

"Yeah? That's great. So what's up?"

"I'm not going to write horror stories anymore."

There was a long pause from his agent. Brad heard him exhale, but that was it.

"Whoa there, fella," his agent finally said. "That's kinda what you do, you know?"

"It's what I used to do," Brad corrected. "I want to write something that doesn't involve maiming or killing. A romantic comedy maybe?"

His agent made a noise that wasn't quite a word, then said, "Hey! No. That's a bad idea. Have you ever read a romantic comedy?"

"No," Brad admitted. "But I saw one on TV."

"No one *reads* romantic comedies," his agent said. "I can't sell

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them. When people want romantic comedies, they watch them on TV.”

“Well it doesn’t have to be very romantic,” Brad replied. “Or even necessarily funny.”

“Then it would just be an unfunny comedy,” his agent reasoned, “and I don’t think I could sell that either. Is something bothering you?”

“Yes,” Brad said. “I’m in a rut. I’m tired of writing about monsters.”

There was something Brad wasn’t telling the agent, and that was because he knew he couldn’t explain it right. His last book had been about a horror writer, like himself, who had made a career writing about the same monster. Only no one — including the writer at first — knew it was the same monster.

It looked different and had various origins in each book, but with each passing novel, the monster got more and more real, like it was getting closer and closer.

One day the monster got out. And the writer had a real hard time putting him back. But in Brad’s mind, when he first envisioned the story, before the marketing people had got their hooks into it, the monster wasn’t put back at all. It took over.

The writer became the monster.

With the sanitized ending in place, his agent had phoned him one day and said, “Ca-ching!” Then the agent told Brad that the book was selling like hotcakes and there was already talk about turning it into a movie.

So Brad bought a house. Then he went on talk shows, and people marveled at the fact that he was becoming so successful, yet he was only 30 and was also a high school drop out.

“It wasn’t that hard to write,” Brad told the people who interviewed him, “all I had to do was describe my greatest fear for everyone’s entertainment.”

And they would laugh and continue the interviews because none of them suspected how much he had meant it.

“But monsters are what you write best,” his agent said. “It’s what

gives you a paycheck and got you inside that house.”

Brad sighed.

“Even Stephen King got to write the ‘Shawshank Redemption’.”

“Yes,” his agent agreed. “And he sold the movie rights for a dollar.”

“Oh,” Brad said. “Well, maybe I can surprise you, yeah? I’ll write something and maybe you can sell it under a fake name or something?”

“Sure,” the agent conceded. “We can coast on the last book for a while. Just don’t forget what brings the real money in, okay?”

Immediately after that call, Brad set up his desk to do some serious writing. It took an hour, and he did it hurriedly so that he could jump right into the thick of it. When he finished, he turned the computer on, opened his word processing program, and then stared at a blinking cursor for the next three days.

At one point during those three days, he looked down at his keyboard and remembered how he used to mash the keys feverishly and with passion, but he only did *that* when he wrote horror. At various other points, he would *make* himself write something. He’d get a few pages into the story, follow the thread for a while, and then the plot would go bad.

He would reach inside to pull the story out and the demons would come with it, like they were all part of the deal. Like they were little hitchhikers that rode along from the place in his soul where the stories came from.

On the third day, he grumbled something that sounded irritated but not quite English, and then he picked up his computer monitor and tossed it at the wall.

Once that was finished, he hit the liquor cabinet again.

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On the fourth day, he traveled to the computer store to buy a new monitor and to the hardware store to buy the things he would need to patch the hole in the wall.



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On the drive back, he took a route that he didn't normally take, and he passed the house where a friend of his used to live.

When he saw the house, he filed the feeling it invoked for later use in a story somewhere. But *that* story wasn't the one he was currently trying to tell, as evidenced by the cursor that continued to blink, rather mockingly he thought, on his brand new computer monitor.

He called his agent again.

"Hey, Brad, how's the non-horror book coming along?"

"Horribly," he said, with a hint of irony.

"Writer's block, huh?" his agent inquired.

"Yes. I think I'm going to work on my house for a while. There's all kinds of things I need to carry down to the basement, and there's a hole in the wall I need to fix."

"So," the agent said. "You're calling just to see how things are going then?"

"I guess," Brad replied. "And also to tell you I'm writing horror again."

"That's good news! The book is doing well by the way; even better than everyone expected. There's some loose talk that a treatment has been written for a movie script, and that Brad Pitt might be interested."

"He's all wrong for the part."

"I'll tell them you said so," the agent said, which led to an idea. "Hey! Maybe I could negotiate for you to be a creative consultant or something. I mean, who'd know the characters better than you?"

"Does it have to be a celebrity? In the movie I mean. I've got a thing against celebrities — (except for Christina Ricci) — so maybe they could go with an unknown actor?"

"I think they want a celebrity so that people will go see it, Brad. But I'll see what I can do to get you some creative input."

"Yeah," Brad said. "Do you think they could get Christina Ricci to be in it?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

"Okay thanks. I guess I'll talk to you later."

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“Hey,” the agent said before Brad hung up, “what are you doing for New Year’s Eve?”

“Celebrating with my friends. I’ve got a fully stocked liquor cabinet.”

“Good for you,” he said, imagining the fun Brad was likely to have. “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

Not only did Brad not do anything he wouldn’t have done, he also didn’t do a lot of things that he would’ve. Some of the things the agent would probably have done is to go someplace and do something on New Year’s Eve. Perhaps he might’ve had a date. At the very least, he wouldn’t have sat alone in his house drinking.

But that’s what Brad did. Because of the choices he made in the past, and because that’s what he chose to do now. It was almost midnight. He lifted up a bottle of scotch and toasted the air.

“Here’s t’ya, mates,” he said. “Should old acquaintance be forgot.”

And they were, by and large, but it took an awful lot of booze to do it.

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That night he had a dream.

It was an old dream that came to him like a routine torment and picked at the scabs of his emotional barriers like an intangible tragedy, a nightly haunting.

*In his dream he sees her in a center clearing, dancing among the falling orange blossoms that float earthward like feathery angels. She is surrounded by bloodstained rocks, beset with many sharp and jagged edges, with familiar faces chiseled into the hateful black shale by an unknown hand.*

*He saw his own face among them.*

*His likeness was marred with her blood.*

## II

For Brad, the New Year began with piercing sunlight and a bout of vomiting. He threw up whatever he'd been eating the night before, and once that was gone, he threw up bits of his inner organs. Or at least that's what it felt like.

He grabbed a handful of toilet paper, wiped his mouth, threw the wad into the toilet and flushed. The wad was too big and the toilet overflowed. For a little while after that, he sat in a tiny pond of toilet water and vomit, which must have made him appear, he thought, as utterly wretched as he felt.

Once he'd cleaned the mess in the bathroom, he spent the rest of the day just lying around the house. Sometimes he dozed and sometimes he read and smoked cigarettes. When he was reading, sometimes he would look up at his nice things — the art that hung on the walls and all of his collectibles — and he would wonder why the hell he wasn't happy.

He didn't know why he didn't enjoy his things or his success like he thought he would. Last year, about this time, he'd still been trying. He'd been spending time down at the local bars and social clubs, and he was often able to charm women to come home with him.

He would try to enjoy his things, and he would try to enjoy his things through the women he brought to see them, and then he would try to enjoy the drinks they shared from his liquor cabinet and the sex they would have later on.

But he could fake enjoyment only for so long, and when he

stopped being charming, the women went away. And not just the women, but everyone else too.

About six months ago, he thought to himself, enough is enough already. But it wasn't until two weeks ago that he bought the house, thinking that a change of scenery would be just the thing to snap him out of it.

He'd been told the house was haunted, but it turned out that it wasn't. The only ghosts that lived in the house were the ones he'd brought with him. And he couldn't, for the life of him, figure out what he should do about it.

When he got tired of lounging around, which was roughly eight in the evening that same day, he got up, dressed, and determined that he would get all the things that were piled in the corner down to the basement.

There were a lot of things in that corner. There were boxes of paperback books, comics, holiday decorations, broken furniture that he swore he'd fix, and other odds-and-ends that he didn't remember buying but hated to throw out because, wouldn't you know it, that's when he'd need an odd or an end.

He picked up a box. The bottom of it gave out and most of his Christmas ornaments shattered when they hit the floor. He cursed the year 2005. Then he picked up another box and walked — CRUNCH, CRUNCH, CRUNCH — to the basement door.

He opened it. That's when he heard a slight hum that he couldn't quite identify. Since he was still mad about breaking most of his Christmas ornaments, he tugged the light string much harder than he should have. It broke free from the socket and dangled loosely in his hand. Because of that, the light did not come on, but surprisingly, there was another light from somewhere else in the basement.

It was coming from beneath the staircase.

He walked down, slowly, unsure of what was making the light and the humming sound, and when he found out, he was unsure of what to do about it.

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The phone in Wesley's house rang at about 10 p.m. that night. He'd been thinking about ordering the caller identification service that his phone company provided, but since he was still in the process of thinking about it, he had to actually pick up the phone to see who it was.

It was Brad. If Wesley had ordered the caller identification service earlier, Brad's call never would have made it through the screening process.

"Hello?" Wesley said.

"Wesley?" asked Brad.

"Maybe. Who is this?"

"Brad Anderson."

"Wesley isn't here."

"I know it's you," Brad countered. "You have a very distinct, nasally-sounding voice."

"I'm hanging up now," said Wesley.

"No, wait! I need to show you something I found in my basement."

The strangeness of that request gave Wesley pause.

"Brad, we haven't spoken to each other in eleven years, and suddenly you call me up, out of the blue, to show me something you found in your basement? Are you drunk or something?"

"A little," Brad admitted. "But no more than usual. I just need a friend right now. I drove by your mom's house yesterday, so I thought of you."

"And you don't have any other friends? A successful writer like you?"

"No," Brad said. "You were the last friend that mattered. Everything I did, the way I acted, I would take it all back if I could. I really would."

That was the kind of bullshit thing that people say when they know they can't actually change something that happened in the past, Wesley thought. But then again, the way Brad had said it made him

think that he actually meant it. And even if the past couldn't be changed, there was always the future, wasn't there?

Even still, it had been years since Brad and Wesley had ended their friendship, and he wondered if they even had anything in common anymore. Wesley was a social worker and Brad was a social outcast who had become successful enough that people thought of him as eccentric instead of an asshole.

Actually, he wasn't like that all the time, Wesley remembered ...

"Brad, can it wait until tomorrow morning?"

"I'm sorry, but no. It's not the kind of thing you can sleep on, you know?"

"I don't know," Wesley said. "What is it you want to show me?"

"I could tell you, but you wouldn't believe me. But if you're looking right at it when I tell you, you'll be more inclined to believe it."

Wesley didn't want to admit it, but he *was* curious.

"... All right. I'll be right over."

"Right," Brad said. "I'll order us a pizza."

Wesley hung up the phone.

"Who was that, Hon?" Wesley's wife called out from the living room.

"Brad Anderson."

"The writer? I didn't know you even knew him."

"I used to, but we had a falling out."

"Nice. How is he?"

Wesley considered this, based on the brief conversation he just had.

"He used to be a jerk," Wesley said. "Now I think he's crazy."

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Wesley arrived at 10:30 and found Brad sitting on his porch drinking brandy from the bottle and smoking a cigarette.

It had been the early 90's when Brad had last seen Wesley, back when Kurt Cobain had set the fashion trend. Now, years later, both

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had traded in their torn, faded jeans, rock t-shirts, leather jackets, and garage sale cardigans. Wesley had cut his hair to a respectable length and now dressed more conservatively. He had gained nearly 30 pounds since high school (where he had been painfully thin) and his blond hair was now receding in the front and touched with specs of gray on the sides. He was dressed in casual slacks and a gray turtleneck. His face was fuller and he wore silver rimmed spectacles that made him look distinguished.

Brad, on the other hand, continued to look frayed around the edges. He still wore faded jeans and a simple black shirt, but now that he was older, the jeans no longer had holes and the shirt no longer advertised his musical tastes.

Like Wesley, Brad had also cut his hair, which used to sit on his head like an unmanageable, black mop. But even with the haircut, Wesley couldn't tell if Brad even owned a comb. He was still tall and broad, and his face was still handsome, but over the years something had obviously taken its toll on him, and Wesley got the impression that the dark circles that hung under his haggard eyes had taken up permanent residence.

Even still, those eyes indicated that he was glad to see Wesley. Brad greeted him warmly and offered him a drink. Wesley declined and got the uncomfortable small talk off and going by asking how things were and what he'd been up to since they'd last spoken.

Even though it had been eleven years, Brad hadn't actually been up to much. He'd dropped out of high school, which Wesley had known because he was there, and then he got a job assembling Big Macs at McDonald's.

Wesley, meanwhile, graduated, attended university and earned a degree that qualified him to be a social worker. Then he married his college sweetheart, moved back into town and had two kids they named Ashley and Raymond.

By the time Wesley had finished doing these things, Brad had worked his way up to shift manager at McDonald's and was more or less suicidal.

But there was an upside. As it turns out, making Big Macs for

eight hours a day doesn't actually require much in the way of thought, Brad said, so his imagination would kick into high gear as he did it.

On his breaks, he would write in a legal pad with a ballpoint pen all the stories he thought about while he worked. When he went home, he would type them out on a typewriter he bought in a garage sale for 10 dollars.

He did this for a year before he produced a novel. Then he sent it off and heard nothing from the publishing companies he sent it to. After that, he went to the library and researched the process for getting a literary agent. Armed with this new knowledge, he sent it off to Mike, his current agent, and things took off.

That was three years ago. Since then, he'd written three novels, a handful of short stories and a movie script that had never been made into a movie.

He had finished telling Wesley all of this when the pizza arrived. The pizza delivery guy brought their pizza, collected the check, then told Brad he was a big fan and he was wondering if he could have his autograph.

Brad autographed a slip of paper, told the pizza delivery guy to stay in school and say no to drugs because, despite the fact that he felt awkward as a role model, he still believed that's the kind of thing role models should say to pizza delivery guys.

Then Brad and Wesley went inside.

"So," Wesley said, "What have you got in your basement?"

"A portal," Brad said.

"A what?"

"You know, a portal? A doorway to someplace else? A gateway to another dimension, alternate universe or some magical place that has elves, wizards and witches?"

Wesley began to avoid eye contact with Brad and to shift from one foot to the other as if he were slightly uncomfortable.

"Yes, Wesley, I know how that *sounds*."

"Portals don't really exist, Brad," Wesley said, somewhat quietly, as if stating the obvious was all he could do, considering the shock.



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“I’m inclined to agree with you, Wesley. Even still, there’s one in my basement.”

“How do you know it’s a portal?”

“Because I’ve been flicking cigarettes at it,” Brad said, offering this as Exhibit A. “And whiskey bottles too,” he presented as Exhibit B.

“Uh ... and that makes it a portal?”

“It does when the things I flick at it don’t come out the other side.”

“What does it look like?”

“I’ll show you.”

They went downstairs into the basement. They peered beneath the stairway. It did indeed look like a portal, Wesley had to admit. It hung in the air, suspended by nothing, like a flat, circular, shimmering mirror made of liquid. The part that was reflective was encased by pure light, which was roughly five feet in diameter and also did not touch the ground.

It just hung there, humming and shining and defying the laws of both physics and gravity, waiting to be discovered so that it could change humanity’s view of the universe.

Brad flicked his cigarette at it. The butt shot into the reflective part of the portal and the liquid rippled like he had just dropped a stone in a lake.

Wesley peered through the stairway to gaze at the other side. No cigarette.

“See? Portal.”

“That’s ... that’s amazing,” Wesley said. “Are you sure it’s ... going somewhere? Maybe the cigarette disintegrated or something?”

“Nope,” Brad said. Then he stuck his hand through it and waved it around a bit. His hand, also, did not emerge on the other side. Then he pulled it out and showed his hand to Wesley. “See? Portal.”

“Where? Where did it come from?”

“I have no idea,” Brad said, as he picked up a box and tossed it through. The box was not empty. Something inside of it was clanking.

“What are you doing?” Wesley asked.

“Throwing these boxes through. This one’s heavy. Would you mind?”

“Oh.” Without thinking about it, Wesley grabbed the other end of the heavy box and helped Brad toss it through to parts unknown. “Uh... why are we throwing these boxes through?”

Then Brad tossed a suitcase through and Wesley suddenly understood what was going on here.

“Are you insane?” Wesley asked, somewhat rhetorically because he believed he already knew the answer. “You’re going through it?”

“Yes,” Brad said. “Yes I’m going through it, not yes I’m insane.”

“You ... you can’t. You have no idea where it goes!”

“That’s why I’m going to explore it. Because I don’t know where it goes. I’ve thought this through. I packed everything I could think of that I might need — a change of clothes, some books, food, water, booze, a carton of cigarettes, and a winter coat, just in case it’s cold.”

“You are insane. You don’t even know if there’s oxygen on the other side. It could lead to outer space for all you know.”

“That occurred to me too,” he said. “That’s why I’ve been drinking this whole time. Or at least that’s the current reason I’ve been drinking. Anyway, it’s a chance I’m willing to take. A few more shots of this here,” he said, indicating that he meant the bottle of brandy in his hand, “and I’ll be brave enough to do just about anything.”

“I can’t let you do it, Brad. You could be throwing your life away.”

Brad paused and turned to look Wesley directly in the eye.

“I already threw my life away,” he said. “But listen, I have this way of kinda blowing people off, you know? I was doing that to you just now and I’m sorry. You’re my friend and you don’t deserve it; and besides, I invited you here. But I fully intend to walk through that portal and see what’s on the other side.

“If I can come back, I will. If not, then I wanted to spend my last few minutes here, hanging out with a friend I haven’t seen in a while.

“The last few years have been hard,” he added. “I’ve screwed everything up and I’m ready to do something with my life that

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matters. But before I go, I have a request.”

“A last request?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“What is it?”

“Tell me something about yourself that no one else knows.”

“What?” Wesley asked, slightly taken aback by the unusual request. “Why?”

“You and I have been friends since grade school right? And we were close?”

“I guess so. That was a long time ago.”

“I know, but back then, I thought we’d be friends forever. Then in high school, I started hanging out with a bunch of assholes, and I became like them for a while, and I acted in ways I’m not proud of.

“But, as I see it, if I hadn’t done that, and if we hadn’t lost touch, you and I would’ve continued being friends, and somewhere along the line, you might’ve confided in me. You might’ve told me something that was important; something that I would never tell anyone. I want you to tell me something like that now.”

“Are you serious?” Wesley asked. “You want me to tell you a secret? Why?”

“Because it’s my way — in the only way I know how — to get some of that lost time back,” Brad said. “And besides, if this portal leads to outer space and I die of asphyxiation, the secret dies with me.”

“That’s not really funny, Brad,” Wesley said. “I could be standing here watching you kill yourself.”

“Or,” Brad argued, “you could be watching me begin something wonderful that will make my life better.”

“Okay then. Something about me no one else knows?”

“Yeah.”

“And you won’t tell a soul?”

“Not a soul.”

“My middle name ... is ... never mind, I don’t want to tell you.”

“No really,” Brad prompted. “I’ll swear a secret oath, just like when we were kids, and I never broke those oaths.”

“Do you even remember what we swore to keep secret when we were kids?”

“Not a bit,” Brad answered truthfully. “And that’s part of the reason those secrets were so easy to keep. But the point is, I never told anyone.”

Wesley sighed.

“Alright. Here goes. My middle name is Nancy.”

“Huh?”

“My dad didn’t want to be a dad,” Wesley said. “So he claimed he did it as a joke on me and my mom. He filled out the paperwork for the birth certificate and named me ‘Nancy’ a few hours after I was born.

“He used to call me his little ‘Nancy boy’ when I was growing up. And for Christmas, he’d buy me Barbie dolls. Years later, dad left mom for another man. I think he just wanted a daughter.”

