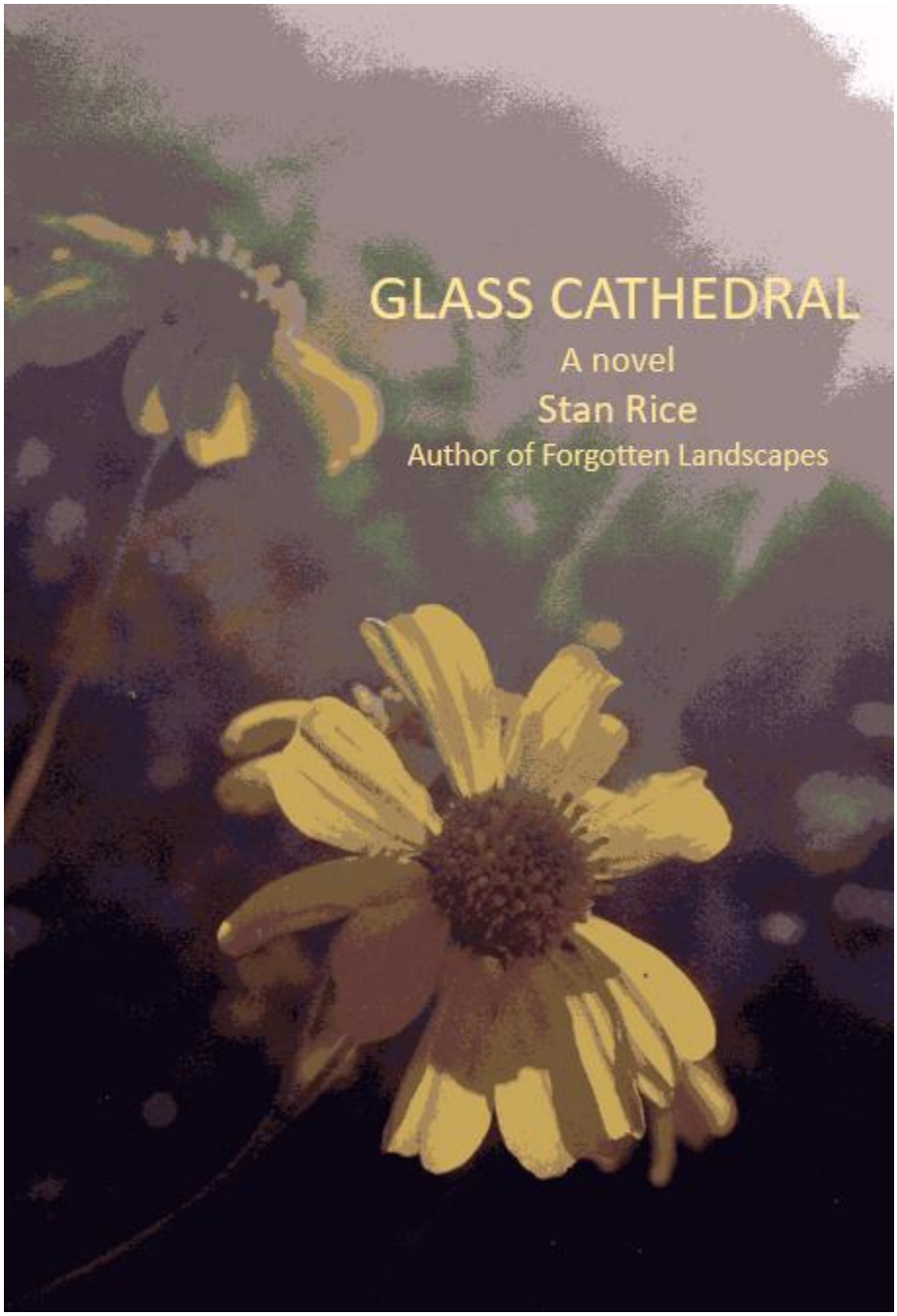

GLASS CATHEDRAL
A novel
Stan Rice
Author of Forgotten Landscapes

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GLASS CATHEDRAL

A novel by Stan Rice

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Summary of Glass Cathedral

The newspaper staff writers of a small desert town assume the strange light in the sky is merely sunlight refracted by ice crystals: atheist Dan Hardy; the spiritually-searching Misty Barbour; and even the confirmed Christian editor Emilio Villanueva. Then the light turns out to be God—maybe. This is enough to make Misty leave her doubts behind and marry Emilio. Dan, who was hoping to win Misty's affection, is skeptical, especially since God showed up on no photographic images, and everyone in town saw God differently. The government authorities declare the light was a mass hallucination.

Emilio and Misty raise money to build a glass cathedral in the desert, near the place they think God appeared. When thousands of people come for the inaugural celebration, a storm pulls the glasshouse into the sky. Misty gets trampled. At the end, Emilio and Misty, who is now disabled, conclude that God's work is to help people, not to build a cathedral, and even Dan agrees.

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Part One

The Susurrus Event

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Chapter 1

Emilio Villanueva was about to wake up anyway when the phone rang. Bright sunlight was already streaming through the window. On the second ring, Emilio began to wonder who might be calling him at what, for most people, was such an early hour. It might be Misty Barbour, his beloved, who might someday be his partner in faith and in marriage. She certainly knew that she could call him anytime and he would be glad to talk with her on the phone, or even to rush to her house to talk with her. How could he know whether just one more conversation might be all she needed to embrace the faith that brought splendor into each day of his life? By the third ring, he wondered if Misty might have a problem. He had a moment of fear that the phone call came from his family in Mexico. His mother was very old. Before the fourth ring, he pulled the handset from the cradle and tried to sound cheerful.

"Hello!" Emilio's voice was blocked by a little bit of congestion.

"Mr. Villanueva?" said a male voice. "Sorry to disturb you so early, but there's something strange going on." Emilio was the editor of the newspaper in Susurrus, a little town in the Mojave Desert of California. He was the one whom people called when something unusual, but not dangerous enough to call the police, was happening.

"What's the problem?" Emilio asked.

"There's a light in the sky," said the man. "I mean, besides the sun. Some of us have been talking about it. We thought you might know what it is."

It was winter, and the desert sky was cold and clear. Emilio said, "I'll bet it's a sundog."

"A what?"

"It's where ice crystals high in the air refract sunlight, twenty-two degrees to either side of the sun. It reminded someone in the past of two dogs running beside the sun."

"I don't think I can remember all of that," said the man.

"Just tell your neighbors it is light refracted by ice crystals high in the sky. Like little rainbows. I'll check it out, but for now, just tell them it is a sundog."

Emilio stepped outside of his house in the old but hardly worn robe he used only on rare, cold winter days like this one. He had not put his glasses on yet, but he could see the light exactly where it should be, on one side of the sun. He smiled and started back inside. Then he looked again. There was only one sundog. Where was the other one? Blocked by one of the sharp, dry mountains? The sky, however, was clear and blue where the other one should have been. He knew he would have to call the National Weather Service and ask them. They

knew him well, since they faxed him weather prediction diagrams for the newspaper every weekday.

His breakfast was the same every morning, and he usually prepared it in a dance of unthinking efficiency. Quick oats with artificial sweetener, dried fruits (most recently black cherries), margarine (this was back before the trans-fat controversy), and cream. He warmed milk in his microwave and stirred in special Latin American instant coffee. Before his first bite, the phone rang again.

"Mr. Villanueva? National Weather Service. Sorry to disturb you at home. We've been getting calls about a light in the sky. The calls are all from Susurrus. People want to know what is going on. Do you have any information?"

"I haven't heard anything. I assumed it was a sundog. I assume you know what that is," said Emilio.

"We do," said the weather man. "But if we were sure, we would not have called."

"I'll be in my office as soon as I can," said Emilio. "I'll check around."

Emilio would not be rushed in writing his devotions. He had a notebook of lined paper in which he wrote every morning. First, he wrote, in his nicest cursive script, his meditations upon a passage of scripture; next, Adoration of God; next, Confession of sin; next, Thanksgiving; finally, Supplication for daily help. This was the ACTS system he had learned back in Catholic school, before his conversion to Protestantism. Whenever he knew he had to be out of the house early, he wrote his devotions the evening before, but he had not done so this time. The scripture was one of the ones about God commanding Joshua to slaughter whole cities of Canaanites. Now, what was he supposed to learn from that? Being in a hurry, he simply wrote down that Joshua obeyed even the commands from God that he did not understand.

Sometimes Emilio was a little late to the office if a devotional idea required a little more thought and writing, but the phone rang again and he knew it was time to close the notebook. This time it was the Air Force base at China Lake. "Sorry to call you at home," they said. "But people have been calling us about a light in the sky. All the calls come from your city. But our radar shows nothing in the sky."

Emilio got irritated for the first time in several days. "It's a sundog," he said to the assistant commander of Military Intelligence who had called him. "Of course your radar doesn't show anything. It is sunlight, not a solid object like a missile or something. And you wouldn't see it unless you were at just the correct angle relative to the sun." Emilio hung up, hoping that he had not made Military Intelligence sound stupid.

Emilio told himself that at least he knew what today's paper would be about. It would at least be more interesting than the third-grade production of

James and the Giant Peach about which he had written last week. Miss Spider was played by the daughter of a rich manager of one of the nearby mines. Not the owner, who lived in San Francisco. Emilio had trouble writing enough lines praising Miss Spider to fill up the newspaper space.

After brushing his teeth, freshening up, and dressing, Emilio took his trench coat from the closet. Like his robe, the coat had hardly been worn, nor had the sock cap he kept in its pocket. Having already packed his briefcase, he stepped out the door. He locked it behind him, even though he possessed nothing worth stealing aside from a desktop computer and a big CRT screen. He walked from his residential neighborhood toward the newspaper office in the small downtown.

A strong wind whizzed through the naked branches of Emilio's mulberry tree, almost the only tree in town. Out in the snowless desert, plants did not need to lose their leaves in winter. But Emilio's mulberry tree was a native of eastern North America, and lost its leaves when the days became short, whether or not they became cold. The leaves responded to cues from heaven, not from the earth, just as Emilio took his cues from the God of Heaven, not from the temptations and rationalizations of the world. The mulberry tree was as out of place in the desert as Emilio was in a town where few people attended church. He walked past the smoke tree, which was actually a large bush, in his neighbor's yard. A couple of feathery seeds still clung to its branches. As he turned the corner toward his office, the sidewalk took him past the edge of town, and he looked out across the desert. Sharp cliffs towered far away across rolling grayish gold plains of large dark creosote and small light ambrosia bushes, as perfectly spaced from one another as decorations on a blanket. A scent of moisture arose from the ground, rich and musky, a redolence that someone had once told him was produced by soil fungi only briefly after rains, like the one the previous afternoon. Before resuming his walk, Emilio wondered whether any of the people who had noticed the sundog had noticed the scent of the rain. He watched the sundog on the right of the sun grow brighter and larger, and he wondered again where the one on the left was.

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Chapter 2

Emilio entered the glass door of the newspaper office and hung up his trench coat. He greeted Stefani, who was both receptionist and word processor, and Tim, who did the computer layouts. The reporters, Dan Hardy and Misty Barbour, made Stefani's work easier by giving her computer files rather than hard copy. Most of her word-processing work was on letters and advertising copy received in the mail or over the counter.

"We got a bunch of recorded phone calls about a light in the sky," said Stefani.

"I'm not surprised," said Emilio.

Emilio usually stopped at Misty's desk en route to his office, to give her a chaste and gentle kiss. She was, however, not at her desk. She was usually absolutely punctual, and Emilio thought that if she was not at her desk there must have been a really good reason for it. Dan was not at his desk either, but he was always late. His quick and good writing made up for it. Emilio went on into his private office.

Dan entered the open office space and stalked to his desk with brisk cheerfulness. He whipped the short jacket off of his tall skinny form and draped it over the back of the antique wooden chair that contrasted with the modern upholstery and metal in the rest of the office. He seemed to be always caught by surprise when it was cold or rainy.

When Misty entered, with bitter coffee in her Save The Desert Ecosystems cup, Dan noticed right away what Emilio would have noticed if she had permitted him to see her.

"Say, what's up?" Dan asked Misty, striding over to her, a smile stretching the skin over his cleft chin. The only ray of sun that entered the office glistened on his dark curly hair.

Misty smoothed her long plaid skirt as she sat in her swivel chair and placed the coffee in the exact middle of her desk calendar. Today a thick sweater covered yet revealed her short, slim form which was usually clad in a loose dress. Her light brown hair fell to her shoulders, and large bangs covered her entire forehead. Little round glasses slid to the tip of her small nose. Only someone who knew her as well as Emilio, or who watched her as closely as Dan, would recognize the unaccustomed tenseness or notice the pout of the lips that almost always smiled. She avoided eye contact with Dan. "What makes you think something is wrong?" she responded with a voice that sounded like the clarinet she used to play.

"You don't hide your emotions very well," Dan said in trombone tones, pulling up a chair beside her and sticking his long legs out as he sat in it backwards, his chin on his hands on the chair back. "In your face and movements, that is. You hide your emotions in your articles pretty well, of course. They are pretty level-headed, even when you feel like biting someone's head off. Like that article you wrote about the trona plant that dumped its sludge into the stream that had the rare little pupfishes in it. I took one look at you when you were writing that article and I knew you thought it was a really shitty thing for Consolidated Potassium to do. And the way they claimed they had to pollute in order to create jobs—right when they were laying people off! People who have lived all their lives in this community losing jobs they'd had for decades. But did you tincture your article with the vitriol that the corporation deserved? No. You just stated the facts, which were damning all by themselves. I saw you holding your anger in like a nuclear reactor. This morning, then: one look and I can tell something's eating you."

Misty looked silently at her coffee. She saw Juan Valdez and his donkey from the television commercial trudging slow circles around the steaming caldera, the black Aztec sacrificial pool, wondering whether his coffee crop would yield enough cash for him to survive.

Seeing how unfocused Misty's gaze was, Dan said to her, "You don't want to talk about it. I can live with that. After the important talks you and I have had, the way we know each other's lives, you know you should feel free to unburden yourself to me, just as I to you. Like when I told you about Margaret, and you told me about your experiences in Ecuador." He did not want to mention the name of Dwayne, her fiancé who had been killed there. "If you want to get something off your chest, you can always tell me." He stood up and wiggled her shoulder with a strong gentle hand, creating a peristalsis that quickly died. "It must be about Emilio. Am I right?"

Suddenly Misty glared up at him and was going to say *Leave me alone!* but instead said, "Yes, it's about me and Emilio. We have to talk."

"Ah, four of the worst words in the English language for a man to hear from his lover," sang Dan.

"I love him, but..."

"Those are the other worst four words," Dan smiled wisely. "Except maybe, *Whose lipstick is this?*"

"Stop it," Misty said with fierce quietness. She pulled off her glasses with one hand—she almost always used two—and plunked them down beside her coffee. She wiped her hand across her dry eyes, and sighed. She looked up at Dan. Her beauty stood out as shockingly in a rural community of plain women as mist in a desert. "We can't go on like this..."

"The worst six words..."

"Stop it!"

"No, seriously..." Dan pulled his chair closer to Misty and sat down in it again, the right way this time. "Look, I really care about you..."

"The stupidest five pick-up words in the English language," Misty shot back at him, without looking him in the eye.

"I deserved that," Dan allowed. "I really respect you..." When Misty looked up at him, her eyes glistening a little more than before, he held up his palms defensively. "I know, the stupidest four words. I hope you know that if I wanted to sweet-talk you, I would already have done so back in Santa Barbara. But I swear, Misty, it's true. I really do respect you."

"You swear? By what? By Whom?"

"By my frontal lobe and all my australopithecine forebears," Dan answered without hesitation. "By the blessed intercession of St. Charles. Darwin, that is. And the lesser saints like Alfred Russel Wallace, George Gaylord Simpson, Ernst Mayr, Herbert Baker, and G. Ledyard Stebbins. I am honest to myself because evolution got rid of any brains that were not honest to themselves. I am honest to you because..." He lowered his voice. "Because I love you."

Misty had heard Dan speak his words of love before. Now, as before, she chose intellectual discussion as a way of escape. "You've brought up an interesting point," Misty said. "That's our problem. Emilio believes in God, and Jesus, and the Bible. It's all so clear to him. He might be right, but I'm just not sure. He tolerates me so lovingly, waits so patiently for me to make up my mind about what to believe. But..." Her eyebrows disappeared behind her bangs. "There is only one conclusion he will be satisfied with me reaching." She looked despondently down into her cup of poison.

"Sounds to me like a fundamental incompatibility," observed Dan.

"But I don't want to lose him either," said Misty, looking up at Dan. "Suppose I do end up agreeing with him. I don't want to have driven him away..."

"End up agreeing with him?" asked Dan. "Exactly what information are you waiting for to show you whether he is right or not?"

"I don't know," said Misty, staring down into the cup as if it now contained the potion of wisdom.

"You can't spend your whole life not making your mind up," said Dan.

"You sound just like Emilio," said Misty, shooting her glance up at Dan. "Sometimes I think you atheists are just as doctrinaire as the Christians."

"I guess I deserved that one too," said Dan. "But you said you didn't want to drive Emilio away. Where do you suppose he'd go? He'll wait for you. Meanwhile, you need a little distance." Misty was a little perturbed, as if Dan had read her thoughts. She looked at his handsome, smiling face as he continued.

"Furthermore, you're having trouble living with his moral standards, which you aren't sure you agree with. Those many hours of lost opportunity each night for lovemaking..." Dan was surprised Misty didn't attack him for saying this. "...are well worth it, if you believe in Biblical orthodoxy, but if you don't, they're just empty sheets. Admit I'm right."

"Okay, okay, you're right," Misty said, turning away from Dan. "Just don't get any ideas."

"Oh, I never do that. I'm a reporter, not a creative writer."

"That's not what I meant. You know what I meant."

"Sure. Just to let you know," Dan became suddenly serious. "You're on my A-list. You *are* my A-list. I've got a B-list, and a C-list..."

"Where did you get those women for your lists? You must really get around."

"Not really," said Dan. "Most of them are women I barely know in San Bernardino."

"Sounds like a hoot."

"And a couple of women from my past whom I will probably never see again. But I just want you to know..." said Dan. Misty looked again into his eyes. "Anytime you give me a call, you have priority over anyone else I might just happen to be with, okay? In the unlikely event I am actually *in flagrante delicto* with one of them, I'll jump out of bed and come over to talk with you."

"Tell me something." Misty turned to Dan. "Why don't you believe in God?"

This was right when Emilio walked out of his office and saw them. He assumed they had been having a theological discussion all along. "Good morning, *enamoradíssima*," he said to Misty. His moustache encircled his grin as his eyebrows spilled over the sides of the eyes magnified by glasses. His skin was scarcely darker than Misty's. Emilio called her by a different affectionate Spanish term each day, sometimes something passionate like *corazón de fuego* and sometimes something silly like *florita bonita*. Misty shifted uncomfortably, because today's salutation was his best yet. *Most beloved one*. Emilio looked at Dan. "And good morning to you. So, interesting question." The last time Emilio had said that to Dan, he wrote their discussion into his weekly column. Without, of course, mentioning Dan by name.

"Well, it's simple," said Dan.

"I'll bet," said Emilio, not intending offense.

"I believe in what I can see. I can't see God."

"I can't see gravity," countered Emilio.

Here we go again, thought Dan.

Misty looked at the tar pit in her cup and wondered what extinct gargantuan beasts were hiding in it. This discussion must have happened a hundred thousand times throughout the world and human history. She just wanted to get some work done.

"I can see what gravity does. I'm taller than you are," Dan hoped Misty heard him tell Emilio, "so I notice gravity more."

"I can see what God does," countered Emilio. "For example, this beautiful morning..."

"You see photons and atoms," Dan said. "You do not see beauty. Your brain interprets what you see as beauty because the sense of beauty helped your hominid ancestors survive better when they experienced adverse conditions."

"What would God need to do to satisfy you?" demanded Emilio, as if he would publish the answer in the Public Notices section.

"If He would just appear in the sky and say *Here I am* then I would be satisfied, at least as to His existence," said Dan.

"But when you see His beautiful creation, you don't acknowledge Him. This morning, a lot of people saw the most beautiful sundog in the sky..." He then had to explain what a sundog was.

Misty made her decision, stood up, grabbed Emilio's arm, and pulled him towards his office, while Dan smiled and Stefani stood stunned as she approached Emilio with a phone message scribbled on a message pad.

"Leave them alone a minute," Dan told Stefani.

*

"Emilio, we have to talk," Misty said breathlessly when she pushed him into the office and shut the door.

Emilio noticed the tears in her eyes. "Misty, darling! You can tell me anything, trust me with anything."

"You won't like this." Misty had found four more of the worst words in English.

"Remember, darling, God is the Judge, not I. And if God will accept you no matter what, how can I do less? So, tell me anything," Emilio pleaded.

"Emilio, it isn't working."

"What isn't?"

"Us. Our relationship."

"What's wrong? Is it something I did? If it is, I will stop at nothing to make amends. God has made us all servants of one another, and I take this role seriously…"

"That's not it," Misty said to her shoes.

"Misty, you know I am socially a little clueless. I might have done something really terrible and not even realize it. It would be difficult to overestimate my naïveté. I will humble myself in whatever way I must, before you, the finest human being I have ever known."

Misty shook her head to fling away the feelings that crowded upon her. How could she say anything disruptive to a man who always said things like that? Always! "Don't make it harder," she said when Emilio hugged her. "Emilio, I love you, but..."

Emilio's face sank. He knew the rest.

"You're the best man I ever met," Misty said, turning from Emilio and hugging herself uncomfortably. "I knew a lot of Christian guys back at UCSB, and, bar none, you are better than all of them. But we're just not seeing eye to eye on what's really important." She waited while Emilio did not reply, then continued. "You're waiting, and waiting, and waiting for me to go back to being a Christian. This has gone on so long that now I'm afraid that if I *do* become a Christian, it will be to give in to pressure from you." She turned back to him and fended off his response. "I know you don't mean to pressure me, but what is it if the man I love says he'll marry me *if* I become a Christian? That's pressure. Now *whatever* I do next is going to be wrong. So, I need some distance. Let me go, Emilio. If I come back, I'm yours. And if I don't, then I never was yours." Misty turned away again, disgusted with herself for quoting a cheap platitude at this important time.

"Let's take this a little slower, give it some time," said Emilio, imposing calmness on himself. "You'll still come over for dinner tonight, won't you?"

"Emilio!" Misty screamed sotto voce.

"We're still friends," Emilio stated as a fact.

Misty threw her arms into the air. "Of course, we are. But don't make it harder than it is! I need time alone to think. No, it's not another man, okay? But I don't want you erecting a wall around me either."

"What is it you need to think about? What stands between you and believing in God?" It was no more painful for Emilio to speak than to remain silent.

Misty thought to herself, *How the hell am I supposed to know?* So, she quoted Dan. "If God appeared in the sky, I suppose I would believe. But hey, that's not going to happen, so give me time to figure out what to do with the unclear information that is available to me." She strode toward the door, and then turned back, eyes flooded. "God, this is hard for me. I swear I don't want to hurt you. I will never, never, never forget your friendship. Oh God help me!" She turned, opened the door, and walked out past an astonished Stefani, who stood ready to knock.

When Misty got to her desk, Dan went over and sat beside her. She wept silently. For one of the first times in his life, Dan had nothing to say.

Stefani waited a few minutes while Emilio sat in painful silence. Then she knocked and entered. “Excuse me, Emilio. You okay? Are you going to be able to finish today’s paper?” When Emilio nodded affirmative, she continued. “Another message about the light in the sky.”

“It’s just a sundog,” said Emilio, irritated. “I’ll send you a little story about what causes sundogs. Put the story on the front page, with a border around it if you want to. Meanwhile, we’d better go see what it looks like. Got your camera, Dan?” he said, as he grabbed his coat and left his office.

Misty took her coat and got up to follow Emilio. It looked to Dan as if she was looking for anything to distract her from her pain. When he joined Misty and Emilio in the parking lot, Dan had his new digital camera. The glow from the sundog was now almost as bright as the sun, and even larger. Dan was very glad that he had invested in a solar filter, which just looked like aluminum foil. He had used it for sunspot images in the newspaper and was ready for the Transits of Venus across the sun to come in 2004 and 2012. He pointed his filtered lens directly at the glow.

“Oh my God,” he said, jerking the camera back down.

“What?” demanded Misty.

Dan snickered. “Just looked like something it couldn’t be.”

“Like what?” she persisted.

“Maybe it isn’t a sundog,” Emilio intoned seriously.

“If you must know, Miss Barbour,” said Dan, “it looked like a man sitting in a chair.” Misty’s face registered surprise, but Emilio seemed to not hear him.

Stefani emerged from the back door of the newspaper office. “Civil Defense called from China Lake. They checked in Trona, and no one there can see it either. Death Valley too. Susurrus is the only place you can see it,” she concluded. “At least, that means it isn’t a nuclear explosion or something.”

Within a few seconds the light became so bright that the observers could begin to feel its radiation.

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” said Emilio. He began to push Misty and Dan toward the newspaper office door. “Remember back in ‘95? Russia almost launched an attack because they saw one of our satellites crossing their air space and no one knew what it was. They even brought The Button to Yeltsin. Fortunately, he wasn’t drunk that day, or in the hospital, and he decided that it would be impossibly stupid for NATO to attack Russia. So, he decided to ignore it. The Cold War was over then, it’s over now, but mistakes can still happen.”

“A nuclear bomb that is already glowing, without an explosion? Doesn’t seem right,” said Dan. “Maybe it’s a comet, or…or…I’ve got it! It’s an asteroid,

like the one that sizzled the dinosaurs 65 million years ago. A rerun of the Terminal Cretaceous Event. Awesome!" He was smiling the kind of smile a man could only have at the end of the world.

"Or it could be a stray nuke from China Lake that their commanders won't admit. Get inside and get under your desks," commanded Emilio.

"You must be joking," said Dan. "As if hiding under our desks like schoolchildren will protect us from Nemesis."

"If there is a flash of radiation, it might protect you from that. It's unlikely to be a direct hit," Emilio said, pushing Misty and Dan inside, where Stefani had already retreated.

While Emilio was stalking around to make sure everyone was safe, Dan used the opportunity to get under the desk with Misty. "So now you get to see how an atheist dies," he told her, "unless you go first."

"This can't be happening," Misty said. What little bit of the office she could see looked so normal.

"You may very well have only a few seconds to live," said Dan. "Think about what you've missed."

Misty knew exactly what he meant, and did not move when he reached for her. "No, no!" she called out.

"What are you saving your virginity for?" Dan demanded. "To be pure when you're fried on the altar of God?"

"Suppose this is just a big mistake," Misty protested breathlessly as Dan massaged her chest. "Or, suppose that a minor explosion hits the office and…and we have to run. If we're all tangled up..." She pushed his hands away.

"Think about me! I'm about to die too! You're denying me..."

"Don't expect me to feel sorry for you! You've had lots of sex, eaten, drunk, and been merry. You've attained everything you want in life..."

"You overestimate me," Dan told her and reached for her again.

Misty cowered back in the corner of the little space under the desk. Her skin was tingling and itching inside the sweater, and she began to sweat a little. She breathed heavily after Dan kissed her, annoyed that Dan would probably misinterpret it as passion. His hand was caressing her backbone.

"What's that?" Misty spat out, tensing into motionlessness.

"It's heaven," Dan said, reaching slightly down inside the back of her skirt.

"Damn it! Get your hands away from me and listen!" Misty hissed at him. Dan pulled back.

The sound had grown so gradually that neither of them had noticed it at first, until Misty heard it and forced Dan to listen. At that point, however, even Dan sat in awe.

"It sounds like stringed instruments," Dan said.

"To me it sounds like voices in a choir," Misty countered. "The chord..." There was no musical movement, no melody, no harmonic shifts, just a chord, although the timbre or color within the chord kept shifting. For a few moments it sounded almost like the blasts of trumpets. "We studied that chord in music class. It's not a major chord. It's not minor. It sounds like what we always called piled-up fifths. Lots of spaces between the notes, almost like two or three chords, one over another, that are dissonant with one another."

"Or maybe like the sound of a giant locomotive coming toward us. God! What could it be?" Dan whispered hoarsely as the sound increased in volume.

"It has a heavenly sound," Misty said, but even Dan, his face only inches from hers, had trouble hearing her because of the loudness.

"Heavenly? With all those dissonances?"

"And why can't that be heavenly?" Misty yelled back. "Heavenly beauty can subsume pain. Like Emilio was telling me." She used one of Emilio's religious words, though she was unsure what it meant. "Christ's wounds are still bleeding even in Heaven. That kind of thing."

"You can't believe that," insisted Dan.

"I'd believe anything right about now," Misty responded.

"Misty! What's wrong with you?"

"What do you mean?"

"You look sick. Pale. You look cadaverous."

"Dan! Look around! Notice the room? Everything is a strange color!" A radiance filled the room that was not white, the mixture of all colors, but it was as if all colors were present while retaining their separateness.

"This is looking more and more like some nuclear holocaust..." Dan sounded, for the first time, frightened. He was ready to die, but not to have his skin slough off in fetid strips like that of the people in the aftermath of the Bomb, as he had read in John Hersey's account of Hiroshima.

"Where's Emilio?" Misty tried to look out from under the desk but Dan was in the way.

"Probably under a different desk."

"I've got to find him. Move!"

"No. I'm going to protect you." Dan tried to lie on top of her, but this time he did not grope.

"Get off of me! Why are you doing this?"

"I love you. Love is the highest attainment of evolution, and I have no choice but to follow it. I can't explain why, my DNA is just making me do it, but I am ready here and now to shield you with my own body and die for you."

They breathed together as the noise became almost unbearable. It now sounded as if a cosmic butt had seated itself upon the celestial organ keyboard and unstopped every note.

Then the sound stopped. The silence was deafening. Neither Dan nor Misty dared to move.

"Come out!" Dan and Misty heard a deep and delicious voice that came from everywhere but mainly from inside their minds. Each thought the other had imagined it and remained motionless, even when the voice repeated twice more, "Come out!" The voice was gentle but seemed to shake the very pillars of the Earth.

Dan and Misty heard the back door of the office open. Misty expected that any moment the invaders would find and shoot them. Maybe with those ray-guns in cheap sci-fi novels she had scorned all her life. Footsteps approached. Misty saw Emilio's shoes.

"Come on out! Didn't you hear Him?" Emilio asked both of them. "It's safe. It's wonderful!"

It was not Emilio's voice that said, "Everyone come out!"

Dan and Misty clambered out, Dan pulling Misty and touching her as much as he could. He squinted into Misty's face and saw her eyes fully open with wonder behind spectacles that sat askew. She shuffled out of Dan's arms, took Emilio's hand, and they walked toward the door. Dan stumbled afterward.

The muscles in Dan's eyes pulled upwards, but he resisted, looking at the street instead, where awe-struck people were gathering. There were even people being wheeled from the little hospital by nurses and orderlies.

Then Dan noticed the sky, which was all colors, all intense, at once. The air smelled like no ordinary nectar, but a nourishing fluid. Then he looked at the source of the light. It was what he could only describe as a heavenly being, in a long white robe, standing before what he could only describe as a throne. The hair was bronze and the face shone like the sun, hurting Dan's eyes, but he could not look away. He recalled later that the figure was at least twenty degrees of arc in size. Emilio shook Dan's shoulder. "What did I tell you? What did I tell you!"

"Mrs. Rodriguez," the voice boomed from the sky. "We're waiting on you. You can't pretend I'm not here. Come on out." A moment later, "There.

"Daniel Hardy!" the voice called. Its fundamental tone shook the earth, but its overtones were rich in harmony.

Dan looked up and saw God looking right at him. But Dan heard Emilio say, "Here am I, Lord," and heard Misty say something also. Dan lifted his camera, its f-stop aperture closed down as far as it could go, solar filter in place, and snapped several pictures.

"Dan! You said you wanted to see Me appear in the sky! Well, here I am. Satisfied?"