“Shit,” Brad said. “Your dad’s nuts.”

“Yeah,” Wesley said. “Now you.”

“Now me what?”

“Now you tell me something about yourself that no one else knows.”

“I have a portal in my basement. Nobody knows that.”

“Something else.”

Brad thought about it for a bit.

“Ah,” he said. “I’ve got one. This isn’t really a secret, but it is kind of personal. When I was about four, my grandmother used to read stories to me.

“Grim’s Fairy Tales, mostly, and a Star Wars book I had. That was my favorite. I would sit on her lap while she read and I would be whisked away by the sound of her voice to the places she was telling me about.”

Brad took a long gulp of brandy, then lit another cigarette. “One day, my parents dropped me off at her house so they could do some shopping and run some errands. I brought my Star Wars book with me. After she finished up in her kitchen, she gave me some cookies. Then it was story time.

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“I was young and small, so I sat in her lap as she read. She sat in a rocking chair by the window. It was a warm, spring day; I remember that because of how the breeze poured into the room; how the billowing curtains looked by the window.

“As she read, I drifted off to the story she was telling me, but because it was warm and smelled like spring and I had just eaten cookies, it probably wasn’t long before I drifted off to sleep.

“Eventually, I woke up. Grandma was still holding me in the chair, except we weren’t rocking anymore. It didn’t really register with me right away that she wasn’t breathing either. But I knew something was wrong.

“She had died clutching me in her arms, and when that realization kicked in, I also realized that I couldn’t break free. I struggled and kicked and I screamed and screamed. And grandma’s corpse wouldn’t let me go.

“I remember listening to myself scream; it didn’t sound normal, like the scream kids make when they really want that toy you aren’t going to buy them. It sounded like a shriek of terror that continued until it became raspy and hoarse, then faded into a dull wisp of simple exhaling.

“It seemed like years before my parents came back. But eventually they did. We went to her funeral and buried her and never discussed the subject again. So maybe I’m wrong. Maybe it was a secret after all.”

“Jeeze,” Wesley said. “No wonder you write horror.”

“Nah, that’s not it,” Brad said. “The place I reach down inside myself to pull out my monsters, they don’t have anything to do with that. Or if they do, I haven’t reached far enough to find *her* yet. In any case, the monsters come from experiences I learned later.

“What I got out of my experience with grandma, I think, was an inability to forge connections with other people. Ironically, the other thing I got was a desire not to be alone — and yet, I forced that very thing on myself for some reason.”

Wesley thought about what Brad had just told him.

“Does that traumatic event have anything to do with why you’re

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about to do something so dangerous now?" he asked.

"I don't know," Brad said. "Maybe. We are what we are and we do what we do. And we make our choices based on our experiences. In any case, thank you for being my friend today."

Brad approached the portal, turned to look back one last time, and then stepped through to see what was on the other side.

### III

Brad traveled down a stream of light at a speed he could only imagine. He imagined it was very fast. Perhaps it was the speed of light. Perhaps it wasn't.

In the short time he traveled, he saw a number of things, all of which were very confusing. The beam of light he rode was just one of many that connected at various points, which might have been junctions, and looked similar to the portal in his basement. Some of them were lit and some of them were dark.

Around the junctions were spheres that kind of looked like jellyfish that didn't have any legs. Some of them were healthy looking, and some of them looked dried and shriveled.

He also imagined, although he didn't know how true it was, that all of the beams of light and all the jellyfish sprawled in all directions — jutting, forking, crossing, and parting — like cracks (micro-fractures) that covered an endlessly vast snow-globe, or flowing rivers that covered the surface of a planet. But then again, he couldn't see that far in either direction because of the vastness of the place he found himself, so he couldn't say what it was exactly that had given him that impression.

There were other beings in there with him. They appeared to be made of light and had no features that distinguished them from one another. They had big, black eyes and sunrays coming out of their backs that looked a little like wings.

A few of them noticed Brad. He gave them a little wave (the

friendliest gesture he could think of) as he shot down the column of light.

Some of them appeared startled. Others gawked in amazement. There was one whose mouth hung open as if he'd been mouthing the words, "oh shit."

But then again, there was no sound, so Brad didn't actually know what he'd said. But even without facial features, they did have facial expressions, and he knew that whatever the thing had actually said, that's what it had meant.

Others encircled the one that spoke. They made gestures with their arms and hands that appeared angry, like they were yelling at him. One pointed frantically at Brad as he continued to zip down the tunnel.

And then, FLASH!

It was like someone had taken a photograph of him with one of those powerful 1940s cameras that left the subject of the photo momentarily blinded.

He rubbed his eyes as he watched the after-effects continue to blossom like Fourth-of-July sparklers, and he heard someone, a woman he thought, ask someone else to explain how the bank veto debate between President Andrew Jackson and Henry Clay served to underscore the philosophical differences between the North and the South prior to the Civil War.

He opened his eyes. He looked around. He shut them again, and said, "No this can't be right."

He was sitting behind a desk in a classroom that looked eerily familiar to him. It should've looked familiar to him because he sat in that very desk, as well as many others just like it, for three years until he dropped out.

He was back in high school.

"Oh no!" he said, in horror, as he shook his head in disbelief. "Dumping me off in outer space would have been more humane."

He suddenly felt that everyone in the room was looking at him. He opened his eyes again, and sure enough, they were. He looked at his teacher, whose name he had long since forgotten, and he wondered



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how the hell this was happening.

It was all very amusing to his classmates, who kept giggling and whispering to each other. Someone called him a freak and someone else wondered if he was feeling all right.

Something was touching the back of his neck. He felt back there and discovered hair. He looked down at himself and was reminded of how he used to dress. He groaned.

He needed a cigarette. He reached inside of his pocket, but apparently, as he had gotten himself ready for school all those years ago, he had failed to take up smoking. He groaned again, and then he watched his teacher's brow begin to furrow.

"Brad," the teacher said, indicating that this had gone on for long enough. "Are you feeling okay?"

"No," Brad said, then added, "Oh God, I even sound weird."

"You sure do," someone else said, moments before the rest of the class erupted into laughter.

"Now simmer down, everyone," the teacher said. "Well Brad, what seems to be the problem?"

"I'm feeling a little disoriented. I think I need to leave."

"Very well then," she said, "but before you go, did you complete your assignment?"

"I don't remember," Brad said. "It was a long time ago."

"Brad, I gave the assignment yesterday."

"Not from my perspective."

He approached the teacher's desk and then she dismissed him. A few moments later, he poked his head back inside the door and asked if anybody had seen a bunch of boxes or a suitcase because he seemed to have misplaced them. His teacher reminded him that he had set off for the office and he really ought to be heading there.

"Right," Brad said, in a manner that suggested this was a wonderful idea. Then he wandered the halls for a bit because he didn't remember how to get to the office.

•••

“Hey,” said a voice from behind him in the hallway. “You got a hall-pass?”

“Huh?”

He turned and saw a tall, lanky kid with red hair and freckles. Somewhere in Brad’s mind, he called the kid a brown-nosing, suck-up, kiss-ass — and that was the part of Brad’s mind that would be most helpful to him, because it was also the part that kind of remembered high school.

“Listen, kid,” the hall-pass monitor said, “I don’t have all day here. You got a pass, or do I have to report you?”

Brad vaguely remembered that his teacher had handed him something before he left. He looked down at his hand, and was surprised to see that it was clutching a slip of paper. There were letters printed at the top of it. They read: “HALL PASS.”

“Oh,” Brad said. “Here you go.”

The hall-pass monitor took the paper and inspected it, as if to see whether things were in order.

“There’s been a lot of forgeries,” the monitor said. “But I can tell the real ones.”

“No shit?” Brad said. “Hey listen, what year is it?”

“What?”

“What year is it?”

“It’s 1989.”

“I did that already.”

“Did what already?”

“1989.”

The hall-pass monitor struggled to understand the conversation he had unwittingly gotten himself into.

“Are you high or something?”

“Nope,” Brad said. “I don’t get high. Not for another three years yet.”

The hall-pass monitor shook his head and decided to attend to his duties someplace else. Brad continued to walk the halls as he contemplated his current situation.

The school was a maze of lockers and doors with people behind

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them who appeared uninterested in whatever it was they were meant to be interested in. He wondered how he had ever navigated these hallways.

Then he began to realize the extent of his dilemma. He didn't remember anything that would help him maneuver through this situation at all. He couldn't remember what classes he attended, who the teachers were, how to get there, or even where his locker was for the books he would need. Furthermore, if he found the office, they would likely ask for a parent's work number before they would let him go home, and he didn't remember that either.

Then it dawned on him that he was living with his parents again.

He began to bang his head against a nearby locker.

"Hey!" a male teacher called from one of the adjacent classrooms. "You go to the office this instant!"

Brad stopped banging his head.

"Which way is it?" he called back to the annoyed teacher.

"Well, I'll be happy to show you, Mr. smart-ass," the teacher said.

And then Brad was able to find the office, thanks to the helpful efforts of his teacher escort.

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The principal's office he remembered. He had been there before, many times.

He remembered the desk, the uncomfortable chair and the look in his principal's eyes that said, "Ah ha! You're mine now. Your ass belongs to me."

He remembered the principal's name was Mr. Wicker, and the reason he remembered that is because the kids used to call him "Mr. Dickster" behind his back. Brad was one of those kids. He felt bad about it when he heard Mr. Wicker died of cancer.

Mr. Wicker straightened himself up behind his desk — an effort to intimidate, Brad thought, which used to work before he turned 30 and realized that nothing he did in high school was ever going to matter.

Strangely though, there seemed to be something different about Mr. Wicker this time around, but it had been so long since Brad had stared into his face, he had trouble pinpointing what it was. He seemed stressed, and not at all like he was going to enjoy giving Brad the ass chewing that he remembered Mr. Wicker seemed to enjoy giving.

“You’re not supposed to be here,” Mr. Wicker said.

“That teacher made me come.”

“I don’t mean here in this office,” Mr. Wicker corrected, “I mean here in 1989.”

“I know,” Brad said. “How do *you* know that, Mr. Wicker?”

“Because I’m not Mr. Wicker,” Mr. Wicker said. “I am a Representative of the Dominion; Set over Angels and Keepers of the Shimmering Possibilities. I am called Enoch, after The One Who Found Favor And Did Not Taste Death.”

“I see,” Brad said. “Does this mean you’re not going to suspend me from school then?”

“I don’t think you understand the seriousness of this situation,” Enoch said from inside Mr. Wicker. “You’ve been here all of 10 minutes, and you’ve already screwed things up.”

“You don’t sound like an angel,” Brad said. “You sound like a pissed-off high school principal.”

“Yes, well, I grabbed the best body with the best brain that I could, so we could have a private conversation. Fortunately, your principal drinks, so I was able to commandeer him for the moment.”

“Yeah,” Brad replied, “he keeps his stash buried in his desk drawer. Every kid knew that, but he acted like it was a big secret.”

“We’re getting a little off topic,” Enoch said. “We have to find a way to send you back.”

“So? Just send me back to 2005. It’s not like I *want* to repeat high school.”

“You can’t just ‘go back’ to 2005. You’ve already thrown off the computations leading from this temporal grid.”

“You’ve got to be kidding!” Brad objected. “I only just got here.”

“I know,” Enoch said. “But you’ve already had an impact.”

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Enoch reached into thin air and pulled out a small, circular device from an invisible pocket that hung suspended between them. The device was silver and had glowing blue lines that covered it sporadically. It also had what appeared to be some kind of emitter on the top of it.

“You pulled that out of subspace, didn’t you?” Brad asked. “I used subspace in the plot of a short story I wrote.”

“Humans call it ‘subspace,’ but we call it something else,” Enoch replied. Then he shook his head, amazed at something. “Humans haven’t even discovered it yet, and they’ve already named it. And sooner or later, we’ll start calling it that too.”

“Whatever. What’s that thing do?”

“It’s a computer,” Enoch said. “With a holographic imager. In order for my kind to access information on this realm of existence, we need machines.”

Enoch placed the computer on the desk and touched it with the palm of his hand. A hologram shot out of the emitter and hovered over the desktop, spiraling slowly as he read the strange looking, holographic writing.

The script struck a memory with Brad. He had read about it at the library when he thought he might write a story that involved angel folklore.

“That’s angel script, isn’t it?” Brad asked. “I saw symbols that looked kind of like that in a book.”

“Yes,” Enoch said. “But this script can only be understood if you factor in a third dimension.”

He continued to read until he made a frustrated sound.

“Oh now, see? I’m going to have to fix that!”

“Fix what?” Brad asked.

“That teacher who walked you in here? He was minutes away from making an off-hand comment about his brother, who had to quit professional football because of a torn ligament in his knee. That comment caused one of his students to consider a career in sports medicine.

“And that’s exactly what that student did,” Enoch continued. “Or

at least he will.” Then Enoch looked at Brad. “Or he might, I should say. That remains to be seen because you chose that very moment to start banging your head into a nearby locker, and the teacher never made the comment.”

“So?”

“So! That student manages to assist a player who suffers a spinal cord injury on the field, and instead of dying, he lives a few years longer!”

“Well, that doesn’t sound so great.”

“By living a few years longer, the athlete’s son takes his dad’s plight as his life’s mission. He runs for a senate position, wins the election, and drafts a bill that will ultimately revolutionize the American government’s emphasis on paralysis research.

“With all the extra funding, treatment becomes possible, and most injuries will be able to be corrected. This was supposed to happen several decades earlier than it will now. Because of *you*. Unless I fix it.”

“Oh.”

“Would you like to know about all the people who will be injured and healed in that time, and all the important things those people will be able to do with their lives rather than just lying in a bed?”

“No.”

“Your presence has created a ripple affect, Mr. Know-It-All-Writer-Who-Knows-All-About-Subspace-And-Other-Advanced-Concepts. The probability vector that leads back to where you came from doesn’t even exist anymore.”

“You mean I’m stuck here?”

“Oh good gracious, no,” Enoch said. “That would be cataclysmic. No, *I’ll* have to do some serious calculations and make the necessary adjustments, but I’ll eventually get things back the way they were meant to be, and then we can open the proper vector to get you out of here.

“In the meantime — and this is very important — try to do everything exactly the way you did them before.”

“I hated the way I did everything before,” Brad argued.

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“I repeat: Do. Everything. The way. You. Did. Before.”

“How did this even happen?” Brad demanded. “There was a portal in my basement! Where’d it even come from?”

“Oh. Haha. Well, that was a bit of an oversight on our part. We, uh, we normally don’t forget to close those.”

Brad remembered the beings he saw while he was traveling down the tunnel of light. He remembered the one that looked especially worried, and then he remembered how the others had yelled at him.

“Hey, wait a minute,” Brad said. “That was you, wasn’t it? The one the others were yelling at when they saw me? This is your mistake, isn’t it?”

Enoch cleared his throat to stall for time so he could plot his next statement.

“I might have, uh, neglected to secure the juncture — no one told you to go through it, you know! ‘Oh, what’s this? I’ve never seen one before. It could lead anywhere! I think I’ll just hop on through!’ Do you realize the places you could have ended up?”

“If it had been the seventies, I would’ve really been screwed,” Brad reasoned. “As it stands now, I’m not all that lucky. How do you open those things anyway?”

“Harmonics. But that’s not important. The real trick is aligning it to where you need it to go, so in the meantime, while I fix the little messes you’ve made and work out some equations, you have to act just as you did before.”

“I don’t even remember where I’m supposed to be now. Are you sure I couldn’t make just a few minor changes?”

Enoch balled up his fist and shook it at Brad. He also made the vein on Mr. Wicker’s forehead begin to pulsate.

“YOU’RE GOING —” he said. Then he relaxed and took a deep breath. “— You’re going to cause me no end of trouble, aren’t you?”

“Probably. Hey! Maybe you could get somebody out there to print off a class schedule or something? Then I’d know everything I need to know. Also, I need a permission slip to leave school. I’m taking the rest of the day off.”

“I’ll get you the class schedule,” Enoch said, “but no permission

slip. Didn't I just say you must do everything as you did before?"

"Yes," Brad replied. "I am. I'm taking a day off. I did that a lot."

•••

At home, his parents were still married. That hadn't dissolved yet. It was still dissolving, and lucky him, he got to pretend it wasn't all over again. He got to be in the middle of it once more and wonder if, perhaps, he wasn't the solvent that helped it along.

"So, Brad," his mother said to him from across the dinner table. "Are you feeling any better?"

"Is it still 1989?" he responded.

"A simple 'no' would have sufficed, son," his dad corrected. "No need to be a smart-alek."

Brad slumped his shoulders and rubbed his hand through his hair. Then he picked at his food silently with his fork.

"So what's the matter with him anyway?" his dad asked his mother, as if the subject of his question wasn't even present.

"You know," Brad cut in, "I used to really hate it when you did that. I'm right here. I'm perfectly able to answer that question."

His dad glared at him.

"I wasn't asking you," he said. "I gave up asking you anything that I might want a direct answer to, without a lie or a smart-aleck quip."

"Look, dad, I don't even know what the exact date is, and even if I did, I probably wouldn't remember exactly what I did to piss you off. So can I just say I'm sorry now, and we can move on?"

"What do you mean you don't know what the date is? What does that have to do with leaving school early today?"

"Oh," Brad said. "I guess I do remember that. That's what you're mad at? Listen, if it's any consolation, I wouldn't have learned anything that I'm going to end up using anyway."

"Oh?" his dad responded, as if the previous statement were an interesting new philosophy that he wished to explore further. "And how did you arrive at that well thought-out conclusion?"



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“Past experience.”

His dad sighed through his nose and closed his eyes. That was what he did when he wanted to force down the things he was thinking rather than say them aloud. When he opened his eyes again a few seconds later, he avoided looking at Brad and concentrated instead on cutting his food.

Brad wished desperately that he had a cigarette and access to his liquor cabinet.

“Dad, what do you want from me?”

“I want you to take your education seriously,” he said. “I’d like you to get more involved in school. Maybe join a team.”

“A team?” Brad said. “No, I tried that before and it went horribly. What else?”

“What do you mean you tried that before? You’ve never joined a team. All you do is listen to your music, hang out with Wesley and play your Nintendo.”

“And skateboard,” Brad added helpfully. “Don’t forget that. Anyway, let’s pretend I did join a team. I’ll tell you what will happen:

“I would do it to make you proud, thinking that by making you proud, you and mom won’t get a divorce, because that’s how your mind works when you’re 15.

“It doesn’t go that way. When you and mom *do* get divorced, I’m on a team with a bunch of assholes, and I’m angry; angry enough to where I start to become *like* them.

Brad paused. He remembered something he had forgotten. Something that had changed him. Something he had buried.

“And I think someone dies.”

“Brad,” his mother exclaimed, “What’s gotten into you? What makes you think your dad and I are going to get a divorce?”

“Oh, Sarah,” his dad said, belittling Brad’s version of the future. “He’s just being dramatic.”

“It’s how he feels, John,” his mother responded. “That’s what he thinks is going to happen.”

“Again,” Brad said. “I’m right here.”

“I’m sorry, Brad,” his mother said. “Why do you think we’re

going to get divorced?”

“I’d prefer not to say,” he said, easing out of that uncomfortable topic. “I was just trying to explain why it’s not such a good idea for me to join a team.”

No one said anything for a few moments.

Then Brad’s knee itched from where the strands of his torn jeans kept rubbing against them. He looked down at them, and then he looked at his “Guns N’ Roses” t-shirt. He moved his head back and forth and he felt his hair sway.

“Hey,” he said. “I’ve got an idea. I look like a bum.”

His dad looked up. The statement had taken him off balance.

“I forgot that you used to hate how I dressed,” Brad recalled. “What if I cleaned up my act a little? Got a hair cut. Got some jeans without holes in them. No rock t-shirts. That’d be a nice start, yeah?”

His dad just looked at him, trying to estimate how serious the offer was.

“That would be a pleasant change, yes,” his dad said. “You could also stop swearing at the dinner table.”

“Yeah, I can do that,” Brad agreed. “We can even sell my Nintendo to buy some new clothes. After you’ve seen an X-box, Nintendo just doesn’t cut it anyway.”

“What’s an X-box?” his mother asked.

“That’s not important,” Brad said. “What is important is that we get things off to a fresh new start. It’ll make things go smoother while I’m here.

“And then, if I should revert back to acting like a 15-year-old, and I suddenly seem surprised that my clothes are different and my hair is cut, well, that’s the other Brad’s problem.”

“Who’s problem?” his mother asked. “Brad, I’m not really following you.”

“My problem, I mean to say. We can go clothes shopping Saturday. When is Saturday anyway?”

Neither parent knew what to make of that.

“Brad,” his mom said, “Tomorrow is Saturday. Today is Friday.”

“Seriously? Sweet.”

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•••

That night he slept in a bed that was both strange and familiar, and he dreamed of things that were both memories and of things to come.

It was the same dream he had on many nights, for many years, buried so deep, he always forgot it.

But that was before he stepped through a doorway; one that led through all the Shimmering Possibilities.

*He sees her dancing in the center clearing of jagged rocks; black, sharp and bloodstained. In her mind, he knows, she dances among the falling orange blossoms that float like feathery angels, earthward falling, but with an illusion of flight. She smells like the color blue and sings like the morning rain and holds a truth in her heart of hearts: If she collects enough of them, she can build wings of her own. And with them, she can attempt to fly. But when she does, she will slice herself open at the attempt.*

*Bloodstained rocks.*

Brad awoke in a puddle of sweat, gasping for air and clutching his bed sheet in a tightly wound fist. It took several moments for him to calm himself, and when he did, a fleeting thought occurred to him: Some dreams are truths and some dreams are lies.

“And still others,” he mumbled quietly to himself before he drifted back to sleep, “are riddles — secrets we keep even from ourselves.”

## IV

“I’d like to look a little like River Phoenix,” Brad said to the barber, who had no clue who River Phoenix even was. “Can you do that?”

“No problem,” said the barber.

BUUUUUUUZZZZZZZZZZZZ.

When the hair stopped falling and the buzzing fell silent, he looked nothing like River Phoenix. But still, his bangs were out of his eyes (despite his suggestion) and the back of his neck didn’t itch anymore, so he felt okay about the haircut.

“You look very handsome,” his mother said as she paid the barber. “Every bit as good as River Phoenix.”

His hair was combed neatly, but he quickly fixed that by rubbing both of his hands over his scalp a number of times. When it finally looked as though his hair had never known the touch of a comb, he felt satisfied.

“This is how I’ll wear my hair in 2005,” he told his mother. “Or at least one day of it.”

His mother smiled at him as if she thought that was nice, and she wondered to herself just what kind of a phase this was he was going through. If Brad hadn’t been prone to go through strange phases throughout his life, she would have worried.

After that, Brad’s mom dropped him off at the pawnshop so he could sell his Nintendo while she went window-shopping. A year from now, he remembered, he would visit this very pawnshop to sell

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his dad's coin collection because he was mad at him.

And his dad never said anything about it because they both silently knew that he had it coming.

Brad sighed at the thought. Then he walked into the pawnshop to ask the hippy who ran it how much he would be willing to cough up for a slightly used Nintendo. If the hippy was high, and chances were good that he was, Brad planned to fleece him.

He wondered how the hippy even stayed in business.

When he opened the door, he detected what he thought was the faint odor of marijuana. He smiled to himself and from somewhere in his mind, he heard his literary agent say, "Ca-ching!"

However, when he looked up, the hippy was glaring at him. And there was something kind of familiar about the pissed off expression he had.

"Lock the door behind you," the hippy said. "We need to have a serious discussion, young man."

"Hey, just what kind of a hippy are you, anyway?" Brad said. Then it occurred to him where he had seen that expression before. "Ah, shit. It's you, isn't it?"

"Oh, I see you do remember me," Enoch said. "I was wondering if you remembered me or the conversation we had just yesterday, considering your blatant disregard for everything I said. What do you think you are doing?"

"I'm going to sell this Nintendo," Brad said, as he held the Nintendo up to give Enoch a better view of it. "And what are you doing inside that hippy?"

"Oh, I had nothing better to do than just hop inside the first foul-smelling, lice-infested human that I found. You know, kind of like how you hopped through the portal you found in your basement? You remember that, don't you?"

"Sure do," Brad said. "How's it going with sending me home?"

"How's it going?" Enoch said, marveling at the question. "Well, seeing as I'm already standing here — inside a man who's apparently never heard of soap or deodorant — I'll go ahead and tell you how it's going. It's not looking too hopeful. No. It's not going well

because somebody can't keep to a simple plan."

"Me?"

"Yes, you. I'm trying to work out some extremely complex temporal equations, only I can't because somebody keeps changing the variables."

"What'd I do now?"

"Well let's see. Right now, the probability currents favor your dad sending you to a military school because he now believes, more than ever, that you lack discipline."

"He's right," Enoch continued. "Under normal circumstances, I would be all for it. You deserve it. Just thinking about you crawling out of bed in the wee hours of the morning to scrub toilets, and then heading off for a nice round of push-ups is a thought that will continue to brighten my day in sad times."

"But then, someone like *me* understands that the proper temporal currents must be restored, and so I am perfectly willing to put my own selfish desires aside in favor of doing the right thing."

"But you? No. You're off to drop little hints about the future; tell your parents they'll get divorced; refuse to join the school football team. In other words, doing everything differently than you did before."

"My dad's planning what?"

"To send you to a military school," Enoch said. "You were supposed to tell him that you would tryout for the team."

"Oh yeah," Brad said. "Last night was *that* conversation?"

"If you mean the one where you told him you would tryout for the football team, then yes. It was that conversation. You do remember how it went the first time?"

"Yeah," Brad replied. "Dad said he wanted me to join the team, and I agreed because I thought it would get him off my back. But I didn't try all that hard, and I didn't make the cut."

"But dad didn't know that, so he warmed up to me a little, and told me that he didn't make the team in his freshman year either; but with a little practice, I'd probably do better next year."

"So we started going to the park on the weekend and tossing the

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football around.

“The next year, I did make the team, and I became a jock because I wanted to make him *really* proud, and because I thought it would help keep mom and dad together. But it didn’t.

“I became a jock, and I stopped hanging out with Wesley because my new jock friends didn’t like him. I just blew him off like he didn’t even matter.

“A few years later, he tried to rekindle the friendship at a party, but I was angry at the world and I embarrassed him. And we didn’t speak again until the night I found the portal.

“But yeah, when I tried out for the team, dad and I bonded a little. He even overlooked the fight I got in at school, even though I got suspended for a week.”

“So,” Enoch said. “You do remember. What you don’t know is that by agreeing to tryout for that team, you kept yourself out of military school. And as much as I would like to see you punished severely for the trouble you’ve caused me, if that happens, I can’t send you back to the life you remember.

“And that would have far-reaching repercussions,” Enoch added. “You only took up writing because it provided an escape from your fast-food job. You brought your life to a very low point so you could remake yourself, and you emerged creative and talented.

“Your writing has influence that is, in human terms at least, beyond measure.”

“Really?”

“You took up a very public role of influence as a profession,” Enoch replied. “Brad Pitt, for example, will be on location filming a movie based on your last novel. He will be at the exact place at the exact time that he is supposed to be. If the novel is never written, he will be someplace else.”

“What happens to Brad Pitt?”

“That’s not for you to know,” Enoch said, with a slight scolding tone in his voice. “You haven’t displayed a very keen ability to keep a secret. And besides, it doesn’t affect you. But it is just one small example of how a life — especially someone who speaks to others as

loudly as a popular writer — can affect millions.

“These are, or rather they were, your formative years. If you are sent off to military school, you won’t take up writing. I’ll send you back anyway because I can’t leave you here, but you won’t like the place I send you to.”

“Hey,” Brad said. “You’ve got to give me a head’s-up when something important like that is coming. My dad used to *always* tell me he wanted me to get more involved in school. I didn’t know that was the conversation where I actually listened.

“Shit. I don’t want to go to military school. Hey,” Brad added, as another thought occurred to him, “that fight I told you about? The guy I fought with eventually got sent to military school too.”

“I know,” Enoch said. “He’s part of the reason you won’t like what your life turns into. Guess who’ll be there with you?”

“That would be bad,” Brad concluded. “He was pretty big. And something else just occurred to me; if my dad and I just had the conversation where I agreed to tryout for the football team, then that fight is just around the corner.”

“Yes,” Enoch agreed. “And I know what you’re thinking, and I want you to stop thinking it.”

“I got my ass stomped. His name was Chuck. He did *something* and I confronted him about it before I thought about what I was doing.

“The events surrounding it are kind of fuzzy, but the fight I remember. I replayed it a thousand times in my mind over the years. You know, like people do?”

“I would have done this differently, or said that differently. I would have ducked when he swung. He’s right-handed, you know. And he looks to his right just before he swings.”

“No!” Enoch said. “You’ve got to do things just as you did before! You’ve got to go back to your dad and tell him you’ve decided to tryout for the football team. Then you’ve got to actually do it, only not well enough to be selected.

“And, as much as you hate the idea, on the day of the fight—“

”I’ve got to take a beating,” Brad resolved. “Thanks for leaving



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that portal open. I'm having a real good time here."

"Don't mention it," Enoch replied, rather bitterly. "I'm having a real good time inside this hippy. I mean, how many chemicals can you possibly pump into a human brain?"

"I don't know. Depends on the brain," Brad said. "Okay then, help me out so I don't screw things up again. I don't even remember what the fight is about. How will I know when I'm supposed to have it?"

"You'll know," Enoch said. "It's in your memory, you've just suppressed it. It'll come back to you, and then we can return you to the unhappy but prosperous life you had before."

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That night, Brad did a bunch of push-ups while he thought about the situation. He did all the push-ups his 15-year-old arms could handle. He wanted to be in fine physical condition to withstand his upcoming beating at school.

He wished he knew what day it was going to happen. Soon, he thought, but he didn't know the exact day. He just bought new clothes — five pairs of faded, blue jeans without holes in them, a bunch of black shirts (no rock shirts, but still, he was who he was) and a black trench coat that would come in handy later. He didn't buy shoes. He decided to keep his Dr. Martens. They'd come in handy later too, though he didn't know how handy either of those items would actually prove to be just yet.

He hated the thought of getting blood all over his new clothes. He really hated that it would be his blood that got all over them.

*Bloodstained rocks*

"I wonder what that means," he said to himself when the image popped into his head. Then he pushed it from his thoughts because that's what his mind told him to do.

His arms finally gave out and he collapsed to the floor.

"Brad," his mom called from downstairs. "You wanted me to let you know when dad got home so you could talk to him about joining the team?"

(“Better get used to push-ups,” he thought to himself, when he remembered what his dad had planned for him.)

“Yeah, mom?”

“Your dad called from the shop,” she said. “He has to work late tonight.”

“I’ll bet he does,” Brad mumbled. “Okay, mom. Thanks.”

He wanted a cigarette. Chuck smoked cigarettes. He wore Dr. Martens too. Soon, the bottom logo on the sole of Chuck’s Dr. Martens would be stamped on Brad’s forehead.

Once, years ago, (or rather, a few months from now) he’d heard at a party that Chuck had come to the previous event thrown by the host. A fight broke out between some guy and Chuck, and everyone was very entertained by the beating the guy took.

But then it turned nasty. After Chuck beat the kid nearly to death, he dragged him outside and then planted his open mouth on a nearby curb. Then Chuck kicked him in the side of the head. The kid rolled a few times, but most of his teeth stayed on the curb.

After that, everyone at the party stopped being entertained and started being a little sick. They filed out silently, one-by-one, and they all remembered never to cross paths with Chuck.

The thing that saved Chuck from juvenile hall was that, in addition to being a sadist, he was also the quarterback for the football team. The other thing that saved him was no one wanted to end up like that kid. The police never found out who did it because no one would tell them.

The only thing that saved Brad from his fight with Chuck was a nearby teacher. If it had been at a party or some other place where people just watched instead of helped, then the earnings for his first novel would have gone to a dentist instead of new furniture.

“Stupid portal,” he grumbled. “I should’ve listened to Wesley.”

He’d have to give Wesley a call. He needed a friend.

*SCRYING GLASS*

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There was little point in trying out for the team if he couldn't tell his dad he was going to do it. Through the weekend, his dad kept leaving early for work and then staying late, and when Brad would approach him, his dad would tell him that he was tired and they'd talk tomorrow.

His dad was avoiding him. Probably, Brad thought, because he felt a little guilty about what he was doing.

On Sunday he called Wesley. Wesley came over and brought the new Mötley Crüe album with him. It was a lot newer to Wesley than it was to Brad, but he tried to act interested since Wesley was so excited about it.

Wesley was confused at Brad's new look. He didn't understand why he'd abandoned his Heavy Metal sense of fashion. Brad tried to explain — without being overly offensive because of the clothes Wesley currently wore — that it was something that would embarrass them all later.

And for Brad, "later" was right now.

That brought him to the next subject he wanted to address with Wesley, which was this: He'd decided that he needed his help, and in order for him to get the help he needed, he had to tell Wesley everything.

He told him all about the portal.

"What?" Wesley said. "I don't understand."

Then he told him again.

"I know this sounds hard to believe," Brad said. "And I know what I look like to you, but the truth is, I'm really a 30-year old trapped inside my 15-year old body. I found a portal in my basement, and you were there when I stepped through it. It was a time portal or something, and you told me not to go through it, but I did anyway, and here I am."

"Are you nuts?" Wesley asked.

"You ask me that a lot," Brad replied. "And I should have listened to you the first time you brought my sanity into question. But I didn't."

So I'm telling you this now, because maybe you can help me figure this out."

"Figure what out?"

Brad told him about trying out for the team, the military school, temporal equations and probability vectors, and the upcoming ass kicking by Chuck. He also told him about Enoch, but left out the part about him being an angel because, let's face it, that seemed far-fetched.

Wesley had trouble wrapping his mind around the ass kicking by Chuck. Out of everything, the fact that Brad would pick a fight with him seemed the most unbelievable.

"I know," Brad said. "I don't know what I was thinking. I don't even remember why I do it. But what I do remember is that I was lucky to escape with my ass intact," Brad said. "Mostly intact," he corrected.

"If you're really from the year 2005, then you can tell me who's president."

"George Bush."

"What, is he the president for life or something?"

"It's his son," Brad said. "And what kind of a question is that to verify my story? You won't know if I'm right or not. So let's skip to the chase: Your middle name is 'Nancy.'"

The blood in Wesley's face began to drain to some other part of his body.

"You told me that just before I left," Brad informed him. "And I promised I wouldn't tell a soul. (Well, I told you, but that doesn't count.) Anyway, you also told me about your dad."

"Oh my God," Wesley said. "You're telling the truth, aren't you?"

"Yes. I am. Do you have any idea what it's like to be 15 all over again? The hormones. The pimples. The uncontrollable erections at the worst possible times, and for no apparent reason.

"I only just got here Friday, and I already have military school hanging over my head and an upcoming beating scheduled. And I would kill — absolutely kill — for a cigarette."

SCRYING GLASS

“So why now?” Wesley asked. “Why here and now?”

“Huh?”

“That guy that keeps popping up?”

“Enoch.”

“Yeah. You said he told you that you could have ended up anywhere, at any time. So why here?”

“I don’t know,” Brad said. “I haven’t really thought about it.”

“Maybe you should. I mean, what are the odds that you would have ended up here and now? One in a million?”

“Probably more,” Brad said. “You wouldn’t believe how many junctures there were in between the portals.”

“So maybe there’s something that drew you here?” Wesley asked. “Something that ties you to what’s going on now?”

*Bloodstained rocks.*

“Or something that’s about to happen! Wesley, you’re a genius!”

Wesley seemed pleased at the compliment.

“I am? If I’m a genius, do I make a lot of money in 2005?”

“Nope. You’re a social worker.”

“Oh. That sucks.”

“It’s okay,” Brad told his friend. “I make a lot of money and I’m miserable. You help other people, and you have everything in the world that matters. I know that sounds like it should be printed on a Hallmark Card, but it’s true anyway.”

“I need to re-evaluate things,” he added, thinking out loud. “There’s something coming that’s worse than the fight. There’s somebody I’m not really remembering, and I think that’s what drew me here. It’s like there’s this person-shaped gap in my mind. It’s a woman. Something happened to her, and I had something to do with it. But that’s all I remember.”

“So what happened to her?”

“Didn’t I just say that’s *all* I remember? Maybe I’ll find out tomorrow when we go back to school. But I’ll tell you this: I’m really starting to get tired of trying to do what everybody tells me to do all the time.”

“Enoch, my dad — ‘join the team,’ ‘get more involved in school,’

J.D. STIVER

‘don’t screw up the future.’ The future was already screwed up. My future might as well have been diagnosed with terminal cancer.

“And the factors that led to that cancer began here and now. It never even occurred to me that I was *drawn* here because of it.

“But I think you’re right, that’s what happened. But if I try to do things differently than *they* want — my dad and Enoch — it’ll be a war. A war between me and them.”

“Us and them,” Wesley said. “So what do we do?”

Brad smiled. A warm smile at first — to his friend, because of his loyalty — but then the smile turned to sheer mischief.

“Do you know how we declare war in the new millennium?”

“Uh, no.”

“We call them pre-emptive strikes.”

## V

Mr. Wicker, Brad's principal, was sad to learn that he had prostate cancer. If they'd discovered it earlier, he might have had a chance. But they didn't, and he died.

Or at least that's what happened in the summer of 1990, during Brad's first go at life. But on Monday, August 21, 1989, Mr. Wicker was surprised to see a brochure waiting for him on his desk.

The brochure contained many interesting facts about prostate cancer screening, as well as a listing that outlined the odds of survival for early detection. The statistics were marked with a green highlighter so he'd be sure to see them.

Accompanying this brochure was a neatly typed note. The note had some chilling details in it, such as the date of his death, along with a horrible account of what would happen to his family after he died.

The note also suggested that he might want to increase his life insurance benefits *before* he sees the doctor, rather than attempting to do it afterward. "Those insurance bastards have a thing against terminally-ill people trying to up their benefits," the note said.

As Mr. Wicker read it, he paused several times over the words "terminally-ill people." He was beginning to feel the bottom drop out of his world.

But there was more. The note also talked about how his daughter would never feel "protected" or "safe again" after his passing, and she would marry the sort of man that he, Mr. Wicker, would have chased off and possibly assaulted, had he been around to do so. But

*J.D. STIVER*

he wasn't around because, as the note indicated, he would be dead by then. Or he might. "Better take this seriously," the note said.

The person his daughter would marry would frequently cheat on her, and she would spend her time drinking in bars to dull the misery.

Mr. Wicker stopped reading the note again. Then he thought about his daughter — now an eighth grader — and he KNEW that's exactly the kind of thing she'd say if he died. That she didn't feel safe.

And as soon as he knew it, a probability current veered in an entirely new direction.

The note was signed, "The Angels."

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One of "The Angels" nearly sprang his ankle jumping from the roof of the school through the skylight in the library, about midnight the night before.

As soon as he jumped, the other Angel remembered something and said, "Uh, Brad, didn't I mention I brought along some rope to lower ourselves down?"

"No!" Brad said, trying to both scream and whisper at the same time. "I probably wouldn't have jumped if you had mentioned that."

"Sorry," Wesley said. "I'm a little nervous. It's my first breaking and entering. What happens if we get caught?"

"We'll just explain to the police that we're trying to make the world a better place. Then they'll arrest us, call our parents, and we can explain it to them too."

"That's easy for you to say," Wesley said. "Your dad's already sending you to military school."