"I hardly know what to say," was all Dan could mumble as he let his camera hang. He wanted to ask, *Why do You hide Yourself? Why do You let people die horrible deaths?* But all he could get out was, "Why? Why?"

"Dan, my child! Those are good questions. But I have already told you everything that you need to know for now. In due time, you will understand."

"I praise you for the assurance of your salvation," Emilio said.

"You must know everything, God! Nobody knew that secret except me, I thought!" said Misty, weeping.

"Just read the Bible," God told Dan.

"Which one?" asked Dan, with utter sincerity. "Lots of religious writings have been produced during human history. Even the Bible contradicts itself."

"But they all say pretty much the same thing," continued The Voice. "You say the Bible is unclear, hard to understand, hard to separate literal from figurative truth. Just do the best you can. If I wanted to make Myself clearer, I would have. You will have no trouble figuring out the important points from the scriptures. Now repent!"

"I need time to think about this," said Dan.

"You have all the time in the world. Which may not be much," whispered God. The colors and the brilliance were already fading. Dan heard music. It was the snow waltz from the *Nutcracker*.

"Behold, the handmaiden of the Lord," said Misty, kneeling with her eyes closed.

"You have made me worthy, and not I myself," said Emilio, head bowed.

Then the whole town looked up into a clear blue desert winter sky. Everyone looked around. Emilio's retinas did not have any afterglow.

"Any questions?" Emilio smiled and looked at the others, but especially at Misty.

"No. I got my answer," Misty said quietly, looking into Emilio's eyes. They fell into one another's arms. "Now, Emilio, we can be true partners."

"At last," Emilio began to weep. "How can I have been worthy to see God and live? And then, to have such a woman as my partner? This is blessing enough for two lifetimes."

Dan looked around in desperation. "This is all too much for me right now," he said to no one in particular. "So, God speaks English. I wonder if Mrs. Rodriguez understood Him. And God is a white man. Imagine that. And God likes Tchaikovsky music."

Misty turned her head and nestled her ear next to Emilio's heart. Without opening her eyes, she said to Dan, "Tchaikovsky? I heard Händel. The Hallelujah Chorus. And God! She was such a beautiful woman."

"I heard Mahler," said Emilio, his brow furrowing. "Resurrection Symphony."

"See here!" announced Dan. "We all saw and heard something different! Like maybe this was a hallucination or something!"

"It was as real as anything I've ever seen," Misty said, pulling away from Emilio.

"Me too, but that's just the problem with hallucinations," said Dan. "They seem as real as reality, because they are inside the same brain that transduces the senses into thought. We need data, verification, from *outside* our own minds, precisely because this event seemed so real."

"You're thinking of science at a time like this?" asked Misty, her eyes again closed and her cheek nestled against Emilio's collar.

"This is precisely the time we need science the most," said Dan. "Luckily, I took images with my camera." He walked back into the building. As he saw Emilio caressing Misty's hair, he knew there would be no newspaper today.

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Chapter 3

"Well, you two are certainly in a hurry," said Rev. Milo Fullminster. The pastor of an evangelical Methodist church, Fullminster was accustomed to seeing Emilio every Sunday, but Misty seldom accompanied him. They stood in the nave of the sanctuary.

"Why should we wait?" asked Misty. "Emilio and I saw God this morning. This eliminated all of my doubts, and they were the only thing standing between me and Emilio. We are ready to get married right now."

"We don't need any more time to think about it," said Emilio.

"A marriage is between two individuals," said Fullminster, "but a wedding is between two families. It takes a little time to prepare."

"We can have a public ceremony later," said Emilio. "Right now, we are only too aware of what the fourth chapter of the Epistle of James says that we should not say that we will go on with our regular economic activities. *You do not know what tomorrow may bring. Your life is like a mist that appears for a while and vanishes*."

"And Proverbs says, Do not boast of yourself for tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring," said Misty.

"And Ecclesiastes says..." Emilio began.

"I agree with all of that," said Fullminster. "But, your families?"

"All of my family is back in Mexico," said Emilio.

"I already called my parents in Palos Verdes," said Misty. "They will visit us tomorrow for a potluck at Emilio's house."

"Photographer?" asked Fullminster.

"Here," Dan called from the open church door.

"Ring?"

"Dan," asked Emilio, "do you have the ring I gave you?" Dan nodded yes. "It was to be an engagement ring, but God had other plans for it."

"Well, I suppose I can do it this afternoon," said Fullminster.

"We are ready now," said Misty.

"As you wish," said Fullminster. "But I am still confused. Why so much hurry?"

"Tomorrow," said Emilio, "you might be busy doing something you cannot now even imagine."

"Well, at least we can go into the sanctuary," said the clergyman. Emilio and Misty, in their work clothes, let Rev. Fullminster go back to his office for the robes that hung on the back of his door. Fullminster turned back. "This wouldn't

have anything to do with, perhaps, a third party who is involved? A very tiny third party?"

It was Dan who spoke up. "No," he said. "I happen to know that Emilio and Misty are as chaste as autoclaved bacterial medium."

Fullminster left, and Emilio visited the restroom. Dan said to Misty, "Well, I guess this means that I don't have a chance anymore." When Misty did not look at him, he added, "I would do exactly what you are doing in your situation."

"Thank you," whispered Misty.

When everyone was assembled, Fullminster began, "Dearly beloved..."

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Chapter 4

Emilio found himself invited to a meeting two days later. Misty was not invited but came anyway. An Air Force general and a federal civilian official, who never did say which agency he worked for, were there, as were Dan and Reverend Fullminster. The civilian official had finally reached Emilio at Misty's apartment, which the couple was cleaning out. Misty already had most of her stuff—which was just her diary notebooks and not much else—at Emilio's house.

As soon as Emilio and Misty entered, Emilio said to the clergyman, "What did I tell you? I'll bet this meeting was not on your schedule."

Fullminster said, "No, it wasn't."

The general cleared his throat. "Welcome, Mr. Villanueva. We need the cooperation of the press. Your newspaper is still publishing?"

"We've been preoccupied," smiled Emilio. "Whenever we try to write anything, it seems so anticlimactic as to be stupid, compared to the events themselves. You have my cooperation, General."

"We've closed off Highway 62," said the general. "Only essential supplies get across."

"What's the problem?" asked Emilio.

"Something, possibly dangerous, occurred here, and we have no idea what it was, and until we do, we can't take any chances," explained the general, with marginal patience.

"God appeared in the sky here. That's pure, utter blessing, not danger," responded Emilio.

"I wish it was that simple," said the civilian officer. "Mr. Hardy, tell him."

"Emilio," Dan explained calmly, "nothing showed up on my images. The edges of one building showed up. That means the camera was working, but...no God. It worked just fine for your wedding yesterday."

"Well, it's hardly surprising that you couldn't get a photo of God," said Emilio. "Why would God allow Himself to be captured on human media?"

"So, we're left with the same situation that we had two thousand years ago," said Fullminster. "A little community of witnesses—last time of The Resurrection, this time of The Appearance—claims to have seen something for which no evidence was found."

"Which means that this time is no more convincing than last time," said Dan.

"Dan, you saw Him!" exclaimed Emilio.

"Emilio, what we think is that you were right the first time. The glow in the sky was a sundog," said Dan.

"That would explain," said the general, "why the surveillance that was trained on the sky continually throughout the period in question, from surrounding facilities and even from satellites, detected nothing. It was just light shining on ice crystals, and visible only from a certain angle, which happened to be in the town of Susurrus."

"Our working hypothesis," continued the civilian leader, "is that this was a mass hallucination that coincided with the sundog. Each observer gave a different account."

"I heard Tchaikovsky, Misty heard Händel, you heard Mahler, remember?" prompted Dan. "You and I saw The King of Heaven, while Misty saw *Regina Caeli.* Moreover, accounts from throughout the city differed. In fact, Mrs. Rodriguez saw a Hispanic man in the sky and heard him speak Spanish."

"Accordingly," concluded the civilian leader, "this phenomenon must have occurred within the minds of the participants."

"But what would have caused a mass hallucination?" asked Emilio. "Has a sundog ever done that?"

"There had to be another factor," said the general. "Something that would have predisposed people to see hallucinations. You know that it rained the previous day."

"Yes," said Emilio.

"And several people—I think including yourself—noted that there was an unusual scent in the air, a scent often associated with fungi."

"Yes."

"Some fungi cause hallucinations. Such as the ergot fungus—the source of LSD."

"Are you trying to say we all breathed in LSD?" asked Emilio.

"The ergot fungus grows on living rye plants, of which you have none hereabouts," said the civilian leader. "But there are lots of fungi, especially in places as unexplored as the desert soil, about which we do not know. So, it could be some other fungus than ergot."

"Which, I suppose, you can find and measure?" demanded Emilio.

"To measure it, we would have to know what it is, which we do not."

"And everybody just happened to breathe in the same amount of fungus spores, no matter where they were—out in the country with the dust, or in the filtered air of the hospital—thus causing a simultaneous mass hallucination?"

"Not necessarily," said Dan. "Some people could have been hallucinating more than others, who then went along with them. Power of suggestion."

"One possibility is an outbreak of a virus," said the civilian leader. "That's why we can't take any chances."

"A virus!" Emilio spat out incredulously. "God is not a virus!"

"An undigested bit of beef, a blot of mustard, a crumb of cheese, a fragment of an underdone potato..." smiled Dan as he quoted Dickens.

"Dan!" Emilio had never actually been angry at Dan before. "You said that if God would just appear in the sky…"

"We're not saying this didn't happen," said the civilian leader. "We just have to explore all possibilities. Right now, we are exploring the possibilities of physical causation. That is, unless God decides to let us find some residual evidence of his, her, or its visit."

"His? Her? Its?" asked Emilio. "We all saw Him! He had a long white beard…"

"Mrs. Rodriguez saw a long black beard…" began Dan. "Misty saw a woman..."

"Enough of this!" said the general. "It may be more serious than a virus."

"If that is possible," added the civilian leader.

"It may be a secret weapon from a satellite, which beams down radiation and causes hallucinations," said the General. "More frightening yet, it can create specific hallucinations, by activating specific nodes of the brain. Such a weapon would leave us helpless."

"The Cold War is over," the civilian leader said before Emilio could.

"It could be the Russians anyway..." said the General.

"They can't even keep Mir from crashing," scoffed the civilian leader.

"It could be the Iranians, the Chinese, even the Japanese," continued the General.

"Or the European Union," added the civilian leader.

"Don't let's be silly," said Dan.

Emilio stood. "It was God!"

"Sure," Dan surprised Emilio by saying. "If God is one of our brain lobes, then it was probably God."

"That's why we are not only closing Highway 62, but imposing a quarantine on the whole city," said the civilian leader.

"Except for the virus theory, what is there that justifies the total quarantine of our city?" asked Emilio. "Remember I am going to have to print up some credible explanation."

"Panic," said the General simply. "We can't let word of this get out, or everyone will panic. That might be worse than a weapon, or even a virus," he added, casting a glance at the civilian. "Remember the old Rod Serling TV show about the space aliens who tampered with the lights on a street in an American suburb? The people attacked and killed each other. The aliens didn't need to fire a shot. Panic is our worst enemy."

"Perfect love casts out fear," Emilio quoted the Bible. "I'll just let everybody know it was God, and that will solve everything."

Quiet laughs emerged from around the table. The civilian showed himself to be in charge by issuing the decision made by the visiting authorities. "Mr. Villanueva, your job is to come up with a story, and publish it, that will squelch all possibility of panic."

"I just did. It's called the truth," said Emilio.

"A different story," countered the civilian leader.

"A lie," said Emilio.

"For your country," said the General.

"God is higher than our country," said Emilio. "That is what I believed before, and recent events have corroborated this."

"Sorry, Emilio, if you don't I will," said Dan. "I've already got it outlined. It turns out it was ergot after all. Ergot in the food supply."

"That will cause even more panic," said Emilio.

"Not if it was from the homemade bread at Willie's bakery, on the day he was handing out free samples of his new honey millet rye bread," said Dan. "The people who ate it had hallucinations, which mentally induced hallucinations in their friends and neighbors. But it's over now. The bread has been destroyed."

"You won't get everyone to agree to this story!" said Emilio.

"We don't have to," said the civilian. "We have enough signed statements to verify..." He thought about this word a moment, then changed it. "...to make it appear that about a dozen people ate the moldy bread."

"I'm the editor," Emilio stiffened. "I won't permit this."

"The presses are rolling as we speak," said Dan.

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Chapter 5

The next day, Emilio and Misty walked into the newspaper office. Stefani, Tim, and Dan were waiting for them.

"Break out the champagne!" Dan called out. Then to Emilio and Misty, "You two look really happy."

"Dan, can I see the last few issues of the paper?" asked Emilio.

"Come on, Emilio," said Dan, who acted as if he had not been one of the people in the unpleasant emergency council meeting the previous day. "Now that the quarantine is lifted, take a few more days off. Go somewhere for your honeymoon. At least as far as Lone Pine. Maybe even La Jolla. You've worked so hard. You deserve a break."

"Dan. The papers?"

Dan showed Emilio an issue of the paper that described the ergot outbreak in Susurrus.

"Dan, everybody in town knows this isn't true," said Emilio.

"It wasn't circulated here," responded Dan. "We only printed fifty, and sent them to various news bureaus and agencies. For the main bureaus, in the big cities, we faxed the front page."

"Dan, almost everyone in town, I know it does not include you, believes we saw God," said Emilio.

"That's right," added Misty.

"Go ahead and believe it," said Dan. "The government explanation will satisfy almost everyone. Here, watch this." Dan popped a videotape into the portable player. The evening news of a major network reported an ergot outbreak that made almost everybody in a little desert community think they were seeing and hearing God. "New legends will emerge, and old ones will not die, but the panic has been averted," said Dan. "The quarantine has been lifted. Life will never again be normal, but the damage control was a success."

"Some reporter will find out that this ergot story is a lie," Emilio almost shouted.

"Not right away. And we created enough confusion to protect us." He handed Emilio the most recent *Newsweek* magazine.

On the cover, Emilio saw a computer-simulated picture of a brilliant light above the Mojave Desert landscape, with the words Desert Mystery. Inside, the article presented the official government explanation—a conjunction of ergot, sundog, and mass hysteria—and two side-boxes with dissenting opinions. One box claimed that it was a government coverup, calling Susurrus "Area 51½." The real Area 51 was also in a desert where, decades earlier, according to some, an

alien spaceship had crashed. The other box claimed that the "Area 51A" apparition was caused by alien spaceships. The box went on to say that UFOs and had been depicted and described in primitive legends and art for thousands of years, and quoted Erich von Däniken as an authority. Von Däniken wrote popular books in the 1970s claiming that every inexplicable event in history had been caused by outer space visitors. The speculations in the magazine reminded Emilio of the way in which false rumors had gotten started immediately after Christ's Resurrection, rumors that the disciples had stolen the body, or that Jesus had not really been dead in the first place, or that Mary Magdalene got mixed up and went to the wrong tomb on the first Easter morning. Emilio turned the page and found another box, in which an anthropologist used this week's desert apparition as an example of how a new religion can get started, just like Christianity did two thousand years ago.

Emilio slapped down the magazine. "None of these alternative views are the truth either. None one of them admitted that God was in the sky."

Dan sighed and looked straight into Emilio's eyes. "It was a mass hallucination. They are not uncommon, actually. Thousands of people claimed to have seen the Virgin Mary at Lourdes, France and Fatima, Portugal."

"Maybe they did," said Emilio.

"Well," continued Dan. "At Fatima, in 1917, fifty thousand people claimed to have seen the sun spin wildly and fall to Earth. And when it went back to its normal position, it radiated beautiful colors. Sound familiar? *Fifty thousand people.* Makes the little town of Susurrus pretty minor by comparison. The Marian Apparition in Venezuela just a few years ago—complete with the smell of roses—was confirmed by four hundred ninety people including academics."

"Yes. Your point being?" asked Emilio.

"Well, since those things really didn't happen…"

"You are starting off with an unsupported conclusion, Dan." When Dan had no response except stunned silence, Emilio continued, "I saw God, and I am going to tell the world about it."

"Go ahead, but this newspaper is printing the truth as it was determined by the authorities," said Dan, who had never before been known to take the government side of an issue.

"I quit," said Emilio. "I resign, gleefully. I don't have time to tell the world about God's new Appearance, and also run this newspaper."

"Praise God!" said Misty. "I'm with you. I quit too."

"No hard feelings, okay?" Dan said to Emilio. "With our short staff, we might have to become a weekly rather than a daily."

"Of course, I have no hard feelings. I'm going to be too busy to sit around and nurse little grudges," Emilio answered, with his big round smile.

"I will particularly miss you," Dan said to Misty. "Your mind and your spirit..."

Misty knew the rest and could fill in the blanks. "My mind and spirit now belong to God, and I use them in partnership with my husband."

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Chapter 6

"This is turning out to be harder than we thought," Misty admitted to Emilio over dinner in their little dining nook, the one at Emilio's house where they had had so many companionable dinners.

"I wonder if it was this hard for Joseph Smith." Emilio referred to the founder of the Mormon faith. "He claimed to have seen God and, as far as I have heard, no one else did. He claimed the truth was on some golden tablets, which he just happened to lose. He had far less to go on than we do, yet today his LDS church owns most of Utah and half of Idaho." This was the church Dan always called the LSD church. "Of course, Smith himself got assassinated."

"We're not in it for the wealth," remonstrated Misty.

"That's not what I meant, darling. I merely point out that our financial setbacks will be temporary. Look how well the Catholics here in town are already doing." They looked out of their front window into the night, past the SOLD sign barely visible in the front yard, towards a distant shimmer of candles inside of a window. The local Catholic diocese sold candles and mementos. Hundreds of pilgrims had come, some even from Europe and Asia, to the Iglesia Católica, the hallowed ground from which Father Oswaldo and Friar Vicente had seen the Blessed Apparition of God Himself. "We could always join in with them, I suppose, but they seem to be content with selling votive candles. Father Oswaldo has no desire to take the message to the rest of the world. And not enough Catholics saw the Appearance to convince Bishop Harp in Riverside or Archbishop Guinness in Los Angeles. But at least the local Catholics believe us, and they won't let us starve. You know, Misty, I almost feel guilty for having the local Catholic diocese as a safety net. I still think we should reach out to the world on our own."

"Well, my love, let us be thankful that we have the diocese as a launching pad." Misty said nothing about it to Emilio, but since their intimacy had begun, she had started thinking about children and their future security. She didn't want a Joseph Smith for their father.

Emilio and Misty decided to seek partners for their ministry by going to a fundamentalist church at the edge of town the next Sunday evening. Emilio and Misty had given the Catholic church one more try at mass that morning, but found that the ceremony was exactly the same, as always, just as if God had not appeared in the sky. Misty and Emilio found the Church of Christ congregation already assembled in their sanctuary as they slipped into the back pew.

The man who appeared to be the pastor, but who was dressed in street clothes like everyone else, stood on the empty platform that served

fundamentalists in place of an altar. “The song for tonight is number 53,” he said, holding up a worn copy of a paperback hymnal entitled *Harvest Sheaves.* “This week we have all been witnesses of God. Our faith does not depend on what we have seen. Jesus said, *Blessed is he who has not seen, yet still believes.* If God expected our full devotion, and expected us to proclaim Him to the world before, how much more so now!” He hummed the starting note, in the absence of any musical instrument in the unadorned sanctuary. The congregation sang:

We saw Thee not, when Thou didst come
To this poor world of sin and death,
Nor yet beheld Thy cottage home
In that despis-ed Nazareth.
Yet we believe Thy footsteps trod
Its streets and plains, Thou Son of God,
Yet we believe Thy footsteps trod
Its streets and plains, Thou Son of God!

A man in shirtsleeves arose and sat alone on a metal folding chair on the platform as the song leader-pastor sat down in the front row of rude wooden pews. The man stood, and the congregation fell silent.

The man spoke. “We in this church have always insisted on taking Scripture literally. But we have not really done so. There are some very specific and direct commands from the mouth of Jesus Himself, which we have conveniently ignored. As God appeared in the sky last week, we know that the time for half-measures, half-devotion, has come to an end. It is recorded in the Gospel of Matthew that Our Lord said, *If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better that you lose an eye than that you should lose your soul in hell.* Brethren, I confess that my eyes have caused me to sin. I have looked lustfully at women. And now, I must obey my Lord and Savior, who will resurrect me in that day whole and healthy, and who gives me spiritual vision far better than earthly sight.” His wife stood behind him, holding a bowl. He grasped his hands together powerfully, set his jaw, breathed loudly, then reached his right hand up to his right eye, dug the forefinger into it, and ripped out the eyeball. He moaned as he plopped the eyeball into the bowl, and crammed a clean handkerchief into the socket. He stepped uneasily down from the platform, and his wife led him out the door to go to the clinic. After he stepped out of the door, he wailed loudly. Emilio and Misty were shocked into immobility, not only at what the man did but at the utter imperturbable peacefulness of the congregation.

The preacher got up again and led the second verse.

We saw Thee not when lifted high
Amid that wild and savage crew,
Nor heard we that imploring cry,
"Forgive, they know not what they do."
Yet we believe the deed was done
That shook the earth and veiled the sun,
Yet we believe the deed was done
That shook the earth and veiled the sun!

Another man had taken his place on the platform as the preacher finished the verse and sat down. The man wore a tuxedo. He began, "Brother Earl has taken a brave step. But we saw God appear in the sky this week and tell us to believe the Bible. We must believe, and obey, the difficult commandments as well as the easy ones. Although I suspect it may be easier to pluck out your own eyeball than to love your enemy.

"As most of you know," he continued, "I am the principal violinist with the San Bernardino Philharmonic Orchestra. My hands have been highly trained and have produced many beautiful notes. But I confess to you that my hands have also caused me to sin, to grasp what does not belong to me. There is but one thing for me to do. Our Lord made it very clear. And he did not say to let someone else do it, but do to it ourselves. Our Lord said, *If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it away. It is better that you be maimed than to enter hell, which destroys both the soul and the body*."

The man nodded, removed his coat, and rolled up his sleeve. A uniformed nurse, a member of the congregation, tied a tourniquet around his upper arm. Another man brought a heavy wooden table with a meat cleaver on it. After a moment of silence, the violinist grasped the cleaver in his left hand and laid his right wrist on the table. The man beside him held the forearm in place. The violinist delivered a powerful stroke with the cleaver. He screamed and twisted as the other man held the forearm in place. Blood spurted as the man grabbed the cleaver and cut the hand off the rest of the way, like a beloved samurai helping his lord commit harakiri in old Japan. The violinist shouted hoarsely and wailed, falling to the ground, as the nurse began to twist the tourniquet. The man in black, white, and red calmed himself, trembled, and stood. The nurse and the man led him, stub dripping, out the door to a waiting vehicle.

The preacher arose, slipping in the blood but not falling. He smiled and held up his hand to signal the final verse of the song.

We walked not with the chosen few
Who saw Thee from the earth ascend,
Who raised to Heav'n their wond'ring view,
Then low to earth all prostrate bend.
But we believe that human eyes
Beheld that journey to the skies,
But we believe that human eyes
Beheld that journey to the skies!

Emilio stood in shock, Misty with him. All eyes turned to Emilio. The preacher said, "Brother! We don't know you, but you are welcome among us! Do you have something to lay down at Christ's sacrificial altar? Very few even in this congregation have the bravery to follow Jesus' commands. Might you be one who will? God will not condemn you for not doing so, but will reward you with the golden street in the City Foursquare if you do! Quickly, there is little time!"

Emilio stumbled over knees and ankles as he clambered for the back door. He looked back to see if Misty followed him. She did. As he ran without looking ahead, Emilio collided with a police officer. He and Misty stopped as the officer, and several other policemen, walked down the aisle. The minister, and lay church leaders who had organized this meeting, stood and held out their hands to be cuffed.

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Part Two

Dan’s Story

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Chapter 1

One of Dan Hardy's earliest memories was of a cockroach that had gotten stranded in the dog's water bowl and had ejected a horsehair worm from its anus. The worm really did look like horse's hairs, a tangle of dark filaments impossibly long for the cockroach's body, like maybe twenty or thirty body lengths. The worm wiggled.

Dan made the mistake of mentioning it in Sunday school a few days later at his mother's Presbyterian church in the Los Angeles suburb of Nemertea, where Dan lived at the time, before his parents divorced. The teacher, a young woman who simply repeated what she had read in a book, told the students about how the beneficence and munificence and grandeur and lots of other big word things of God were manifested in His Creation, and how God had provided every creature with everything it needed. The teacher had used every big word except the right one for this belief, which was *plenitude*.

"Miss Pulchra."

"Yes, Dan?"

"I saw a drowned cockroach with a big worm coming out of its butt. I mean a big, big, big, big worm. The roach was dead, but the worm wasn't. How does that fit in with what you've been telling us about God?"

The other kids started laughing.

"Dan, please, I'm trying to be serious here."

"So am I, Miss Pulchra. I really saw it."

"Well, the cockroach was food that God had provided to the, uh, worm."

Dan's life was changed at that moment. Not just because the other kids in Nemertea started calling him Buttworm Boy but because everywhere he looked, he saw parasitism and conflict and competition and death. From his bedroom window he watched a scrub jay attack a robin's nest and leave the broken, uneaten egg with its fragile azure shell on the ground, as if it had been for pure spite. He heard on the news about the woman in Amsterdam who had been smiling at an alpha male gorilla in the zoo, day after day, until one day the gorilla (who had interpreted her smile as a threat) shot out of the enclosure and beat her silly. The world of animals and humans was violent. And then Dan started reading everything he could about parasites.

When Dan was a high school frosh, the other boys enjoyed listening to Buttworm Boy tell a lot of gross stories about parasites at lunchtime in the cafeteria. He was the focus of attention at his table. It was mostly the less popular underclassman boys who were at the table, but there was one girl, a senior named Wanda Barnes, who joined them. She wore cat's-eye glasses and didn't care what

anyone else thought of her. She was dating a guy named Hal who had dropped out and was, in some unspecified way, earning lots of money.

Dan read everything in the Nemertea library about parasites, and then went to the Thousand Oaks library and read more. He told the others about parasites that would actually change the very behavior of their hosts and make them do things for the parasite's benefit. One kind of worm actually fucked with the minds of snails, which normally hid in the shade, and made them crawl out onto the tips of leaves where birds would see and eat them. Holy God! There were whole phyla of animals that consisted of nothing but cruel parasites! There were even male barnacles that had degenerated so much that they were parasitic on the females: they consisted of little more than a penis and a head and soaked up their food from the female's body.

"Sounds like a hell of a good time," said Wanda. "Endless orgasm. Ecstasy."

"Only problem is," said Dan, "that the male barnacle doesn't have enough of a brain to enjoy it. Sex happens in the brain, you know. All the rest is just plumbing."

Dan then told them about elephantiasis, in which a small worm caused the victim to swell up into prodigiously disgusting mounds of flesh. "Ever seen pictures of people with elephantiasis? The parasite can make men's testicles swell up to the size of a suitcase."

"What will you do when you run out of parasite stories?" asked Wanda.

"I'll never run out," said Dan. He was serious. "There are enough parasite stories in the world to last a lifetime. And they aren't all physical. There are mental parasites, also. Ideas like religions, and ideologies like communism, that live in and take over people's brains even better than a worm could."

The other guys started calling Dan *Parasite Rex*.

"What you got for us today, Rex?"

"Right. Well, there was this man, I think in Asia somewhere, who was taking a leak, and out comes this four-foot-long horsehair worm, right out of his dick." This was the same kind of worm that had initially captured Dan's attention years earlier.

"Shit, you don't expect us to believe that?"

"Well, it was really narrow, so it fit right through the slit."

"But you said before that they don't live in people, just in cockroaches."

"That's right. But somehow this guy ate a roach..."

"I take it," said Wanda, "a roach that had not been cooked."

Dan continued. "...and it slithered from his intestine into his liver and somehow got into his kidney and…"

"Who would eat a cockroach?" asked another person.

"Insects are not much different from shrimp. And people eat all kinds of weird things in other countries. In Korea they eat boiled silkworms. I mean, why not? Nothing else to do with the pupae after you've unwound all the silk away from the chrysalis. In Thailand, they eat chocolate chirpies. Those are chocolate-coated crickets."

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Chapter 2

Dan got so interested in parasites that the next year he asked his biology teacher, a withered and ugly middle-aged woman, if he could do a special research project.

"Horsehair worms," he told her.

"What about them?" asked Mrs. Bumm.

"I just want to find out how common they are in crickets around here."

"How do you plan to do that?"

"Capture as many crickets as I can and submerge them in water. That will make the worms come out."

"What's your hypothesis?"

"That they are here?" Dan had not thought about scientific investigation. He was just interested in parasites.

"They're everywhere," said Mrs. Bumm.

"They're common," said Dan.

"How many do you have to find to conclude that they are common?"

"Mrs. Bumm, I'm not doing a Ph.D. or something. I just want to know..."

"Crickets come out at night," said Mrs. Bumm. "Are you sure it is safe for you to be out at night?"

"I'll set up a light in my back yard," said Dan.

But Dan did not stay just in his back yard. He told his parents he was going to look for crickets out on the sidewalk. They were having a serious discussion at the time and seemed to be just as happy that Dan was not going to hear it. He thought they could have said, *Go ahead, play in the street,* for all the difference it made. Dan slipped out into a run-down part of town. He found what he was looking for: a bunch of crickets jumping around on the well-lit wall of a municipal building.

"Dan, what are you doing here?" It was Wanda.

"Oh, hi, Wanda. You scared the buttworms out of me."

"It's not safe for you to be here," she said.

"Then why are you here?"

"I live right around the corner."

"I thought you graduated and all."

"I did," said Wanda. "Just barely. Hal and I are sort of running a business."

"What kind of business?"

"Not something I'm going to tell you about, that's for sure." Then Wanda thought a moment, and said, "Or maybe I will. Can I trust you?"

"I swear by all the parasites in the world!"

Wanda made a decision. "I like you. You got a few minutes?"

"My parents were having an intense discussion when I left. I could probably stay out all night and they might not notice."

"Come with me."

Wanda lived in an unpainted wood house with a splintery front door that did not quite close all the way. When she and Dan were inside, she bolted the door with a latch that was much newer than the door itself. A street light provided the only illumination. "Don't turn on any lights," said Wanda.

"Why not?"

"I want people to think this is an abandoned house."

"You could have fooled me, Wanda."

"Dan, you ever tried pot?"

"No. Are you offering some?"

"Maybe. If you are ever going to try some, tonight might be the best time. Your parents aren't going to be smelling your breath when you get home, likely."

"I don't think I can get enough money."

"Don't worry about it. I like you," said Wanda.

"Is this why you sat with us younger boys at lunch?" asked Dan. "Bunch of nerds."

"Nerds are some of my best customers.

"Come over here." Wanda led Dan to an old stand-alone bookshelf, with no books. She picked up the corner and moved it aside. Behind it was a little door. She opened it. Air sucked past the plastic wrapping that sealed it on the inside. A brilliant light shot out from the chamber inside. "Hurry up, get inside," she said. Dan's eyes were dazzled as he crouched to enter and then stood up. He heard Wanda close the door behind him.

What Dan saw was three PVC-pipe tables, on which sat at least a couple of dozen plastic pots of marijuana plants underneath very bright sodium-vapor lamps inside of hemispherical reflectors. The scent of the plants almost overpowered him. Circulating fans stirred the leaves and his hair. "Wow," is all he could say.

"You will not say anything about this to anyone," said Wanda. "Or else Hal will have to do something really bad to you."

"Where did you get all this?" asked Dan. "Those lights look like the floodlights in the gym at school."

"What a coincidence," said Wanda, smiling.

"You mean, you and Hal stole them?"

"The school doesn't have a very good inventory system."

"And the electricity! It must cost a fortune."

"It would, except we aren't paying for it."

"Who pays for it?

"You do."

"You mean," asked Dan, "us pot customers? Assuming I'm going to be one."

"No, I mean all the utility customers. One of our partners is a man who works for PG&E. He gets a cut of the profits. He patched a line into the transformer box for us. Don't you remember the electrical outage a few months ago?"