Brad glared at him in a way that friends glare at their friends, then told him to lower the rope and crawl on down. He tied one end of the rope to a ventilation pipe and lowered himself down.

Then they crept through the school to the principal's office and attempted to pick the lock. This attempt lasted several long moments.

"When I worked for McDonald's, I hired an ex-con who told me



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how to do this,” Brad said. “I used a lot of what he told me in my first book. I got as much out of him as I could before he and his friends robbed us a few months later. We kept in touch after he went back to prison, and then I got even more stuff out of him. You wouldn’t believe the kinds of people you can meet working at McDonald’s.”

The lock clicked and the door opened.

“So how many people can we actually help,” Wesley asked. “How many are there like Mr. Wicker?”

“They’re out there, but I don’t remember a lot of the details,” Brad said. “One kid died in a car crash because he was too drunk to drive, but I don’t recall the exact time and date.

“There are others, but I don’t remember a lot of the details for them either. So basically, there’s just Mr. Wicker. Did you get the brochure from the hospital?”

“Yup,” Wesley said. He handed it to Brad.

“And here’s the note,” Brad said, pulling it out of his pocket. “I’ll just borrow a paper-clip from Mr. Wicker, and we’ll get out of here.”

“So, how’d you know all about that stuff with Mr. Wicker?” Wesley asked. “About his daughter and all that?”

“I met her in a bar and bought her a few drinks. She was one of those people who unload all their problems on someone if they buy them a drink. Just one of those things.”

Then he opened the principal’s desk drawer to grab the paper clip, and he saw something that would be even more helpful than either his Dr. Martens or his trench coat.

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The following day, Brad realized he’d forgotten how dull high school could be. His first day back began with home room, where he was supposed to sit quietly and wait for his classes to start. He read a book while his other classmates talked, finished homework and slept.

Then school officially began. They all stood for *The Pledge of Allegiance* and pledged their allegiance, yet again, just in case it had

worn off from the last time they pledged. Then everybody sat and listened to the announcements, which beamed to each room through the intercom system.

There were a lot of students forging hall passes, the announcement said. Anyone caught with a forgery would get an automatic suspension. There would be a pep rally that day, and this was news that caused everyone to moan. Then the announcement said that someone had broken into the school last night and stolen absolutely nothing. But if something *was* missing, all the teachers were advised to let the office know immediately.

Then there was a buzz that sounded like a cattle prod and everyone shuffled like zombies to first period.

Brad had a science class for first period, so he got to dissect a worm.

There didn't appear to be a lesson plan attached to this assignment. They just cut the worm open, spread it out and pinned it to a board. The teacher gave step-by-step instructions on how to do this, and then assigned homework.

Any future scientists coming out of that classroom was purely by chance, Brad thought. Only the future sadists or serial killers might have found their calling.

Buzz. Shuffle.

Second period was spent reliving the horror that is math. The teacher drew equations on the board, talking to himself as he did it, and then assigned homework.

Buzz. Shuffle.

By third period, Brad was wondering where he could get a copy of a forged hall pass to leave school. He didn't know how much more he could take. He would've simply faked illness and asked the teacher for a real hall pass, except this was the same teacher who had dismissed him Friday (just three days ago) so he didn't like his chances.

It was history class and, ironically, the one he had dropped into from the future. In that class, there was a book they were forced to read that talked about long-dead people debating long-dead issues,

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without any kind of anchor that would help someone apply an ounce of meaning to it for the present day.

But good news! The teacher assigned homework, and one of the assigned questions at the back of the chapter asked, “How does this apply to the present day?” That meant that, somewhere inside the vastly thick book of facts and names, someone had addressed this issue.

Buzz. Lunch!

“I’m starting to crack under the pressure, Wesley,” Brad said, as they sat in the outside eating-area of the school. They sat under an awning because it was raining.

“It’s only Monday,” Wesley said. “On your first day back, and we have a fourth period lunch. It’s only going to get worse from here.”

“Yeah, I heard the announcement. A pep rally. Oh, God. Do you have any idea how pointless this all seems when you’re an adult?”

“It seems pretty pointless when you’re a high school student too,” Wesley said. “So when is Chuck going to beat you up?”

“I’m thinking I’ll pick a fight with him today so I can skip the pep rally. Any beating I’ll take from him just doesn’t seem as bad as having to sit through that.”

“So, you’re still going through with it? Even after the note we left for Mr. Wicker last night?”

“Actually, I haven’t decided yet,” Brad said. “I’m sure Enoch will be along sooner or later to scream at me for throwing things off. But there still might be *another* reason for me to face him. We’ll see.”

“I’d sure hate to be you,” Wesley said.

“Yup,” Brad agreed. “From what I remember about him, Chuck’s fist is as big as a regular person’s head. But there’s still one thing I have going for me.”

“Yeah?”

“His brain’s as big as a regular person’s fist. He’s not that bright. And when you’re a writer, smarts count.”

They both ate their lunch for a while and contemplated their respective lives in high school. Wesley surveyed his peers and wondered what the future held for them. Brad did the same, but

wondered how and why the future had unfolded the way it did.

He was deep in his thoughts, lost in time, and so he didn't notice when everyone, including Wesley, began to watch something they found humorous. In fact, he didn't notice *any* of the murmurings, whisperings, jeers and laughter until Wesley began to take part in them.

"Weirdo," Wesley said. "Hey, Brad, check out the canker sore."

"The what?"

Wesley pointed to something behind Brad, so he turned to see what it was, and that's when he saw *her*. And when he did, a final, painful puzzle piece came slamming down inside his mind.

"Oh my God."

"Brad? You okay? You just turned pale. What's wrong?"

"How could I have forgotten?"

"What?" Wesley asked, now visibly concerned.

"It's her. She's the reason I'm here."

"The canker sore?"

Brad's face twisted into rage.

"Don't call her that!" He screamed, which startled several people around them, causing those people to stare and Wesley to recoil.

Then Brad calmed himself — a little, he was still shaking — but no longer enraged. "I'm ... I'm sorry. You don't know what happens. You don't know the affect she has on all of us. Jesus. She's probably the *reason* you became a social worker. I can't believe I forgot."

His eyes began to water. And his hands shook even more.

"I cried for three days," Brad said. "And then I started drinking and I didn't stop. And then I wrote about monsters. One monster. And it was me.

"And I dreamed about her for 15 years, as her memory turned into a cancer inside me ... my soul."

Her name was — is — Julia Cranker, but everyone called her the canker sore. In a town of poor people, she came from a family that was the poorest of all. Her family lived in a trailer on the outskirts of town, and her parents — an alcoholic dad and a mother that had her spirit beat out of her, if not her life — had begrudgingly enrolled her

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in school when the state came by and said they had to.

Elementary school had not gone well for her and high school had been even worse. She was a bright, imaginative child, but no one knew that because no one had bothered to know it. They found out later when it was too late, and only because she kept a diary.

She was not all that different looking than most of the other kids, except for one thing: Her parents had spent what little money they had on alcohol and other things, and apparently none of it on her.

She had a total of two dresses that looked like they had been made from table clothes, and shoes that looked like they had once been her dad's army boots.

Her hair was un-styled, long and body-less, but combed everyday because she was a person who hadn't given up.

Yet.

She was an outcast of biblical proportions with the worst kind of invisible leprosy — the kind that EVERYBODY could see. She wore her scarlet letter and didn't know what sin she'd committed to get it.

She smelled like orange blossoms and looked a little like Christina Ricci. Her only friends were her books and she always carried them with her.

One day, for reasons that were her own, she began to dance in the rain. It was a dance of freedom, defiance and beauty — too significant for a high school student to understand. She danced in the middle of them all. In the center clearing of jagged rocks.

Brad remembered this day. He didn't know how he could have forgotten, but he knew why he would want to. He stood and lowered his head and made a silent promise to himself and to her, even though she couldn't hear it.

It would be different this time. He would wash over anyone who tried to hurt her like the wrathful hand of God.

"This is the day I fight Chuck," he said to Wesley, without taking his eyes off of Julia. "I'm sorry I yelled at you. Her name is Julia. Please remember that."

"Yeah, I'm sorry," he said. "Jeeze, I've never seen you like this before."

“I’ve never been like this before,” Brad said. “I was the worst kind of person there was, even when I had a chance not to be. And 15 years of regret just turned into rage. At myself, at this school, and in a few minutes, at Chuck.”

“You’re seriously going to fight him?”

“Not just fight him,” Brad said, as he tilted his head to the left to crack his neck. “I’m going to make him my bitch.”

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They waited in the hallway near the spot that Brad remembered. He stood silently with his arms folded, leaning against the wall, and Wesley stood next to him, shuffling from one foot to the next, like he did when he got nervous.

“Relax,” Brad said to him. “It’ll be fine.”

“If you say so,” Wesley said.

They watched people passing them, heading to class, and they waited.

“When it starts, put some distance between us. If it looks like it’s going badly, go get a teacher. But I don’t think it’ll come to that.”

Wesley nodded in compliance and took a deep breath.

Then he saw Julia coming down the hall, dripping wet and carrying her books. When she was about to pass them, Brad stopped her.

“Hello, Julia,” he said to her. His tone was gentle and sorrowful, but then warmed and became friendly. “Is that a copy of ‘War and Peace?’”

She appeared startled that someone had spoken to her, and Brad’s heart broke a little.

“Ummm, yes.”

“That’s a big, thick book. I need to ask your permission to borrow it. I’ll need it for just five minutes; 10 at most.”

“My book?”

“Please?”

“You can’t read it in just 10 minutes,” she said. “Umm.”

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“I’m not going to read it,” Brad said. “You can stand right here if you like, to make sure I give it back. Then Wesley here will walk you to your next class.”

“I will?” Wesley asked.

“He’d be happy to,” Brad answered. “And he’ll carry your books for you, if you’ll let him. I’d do it, but I’m going to be suspended in a few minutes.”

Julia wasn’t sure what to make of this, but there was something about his tone that told her to trust him. But she wasn’t used to trusting people (no one had ever earned it), so she met him halfway.

“Umm. Class will start before then and I don’t want to be late,” she said. “But, uh, you can borrow the book, if you like.”

He took the book and smiled at her. “Thank you. I’ll give it back.”

“Okay,” she said. “Uh, goodbye.”

Then she continued down the hall, heading for her class.

Only seconds later, Chuck and one of his satellites, (Perez, Brad thought his name was) came walking down the hall as well. They passed Brad and Wesley without looking at them. Wesley stiffened and turned a little pale. He didn’t run. He was a good friend.

Chuck sure was big.

Brad kept leaning against the wall, holding Julia’s copy of *War and Peace*, and whispered to Wesley, “Wait for it.”

Then Chuck came up behind Julia and knocked all the books out of her hand. Perez snickered. And they continued walking.

“This was the kind of shit she was always putting up with,” Brad said. “Death by a thousand cuts. Start putting some distance between us now.”

Wesley did as he was told.

Then Brad called out to Chuck, loudly, so they could all hear. Every single one of the bastards. Including himself.

“Hey Chuck!” Brad said. “You knuckle-dragging, shit-slinging, ass-humping, shaved ape. Come over here for a second. Let’s talk.”

Everyone in the hallway paused and went dead quiet.

“What the hell?” Chuck said. “Who said that?”

“I did,” Brad said. “I think it’s time you learned a little humility.”

“Who’re you?”

“I’m Brad Anderson. I just called you out. How long’s it going to take for that fact to reach your ape-shit brain? Should I come back in five minutes?”

Chuck clenched his fists and bit his bottom lip. He walked through the hall toward Brad, slowly, as if he were unsure whether anyone could really be this stupid. When he walked, it was like the parting of the Red Sea.

Perez didn’t follow, probably because he was stunned, and also because he’d never been in a position where Chuck had required backup. Neither had Chuck.

He finally stood in front of Brad, within arm’s reach, and he towered over him. Brad just kept leaning against the wall like he was a cowboy (complete with trench coat) because when you’re in high school and trying to make a point they’ll remember, style counts.

He’d try, he thought, to put a little style in the ass kicking he was about to deliver to Chuck.

“Apologize to her,” Brad said. “For knocking her books out of her hand.”

“Apologize to the canker sore?” Chuck asked. This confused him. The whole situation confused him.

“And don’t call her that again,” Brad said.

Chuck just shook his head like he couldn’t believe the stupidity, then he turned to the right.

And he swung.

Years ago, Brad’s head had been where he swung. This time, there was a brick wall. There was a nasty crunch when he hit it, and Chuck howled in pain.

Then Brad, rather calmly, took two steps to the right — in the direction that Chuck had turned when he swung — so he could face him directly. Then Brad kicked him in the balls as hard as he could with his steel-toed Dr. Martens. (See how handy they were?)

Chuck’s knees folded together and then buckled. He dropped to the floor, on his knees, and howled even more miserably. After that, Brad judged, there still seemed to be a little fight left in him. He



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thought there would be, so for good measure, he took Julia's copy of *War and Peace* and whacked him in the side of the head.

Brad heard Chuck's jaw pop, and then he fell backwards, limp and unconscious.

Everyone just stood in the hallway, transfixed, shocked and horrified.

"That went so much better the second time," Brad said. Then he went over to Chuck, reached inside his jacket pocket and pulled out his cigarettes and some matches.

"I've been dying for one of these," he told Chuck, who was in no position to hear him. "You mind if I borrow one? No? Thanks."

He lit the cigarette. Then, because his lungs weren't accustomed to the smoke, he had to fight the urge to cough.

He looked at Wesley and said, "Might as well smoke, I'm about to be suspended pretty soon anyway."

Then Brad turned his attention to everyone in the hallway. Julia was there too.

"You all just saw what I did to him, and I could have done worse. When I get back from suspension, if I hear that any of you has done anything — or *said* anything — to her that I don't like, then I *will* do worse," Brad said, while indicating he meant Julia. "A lot worse. To whoever did it or said it. Now, don't you all have classes to go to or something?"

They just kept staring at him.

"GO!"

And they moved. They had just seen this person produce the impossible.

"Wesley?"

Wesley came over. "Oh my God," he said. "Holy shit," he added for good measure.

"It helps when you know the punch is coming and you have 15 years to think about it," Brad said. "Please give Julia her book back. And see her to her class, would you?"

"Uh, yeah. No problem."

"Oh, and could you grab my homework for me? I think I might be

staying in high school for a little while longer. Enoch's going to be good and pissed at me."

And then Brad smoked his cigarette and waited for a teacher to discover what he'd done.

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Mr. Wicker wasn't there to suspend Brad like the last time. Instead, that task fell to the assistant principal, who also doubled as a guidance councilor. His name was Mr. Franklin.

Brad sat outside his office and eavesdropped on the teacher giving the report about what he discovered as he headed to his classroom. Chuck had to be picked up by his aunt and taken to the emergency room so they could treat his hand — which was likely broken — and check to see whether he had a concussion.

The coach was going to be furious, the teacher told Mr. Franklin, because Chuck was their quarterback. "Was" being the optimum word here. His hand was busted up pretty good.

Mr. Franklin peered outside his window at Brad. Then he asked if the teacher was sure it had been Brad that did it.

"Believe it or not, that's the kid that did it," the teacher said. "There was a hallway full of witnesses. He was just standing over the kid smoking a cigarette and waiting for a teacher to come along."

"That guy he beat up? The quarterback — he's huge," Mr. Franklin said. "That kid sitting in the office is *definitely* the one who did it?"

"He's the one, all right."

Mr. Franklin thanked the teacher and then walked outside of the office to glare at Brad.

"So where's Mr. Wicker," Brad asked him. "Is he okay?"

"Mr. Wicker left for the day to attend to some personal business," Mr. Franklin said.

"Was it a doctor's appointment?"

"That's none of your business, young man," Mr. Franklin said. "My office. Now!"

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The teacher turned and left and Brad sat in a chair in front of Mr. Franklin's desk.

Then Mr. Franklin closed the door and stopped acting as angry as he'd been acting.

"Okay, now we can talk in private."

"Enoch?" Brad asked.

"No, my name's Mr. Franklin. Jim. What really happened out there?"

Brad wondered how much he should tell him, and eventually concluded that Mr. Franklin suspected there was more to this than just a fight between students.

"Chuck threw the first punch," Brad said. "Only he hit a wall instead of me, and that's how he broke his hand. I decided not to let him throw another punch, so I kicked him in the nuts and hit him with a book. If he *had* been able to hit me, then it would be me going to the emergency room."

"What's your name again?" Mr. Franklin asked.

"Brad Anderson."

"You mind if I call you Brad?"

"I guess that'd be okay, since it's my name."

"Brad, I've had to deal with that student, Chuck, before. Just between you and me? He's an asshole. But he gets away with murder because he's our quarterback.

"I've had complaints about him for two years, so I understand where you're coming from. I really do. But the fact is, when word of this hits the coach, he's going to be screaming for your head. You hurt Chuck pretty bad; bad enough that I'm probably going to have to expel you from the school."

Brad was unhappy to hear this.

"Instead of just being suspended? Oh shit. I'm not ready to work at McDonald's again. Seriously?"

"Is this some kind of game to you?" Mr. Franklin asked.

"No. I'm deadly serious. I'm tired of people like him doing what they want and being allowed to do it because everyone thinks he's important somehow. You have no idea the kind of repercussions that

sort of thinking has.”

Mr. Franklin considered Brad’s words.

“You don’t sound like a 15-year-old,” Franklin said. “You sound very bright. How come I’ve never heard of you before today?”

“I got a lot smarter this past Friday,” Brad said. “And here’s what I got smarter about: If you’ve been dealing with him for two years, and you’ve done nothing about it, then you’ve done a disservice to us all. Shame on you for that.”

Then the secretary’s voice piped through the office intercom. “Mr. Franklin, I’m sorry to interrupt, but there’s a student here to see you.”

“Tell the student I’m busy,” Mr. Franklin said.

“She says it has something to do with the incident in the hallway.”

Mr. Franklin sighed. “Okay, send her in.”

It was Julia. She opened the door and peered inside uneasily. Brad stood when he saw her, and Mr. Franklin took note of that.

“Umm, Mr. Franklin?”

“Yes, Julia, hello,” Mr. Franklin said.

Mr. Franklin was being pleasant to her, Brad observed. He knew her first name. He knew what she went through on a daily basis. He felt sorry for her. But he didn’t know what he could do about it.

“Uh, well, I’m sorry to interrupt,” she said, her gaze alternating between Mr. Franklin and the floor. “It’s just, this student here, Brad, he, uh, well, he got in this fight standing up for me. And, well, if he gets in trouble, I’d feel really responsible.”

“He makes his own decisions, Julia,” Mr. Franklin said.

“Yeah. But, he, well, he stood up for me. And no one’s ever done that before.”

“He did?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s what this fight was about, Brad?”

“Pretty much.”

“Okay, Julia, thank you. I promise, I’ll take that into consideration,” Mr. Franklin said.

Julia turned to leave, but just before she did, she turned and

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smiled, shyly, at Brad.

“Bye,” she said.

He returned the smile. “Good bye, Julia,” he said.

Mr. Franklin watched the exchange and began to assemble a puzzle in his mind.

When she was gone and the door was closed, he turned to face Brad. “Is she your girlfriend?”

“No!” Brad said.

“Oh? She’s important enough that you’d beat the shit out of our quarterback — a kid that outweighs you by at least 200 pounds — but she’s not your girlfriend?”

“She’s only 15!” Brad said.

“So are you,” Franklin countered.

“But I’m cynical enough to be 30,” he answered back.

Mr. Franklin considered this. Brad got the impression that he had been baited, and he had fallen for the trap.

“Some strange things have been happening the past few days,” Mr. Franklin said. “Since Friday. You know, the day you ‘got smarter?’”

“Oh?”

“Yes. One of our teachers — I’m sure you know which one — was telling us in the teacher’s lounge that one of her students started acting weird. She told us that he claimed that she assigned his homework ‘a long time ago,’ and he didn’t remember if he did it or not.

“We all laughed and thought that had to be the most original excuse we’d ever heard. Shortly after this student was dismissed, one of our hall monitors told us — this morning, in fact — that he had stopped a student who said something about having ‘already done 1989.’”

“Weirdo,” Brad said.

“That’s what we all thought. Except, something else happened this morning that gave me pause. Mr. Wicker — you know, the principal you were just asking about? — Well, he did go to the doctor’s this morning, and they think he might really have prostate

cancer. They'll know more when the test results come back."

"That's not good," Brad said. "How is he?"

"Luckily for him, they think they might've caught it early."

"I'm glad to hear that," Brad said.

"Yes," Franklin agreed. "But it was the strangest thing: He told us he never would have gone if someone hadn't left a note telling him to do it. The note even said he had prostate cancer, and that he'd die from it if he didn't go.

"Oh, normally he would have just dismissed it. I mean, it was an obvious prank, except it gave details about his family that most people wouldn't have known."

"That's a little spooky," Brad said, although his tone indicated that he knew he was caught.

"Yes it is," Franklin agreed. "Someone also broke into the school last night and didn't steal a thing, or even vandalize it. That's weird too. We figure it was someone who wanted to leave that note. But we'll know who it was when we dust for finger prints."

"They didn't leave any," Brad said.

"Yes, they probably wore gloves," Franklin replied. "That's what the police said anyway, when they dusted for prints this morning. Well, you're two for two, Mr. Anderson. You knew Mr. Wicker went to the doctor's this morning — or at least he might be heading there — and you knew whoever broke into the school wore gloves. That's amazing," Franklin concluded. "What is your secret?"

"Lucky guesses?" Brad offered as an explanation.

"Guesses? No, you're right on the money. I'd be willing to wager that if I pulled that hall monitor into this office right now, he'd point right at you as being the student who claimed he'd already been through 1989."

"He might," Brad admitted. "But that's crazy."

"Oh, I'd have to agree," Franklin said. "Nevertheless, 'strange things are afoot, Watson.' 'When you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, no matter how improbable, must be the truth.'"

"You used to be a literature teacher, didn't you?" Brad speculated.

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“Let’s cut the bullshit, Brad,” Franklin said. “How are you doing this stuff? How do you know what’s going to happen?”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you,” Brad said. “But let me ask you this: Have you ever done anything in the past that you regretted?”

“Of course,” Franklin said. “Everyone has.”

“Well what if it was something you *really* regretted? Wouldn’t you do anything you could — anything at all — just to change it? And then one day, what if you found something that allowed you to do it? Change all the things you wished you’d done differently?”

“What happens to Julia, Brad?” Mr. Franklin asked. He was a remarkably smart man, Brad discovered.

“Okay,” he said. “Where I come from, I end up being a writer. A popular one because I guess I’m good at it. So, I’ll do what I do best: I’ll tell you a story. Do you mind if I smoke in here?”

“It’s against school policy,” Mr. Franklin said. “But there’s no law against it.”

“Another benefit of 1989,” Brad said, as he lit another of Chuck’s cigarettes. “Let’s imagine the year is 2005, and a high school dropout — who beats the odds and becomes a successful writer; somewhat like me — buys a house with something in the basement. Something that’s magical.

“It sends him back to when he was a high school student, and suddenly he has a chance to do things all over again. Only this time, he does them right.

“Here’s how he remembers things went the first time: There is this girl that everyone picks on. She’s poor, shy, and doesn’t have a clue how to fit in. She’s unimportant to everybody, and eventually, even unimportant to herself.

“But one day, this kid sees her dancing in the rain and he sees something beautiful. And he kind of feels bad for her, but hey, what can you do?

“Then, as he and his friend are walking to class, they see a guy they don’t like — a real asshole who makes almost everyone miserable — knock some books out of her hand. And the kid, the

future writer, without thinking about it, calls the guy an asshole to his friend as they walk.

“Only the asshole—“

”Chuck?” Franklin asked.

“Sure,” Brad said. “We can call him Chuck. Only Chuck hears the kid call him an asshole. He didn’t think he said it that loud, but Chuck hears him anyway.

“And the kid’s thinking, ‘Oh shit, I’m doomed!’ and he actually is because Chuck towers over him.

“Chuck walks over and punches the kid in the head — probably not as hard as he can because his head stays attached to his body — but still, the world spins and he’s barely conscious for the rest of the beating.

“Both Chuck and the kid get suspended from school. Meanwhile, the kid and his dad have warmed up to each other a little, because the kid told his dad he would tryout for the football team.

“But he won’t make the team so long as Chuck is around. But there’s hope.

“A few months later, Chuck is sent off to military school and the kid thinks, ‘Ah ha! Now’s my chance to get in good with my dad! I can make the team!’

“You see, the kid’s parents are on the verge of divorce, and the kid thinks that by making the team, things will improve at home.

“The following school year, that’s exactly what he does. He makes the team. He makes new friends. He becomes a jock and starts getting invited to popular parties, and going out with popular girls. The world is his oyster.

“But nothing really changes at home for the kid. Not really. And despite his efforts, his parents still get divorced. The kid is devastated.

“He goes to parties and starts drinking. He starts changing. He revels in his newfound popularity. He ditches his old friends and becomes almost — not quite, but almost — as bad as Chuck. Because deep down inside, he’s pissed at his dad, and he’s angry at the world because it isn’t turning out the way he wants.



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“That year, the girl ...”

Brad stopped talking and took a few breaths — trudging the memory from the darkest corners of his mind.

“Julia,” Franklin said.

“Yeah. Julia. One day that year, Julia comes to school with a new outfit. It’s shortly before the prom. Her parents don’t have any money, so God knows where she got it.

“Maybe she did odd jobs for it? Maybe she made it somehow? No one knows. But one day she comes to school with a new outfit. Her hair is even styled. It’s styled and looks beautiful. She holds her head high when she walks.

“She is a new woman that day. You can see it on her face. But everyone refuses to see a new woman when they look at her. They see the old Julia.

“After school, she approaches a group of jocks — just kind of walks by them, sort of nervous. They don’t know what she wants, and they don’t really care. They start to tease her.

“The kid is there. The other jocks start laughing and asking her who she’s trying to fool. They start pushing her a little. One of them rips her dress. ‘Nice dress,’ he says.

“Then someone else rips another piece from it, and she starts sobbing, asking for them to stop.

“She looks at the kid. She remembers him. He’s the one who got beat up by Chuck for standing up for her, in a half-ass sort of way.

“The others call him over. And he looks in her eyes and sees this look of desperation. Her eyes beg him to help her.

“But he doesn’t. He starts teasing her too. That’s what the others are doing, and he’s one of them.

“And that desperation in her eyes turns into a look of betrayal. He rips her dress. And she runs away, crying.

“And he thinks, ‘who was she trying to fool? She is who she is, and we weren’t going to forget that just because she changed her clothes.’

“And he thinks, ‘why was she looking at me for help?’ ‘She’s not my responsibility. I have problems of my own.’

“Anyway, the night of the prom comes, and the kid has a date with the most popular girl in school.

“The prom goes along and no one notices that Julia isn’t there. Near the end of the night, a teacher approaches the microphone and tells everyone that she’s just received some sad news. Julia Cranker had shot herself with her dad’s gun. She was dead. Just like that. Dead.

“Everyone is surprised by this. I don’t know why, but they are. The kid remembers the look in her eyes, and how that looked had begged him to help her. And he goes outside and throws up in the bushes.

“The following day — or maybe it’s the day after — her mother — Julia’s mother — gives Julia’s diary to a reporter. She blames her suicide on the kids she went to school with — and she should.

“She gives the diary to the reporter because she wants them — the whole goddamn town — to know who her daughter actually was.

“And the kid — the writer — reads every word of the story the reporter publishes.”

Brad lit another cigarette and wiped his eyes.

“Turns out, Julia had a thing for that kid who stood up for her the year before. She wrote about him a lot. She watched him from afar and daydreamed about a date with him. You know, 16-year-old girl stuff.

“The reporter never mentions his name in the story. But the kid knows. He knows it’s him.

“The story talks about how Julia had started mowing lawns to earn some money for a new dress. She made some crafts and sold them at craft-shows — she went everywhere in the state she could, as long as it was in bike-riding distance. She saved her money for a year to buy that dress — the one they ripped and tore. And reduced to rags.

“She had hoped — perhaps unrealistically — that the kid would ask her to the prom. That’s why she was walking by them. That’s why she wore the new dress.

“When the kid read that, he sobbed for days. He fell apart after that too. He stayed in school for a little while, but his grades tumbled.

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He quit the team.

“He dropped out the following year and drank all the time. One day, he thought about hanging himself in his dad’s basement. But he didn’t.

“With the divorce, he didn’t think his mom could handle that too. Or he would’ve.

“Julia’s suicide affected everybody who had a hand in it, but no one talked about it, like it was a dirty family secret. But you could feel it. Like they were all co-conspirators in a murder.

“And one by one, it took its toll on them all, even if they forgot all about her.

“Some, like the writer’s friend, became social workers, or people who dedicated their abilities to helping other people. To making sure all the people like Julia got looked after.

“But most, like the writer, might as well have died themselves because they started decomposing anyway, from the inside out.

“The writer even managed to make himself forget — somehow — he forgot all about her. Who knows? Maybe that was the only way he could go on living with the guilt he had.

“But that took its toll on him too. Each night, she resurrected herself in his dreams, and when he wrote his stories, all he had to offer the world were his demons.

“So, like I said, one day — New Year’s Eve, 2005 to be exact — he finds this magical thing in his basement that can take him back to start all over again. To do things differently. Make things right. And he uses it.

“And it’s not a game. If he had needed to kill Chuck to make that point to the others, he would have.”

Brad extinguished his cigarette, as if to say the story was over. Or at least the part he was willing to tell.

Mr. Franklin considered what he had just been told.

“Fortunately, it didn’t come to that,” he finally said. “I would hate for that young man to throw his second chance away.

“If any of that story about Julia were to happen,” he added, “the writer’s actions would be inexcusable. But another fortunate reality,

as I see it, is that Julia is currently alive and well. I just saw her, so none of that has happened.”

“Yeah,” Brad said.

“I’m going to have to suspend you, Mr. Anderson.”

“Suspend?” he asked. “Not expel?”

“You heard me,” he answered. “Consider this your third and final opportunity. I can’t imagine you will get another.”

“Yes sir,” Brad said, smiling at his new friend.

“Mr. Wicker is a good man. A friend of mine, who cares deeply about his students, despite his seemingly gruff exterior.”

“Yes sir,” Brad agreed.

“When I see him, I will tell him that his mysterious angel gives his best for a speedy recovery.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“And when the coach asks why you weren’t expelled,” Franklin added with a smile, “I’ll tell him he can blow it out his ass. I don’t expect you’ll ever be on the football team.”

“I’m going to name my first child after you, sir.”

“We’ll just say you have a remarkable imagination, Mr. Anderson. You should be a writer. And take it from me, I know these things. I’m a guidance councilor.”

“And a damn fine one, sir. I really needed the guidance.”

## VI

Brad's dad was not a happy man. First of all, he was called from work to pick up his son from school. Then he was made aware of the possibility that Chuck's dad might sue him for the emergency room visit. His son reeked of cigarettes when he got into his car. And finally, Brad asked him if he could borrow \$50 for some errands he had to run.

He told him no.

"Brad," his dad said on the drive home, "I've found a school that caters to young men like you. I'm sending you there."

"A military school?" Brad asked.

"You could call it that, yes."

"I see," Brad replied. "Dad, I'm fond of you. You're almost like a dad to me, and if I were in your position, I'd be very concerned with the dismal snapshot I'm sure you've taken about this situation."

"But," Brad continued, "I have to point out that I don't think you understand the significance of what happened here today."

"Oh?" his dad asked. "You mean there's more fine news I haven't been told? And by the way, I *am* your dad, for all that's worth."

"Yes," Brad agreed. "I guess you are. But listen, I arrived at a conclusion today. I'm not letting anyone — even you, I'm sorry to say — control my future for me. No military school."

"You're not 18! And as long as you live under—"

"Yes, yes. As long as I live under *your* roof, I'll abide by *your* rules. I know. I understand. But since you're about to send me to a military school, I'll be living under someone else's roof. So I

consider this a breach of contract. You've broken your end of the deal, so now I'm forced to take action."

Brad's dad stopped the car.

"You listen to me, you—"

"Bastard?" Brad interrupted.

"I was going to say little shit," his dad said. "I've had it with this new attitude you've got going on. I didn't think that you could get any more cocky, but you've managed to outdo yourself."

"Dad? Would you describe me as a person who thinks things through?"

"Are you kidding?" he said.

"No. Seriously. Would you?"

"No!"

"Then prepare to be impressed. You can't send me to military school, at least not right away, because you can't afford it."

"That's where you're wrong, mister!"

"Ah. But I'm not. When you budgeted out the cost to send me, did you factor in the lawsuit from Chuck's dad? Did you plan for attorney's fees? Did you account for your insurance premiums going through the roof when they hear about the lawsuit?"

After that, Brad felt sorry for his dad. He watched this newfound realization sink in, and then he saw an awful look of betrayal cross his face. This wasn't a screw-up. This was a deliberate screw you.

"Get out," his dad said to him. "Get out of my car. You can walk the rest of the way."

"Dad," Brad responded, "I didn't want it to go down this way, but—"

"I said get out. I have to go back to work. I'm finished with you."

And then Brad got out and his dad drove away.

•••

Well, that could have gone better, he had to admit as he walked home. For starters, he could have waited until he was at least in the neighborhood before he pissed his dad off. And it wasn't entirely fair

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to his dad either. After all, his dad had no idea where all the resentment was coming from.

He didn't know it stemmed from something he was about to do, rather than something he'd already done. But as far as that went, Brad knew he'd be able to patch things up with him later. There were more pressing matters to attend to first.

Such as Chuck.

Chuck would probably seek revenge for the embarrassment he suffered. Or his friends would. Either way, Brad wanted to know what was coming, and he needed to arrange a measure of protection against whatever came.

And then there were the angels.

The angels would likely be upset at him too, and he didn't know what he should expect from them. Either way, he needed to talk to Enoch again, but he'd have to do it on *his* terms, not Enoch's.

He didn't want any more surprises.

When he got home, he armed himself. Brad's dad didn't own a gun, but he did own a drill, a rusty screw, and a baseball bat. The screw was very long and very rusty, and it promised to inflict not only a deep gash and a lasting scar, but a nasty case of tetanus as well.

He drilled the screw into the bat, inspected how it looked, and was satisfied that it appeared menacing enough to discourage an attack. Then he took a strip of Velcro from an old shoe and sewed it to his belt with his mother's sewing machine. After that, he put his belt on and attached the bat to it.

He looked at himself in the mirror. The trench coat hid the bat pretty good. After that, he spent roughly a minute feeling pleased with himself. He felt a little like MacGyver. Not a lot, but a little.

Then he set off for town to sell his skateboard and his hard rock music collection.

And to find Enoch.

...

On the way to the pawnshop, Brad saw Melvin, the homeless

town drunk, who hadn't died yet because it was still 1989.

Everybody in the small town knew who he was. Melvin was the guy nobody wanted to know.

He was sitting in an alleyway between the pharmacy and the movie theater drinking a family-sized bottle of Listerine — not because he wanted to fight the germs that cause bad breath, but because the liquor store wouldn't let him back since the day he threw up in aisle five.

He was the exact man Brad was looking for.

Brad approached the ally and sat on a crate next to Melvin and struck up a conversation about the weather.

Through the alcoholic haze that had become his life, Melvin agreed that the weather was indeed cool for this time of year. Or at least that's what Brad thought he said. It was kind of hard to tell.

Then Brad lit another cigarette and asked Melvin if he knew anything about angels.

They're everywhere, Melvin told him. Both types. Regular and the fallen kind. One was standing right behind Brad. He didn't look happy.

Brad turned around and didn't see anybody. When he looked back at Melvin, his expression had changed and he didn't look happy either.

"Ah, there you are, Enoch," Brad said. "I've been needing to talk to you."

"Devils and damnation," Enoch said from inside Melvin. "You must be the most troublesome human I've ever encountered."

"Must I?" Brad asked. "Listen, I've got a few dollars left from when I sold my Nintendo. Let's say we treat Melvin to a nice bowl of soup and some coffee. You know, kind of a repayment for renting him?"

"I am not moving from this spot," Enoch said. "You wouldn't believe how painful it is to be in this body."

"Sure I would," Brad countered. "That's why I picked him for you. I'm betting he's too inebriated for even you to handle. You probably feel like someone's hitting your head with a sledge-hammer."

"Why do you hate me?" Enoch asked, miserably.

"I don't hate you," Brad answered. "But you are kind of



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annoying. I'm annoyed with all of you angels right now. I remembered what happened to Julia."

"I know," he said. "I told you that you would."

"Well, I'm especially annoyed that you could have fixed what went wrong anytime you wanted. But you didn't."

"Wrong?" Enoch said. "And how would you define wrong? One action that might be viewed as wrong sometimes leads to another that could be considered right. Those in *my* position must measure the one that has the greatest impact."

"Whatever," Brad said. "I've got something to show you. You'll definitely want to see it, so you'd better come with me to the nearest diner. We're going to feed Melvin, and we're going to talk while we do it."

"And if I refuse?"

Brad smiled.

"How do the other angels feel about everything that's been going on here?"

Enoch scowled.

"I'm sure you are aware that the others are ... very cross with me," he answered.

"I'll bet they are," Brad said. "I'll bet that's an understatement too. If you don't come with me, I'm going to do something that'll make them bloody furious with you."

Enoch groaned because he had a headache, then he got up and wobbled down the street with Brad toward the nearest diner.

...

The only thing that smelled pleasant about Melvin was his breath. The rest of him smelled like the things people discard. Since Melvin himself had been discarded, this seemed somehow fitting.

His presence in the diner made everyone uncomfortable, and Brad enjoyed that it did. At first, the waitress and the restaurant staff glared at Melvin. Brad was sure this was meant to convey he wasn't welcome.

The restaurant staff did that until Brad told the waitress that his dad was an attorney for Melvin, who was filing a lawsuit against a restaurant that had thrown him out for no apparent reason. Melvin might lose the lawsuit, he added, but his dad was working the case Pro Bono, and he doubted the restaurant's lawyers were doing the same. They planned to drag it out for years because that's the kind of lawyer Brad's dad was. Ruthless.

Then Brad told them he wanted a bowl of soup and a pot of coffee. Leave the pot, they'd be fine. Then they'd be on their way.

The waitress called Brad a rotten little prick under her breath, but she brought the soup and the coffee and left them alone.

Then they sat in the corner booth he'd selected and conducted the business at hand. The business at hand was that Brad planned to blackmail Enoch.

"See, it's like this," Brad said. "For most of my life, I've been a miserable bastard. Now, I'm a bastard with a mission. I'm going to rescue people who need it, and I'd appreciate your offer to help."

"Humph," Enoch said. "I wouldn't offer you a glass of water if you were drowning."

"Now see? This is where the bastard part of my personality comes in handy. Let's do a little Q&A. Q: Do you remember when we first talked?"

"Of course I do," Enoch said.

"What happened when we parted ways?"

Enoch seemed confused.

"What?" he asked. Then he stroked his hand through Melvin's long, gray beard. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, once you gave me my permission slip and class schedule in the main office, what did you do next?"

"I vacated your principal and went to work on trying to send you home. At the time, I didn't know you would do everything in your ability to sabotage my efforts."

"I prefer to think of it as improving on your efforts," Brad argued. "By the way, if you'd bothered to go back into Mr. Wicker's office, you would've remembered to grab this."

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Brad pulled Enoch's computer from his coat pocket, the one that Enoch should've put back in subspace.