"No."

"It was at night."

"Well, I remember waking up with the alarm clock blinking. Mom had to get me up, and I was still late to first period. So, he turned off the electricity, put in the patch line, then turned it back on. This is how you grow pot where nobody can find it?"

"So long as nobody in present company says anything about it. But this little growth chamber is not just a way of hiding the plants. For a long time now, with pot being illegal, people have bred the plants to grow not outdoors but under artificial conditions. That way the plants, instead of making strong stems and deep roots, can pour their energy into making THC. It costs more to raise the plants this way but, ounce for ounce, we get more good product."

"That's brilliant," said Dan. "You know, it's kind of nice in here."

"Have a seat," said Wanda, indicating a chaise longue made of thin aluminum poles and frayed plastic straps. It was folded so that Dan sat in it upright. Dan heard Wanda doing something behind him. She said, "There's enough room you can stretch the lounge out and lay down. Rest a little."

Dan pulled the chaise longue into its full length, lay down, and closed his eyes. He knew Wanda was next to him. He opened his eyes. Her face was very near his. Without her glasses, her eyes looked bloodshot and hungry. She kissed him. When she stood up, Dan could see she wore only her cotton underwear. Her small breasts dangled.

Dan lifted himself up on his elbow. "Whoa, Wanda, I wasn't expecting this."

"Just relax," she said, pushing him back down and kissing him again.

"What if Hal comes back?"

"He's out doing deliveries."

"But he could come back early..."

Wanda slapped him and turned her tiny butt toward him. She said, "Okay, if you must know, he's at Julie's place. She's his woman now."

"Why would he go and do that? You're hot."

She whirled back to Dan. “Just how many women have you seen without clothes, little Buttworm Boy? I don’t compare very well with most of them. Not the ones I saw in the school locker room. Certainly not with Julie.”

Dan turned his eyes away so he could think. “Why do you put up with it?” he asked.

“I’ve sunk what little money I had into this operation,” said Wanda. “And Hal? He did too. And he pays me my full share. I’d lose all my money if I left him. This, this...” Wanda whirled around with her arms extended, encompassing the plants. “...is what keeps us together. And now, get your clothes off.”

“I’ve never done this,” said Dan. “I’m not sure I can...”

“I don’t have a lot of choices if I want attention from a guy,” said Wanda. “If you can’t get it up, I won’t make fun of you. You’re safe with me.”

“Safe?” Dan sat up and hung his feet over the side of the chair. “I hate to have to bring this up, but I’ve studied parasites, as you recall. Are you sure you’re clean?”

“You got a condom? That’ll keep you safe.”

“How would I get a condom? None of the stores would sell me one.”

Wanda sighed and nestled down next to Dan. “Hal might have left one in the drawer. Only it might be too big for you.”

“It wasn’t necessary for you to say that, Wanda. I mean, I see other guys’ junk in the showers, but they are never, you know, pumped up or anything. All I know is that I don’t look too different from them.”

“Listen,” said Wanda. “I didn’t mean to insult you. And I doubt Hal left any condoms behind. But there’s something else we can do. You don’t even have to undress. Just unbuckle.”

The second time Dan visited Wanda, she smoked some pot with him. She started to look like a goddess to him when he was high, in the growth chamber, and when they lay together on the dusty couch, which seemed to be more fungus than fabric, in the unlit living room. Dan’s friends began to notice that he was distracted. He thought all day about Wanda and the feeling of release that she could bring to him each night. It was easier than he expected to slip away from his house. He was careful with his hygiene and washed his own clothes. None of the teachers suspected that he smoked weed.

This went on for about two weeks. It was starting to get chilly enough at night that crickets were getting hard to find. Not that it mattered. None of his crickets had horsehair worms. Then one night, as he approached Wanda’s house, the window was open and he could hear that she was occupied with a guy. Maybe Hal came back to her. Dan never went back. But on his way home that night, he saw several crickets, and chased them. They all bounded away from him. He

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finally caught one. At home, out on the porch with the garden hose, he finally got a horsehair worm out of a cricket.

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Chapter 3

Not long after that, Dan's parents divorced and his Mom remarried. Dan hated his step-siblings and went to live with his Dad, who moved to the little town of Lindsay in the San Joaquin Valley, right at the western base of the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Nothing much happened in Lindsay. By staying with his Dad, Dan chose boredom over conflict. The town had been famous for its olive packing plant, which had just relocated to a different city. There were still large olive groves outside the city, and olive trees underneath palms lined the high school sidewalks. After spending a not-quite-disastrous junior year as the New Kid, getting to know everything about the town and countryside, Dan anticipated his senior year with a mixture of dread and hope.

Dan first saw Margaret Jeffs when her family's car drove down the street toward the little Mormon church one Sunday morning in late summer. He did not know who she was. She sat in the back and looked out the open window. Dan noticed her eyes. Owl's eyes, with little puffs of skin under them. Her nose was long and straight. The skin of her face was loose, and her lips were plump. She did not look particularly interested in going to church. Dan could not get her face out of his mind, even though he did not think she was particularly beautiful.

Dan saw Margaret, the New Senior Girl, at school. She wore a plaid skirt as she sat on a cement bench. Her skin was soft from subcutaneous fat. Her blouse showed off her bosom to good effect. She was exactly the kind of girl Dan fantasized about. He wanted to get to know her, so that she would either be his girlfriend or, if not, so that he could shift his attention to some different girl. No one else had started talking with her when Dan stepped up to her bench.

Margaret looked up at him without smiling. Her eyes did not welcome him either. She may have expected him to say, "Hi, I'm Dan. Who are you?" But he decided to say something that she was not expecting. He said, "I saw you in your family's car driving down my street."

"Which street is that?" She didn't sound like she was invested in this conversation. Her voice was as uninteresting and inoffensive as the tone of a viola.

"Stanford Avenue," answered Dan. It was a street of little stucco ranch houses opposite a big vacant lot.

"Oh," Margaret said. "Our church is on that street."

"Yes. It was a Sunday morning when I saw you. Do you live near it?"

"About a quarter mile. We could walk, but my mother has limited mobility."

This would be the perfect time for Dan to have suggested they get together for a walk. He hesitated just long enough for Margaret to say, “Look, Dan. I should tell you up front that my parents don’t want me dating any guys who aren’t Mormon, so if that is where you think we are headed, you need to know that.”

“It’s too early for me to have any plans that big,” Dan said in a rare moment of complete honesty. Dan never cheated on tests or copied essays. He almost never lied, and then only to keep from offending someone. But every time he spoke, he thought about how he could turn a conversation to his advantage. He seldom opened his heart. “You seem to not know anyone here yet, and I thought you might want a friend. I don’t want to take your time away from finding a Mormon guy to date...” Dan wondered if he had spoken a little too abruptly.

“It’s too early for me to have any plans that big,” Margaret repeated back to him, smiling. She relaxed. “It’s not like there are any guys I might like at our church. There are probably some down in the church in Porterville, but my Dad doesn’t let us go there. The Mormons down there are too worldly, he says. It’s not as if a friendship with you would interfere with any plans Dad might have for me. He can’t wait for me to finish school, get married, and start popping out babies. I’m not even sure he can wait until after I go on my mission trip to get married.”

“Tell me more.” Dan sat down beside her. She moved her purse to her other side so Dan could sit a couple of inches closer. At least, Dan imagined that this is what she wanted.

“About what?”

“That mission trip.”

“We Mormons all have to go on a mission trip to tell the world about our religion,” Margaret said.

“Do you all go together?”

“Some groups are large. But some young people just walk up and down their street a few times handing out tracts. I’m kind of shy, which is why I am surprised I am talking to you right now, and knocking on doors while dressed up in church clothes is not my idea of a good time. Dad’s response, when I told him, was that the mission trip, besides being required of every Mormon, would help me break out of my shell, make me interact with people, which would help me get a job later. Of course, what’s wrong with having a shell? Snails like it just fine. It keeps them safe. But the missionary trip thing seems to work.”

“What do you mean?”

“A lot of Mormons are really successful in business. And that’s because we learn early about talking to people. Talking to customers is the most important thing in a business. The accounting and merchandising and all that stuff comes later. And, after that, a lot of us who get jobs are really good at rising up corporate ladders.”

"Because you are all so nice," said Dan.

"Anything wrong with that?" Margaret lost her smile.

"Sorry if I gave that impression. No. I hear a lot about smiling Mormons from people who, I suspect, feel embarrassed at not having much in their own lives to smile about."

Margaret grinned. Her teeth were not beautiful, but they were all there, all lined up, and all whole. "I never thought of it that way. Yes, being nice is one thing we are really good at."

"Well, then let's get to know one another."

Margaret looked uncomfortable. "I think my Dad would prefer me to make friends with other girls, at least at first."

"No hurry. We can wait until tomorrow afternoon." Dan stood up, so that Margaret, who was now watching him, could see how tall he was. "Joke, okay?"

"Tomorrow afternoon's fine," Margaret said.

Dan sat back down. "You mean it?"

"Depends on what you mean by *it*."

"I don't know what I mean by it, except that I don't mean *it*." He wondered if Margaret would understand the sexual connotation. She smiled, which meant that she understood.

"Dan," said Margaret, looking thoughtfully into the air. "I'm not ready for everyone to start thinking we are going together or something."

"Too late," said Dan, motioning with his chin. Margaret saw clusters of guys, and of girls, looking at them. In Lindsay, there wasn't much else to do but to gossip.

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Chapter 4

The next afternoon, after school, Dan walked over to Margaret's house. It was in his neighborhood, the Page Tract, which was surrounded by the City of Lindsay but which remained unincorporated county land. The houses got their water from the irrigation system, and there was no sewer system; each house had its own septic tank in the back yard. This was why there were no back yard trees. Margaret's place was a wooden house with a nice porch, but not much larger than Dan's. Margaret's Dad answered the door. He had been expecting Dan, and began the interview immediately by showing Dan into the living room and to a straight-backed wooden chair. Margaret came in and sat on the couch. Mr. Jeffs sat in his easy chair.

"So," Mr. Jeffs said, "I see you like my daughter."

Margaret started looking uncomfortable, but relaxed when Dan said, "I like her well enough to go on a walk with her."

"Nice afternoon for it," Mr. Jeffs said. Dan was still waiting for him to say something that wasn't already obvious. Of course, it was a nice afternoon for a walk. It only rained in Lindsay in winter and early spring, and then only a few inches. And it never snowed. Every afternoon was a good one for a walk in Lindsay. Depending, of course, on where you walked. "I suppose there's no harm in going for a walk. Just be back," he said to his daughter, "for dinner." Then to Dan he said, "I suppose you have to be back home for dinner also."

Dan's father usually just warmed up a frozen dinner, and expected Dan to do the same. He worked as a convenience store clerk, and sometimes got to bring home the expired food. He brought home overcooked pigs-in-blankets or tacos that had dried out under the warming lights all day. There was no dinner-time. His Dad mostly watched television, which gave Dan time to read books. Dan said, "My schedule is kind of flexible."

"I knew that," said Mr. Jeffs.

"What?" asked his daughter.

"I've been asking around a little," the father said.

Margaret almost yelled. "You've been checking up on him? Dad! We're just going for a walk. It's not like we are dating or something."

Mr. Jeffs smiled. "Since you have no dinner plans," he told Dan, "why don't you join us?"

*

When Margaret and Dan finally got out on the sidewalk, Margaret said, "Sorry about Dad. He's kind of controlling. I forgot to tell you he is the new preacher at the little church."

"You would have told me later," said Dan. They walked south on Laurel Avenue to Alameda Street and turned west. "We are walking toward your church. You never finished telling me about Mormon missionary trips."

Margaret's arms were crossed in front of her bosom, as if to hide it. Then she relaxed and ran her fingers through her hair. "I suppose I will have to do it. But I have a little say in the matter. I can probably, within reason, choose where I want to go."

"So, where did you have in mind?" A man painted a stucco house with a shaggy roller on an extension pole. The house next to it had not been painted in many years. "Remember, we're talking about a year from now."

"Hawaii."

"I'll bet there are already Mormons there," said Dan. "They don't need you."

"I wouldn't presume," Margaret said. "Mormons, yes, but not necessarily conservative Mormons like us."

"Hawaii? Sounds expensive."

"The Waxmans will probably pay for it."

"Who are they?"

"Rich people who pretty much pay for our whole congregational budget. We're pretty conservative, but not as much as the ones who live in northern Arizona and southern Utah."

"Oh, the polygamists," said Dan.

Dan got the response he had expected. "That's not us!" Margaret stood in front of him and raised her arms. Her face looked a little bit like that of a mosquito gorged with blood and coming in for a landing. "That's the FLDS people. But," she calmed down. "We don't take orders from Salt Lake City, either."

"I stand corrected," said Dan, motioning for them to continue walking. "Lot of volcanoes in Hawaii."

"Like, that one over there?" Margaret indicated Lindsay Peak, a grass-covered hill that looked conical, just north of Elephant's Back, a hill that looked like its name.

"I know it looks like a volcano, but if you go on the other side of it, you find that it isn't really shaped like one," said Dan. "I've climbed it."

"Really?"

"It is private property, and I got in trouble for it. The owner said it was dangerous for me to be up there. I found out what he meant. He raises camels up

there. One of them chased me. When I crouched on the ground to hide, he sat on me."

Margaret stopped and looked at Dan. "At some point," she said, "I shall have to decide whether to believe your stories."

"Plenty of time for that." The last block of Alameda Street, right in front of the church, was unpaved. "Where did you move from?" asked Dan.

"Thousand Oaks."

"Los Angeles."

"North of."

"I lived near there until last year," said Dan. "Nemertea?"

"Heard of it."

"But I've learned my way around here pretty well. "So," continued Dan, "you already know a lot about southern California. If you came from New England or someplace, I'd have to tell you all about how to survive here. Like, don't eat the oleanders."

"Really? They're poisonous?"

Dan started to say, *one leaf will kill you,* but Margaret smiled and gave him a little punch on the shoulder. Dan wasn't expecting this friendship to develop quite so quickly, but smiled back. "But I bet you don't know about this vacant lot here." He motioned to the west side of Stanford Avenue.

"It's a vacant lot. What else is there to know?"

"It was a German prisoner of war camp in World War II. There used to be bunkhouses, latrines, a cafeteria. The prisoners did road work and picked oranges." There were whole square miles of orange groves around Lindsay, even more orange trees than olive trees. Some were Valencia oranges, but most were the big, juicy, seedless navel oranges. That was about it, except the little patch of avocadoes on Towt Hill directly to the north. "The prisoners had it pretty good, actually. I mean, they weren't all Nazis. They were downright *glad* to get captured and brought here. And the local people liked them, I heard. There was even a story..." Dan moved a little closer to Margaret and spoke more quietly. "...that one of the German prisoners slipped away and got himself a local girlfriend. She got pregnant. The father insisted that the German stay here and take care of her. Of course, that's what the German wanted all along."

"Are they still here?" asked Margaret.

"I don't know," said Dan.

"Okay, that's two wild stories I've heard from you in a half hour. Any evidence that this was a prison camp?"

"You go walking in that vacant lot, and you can still find pieces of wood and porcelain from the detention facility. Oh, and see that yellow house?"

"What about it?"

"The guy who grew up there became a famous writer."

"That's three stories now."

They reached Tulare Road, which became a highway that led west to Tulare (Too-*lair*-ree), the town after which the county was named. Margaret and Dan turned east. There was no sidewalk, so they stepped on the grass in front of a faded-olive-green stucco apartment complex.

"And that dark patch out in the road. That's where little Anthony got run over by a car. Everybody loved him. He had a speech defect, but he made everything sound cute. Then he ran out in front of a car that was going a little too fast."

Margaret looked at the dark patch over which cars passed. "Doesn't look like blood to me. How long ago was this?"

"Maybe five years."

"Blood doesn't last that long. The rain would have washed it away. That's four stories, the last of which I do not believe."

Dan and Margaret crossed Tulare Road and continued south on Cambridge Avenue. With mostly trailers and old wooden houses, it looked nothing like a British or American university. At the corner of Denver Street there was a large old house of unpainted dark wood.

"That's where the witch lives," said Dan.

"You expect me to believe that? You're up to five stories now." Margaret stopped and faced Dan. "These are all the stories they told you when you moved here, and you fell for them, just like you think I am going to."

They resumed walking. Dan pointed to a very large pepper tree in the witch's yard. A common ornamental tree from Australia, pepper trees almost never grew this large. There was a large hole in the trunk. As they approached, they could hear the buzzing of hundreds of bees, and could even see a few of them.

"Mormons like bees," said Margaret as she approached the hole.

"You'd look good in a bee beard," said Dan.

Margaret smiled at Dan as if she had known him all her life.

"Why do Mormons like bees?" asked Dan. "I saw in the newspaper once that Utah state highway signs have beehive symbols on them."

"Those busy little bees are always working together for the good of the hive, just like good little Mormons," said Margaret.

"Well, the females do. The male drones just mate and die."

"Mormons don't talk about drones very much. Just the workers. But you know what I like? The queen. A female is in charge. Now, the Mormon Church could learn something from *that!"*

"Well, she's not really in charge," said Dan.

"What do you mean? The workers do everything for her and she lays all of the eggs," said Margaret.

"The queen is actually a captive egg-laying machine. Think about it!" Dan stood up and started flapping his arms. He spoke in a buzzy bee voice. "*They say I am the Queen! But I've spent my WHOLE MISERABLE LIFE sitting on this throne, day after day, week after week. My servants bring me vomited nectar to eat and I just sit here popping out eggs. It's been YEARS since I've been outside the hive! It's a beautiful day—well, I think it is, I haven't been outside in so long. Why do the foragers get to have all the fun? They get to nuzzle down into the flowers and get male pollen all over their faces and drink nectar. Well, maybe I want to have some fun too! That's it! I'm taking a vacation!*" Margaret laughed heartily.

Then Dan looked down into Margaret's face. "Now, what do you suppose would happen if the Queen Bee decided to take a vacation? One of the worker bees would say…" And here Dan affected his most convincing fake British accent. *"Perhaps Your Majesty might consider that now is not the right time. Every day, workers die and the population has to be replenished by your eggs. Perhaps Your Majesty should consider THE WELFARE OF HER EMPIRE. Yes. Besides—how should I put this delicately—Your Majesty might consider such an excursion problematic…*

"And then the Queen says, *Problematic, my abdomen! Let me out of here! Where's the door? Everybody seems to know where the door is except me! I haven't left this chamber my whole life…*" Dan smiled like a saint seeing God. "*Except that one beautiful day, right after I hatched, and I flew up into the blue sky, the drones flying after me, and they all mated with me, MMM! MMM! MMM! One after another. Then they all died and the workers chewed them up and fed them to me. Oh, well, I guess that will never happen again. I'll just sit on this throne and keep laying eggs.* Then the worker bee says, *Oh, excellent choice, Your Majesty. Here's dinner!"* And then Dan made a vomiting noise and pretended to offer regurgitated nectar to Margaret, who went into paroxysms of laughter. Once she had calmed down, Dan said to her, "See? Excellent choice? It wasn't a choice. The queen bee is captive and has no more freedom to do what she likes than do any of the workers."

They walked back to Tulare Road, east a block, and turned left onto Lafayette Avenue, right across the street from the Jehovah's Witnesses church.

"So, Margaret. Tell me what to expect," said Dan.

"What to expect?"

"Well, I still don't know anything about Mormons. I hear you have strange beliefs."

"Aren't we supposed to be starting a friendship?"

"I was just asking. Of course, every religion has strange beliefs. Your beliefs can't be any worse than Catholic relics-of-the-saints and pieces of the *vera cruz* and..." Dan started laughing. "And there are churches all over Europe claiming to have the Holy Prepuce."

"What's that?"

"The foreskin of the little eight-day-old Jesus when he was circumcised. And Catholics probably think Mormons are weird."

"What do *you* think, Dan?"

"I have to find out what you believe, first. Another question. What do Mormons do for fun?"

"I know what my Mom and Dad do," answered Margaret. "That's why our family is so big."

"And what about dinner tonight? You know, any special Mormon ceremonies or foods."

"Are you serious? It's just like any other family dinner."

"Not mine, as your father figured out. You can't feed a family on day-old pigs-in-blankets from the C-store. Anyway, how would you know what other families do for dinner? Of course, what you do seems ordinary to *you*. For example, I heard you don't drink alcohol."

"Lots of families don't drink alcohol."

"Or coffee or tea."

"Lots of Mormons drink coffee and tea."

"But your little church doesn't."

Margaret mumbled agreement.

"Do you eat meat?"

"Of course, we eat meat. Not much."

"Sorry, my mistake. That's the Adventists who don't eat meat."

"What's an Adventist?"

"What about prayers?" asked Dan.

"What about them? Doesn't your family have prayers?"

"It's just me and Dad, remember? No, we don't pray. But do you Mormons pray to Joseph Smith or something?"

Dan knew Margaret would get mad at that. But he planned to reel her back in right away.

"Don't be crazy! Of course, we don't. He wasn't God or something. We're the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, not the Church of Joseph Smith. God, how could you say that?" Margaret looked away but they kept walking.

"Sorry," said Dan. "How was I supposed to know if I didn't ask? I'm only asking these things because I want to know more about you."

Margaret glanced at him, then crossed her arms in front of her chest again. “I guess I should be happy about that.”

*

“Just in time for dinner,” said Mrs. Jeffs as Margaret and Dan returned. She used a walker to get around. The front poles of the walker had tennis balls at the bottom.

“Dinnertime,” Mr. Jeffs called to the back bedrooms. Margaret’s siblings, all younger, came out and joined them in the living room. Dan wondered why they were not in the dining room.

The Jeffs family slipped down to the floor on their knees. Even Mrs. Jeffs. Dan did also. Everyone but Dan closed their eyes.

“Heavenly Father,” began Mr. Jeffs. Dan would later learn that this was the only correct Mormon name for God. “We ask that you continue to bless us in our new work. We thank you for meeting our needs and keeping us safe and healthy.” Dan realized that Mrs. Jeffs, though legally disabled, must be healthy. “We thank you for letting us be beacons of light to the world.” Dan resented this a little, but realized that they might be right. At least they were more like beacons than he was. So long as they didn’t mean they were the only beacons. He wasn’t sure what Mr. Jeffs meant.

Dan was then surprised by what he heard Mr. Jeffs say next, just before they went to the dining room. “And we thank you for letting Margaret start to make friends.”

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Chapter 5

"I think Dad likes you," Margaret said to Dan the next time they were alone, which was between classes a couple of days later.

"I just want *you* to like me," said Dan. "But if your Dad does too, that can only be good."

"He wondered if you might want to come with us out to the Ranch."

"I'd love to, I think. Depends on what it is."

"It's where the Waxmans live," Margaret explained. "Three families of them, all with adjacent properties. Out in the country, but not too far. You know when Honolulu Street curves out into Avenue 226?"

"I've ridden my bike out that way lots of times. That's out past the LSID?"

"The what?"

"The Lindsay-Strathmore Irrigation District building. Bureau of Reclamation."

"Yes, past the canal."

"The Friant-Kern Canal. That's the closest thing we have to a river around here. It's out where the hills have lots of granite boulders on them."

"That's all Waxman land." Margaret smiled.

"Oh, them," said Dan.

"The Waxmans made up the whole conservative Mormon population around here. They were the ones who bought the church building and hired Dad to come, after they decided to separate from the Porterville church. Mason Waxman is the assistant pastor."

That is how Dan found himself in the Jeffs's van on a Saturday morning. Mr. Jeffs made sure a couple of small siblings were between Margaret and Dan in the back seat. Mrs. Jeffs brought a tub of her own coleslaw, with hot peppers in it. Margaret and Dan walked down to the ponds, which were hidden in willows and cottonwoods. They remained within sight of the families. The cottonwoods diffused a pungent smell into the air. The ponds were where all of the catfish came from for the noon meal. Deep fried in corn meal. Corn bread with fresh corn in it.

"I'll show you something. One of the Waxman guys showed me last weekend." Margaret motioned across the road into the hills from which granite boulders protruded like pustules.

"I've always wanted to go climbing around in there," said Dan. "Every time I ride my bike out this way, I wonder what's up there. Of course, there are no trees, and nothing is hidden, so I already know what's up there."

Margaret was already walking toward the road. “Wait till you see this.” On the other side of the road, Margaret pushed a couple of strands of barbed wire apart and stepped through them. The barbs scratched her jeans. Dan stepped up to hold the wires apart as Margaret slipped her chest through. Then Dan jumped over the fence like a satyr. They climbed around the smooth granite boulders. Mica and feldspar crystals glistened in the sun. Finally, Margaret said, “Here it is.”

“A cave,” said Dan.

“Not really,” said Margaret. “It’s just some granite boulders that fell together. It doesn’t go back very far. But just far enough to hide in. Well? See anything?”

Dan was looking at Margaret but then saw that she was looking at the cave ceiling. Then he saw the painted lines. “Graffiti?” he asked.

“Maybe,” said Margaret. “The Yokuts Indians painted these little pictures.” They were fairly abstract, but one of the images looked like a turtle. “They don’t look very old, but they could date back to after the first white settlers came and the Yokuts had to hide from them. Maybe carry out their religious rites in secret.”

Dan and Margaret sat on the floor of the cave and looked out at the flat valley and the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. The cave entrance formed an arch that made the scene look like a landscape painting. Dan thought about putting his arm around Margaret’s shoulders, but she was just a little too far away for this. He did not want to scare her by moving toward her. He decided to just enjoy this moment.

“Do the Waxmans know this is here?”

“Yes. Zeke showed me. But they don’t really care. I’m the only one who comes here. And now you.”

After they climbed back down the hill, Dan looked around and said, “I like this place. It’s peaceful. Even the cows are obedient Mormon cows.”

“Dan, quit insulting me.”

“Insulting? It was a compliment. By the way, what do the Waxmans do? Besides raising cows.”

“They make furniture. Good furniture from fine wood.”

“Not cottonwood, I take it. Those are the only trees around here.”

“No. Cottonwood grows too fast and the wood is weak. They get wood from live oak trees further up in the foothills. It is dense and very good wood. The trees are too short for making houses, but are perfect for furniture. The Waxmans sell the furniture wholesale to most of the stores in the county. I’ll show you around the workshop after lunch.”

Lunch was really good.

The big white barn, immaculately painted, was crammed with furniture, from beds to bureaus, and all different kinds of cabinets, and even rocking sofas, in various stages of completion. Margaret and Dan started running around in the narrow passages between the furniture. Soon they were playing hide-and-seek as if they were the age of the little children outside. Dan breathed in the deep scent of wood. He and Margaret found themselves in a dark part of the barn where they could not see one another very well. Without realizing it, they both went into the same passageway at the same time. It was just wide enough for them to press their bodies together, face to face, before they knew what was happening. Margaret was pushed up against a mirror, Dan against a desk. Dan saw his own surprised eyes in the mirror in the semidarkness before he looked into Margaret's terrified face.

Margaret closed her eyes as Dan embraced her. She pressed her chest against his. She looked up and accepted his kiss. She looked as if she were deciding whether she liked a new flavor. Then she became rigid.

"I feel you getting a little, excited?" she said.

Dan said, "I can't help it, Margaret. Men are like that." He hoped she heard his emphasis on *men*.

"I think we should, maybe, get out of this, arrangement?" said Margaret. When Dan didn't move, Margaret said, "I'll scream if you don't let me move. I mean, I enjoy being here, but we aren't married, and we aren't likely to be unless you move. You don't want me to scream. You'll have to walk home. And I'll never speak to you again. And everyone at school will know that we have broken up, I mean, even though we haven't started dating, I mean...Just move your ass, Dan."

Dan slipped away. Margaret extended her arms against the desk to keep from collapsing.

"I'm sorry," said Dan, even though he wasn't. "I didn't mean for this to happen."

"Of course not," said Margaret, looking up at him. "Or maybe you did mean for this to happen. But I'll take your word for it that you didn't.

"Well, here we are," continued Margaret. "A little beyond mere friendship. If you want to get to know me a little better, you can start coming to church with me. I'd visit your church, too, but you don't have one. You okay with this?"

Dan didn't want entanglements. Every morning he looked around at all the other girls at school. Every afternoon he imagined what they looked like in the locker room. Most nights, he felt himself grow and helped himself discharge into a tissue. Margaret was in none of these scenarios. But she was the only one who seemed to let him come within five feet. And, he admitted to himself, she was

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sexy. Go to a Mormon church? He had nothing better to do except read his science books and his collection of Jack London stories. He'd already read all of the Jules Verne novels he had.

Dan said, "I'm just fine with it, Margaret. Tomorrow morning? I'll wait for you outside the church building."

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Chapter 6

Dan was surprised how similar a Mormon church service was to any of the others, few in number though they were, to which he had been. In fact, he was surprised that they even let him in. Margaret explained that non-Mormons could not enter temples, but were welcome in all the regular chapels, such as this one. In this church, but not in all Mormon churches, the males were on one side, the females on the other, so he did not sit with Margaret. The xeroxed bulletin indicated that Pastor Jeffs's sermon would be about the Garden of Eden, but at the last moment he must have changed the topic when the boy interested in his daughter decided to attend. Instead he talked about the Whole Armor of God. Dan recognized most of the hymns from the church he attended with his mother back in Nemertea. The sacrament, or communion, used water instead of grape juice or wine. There was no collection plate, since the Waxmans covered all the expenses. They let Dan borrow a Book of Mormon to take home and read.

It was about a month before Dan started reading the Book of Mormon. Margaret kept urging him to do so. They sat on a park bench. He asked her why she was rushing him to read it.

Margaret sighed as loudly as a Peanuts cartoon character. "Because, Dan, things are moving right along between us. Everyone thinks we are going together. And we are. Don't deny it. Are you seeing anyone else?"

"I could if I wanted to."

"I'll take that as a no. Dan, this is getting serious. Even my Mom and Dad think of us as a couple. And we are seniors. In a few months, I am going to have to join the church. And if we stay together, you will have to also. And, as far as you have told me, you don't even believe in God, much less, you know, the book you haven't started reading."

"What's the rush about joining the church?" asked Dan.

"You don't get it, do you? To us Mormons, family ties are very important. Probably more so than in any other group of people. I don't want to join the church and go on a mission trip right away. I want to think about it. At least I want to think more about where to go. Tahiti? But mission trips, that's what our young people do to enter adulthood. Listen, Dan. I can't defy my family. Mormons who have left their families are the loneliest people in the world. I don't want that to happen to me."

"You should go to college," said Dan.

"I'm not good enough to get into BYU, and besides, our branch of the church doesn't believe in going to college. They say there is nothing in college

that can bring a person closer to Jesus." Margaret seemed as upset at herself and her church as at Dan.

"I've heard," said Dan, "that there are some pretty good Mormon scientists. They didn't just go to college; they didn't just get Ph.D.'s; they run their own labs and have graduate students. Molecular biology, you name it."

"But that is the main church, not us," Margaret said quietly.

"Well, go join the main church," said Dan. "And about getting into BYU. The Mormon scientists I referred to aren't just at BYU. There is a big plant physiology guy at Colorado State. You can go anywhere you want. I'm planning to go...Oh, I guess I haven't told you."

"No, you haven't," said Margaret, holding in the tears.

"I'm planning to go to UCSB to major in journalism."

"Santa Barbara?"

"Yes. You want to come with me? It'll give us more time to figure our future out." Dan had not intended to say this. In fact, he had planned to use his college freedom as a chance to explore women in ways that were totally out of reach to a high school guy. He had not thought about working Margaret into his plans.

"Dan, I just want you to realize what you are asking me to do. I'm caught in a dilemma, Dan. If you go to UCSB, I either go with you and leave my family, or else I marry..."

"Marry whom?"

She sighed again. "I'd probably marry Zeke Waxman."

"Who's that?" asked Dan in an alarm that he told himself he should not feel.

"Remember that pimply guy at church?"

"Him?" Dan almost stood up. But he remembered that the alternative to a husband named Zeke Waxman was a Mormon named Dan Hardy. "He won't have pimples forever," he concluded.

Margaret stood up quickly and turned toward Dan. He had begun to think of her as a little pudgy, just enough to be comfortable. But now she looked like a statue. "This conversation has come to an end. Read the book." She turned and walked away.

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Chapter 7

"Listen, Dan, I'm glad you finally started reading The Book. But I think you should ask my father these questions. He knows a lot more about the Book of Mormon, and our history, than I do."

"I don't feel comfortable talking with him."

"Get used to it. He might be your father-in-law someday."

"I mean, I don't feel comfortable talking *religion* with him. Other things, we get along okay. We had a pretty good talk the other day about psychology. I mean, he believes everything the scientists say, even though the science of psychology leaves absolutely no room for a soul. At least, the kind of soul that survives after you die."

"Get used to it, Dan. We Mormons don't bother ourselves with unnecessary conflicts with scientists. Well, I guess there are unnecessary conflicts between the different branches of the church."

"You mean, like those polygamists?"

"Yeah, like them. Let them all go to jail, and the child wives into foster care. I haven't talked to Dad about it, but I suspect he feels the same way. Say, Dan. Listen. How much have you read about the polygamists?"

"I've skimmed some newspaper articles."

"Do you remember any of the names of the leaders?"

"No. Wait. No, you can't mean it. One of the last names was Jeffs."

"That's right, Dan. Their leader is my grandfather's cousin. He has somewhere between five and fifty little wives, depending on how you count them. Our branch of the church may be more conservative than the mainstream Mormons, but we'll never do anything like that."

"But you do still have arranged marriages."

"Just so long as it is within the church, I mean, our branch of the church."

"Zeke Waxman."

"Why do you have to keep bringing him up?"

"Okay, okay, back to talking with your Dad about religion. I suppose I'll have to talk with him. But let me, you know, go over some things with you first."

"Fine. Where do you want to start?"

"The gold tablets."

"What about the gold tablets? Joseph Smith left them out in the woods so Moroni could take them back."

"And then they vanished. Right? How can you *lose* gold tablets?"

"Does it matter? They transcribed the words so we know what was *on* the tablets. The tablets with the Ten Commandments on them were lost, too, but all

the Christian churches still believe that *they* existed. How is Joseph Smith and the gold tablets any different?"

"It's easier to lose stone tablets in two thousand years than gold tablets in one hundred years. But I find both stories, about stone tablets and gold ones, a little hard to believe."

"Me, too, to be honest, Dan. But nobody is going to stand at the church door and ask you if you believe Joseph Smith lost the gold tablets."

"I thought there was going to be some kind of interview, followed by a ceremony. That is, if I were to join."

"All you have to do is to say that God's truths are written, as the Bible—not the Book of Mormon—says, upon our hearts, not upon tablets of stone."

"So, if they ask me if I believe Joseph Smith lost the gold tablets, I can just say no, there never were any gold tablets. Or, if they ask me if Joseph Smith saw God."

"Well, you might want to say yes about that..."

"Margaret, this isn't going very well. I am not going to lie in order to follow you into the Mormon church. And you wouldn't want me to. You want an honest man, right?"

"Yes, of course. Now, is there anything else that is bothering you?

"Yes. You have an archangel named Moroni."

"So?"

"Moroni? You kidding me? Well, what do you expect of a religion that has an archangel named Moroni?"

"Read The Book. Until then, let's not talk about this."

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Chapter 8

Winter days in the San Joaquin Valley were mild enough that one could grow everything except tropical fruits there. But sometimes very thick fogs could develop. People called them pea-soup fogs, and they made driving incredibly dangerous. One could shine a flashlight and it looked like one of those light sabers that had been popularized, not long before Dan and Margaret's courtship, by *Star Wars*. When Dan called up Margaret and asked her to go on a bike ride with him through the fog, still thick as a blanket in the middle of the day, her father agreed to it. Dan came by her house on his bike, and she came out with hers.

"Dad says to be careful on the road," said Margaret. "The drivers can't see us."

"There aren't very many cars the way we are going." Dan started riding. He called back, "You sure you can keep up? We're going on little county roads up to the base of Lindsay Peak."

"Of course, I can keep up," said Margaret, who was already breathing heavily.

Dan held back for her. "We have to ride on Foothill Avenue a ways. Some traffic there. But once we get off on Road whatever, I don't know the number, we will probably be all alone."

And this is what happened. Once they got past the Brumley place with the loose dogs, they were safe. They crossed over the Friant-Kern Canal. When they got to a place that only Dan recognized, he got off of his bike. Margaret did also.

"Where are we?"

"Lindsay Peak is right here. We can't see it right now, is all."

They hid their bicycles under an orange tree and started walking through the orange grove. The trees, dense with succulent evergreen leaves all the way to the ground, were crowded into rows, but there was plenty of room between the rows for Dan and Margaret to walk. As they started up the hill, they encountered a concrete barrier. It was a chute, about ten feet wide, with rods spanning it every twenty feet or so.

"What's this?" asked Margaret.

"The old Lindmore Canal," Dan answered. "It was the source of all the irrigation water before the Friant-Kern was built." Except for a few little pools, the old canal was now empty. As it had fallen into disuse, it was breached in a few places. Dan and Margaret walked through one of the breaches.

"Well, now the hill's going to become pretty steep," said Dan. "Sure you can make it?"

"I've got legs," said Margaret. "You'd be surprised at all the things I've got."

As they climbed, Margaret had to open her coat, then remove it. She tried to tie it by its arms around her waist, but the artificial fabric was too slick and the coat kept falling to the ground. She draped it on the top of a rock. It was bright crimson and would be easy to find on the way down. The scattered rocks became more and more numerous until the two friends had to find a path between them. The dead brown grass was soggy underfoot.

"Can we rest, Dan?"

"We're almost to the top. If we stop, it will be hard to get started again."

What Dan did not tell Margaret was that the top was a cap of rocks that was very steep, and on which it was difficult to find hand-holds. At the very top, Dan had to almost embrace Margaret to haul her up. For a few seconds, her face was right next to his. She turned around and sat on the rock. Dan sat beside her. They looked west, down the slope they had climbed, toward their unseen little town. The sun was a sharp, dim disc through the fog. Could they have seen it, the Valley would have stretched absolutely flat for over a hundred miles. They were in the first range of foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, unseen behind them, the tallest peak of which was Mt. Whitney, the highest mountain in the lower forty-eight.

"On a clear day, you can see Strathmore," said Dan.

"Ask me if I'm impressed," said Margaret. "But, seriously, Dan. If we were Indians climbing up here a hundred years ago, what would we have seen? I imagine we would not have seen orange trees."

"Or lemon trees, or lime trees, or almond trees..." Dan began to think about the abundance of agricultural bounty that grew in the foothill towns. "What you would have seen is hundreds of square miles of tulares." The word had three syllables.

"What are those?"

"Cattails. *Tulares*, in Spanish. That's where our county got its name. Cattails grow in shallow water. That means the eastern part of the San Joaquin Valley was one vast marsh."

"Why isn't it a swamp today?"

"You mean a marsh. A swamp has trees. When the glaciers melted after the last Ice Age, the water created a vast lake. The Central Valley—San Joaquin in the south, Sacramento in the north—was a giant lake. It dried up into a giant marsh. Full of wildlife. Waterfowl, elk. Then the white settlers drained off all the water. Of course, on a day like this, you would have seen nothing but fog."

"Dan, is this where you said the camels were?"

"Yes, but they must be inside of a barn for the winter."

"These rocks, Dan. Look at them. They are standing up like monuments. And they are all different colors."

"The colors come from the lichens that grow on the rock surfaces. Lichens are living organisms. They are sort of fungus sandwiches with algae on the inside. All different colors. Green, gray, black, yellow."

"And red. I see red."

"That's right. On days like this, or right after rain, they are especially vivid because they soak up moisture. There are no wildflowers yet. The palette of color right now belongs to the lichens. This is their moment to shine."

"You sound like a poet, Dan. You probably are. You probably secretly write poetry."

"No. I just notice things when I am out in the country. And this isn't even Nature, really." He made sure Margaret could hear the capital letter. "This is a pasture, for crying out loud. But these rocks look like—want some more poetry?—the menhirs and dolmens of ancient heathlands."

"You lost me there, Dan. But I'm listening."

"Menhirs were upright stones erected in prehistoric times. Dolmens were menhirs with horizontal stones on top of them."

"Like Stonehenge."

"And lots of other places in Europe. But the rocks right here were not erected by human hands. These are the products of..."

"You started to say, of God?"

"Of geology."

"Geology is just the *study* of rocks. Geology doesn't *make* things."

"Well, the forces of nature, then."

Margaret did not respond. Instead, she looked out toward the unseen west. "I do believe, Dan, that this has been the best day of my life. God has blessed me through you, whether you believe it or not."

"I also believe this has been the most enjoyment I have had, maybe ever. I just don't feel the need to attribute it to a deity."

"Maybe someday you will."

Dan did not answer. Instead, he slid down the east side of the rock into a little circle created by the boulders. There was a smooth, flat floor, springy with soil and dead grass. Margaret looked at him. He motioned for her to join him. Soon she was sitting beside him.

"Why are we down here?" she asked.

Dan leaned against her and placed a gentle kiss on her cheek. She turned her face toward him. They kissed lightly, then heavily. Dan slipped his hand inside her shirt and caressed first her back, then her shoulders. He moved around to the front and touched her brassiere and the softnesses inside. When she pulled

away from him, Dan felt instant remorse that he had violated their friendship. But she took off her shirt and her brassiere. He stared at her breasts, which were more beautiful—not just large, but of perfect shape—than he had dared to imagine even in his nighttime fantasies about other girls. Margaret let him touch and explore. She lay on her back. He started to unlatch her belt and unbutton her jeans. He began to unzip her.

As he gave her another kiss, she whispered in his ear, "If we do this, and I get pregnant, we will have determined our entire future. You will not leave me if that happens. Do you understand?" Dan mumbled an assent. Margaret then moved out from under him and slipped out of her jeans and cotton briefs. She draped her clothes on the ground as a bed. Dan watched her closely, investigating the curves of her thighs as she moved. And she knew he did. When she lay supine on the ground, her entire body untouched by suntans, she smiled at him. "We've started. We need to finish. Aren't you going to take off your clothes?"

They fell afterwards into a stupor. Only then did they start to feel a little bit chilly. When Dan looked up and became alert, he felt utterly satisfied. The sky did not look any darker than it had before. There was plenty of time, he figured, for him to caress Margaret, which he did as she slowly awoke. Then he stood, stretched his arms, and yelled a whoop of pleasure. He looked over the rocks toward the west. He saw half of a sun.

He bent down to Margaret. "Get your clothes back on. The sun is setting."

Margaret sat up, her breasts waving, to gather her clothes.

"We must have dozed off," Dan said. "And we are very near the eastern edge of the time zone. That means sunset is, like, 4:30 or something. It will be dark by five. We'll have to run down the hill."

"What if we slip?" Both had gotten all their clothes back on and were climbing out of the little caldera of pleasure.

"We won't," said Dan, helping Margaret down from the cap of rocks. On the way down Margaret slipped but got immediately back up.

"I wish we had several hours," said Dan, "so I could fully enjoy the beauty of your body."

"There will be plenty of time for that, after we are married."

"We haven't finished discussing things, you know."

"The decision was made," shouted Margaret. "up there on the top of the hill."

"You just said that I would have to marry you if you get pregnant. If you do, I will take care of you. But if you don't, we still have time to figure things out." Dan ran ahead of her.

"You just don't get it, do you? Boys! They think they can just squirt and leave. I dared to think, Dan, that you were a man, not a boy." Margaret spoke more loudly. "Dan, do not leave me bereft."

"Who said I was going to do that?" He felt hurt, but was too busy trying to find a breach in the Lindmore in the gathering darkness. Margaret found her coat and caught up with him. Maybe it was a miracle, and maybe not, that they found their bicycles. Dan had counted: they hid their bicycles in the fifth row of trees from the curve. But it was impossible to see the curve. They started riding through the even thicker fog.

"Dan, talk to me."

"Tomorrow."

"Tomorrow is church. You expect me to just act like nothing happened when I see you there?"

"I'll pretend to be sick. You can come by my house and we can talk."

"This is a fine mess you got us into."

"You acted like it was okay with you."

"It was. I mean, as soon as you announce that you are going to marry me, it will be."

As they rode across the Friant Kern bridge, a police car stopped beside them.

"Margaret Jeffs?" asked the officer as he rolled down his window.

"Yes!" screamed Margaret.

"Your parents were worried. I'll call in and tell them you are safe. You need a ride back?"

"I want to get the bike home. I'm safe with Dan here."

"Okay. Young man, you keep this girl safe."

"Yes, officer."

The police car left.

Margaret stopped riding. "What you did, Dan, might be considered rape."

Dan stopped also. He was too shocked to even look ahead into the dim light shed by streetlights at the corners.

"No, my love. It wasn't," said Dan.

"You call me *your love?* I can only hope so," said Margaret. "But I stood up for you right then. I told the officer I would be safe with you. I'm not sure of that anymore. If I said that you started pulling my clothes off, and that I was too shocked to resist you, that would make it rape. And people would believe me, not you. But I chose to believe you. As far as I can, I am going to make you my partner and protector. I refuse to believe that you are a parasite who sucks..." She wept openly. "...who sucks the very hope and life out of me."

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Chapter 9

Even after all of this, Dan was still not quite in love with Margaret. Lust, yes. He now focused mostly on her every night. Everyone at school knew he and Margaret were an item. While she was not gorgeous, he knew that the other guys admired him for having a sexy girlfriend.

Dan decided it was time to try something different for their dates. There was a Japanese restaurant that had sushi over in Visalia. He didn't have his own car, but his Dad let him borrow the car from the C-store parking lot after school. Dan's Dad said he could walk home. He also said, "Be careful with the money, Dan. But I haven't had to bail you out of jail or anything, so you deserve a little bit of fun money now and again. Anyway, you've been eating over at the Jeffs place often enough that you've saved us a lot of money."

"Thanks, Dad," said Dan.

At 5:00, Dan drove over to the Jeffs house. Margaret was waiting, smiled, and got into the car. Mr. Jeffs waved. *Everything is fine,* Dan told himself, *except two things. One, I don't really love Margaret enough to stay with her after I leave for college. Two, that religion of hers. That is, unless I can convince her to give it up.* They drove into the sunset. The sun nestled like a fuzzy spider egg case in the branches of an oak bare for the winter. The restaurant wasn't far off of Mooney Boulevard.

They ordered different kinds of sushi. He got a deep-fried sushi roll. She ordered raw tuna nigiri on thick orthopedic shoes of sticky rice, and extra wasabi. She seemed to have no reaction to the wasabi as she stuck it in her mouth like lime crème.

"Isn't raw fish supposed to have parasites in it?" asked Margaret after having eaten hers.

"They inspect sushi meat pretty carefully," said Dan. "I'd worry more about salmonella from the inadequately-washed hands of the chefs." He smiled at her. They did not talk about anything deep or significant. They were falling into the kind of easy routine that married couples are supposed to have.

They both ordered ice water with lemon. As they were finishing their meal, Dan squeezed lemon into his water. A shot of juice hit Margaret right in the eye. "Oh, I'm sorry," he told her.

"No problem," she said as she dabbed her eye with a napkin and began to drink her water. She sucked on the straw. The sides of her cheeks collapsed, and she looked up at him with her owl eyes. She must have done this many other times, at other meals, but this time, he was suddenly in love with her. The first of

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his two reasons to hold back from accepting Margaret as his life companion had just vanished. The second one would take a little longer.

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Chapter 10

"And what about the Battle of Cumorah?" Dan asked Margaret as they sat in his living room. His Dad was still at work.

"What about it, Dan? You tell me. You seem to know more about it than I do, now that you have read The Book."

"Two hundred and thirty thousand people died there, on that hill outside of Palmyra, New York? Where are the bones?"

"Maybe God made them disappear."

"You just made that up. That's not in The Book."

"Some Mormon scholars say that it was actually a hill down in Mexico someplace."

"That doesn't help much. Two hundred and thirty thousand people? That's forty million bones. Where are they?"

"Dad said that bones dissolve quickly in the limestone soils down there."

"That's in acid soils," said Dan. "Limestone is basic."

"Maybe they are acid soils."

"Anyway, it wasn't down in Mexico. Cumorah was the hill where Joseph Smith received the tablets from Moroni."

"Mormon."

"Whatever. Is there any evidence that Joseph Smith took a trip down to Mexico?"

"Maybe, the angel Moroni took him?"

"You just made that up, too. I mean, you Mormons. Not you personally. You all believe it was the hill was outside of Palmyra, New York. You have statues there and an annual pageant. And there is something that bothers me even more, Margaret. The Holy People, the Nephites, were supposedly the ten lost tribes of Israel. Their enemies were the Lamanites. When I read about them, the Lamanites sounded an awful lot like Native Americans. In short, Margaret, the Book of Mormon sounds like a politically-motivated early nineteenth century writing intended to make the Native Americans sound like the evil enemies of God. This probably helped the white invaders from Europe justify their attempted extermination of the Native Americans."

"But The Book doesn't say the Lamanites were Native Americans."

"So, you think the Lamanites just vanished, and Native Americans took their place?"

"Maybe the Native Americans were Nephites, God's people, rather than Lamanites. There were a lot of people back in Joseph Smith's time who thought the Indians were the ten lost tribes."

"I will not concede that point. But let's move on. Some scholars think Smith got some of his ideas from the stories told by Captain Kidd. Kidd wrote about buried treasure in a mountain. Smith spent several years hunting buried treasure before he proclaimed himself a prophet. That's where the story of the gold plates came from."

"Not necessarily."

"I will not concede that point, either. There's more. The Book was not written by ancient people. Joseph Smith clearly wrote it in the style of John Bunyan."

"The guy who wrote *Pilgrim's Progress?* We're having to read that in literature class right now."

"Yeah, *Pilgrim's Progress*. The American Library Association recently voted *Pilgrim's Progress* to be the most boring book ever written. But Bunyan wrote a lot of other things that were even more boring. Such as *The Life and Death of Mr. Badman.* Go figure."

"Your point, Dan? Did Joseph Smith plagiarize either Captain Kidd or John Bunyan?"

"Well, no, but the style was such a close match that Smith was clearly imitating Bunyan."

"Listen, Dan. You probably know this already from all the reading you have done. I take it, not just from The Book? But secular history books also. The way Joseph Smith transmitted The Book to us was through dictation. He placed a seer stone in a hat, then held the hat up to the light from a window. He dictated The Book from this vision."

"Since the plates were already lost."

"But not before eleven other men had seen them and touched them. That's more people than who saw the empty tomb of Jesus Christ."

"Good point. The Book is not the only unreliable narrative from the past that millions of people believe. But we can talk about that later."

"Smith dictated all 500 pages in the course of about two months. He did not sit down and write a careful imitation of John Bunyan. Or Captain Kidd! How could he have just made this stuff up? He was not an educated man."

"But he was enough of a scholar, we are told, to have translated the engravings on the gold plates from Reformed Egyptian into English."

"I suspect he had some help with that."

"From Moroni?"

"Dan, this has gone on long enough. The simple fact is that you will do whatever you must to join The Church. I don't care whether you believe it or not. I love you. You are going to be my husband. And we are going to raise children. *Nice* children."

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"Mormon families don't have any other kind of children."

"Unless their fathers criticize The Faith and act like assholes...Sorry, Dan. And if you don't do all of this, well, remember that I am still not sure if what happened on the hilltop was rape or not."

"I love you, Margaret. It was not rape. Besides, you took your own clothes off, remember?"

"My memory might have been distorted by my desperate love for you. But, Dan, it is this same love that means I won't ever accuse you. No matter what happens. Unless you do it again before we get married."

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Chapter 11

And they didn't. Dan and Margaret did not touch one another, or kiss, as springtime unrolled in the foothills. An explosive profusion of wildflowers covered the hills. The earliest ones were the brilliant yellow mustard flowers whose seeds the Spaniards brought with them in the eighteenth century. Next were the fiddlenecks. Each flower was a deep orange trumpet, with five red spots on the rim, and they opened in succession as the stalk unfurled, looking like the neck of a violin. They bristled with tiny hairs. Dan and Margaret did not touch them. The mustards, then the fiddlenecks, were so abundant that their brilliance could be seen from far away. There were also pink wild onions and purple lilies. Short California poppies covered the shallower soil. They opened their brilliant gold flowers on sunny days, but rolled them up like an umbrella on cloudy days. One had to look more closely to see the small, scattered magenta flowers of the red-maids. There were even some white flowers, also on unfurling stalks, that grew only at the bases of boulders. If one saw them, and did not see the boulder, it was only necessary to walk over to them and find the hidden rock. There were so many of these brilliant flowers that the lichens, still bright, went unnoticed.

By now, everyone recognized them as a couple. Even Mr. Jeffs assumed Dan would marry his daughter. He did not worry that Margaret and Dan spent two whole Saturday afternoons, before the flowers faded in early April, on the hillsides looking at flowers. They climbed Lindsay Peak, but did not go down into the little circle amidst the boulders.

And, at last, they touched. Margaret touched Dan's hand as he held a lupine, a deep purple spike of flowers. He did not pluck it. They looked into one another's eyes.

*

Dan finally found someone who could supply him with weed. He could hardly think about smoking it, because of its association in his memory with the tragic figure of Wanda. But when he did, he at last found a way to overcome the final barrier between him and Margaret. While high, Dan got religion. And, without inhibition, he decided to walk over to Margaret's house and tell her about it.

Margaret saw Dan approaching down the street from her bedroom window later that afternoon. He was swaying and staggering. She immediately ran out and intercepted him before he got close enough, maybe, for her father to notice.

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"Dan, what do you think you are doing?" Margaret blocked him on the sidewalk.

"I want to talk to you," he drawled.

"Dan, go home. The neighbors are watching. You want to talk to me? Well, I don't want to talk to you, the way you are right now. Even if you were Moroni, I wouldn't want to talk to you."

"That's what I want to talk about."

"Moroni?"

"Well, not Moroni, but about religion."

"I'll talk to you after church on Sunday."

"Oh, I'll be there. But I want to talk now too."

"Dan, we're out on the sidewalk..."

"Margaret! What I'm feeling is, I don't know, I can only call it spiritual. I feel some kind of power flowing through me…"

"You know perfectly well what it is, Dan. It's tetrahydrocannabinol."

"I mean, it's like everything in the universe makes sense, feels right, is balanced. I feel like I want to just love everybody, you know? Well, my mind is open now, wide open, fertile soil for the seed of God-or-whatever to start growing. Like that hymn we sang back when my family and I, back when I had one, used to go to church." He cleared his throat and sang loudly. "*First the grain and then the ear, then the full corn shall appear*…"

"Dan, not so loud!" Margaret approached and whispered. "Oh, and you can't sing worth shit."

Dan shrugged her off. "I feel a little seed popping in my mind tonight, and I can hardly wait to see what it grows into! Until now, I thought that science released us from old mythologies, but now I feel like science can connect us to an understanding of God, not the old rituals and stories and doctrines but…that's what religion is supposed to be! It comes from the Latin *ligere*, which means connecting.

"And that day last winter on the top of the hill," continued Dan.

"Dan, shut up! Right now! You are crazy!"

"…we were one with the universe, one with each other, cradled by all of creation. Call me crazy…"

"I just did, and I'm going inside." Margaret turned him around and gave him a little push. "See you in algebra bright and early. Now scram."

"Scram, run, flee, disperse. Truths are running away from me like crickets. But if they run far enough, around the globe of wisdom, they will come running back to me, so they're not really gone…"

Margaret turned and walked quickly to enter the door of her house and close it behind her. Dan watched her hips sway and thought about the circles of

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the universe and how wonderfully this girl he loved fit into all pulsating and wondrous reality.

Dan started running down the sidewalk, jumping, and grabbing tree branches.

*

Dan met with Mr. Jeffs in his living room in mid-April. He had arranged for his family to leave them in privacy. Dan was almost intoxicated with the scent of millions of orange blossoms all blooming at once around Lindsay.

"My daughter has chosen the place she wants to do her mission work." Mr. Jeffs looked up, expecting Dan to share the joy of this announcement. When Dan said nothing, he asked, "Don't you want to know where it is?"

"Of course," said Dan.

"She wants to go to Santa Barbara."

Dan had just started to feel that, one way or the other, the question of his relationship with Margaret was going to be decided very soon. Now he saw that this was not the case.

"How nice," said Dan. "I've just been accepted to..."

"Margaret told me."

"I got a scholarship, too," said Dan, smiling.

"I hadn't heard that. Congratulations! I imagine the two of you will be spending a lot of time together."

Dan did not answer. He had been spending his fantasy time imagining the nude beaches, not far from the University, that he heard about. At first, he fantasized about the nubile bodies of the female students. Then he allowed himself to fantasize about his own body. He was tall and trim and endowed. Surely lots of girls would want him. He could do this even if he were technically engaged to Margaret, so long as she stayed back in Lindsay. Or went to Hawaii or Tahiti. He could enjoy a year, or more, of pleasures, and then come back to marry Margaret. Or perhaps he would remove her from his life. He was still not quite in love with her, and did not like to think about this option.

"Margaret says that you have been reading The Book. I am a preacher—not an official one, since we have broken with the main church hierarchy—so perhaps now is a good time for me to help you figure out answers to any questions you may have."

"Is this really necessary?" asked Dan.

"Of course. Before you leave, young man, you have to join the Church. That means this spring, before you graduate. If you do not, I cannot allow you to

marry my daughter, or even to be engaged to her. Consider this to be a little pre-interview. A question-and-answer session."

Dan knew that he could put it off no longer. He said, "Mr. Jeffs, you Mormons are really nice people. No two ways about that. I cannot imagine people I would rather live among. But, and I am sorry to have to say this, your doctrines are ridiculous."

"I remind you, young man, that there are certain doctrines to which you have to assent. That does not mean you have to understand them. You can leave that part up to men like me. But we, the leaders of the church, believe with all our hearts that a Church family can only be happy if both partners are in complete accord on spiritual matters."

"Spiritual matters?" asked Dan. "I can go along with you on spiritual matters. I had kind of a spiritual ecstasy last week..."

"I heard you. The whole neighborhood heard you. Poor Margaret. She couldn't stop crying all evening. But that's not what I'm talking about. I don't mean spirit. I mean doctrine."

"In that case," said Dan, slumping, "it isn't going to happen."

"Think about it some more, son."

Dan sat up and looked Mr. Jeffs fully in the face. "Sir, religion is a parasite upon the human mind. Some religions are harmless parasites. Some are deadly, like that cult that committed mass suicide down in Guyana. I love your daughter, and I have great affection for all the rest of you. I have carefully considered everything. You will probably never find a person from outside your church who has considered these things as carefully as I. I am an honest man, Mr. Jeffs. You would not want it any other way. Nor would Margaret."

"If you change your mind, young man, you are welcome to come and talk with me. Meanwhile, Margaret has to move on with her life. I very much doubt that this will now include a year of mission work in Santa Barbara. I speak with the fulness of my heart that I hope to see you again. But for now, good afternoon."

As Dan left the house, he looked up and saw Margaret at the hallway entrance.

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Chapter 12

"I was wondering how long it was going to last," said Phil, one of Dan's acquaintances in the locker room at school. "I mean, she's hot, but she has all that religious baggage." Dan mumbled assent. "You want to come with us Friday night? Drive around a little?" Phil leaned closer and spoke under the noise of showers and crashing locker doors. "Beer and girls will be involved." Dan looked unconvinced. Phil said, "You don't need to study for your classes here. You've been accepted into the university. Here's your chance to have fun."

Dan looked up and said, "I know. Just give me a few days to get over Margaret."

"You bet, man," said his new friend.

It was mostly to get over Margaret that Dan went out with the guys when they picked up the girls on Friday night. Phil had Linda, Tom had Cheryl, Jackie had Jackie. They had already picked out a girl for Dan. It was Flora, who worked with Dan on the school newspaper. She was dressed to show her petite torso to good effect. They were in the back seat behind Phil and Linda.

"Sorry to hear about you and Margaret," Flora said to Dan. "Need somebody to hold your hand while you get over her?"

"I thought you were going out with Joe." Joe was a basketball player.

"He goes out with me and a lot of other girls," said Flora. "But, how about it? If he calls me up again, I can say I have other plans."

"Hey, I appreciate that," said Dan.

Dan and Flora sat closer together than was absolutely necessary at The Hamburger Joint. They fed fries to each other. From the counter, Imelda Takemoto looked over. She decided to come over and say hello. Flora wasn't too pleased with this, but Dan was starting to feel really good. The sansei, third-generation Japanese, usually married each other, but there was no harm in checking out the white guys. She said hello, then, recognizing Flora's hostility, said goodbye.

Dan and his new friends left the burger joint and walked out toward their cars. A group of Mexicans were on the corner. They cheered the low-riders who drove by, their cars blasting Mexican music, the chassis nearly dragging on the ground. The Anglos and the Mexicans stayed apart.

The next Monday at school, one of the Mexican girls, Darian Gómez, walked up to Dan.

"I saw you Friday night at the Joint," she said.

"I didn't see you," he answered.

"We can do something about that, you know." Darian smiled. Her waist was narrow, but her hips were wide. She wore really tight pants, almost but not quite tight enough for the school administrators to send her home.

"I thought you were Hector's girl," said Dan. He pronounced the H that Spanish speakers did not.

"He thinks I am," said Darian. "I heard you like orange groves."

"Where did you hear that?"

"My Dad works in the police station. He heard the officers talking about you and Margaret. Lotta gossip around here. You know, I could just happen to be out in an orange grove, and you might just happen to find me, maybe this Saturday afternoon."

And when they met, they walked through an orange grove, until by unspoken agreement they slipped beneath one of the orange trees. Not the largest, for the trees were all the same size. The branches over them created a green cupola almost all the way to the ground. Long sharp thorns scratched them. The decomposing orange leaves, the shed flowers, the fallen fruits covered with green fungus, created a rank and heady scent. Darian smiled as she rolled her tight pants off and tugged off her tight black blouse.

He met Darian a couple more times under different orange trees. After the third meeting, when he came back home, his Dad was watching television. His Dad simply said, "Dan, I know you're screwing that Mexican girl. Just be careful."

"Okay," mumbled Dan. And that was the extent of the discussion.

Once, just once, Dan and Darian walked together across the campus. Someone whooped at them. Darian looked back and smiled. She grabbed Dan's hand. They sat together on one of the cement benches, not off to the side where he had first talked with Margaret, but out in the center of the open space, where everyone could see them. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Margaret glaring at them. Let her be angry, thought Dan. Let God find her what she wants. Even though he never fell in love with Darian, something about her hips had broken the spell of his love for Margaret, at least temporarily. Dan always managed to avoid Hector.



Fiddlehead wildflower, foothills east of Lindsay, California, March, 2002.



Lichens on granite, foothills east of Lindsay, California, March 2002.



Lindsay Peak, which looks like a volcano but is not. The wild mustard in the foreground is not native, but was introduced by the Spaniards.

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Chapter 13

Dan was packing for his move to UCSB when he heard a commotion outside his house. Somebody ran through his lawn and brushed against the camellia bushes under his window. He heard a girl sobbing. He went outside to investigate. Margaret's head popped up from the leaves. Tears stained her red face. Before he could ask what was going on, she stepped out of the bushes. She wore a flimsy gauze robe. Her fleshy breasts and hips pressed against the robe.

"Please, Dan, let me in," she said. Without looking at her further, Dan opened the back door and let her into his bedroom.

"I can explain," she said.

"You don't have to," he answered. "We agreed to be 'just friends,' but friendship is sacred. You know that I will help you for any reason or for no reason. But you have to admit I was not expecting to see you in these circumstances."

"I just had my ceremony," she said.

"You mean, the one I was supposed to have with you?"

"Dan, don't make this harder than it is. Yes."

"What's this with the white robe?"

"It is my endowment robe. I just had the ceremony of the blessing of the breasts and hips," she said.

"The what? I don't remember reading about this."

"It isn't widely known. And the mainline Mormons don't do it. But Joseph Smith said that church elders—men, of course—must bless the breasts and hips of young women to ensure their fertility. At least that is what I have been told."