"You sure are forgetful," Brad said. "I found this in Mr. Wicker's desk when I broke into the school. You left it there, and he must've thought it was something a teacher confiscated. A portable CD player maybe? Anyway, he just put in his drawer and forgot about it."

Enoch just swallowed hard and stared at it. His game face wasn't as good as Brad's. The stakes had just gotten too high for his liking.

"You'll never figure out how to use it," Enoch said.

"I don't have to," Brad countered. "I'm going to sell it to a tech company, and they'll figure out how to use it. Then I'll use the money for my little world improvement campaign."

Brad held the computer in his hand and inspected it thoughtfully.

"I'll bet there's all kinds of information in here," he added. "They'll figure it out, eventually, and then humans will know all your secrets. How would your angels friends feel about that?"

"It would be disastrous for humanity. The others will find a way to stop you."

"Maybe. But to do it, they'd first have to find out about your latest mistake. Is that something you want?"

Enoch did a quick inventory of his options. They were limited, which was the main reason it was so quick.

"I think the real question, you vindictive swine, is what do *you* want?" Enoch said.

"Like I told you, I want a Q&A session. I've got questions and you've got answers. The first thing I want to know is what kind of angel you are. I thought you guys were supposed to help people. I shouldn't have to make you do it."

"You can't *make* us do anything," Enoch replied. "No more than we can make humans do something. The only difference is that humans have free will, and we only have our functions."

"So there are angels that are specifically geared to help people?"

"Yes."

"And you're not one of them?"

"What do you think?"

“I think you’re not. So what do you do? What is the Dominion?”

“We oversee the intricate workings of the Universe.”

“That sounds like a big job,” Brad said. “You guys keep an eye on the big picture, yeah?”

“It is our function,” he replied. “We are what we are and we do what we do.”

“So you guys are like the government then? You keep an eye on the big picture, and another department handles all the poor people who need help?”

“If that helps you to understand us, then yes,” Enoch said. “Without us, the Universe would end.”

Brad thought about this.

“I don’t buy it,” he concluded. “That’s like saying America would end if we voted out all the crooks. Next question: Has anyone else ever walked through one of the portals?”

“No,” Enoch said, with bitterness in his voice. “I have the single distinction of being responsible for that mistake.”

“Congratulations,” Brad said. “So, when you guys saw me, did any of you know what was going to happen?”

“We did not.”

“You had nothing to do with me ending up in my own body when I was 15?”

“We are not to blame for that.”

“I wasn’t blaming you. I’m starting to understand something.”

“Oh?” Enoch said, both doubtful and curious about what Brad was getting at.

“Yes,” he continued. “You see, back when I used to visit the library, I read just about everything I could get my hands on, including theories about time travel.

“One of the theories that caught my attention said there is only so much matter that can exist in the universe at one time. It can’t be created or destroyed, you know?”

“Because of that, a lot of scientists think that time travel is impossible. But since we know it’s not, under those conditions, one of three things would’ve happened if I’d been sent back before I

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was born:

“I would’ve ceased to exist; matter from somewhere else would’ve ceased to exist to accommodate my arrival; or everything in the universe would’ve come apart at the seams. That would’ve been real bad.

“And see? You guys didn’t really have anything to do with protecting it. In fact, you were kind of responsible. Wesley got me asking myself why I ended up here, and I think it has something to do with Julia. But there’s more to it.

“I think the universe protected *itself* from unraveling by putting me into my own body, which was already here. No matter was created and none was destroyed. And again, you guys didn’t have anything to do with it. I think the universe would get along just fine without you angels tinkering with it. In fact, it would probably be better off.”

Enoch appeared to consider Brad’s theory.

“Possibly,” he said. “I can’t prove you wrong. We would — all of us — have to abandon our functions just to see what would happen, and that *could* mean the end of everything. The Universe *might* remain in working order, but who would want to take that chance?”

“Also,” Enoch continued, “I know your intentions are noble, even if your tactics leave much to be desired. But we only began manipulating the probability vectors a mere handful of centuries ago, and our intentions were also good.

“We thought we could direct the future into a more positive direction. That is still our goal. We *do* care about the fate you have before you, but in order to achieve that fate, the corrupted timeline must be corrected.”

“I’m not sacrificing Julia,” Brad said. “And I’m not sacrificing anyone else in this town either. They’re all going to get a second chance, just like I did.

“And you expect me to help you do this, hmm?” Enoch asked. “I am to be your partner in crime, yes?”

“Yup. You tell me what I want to know; then you tell me what you

think is best; and then you tell me what will probably happen. After that, I'll do *what I think* is best."

"You still don't understand, do you?" Enoch said. "You never even asked 'how's it's going' with sending you home. Don't you want to know what your probable future is from this point?"

"I was getting to that," Brad said. "But since you've brought it up, I actually do."

"You don't have one. I can't send you back because you don't have a future. In fact, you will probably be dead by this time next week."

Brad's game face faltered a little after that. The stakes had just gotten a bit too high for his liking as well.

"Chuck?" he asked.

"Chuck," Enoch answered. "And worse, the events surrounding your death could rip the Universe apart."

"Oh," Brad said, after a lengthy pause. "Really? Glad I won't be around to see it."

## VII

They don't teach people how the Universe actually works in school — especially not in Brad's school, where they don't teach much of anything.

But even if his school taught everything that was ever known by humanity, they'd still only be covering the tiniest sliver of truth, and a lot of it they'd just be making up to fill in the gaps.

It's okay. It wouldn't be practical. If they tried, the average age of their graduates would be 205, and that's way too old to begin college.

As far as the Universe goes, people understand some of it. They know it's big. Really big. And complex too. They're also pretty sure that just about everything that ever existed is somewhere in it. But where people fail in their reasoning is to take what they know and follow it through to a logical conclusion.

For starters, the Universe is alive. There'd be little point in explaining how it's alive because it's on a scale people aren't wired to comprehend. If a scientist stopped the first strain of bacteria he spotted with his microscope, and then tried to explain his life to it, odds are good the bacteria would fail to understand.

Perhaps in its own way, the bacteria might put in a request to turn that damn light off and stop staring at it. But that's very unlikely. That would mean it had achieved ultimate truth.

Perhaps it would simply wonder where the light had come from and what it had meant. Then, if it were capable of telling other strains of bacteria about it, they could all form a religion around the experience, and eventually proceed to declare war over a

neighboring faction that didn't believe it happened quite that way.

But that's unlikely too. That would mean it had a grasp that *something* was out there, but damned if it knows what it is, so it'll just contend itself with making something up.

More than likely it'll just wonder briefly about the light, then move on with its life, which actually makes it a little smarter than people. Only people go to war over the shit they just made up.

To the Universe, people are just bacteria. They kind of cropped up one day, and as long as they aren't hurting anything, there's no real problem with them being there. In fact, in some respects, they even serve a purpose.

One day, from the Universe's perspective, a rogue strain of bacteria tore a hole through the space-time continuum and gave the Universe something of a rash. Not that big a deal. A little annoying, but the angel antibodies were on it.

The rogue strain of bacteria slid through the probability currents, inverting them as went, until it finally tore a hole in space-time and unleashed a localized eruption of improbability.

Here's some of what happened:

The entire student population in the Scranton school district wore the color red for reasons that weren't entirely clear to them; an electrician was struck by lightning; an anesthesiologist fell asleep at the wheel and wrecked his Jag; and a small plane crashed into the home of an air traffic controller. Those were just the events that made headlines. There were thousands more that didn't.

Perhaps the most disturbing of these, which no one mentioned, was that every single person in a 300 mile radius of Brad's school suddenly got Cher's song, "If I Could Turn Back Time," stuck in their head for no apparent reason. Five radio stations also broadcast the song at the exact same moment, independently of each other, which didn't help matters any.

Everything would've been fine if that's all that had happened. But once it arrived, the rogue strain of bacteria really got to work. Carrying this analogy even further, it became the equivalent of flesh-eating bacteria.



## *SCRYING GLASS*

Suddenly there was a real problem. How's that?

Consider the star. Any one of the uncounted billions that are happily floating along burning up hydrogen and brightening the day of their nearby planets. What do just about all of them have in common? Balance and harmony.

A star consists of diametrically opposing forces operating in harmonious balance. The explosive force of the fission in its core wants to blow it apart, while the gravitational force of its mass wants to crush it into a tennis-ball.

The entire Universe is a little like that. Everything is balanced by a series of natural and moral laws, and if ONE of those laws gets broken, they ALL get broken.

Find a lawyer, pay him handsomely, and get him to explain the concept. (In English, dammit, not legalese.) Throw a suspected serial killer in prison without a trial, and watch the whole legal system collapse, that's what he'll say.

The Universe doesn't need lawyers. Its laws are simple. Break the balance, and everyone's screwed.

In the year 2012, the world will face an evil unlike anything it has ever faced before. Hitler? Stalin? Reality TV? Those were just warm-ups to get people used to the concept that such evil could exist.

It's coming.

That evil created a force that needed a counter force, and one man was selected to fill that role. When the time comes, the two will battle each other. While up close, it might seem a little destructive. But from the standpoint of the Universe, everything will be operating in harmonious balance.

Who will win? It could go either way. It isn't really important in the cosmic scheme of things. The struggle's important, not the victor.

A final note: Although people aren't connected to the Universe, the roles they sometimes fill are very much connected to it.

For example, if someone were to feel bad about something he did in high school that caused someone else to commit suicide, and then he dedicated his life to a higher ideal, that's just the kind of guy the Universe is looking for.

*J.D. STIVER*

One day, this guy will become President of the United States. Or at least he might. In another 23 years, he's supposed to be in the most powerful position on Earth, which would put him in just the right standing to oppose the evil that's coming.

Unfortunately, in this version of 1989, it now appears that he'll be arrested for the murder of Brad Anderson. A lot of things change in 23 years, but what doesn't change is that voters don't elect murders. Murders can't even vote for themselves.

The antibodies understand this. More of them are coming.

•••

Once his business was finished with Enoch, Brad took his skateboard and music collection to the pawnshop owned by the hippy. Since there was no angel inside the hippy this time, he didn't anticipate a problem with his plan, which he'd amended from fleecing to outright swindling.

He really needed the money.

"See this?" Brad said, as he pointed to a badly forged signature on his skateboard. "This is the signature of Tony Hawk, who signed my board at a skate show. It's worth hundreds."

"Yeah? Wow, man," the hippy said. "I can, like, give you \$50 for it."

"Maybe you didn't hear me say hundreds," Brad observed. "I'll settle for \$200."

"Wow," the hippy said. "That's a little steep. How 'bout \$100?"

"You're trying to take advantage of a naive 15-year-old," Brad responded. "You should be ashamed of yourself. \$150."

"I don't know," the hippy said. "It's all banged up an' shit. I can do \$125, but that's all, man."

"Okay, \$130. Deal. Also, I have these," Brad said, as he held up the carrying case that contained his album collection. "As you can see, this one's signed by Axl Rose."

Armed with his newfound wealth of \$246, Brad left the pawnshop and headed to Main Street to do some serious shopping.

*SCRYING GLASS*

According to what Enoch had told him about his prospects for living through the week, he'd need a number of items to ensure his personal safety. He no longer believed that a baseball bat with a screw drilled through it would do the job.

He found a toy store that sold him a BB handgun (capable of firing darts), a packet of Co2 cartridges, a Super-soaker, and an assortment of darts for the gun. ("Use them safely," the man said when he sold them, "remember, you could put an eye out.") Then Brad headed down the street and found a dollar store where he bought a can of black spray-paint, thin strips of electrical wiring, and four bottles of dish soap.

The rest of the things he needed could be found in his parents' basement. And that's where he was, working on his personal safety devices, when he heard a knock from outside the cellar door.

It was Wesley. Brad opened the door to let him in and then went back to work.

"What are you doing?" Wesley asked. "It smells like gasoline down here."

"When I got home, I was thinking Chuck and his friends might do something stupid," Brad said. "So I drilled a rusty screw through this baseball bat."

He slid the folds of his coat to the side to show Wesley the bat. "But then I had lunch with Enoch, and he told me things are even worse than I thought. So now I'm making napalm."

Wesley appeared uneasy.

"You're making what?"

"Napalm. I'm going to fill up this Super-soaker with it," he added, pointing to the Super-soaker in which he would put the napalm. "I learned how to make it on the Internet for a book I wrote. It was pretty easy — just gasoline and dish soap. It was a hell of a lot easier to make than the stun gun."

Brad felt especially proud about the stun gun.

He'd found his parents' soldering iron in one of the boxes inside the basement. Then he used it to attach two electrical wires to one of the darts.

*J.D. STIVER*

After that, he took two tiny, metal spools from his mother's sewing machine and screwed them into each side of the gun, loosely, so they would spin, and then he wound the wires up around the spools.

He wasn't real sure the dart would still fire with the electrical wires attached to them, so he test-fired it several times, and was a little disappointed at its accuracy.

The problem was quickly solved when he thought to lubricate both the barrel and the dart with WD-40. Of course that would mean possible infection to whoever he shot with it, but then he figured he probably wouldn't even like whoever he shot, so who cares if it got infected?

Once he applied the WD-40, it worked like a charm.

After that, he rummaged through the rest of the boxes in the basement until he found his mom's taser. It had been a gift from his aunt, but his mom never carried it because she thought they were illegal in Pennsylvania.

He took the soldering iron and attached the taser to the back of the gun. Then he soldered one wire to each of the two prongs. When it was nearly completed, he figured he could shoot and shock anyone within 20 feet of him if they looked like they needed shooting and shocking.

After that, he wrapped both the handle and trigger of the gun with electrical tape so he could avoid the embarrassment of inadvertently shocking himself when he used it. As a finishing touch, he spray-painted the gun black to make it look cool.

"You made a stun gun!" Wesley said, conveying a mixture of awe and horror. "What are you, MacGyver?"

"Nah," Brad said. "Try as I might, I couldn't think of any deadly applications for chewing gum."

"And you made napalm? Are you insane?"

"Why do people keep asking me that?"

"Maybe," Wesley suggested, "because you're the kind of guy who'd load napalm in a Super-soaker and shoot someone with it?"

"Not just someone," Brad said. "Angel assassins."

"..."

*SCRYING GLASS*

“Oh right,” he remembered. “I haven’t told you that part yet. To make a long story short, uh, Enoch’s an angel; the angels control the portal I used; and everything we ever thought about time travel is dead wrong. Oh, and also the Universe is alive and I might’ve damaged it with either something I did or something I’m about to do.”

“Wha?”

“You wouldn’t think they’d leave something that dangerous in a guy’s basement, now would you? Anyway, Enoch told me that Chuck’s going to kill me, probably in less than a week, and when he does, the Universe starts to come undone.”

“Huh?”

“A Universal law gets broken if Chuck kills me — I don’t know why exactly, but that’s what Enoch said, and I believe him. So the other angels figure they can keep that from happening if they kill me first.”

“Angels?”

“Yeah, nasty sons of bitches too. Apparently there’s a group of them that kill people who cause them problems. Like me.

“Anyway, I don’t know why Enoch warned me — maybe because he feels guilty about leaving that damn portal open — but I don’t think I can count on him for help anymore. The others are probably plucking his wings even now.”

Wesley began to look around the basement, desperately searching for a chair. He needed to sit down. He eventually just sat on the floor.

“Is this really happening?” he asked.

“Yep,” Brad said, as he poured the napalm into the Super-soaker bottle. “I figure sooner or later, one of them is going to come after me. And when they do, I’ll probably be glad I made napalm. You need to go.”

“Go?” Wesley asked. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, get out of here. I mean stay away from me. I mean you’re in danger.”

“Brad, you’re my friend...”

“That’s touching. It really is. But I don’t want you to get killed. So, scram.”

“I’m not leaving,” Wesley said, defiantly. “I’m in this to the end.”

“It is the end, for you at least,” Brad argued. Then he pointed his stun gun at Wesley to drive that point home. “I’ll shoot you.”

“You wouldn’t!” Wesley said, although his voice was laced with doubt.

“I would. It won’t kill you, but it’ll hurt like a bitch. And I’ll shoot you every time you come near me, if that’s what it’ll take to keep you alive. This whole war with the angels was fun for a little while, but now it’s gotten way too serious. I won’t live with the guilt of your death like I lived with the guilt of Julia’s. Go Wesley. Please?”

It was the second time that day that someone gave Brad a look of betrayal. Then he turned his back on Wesley, and he was glad that he did.

He was thankful Wesley couldn’t see his face when he heard him start to leave. Brad didn’t want him to know how hard that had been to do.

Then he pushed it to the side, and got back to work.

•••

That was Monday.

On Wednesday evening, Detective Joe Thompson found himself standing in the medical examiner’s office wondering if the report he’d have to file later would be a stolen property or a missing person’s report.

Fifteen years on the job, and this had never come up before. Detective Thompson liked knowing how he was going to classify his reports. But this one, he strongly suspected, was going to be a bugger.

According to Eddie, the medical examiner’s assistant, a cadaver had vanished. That was very odd, Eddie thought, because people normally dropped cadavers off, they didn’t pick them up.

Detective Thompson hated the medical examiner’s office. In his 15 years of law enforcement, he had visited the place so many times,

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the staff felt conformable enough to play jokes on him. Like he was just one of the guys.

Bastards.

Once, they had taken a homeless man who died leaning against a wall in an alley and used him as a prop for one of their jokes. Since it had been such a cold winter when the man had died, a day or two had passed before he was discovered. He was pretty stiff, and the body didn't want to lie flat.

That gave them an idea. They strapped his legs down, put a sheet over him, and pushed him flat against the table. They held him flat until they heard footsteps coming down the hall, then they ran into a nearby office and waited. When the person entered the room — which had been him, Detective Joe Thompson — the first thing that caught his attention was a corpse slowly rising on the table, like it was sitting up.

It damn near gave him a heart attack.

He was reaching for his gun when they burst into the room laughing. Then, when he understood it had all been a joke, he continued reaching for his gun. If he was going to die of a heart attack, he thought, he wasn't going to die alone. But he didn't die, which meant he got to continue sorting through all the crap life could offer.

What it looked like to Thompson was that someone had finally played a joke on them. Except the other practical joker, Dave, was just sitting in chair in the corner of the room like he wasn't getting the punch line.

No. It wasn't just that he didn't get the joke. It was something more. Dave looked like a man who was contemplating a career change. He looked like a man that knew this wasn't a joke.

"What's with him?" Thompson asked Eddie.

"Dave? Well, you know, the body disappeared on his watch. Kinda freaked him out."

"I'm going to need a statement from him, too," Thompson said.

"Well, yeah, can it wait?" Eddie said. "He's, uh, well — I can tell you what happened."

“But you weren’t there,” Thompson said. “He was.”

“Yeah. Okay. Hey, Dave, uh, come here.”

Dave just continued staring at the floor. Thompson walked over and sat in a chair next to him.

“So, Dave,” Thompson said. “What happened?”

“It just got up and left,” Dave said. “It just opened its eyes, got up and left. It took my coat.”

Thompson looked over at the coat rack by the door. Dave’s coat was missing.

“Hey, Eddie,” Thompson said. “You left that part out.”

“Did I?” Eddie responded. “Well, it’s uh ... yeah.”

“Okay,” Thompson said, rather calmly. “Where were you *really* when the body disappeared, Eddie?”

“Me? I was ... well. Uh ...”

“Standing next to me,” Dave said. “He was standing next to me. He saw it too.”

Dave didn’t need to finish. Thompson understood. Eddie had also been scared out of his mind, but unlike Dave, Eddie had a wife and kids. What scared him even more than a corpse suddenly getting up and leaving was the prospect of being labeled crazy and losing his job.

Thompson knew Eddie for 10 years and Dave for five. They’d play jokes, but not like this. As crazy as it sounded, they believed what they were saying. And if Thompson started to believe what they were saying, he could be labeled crazy and lose his job. Maybe it wasn’t dead?