Dan was astonished. "You mean, bless them by touching them."

"Yes. Actual skin contact."

"Who did this to you?"

"Assistant Pastor Mason Waxman."

"So, he groped you? I think we had better call the police, Margaret. They can't do this to you."

"Oh, yes, they can. I consented to it. And you can get away with a lot if you call it religion and claim First Amendment rights. Anyway, Joseph Smith said there had to be direct skin contact, but he didn't say how much. See this robe?" She straightened out the fabric. "There is a little gap in this robe that goes right under each breast. That's where his hands touched my breasts. And there's a gap along the hip, see? That's where he touched my hips. Just a couple of square inches total. Waxman did only what our branch of the church says is essential. I knew what was going to happen, and told him to go ahead and start, but when he

started to do it, I just freaked out. I didn't know where else to go but to your house. It's so close by."

"You came to the right place," Dan said.

"There's more," said Margaret. "The other part of the ceremony is the blessing of the manhood. That's the part my Dad did. He grasped the scrotum and penis of a young man, once again with just a small gap in the robe allowing direct skin contact."

"Who was the guy?"

"Zeke Waxman. I already told you that was who it was going to be. The next step is that we are going to be married."

"They can't do this to you, Margaret. This is fucking crazy! Is there any way to get you out of this craziness?"

"Of course, there is. You already know what it is. If you marry me. That is the only way I can get away from Zeke."

"Which means, Margaret, that I have to let your father grab hold of my junk and..."

"It's just a little touch, and most of your junk will be covered with cloth. It's not such a big deal..."

"You're acting like it's a big deal."

"I'm reacting this way because this is the last step before marrying Zeke. Nice guy, but he just creeps me out. Not his fault. But if it was you instead of him..."

"There must be some other way," said Dan. "Do you have to marry him before your mission trip?"

"No, but what difference will it make?"

"You might meet someone on your mission trip, and fall in love, and it's happily ever after, and all that shit."

Margaret became quiet. "Thanks, Dan. You've made me feel a little better. I'll go home and tell Dad that I can't promise to marry Zeke. Of course, I can't just walk home like this. My clothes are back at the church."

"I don't think you can fit into my clothes. You're more buxom than I am." Margaret smiled a little upon hearing this. "But I have a spare blanket. You can wrap it around you and I can walk you home."

"In broad daylight?"

"No. We can wait until night. Meanwhile, we can think of something to do. You can lie down on the couch."

"Not if you're going to touch me, Dan. I've heard about you and that Mexican girl."

"In that case, you know that my sexual needs are being taken care of, at least once in a while. Which means that I don't need to grope you." Then Dan

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stood up and spoke directly and quietly into her face. “But I will never forget the times we spent together. Nothing will ever take their place.”

When Dan’s father returned from work, he saw Margaret on the couch. He said something about expecting to see Darian, but that he was right pleased to see Margaret instead.

“It’s been a while,” Dan’s Dad said. “Welcome.”

Dan read some poetry to her. A few minutes later, she was sitting at the table with Dan and his father, eating tough-skinned pigs in blankets.

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Chapter 14

The fall quarter at UCSB did not begin until October, so Dan had a month in September to sneak in a few more meetings with Darian. Flora went off to Fresno State, where the fall semester started in September.

Dan could hardly believe how wonderful his life was at UCSB. He loved all his classes, from English to Chemistry, which he chose to fulfill his science requirement. His dormitory room, which overlooked the Channel and the Channel Islands, was sparse, but he wasn't there very much. There were lots of places to go in IV. Isla Vista (Eye-la Viss-ta) was the village, consisting mostly of apartments, adjacent to the university.

Sometimes there were student protests in the small downtown area of IV. The big issue, which did not interest Dan very much, was Ronald Reagan's involvement in Central America. Speaker after speaker said that the Nicaraguan Contras, which Reagan supported, were terrorists who killed people in order to weaken the legitimate Nicaraguan Sandinista revolution. Dan was much more interested in his general education Psychology class, which explored topics such as how the human mind could get so deluded as to offer unrestrained adoration to a political leader such as Reagan.

There were lots of parties in the dorms and in the apartments. One time, when Dan was walking to one of these parties, he heard a group of people singing in an upstairs apartment behind some eucalyptus trees. It sounded like some kind of hymn, though it was bouncy and would not have gone well with an organ.

"Those stupid Christians are at it again," said a guy whose name Dan kept forgetting.

Dan thought about his psychology class and said, "So, what's wrong with a diversity of viewpoints? We need to have more than one viewpoint."

"They're probably a cult or something," said the guy. "Which means some crazy leader is controlling their viewpoint. I very much doubt that any of them have actually thought through a viewpoint of their own."

I want Jesus (I want Jesus) to walk with me (to walk with me),
I want Jesus (I want Jesus) to walk with me (to walk with me),
All along (All along) life's pilgrim journey
Oh, I want Jesus (I want Jesus) to walk with me (to walk with me).

"Actually, diversity of opinion is what they have," said Dan. "I was dating this Mormon girl back in high school, and not only would she have had nothing to

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do with whatever this group is, but not even with other branches of the Mormon church."

"The polygamists?"

"Some Mormons, but not her group." Dan did not mention how close he came to joining them. And at that moment, his feelings for Margaret started coming back. Sex with Darian had not totally erased love for Margaret from his heart.

*

The first time Dan visited the unofficial nude area of the beach, he decided to go all the way, and he took off all of his clothes. He left them in a little bag next to the mud cliffs. Since his dorm was within easy walking distance, he needed no driver's license or money, which he left back in his room. He wore only his dorm room key on a string around his neck, which glinted in the sun like an electric heart. He walked right along the surf line. It was November, but the weather was warm.

He hardly recognized the girl who jumped up from her towel under an umbrella. "Hi," she said, running up to Dan totally nude. "I'm in your chemistry class. Remember me?" she said.

Dan looked at her in amazement. Her body was everything he could have dreamed about: her hair was blonde, her face beautiful in the standard way, her skin tanned, her chest buxom.

Finally, Dan remembered her. "You're the girl who wears the dresses that look like they come from the Alps. Like a Swiss doll."

The girl said, "*Jawohl*," and spun herself around before his amazed eyes. "Think of me as an anatomically correct Swiss doll, *wenn du möchtest. Kömm'*, sit with me."

Dan was enjoying the fact that everyone was looking at him talking with the most stunning girl on the beach. He joined her on her big towel. She contorted herself around to find some more suntan lotion in her backpack, in the process showing Dan everything that she had to offer. It was not long before he found out why she showed such an interest in him, but at the moment, his pleasure neurotransmitters were clogging his synapses, leaving conscious thought far behind.

"I notice you from the first day of class," said Beate ("call me Beatrice"). "You seem to know everything. You think you could help me study?"

"Just let me know when you want to," muttered Dan, still looking at her.

"Tonight," she said. "The first exam is not long from now. We should not wait. First, I must shower. This salt spray!"

"I wish I could shower with you," said Dan. Of course, this was impossible, since all dorms had communal showers for men, separate from women, on each floor.

"Ach du Lieber!" said Beatrice. She told him her dorm and room number.

Dan barely had time to eat and shower before knocking on her door. She welcomed him in. She wore a terrycloth robe. Dan was at first confused about why she wanted to sit on the floor, where her class handouts were arrayed, instead of on the bed. That is, until he saw her crouch, and he caught the remembrance of her body. It was so easy to explain to her the difference between an ion and an isotope, but when he looked into her clueless blue eyes, he could hardly remember it himself.

The next time they studied together, Dan tried to explain electronegativity to her.

"Who cares about all of this?" she said.

Dan was looking at her form, sheathed this time inside of a gauzy nightgown. "Well," he said, looking away to gather his wits. "We are all made of atoms. That's why."

Her face was close to his when he was ready to leave. He decided to take a chance. "It's okay to say no," he began the way a guy is never supposed to begin.

"Then I say no. Lots of guys want me. Which ones will I choose? Maybe you? Not yet."

"What do I have to do to be one of the guys you choose?"

"Well," said Beatrice, sitting down on the bed this time. "It depends on what you can offer me."

"Money?" said Dan.

Beatrice stood and slapped him.

Dan responded quickly, "Not that I consider it a bad thing. I mean, what you have to offer does, in fact, have monetary value."

"I don't need money," she said. "My family is rich. How you think I got here from Dresden? But there is something you could do for me. No promises of what I might do in return. Are you interested?"

Dan answered, "You need even ask?"

"The exam," Beatrice said. "You will finish it quickly, I know. For you, the questions will be little piddles. Maybe we could sit together, and when you write your answers on the exam, you could also write them on a little sheet of paper, which you just happen to leave behind for me?"

Dan had never cheated on a test, but he said, "If that is what it takes for you to like me."

"It is a start," she said. "You are also in English 1A, not in my section. But I think you might be able to write something I could turn in?"

"I am a journalism major," is all Dan had to say.

"We have started," Beatrice said. "After these next few days, we can talk again. Meanwhile, I will see you on the beach again. Maybe this time I walk around with you, and everyone will admire you for having me with you."

Dan felt like the king of the world.

With the first chemistry exam and English paper finished, Dan was expecting something from Beatrice. But when he touched her midriff, as they finished an afternoon at the beach, she turned on him and said, "You think I can be your girl. But you get to look at me, that is all. I have boyfriend in L.A."

Dan head heard that all the freshmen girls had boyfriends in L.A.

"You didn't tell me," mumbled Dan. Then he said what he had heard another guy say to a girl. "What's he got that I haven't got?"

"You really want to know?"

And that is how Dan ended up going to a local meeting of the Young Communists of Southern California. On the wall of the meeting room, in the University Center, the very nerdish president of the association put up a poster that idealized Joseph Stalin in the middle of rays of red light.

"You can't be serious," Dan said to Beatrice. He had not fallen in love with her and could still speak his mind, a little bit. "Stalin was a monster whose policies resulted in the starvation of over a million people. He imprisoned and killed scientists, for crying out loud."

"Have you ever been to Moscow?" asked Beatrice, as the chairman put up a poster of Lenoid Brezhnev. "I have, and the sky was clear and blue and the sun was shining."

Dan was startled. "Neither Stalin nor Khruschev nor Kosygin nor Brezhnev deserve any credit for the sun shining, any more than God does." He wanted her to know that he probably knew more Soviet history than she did. "And I have read that pollution, whether of smog in the air or crud in the water, is worse in the USSR than in America."

"Worse than the Santa Barbara Oil Spill of 1969?" Beatrice threw back at him.

"No, but more widespread," Dan said, confident of his facts. "Here in Santa Barbara, the oil companies claim that the globs of petroleum on the beach are natural seepage. They are liars. But in Russia, the whole government is a bunch of liars. I don't see any appreciable difference."

"We have to change the world, Dan," said Beatrice. "Just changing a law or two, here and there, recycling some paper, driving smaller cars, isn't going to get us where we need to go."

"I totally agree, Beatrice. But I don't think you Marxists know how to get us there."

"Then who does?" demanded Beatrice. "The capitalist system is the problem."

"You're probably right."

"We have to start with the young people," said Beatrice. "Even younger than at the university."

"You mean, Youth for Brezhnev?"

"You got a better idea?"

"Beatrice, that sounds like those Mormons I used to hang out with."

Beatrice slapped Dan, really hard, and in front of everybody. He left before the meeting began.

Dan saw Beatrice later with the boyfriend to whom she referred. He was tall, strong, wore khakis, and had a Ché Guevara beard. Dan decided there must be some other girls who had what Beatrice had without the psychological baggage. Once, after class, Beatrice tried to talk with Dan, but when it was clear she was not offering herself to him, he politely said farewell.

It was at this time that Dan began assembling his lists. Beatrice would absolutely be on the A-list, except for her Marxist delusions and the fact that no way in hell did he look like the Ché guy. Margaret would have been on the list too, except for her religious delusions. He had phone numbers of girls on his B-list and C-list. Late to supper one evening, he ate with an ugly girl for whom he felt sorry. Why is it the ugly girls who also have the most pimples, he wondered. She would have been on his D-list, if he had one.

He was on the staff of the student newspaper, the Daily Nexus. His writing was good enough that he caught the attention of the editor, a senior girl named Sophie. He asked her out.

"Daniel Hardy," she said, "that was absolutely unprofessional."

"I was just asking," said Dan. "Sounds like you are, as is your right, saying no."

"You think I'm just a hunk of flesh with no brain?"

"It is your brain that I find most attractive..."

"Like I'm supposed to believe that. I would be the overachiever in such a relationship, and you would just tag along with me like a dog."

"I'd be okay with that. I like strong intelligent women."

"Besides, I'm a lesbian."

"We could still be friends." Dan did not let his surprise show.

"You're on the prowl for a girl," said the editor. "My friendship, if I had any time left over from Norma, would just be a waste of time for you."

"Not completely, Sophie. I mean, friendship is..."

"I could get you fired."

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"No, I don't think so." Dan stood his ground. "Only the faculty member who oversees us could do that."

"She's an assistant professor of journalism, and her name is Norma. For the sake of your success here at UCSB, I would recommend that you do not provoke anyone to complain to her about you."

"I'm sorry I offended you," said Dan.

"Try going down to the nude beach," said Sophie. "There might be someone there showing off her tits and ass to the little freshmen."

*

Late in the winter quarter, someone knocked on Dan's dorm room door. Dan opened the door just a crack, then fully. Wanda greeted him. She was only a few years older than he but she had a few wrinkles of hard experience.

"Wanda!" he said. "What are you doing here? How did you find me?"

"I'll tell you if you let me in," she said. He did. "I called your Dad and he told me you were at UCSB in a dorm. I called the housing office.

"You drove all the way here to see me?"

"No. Although I would have. I am, however, too busy. I can't take a day off. I work here now."

"In Santa Barbara?"

"Actually, up the coast about fifty miles, in a little town called Nipomo. But I had business down here."

"Same business as before?"

"It's a good business, honey."

"Well," said Dan, "you have perfect timing. I haven't got a reliable supplier yet."

"I knew that. We have our territories. Goleta—the university isn't actually in Santa Barbara, you know—is now in the territory Hal and I control." Wanda smiled.

"Wow," said Dan. "I can't believe how lucky I am. You don't have any weed with you?"

"I don't take chances like that on state property," Wanda answered. "You'll have to meet me somewhere else. Like, maybe, down on the beach?"

"That's state property, too." All beaches, even if not state-owned, were regulated by the California Coastal Commission. No landowner could block off a beach from public access, so long as nobody walked through private property to get to the beach. But there were plenty of trails and stairs that allowed access to the beach.

"At night," said Wanda. "Nobody will see us."

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That night, just after sunset, Dan and Wanda met next to the cliffs at a point that was a half mile away from the nearest access. The sea breeze, that blew in every night, was a little chilly.

"You brought money?" asked Wanda.

"Of course."

"I'd give you a discount, but it's Hal's money, too."

A tightly-sealed bag of weed, which only a dog would be able to smell, went from Wanda to Dan and cash from Dan to Wanda.

On three such meetings, Wanda sold weed to Dan. On the fourth meeting, however, it seemed a little different. She embraced him and whispered into his ear, "I trusted you back in high school, and I think I can trust you again." She held Dan tightly. His hands held her shoulders, then her waist, and finally her small buns.

"You mean, you are inviting me for sex?" he asked.

"That could be part of it," she said. "You haven't mentioned having a girl."

"No," said Dan. "But you are on my A-list. So, what about Hal?"

"What about him?" Wanda asked. "We don't ask about one another's lives. Sex doesn't require trust. But I can show you where we grow our weed."

"I'm going to be a reporter," said Dan. "I don't want in the business."

"Oh, you can't get in unless you are willing to take some risks that are bigger than I suspect you would like. Risks from which I cannot protect you. I can show you, just for laughs. You are the only guy I can trust to not try to steal from me."

"Even if Hal didn't have a gun, as I suspect he must, I would not steal."

"What keeps you from it? Religion?"

Wanda could not have known about Margaret. He simply answered, "No."

"Is it love?"

"There are many kinds of love," said Dan. "One of them is the kind of friendship I am feeling with you." He let go of her buns.

"Meet me Saturday morning at the top of those stairs," said Wanda. "I'll take you for a ride."

*

They met and were soon in Wanda's old car going west on the Pacific Coast Highway, which was also State Highway 1. The ocean was to the south, and the PCH paralleled the shore.

They stopped at the rest stop before the Gaviota Pass tunnel. Big rocks protruded from a solid mass of dull green, which were chaparral bushes, the kinds

that are just waiting to catch fire. Dead leaves and branches built up into a thick, dry mat. On hot winter days when the Santa Ana winds blew up from Mexico, one could even smell the volatile compounds that were almost as flammable as turpentine. They drove through the tunnel. In later weeks, they adopted the habit of kissing in the tunnel. They followed Highway 1 toward Santa Maria. Nipomo, Wanda's base of operations, was near Santa Maria. There was more chaparral, some grassland, and woodlands of live oaks which shed their leaves a little at a time into mats almost but not quite as flammable as those of the chaparral.

"Forget where this is," said Wanda as she turned off onto a dirt road north of Lompoc. She pronounced it *Lahm-poke.*

"Since I'm lost, that will be very easy to do," said Dan. "The vegetation looks really different here. Not grass, or shrubs, or oaks. These are pine trees. Wait, I recognize this place. I learned about it in my geology class." This quarter Dan took a science class that was beyond the graduation requirements. "This is all diatomite. It isn't dirt; it's billions of dead microscopic algae from millions of years ago."

"I don't know anything about it," said Wanda. "That must be why the dirt is white." She stopped the car. There was a barbed wire fence ahead of them. "Inside that fence is Vandenburg Air Force Base. To the right is someone's ranch where we have our operation."

"Right next to an air force base?"

"It's actually the safest place to be. Everyone assumes the military police watches the borders of the base, but they don't. We have patches of outdoor weed that are too small to be recognizable by aerial reconnaissance. And you can probably guess what else we have up here." She led him to a little cave with dead brush at the back. She pulled away the brush, revealing a door, to which she had a key. When she opened it, light poured out, and a familiar scent.

"A long way from the nearest electricity, isn't it?" Dan asked.

"We pay electrical bills for the little house up there, see it?" Dan did. "The same guy that patched us into the transformer back home. He couldn't get it free for us, here in Santa Barbara County, but he did connect a big cable from the house to the grow chamber."

*

Thus began a year in which Dan met Wanda every couple of weeks, smoked responsibly, got good grades, added a few women to his B list to replace Wanda, who graduated to List A.

On his occasional Saturday trips with Wanda, he found opportunities for intimacy with her. They tried to couple one time among the pine trees north of

Lompoc, but the slope was so steep that they kept rolling downhill. Their usual place was along Santa Rosa Road, which connected Highway 1 with Highway 101, but which had almost no traffic. They found places under the oak trees festooned with Spanish moss (which, Dan told her, was actually a kind of lichen), in a walnut grove, and even, as summer approached, fields in which thousands of brilliant commercial flowers grew, providing seeds for Burpee Seed Company to sell. Down in the scent of snapdragons and calendulas—that was Dan's favorite place to have sex. They only did it in the flower fields a couple of times, but Dan would always remember it. And they met on the beach at night, also.

After one nighttime beach coupling, Wanda asked, "Dan, what do you see in me? I'm not exactly beautiful like a lot of the girls that walk along this beach."

"Some of them are beautiful, some not," said Dan.

"I mean, I have bad skin, I'm older than you and getting wrinkles already, and..." She led Dan's hand to one of her breasts. "These boobs are just sorry."

"A boob in hand," said Dan, squeezing her, "is worth two in the bush." His hands found her outback. She giggled. "Seriously, Wanda. I won't lie to you. I see other women occasionally. But you are the only one who *likes* having sex with me." He turned over and started kissing her body as they lay on the beach towel.

"You mean, you might want to stay with me?"

Dan was afraid she would eventually ask. But he was not lying when he said, "Maybe. I'm not even a sophomore yet. But I need to go wherever I can get a journalism job."

"You can freelance," said Wanda.

Dan sighed and lay down beside her. "Have you been making plans? And how does Hal fit into this?" Dan had never met Hal. "I have three more years. A lot can happen in three years."

"I was just wondering. You're right, Hal wouldn't like it. But I don't see what he could do about it."

*

At the beginning of the fall quarter of Dan's sophomore year, Wanda came to his door again. They had not dared to communicate by phone about their activities, but the hidden messages were clear enough in their letters, without saying anything that would arouse Hal's suspicions. Dan spent the summer in Lindsay, where he got a part time job with the Gazette. The previous year, their intimacy had gotten very creative, but they started off this year fully excited by redoing the things they had not done for months.

It was almost completely dark at the beach meeting place. Dan started to embrace the woman he assumed was Wanda, but she pushed him away. He felt her jacket—it was not Wanda's jacket—just enough to know there was a gun in the pocket.

"You expected Wanda?" said the woman.

Dan recognized the voice but could not believe it. "Beatrice?"

"This is our territory now," said Beatrice.

"You and..."

"It is best that you do not know his name. Yes, the same guy as last year. Our fates are woven together now. Just how much did Wanda tell you?"

"Not much," said Dan, trying to recover from his astonishment.

"You lie to me," she said. "We saw that you were often with her."

"That doesn't mean she told me anything about her, uh, business. Where is she?"

"I do not know."

"Now you are lying to me," said Dan.

"I am not. Maybe my man knows, but it is best that some things not be known to too many people. This is why I decide to believe you about Wanda telling you nothing."

"Very well, Beatrice. I believe you too."

"Let us take not too long," said Beatrice. "I have other contacts to make."

Beatrice told Dan the purchase price. "The price has gone up a lot," he said.

"I would not know. But you receive no discount from me. Well, do you have the money?"

"Not that much. Could I buy a smaller amount?"

"No. It is already in bags. Call me when you have the money for a whole bag. Unless they are all gone."

Then Dan said, "Beatrice, tell me something. Selling pot is the ultimate capitalism. Why are you doing it? I assume you are still a Marxist?"

"Yes, I am. We are doing two things. We are saving up money, and we are making contacts."

"Contacts?"

"We plan to join our communist brothers and sisters in Latin America. Lot of good weed from Mexico, good cocaine from South America. But what we really want is to join their fight. It is so sad," said Beatrice. Dan could tell that she was relaxing in the dark. "Can you blame the people of the rainforests for raising coca? They are desperately poor. They keep some of the coca leaves for themselves. They chew them to deaden the constant pain of malnutrition and depression. They must be liberated."

"Good luck liberating them," said Dan. "I mean that, Beatrice. I assume that you, that is, your compatriots, pay the peasants good money for the coca leaves."

"Most of the cost is in processing the cocaine," said Beatrice. She almost sounded cheerful. "That chemistry I didn't learn in our freshman year? I had to learn some of it so I knew what grade of material we were buying and selling."

"Like ions and electronegativity?"

"No, but some of the lab techniques. I don't do them but I need to understand them. I'm almost sorry I got you to help me cheat on exams, especially since you didn't get any sex in return for it."

"We had some nice times on the beach, which I will never forget."

"That will not happen again."

"I assumed as much. Are you still at the university?"

"Too much work to do. I dropped out. Now I get money instead of paying tuition."

"I thought your family was rich."

"I had to cut off from them," said Beatrice. "You realize Dresden is in East Germany. If the government there found out I was involved in drugs, they would insist on my extradition to face trial there. You cannot imagine what that would be like."

"I thought you believed communist countries were utopias."

"Not yet. They will be. But meanwhile the struggle continues. *¡La lucha!* See, I am learning Spanish."

"You never answered my question."

"Which is?"

"Do you all pay the *campesinos* good money for their coca leaves?"

"We cannot afford it, but soon we will."

"I applaud your high ideals, Beatrice. But it sounds to me like those endless five-year plans and dictatorships-of-the-proletariat and all, which were supposed to be temporary but have gone on for almost seventy years..."

"At least I *have* ideals. Do you?"

"Good point, Beatrice. Yes, I do." Dan became excited. "I know how you can help me not just with weed but with those ideals. You know I work for the student newspaper. The new editor approved my proposal for a new column dedicated to political topics. I think the struggles in Latin America would be a good topic. Can you supply me with information from your network about what is happening in Latin America? Without, of course, divulging any secrets. I could be, in this way, your spokesman."

"I speak to my man about this. We might have a deal. But meanwhile, no discount."

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Chapter 15

Dan first met Misty Barbour in the Nexus office during his junior year. One day, Misty stayed late to work on a piece. Her bangs hid her forehead, and big glasses perched on her small nose as she concentrated on her writing. She used a keyboard for a computer terminal. Dan went around and approached her from behind, looking over her shoulder. She seemed frustrated at the computer time-sharing, which made her text entry sometimes stop responding for several seconds at a time, then suddenly spill a vomit of words onto her screen. Dan looked at her paper notepad, at her neat handwriting, and thought about how she was, in this and probably many other ways, uncomfortable with the modern world.

When Misty whirled around and looked at him, Dan thought of something to say. “So, you’re the one.”

“The one what?”

“You write those wonderful articles about, well, whatever it is you write about.”

“That could describe anybody.” She smiled as she turned back to her work.

“You’re Misty.”

“And to whom am I speaking? You wouldn’t happen to be Dan, would you?”

“The same.”

“I know you by reputation, as you apparently know me,” said Misty, looking pleased to put her work aside for a moment. “Your articles about Central America made me think. I really did not know what was going on down there. I take it you are no fan of Reagan.”

“Wait till you see my articles about *South* America,” Dan responded.

“How do you find out so much?”

“Our sources are confidential, remember? Even in a student newspaper.”

“Tell me,” said Misty, turning her chair around and facing him. “You almost make it sound like you approve of Marxist-Leninist movements in Latin America. I remember your first article, about the strike of the Browning Ferris Industries garbage collectors. You made it sound like a lot more than just better wages and working conditions, but like it was a struggle for the soul of America. You used a lot of Marxist buzzwords even back then.”

“We all have bias,” said Dan. “I’m just honest about mine. Your articles make it sound like Reagan and the Moral Majority are the ones of whom God approves.”

"Well," said Misty, relaxing and smiling. "We are at least giving the other students a range of viewpoints from which to choose."

"Tell me, Misty. Why do you assume God is on the Republican side? I mean, what little reading I have done of the Bible, Jesus sounded like a radical revolutionary. I mean, the way he told off those scribes and Pharisees and other members of the Establishment. I wouldn't want *him* writing a newspaper column about *me* with the kinds of words he used. *Whitewashed sepulchers* and such like."

"Jesus cared about the downtrodden and oppressed," said Misty.

"My point exactly..."

"But He would not have considered liberal immorality to be a solution to it."

Dan thought about how to respond. One did not have to be immoral to be a liberal—the anti-nuclear activist Father Daniel Berrigan certainly was not, nor was the very religious ex-president Jimmy Carter—but Dan, in fact, was immoral.

Misty spoke before Dan could respond. "I did not mean to offend. But Marxists are not the solution."

"No, they aren't," said Dan, thinking back to Beatrice's naive idealism. "But I think they may be doing more tangible good in Latin America than Christian missionaries."

"Just now much do you know about Christian missionaries? We aren't conquistadors anymore."

"You're one of them?"

"I will be. Next year I hope to find a church sponsor for a mission trip to South America."

"Meanwhile," said Dan, "I might learn a thing or two from you, and you from me. We could even write joint tête-à-tête articles for the paper."

"I'm busy with my classes, and I'm deeply involved with my prayer-and-study group. Also, I would not want to meet with you unless Dwayne came along with us. He's pretty busy too, though. But if we do have time, I'll give you a call."

Dan gave her his phone number, but he knew she would never call. God has a way of filling up a person's time.

Whenever Dan saw Misty, from a distance, or saw her with the man who must have been Dwayne, he marveled at how beautiful she was. He also marveled at the fact that, when he tried to imagine her naked, he could not. It was as if his carnal thoughts bounced off of her. In his imagination, she became even more radiantly and softly beautiful and wise than she probably was. He put her at the top of his A-list, even while he was trying to get intimate with women on his B and C lists. He finally admitted to himself that he was falling in love with her.

This only made him more vigorously pursue his other contacts, usually without success. He missed Wanda.

*

At the end of Dan's junior year, he sat on the nude beach watching the girls. He was starting to get over Misty. Just in case a girl might come along, had his junk on display. He looked up and saw a girl walking along the surf. She had a nice, voluptuous figure. She wore long shorts. Most of the skin on her legs was sunburned. He guessed that she must always wear skirts or pants, that did not wear shorts very often or swimsuits at all. It was Margaret. As she walked past, Dan considered whether he should hide himself a little. He decided not to. Margaret cast a glance in his direction, and kept walking.

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Part Three

Misty's Story

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Chapter 1

For the rest of her life, Misty would remember Philo Chambliss crawling across the apartment floor on his hands and knees at the last Bible study of the fall quarter at the university. Misty Barbour, Dwayne Singleton, and their fellow students were in a sparsely-furnished apartment in Isla Vista. Philo was the campus minister of a nearby evangelical church. As they were too numerous for the furniture, Philo and several others always sat on the carpet. It was the Friday night just after final exams, and loud parties were going on all around. At one of the parties, a loud male voice sang, “Duh-duh da-duh-da duh-duh, sit on a happy face.” Misty and the others, though pious, had gotten used to the worldly community around them and hardly noticed the words. Philo retrieved his Bible, turned his butt around, and returned to his spot. He sat with his back against the post of the sofa. Everyone was equal, but all the others knew to leave the spot next to the sofa for Philo. It was the spot in the unadorned apartment that served as a pulpit. Jesus said to sit on the floor rather than the place of honor. These Christians had turned this spot on the floor into the place of honor.

“Well, let’s get started.” Philo had a comical Louisiana accent. “Tonight is our long anticipated farewell party for Misty and Dwayne.” Munchies crowded the little table in the kitchenette. Misty and Dwayne sat chastely together on the love seat. “They have requested that we just have a regular Bible session, nothing special, except that Dwayne will tell us a little bit about what they plan to do on their mission trip to Ecuador. But first, let’s open in prayer.” Philo threw together some perambulatory words with Bible phrases that referred to God as the familiar second person Thou and Thee. All mumbled Amen, and then it was time for Dwayne to speak.

“Well, the time has finally come,” Dwayne said. His eyes were dark and his hair light brown. Dwayne rubbed his moustache before speaking. “Misty and I are graduating. By Christmas, we will be in Ecuador. It will be something of a culture shock for us.” Everyone knew how truly Dwayne spoke. He was graduating magnum in Spanish literature. He was fluent in the language, and well-read about all the political and social conditions in Latin America. But he had never been outside the United States. His experience with real Hispanics was mostly with kids from the barrio in his high school town. Misty, having grown up in a privileged family in Rancho Palos Verdes, had even less experience. Her degree was in journalism. While she wasn’t graduating with any kind of cum laude, everyone knew she wrote the most thoughtful articles that appeared in the free student daily newspaper, the Nexus. People had to know Dwayne for a while,

and had to read Misty's articles very closely, before they could discover the couple's quiet but strong religious beliefs.

"Some of you already know," continued Dwayne, "that Misty and I will be staying with a family in the village of Chordeleg, near Cuenca. That's in the Andes Mountains uphill from the port city of Guayaquil, way south of the capital, Quito. We are being sponsored by our church and by the Christian shortwave radio station, HCJB, in Quito. We will fly into Quito, where someone from the radio station will meet us. The next day, someone from the station will drive us down the E35 freeway from Quito to Cuenca, and then over to Chordeleg."

"Will you have time to get over jet lag?" asked one of the students.

"Their time zone is the same as our eastern time zone," answered Dwayne. "Not too much of a change. The main thing we will have to get used to is the altitude. Quito is 2,850 meters above sea level. We'll have to get used to metric, you see. But that is over nine thousand feet. We'll probably have altitude sickness for a while. The Andes are a rapidly rising mountain range, lots of earthquakes, no more than a few million years old." Though evangelical, the group had no young-earth six-day-creation Genesis fundamentalists. "Our host family will feed us, give us free lodging, and allow us to hold small Bible study groups in their house, that is, if we can get anyone to come."