“Are you sure it’s dead?” Thompson asked.

“Well,” Eddie said. “We’d just finished removing its internal organs. So ... yeah.”

“That’s them over there on the table,” Dave added. “Heart, lungs, kidneys, intestines ... I’m be gonna sick.”

Dave excused himself so he could run to the men’s room and be sick. Since Eddie’s lie had started to evaporate, he wasn’t looking too good either. It was a lie he’d not only been telling Thompson, but also himself.



*SCRYING GLASS*

“Are you going to be sick too?” Thompson asked.

“Yeah, maybe.”

“Where do you think it went?”

“Maybe it had ... some business to take care of? I don’t know.”

“Well,” Thompson reasoned. “It’s got to be close. It’s not like it could just hail a cab.”

Then Thompson heard someone clear his throat. He looked over and saw a uniformed officer standing in the doorway.

“Excuse me detective, but there’s a cab driver out here who might have some information relating to your case.”

“Are you serious?” Thompson asked. “A cab driver?”

“Uh, yes sir. The cabbie says someone outside the building carjacked his cab. And, well, he claims the suspect looked ... dead.”

Well that settled it, Thompson thought. He knew how he would handle the report. He had no intention of writing it.

•••

Even as Dave and Eddie began to formulate plans for a new career, and Detective Thompson began to wonder if he should’ve suffered a heart attack after all, Brad was bemoaning the fact that 1989 had been a very bad year for television.

It was the third day of his suspension, and he was bored. He’d spent the first half of the morning installing deadly booby traps around his home to protect himself, then he’d spent the second half of the afternoon taking them down because he was worried his parents would accidentally set them off.

He got them all disassembled just before his mother arrived to cook him dinner. If he hadn’t, he would’ve had to convince her that lighting the stove wasn’t such a good idea (because he’d rigged it to explode) and that maybe they should just get take-out.

The whole day had been evidence that Brad didn’t know what to do with himself. He knew he was in danger, but he didn’t know what he could do about it without tipping his parents off. And he couldn’t do that because they’d involve themselves, and then likely get hurt.

He wished he hadn't sold his Nintendo. Or his album collection. Or even his skateboard.

There was a reason he sold them, but he was scared to bring *her* more trouble. But, as Wesley had pointed out, this whole thing was happening because he was drawn to her.

"Hey mom, I'm going to the library."

"Nice try Brad, but the library closes in 10 minutes."

"I'm not going there to read, I'm going there to meet chicks."

"That sounds more like the truth," his mom said. "Be back before 10. That's when your dad is supposed to be home."

"Supposed to be," Brad said. "Thanks mom. Do you think we could get take-out tomorrow?"

"No."

"Okay. But if I die, it's on your head."

"Brad, my cooking's not *that* bad. The library closes in nine minutes."

"Oh yeah. See you later."

•••

The library was close to Brad's house, so he got there just as they were locking up. He waited outside until he saw her leave the building.

Everyone thought she was such a nerd because she always stayed at the library until it closed. It wasn't until later that everyone discovered she did that because she didn't want to go home. It made him sad, but he forced himself to smile anyway when he approached her.

"Hi Julia," he said.

Again, he startled her. He wondered if she would ever get used to people talking to her.

"Oh! Hello!" she said, warmly. "I didn't expect to see you here."

"Are you kidding?" Brad said. "If there's one thing I have going for me, it's literacy."

She smiled. Then shyness overtook her. She broke eye contact

*SCRYING GLASS*

with him and looked at the ground. Brad touched the underside of her chin and gently tilted her head back up to look him in the eye.

“You look so sad,” Julia said. “Every time you look at me, you look so sad. Then when you look away, it fades a little. Why?”

“I’m ashamed at the way people treat you.”

“I don’t want to make you sad,” she said. “And you don’t treat me badly.”

This time, Brad broke eye contact with her because of the surge of guilt he felt. “And I won’t,” he said. “Not ever.”

“I know. Well, uh, I should be going home.”

“I’m going to get something to eat. Would you like to come?”

“Oh, um, I really should be getting home.”

“Julia,” Brad said. “Will your parents care if you come home at all?”

This time it was Julia’s turn to look sad. She tilted her head again, not out of shyness, but because she was ashamed.

“How do you know about that?” she asked.

“I have a unique perspective,” Brad said. “I know where you live and what your parents are like. You shouldn’t be ashamed.”

“I don’t like people knowing about that,” she said.

“I’m sorry. I know what will make you feel better,” Brad suggested. “Double Chocolate Espresso with whip cream.”

“What’s that?”

“Oh crap, it’s 1989. Nobody drinks that yet. How about an ice cream sundae?”

“I don’t know.”

“With almonds and fudge.”

“I really should be...”

“And a great big cherry on top?”

She smiled again, like a ray of sunshine through a passing storm.

“I like cherries,” she said. “With extra chocolate, maybe?”

“Why not?” Brad said.

They walked to the nearest ice cream parlor, and for the first time since Brad found the portal — or even the years prior to his finding it — he believed that things were going to be okay.

## VIII

Julia.

Beneath the surface layers of shyness and subterranean chambers of isolation and loneliness, Julia was as beautiful as birds taking flight into a sunlit sky. Like a pearl at the center of a decaying oyster, or gold in the depths of a coal-encrusted mine shaft. And when she smiled, she revealed that part of herself like the uncoiling pedals of a rose.

They took a corner booth at the ice cream parlor, and Brad watched as she — out of habit — slid to the furthest side of her seat. Then she neatly placed her books on the other side of her, like she was using them to build a castle wall.

It was a subconscious thing she did.

With this routine completed, she allowed herself to relish the simple joys in life — such as chocolate — before she eased into a newer, more unfamiliar joy, such as friendship.

As time passed, they talked about books, movies, television, and once the sugar and caffeine highs kicked in, philosophy.

“I love coffee-fueled philosophy,” Brad joked. “If Plato had been introduced to Juan Valdez, the two of them could’ve figured it all out and saved everybody else a lot of time. But where would the fun be in that?”

“Here’s one,” Julia said. “Have you ever wondered if the whole, entire universe is just a molecule in some giant’s table?”

“Yes,” Brad said. “I have wondered that. But I don’t think it is. I do, however, know that time looks like a series of cracks in a giant snow-globe, and is connected by junctions that look like jellyfish.”

SCRYING GLASS

“Huh,” Julia said, as she considered this. “Why?”

“Who knows?” Brad answered. “Maybe it doesn’t really look like that at all. Maybe that’s the only way a third-dimensional mind can perceive a fourth-dimensional reality. The Universe is a strange place. And a little vindictive, if you ask me.”

Julia covered her mouth when she laughed, like she was uncertain whether she was doing it right. But only in public, Brad suspected. In an isolated setting, she was someone who knew how to enjoy life. But she was already showing signs of forgetting. Another year, and she would have forgotten completely, and he would’ve been the one to blame.

When that thought resurfaced, he clenched his fist under the table. Then he buried his guilt in the darkest cemetery of his soul. But even as he did, he knew that it would rise from the grave to haunt the pages of his stories.

Julia saw this in his eyes, and tilted her head in puzzlement. Then, sensing that he needed it, she smiled at him in a consoling manner, and the undercurrents of rage slowed to a gentle stream.

It was a moment he would never forget. It was also the worst possible moment for Enoch to drive a Ford Pinto through the storefront window. But that’s exactly what he did. And that’s exactly when he did it.

•••

In the 24 hours preceding his blatant disregard for the rules of traffic safety, Enoch was having the worst Tuesday of his life.

That was easy for him to do since he’d never before had a Tuesday, or even a life, which is mainly because he’s from a dimension outside of time and space. But even still, anyone else who’d experienced that particular Tuesday would also think it was pretty bad, even if they *did* have a bunch of other Tuesdays to compare it to.

Enoch might’ve been forgetful at times, but he wasn’t stupid. He knew the others would blame him for Brad, mostly because it really was his fault.

When the others finally came for him, they said he’d better

accompany them or it would go very hard for him, and because he wasn't stupid, he knew it would go very hard for him even if he did.

And he was right.

What preceded next could be considered a trial, but only by someone who'd never heard of a trial before and was unfamiliar with the concept. It was more like a sentencing. When it was over, they banished him to the worst place in the Universe they could think of, and the worst place they could think of was inside a human mind.

"Isn't Hell available?" Enoch posed to the arbiter as a means of pleading for mercy. "I really hate the heat?"

The arbiter was unmoved.

The long-term affects of being inside a human mind can be devastating to an angel if it's longer than a few days. Unfortunately, the span of his sentence was very explicit.

He got life. Or more specifically, the life of the person he was in. But it got worse. The person they'd selected for him suffered from an extreme case of schizophrenia, and because of this, his current residence was a mental institution.

Enoch wasn't expected to stay very sane for very long.

Hours later, he wondered how things had gotten this bad. He wondered this as he crawled through the air ventilation system of the psychiatric ward while making his escape. He was still wondering it when he got outside and stole the Ford Pinto. He even wondered it as he tore down the narrow streets, destroying mailboxes and light poles as he went, because he'd never actually driven before.

In fact, he was so preoccupied with his thoughts that he didn't notice a man walking across the street until after he hit him. He didn't even jam on his breaks until after he heard the sickening thud. Once he heard it, he slammed on his breaks — hard — and veered right into the ice cream parlor's storefront window.

It was the kind of thing that someone would feel guilty about if not for one thing: The man walking across the street was already dead.

Now that's a bad Tuesday. And Wednesday wasn't showing any improvement.

## VIII

There was a splattering of meat and a shattering of glass, followed by the types of screams that result from a mishap that leaves a mangled body lying in the street. Then, time began to roll forward numbly, and the people who witnessed the accident subtly shifted the noises they made from alarm and fright to horror and repulsion.

A group of people clustered around the body of the man Enoch hit. He looked very dead. He was naked, except for a gray overcoat. He was pale, and he had some kind of dark fluid oozing out of his mouth. There were also abrasions at various points on his body because of all the rolling he did after he was hit.

His right hip had been crushed from the collision, and whatever was streaming out of his wounds wasn't blood.

He smelled of fresh decay. Then some of the crowd noticed the deep incision that ran down the length of his abdomen, and how dark it appeared inside, kind of like he was hollow.

When he opened his pale eyes and sat up, people shrieked in a way that made all the prior screaming seem like an opening act before the main performance.

The events outside the ice cream parlor were lost on the people inside because they had problems of their own. One of their problems was Enoch, who was now expressing his frustration at the turn of events by banging his head repeatedly on the steering wheel. This caused the horn to blare in a series of sharp, annoying bursts that made people stop screaming because they wondered why he was

doing this.

Eventually, a teenager who wore a funny paper hat and an apron with chocolate stains on it approached the car to see if Enoch was injured. Enoch said he wasn't. Despite this, the kid reassured him that everything would be fine, and that an ambulance was on its way.

He did not find that reassuring. When the kid said the word, "ambulance," Enoch remembered that he was an escaped mental patient, and this meant he would probably hate the hospital the ambulance would take him to. It would likely be the hospital he'd just driven away from at a high rate of speed.

He could hear sirens in the distance.

The sirens sounded like they were getting closer, so he started his car and put it in reverse. Then he noticed there was soft-serve ice cream on his windshield. He turned his wipers on, and when the window cleared, he saw the remains of the soft-serve ice cream machine he'd decimated with his car. Standing around the car, he observed, were a bunch of people who were now staring at him in disbelief.

One of them was Brad.

"You!" Enoch said, as he leaned his head out of the driver's side window and pointed in Brad's direction. "This is your fault!"

A teenager standing next to Brad apologized to Enoch, but said, for the record, that he didn't see how this was his fault.

"I think he means me," Brad said. "Is that you, Enoch?"

Enoch was about to answer when something whizzed by his head, missing him by inches. He looked around to see what it was, and when he looked back at Brad, there was a knife sticking out the side of his left leg.

When everyone realized that someone was now throwing knives at people, everyone started screaming again.

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About two minutes before Brad had a knife sticking out of his leg, the corpse sat up.



*SCRYING GLASS*

This took some effort because many of his bones had been broken, fractured or wrenched from their sockets. And that's not even counting the difficulties of trying to move in a body beset with rigor mortis.

The corpse wondered what had hit him. He grumbled something intangible that sounded like a chain of irritated gurgles, and then he attempted to realign his neck and back into a position that wasn't quite so mangled. When he did, a series of grotesque cracking noises emanated from his tortured body, which could've made even the most sadistic chiropractor wince.

At first, the corpse appeared a little disorientated. His neck was broken, so he had to use a hand to assist his head with looking around to gage his surroundings. When he seemed to get his bearings, he lowered his hand, which caused his head to dangle lifelessly without much of a neck to support it.

The corpse was starting to get pissed. This was supposed to have been an easy assignment.

After that, he crawled toward the ice cream parlor as best he could, while dragging his injured leg behind him sort of pathetically. He didn't get far before he spotted a man charging at him with a knife in his hand, screaming something he'd probably heard in a movie.

"Back to hell, you zombie son of a bitch!" the man screamed, melodramatically. It was as if he'd waited his whole life for this moment.

Then the man lunged at him and attempted to jab the knife in the corpse's head. When he realized what the man was about to do, he covered his face with his hands, and the blade sliced through his right hand and stabbed deep into his forehead. An eruption of dark fluid oozed out of the wound.

The man was now standing only a few inches from the corpse, watching in growing horror as he tugged and pulled in an effort to dislodge the knife. When the corpse finally succeeded, both he and the man paused to inspect the effectiveness of the attack. It wasn't very effective at all because the corpse now had a usable weapon.

The corpse thanked the man by pulling him close and giving him

a nice pat on the back. Unfortunately for the man, he did this with the hand that had the knife sticking out of it.

When the man was dead, the corpse pushed his body out of the way and resumed crawling toward the ice cream parlor. He was in a foul mood at this point, and was looking forward to taking it out on somebody.

When he saw Brad, the source of his irritation and the person he'd been sent to kill, he pulled the knife from his hand and threw it at Brad. But because of all the damage to the body he was using, his throw wasn't that good, and the knife hit Brad in the leg.

The corpse realized he'd made a tactical error when Enoch backed the car up and ran over him again. But all was not lost, he thought, even as he felt the crushing tires of the car roll over him painfully.

There was, after all, a perfectly good additional body lying in the street a few feet away. He vowed that before the night was done, he was going to run over Enoch four or five times. And then he'd really get started on revenge. This wasn't business anymore. This was personal.

•••

Brad was surprised how much being stabbed in the leg could hurt. Sure, he expected that if it ever happened, it would be painful, but ... shit. It really hurt.

Quickly, he yanked the knife out of his leg. Then he grabbed a hold of Julia and dove behind what was left of the shop's front counter. Once he firmly believed that knives weren't going to start landing in other parts of his body, he stared yelling at Enoch.

"Owwwwwwwwww! Shit! I've been stabbed! Enoch! Is that a friend of yours?"

"No!" Enoch called back at him. "I don't have any friends left, thanks to you!"

"I'd be more sympathetic if I weren't BLEEDING TO DEATH!" Brad called back. "You're in a car! Run over that guy, would you?"

SCRYING GLASS

Brad heard the car start moving and then he heard something gurgle the word, “Don’t!”

Enoch ignored the corpse’s suggestion not to run over him. Brad knew this because seconds later, he heard the distinct sounds of a body being pulped. Crunch! (Back tire.) Squish! (Front tire.)

Brad slowly peaked his head above the counter and saw an arm extending from beneath Enoch’s car. It was twitching in dying spasms and, more importantly, wasn’t holding any sharp weapons.

Then he took Julia by the hand. “Let’s go!”

Julia seemed dazed and frightened, and he remembered when he saw the expression on her face that she didn’t have any idea what was going on.

“I’ll explain this in the car,” he said to her. “But right now, we have to get the hell out of here. I don’t think that thing’s as dead as it looks.”

“It ... it looks awful ... “ she said.

“Yeah, well, that’s what it gets for letting itself get run over by a car.”

“It looks awfully dead,” she added.

“It isn’t. I have to get my duffel bag. I left it at our booth. Can you help me walk?”

“Hey!” Enoch called from the car. “There’s a bunch of sirens heading this way! And I’ll wager they’re coming to take me back to the mental hospital I escaped from!”

Brad paused without saying a word, and then spun around to look at Enoch. “You what?”

“The others, you selfish prick! They put me inside a mental patient!”

“Oh. Well, that’s nice to know.”

Now that Brad took a good look at him, Enoch did look a little unhinged. What was unsettling was that Brad could see the potential for Enoch to suddenly become *very* unhinged with little warning.

He was inside a man in his early 30s, with receding, short-cropped hair and shifty eyes that scanned the world nervously. He was also wearing green hospital scrubs and a white doctor’s coat, but

Brad found it hard to believe that anyone could actually believe he was a doctor.

With Julia's help, Brad painfully hobbled as quickly as possible to fetch his duffel bag. Then they hopped in the backseat of Enoch's car. When they were inside, Enoch floored it, and took out a perfectly innocent mailbox as they fled the scene.

Inside the car, Brad's leg began to throb. Then he remembered seeing the corpse pull the knife from its hand before it threw it at him. The memory came in flashes. It happened so fast that he didn't even have time to react. He didn't want to think about the bacteria that thing carried, which was likely infecting his body.

He looked at his leg. Upon inspection, he discovered the wound wasn't all that bad, as far as stabbings go. The blade had merely sliced through the furthest side of his leg and exited through the other end, completely missing the bone and most of the tendons and muscle. But it hurt and it was bleeding.

The blood was caking around the wound and soaking his jeans. It was oozing down his leg and pooling on the seat.

Julia looked at the blood and bit her bottom lip. Then she began tearing off long strips from her dress.

"I should drive slower so we can blend in, yeah?" Enoch asked.

"Sure," Brad said. "They probably, ugh, won't even notice all the ice cream and blood the car's covered in. And the bits of zombie bone fragment lodged in the, mmm, dent at the front of the car. But yeah, driving slower should make us less conspicuous."

"Who are you?" Julia asked Enoch. "A friend?"

"No." Enoch said. "Well, sort of," he reconsidered.

"We have to get him to a hospital."

"No hospital," Brad argued. "We have to change cars."

Julia tied the strip she tore from her dress around his leg, just above the wound. She tied it good and tight, to where Brad thought his leg might fall off. Then she tore other strips from her dress and made a makeshift bandage, and wrapped the wound as best she could.

"Oh yeah. Much better. I can't feel the knife wound so much now."

*SCRYING GLASS*

Or my leg.”

He was lying. It still hurt terribly.

“What’s happening?” Julia asked. “It looked like ...”

“A zombie?” Brad said. “That’s a good question. Enoch?”

“That was an assassin sent to rip you from the mortal coil,” Enoch said, as he turned a sharp corner and sent Brad flying into Julia. “You know, since you’re about to destroy the Universe?”

“Would you mind not taking those turns like that?” Brad asked. “It’s not like you know where you’re going! So you didn’t have to take that particular turn!”

“I’m driving in the direction that leads away from the mental hospital and the scene we caused at the ice cream parlor,” Enoch explained. “As long as it’s a considerable distance from those places, I don’t care where we go.”

Julia didn’t hear that part because she wasn’t listening. She got stuck on the “destroy the Universe” statement Enoch made earlier.

“Destroy the what?” she eventually said. “Universe?”

“Uh, not on purpose,” Brad said. “We’re, well, we’re dealing with supernatural forces here. Mean ones, too. Enoch’s one of them.”

Brad slumped down in his seat and leaned against the car door. He seemed to be getting more exhausted from the adrenaline crash and blood loss.

“They think I’m about to do something to mess up the cosmic order, or some shit. So they’re trying to kill me. Yeah, I know how that sounds, but that guy was a zombie. You saw it yourself.”

“I think it was Uriel,” Enoch interrupted. “He’s been sent as an instrument of judgment. He was in Egypt at the Time of the Plagues.”

“That doesn’t fill me with much hope,” Brad said.

“He also wrestled with Jacob and lost.”

“Now see? That’s more encouraging. And now he’s walking around in a corpse?”

“Our kind can make bodies, but it takes time and power, and long-term exposure to a living human mind could cause us psychological damage. The Dominion doesn’t believe they have a lot of time left.”

“Me neither.”

“Would you stop interrupting?” Enoch said, testily. “And I know what you’re thinking; why are they so concerned about time when we exist outside of it.”

“That isn’t what I was thinking,” Brad said.

Enoch sighed. Then he ran a red light and almost caused a traffic accident. The car that almost hit them slammed on its breaks and the person driving blared her horn. Enoch stuck his hand out of the window and gave her the finger.

“Bitch!” he yelled. Then he retracted his hand and looked at it like it was diseased. “Aw, shit. I’m starting to merge with the mind of this body. It’s only a matter of time before I go crazy. I blame you.”

“Yeah, I got that. So why are they so concerned about running out of time?”

“Think of time like a body,” Enoch said. “You’ve given it cancer, and it’ll spread outward from its source.”

“So, I’m like years of smoking?” Brad said, which reminded him that he wanted to reach into his pocket and light a cigarette. So that’s what he did. “So, why they’d send a zombie?”

“Maybe you haven’t observed — even though you should’ve by now — that we can’t act on this plane of existence without some sort of a body. So he found someone who died and didn’t need theirs anymore.”

Brad smoked his cigarette while he considered this. When he finished, he flicked the butt out the window.

“Man, this is a lot to take in,” he finally said. “Anyway, we ran over him, so we’re doing good, right?”

“He’ll just find another body, and then he’ll eventually find you. And me too, if I’m standing next to you when he does.”

Brad flashed a quick, concerned look at Julia. He didn’t want her standing next to him if he was found.

“So, how’s he find me?”

“An inverted probability field surrounds you like an aura. Do you realize how improbable it was that I accidentally ran over the very assassin sent to kill you? And then I crashed into the very building you were in?”

SCRYING GLASS

“That *does* seem unlikely.”

“Uriel is known for his sight. He can see the field trailing off you like a multi-colored stench.”

“The odds are against us, then?”

“Yes!”

“In that case, maybe we’ll survive. We’ll figure something out.”

Then Brad saw they were passing the town’s movie theater, and a memory jumped out at him. That memory gave him an idea.

“What’s today?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” Enoch said, bitterly. “I’ve spent most of the day drugged and sharpening my skills at basket weaving.”

“Um, I think today is Wednesday,” Julia said.

“Wednesday, of the week I got suspended. I’ve got a plan. I think we can ditch this car and buy us some time.”

“Whatever,” Enoch said. “More time isn’t going to help me any. Does your plan involve buying more time for the Universe? Because that’s the only reason I’m helping you. I feel a little bad for allowing you to destroy the Universe.”

“So you’ve said. Now, let’s fix it.”

Enoch pulled into the movie theater parking lot and screeched to an abrupt halt. Brad yelped from the pain this caused his leg. Then he grabbed his duffel bag, climbed from the car and started limping across the parking lot. Enoch and Julia started following him.

“We should leave Julia here so she’ll be safe,” Brad suggested to Enoch.

“Safe? Did you see how angry Uriel was?” Enoch asked. “He saw her with you. He’ll probably kill her to lure you to him, or just because he knows it’ll make you miserable. He knows she’s the reason you were drawn back to 1989.”

“What?” Julia asked. “Because of me?”

She didn’t understand the time travel part, but she knew enough. Now she understood that she was a part of this.

“If he’s following us, we’ll have to lure him someplace we can use,” Brad said. “Start planning. But wherever we go, that’s the car we’re taking.”

The car they were taking was a Camaro that was parked off in a distant corner of the parking lot. It was parked there because the person who owned it would lose his mind if anyone were to scratch it. It was red and had gold flames painted on the sides, and was lovingly waxed by hand for several hours every weekend. (You could tell by looking at it.) Because of this, it seemed to gleam, even in the darkness, with nothing but parking lot lights to reflect off of its pampered surface.

“This,” Brad said, “is Chuck’s dad’s car. He loves it more than he loves Chuck, and who can blame him? Just looking at it, I have that theme from Ferris Bueller in my head. You know, the Ferrari theme?”

Enoch didn’t know anything about the Ferrari theme.

“So?”

“So, we’re going to steal it,” Brad said.

“That’s your plan? That’s it?”

“Pretty much. See, the first time I got suspended and had this Wednesday, I went to the movies because a girl I was crazy for was going to be there. She’s in there now.

“But when I got here, I saw Chuck and his friends get out of this very car, and she went nuts over it. She convinced Chuck to give her a ride and he convinced her to give him sexual favors. I know it sounds stupid and degrading, but that’s high school for you.

“On Monday, he’s going to tell everyone at school all the demeaning things he got her to do, and she’ll be called a tramp for the rest of high school.”

“I see,” Enoch said. “We’re going to steal the car so we can help out the little harlot?”

“No,” Brad said. “We’re going to steal it to help *us* out. Chuck only drives the car when his dad’s out of town on business. His dad doesn’t know Chuck made a key.

“About six months from now, he’s going to crash it. When his dad finds out, he sends him off to a military school. Terrorizing other students is one thing, but wrecking his car is something else entirely.”



*SCRYING GLASS*

“Yeah?” Enoch asked. “That’s why he got sent off?”

“Yup,” Brad answered. “So we’re going to steal the car to see if we can send Chuck there a little early. If he’s sent away, he won’t be here to kill me. Then everything gets fixed, right?”

Enoch scrunched up his face in thought. “Actually, yes. That might really work.”

“Um, Brad?” Julia said. “I, uh, I’m not sure about stealing a car.”

Brad took Julia by the hand and stared deep into her eyes. “Do you trust me?” he asked her.

“I, well, I guess I do. You found something, didn’t you? Something that brought you here? Because you’re different now than I remember you. You came here for me?”

“Yes. It’s complicated, but yes.”

“Well . . . I do trust you, I guess.”

“Thank you,” Brad said. “Okay, Enoch, break into the car.”

“Me?” Enoch asked. “How?”

“Like you did before.”

“That car wasn’t locked. This one is. I got the memory of how to hotwire a car from your principal. He used to be an automotive instructor, not a thief. I don’t how to pick a lock.”

“That’s okay,” Brad said. “I just happen to have a key.”

Then he took out the baseball bat from beneath his coat and smashed the driver’s side window.

“Chick. Chick-a-chicka.”

•••

Jason Bowers was lying unceremoniously in the street, an un-sung, almost-hero who died for nothing. He was the victim of B-movie plots and a sincere desire to be the daring hero — if not for the world, then at least in the theater of his own mind.

His mind was a shabby theater of late-night movies, Ed Wood films and vampire porn. The seats were damp and the floors were sticky. Don’t ask why.

He had shuffled through life quietly — a man who blended in with his surroundings, but not the people who inhabited them. He

was a lonely man of 40, pale and a little overweight. He had a bad skin complexion and lived on a steady diet of McDonald's food and potato chips. His meals were served to him by teenagers who thought he looked like a pedophile and spit in his food regularly.

Jason knew everything there was to know about Buffy and slaying vampires, demonic curses and all about the monsters of folklore and cinema. He thought the people who opposed them were dashing and brave.

One day he was mugged and beaten in the parking lot of McDonald's. He never quite got the feeling back in the left side of his face. The experience left him with a nervous twitch that he couldn't control, and a desire to carry a knife wherever he went.

On the night he saw the dead thing crawling toward the ice cream parlor, it was as if all his celluloid heroes called to him from their flickering world of silver light footage, and beckoned him to join their struggles against the monsters of grays and blacks. It was a chance to touch the movie magic.

Only this was real, and Jason had trouble knowing the difference.

It will be several weeks before anyone notices he is missing. When he finally *is* missed, it will only be because a McDonald's manager will notice the restaurant is slightly behind projections after tallying the monthly sales report.

He didn't think dying would be like this.

It was a strange feeling for him to die, but it was even stranger to stand over his lifeless body and watch it get up and leave without him.

"That doesn't normally happen," an angel said to him as he was wondering what to do with himself now that he was dead.

"I tried to save those people," Jason said to the angel. "I tried to stop the zombie. Is this the end of the world?"

"Maybe," the angel said, with a detectable level of regret in his voice. "But even if it's not, it's the end of your part in it."

"So what happens now?" Jason asked.

And the angel told him.

"Cool. So I died a hero?"

*SCRYING GLASS*

“Heroes are not forged from victory, but in the attempt itself — especially when victory is not possible,” the angel said. “You died a hero.”

And when they disappeared, Jason finally understood something that had escaped him when he lived: Even he mattered.

## IX

Brad, Julia and Enoch had been driving for a little more than half-an-hour before they finally decided to stop and formulate a plan. Once they did and they realized where they needed to go, they were a little disappointed to discover they'd been traveling in the wrong direction for a little more than half-an-hour.

At some point before that happened, a bottle of grain alcohol rolled out from beneath the front seat and brushed up against Brad's leg. The bottle was probably put in the car by Chuck and his friends to ease the transition from "just hanging out" to "full-blown orgy" with the girls they intended to bring along later that night.

Brad had a better idea for it. He removed the makeshift bandage Julia made, and then he poured the alcohol directly on top of the wound. It burned and burned, but he was sure it would coagulate the blood and kill the bacteria. Eventually, the agony subsided into a dull ache that was somewhat manageable.

"We need to stop to get a first-aid kit and maybe some penicillin," he said to Enoch. "And some orange juice."

The town they were passing through had a gas station. And that was it. It was not a big town, and Enoch grumbled when Brad made him pull into the station to purchase the items he needed. Enoch believed that one of the most important factors of running from the law was the running part, and it took some coaxing to get him to stop.

When Enoch walked into the station, he was greeted by an attendant who appeared to think of civilization and its trappings — such as soap, deodorant and toothpaste — as a distant fantasy worthy

SCRYING GLASS

of skepticism.

“Hey, Goober,” Enoch said. “You got any penicillin?”

“Name’s Earl,” Earl said. “Nope. You a doctor?”

“Yeah, that’s what I am,” Enoch replied. “How about orange juice?”

“Expir’ations expired.”

Enoch turned and looked at Brad sitting outside in the car. Then he looked back at Earl and smiled wickedly.

“How expired?”

“S’pretty old.”

“Right. I’ll take it. And a first-aid kit, too.”

“Don’t got one.”

“Oh that won’t due. He’ll be complaining the whole trip about his silly knife wound.”

Enoch looked around the station and realized how worthless everything in it was. Then he saw what was likely meant to be a souvenir stand. There were a number of t-shirts hanging there. One of them said, *I’M WITH STUPID*, and it had an arrow that pointed up.

“How much for this?” Enoch asked.

“Take it,” the man said. “I’m retirin’.”

“Yeah?”

“Won the lottery.”

“You won the lottery? *You* did?”

“Yup. Lotsa folks did. See?”

The man pointed to an ancient television set that was sitting next to the cash register. He walked over and turned the volume up, and a newscaster explained how a lot of folks just won the lottery.

“This has been unprecedented in lotto history,” the newscaster said. “And the calls just keep coming in. People all across the state — for reasons that aren’t let clear — decided independently of each other to select the exact same lotto numbers, seemingly at random. What makes this story even stranger is those numbers have apparently won.”

Then the camera cut to another reporter.

“That’s right, Bill,” the other newscaster said. He had a bandage

over his nose and a black eye, and he was standing in front of a pub that had broken windows and was surrounded by police. “Pandemonium struck here tonight at ‘Bills Eat Shack’ in Scranton, after lotto officials read tonight’s winning numbers.

“For weeks, the 47 million dollar grand-prize jackpot has been driving lotto ticket sales through the roof. But as this reporter learned earlier tonight, anticipation and the promise of wealth can turn deadly at a moment’s notice. Just watch.”

The scene switched to footage that had been recorded earlier. The reporter was standing next to some guy who was eating buffalo chicken wings and drinking a stein of beer.

“So,” the newscaster said to the man, “what brings you here to ‘Bills Eat Shack’?”

“Lotto party!” the man said with enthusiasm. “Yeah!”

Then everyone in the pub cheered and lifted their drinks in a celebratory fashion.

“So, are you hopeful you’ll win the jackpot?” the reporter asked.

“Hey, someone’s got to win. Might as well be me.”

“Or me!” someone else called out from off-camera. Then everyone laughed and cheered.

Finally, someone turned the volume up on the pub’s big-screen TV and quieted everyone in the room. “It’s time! Shut up!”

On the TV, lotto officials read the numbers and everyone in the pub read their tickets, including the man sitting next to the reporter.

“Seven. Twenty. One. Nine. One. And ... five!”

Oh my God!” the man next to the reporter said. “7-20-1-9-1-5? I won!”

He shot out of his seat and engaged in a badly rendered victory dance. “I won! I won, I won!”

“You did?” the reporter asked. “This is amazing! How do you feel, sir? You’ve just won the 47 million dollar grand-prize jackpot!”

“I feel great! This is the greatest day of my—“

”I won too!” someone else in the pub shouted.

“So did I!” a different person exclaimed.

“What?” the first man said. “How could you win if I won? Let me

*SCRYING GLASS*

see that ticket!”

The camera followed the man as he went over to the other winner and grabbed the ticket out of his hand.

“Get your hands off me!”

“Those are my numbers!”

“They’re mine too!”

“They’re also mine!” a fourth person yelled.

“And mine!” said a fifth.

And then an old-fashioned bar-brawl started.

The live feed picked back up with the reporter standing in front of the pub. In the background, police were still escorting people to the slammer. Most of them were lottery winners, briefly crazed after their magic carpet ride was yanked out from under them.

Then Earl turned the set off. “What’re the odds?” he said to Enoch.

“Did they say how many people won?” Enoch asked, which was information he’d need to calculate the odds.

“Still countin’” Earl said. “People getting’ in fights all over.”

“Well, Earl, I hate to tell you this, but your ticket is probably worthless.”

Earl just looked at Enoch like he was speaking a different language. (Maybe Japanese.) The thought that his ticket was of no value hadn’t occurred to him for some reason.

“Worthless?” Earl said. “But ... but I’m retirin’.”

Suddenly a great, black cloud of reality was looming over Earl’s shantytown of dreams. Enoch could see the storm brewing behind his eyes.

“Damn,” Enoch said. “You’re going to make me pay for my t-shirt, aren’t you?”

“Yup.”

Enoch left the gas station with empty pockets, repeating the winning lotto numbers because they sounded familiar to him for some reason.

“Hmm. 7-20-1-9-1-5?”

He opened the car door and tossed Brad’s items at him. Then he

looked at Julia.

“Hey,” he said to her. “I need you to fill the car up with gasoline. And when it’s full, jump in real quick.”

“Ummm . . . why?”

“Why? Because we need gas and we’re out of money. As for you,” he said to Brad, “do you still have my computer?”

“Yeah,” Brad said. “In my duffel bag. What for?”

“A probability glitch in the universal matrix has erupted and I want to find out how bad it is. We can also use it to figure out where we need to go.”

Julia got out and started to pump gasoline into the car. She set the pump to automatic and then paced around the vehicle nervously while the tank filled. She was trying very hard not to look like a gasoline thief, and because she tried so hard, she completely failed.

Brad rummaged through his bag until he found the computer. Then he tossed it to Enoch.

“So,” Brad said. “What can this computer thingy do?”

“Sure,” Enoch said. “Like *you* ’ll understand.”

“Tell me anyway.”

“Fine. This ‘computer thingy’ is several million generations beyond anything on Earth. It’s an Omega model field unit with standard features, including bio-gel processors capable of ciphering 6.3 teraquads of data per millisecond. The data can be transmitted by a temporal carrier wave and stored in our subspace memory womb. It also has a hard-light holographic display function and communication relays that are transmittable through all the known psychic spectrum frequencies.”

“Yeah?” Brad asked. “Does it download MP3s?”

“If it did, it could beam them directly into your feeble brain. It would be very painful. I’d be happy to show you.”

“And risk a lawsuit from the music industry? No thanks. Did you say it could beam messages into a human brain?”

“Yes.”

“That could be useful. What’s it tell you about where we should make our stand?”



*SCRYING GLASS*

“Well,” Enoch said. “Perhaps you’ve noticed I haven’t used it yet. Give me a second, can’t you?”

Enoch sat the computer down on the hood of the car, and said, “Pad.”

A hologram shot out of the emitter and hovered in front of him like a futuristic keyboard. Then he grabbed the hovering pad with each hand and stretched it into a horseshoe shape, with himself in the center.

“Monitor.”

Then a monitor, roughly the size of a checkbook, hovered in front of him too.

“I hope you’ve got good eyes,” Brad said.

“Come here and grab this end,” Enoch replied.

Brad took one end of the monitor and the two of them stretched it out until it looked something like a plasma screen TV, hovering in the air.

Then Enoch began typing on the keyboard. Since the symbols he typed were foreign to Brad, as well as the graphs and symbols on the screen, he had no idea what information it was relaying. But he knew enough about facial expressions and noises people make when they’re worried to know that it wasn’t good.

“Okay, I know where we need to go,” Enoch said. “And there’s something else. Do the numbers 7-20-1-9-1-5 mean anything to you?”

“No.”

“Mm.”

“Um, excuse me,” Julia said. “Those numbers? They’re right here.”

“What?”

Brad and Enoch walked back to Julia, who was standing behind the car.

“The license plate,” Julia said. “‘P’ and ‘A’ on the phone is ‘7’ and ‘2.’”

She pointed at their plate. It read, “PA-01915.”

“You know,” Brad said, “I was actually hoping this didn’t have

anything to do with me.”

“Wonderful,” Enoch said. “The Universe just fingered us as car thieves.”

“Maybe the numbers were suggesting a course of action?” Brad argued. “You know, steal the car to get Chuck out of the picture?”

“Maybe,” Enoch agreed. “I’d have to do some extensive calculations to know for sure, but I can’t because we have to keep moving. And since our actions seem to be affecting the world in ways we can’t predict, we’ll have to be careful.”

“Uh, that guy in the gas station? He’s looking at us,” Julia observed.

“Don’t worry about him,” Enoch said. “Earl’s not real quick on the uptake. We’ll be halfway to where we need to go before he realizes we aren’t coming in to pay.”

“He’s probably just fascinated by the giant hologram,” Brad added. “Like he’s never seen one of *those* before. Speaking of which, where *are* we going?”

“Back the way we came,” Enoch said. “And before you say ‘*I told you that you didn’t know where you were going,*’ just ask yourself, ‘*how much would it hurt if Enoch were to kick me in the leg right now?*’”

“We’re going back the way we came? Seriously?”

“Yes! Twenty-seven miles past where we just were, yes! There’s only so many places we can lead Uriel. I’m assuming someplace dangerous is what you had in mind? Dangerous and remote? Well I found a place, but time’s a factor: We have three hours and 42 minutes to get there.”

“And then?”

“And then we kill him. Or he kills us.”

“Oh.”

They all stood in silence for a moment, contemplating the possibility that they might be dead in three hours and 42 minutes.

POP!

All three looked over at the gas nozzle, which had stopped pumping. Then they slowly turned and looked over at Earl. After

*SCRYING GLASS*

that, they ran hurriedly to the car in chaotic fashion; started it, and peeled out, kicking dirt and small bits of gravel in Earl's face when he ran out to scream at them for stealing his gasoline.

Earl tried to take down their license plate number for the police. For some reason, the numbers seemed mockingly familiar to him. Also, although he didn't notice it, there was a small point of light in the night's sky just above his head that suddenly went out.

A distant star had simply blinked out of existence.

That star was (or had been) Proxima Centauri, the closest star to Earth. An astronomer named Robert Innes discovered it in 1915. He died just before his 72<sup>nd</sup> birthday.