The same loud male voice, joined by others at the nearby party, sang some words from Uptown Girl. "That's what I am," he finished.

"One of the main differences," Dwayne continued, shifting his long legs, "is that nearly everyone there is Catholic. Some people take their religion more seriously than others. But at least they don't think belief in Jesus is stupid or offensive. Our biggest problem will not be to get them to hear about Jesus, but to get them to question whether their Catholic beliefs are good enough to please the Lord."

"Is it going to be dangerous?" asked another student.

"Of course, it is," said Dwayne. "Is there a place that isn't? They have drug gangs, but so do we. They have political violence, but so do we. At least, we used to." Isla Vista was the community in which, back in the student violence days a couple of decades earlier, the Bank of America building had been burnt to the ground. "But it is just dangerous enough, that...Misty, you tell them."

Misty looked down at her hands and smiled. Her big round glasses even steamed up a little bit under her big bangs. She nervously stroked her hair. "That's why Dwayne and I are going to wait until we get back to start a family."

A cheer erupted from everyone. One said, "We knew you were really close, but we didn't know you were engaged. Nice!"

Misty continued, “We wanted to see if God intended us for each other. We thought we would wait and see what happened. When we both got accepted to the Chordeleg outreach, we took that as God’s sign that He wanted us together.”

Soon thereafter, Philo read to them from the part of the Bible that said that Christians should always rejoice, no matter what the circumstances. “The Apostle Paul said that we should give thanks *in* all circumstances. Not *for* all circumstances. That would be ridiculous. But there is never a time when a Christian cannot be joyous. That means it is sinful to be unhappy, at least for more than a brief period of time.”

“What about people with psychological depression?” asked a science student who sat in the corner of the couch.

“God will heal them.” Philo always had an answer ready.

Next, Philo read to them the part of the Book of Acts, about the Apostle Paul going on a missionary trip. Paul, he explained, was not afraid of whatever might happen. And plenty happened. On one part of his trip, he got shipwrecked. When the survivors, including Paul, built a campfire on the beach, the pile of sticks contained a snake, which crawled out and bit him. But, as scripture promised, Paul was unharmed. “In fact, Paul had a lot more trouble with the other church leaders than he did with the heathen or with the elements of nature. Peter and the others simply would not accept this man, who had never met Jesus while He was alive, as one of their fellow apostles. The heathen? Some of them even thought that Paul and Barnabas were gods!” Philo closed his Bible. “Misty and Dwayne, God will take care of you. That doesn’t mean that He will keep you from suffering. It just means that we will see you again after you get back. At least, those of us who have not graduated and left. You cannot pray, *Dear Jesus, make my path easy.* But you can pray, *I want Jesus to walk with me*.”

That was the cue for one of the group’s favorite songs. Two antiphonal voices wove together in a somber minor mode, like an old black spiritual.

I want Jesus to walk with me.
I want Jesus to walk with me.
All along life’s pilgrim pathway,
Oh, I want Jesus to walk with me.

From the party outside the windows, open to the December warmth, voices rose in mockery of the melody the little group of Christians sang.

*

"I understand congratulations are in order," Dan said to Misty when at long last they encountered one another once again in the Nexus office. "I knew you were graduating, but now I hear you are engaged to some very lucky guy."

"Blessed, not lucky." Misty was putting things from her desk into a large backpack.

"I stand corrected. When do you tie the knot?"

"When we get back from Ecuador. I think I told you we are going on a mission trip."

"I'm not surprised. Last year we talked about missionaries. Did I ever tell you I almost became a Christian?"

Misty looked at Dan. Her eyes widened. "What happened?"

"How much time do you have? I can tell you all about it, but it will take a couple of hours."

"Wish I could, Dan." She looked back down. "Really, I'd love to hear it. If it is half as interesting as your articles, I would be delighted. But you can see I am cleaning my desk out so I can leave town."

"With your fresh new journalism degree. You will find that useful as a missionary?"

Misty stopped and gave Dan her full attention. "It's all about communication, Dan. Remember the first day of class in Journalism 1A?" The university numbered its freshman courses with a single digit, and used letters A, B, and C for the fall, winter, and spring quarters. "They told us: Who. What. Where. When. How. Why. You're never supposed to leave any of those things out, even in a short article. Same is true of sharing the Gospel. You can't tell anyone *what* without telling them *why*, or it makes no sense. Also, the Gospel is based upon the *where* and *when* of a specific set of historical events. I can't think of a better major I could have chosen." She resumed her work.

"Not Religious Studies?"

"Certainly not. I can read the Bible for myself perfectly well."

"And you understand it, immediately, in total isolation from what millennia of other people have thought about the Bible?"

"No, of course not," said Misty, zipping her backpack shut. She made one final check around her desk. "But I understand it well enough. Questions like, oh..."

"Like why do good people suffer?"

"Yes, like that one. Job asked God why He, though omnipotent, permitted good people to suffer. And God didn't give him a straight answer. But we just do what we have to do down here on Earth, running with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the originator and finisher of our salvation..."

"Sounds like you are quoting some Bible at me," said Dan.

"I am. And running that race is all Dwayne and I have time to do. Plenty of time for theosophizing when we get to Heaven." She looked thoughtfully at the window. "I think I just made that word up."

"Journalists can't do that," said Dan.

"Missionaries can," said Misty.

"Nobody ever told me before that they would be delighted to hear my story," said Dan, looking down. "You are the first one to do that."

After thinking for a few seconds, Misty said, "Only if you can give me, maybe, the fifteen-minute version? And, for obvious reasons, I'd like for Dwayne to be with us."

"Well, I suppose. But, when we studied interviewing techniques, they told us how different it was to interview someone alone as opposed to being with a third party. I know this isn't an interview, but the psychodynamics are the same."

Misty smiled. "I haven't thought of that word for a long time. Psychodynamics. Can you tell me your story now? I'll call Dwayne just to let him know I'm not seeing another man on the side."

"Please, call him."

Misty went to the telephone at the main desk. When she came back, she smiled. "Dwayne told me to go ahead. And he told me to take however long I need." She looked down. "Here I am, planning to spend my life serving God and other people. To do so, I need to listen to people. That means you, and that means now. Forgive me for cutting you off."

It was only four blocks to the mud bluffs over the beach at the extreme southern point of the campus. The California coastline goes east and west at Santa Barbara; to look out to the sea, one looks toward Antarctica. Dan and Misty walked on a trail through a grove of eucalyptus trees, which had a scent somewhere between cough drops and cat pee. They brushed past gigantic clumps of pampas grass, an invading species from Argentina, and giant stalks of fennel, which everywhere else in the world was a little garden herb. A thick mat of green succulent ice plant, from South Africa. Almost everything Dan could see was from somewhere other than Southern California. The ice plant spilled over the cliff. Big pink flowers with hundreds of little petals were scattered among the stubby succulent leaves. The strong wind blew Misty's hair almost straight back. Little airborne droplets of salt water coated her glasses as she sat on a rock. Dan sat beside her, closer than she might have felt comfortable with, but he had to speak over the crashing surf without shouting. He told her his story about Margaret.

"Wow, I can understand how that must have felt," Misty said. "But, Dan, that was, what, four years ago?"

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"Yeah, I thought I was over her," said Dan. "I figured there were so many girls..."

"Get used to calling us women, Dan."

"That's what I meant. With so many young women around here, I figured I would find somebody. A couple of times, I almost did. But last year, there was Margaret, walking along the beach."

"With her clothes on?"

"Misty, are you making fun of me?"

"No, Dan. If she had her clothes on, that might mean she was finishing up her missionary trip. Though I don't know why it would have taken her four years to do so. And if she didn't look for you here in Santa Barbara, that means she must have had plans with some other guy. She's probably got three little Mormon babies by now."

"Babies can't be Mormon, Misty."

"Try telling that to Margaret," said Misty. "Dan, you were just looking around at random for a girl."

"Woman."

"You were looking for a girl. But what you really wanted was a woman. A companion, who would later be a friend, whom you could later share your heart with. You can't get that at random."

"You think I should have gone to a Bible study or something?"

"Worked for me. You ever consider a dating service? They have all of their clients on punch cards, and just line up the holes, and bam! They find someone you at least have something to talk about with."

"You ended that sentence with two prepositions," said Dan.

Misty laughed. "Dan, you're avoiding the subject. We're both nerd journalists. But journalism serves life. Life beckons." She spoke more quietly. "Jesus beckons. You know, Dan, I think you did the right thing, not going along with Margaret. Mormons aren't Christians."

"They think they are."

"Some of their beliefs are Christian, but all that stuff about Joseph Smith? The gold plates? The..." She started to laugh. "The blessing of the breasts?"

"You laugh," said Dan. "And so did I. But it was really important to Margaret."

"I wouldn't have laughed if she had actually been here," said Misty. "I don't mean to be insensitive to people's feelings." She became serious. "Back when I was a freshman, this hippie woman came to our Bible study. She started crying when she talked with us other women. I mean, really weeping. One of her partners had given her a sexual disease. I was feeling a little judgmental. I thought, first, woman, get some antibiotics. I did not at the time realize antibiotics

don't always work. Second, woman, you got what you deserved for fornicating around. I didn't say any of this, of course. The older girls in our group just listened and comforted her. And now, that is what I aspire to do: to listen, without criticizing. Every day, on my mission trip, and also after I get back.

"But, Dan, just read the Bible for yourself. Open your heart to God. The Book of Mormon? Lose it."

"I have to say," said Dan, "I feel really angry when I hear that fundamentalist preacher who stands around yelling at the base of Storke Tower."

"Oh, yes, I remember that article you wrote about him. Well, lose him, too. Your salvation doesn't depend on him any more than it does on Joseph Smith."

"I graduate in spring," said Dan. "I don't know where I'm going or what I will do. But I'd like to talk more with you after I've had a chance to think about this."

"I'll still be in Ecuador," said Misty. "I'll give you my American address, if you feel like writing to me. My Ecuadorian address, too, once I know what it is."

When Dan answered, "I would like that very much," Misty was already reaching for her little spiral notebook and stubby pencil. The wind almost blew away the little scrap of paper. When Misty handed him the address, in her beautiful small handwriting, Dan said, "God bless you."

Misty shook her head and smiled. "Before you say something like that, Dan, you need to figure out what you mean by it." She touched his hand and looked into his eyes. "Goodbye."

As Misty walked away, back toward Isla Vista, Dan glanced down at the beach. A voluptuous young woman walked out into the surf. She threw herself into the surf. Dan looked back at Misty, whose clothes hid her graceful form. He looked back down. The woman stood up and faced the shore. But as he looked again at Misty's retreating form, he wondered again, as many times before, whether he would rather have a friend than a lover. Both, if possible, but it seemed that it would never happen.

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Chapter 2

Misty's and Dwayne's families had not met until they came to Los Angeles to see their children off into the mission field. Misty's father was a professor of physics, but the faith he shared with Dwayne's pipefitter father made them instantly like one another. As they talked, Misty's father became more and more impressed at how much practical physics a pipefitter had to know. Dwayne's father could have been a professor of engineering if he had chosen to be. Misty and Dwayne, their hearts full, could think of nothing to talk about, so they listened to the others. The Barbour and Singleton families met at a restaurant that advertised itself as Authentic Mexican, which must have been true because one of the meat choices was tongue *(lengua),* and the cable television monitor played Mexican news in which events within Mexico were labeled by state (a big apartment fire had just occurred in Michoacán), whereas events in the United States were simply labeled *Estados Unidos*. Without being asked, the waitress brought a pitcher of *horchata* to the big table.

The next morning, both families waited with Dwayne and Misty at the departure gate at LAX.

*

As their plane descended toward Quito, Misty and Dwayne saw the tall volcanic peaks to the left, Cotopaxi nearby and Chimborazo further south, permanently capped in snow. They could see Volcán Cayambe, just northeast of Quito, from the gate where two men from the radio station met them.

In addition to the altitude sickness they expected, Dwayne and Misty reeled from the near-collisions in the traffic as the men drove them to the HCJB compound. The car was beaten up, old, and noisy.

"This car does not have much time left," said Dwayne in Spanish.

"It's one of the best cars in Ecuador," the driver answered. "All the cars here are old, even the ones you see parked out in front of big mansions."

The big chain fence that surrounded the radio compound closed behind them, encompassing them in a world of peace apart from the hectic life of the country they had come to help. A homeless Quechua family camped right outside the gate. The man's plate remained empty. The woman unwove and rewove her braids.

After they had settled into their sparse rooms, Misty and Dwayne took a tour of the station. "We broadcast in Russian and Czech, to beam over to the Soviet bloc," said the manager. "Also Spanish and Portuguese—for Brazil—and

we hear back from listeners in France and Germany, thanking us for programs in their languages." On the audio monitor, there was a Billy Graham sermon dubbed over in Dutch.

"What about the people right here in Quito?" asked Misty. "Like those people right outside your gate."

"We can't do everything," said the manager. "Our calling is to use the high elevation to broadcast radio signals that can travel many thousands of miles. Even to Japan. The signals in shortwave frequencies bounce back and forth from the ground to the ionosphere and back, allowing them to follow the curvature of the Earth. Our income barely covers the transmission costs."

After an American dinner, the manager talked with Misty and Dwayne. He gave them debit cards. "The bank is in Cuenca. Take out just the cash you need for the week, maybe two weeks. Your host families will take you every week or two to the Banco de Ecuador. Don't keep large amounts of cash with you. If the card gets stolen, the bank will give you another. The card can't be used anywhere except there. Your host families will charge nothing, but I'm sure you can find thoughtful gifts for them now and again. And you probably brought some gifts with you, too."

"Claro que sí," said Dwayne.

"And you brought pamphlets in Spanish," continued the manager. "We will give you some more. You can drink the water in Cuenca, but don't trust it anywhere else. Always ask for Agua Güitig when you are away from the house. It's fancy mineral water from melted snow, with natural fizz, but the real reason it is so popular among visitors is that it doesn't usually have E. coli in it. Your host families are immune to the local strains, and if you want to drink the water, you will get used to it, but you will have the squirts for a few days or longer. They know you aren't used to Montezuma's Revenge. We have provided bottled water for them to use for you. Unless you are ready for the consequences, don't even brush your teeth with the tapwater outside of Cuenca.

"Most important," said the manager. "Don't act like Americans."

"We don't," said Misty, thinking back to the wild parties in Isla Vista that she heard but never joined.

"No Disneyland T-shirts," said the manager. Misty and Dwayne laughed. "No luau shirts," he added as his guests kept laughing. "No shorts, especially if you have pretty legs.

"There are no seasons here," continued the manager. "But it is chilly every night. You might get one of those wool sweaters they sell everywhere. The local women weave them. Sometimes you will find one of their long, black hairs woven in with the wool."

"You can't get that at Wal-Mart," said Dwayne.

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"You should also get a Panama hat," said the manager. "They aren't from Panama. They are pure Ecuadorian. The native Quichua Indians wear them, including the women. Don't wear a baseball cap."

*

The old Finnish man who drove Dwayne and Misty toward Cuenca on the Pan-American Highway could only communicate with them in Spanish. They talked about things they saw from the highway. They drove past pastures used by dairy cattle. Most of the rest of the land was used for corn and potatoes. A large billboard proclaimed a major brand of pesticide.

"El mata todo," Misty read. "It kills everything." She conversed with Dwayne in English.

"I'll bet it does," said Dwayne. "Insects."

"Birds?" asked Misty.

"Children?" responded Dwayne. "The farm workers here get poisoned, but not quite to death. Usually. A lot of the children get nerve damage from the toxins."

"And look here," said Misty. "Look how much soil has eroded down into the gullies. The soil looks like it was really bad to begin with, and now it has washed away."

"Actually," said Dwayne, "the soil is volcanic and has plenty of nutrients. The people are trying to control the erosion by planting trees." They passed a sign that said *Arboricemos Ecuador: Ahora o Nunca*. Plant trees, now or never.

"I recognize the eucalyptus trees," said Misty. "From California?"

"From Australia. They have started to spread aggressively in the Andes, just as they have in California. They are an ecological disaster. They crowd out all the native plants. The leaves pile up because they are so toxic that nothing can decompose them."

"I recognize the pine trees, too."

"Again, not native ones. They are Monterey pines from California. But neither the pines nor the euks can stop the blight of soil erosion. Now or never? It will probably be never."

They stopped at a small village restaurant. Stringy chicken, mashed *plátanos* (plantains), and, of course, Agua Güitig. The chipped plaster walls were painted light green. A local artist had drawn a man's head on the wall. It reminded Misty of the old phrenological diagrams she saw in the historical background part of psychology textbooks, except that the artist had drawn a naked woman on top of the skull. *That's what some men think about all the time,* thought Misty. Dan's

face flickered across her mind. But she realized that even Dan probably did not think about sex all the time or with every nubile woman. She wondered if Dan had ever fantasized about her. She sent a small prayer in his direction, hoping he would find true love, not just sex.

Misty went off to the outside bathroom, then came right back. “We need to find a different bathroom,” she said in Spanish. “There’s no toilet in there. Just a hole in the ground.”

“Some poor family decided they needed a toilet,” said the Finnish driver. “I would suggest just using the hole.”

“There’s a big gap in the wall, too.”

“No one will see you.”

“It’s right next to the sidewalk.”

“There aren’t any sidewalks.”

“It’s right next to where everyone walks.”

“I’ll stand guard outside,” said Dwayne.

Soon they were back on the road. They drove past a small orchard. “Ah, I thought I would never see these,” Dwayne said, reverting to English.

“What are they?”

“Cherimoyas. Custard apples. Inside that green rind is a delicious, custard-like fruit. Native to here, but widely planted in tropical areas. You almost never find them in American stores. And some kind of melon vine is growing all around the trunks.”

The travelers stopped just long enough in Cuenca for Misty and Dwayne to get money with their cards. Buildings, many old, were crowded together. On the broad sloping banks of one of the rivers, women had spread out laundry to dry. The car approached Chordeleg as the sun was low in the sky. A couple of minutes later, the equatorial sun had gone straight down, not slowly angling down as in the temperate zones, and it was night. There was electricity, but few street lights, in Chordeleg.

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Chapter 3

The host family, a large family named Del Trigo, greeted Misty, Dwayne, and their driver warmly. The man, woman, and children wore serapes as the chill of night settled over them. Mercedes Del Trigo had prepared dinner in the afternoon and kept it warm. Each person received a *bolon de verde,* a ball made from mashed green plantains stuffed with pork, then boiled. When the guests arrived, Mercedes heated an iron skillet and fried the bolones in lard. Everyone ate the bolones with rice and slices of avocado. When the basket of *empanadas de viento* arrived, everyone grabbed one of the air-filled biscuits that had sweet cheese in the middle. Ramón Del Trigo toasted the family and guests with a little glass of rum. Misty, Dwayne, and the children had apple-flavored soft drink. The Del Trigo household was richer than most, though not wealthy. Most houses had running water, but the Del Trigo house actually had two bathrooms. Misty slept on a cot set up in the children's bedroom, and Dwayne slept on the couch.

It was a Saturday night, and there were loud parties somewhere down the street, sounding a little like Isla Vista. But there was more whooping and less yelling than Misty remembered from there. And the background music from tape players was one of the things Misty had most wanted to experience: Andean flutes playing lively songs in the minor mode, as if the musicians were trying to punch celebration into a pervasive sadness. Misty recognized the small panpipes known as *rondadores* that carried the melodic lines. She settled into the pillow, pulled a spare serape over her, and thanked God that He had sent her to this culture.

Misty noticed an eerie green light, edged with purple, that glowed from outside the window. Without waking the children, she slipped out of her cot and climbed up the narrow stairs. From the flat roof, she looked for the source of the illumination. It came from a building at the end of the street. Two women, wearing silk dresses from which their legs emerged alluringly, stood beside two pillars. A man stumbled into the whorehouse.

Misty felt a warm body approach from behind her. Mercedes knew what Misty was looking at. Misty turned toward her.

"¿Está tu esposo allá?

Sí, Mercedes whispered. *My husband is there.*

Misty asked in Spanish, "Does Ramón go there often?"

"No, he does not," Mercedes answered in Spanish. "We have discussed it. He said he was going there no matter what I said. But he goes only once a month. He is a good man, and does not spend very much money on these pleasures. He looks, he touches, but he does not, you know... When he returns, he is a good husband."

"¿Un buen esposo? ¿Cómo es esto posible?" asked Misty.

Mercedes explained, "Ramón, he looks, he touches, but he does not go to the little rooms. And when he returns, he is satisfied to be with me again. If he met with a woman at any other time or place, I would confront him and tell the priest." She then took Misty's hand and whispered to her, "It is not a perfect marriage that we have. But it works. The children have a good father. You will marry Dwayne, *¿no?* Remember, you go into a marriage with both eyes open. You stay in a marriage with one eye closed."

*

Misty awoke and looked at the stars through the window. She wondered whether it was the middle of the night. Within minutes, right at 6:00, the sky started to become bright. She was soon up with the kids and at the breakfast table. A hot pile of fried tortillas, a bowl of scrambled eggs, and little dishes of green chili sauce awaited them. They all had *jugo de naranjilla,* which tasted a little bit like orange juice but was actually made from a kind of sweet tomato.

Misty softly embraced Dwayne. "I have a good feeling about this place," he said.

"I love it already," said Misty.

Misty got a funny feeling when Mercedes placed the ceramic cups, filled with hot milk, in front of each of the adults. The children had cool milk. Everyone sat and watched the two Americans. Then Ramón reached for a shaker bottle of what looked to Misty like soy sauce. As a matter of fact, he said that this is what it was: *salsa de soja*. And he poured some in his milk. Nobody moved as he stirred the dark watery fluid into the milk. *"¡Bébelo!"* he smiled at Dwayne. Dwayne imitated him. *"¡Y tú también!"* He motioned toward Misty, who poured the fluid into her milk. Everyone watched the guests.

"¡Qué buena!" exclaimed Dwayne after he drank. Misty trusted Dwayne in everything except an occasional joke. When she drank it also, she forgot her Spanish and intoned, *Mmmmm!* Mercedes and Ramón drank theirs, and the kids slurped their milk, all laughing. It was not soy sauce, but strong coffee. This was the *café con leche* she had read about.

Misty talked with Dwayne after breakfast. "That's why we didn't smell the coffeepot," she said. "There isn't one."

"This is the way to make coffee into a meal," he told her. "Mostly milk. They wanted to see how we would react. I think the whole rest of the day is going to be like this."

It was. Being Sunday morning, Mercedes and Ramón dressed in their finest. So also did Dwayne and Misty. Soon the whole family walked toward the

sonorous church bells. Women led burdened donkeys down the middle of the street, which had no cars. Several men were passed out drunk in the gutters. But not, Misty told herself, Ramón. Many women, and fewer men, entered the church. The women wore embroidered skirts of maroon, burgundy, and gold; dark shawls covered swaddled infants; and long, dark socks vanished into dusty dark shoes. The men and women all wore Panama hats. The sight almost took Misty's breath away. Both the young women and men had smooth skin, brilliant dark eyes, and aquiline noses.

"They are so beautiful," Misty whispered to Dwayne in English. "But so sad." She glanced down to keep from stepping on a man's hand.

"These Quechua people are poor. And they know that the rich whites, whom they call *patrones*, will keep them poor. The whites call the Native men *chagros*, and the Native women *cholas*. This implies the Natives are all petty criminals or worse. They have nothing to look forward to except more of the same. For their whole lives. For some, there is no hope. For others, the church is their only hope. This is what we are up against," concluded Dwayne.

"Dwayne, are we doing anything wrong by going into a Catholic church?"

"Not if we do not repeat their words or their actions. Just maintain a silent meditation."

Even though the Church had long permitted other languages, this mass and the songs were in Latin. All but one. They sang a version of the Beatles' *Let It Be* in Spanish. *In my hour of greatest darkness, Mother Mary comes to me.*

"Is this their cry of faith?" Dwayne whispered to Misty in English. "Or is it resignation? Let it be, we shouldn't try to improve our lives or solve the social problems. This is exactly what the *patrones* want them to think."

*

Instead of going home for Sunday brunch, the Del Trigo family stopped at an outdoor restaurant. Walls of most of the buildings, with cracked plaster and splotched with mud, came right out to the street. The courtyards were inside. Most of the shops, including a couple dozen *joyerías* that sold jewels, marketed tourist items. Misty could recognize the tourists that had come in on the Pan American Highway. She wanted to think that she did not look like a tourist. The restaurant to which they all went had a porch right on the street. They all sat on unpainted wooden tables and watched men at a market across the street butcher a hog that was hanging from a rope. A tame, green parrot jumped around from one table to another.

"Let me just make a wild guess here," said Dwayne. "The Del Trigos don't usually eat out, I'll bet. They are doing this just to see what our reaction will be to something. You will notice that Ramón is ordering for all of us."

The waiter brought plates to Misty and Dwayne before anyone else. "I read about this, and it has finally happened," Misty whispered to Dwayne. "This is *cuy*." The little guinea pig, flayed and broiled, still had its paws, and its lifeless eyes stared at the visitors. Its lips had curled backward while cooking, making it look demonic. Everyone, including the waiter, watched the Americans. Misty smiled grandly. *"Muchas gracias,"* she told them. Soon all of them were eating cuy and plantains. "I swear," said Misty, "that if they ever visit us in America, I am going to make them eat Louisiana crawdads."

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Chapter 4

Dwayne and Misty spent the two weeks before Christmas getting to know as many people as possible, both in their homes and at work. They finished just in time for Christmas.

The *Cena de Nochebuena,* the Christmas Eve feast, brought families together to eat chicken stuffed with rice and raisins, and lettuce salad with fresh grapes and cheese. An old man, a distant uncle, told Dwayne and Misty about greater feasts and more joyous gatherings in the past.

After the Nochebuena feast, just after sunset, nearly everyone in town, even the men who might normally have been in the whorehouse or the gutter, wore their finest clothes to the church. The long ceremony, called the *Misa del Gallo,* the Chicken Mass, began when young men in suits and Panama hats carried a Christ child image, framed with paper flowers, on a palanquin. The people sang,

Veni, veni, Emmanuel, Captivum solve Israel,
Qui gemit in exsilio Privatus Dei Filio.
Gaude! Gaude! Emmanuel Nascetur pro te Israel.

The long mass was all in Latin, which nobody seemed to understand. Little kids became squirmy. Women took crying babies outside, and men went with them to smoke.

As they left the church, everyone lined up to cross themselves with holy water from the font.

"God forgive us," said Dwayne as he got in line.

"Dwayne?"

"Misty, if we do not do this, nobody will respect us and we might as well go home."

Misty made some little hand movements, but did not cross herself.

On Christmas Day, the Del Trigo family visited, and ate at, several other houses, and many people came to their house. Lots of *humita*, the Ecuadorian tamale, and lots of shrimp *ceviche*. The Del Trigo family made sure they were home at 3:00 for the local youth choir to come around. The melody and harmony were heartbreaking to Misty. This time she understood the words.

A la nanita nana, nanita ea, nanita ea,
Mi Jesús tiene sueño, bendito sea, bendito sea.

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Mary was singing that her Jesus is sleepy, may he be blessed.

Fuentecita que corre clara y sonora
Ruiseñor que-en la selva cantando llora...

The little brook that runs clear and resounding; the nightingale that in the forest, singing as it weeps. Misty nestled her head into Dwayne's shoulder as she listened.

*

Misty awoke one morning soon after Christmas, and lay staring at the ceiling. It seemed strange to her that the children had all left the room. Her *cumpleaños* was in January. She was twenty-two years old that day. She had said nothing about it to anyone, but was a little puzzled that nobody, even Dwayne, had mentioned it to her. But she would be happy, totally happy, just to spend this day like any other, starting with helping Mercedes with chores.

She heard some guitar strumming under the window. Before she could get out of bed, she heard Dwayne's voice. She wondered when he had learned to play the guitar, since the Bible study, and the church that sponsored it, had no instrumental music, but just vocal, always with four-part harmony. Dwayne sang,

Qué linda está la mañana en que vengo a saludarte...

How beautiful is the morning on which I come to greet you. Misty did not hear the next words as she scrambled out of bed, made sure her nightdress had not shifted during sleep, and stumbled to the window. By then Dwayne was singing,

Despierta, mi bien, despierta,
Mira que ya amaneció...

Wake up, my darling, wake up, See that it has already dawned. Then Dwayne drawled out the next words, milking them for their full effect.

Ya los pajarillos cantan, la luna ya se metió.

The little birds are already singing, the moon has already set. Misty nearly fainted, propping herself against the windowsill as Dwayne bowed and the family cheered. Dwayne later explained that he had for months planned to sing a birthday

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mañanita for her. Misty realized that she would probably never be this happy ever again in her life, no matter what blessings God had yet to send to her and to her betrothed.

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Chapter 5

Misty and Dwayne continued going around to houses and stores to meet people. They handed out little cards that identified them as servants of *Jesucristo*. The little cards also indicated times and places of Bible studies: Tuesday evening for the women, with Misty, and Thursday evening for the men, with Dwayne. They opened their box of Spanish modern-translation Bibles, titled *Díos Habla Hoy,* God Speaks Today. For the first week, nobody came.

Then the second week, a priest came to Dwayne's study. Dwayne was confused.

"You make it sound as if none of us here are Christians," the priest said in Spanish.

"That is not what we meant," said Dwayne.

"Then what is this all about?"

"We just want to talk about the love of God."

"Then just say so," said the priest, leaving.

*

After Dwayne and Misty stopped calling it a Bible study and just asked people to come and talk, a few people came, then more. Misty and Dwayne got pretty good at finding Bible stories that corresponded to the things that the villagers wanted to talk about anyway. You raise sheep? David was a shepherd. Your son has left you and gone to Guayaquil for wild living? Maybe he will come back, as the Prodigal Son did in Jesus' parable. The only way you can get enough to eat is to glean what the harvesters have dropped in the cornfields? That is what Ruth, King David's grandmother, did. Your little daughter was sick and almost died? Maybe God healed her, as Jesus did the little girl in the gospels somewhere. You heard that God commanded the Israelites to slaughter whole cities full of Canaanites? Yes, He did, but we don't do that today, because we are under a new covenant with Jesus, the full expression of God's love. You sell goat cheese? I can't think of a Bible verse about that one.

*

Ramón almost never used his car, a clunker like all the others, except to take Dwayne and Misty to the Banco del Ecuador. In late January, as Ramón parked his car behind the house, and Dwayne and Misty stood by the front door, a man in a serape approached them. Misty thought that he looked like the

revolutionary she had read about in a history class. What was his name? Ché, that was it. Ché Guevara.

"Can you give me some money?" the man asked in Spanish.

Misty started to reach for a couple of *sucres*, almost worthless in dollars but enough to buy food for a day. Dwayne stopped her, and said in English, "Let's not start this. We are here to teach, not hand out money. It's not our money, remember. It comes from our sponsors. If you give a man a fish, you feed him for a day; if you teach a man to fish, you feed him for a lifetime."

Misty pulled her hand back from her purse. "That's not the way this man sees it," she said, still in English. "But, maybe, if you explain it to him?"

They all then conversed in Spanish.

"We do not have very much money," said Dwayne.

"You are rich *norteamericanos*. You must have lots of money."

"Not enough to help you very much."

"You just came back from the bank," said the man.

"How did he know that?" Misty asked Dwayne in English.

"He doesn't," answered Dwayne.

"It's not our money," Misty said to the man in Spanish.

Dwayne turned on her and whispered fiercely in her ear in English. "Now he knows he was right." Misty looked alarmed.

"You rich *patrones*," said the man in Spanish. "You cause all of the problems of the *campesinos* here. First, the Spaniards conquered and enslaved them..."

"His Spanish is pretty good," Misty whispered in English.

"...and today you keep them in poverty. You eat the meat, they eat the potatoes that grow in the worst soil. You drink the rum, they drink the *chicha*."

"No, we don't," Misty said in Spanish. Dwayne jabbed her with his elbow.

The man continued. "You call them *pobrecitos*, and pretend that you care about them. But you own the good farmland, of which there is not very much, and raise crops like strawberries that you send off on jet planes to sell to rich countries. You have the doctors; they die of diseases that never touch you. The Ecuadorian government gives your corporations special privileges, and your corporations give them bribes. The people will not tolerate this." He turned to march away.

Dwayne was already entering the house when Misty looked back over her shoulder and said, *Díos te ama.* God loves you, she hoped loudly enough for the man to hear.

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Chapter 6

The next Thursday evening, nobody showed up to meet with Dwayne. He stepped out into the street to look around. That is the last that anyone saw of him in the town of Chordeleg.

The deputy of police met about midnight with a trembling, weeping Misty. He tried to calm her down, but it did not work. They talked in Spanish.

"Are you sure he is not at the whorehouse?"

Misty exploded.

"Calm down, *muchachita*. We will look for him."

"El es mi prometido."

"We will find your fiancé."

"Where do you think he is?"

"He probably got kidnapped."

Misty nearly fell on the floor. "What?"

"There are lots of little gangs here," the deputy explained. "They kidnap a *norteamericano*, then they ask for a little money, you give it to them, and they return the victim. It's almost become a regular business in Ecuador and Peru. Nobody gets hurt."

"We don't have very much money," gasped Misty.

"You probably have what seems to them a lot of money."

"I should have known this might happen." Misty told the deputy about the man who had confronted them at the front door a couple of weeks earlier.

When Misty told him what the man had said, the deputy looked a little worried. "That doesn't sound like a regular gang member. Too idealistic. It sounds more like one of the guerilla groups."

Misty looked around for a chair, but sat clumsily on the floor before she could find one.

"Don't worry, *pobrecita*. It sounds like...but it cannot be. The Sendero Luminoso are in Peru, not here."

"Sendero?" asked Misty.

"*Sendero* is like *camino*."

The Shining Path guerillas.

"Who are they?" asked Misty.

"They are a Marxist group," said the deputy. "They usually target native civilians, not Americans. Except missionaries. You wouldn't happen to be..."

"We are," said Misty, almost numb with fear. "What can we do?" she mumbled.

"They will probably contact us in the morning," said the deputy.

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"What do they want?"

"World communism. Strict communism. They are the fundamentalists of the communist world. They think that even Stalin and Mao were too soft. There is no way to predict whom they will attack, except that, so far, they have only targeted people up in the mountains. Coastal cities like Lima have been safe from them. Recently, in Lucanamarca, Peru, they went door to door shooting and axing men, women, and babies. What they want to do is to destabilize society which would then, they think, turn to them for leadership. Total bastards."

Misty agreed that they were total bastards. She could not help but think that God had the Sendero in mind when He created Hell. He did not have Muslims or Hare Krishnas in mind. He especially wasn't thinking about Catholics like the peasants of Chordeleg. He created Hell for those like the Senderos who hate their fellowman.

"You can understand their frustration, though," said the deputy.

Misty could not believe what she had just heard. "What?" she prompted.

"Well, the rich capitalists have kept the poor *campesinos* in virtual slavery. Of course, they cannot attack the actual billionaires who keep them in poverty. But you can see why, if you are white and wear nice clothes, they hate you for what the billionaires have done to them. And even the Sendero. The massacre in Lucanamarca was in revenge for what the Peruvian military had done to their families. Rape. Torture. You can understand why the Sendero would want revenge."

Misty wanted to say, *It's not fair,* but she knew Dwayne would have said, *Who says life is supposed to be fair?*

Then the police chief came in, still buttoning his shirt. "This had better be good, Guzmán, to get me up at this hour."

"We might have a Sendero situation on our hands," the deputy told him.

The chief smiled. "Ridiculous," he said. "The national government forces have been watching them, here and in Peru. If any of them came here, we would have known about it." Then the chief thought for a moment. "Unless it is one of their sympathizers who is not on the actual Watch List. By the way, who is this chick who is sitting on the floor?"

The deputy filled him in, including the details of what the man had said to her a couple of weeks earlier. The chief got a serious look on his face.

"Maybe you're right," the chief told him. "It might be a new group starting up here. This could be even worse than Sendero."

Misty started weeping quietly. Mercedes crouched beside her and put her arm around her. Then Misty began weeping loudly.

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The chief said to Misty, “We want to find your *prometido, señorita,* not only because we want to rescue him but because we want to make sure the Sendero does not start operating in Ecuador. And for this we will stop at nothing. The future of Ecuador depends on us finding your *prometido*.” What the police chief did not say was that, if he solved this case, he could try to get promoted to a position with the national security forces in Guayaquil. Maybe Ecuador’s future didn’t really depend on finding Dwayne, but the police chief’s future did.

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Chapter 7

Misty could not sleep. Mercedes and Ramón stayed up with her. About 3:00 in the morning, a woman in a serape came to the door. A scarf covered her hair. Mercedes answered the door. The woman mentioned the name of Misty Barbour, so Mercedes let her in.

The woman's face did not look either Native or Spanish. The skin was light, even flushed. Her face looked cherubic. Then she removed her scarf and revealed blonde hair.

"My name is Beatriz," she said. "I have information about this man Dwayne Singleton."

Misty shot to her feet. The visitor told her to sit down. Then the woman spoke in English, which astonished Misty and her hosts. "You will not tell anybody that I am here. I am the messenger from the people who kidnapped your man."

Beatrice then told Misty, in English, about the struggles and anger of the campesinos. It was the same story that the man had told them a couple of weeks earlier. Now that she heard it in English, Misty realized it was the same thing that Dan, whom she had until this moment forgotten, had told her back in Santa Barbara as well. She was now petrified with fear; she knew that her beloved Dwayne was a captive who was symbolically blamed for all of the sins of western civilization.

"I have come to tell you," Beatrice switched to Spanish, "that Dwayne's captors will release him in exchange for money, arms, and ammunition." She mentioned a considerable sum. "There is a field outside of Chordeleg, at the end of Vía Esperanza." The street of hope.

"We know where it is," said Mercedes.

"The money and matériel be must be left there at sunset tomorrow. Then, I can only hope, they will release your Dwayne." The blonde looked Misty directly in the eyes.

"You can only hope?" asked Misty. "Don't you know?"

"I report only what I have been told," said Beatrice. "The army, they have photos of all of us. Of course," she switched to English and spoke to Misty. "I cannot blend in. I am from East Germany. What was I thinking, to come here? I cannot leave through an airport. I will try to escape into Colombia across the border through the jungle. I will join a revolutionary group there."

*

Dozens of people came by the Del Trigo household to offer their best wishes to Misty. She refused protective custody that the police offered. She said her own life was worthless without Dwayne, so what did it matter if she were safe? But soldiers filled the streets outside the house. Misty knew that international reporters were nearby, kept away by the soldiers, and that American Vice President George H. W. Bush was being kept informed.

"Those Sendero terrorists must be stupid," an American military advisor said to the Ecuadorian military attaché as they sat at the Del Trigo kitchen table.

"They are not stupid," said the attaché.

"Your army will see them and attack the moment that they go for the loot. They know that you will retreat from the field but will be waiting to attack. And why would they want to release Mr. Singleton?"

"It has caused an international *tumulto*."

"But the Sendero doesn't care what other countries think about them." The American advisor gave the Ecuadorian his full attention. "Suppose America slaps a sanction on Ecuador. It might hurt the rich Ecuadorians. But that is exactly what the Sendero wants to do! To hurt the rich people!"

"That is why I do not think that they want the money and matériel," said the attaché.

The Ecuadorian soldiers, with American advisers, were ready at the field at the agreed time. Other Ecuadorian security forces had surreptitiously searched for guerillas in the vicinity, but found none. Misty insisted on being there. She sat off to the side to watch the unrolling of events in which she, and even Dwayne, were of secondary importance. She wanted to greet Dwayne, in the extremely unlikely chance that he would be there.

A fleet of armored vehicles drove into the field and unloaded boxes, then retreated. Everyone waited. No one came out to take them.

"I don't understand," said the American advisor. "Why would they want the stuff left out in the middle of a field?"

"That is why I do not think that they want the money and matériel," the attaché repeated.

At sunset, a man began to run across the field from the opposite side. Misty knew it was Dwayne. She jumped up and, before anyone could stop her, she ran out toward him. The soldiers suddenly became alert, but there was nothing they could do. From behind a eucalyptus tree off to the side, automatic gunfire erupted. Dwayne's torn body fell. But before it did, his blood, shards of bone, and pieces of brain splattered on Misty's blouse, arms, face, and hair. The soldiers ran toward where the shots were fired from. They found an AK-47. The man who used it left fingerprints all over it, but had vanished into the mass of *campesinos* whose fingerprints were not on file.

Misty was utterly silent as nurses cleaned and examined her in the hospital. She refused food. They forced her to drink water. She was utterly silent during the church funeral at the Chordeleg cathedral. She was utterly silent when her parents came for her and Dwayne's parents came for the little box draped in an American flag.

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Chapter 8

Misty stayed at her childhood home in Rancho Palos Verdes. Her parents and brother did not engage her in conversation very much. They knew she needed time to rest and heal. She didn't even go to church with them. She turned down every request for an interview from everyone from local news to NPR to the BBC to Deutsche Welle. She received a letter from the Ecuadorean consulate, apologizing for the trauma they had not caused but had not prevented. She took walks by herself, taking different routes to avoid paparazzi. She read books, but no religious ones. She waited for the world to forget about her. That never takes very long.

*

Then one day Misty told her family she was driving to Santa Barbara to look around the university from which she had graduated. She packed a few essential items, including her devotional-turned-conundrum notebook. She began her two-day trip on a Friday morning.

Misty walked around campus, under the eucalypts, then went out on the trail that circled the little island in the middle of the lagoon. The lagoon was very saline. The soil around its margin was covered with pickleweeds, and Misty could smell the filaments of algae that filled the water. She went to the beach and watched the sandpipers running on the wet sand as the surf retreated, leaving behind sticky bubbles. The birds poked with their shallow beaks, seeking food near the surface, then they ran back inland when the next wave came. Longer-billed sandpipers, the ones Misty had heard were called curlews, did the same, but were further inland, and they did not need to run away from the surf. Their beaks penetrated the wet sand for deeper food. Misty smiled as she remembered that, just a few years ago when she was a freshman, she watched these birds and compared them to people. Some people, like the short-beaked birds, run around with every shifting wave and are satisfied with a shallow understanding of the world, while others, like the longer-beaked birds, probe more deeply and wisely. God wants us to seek deep wisdom, not run with the waves of fortune. *And I actually thought that this was a teaching revealed to me by God,* she thought.

She took off her shoes and stuck her toes in the tide pools, letting the sea anemones grasp her skin with stinging cells that, being small enough to fit between her pain sensors, she could not actually feel. She stopped at a drug store in Isla Vista for rubbing alcohol, then sat on a park bench to try to rub off the globs of oil seepage that clung to her feet.

As the sun sank low, she walked instinctively toward the apartment where she had always gone for Friday night Bible studies. She could already hear them singing. When she knocked on the door, someone she did not know answered it and let her in. There was a collective gasp.

Misty, please come in.

Misty, we heard all about what happened.

Misty, we love you.

Misty, please have a seat. I'll sit on the floor.

Misty, what a coincidence, I mean, a blessing. We were about to pray for you.

Misty, do you want to say something? No? That's all right. You will tell us whatever words God places on your heart, whenever that happens.

Misty could not see the faces of the people very well. Her glasses were coated with salt spray. She took them off and looked at the friendly blurs. She did not see Philo. Instead, she saw Richi, the other campus minister.

"Where's Philo?" she asked.

Richi said, "Brother Philo has left the ministry. He..." Richi hesitated, looked down, then looked back up and said, "...got entangled in the ways of the world. His wife left him. I am afraid we are out of contact with him."

"Why haven't you stayed in contact with him?" asked Misty, who did not really care one way or the other about Philo.

"We wish we could, but the Bible instructs us to not even speak to those who have brought shame upon the Body of Christ. Really, Misty, we bear him no ill will."

"We pray for him every week," said one of the people Misty used to know.

"As we have prayed for you," said Richi. "Is it okay, Misty, for us to continue with the topic we were planning?" When Misty slightly nodded, looking down at her hands, Richi continued the lesson he had started when she walked in. He said what Misty had heard many times before, that God had a reason for everything that happens to everyone, even though we may never know in this lifetime why He allowed those things to happen. This is what the Bible teaches, he concluded.

"Is that so?" asked Misty.

"Why, yes, Misty," Richi answered. Everyone looked at her with love and dread. "I know that it must be difficult for you right now to believe..."

"And, one time, Philo said that the Bible taught that Christians never have any reason to be sad, so great is the joy of their salvation," said Misty. "I am here to testify that this is not true."

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Misty then stuck out her arm stiffly toward Richi. “Hand me that Bible,” she said. He did. She turned to the final chapters of the Book of Job in the Old Testament. “Job lost everything in a series of unbelievable disasters. He was a righteous man and he knew he did not deserve this kind of bad luck. His friends kept telling him that he must have somewhere, sometime, somehow done something bad that he either had forgotten or would not admit, something that made him deserve what happened to him. He refused to believe them. Finally, God Himself answered Job.”

“From out of the whirlwind,” said Richi.

“Exactly,” continued Misty. “And do you know what God did? He refused to give Job an explanation. He simply said to Job, *you do not know everything*. For chapter after chapter, God lists the things that Job did not know.” Misty started choosing verses at random. *“Where were you when I laid the foundations of the Earth? Have you measured them? Answer me, if you are so wise.”* She flipped to another page. *“Have you plumbed the depths of the sea? Do you even know how deep it is? You are so smart, you must know!”* She flipped again. *“Does the eagle arise into the air at your command? She builds her nest in the rocks, and can see her prey from a great distance.”* She flipped back. *“Who is it who sends the water down the courses of the rivers, or creates the thunder?”* Misty stood up. *“Who sends the rain upon the desolate ground, causing flowers to spring forth in the wilderness, even though there is no man to see it? Answer me, Job, since you seem to know everything!”*

Misty slapped the Bible shut and handed it back to Richi. Everyone waited in silence for Misti to make her point. She sighed and slumped, but did not sit down. “We all think we are so smart and can answer all the questions. But maybe we should just do like Job and shut up.” Misty stepped over the legs of people on the floor and stumbled toward the door. Someone whom she was supposed to know stepped to the door to help her. Misty stopped her. “I know how to open a door, thank you very much. I do not know...” She inhaled and stood erect. “I do not know how or why the arctic tern migrates twenty thousand miles each year from the north pole to the south pole and back. I do not know how one whale can talk to another hundreds of miles away under the sea. I do not know how a seed knows just the right time to germinate. Maybe somebody does, but I do not. There is no end to the list of things I do not know. But I do know how to open a door.” A moment later, she stood outside on the stairway landing. She slowly and silently stepped down. As she walked away, she heard her friends singing.

I want Jesus to walk with me.
I want Jesus to walk with me.
All along life's pilgrim pathway
Oh, I want Jesus to walk with me.

Misty began to run, almost colliding with people, almost dashing in front of cars. At sunset, she found herself on the rock at the edge of the cliff, the extreme southern point of the campus. A bright pink light filled the entire sky, making the scrub oak woodlands and the degenerated grasslands of the Channel Islands appear to be shades of gray.

She felt more than heard someone approaching behind her. She did not look back. The person stopped and must have been looking at her. She remembered a Bible study meeting a couple of years back where someone talked about sitting on this very cliff in a sunset exactly like this one. A man approached him from behind and said some threatening things, then asked him, *What are you doing?* The young Christian answered, *I am watching the power of God.* The intruder retreated, saying something like, *Well, isn't that nice,* and was gone. One of the other young people at the meeting, one who saw spirits and angels everywhere she walked all day, said, *It was a demon, and you drove him away with the power of Jesus' name.* Another person, a science student with a more practical bent, said, *It was just a frat boy*. Misty now smiled at the memory. The same thing was happening to her right now, and she was amazed to find that she did not care what was about to happen to her. Might the man, if it was a man, rape her? Push her down the cliff? She had already experienced worse, and her beloved Dwayne even worse yet. But when she heard the person move again, she tensed her muscles.

"Sorry to startle you," said the voice. "You just reminded me of someone I know."

Misty whirled around, recognizing the voice. It was Dan.

"Oh, my God, it *is* you!" he said quietly. Misty stood and embraced him. They stood in the wind looking into one another's faces. "And right here, where we last talked," Dan said.

"This was no coincidence," Misty said. "How likely is it that I would just happen to be here when you came by?" asked Misty.

Dan said, "You make it sound like a miracle. But I come by here every evening at sunset, weather permitting. The only miracle is that you happened to be here. But even this is not so miraculous. Is there a more beautiful place for you to come at the university, or a more beautiful time to come to it?"

"I choose to believe it was a miracle," said Misty.

"Misty, I am so glad to see you. I heard all about what happened. After all that you have endured, I admire you more than ever. What you have experienced would break most people."

"Are you sure it hasn't broken me?"

"I was going to write to you, to your Palos Verdes address, knowing that it would get forwarded to you even if you weren't there. But everything I started to write just seemed so trite. There was absolutely nothing I could say to you that was worthy for you to read."

"Words fail a journalist?" asked Misty.

"Sometimes. You are so amazing. You..."

"I've heard it all, Dan. You make me sound like a heroine. But I am just a young woman who wants to get on with her life." She sat down.

Dan sat beside her. Misty looked down at the beach, where a young couple, naked as Adam and Eve, ran into the surf, splashing one another, laughing. Misty felt a pang of regret. Would she ever again love a man as much as she had loved Dwayne, and would she ever share intimate moments with this man? Though in private, not out on a beach.

"So, what do you plan to do now?" asked Dan. "Your time for being a celebrity is probably past."

"Thanks for reminding me. I really have no idea what to do."

"I got a job offer, Misty."

"Congratulations." She sounded like the meant it.

"And there might be one for you, too. Let's go talk about it. Are you hungry?"

"I haven't eaten all day."

"Then, let's go to Borsodi's."

*

The ceiling of Borsodi's coffee house was painted with a vertically-viewed scene of twisted rods and piles of brick. It was on the exact spot where the Bank of America had burned in student riots a couple of decades earlier. Misty gobbled down a guacamole burger with spiced mayo so fast that she almost couldn't breathe. Dan, who had already eaten, did not try to engage her in conversation as he ate a scone with tea.

When she finished, Misty said, "Sorry I acted like such an animal, Dan, eating like this."

"Well," said Dan, "you *are* an animal, after all."

"Somehow I knew you were going to say that."

"Let's not get into religious discussions," said Dan.

"God, I've had it with religious discussions," said Misty. Her cheeks collapsed when she sucked on the straw of her malt. For just a moment, it reminded Dan of Margaret. Misty struggled with a chunk of brownie that got caught in her straw. She pulled the straw out and sucked the other end to dislodge the brownie, then continued consuming the malt with a long spoon. "I mean, I'm still a Christian, but there must be something else I can talk to someone about."

"You need a job," said Dan.

"You are so right," Misty answered, burping quietly. "And you know why?"

"Let me guess that it isn't for the money. You could, after all, just keep living in Rancho Palos Verdes as long as you might reasonably want to."

"As usual, you are very insightful. I want a job so I can focus on something other than figuring out the meaning of life. And I want it someplace where everybody doesn't know my life's story. Tell me about this job offer you have. And you said there might be a job for me?"

"It is to write for a newspaper out in a little town in the desert. The town is called Susurrus."

"Is it near Zzyzx?"

"There's a...whatever you said?"

"Yes. Zzyzx is right near Darwin."

"You're making this up, Misty."

"No, Dan, I'm not. Zzyzx and Darwin are soda mining towns. Or were. My family went on a desert vacation when I was a girl. I wanted to see Death Valley, but we couldn't go there. It was summer and Death Valley was too hot."

"Well, Susurrus is probably not too far away from them."

"What's in it for me?" asked Misty, clunking down her empty glass of water.

"I will write some local news stories. You could too."

"What makes you think they would hire me?"

"They sounded desperate to hire me and whoever I might recommend."

"I'll take it," said Misty. "For now, anyway. It sounds like the kind of desert situation that early Christian recluses lived in. They went there so they could get away from life in the city, I think."

"I also got a job offer from a newspaper back in the town where I lived a couple of years in the San Joaquin Valley. The Lindsay Gazette. Another little town, but at least they have orange groves there. Less dust, more pesticide. I know it well. A little too well. It pays better than Susurrus. But..."

Misty looked into Dan's eyes, and nodded. *Finish your sentence*.

"But I would go to Susurrus if you do. There, I said it."

"I would enjoy your company," said Misty. "But not, of course, your intimacy."

"I won't try to get you to fornicate with me," Dan said.

Misty raised her hands to her forehead and exhaled loudly. "Dan, where can I begin? Don't use that word, *fornicate*. I used to think it was wrong. Now, I'm not sure. But I cannot make an unbiased decision about whether it is wrong or not if I'm tangled up with you. We're just friends in Susurrus. Got it?"

"I will gratefully accept your friendship. It is like water in the desert, so to speak. You might as well know that I fornicate with some woman about once every two months. But I don't have any friends, at least after she uses up my money."

"Well, in that case, thanks for paying for my dinner."

"Thank God for credit cards," said Dan. He brought his face very close to Misty's. "I have to know if you're serious about taking this job," he said. "If you are, I will turn down the job offer in Lindsay, one that I do not want to pass up if you aren't serious."

A woman started to sing and dance on stage. She swirled around in fake silk and sequins. It was open stage night.

"Have you had an interview yet?" asked Misty.

"No. I got the offer by phone. The editor, a Mr. Emilio Villanueva, read my articles when I sent them." He cleared his throat. "He read your articles too."

"Why did he read mine?"

"He asked if I knew anyone else who might want a job. I thought of you, of course. That's why I think he will hire you."

"Let's do this, Dan. I have to grab the bull by the tail and look the situation squarely in the face. If I wait any longer, I will just end up sitting around at home. Speaking of home, I didn't plan on driving back to Rancho P.V. tonight."

*

A half hour later, they were at Dan's apartment. Misty smiled at the sparse furnishings. She emerged from the bathroom, her face freshly washed, her teeth brushed.

"I forgot my deodorant," she said.

"There is no possible situation in which you could smell bad. You are a goddess."

"Dan, I appreciate the praise, but just stop it."

"I have masculine body spray with pheromones in it to attract women. Can you tell?"

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"No. Does it work? I guess if I have to ask, it doesn't. I'll use it."

Dan had no extra sheets, but he had some big shirts Misty could sleep under in her clothes. They sat on Dan's couch and talked some more. When they ran out of words, Misty began to cry. "I miss Dwayne so much, Dan. Only God could know how terrible I feel. I guess Dwayne is happy now, up in Heaven. But I feel like half a person without him." She waited for Dan to speak, but he did not. He put his arm around her shoulder, and they lay back into the couch.

*

Misty had her bags ready, including a gift for her host. She had just finished packing when Dan drove his old boxy Datsun around to the front of the Barbour mansion in Rancho P. V. a couple of mornings later. Dan got out, his tall form stalking toward the door. Misty's father saw him.

"That's your co-worker at the little desert newspaper?" he asked his daughter.

"Yes, Dad." She had already told her father about the previous day's phone call from Editor Villanueva.

"You didn't think about this very long," said Misty's father.

"You should be happy I'm putting my degree to good use."

"I am, Misty. It's just that, everything has happened so fast."

Misty sighed, pulled a loose strand of hair from behind her lenses, and looked at her Dad. "Dwayne's been dead for what, three months now?" She actually knew the exact number of days, hours, and minutes. "I think that's long enough. And, no, Dad." She spoke quietly while her mother ushered Dan into the house. "I'm not sleeping with Dan."

"I would have no right to forbid you," he said.

"But you would worry about me if I was."

*

"I think we missed the turnoff," said Dan. Susurrus was not very big, nor was the turnoff well marked.

"No, that was the turnoff for the mine. The town is right down here." Misty pointed.

When they found the newspaper office, Emilio Villanueva ran out of his private office to greet them. He smiled into Dan's eyes. "I can put you to work this afternoon, if you are ready."

"We might need to learn a little bit about the town we are supposed to write about first, but other than that, we're ready," said Dan.

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Then Emilio looked at Misty. She had a surprised expression on her face. Emilio looked a lot like Dwayne, but with wire-rimmed glasses. He smiled at her and took her hand softly. “I am honored to meet the author of such thoughtful articles in the student newspaper of such an important university,” he said. “I am afraid that they are more thoughtful than the miners, which make up most of our population, would appreciate. But the whole point of my work,” he said, looking at Dan also, “is to lift them up from where they are toward where they might go. I seem to recall this is a frequent theme in your writing, Ms. Barbour.”

“It is,” Misty answered. She had not thought much about her writings since she graduated.

“Well, that is what we will do.” Emilio still held her hand as he looked at Dan. “You might want to go a little light on your environmentalist and socialist writings out here in the desert.”

“I got those ideas out of my system while I had the chance,” said Dan.

“But do not forget them completely. They are important ideas. The salt-of-the-earth miners—and I mean this literally—need to hear what our human impact, including mining, is doing to the Earth.” Dan could hear the capital letter. “Maybe not all at once, but I believe God wants them to show respect for His Creation.” More capital letters. “And more than respect. I want them to feel Love.” Emilio noticed he still had Misty’s hand, and he carefully released it. “You should see some of the letters from readers that I have to print. And which you, Misty, will have to edit to remove the profanities and enforce a word limit.”

Dan reached over and picked up a recent issue. “I don’t see much advertising here,” he said.

“No. I hope you will be able to sell some space.”

“What makes you think I can do this? You hired me as a writer.”

“You know how to listen to people, Mr. Hardy. And you might make them understand that, while they may not like everything we write, we are the only newspaper in town, and they want to keep up with the news. Whenever one of their kids is in a school play or something.”

“I can hardly wait,” said Dan. “But, meanwhile, where does your money come from?”

“I inherited it. But I cannot keep this up forever. We need more revenue. We have enough money that I can promise you employment for a year. If we prosper, you can stay longer. But I am not worried, one way of the other. God will provide. Or not, as He wishes. Do you believe this?” He looked into Dan’s eyes.

“I do,” said Misty. She smiled. Dan looked at her in disapproval, Emilio in delight.

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Emilio's house was not large, but he had a spare room for Misty, and a couch for Dan. He offered to pay the deposit on their apartments, with the understanding he would get the money back someday. No hurry.

"Why did you say that to Mr. Villanueva?" asked Dan afterward.

"What? About believing that God will provide, or not? When Emilio said that, I suddenly felt like believing it again. To see a man who actually puts his money where his mouth is when it comes to the Christian life."

*

And that was how Dan and Misty ended up working in Susurrus. This was also how Misty started spending more and more time with Emilio. She turned her journal back into a devotional, and wrote down the insights that she got not from Emilio but from herself while talking with him. At first, Dan was included in the discussions, but he had nothing to say and finally got bored. Especially on the weekends, it made more sense for Dan to go out of town and look for some action. Not that he found any. Not even in San Bernardino.

*

Usually Misty wrote her devotional thoughts in the mornings before work, an idea she got from Emilio. But after a few months, she felt that everything she wrote was what her creative writing professor would have called formulaic. She did not adopt Emilio's formal system of A, C, T, and S, but she seemed to be writing the same things over and over anyway.

Misty came to the sudden realization that she interpreted every scripture, and every experience, in a rigid Christian framework, the very framework that she rejected that night when she visited her old Bible study group. She was putting words into God's mouth instead of standing silent as Job had done. Whenever she thought back on Dwayne, and her experiences in Ecuador, she explained them to herself as trials that God imposed on her. But, she thought, this is ridiculous. Everybody has bad experiences, not just those whom God is cultivating, strengthening, and perfecting.

Then she thought about how much Emilio resembled Dwayne. Right away, she realized that she was transferring her love for Dwayne, which remained strong, to Emilio. Then she realized that much of her previous, strong faith was just her assent to what Dwayne had said. This meant that she had not been thinking for herself—not since moving to Susurrus, not even since meeting Dwayne.

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She thought about Emilio, and admitted that she loved him. Even as she recognized that she transferred her love for Dwayne to Emilio, she thought about the many things she loved about Emilio that were uniquely his own. He filled her thoughts. But, of course, he filled her thoughts. She had dinner with him almost every evening. She was even beginning to automatically think like Emilio: his interpretation of scripture, of history, of the cosmos, of life. It was at this point, when she closed her notebook and started out the door for work one morning, that she decided to spend a couple of evenings alone with her notebook, honestly facing the doubts that had arisen before her eyes on her last visit to Santa Barbara before slipping back into the sea.

*

A few days later, when she got in her car to go to work, Misty felt that something very different was going to happen that day. The air smelled like it. Moreover, her self-encounter of the previous night, recorded in intense red ink in her journal, made her feel strongly that today was the day to talk to Emilio. She looked out of the windshield. There was a strange smudge of light in the sky.

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Part Four

Living on Faith

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Chapter 1

The first check came soon after Misty and Emilio started their own church after the Appearance. They had started their business bank account just in time. They took out an advertisement in the Los Angeles times. The check they received was for a thousand dollars, from a large independent church in San Bernardino, not to Emilio but to the Appearance Proclamation Ministries. When, the next week, Emilio gave a sermon to this church, his descriptions of the colors in the sky, the rumbling of the ground when God spoke, and the confusion that exactly paralleled Jesus' Resurrection spellbound the congregation despite his meek monotone. Many parishioners stuffed checks into Emilio's hand, even though, or because, he passed no collection plate.

Misty had always been a shy speaker, and ever since her disastrously poor experiences in Argumentation and Public Oration classes at UCSB she had done her best to avoid public presentations. The Appearance transformed her in many ways, and one was that she now spoke powerfully to large audiences, on television and in private conferences. What was her secret of fearless public speaking? She said that when she got up in front of people, she poured out her soul, a river of blessing to them, totally ignoring herself, paying attention only to a coherent message and to the needs of her listeners. She said she would get up in front of an audience, large or small, and die—that is, let her ego die. Her utter lack of self-awareness at those times resulted in some annoying habits, such as tugging at her bangs and continually pushing her glasses back up her nose. A few humorists parodied these idiosyncrasies, but her audiences loved her all the more for them.

It wasn't too long before the Ministries had enough money to buy ten acres of land out in the desert, and not too much longer before they could pay for utility services to be extended to the site from Susurrus. They built a few small temporary buildings. They used none of the Ministries money for themselves, not even what was legally allowed. They lived on the last of Emilio's inheritance.

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Chapter 2

As Dan drove his little car into the parking lot of the Appearance Proclamation Ministries, he noticed two things. First, the headquarters buildings were cheap prefabs. He assumed that, once construction on the Glass Cathedral was complete, Emilio would have a nice office complex built. Then again, from what he knew of Emilio's refusal to give any thought for himself, Emilio might just consider the prefab buildings to be just fine. Second, he was astonished at the scale of the concrete foundations and the first metal ribs of what was to become one of the wonders of the desert. Perhaps of the world.

"Misty is expecting me," Dan told the receptionist, a young sallow blonde whose blank expression did not change as she called Emilio's office. Dan sat in one of the chairs. He noticed a strange plant just inside the window, with full desert sunlight beating down on it. At first it seemed like a joke. The plant consisted of two immensely long, wide ribbons of greenish-gray tissue and unrolled like tongues from underground organs buried deeply in the sand of terra cotta cylinders. Then he realized that this must be a Welwitschia plant, about which he had learned in a science class back at the university. It was a rare plant species from the deserts of Namibia. It was one of the ugliest plants in the world, Dan thought.

In a few moments, Emilio and Misty both appeared and smiled in greeting.

"You have a Welwitschia," said Dan.

"Yes, isn't it beautiful?" asked Emilio.

"Isn't it ugly?" asked Misty.

"It is both beautiful and ugly," explained Emilio. "When we complete our greenhouse, we will keep it there. It grows in the deserts of southern Africa..."

"I understand those are some really bad-ass deserts," said Dan. "The only rain is mist that blows in from the Atlantic Ocean."

Misty smiled. "Indeed. Only a really ugly plant like this could survive there."

"But God has created something that can tolerate those conditions. The plant is mostly underground, and is dormant most of the time. And then it bursts forth in beautiful life." Emilio raised his arms pentecostally and smiled triumphantly at his atheist friend.

"Well, I've always wanted to see one," said Dan.

"I have my hands full with plans for the Cathedral," said Emilio. "Misty will be glad to talk with you." Emilio waved and disappeared down the hall, which consisted only of drywall.

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"This way." Misty motioned down another hall to her barren office. Dan sat down in a cracked lawn chair. Misty's desk was a church-basement table held up by metal struts. "So, you weren't very clear about why you wanted to talk with me. Long drive from San Diego. By the way, what happened to the newspaper?"

"It was running in the red, kept alive by Emilio's inheritance. As soon as the two of you left, that was the end of the line. That's when I found the San Diego job.

"I don't have a really clear idea myself why I want to talk with you," continued Dan. "I'll bet that doesn't surprise you."

"No, Dan, it doesn't. But I cannot imagine how this could be something that Emilio could not also talk with you, with us, about."

Dan almost sneered. "You know Emilio. Whenever we talk about something, he always responds with some precise little aphorism drawn from his quiver of Bible truths."

Misty stared at him. "Yes, I know."

"I'm not entirely sure what I want to discuss with you, but whatever it is, I want it to be an honest discussion, and that means Emilio would be inconvenient."

"If you mean that you intend to question the fundamental concepts of our faith, yes," said Misty, relaxing into her chair. "Emilio doesn't have time for it. I guess I don't either. But I will give you the benefit of the doubt, old friend."

"Thank you," said Dan, sliding down in his chair. "You have just made the whole trip worthwhile for me."

"Does that mean you are going to leave now?" Misty gave that little smile Dan liked so much. "Not that I want you to, but, as I said..."

Dan suddenly became serious. "Misty, you are the only one of these revolting Christians to whom I can talk."

"I'll take that as a compliment," said Misty, looking Dan fully in the face. "I guess."

"Then," said Dan, "Let's go have a talk. A real talk, away from Emilio's complacent theology. I seem to remember..." He looked into Misty's eyes. "...that you were more open to sincere doubt than Emilio."

Misty looked down at her appointment calendar. "I was," she said. "As time permits, I still am."

"Well," said Dan, surprising himself by his own forthrightness. "Find the time. Meet me out in the desert, where we can talk."

"We're already in the desert," said Misty.

"I mean, the real desert. I mean Death Valley. You've always wanted to go there. You said you wanted to go there when you were a little girl. Well, tell Emilio that you want to go there. Now. He'll say yes."

"He will."

"And he won't even ask why. If you tell him you just want to see the most bad-ass desert in the world, second only to Namibia, he will believe you."

"I won't lie to him," said Misty. "But, actually, I already told him I wanted to see Death Valley."

"And I just happen to meet you out there."

"He won't ask. And our meeting, if it happens, will be chaste. That's a word you don't like..."

"Give me a break, Misty. I'm not a sexual predator or something just because I'm an atheist."

"Sorry, Dan. But I do have to make the rules clear before we meet."

Before we meet. Those are the words Dan wanted to hear.

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Chapter 3

Dan parked his car in a wide spot in the road near a sign that said Badwater. He got out of his car and looked at the shallow water on the playa that extended, flat, all the way to the Panamint Mountains toward the west. The plain was all crusts of salt and clay. Little *Salicornia* pickleweeds grew on the banks, and strands of green algae grew in the water. A lone raven strutted around amidst tiny bushes with prickly silver leaves. They were *Tidestromia* bushes, which were actually unhappy with the cool winds and the overcast skies that swept now across the bottom of Death Valley, as they often did in March. These bushes didn't really wake up and start funneling the photons of light into their chloroplasts until it was at least 100 degrees Fahrenheit. Dan knew exactly what kind of sermon, about spiritual triumph over adversity, Emilio would have gotten from these shrubs.

Dan looked up at a nearby hill. Far up the hill, the sign indicated Sea Level. He walked out onto the salt flats, careful to not crack through a salt layer and bury his foot in sticky clay. He did not know how long he walked around. When he looked again at the parking area, there was a second car. A woman stood beside it, her hair wrapped in a scarf. Misty was nearly hidden in the dust and salt particles as Dan stepped toward her.

Misty looked up at the mountains in the west. Snow covered their summits, but did not make it down into Death Valley. They kept the blessing of moisture on their Pacific slopes.

Misty turned her head toward Dan as he approached. "This had better be important," she said. "It was a longer drive than I expected. I got a room at the motel that you said you were staying at in Trona. God, that place smells awful. I don't know what kind of mining they do, but the air smells like sulfur. I'm going to have to smell that stuff all night. I already miss Emilio. Well?"

"I'm sorry to disappoint you," Dan told her. "I do not have a sermon prepared."

Misty exhaled and relaxed. "Sorry, Dan. I'm just a little grumpy."

"I'll open the conversation, though," said Dan. "I strongly suspect that you are not entirely convinced that God appeared in the sky that day."

"Most of the evidence points to the conclusion that He did, I will tell you for the dozenth time."

"But you are not entirely sure."

"Of course not. Nobody can be entirely sure about anything. But that's life, Dan."

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"And if it wasn't God, then your entire Glass Cathedral project has no basis."

"Dan, are you going to tell me anything you haven't told me before? I was expecting better from you. You are a smart and very thoughtful man, not given to saying the same thing over and over like this."

"Is that God?" Dan motioned toward the sun. The mist and salt particles hid it in a blob of white.

"Dan, you either say something that makes sense or I'm driving straight back to the little hut I share with Emilio. It's no better than that ramshackle motel, but at least it doesn't smell as bad."

Dan continued. "Things happen. People see things. You've heard of what people claim to have seen at Fatima, I suppose."

"Yes," answered Misty. "Thousands of people claimed that they saw the sun come down out of the sky and zigzag around. As for me, I don't know what they saw."

"It was visual purple afterglow as they looked at, then turned their eyes away from, the sun."

"What does this have to do with us? Now?" demanded Misty. The wind became so strong that Dan could hardly hear the words that she shouted. "Listen, Dan. I like you, but I'm getting really tired of you trying to make me think I was crazy..."

"No, not crazy," Dan shouted back. "People see things. Then they make their best effort to make sense of them. That's not crazy. We all saw whatever it was in the sky that day. But remember that nothing showed up on my camera."

"But you said you saw..."

"I know what I said. I said I saw a man with a white beard on a gleaming throne." He stopped to think. "Why would God need to sit on something? Never mind. My brain is as vulnerable to delusions as anyone else's, Misty. We're just apes with brains that evolved to make us dominate other apes. These brains did not evolve to reason, but to rationalize. They did not evolve to understand the universe or God. We understand the universe better than we ever had any right to expect. But we aren't perfect. Emilio's brain creates delusions. Your brain creates delusions. My brain creates delusions. All day, every day."

"Well, in that case." Misty crossed her arms over her chest. "I can't help believing what I saw, or what my brain wants me to think I saw."

"Precisely the point, Misty..."

"Dan, just stop it! This is the last time I'm meeting with you for a little talk, even if it is in a coffee shop or anyplace else." She looked down at her feet. "You know, Dan, I was just starting to like you again." She sighed. "Well, this isn't turning out very well, is it."

"Forgive me, Misty," said Dan, drawing close enough that he did not have to shout through the wind. "Tell you what. It's springtime in Death Valley, and you know what that means. Wildflowers."

"I don't see any here. I did see some while I was driving here, though."

"Those *Tidestromia* bushes over there..."

"Over where? Oh, those."

"They have flowers on them. Very tiny flowers. Emilio would say that is all they need, and God's grace is sufficient unto them."

"He would, Dan. But he's not here."

"So, what do you say, Misty, that we go look around. See beautiful wildflowers."

"I could have done that in the desert outside my office." Misty looked up at Dan. "I know what that sounded like. It sounded like you being with me when we look at the flowers was totally irrelevant. Like me looking at the flowers by myself would be exactly the same experience as looking at them with you. I didn't mean it that way."

*

Misty followed Dan's car. They drove north toward Furnace Creek. Dan signaled for them to park in a wide spot at the road's edge. Dan and Misty stood together and looked around them in silence. There was a dry rock outcrop with sand dunes all around. Nothing grew on the sand dunes, but tall sunflower-like plants bloomed around the dune edges. The rock outcrop at first appeared barren, especially in the late afternoon light. Dan just looked at the ground. Misty was puzzled at first, then looked more closely at the ground herself. She saw widely scattered wildflowers. She crouched down to her knees. Dan was right beside her.

"What is this beautiful orange flower?" Misty touched the petals of a flower that was bigger than the entire plant on which it grew, barely four inches above the soil.

"That is a mariposa lily," said Dan. "There's also a light purple species of mariposa lily around here sometimes. Mariposa means butterfly. These flowers grow only very, very briefly in the springtime. They spend most of the year as seeds in the dry soil."

"And this one?" Misty asked about a deep purple flower.

"That is a species of *Nama*," Dan answered.

"The plant below the flower is maybe an inch tall? And the flower is almost an inch. It's as if the plant is pouring everything it's got into being beautiful."

"Into producing seeds, actually."

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"Out here where nobody sees it except God."

"Pollinators see it. That's what's important."

"You know, Dan. This just reminded me of something. You remember that evening when you found me sitting out on the cliff at UCSB? After I came back from Ecuador?"

"I will never forget that evening, Misty. Never."

Misty removed her scarf, shook her hair in the wind and smiled. "I'd just come out of my old Bible study group. Only this time I could not really believe all of the pious things they were saying. I grabbed a Bible and read random passages from the end of the Book of Job. I recently looked back at them. One passage said, *"Who sends the rain upon the desolate ground, causing flowers to spring forth in the wilderness, even though there is no man to see it? Answer me, Job, since you seem to know everything!"* I told them that we should stop pretending that we have all the answers, and just shut up."

"But you and Emilio are not shutting up. You are telling the world that you have The Truth," said Dan. Capital letters.

"Dan," said Misty. "All I'm saying right now is that we, right now, should just shut up and look at the flowers. See this one? It's pink, with five magenta spots."

"That's a desert five-spot."

"What else could it be but a five-spot? But you seem to know all the flowers, Dan."

"Not all of them. But I came prepared. Not with an atheist sermon, of course. Just with the knowledge that allows me to notice what is beautiful."

"I've seen these around our construction site," said Misty. "And I've heard people—Christian people—look at the desert and say, *There's nothing out here*." She stood. Dan did also. She looked him squarely in the eye. "Jesus said to consider the lilies of the field. These were flowers that covered the spring hillsides in Palestine. To consider them, you have to look closely at them. You, my friend, do precisely this thing that Jesus said to do."

"I? Obeying Jesus? You can't mean it."

"Dan, just stop it. Whether you know it or not, you are a very spiritual person." Misty looked down at her hands, to which a few grains of sand clung. "I suppose this is one reason you wanted to meet me in the desert. So that I would realize this about you. You are, I think I can say, reverent when you look at the natural world. I already knew this, but in recent months, being so busy, I've forgotten this about you."

"And Jesus said, *Even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed as one of these*. Referring to the flowers." Dan smiled.

"He did, Dan. As *one* of these. One little wildflower is more beautiful than all of the greatest creations of the human hand." She looked up into his face. "Or mind. I'm sorry I've not appreciated your spirituality."

"Even though I don't have my doctrines all figured out."

Misty chuckled. "Doctrines? I leave those to Emilio."

"I'm especially spiritual when I've had a little bit to drink," said Dan.

"I'll bet you are."

"But I'll forego that during our time together. Also, I feel spiritual when I'm looking at women."

Misty pulled back. Her eyes widened.

"Relax. With you, I'm just feeling friendship."

Misty relaxed. "Friendship can be pretty intense," she said. "You should realize, Dan, that Emilio is not just my husband but my best friend. You and I can't start up a friendship that takes up very much time and takes me away from Emilio's friendship."

"One afternoon in the desert," said Dan. "Tomorrow morning, you drive back to your godly work. This doesn't take much time. Which reminds me. We have one more thing to see. And it's almost sunset. I hope you don't mind off-road driving."

"It depends. How bad are the ruts?"

"I actually don't know. We'll take it slow. If you want to leave your car parked along the paved road, we can go in mine. You trust me?"

"I trust God, who has brought you back into my circle of friends." Misty smiled.

In their cars, Misty followed Dan to a little dirt track. He turned onto the track. Misty followed him for a few yards, then stopped. She got out of her car, locked it, and got into his.

"The sun is going down," said Misty.

"The Panamint Mountains in the west are pretty high. Sunset comes early down here in the valley." Dan was concentrating on the dirt trail as he drove.

"The road looks the same as the dirt around it. We're going to get lost out here."

"Full moon tonight," said Dan. The wind had died down, and salt no longer blew in the air. There was just a little mist. "I think we can see well enough." Dan stopped his car.

"This is it?" asked Misty.

"Get out and take a look around," said Dan.

Misty saw some boulders. Not large ones, and there were very few of them, all alone on a flat dry mud-scape. She gasped when she saw that each

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boulder sat at the end of a curved groove in the dried mud, as if something had pushed them, all in the same direction, and they had left the grooves behind them.

"Welcome to the Devil's Racetrack," said Dan.

"Something moved the stones. But what?"

"Maybe the Devil did it, like the name says."

"Seriously, Dan."

"Don't you believe in the Devil?"

"Not a Devil that pushes rocks around in the desert."

"Nobody has ever seen them move. People have watched and watched, and never seen them move. But the tracks keep getting longer. Just a little, but enough to measure. Even a study by the National Academy of Science was unable to come up with anything other than a good guess."

"Which was?"

"It's usually dry out here, but not always. When it rains, the mud turns into a kind of slurry. There's not enough rain to wash away the tracks, but enough to make the mud sticky. Sort of the consistency of shit." Dan waited for Misty to object to his language, but she remained silent. "And then the wind blows really, really hard, and pushes the rocks along."

"They're too heavy for the wind to push. Maybe it's earthquakes."

"No. Earthquakes would make the rocks tumble in random directions. It must be the wind, coming from the southwest. When the moisture is just right, it only takes a little nudge from the wind to move the rocks."

"I get the feeling you are working up to some conclusion, Dan."

"Me? I don't know where I'm going with this, actually. Except maybe..."

"See, I knew it."

"...sometimes, under rare conditions, strange things happen. You can't make scientific observations to find out. You could put up stakes to triangulate the boulders, without getting in the way of their movement, and measure and measure and measure, for years, and never detect any movement. But their movement can all be explained by natural laws. It is just such rare occurrences that, in many cases, people interpret as miracles."

"See, I knew it. You did have a sermon ready. And for what it's worth, Dan, you might be right. So, what—don't tell Emilio..."

"Why would I do that?"

"So, what if it wasn't God up in the sky that day? Is God any less God for it? God creates the natural laws."

"And that settles it, doesn't it, Misty?"

"No," Misty said a little louder than she intended. "I'll leave all of that up to the scientists and theologians and to those few who are both. Someday, I'll get to ask God. Until then..."

In the near darkness, Misty moved in such a way that her arm touched Dan's. Neither moved. Neither spoke. They looked up at the moon for several minutes. Then Misty said, "I think we'd better get back to our motel. They have a restaurant there?"

"I guess you could call it that," said Dan. "They have a kitchen where they warm up processed food-like substances." They stepped apart from one another. "You like canned gravy?"

"Only on chicken-fried steak that comes out of a box," she answered.

The ground was almost completely dry from the last, small rain. There was just one little muddy patch. Misty found it, and slipped. She grabbed Dan's arm and pulled him down with her. They both had layers of mud randomly streaked on their clothes. They started laughing as they disentangled from one another. Misty got into Dan's car. "Oops, I'm sorry," she said as Dan got into the driver's seat. "I wasn't thinking. I just got mud all over your car seat."

"I did too. Don't worry about it. What's a car for? It's for going places, for going to interesting places that are sometimes muddy."

*

They were still muddy and laughing as they ate chicken fried steak. Misty sucked a malt through a straw from a chipped, scraped plastic glass. The slurry was thick enough that she had to suck very hard. Her cheeks caved in. She looked up at Dan. His fork, holding a piece of cube steak that had slipped free of its chicken-fry coating, hovered midway between his plate and his mouth.

Misty stopped sucking, put down her glass, and asked, "What's that look on your face?" Dan continued looking at her. "Dan?" she asked.

Dan put down his fork, smiled, and said, "You just reminded me, right then, of an old girlfriend." He expected Misty to tell him they should not continue this conversation, but she just continued to listen. "I fell in love with her when I saw her sucking on a straw and looking at me, just as you did right then."

"Margaret," said Misty. "That was her name, right?"

"Yes," said Dan. "Thanks for remembering. I mean it." He quickly added, touching Misty's wrist, "I'm not trying to say that I am going to fall for you. Trust me."

"I do, Dan. So, tell me. What do you do when you're not working? Or not drinking, or looking at women, as you have told me."

"That's pretty much it," said Dan.

"You don't sit around and talk about, you know, philosophy, with anyone?"

"I do sometimes. There is a woman I asked out once, down in San Diego, and she let me know right away she was a lesbian. It's not the first time that a woman I liked turned out to not like men. But I didn't want to retract my offer. That's how we began fixing dinner and having spirits at each other's apartments. We talk philosophy. But that doesn't happen very often. She's usually on trips for work or for gay and lesbian rights rallies. Usually both; she's a lawyer who defends gays and lesbians from workplace discrimination. We sometimes have really good talks. Well, actually, we only had one."

"What did you talk about?"

"Life, the universe, and everything. But not about God. She is as fiery an atheist as I am a calm one." Dan grasped the edge of the table and bent toward Misty. "If she knew I was here with you, she would explode and call me an idiot for trying to talk with a religious person."

Misty stopped chewing and looked into Dan's eyes. "I guess that means that I am fortunate to be talking to you, and not to her."

"As I to you, rather than to her," said Dan.

Misty picked up her malt. "I do appreciate you, Dan." Her cheeks became concave again. Then she put her malt down and stabbed the last of her food with her fork. "So, aside from your lesbian friend?"

"I manage to hook up with a few women," said Dan, not looking directly at Misty. "All colors, sizes, shapes. Most recently a big Asian woman and a petite black woman."

"God made us all," said Misty. "And He made us all beautiful in different ways."

"What, then, is beauty?" asked Dan, striking a philosophical pose.

"It's relative," said Misty.

"That's my line, Misty. You're the one who believes in absolute standards created by God. Is that not so?" Dan was surprised that Misty did not react to his challenge. "Whatever God looks like, any departure therefrom must be, to the extent of the departure, ugliness."

"The Bible talks about the image of God. But that does not necessarily mean a physical image." Misty slipped the last food into her mouth. "But, Dan, you believe in standards of beauty. I assume you do not sleep indiscriminately with women."

"No. But, as you say, there are lots of ways for women's bodies to be beautiful. Besides, evolution has created standards of beauty."

"You'll have to explain that one to me, Dan."

"I refer to symmetry. We are all just a little bit asymmetrical. That is, the right side of the face does not exactly mirror the left side. But people tend to find asymmetry, when they notice it, ugly."

Misty looked at Dan and scrunched up the left side of her face. “So, now I’m ugly?”

“Never. Well, maybe if you looked like that all the time.”

“Why does evolution make us think asymmetry is ugly?”

“Asymmetry is often associated with genetic diseases. You can’t see genetic diseases, and primitive people didn’t even know what they were, but you can often subconsciously detect a genetic problem by seeing an asymmetrical face.” Dan scooted his plate away, just a little, and started to finish his iced tea.

“What about a scarred-up face?” asked Misty.

“Depends on how badly,” answered Dan. “A whole lot of scars, that would be ugly to most people, even if not to God. But a little scar might make someone attractive. It means that the person has successfully sustained and survived an injury. It’s known as the G.I. Joe effect. The soldier doll that was popular in the 1960s had a little scar on his face, and customers loved it. The ability to rebound from injuries could be useful information for someone who is seeking a good mate. But, for you, even a scarred-up face would be beautiful.”

“Let’s stop talking about me,” said Misty. “I just wanted to say that having lots of different sex partners, as you do, is not the only way to find pleasure. I find it by ever more deeply exploring the physical, mental, and spiritual aspects of my husband. And God. That is, my pleasure is vertical, Emilio and God, while yours is horizontal. Though your lesbian friend would not understand this, Christian monogamy is a lot of fun.”

“Especially if it is with you,” said Dan. “Emilio is lucky.”

“Blessed,” corrected Misty. She sucked away the last malt.

“So, you and Emilio must spend a lot of time in bed, to make up for the fact that you two have no other partners.” As soon as he said it, but not before, he knew he must have offended Misty.

Only she did not act offended. “No,” she said. “We want to wait until we finish building our ministry before we start a family. But at least, Dan, I have someone to come home to. I don’t have to go looking for someone every time.”

Dan hung his head, but Misty did not take her words back. They slipped out of their booth, leaving chunks of mud behind. “Oh, I’m sorry we messed up the seat,” Misty said to the waitress.

“Don’t matter,” said the waitress, a chubby blonde. “Them miners come in here all day all caked with dust. You probably took as much dirt as you left.”

*

Misty unlocked her motel room door and turned on the light. A very light rain moistened the mud on their jackets that had begun to dry. Misty’s silhouette

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said, “It’s been great, Dan. I certainly know you better now. You are, theology notwithstanding, a good man.”

They embraced gently. Dan tried to keep himself from hardening, but failed. Dan held Misty more tightly and brushed his lips against her ear.

The mud that glued them together made a slurping sound as Misty pulled away. “Look, Dan,” she said. “This is going a little too far.”

“You’re safe with me.”

“I know. But we are just human. Things happen. We can’t let them.”

“Aren’t you protected by that Holy Spirit of yours?”

That was exactly the wrong thing for Dan to say. Misty shot him a glance.

Dan worked himself in deeper. “I mean it. What good is a Holy Spirit that does not protect you from what you consider sin?” When Misty said nothing, Dan continued. “We need to get some rest. We’ll be back to normal in the morning. See you at the restaurant? How about 7:30?”

Dan did not see Misty at the restaurant the next morning.

*

Dan sent Misty a card, an old-fashioned card, with a pressed flower in it, the next week. He wrote, “I’m sorry that things ended up as they did. It was so beautiful to be with you out in the desert. Maybe another time?” She left the card open on her desk and Emilio saw it. Misty was just entering her office.

“So, you met Dan out in Death Valley?”

Misty’s face scrunched up in alarm. “I... I’m sorry I didn’t tell you, Emilio. I swear, we weren’t doing anything romantic.”

“Of course not,” said Emilio. “I trust you. But you could have told me you were meeting him. I wouldn’t have had time to go, but I would have sent my greetings. How is he?”

“As well as one could expect, except that he needs Jesus.”

“What did you talk about?”

Misty pointed to the pressed flower. “This.”

“What did Dan have to say about the flower?”

“He said, my beloved Emilio, *Even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed as one of these*.”



Desert spring wildflowers, California. Left: Chuparosa. Right: Mimulus. Author photos.



Salt flat at the bottom of Death Valley, early spring. Author photo.

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Part Five

The Glass Cathedral

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Chapter 1

"Where do you live?" Emilio and Misty's financial advisor, Ernest, sat in the plastic chair in Emilio's office. "All I see is the slab for your cathedral. I assume you have a house in Susurrus."

"We sold it," said Emilio. "That was our seed money. We live in that little shack over there." He pointed to a tin roof cubicle.

"Well, the good news is that contributions are beginning to come in. Some of them pretty big. The biggest one is anonymous."

"That's fortunate," said Misty. "We won't let anyone put their names up on anything that we build."

Ernest said, "You could use some of that money to build a manse."

"A what?" asked Misty.

"A house for us to live in," said Emilio to Misty. "Only, since the Appearance Foundation owns it, we can live in it for a nominal fee." Then, he said to Ernest, "Sounds great. But we want to do the cathedral first."

"Which brings me to the not-so-good news," responded Ernest. "You're talking tons of glass here. First off, how are you going to keep the cathedral cooled off? You'll have an incredible greenhouse effect in there, with all the sunlight coming in and the glass trapping the heat."

"There will be plenty of vents," said Emilio. "Beveled edges, so that the rain can run off, but otherwise it's open to the outside. The panels will be dark translucent plastic. An automatic control system will swivel them up and down by chains. When the panels are parallel to the sunlight, they will admit bright light. But on hot days they will block sunlight, a little bit or a lot. Also, we will have evaporative cooling."

"There's not enough water out here for that," said Ernest.

"Oh, yes, there is," said Misty. "We will gather the rain water in underground cisterns, and recycle the evaporated water through a geothermal unit. And we are going to have tropical plants in here. We'll recycle the water they transpire and give it back to them."

"We'll have supplementary A/C," said Emilio. "Solar electricity, of course."

"This all sounds expensive," said Ernest. "You don't have nearly enough contributions coming in for all of this."

"You told us last time that more and more contributions were coming, each week more than the last," said Misty. "Surely a bank will finance us."

"The bank I've been talking with wants to be sure you are not a risk," said Ernest. "When I showed them how little of the money you are keeping for yourselves, they concluded that you would be very good stewards of the money.

"But this brings me to my second point," said Ernest. "With all that glass..."

"Not actually glass," said Misty. "A shatter-proof composite material."

"...and this being an earthquake area, you could have a catastrophe on your hands."

"We've thought of that," said Emilio. "Misty, is Primo here yet?"

"I'll check," said Misty, who slipped from the meeting room into the office, which was just a few feet away. She came back with a young man, fire in his eyes, who carried an early laptop computer. "Ernest and Emilio, this is Primo Respighi, from Rome. He is one of the finest architects in the world."

Emilio shook Primo's hand with a calm satisfaction. Ernest approached warily and shook his hand. Emilio explained. "Primo arrived at LAX earlier this week. We met him and drove him to his little apartment in Susurrus, for which the Foundation is paying."

"I'll just be honest here," said Ernest. "There is no way that you can afford to bring in an architect from Europe, all the way out here in the desert. You'd be lucky to get one from San Diego."

Primo spoke perfect English with a slight Italian accent. "Ever since I heard the news about God appearing in the sky, I knew I had to devote my life to this work. I have complete faith that the Villanuevas' project will succeed. God has already created peace in my heart about this."

"Faith, and no money?" asked Ernest.

"The money will come," said Primo.

"What does this have to do with earthquakes? That's what we were talking about," said Ernest.

Primo looked at Emilio, who nodded. Primo unplugged Emilio's phone and plugged in his laptop. He logged in to his page, and showed Ernest a diagram that looked like a ball and socket joint.

"Can somebody explain this to me?" asked Ernest.

"These are the joints that hold the metal frame together," said Primo. "Together, they are all strong enough to support the glass composite. But since they are balls in sockets, they can move, shiver, and dance during an earthquake."

"Has this technology been tested before?" asked Ernest.

"Not on this scale," said Emilio.

"We built a greenhouse near Mt. Etna," said Primo. "Lots of little earthquakes there. No problems. I brought documents and a videotape to show the bank."

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"It's still going to have horrendous insurance premiums," said Ernest. "Especially for liability. One little piece of glass falling a hundred feet onto someone's head, and you get sued for a million."

"I will take that chance," said Emilio.

"The state will not allow you to take that chance," said Ernest. He considered that this piece of information would bring all further discussion to an end, and prepared to leave.

"How much will the insurance cost?" asked Emilio.

Ernest quoted a figure that he was sure would frighten the Villanuevas. It was in excess of the cost of the building itself.

"Well," said Misty, "I guess we will just have to pay it. Will you make the arrangements, Ernest?"

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Chapter 2

Tourists started coming almost as soon as the workmen, hired from around the country by a Christian employment agency, began erecting the first beams. They were not metal beams, as in most greenhouses, but a composite that was actually stronger than steel, and transparent, so the Cathedral would look like a glass bubble. Donation boxes began to fill, but did not keep up with the mounting expenses. A bank offered a loan, but only a bit of money at a time.

The county Chamber of Commerce wanted to publicize the Cathedral. They wanted to put Susurrus, and San Bernardino County, on the map of world attractions. They had brainstorming sessions. Emilio and Misty were invited, in case they wanted to refuse some of the suggestions. But usually chamber members shot down each others' ideas first.

"Fireworks!"

"Too dangerous."

"Dangerous? There's not enough brush out here for a wildfire."

"Fireworks? Now after the glass panels are in, that would be good. But that won't be until next year. We need something sooner, while the frame's still being put up."

"A Passion Play!"

"You gotta be joking. People drive all the way out here for a passion play?"

"Laser tag, after hours, running around the steel beams."

"Too dangerous. Construction equipment left all around."

"Paintball!"

"That's an even worse idea than laser tag."

In the end, they agreed on setting up ziplines from one beam to another as the remaining beams were installed. Once again, this would be after-hours, when the construction workers were not there. A major recreation company stepped up to finance the whole thing, including liability insurance, and agreed to donate ten percent to the Foundation.

But, as it turned out, the most important idea came from the chamber president. "A restaurant," he said.

"Who would drive out here for a restaurant? Anyhow, that would take a long time to build."

"This won't be just any restaurant, my friends. And it won't take as long to build as the Cathedral itself."

"Okay, so tell us what will be so special about this restaurant."

"It will be a greenhouse, just like the Cathedral," said the president. "Same kind of beams, glass, and the panels that will control the light. It would be nice to try it out on a smaller scale."

"Okay, a restaurant inside a greenhouse. Tell me again why anybody would come."

"The diners sit in shaded areas, situated all around a central greenhouse where a lot of the food would be raised."

"Farm to table inside a glass building?"

"Not all the food. Just the interesting food. The spices. A few tropical fruits like guavas or starfruit. Hydroponic lettuces."

"Explain."

"You grow lettuces in little holes in styrofoam boards floating on water. The roots are down in aerated water. The styrofoam boards move downstream toward the harvest area. The mature ones get harvested, the board removed and put back at the beginning of the line for new lettuces. Once you plant the lettuces, it's no work at all. You can tell the customer, look, the greenhouse manager is going out right now to get your salad. Here it comes, right out of the water."

"Lettuces need more than water to grow."

"That's the brilliant part," said the president. "The water comes from big fish tanks."

"So, the lettuces get their fertilizer from fish poop."

"And guess what kind of fish are on the menu. The same kind that the customers see swimming around in the fish tanks."

"How can you be sure the fish will go along with this idea? Fish die in aquariums all the time."

"You use tilapia," said the president. "Tilapia are adapted to being crowded like that. The technology's all worked out. With trout, perch, or crappie, it wouldn't work."

"And you could have educational brochures at the tables," said a local teacher. When greeted by silence, she explained, "all about rainforests and agriculture and such like. Coloring books for the kids. Biographies of rainforest and desert ecologists studying monkeys and orchids."

"How about monkey and parrot robots?" asked a retired man who used to work at Disneyland.

"Been done already," said the president. "We don't want a knockoff of the Rainforest Cafe. Although, you must admit, the Rainforest Cafe has been pretty successful. And, of course, a tithe of the profits from this restaurant would go to the cathedral."

Everyone looked at Emilio. He just nodded.

"And a gift shop," said the president. "T-shirts, stuffed animals, etc."

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"Rattlesnake jerky," said someone else.

"Books," said Emilio.

"I suppose you mean Bibles," said the president.

"Well, there's this new study Bible that has just been published," said Emilio. "It's called the Green Study Bible. It has all the ecological passages printed in green."

"Ecological passages? Such as? Besides the Garden of Eden, of course."

"Oh, there are some passages about God turning wastelands into forests and gardens. And about Noah saving all the animals on the Ark. And about the Sabbath of the Fields. That's where the farmers had to let their land lie fallow every seventh year, so that the soil could build back up." Emilio looked around at the blank faces.

"And about the lilies of the field," said Misty. "That would go good on a T-shirt," she added.

"There's even part of the Mosaic law that forbids permanent land ownership," said Emilio. "Every fifty years, the land reverts to its original owner. To them, land was not something you could permanently own. That's what the Native American tribes thought also. Now that is *really* green."

"That sounds bad for business," someone said.

"Not really," said the president. "Nobody would actually read this green Bible any more than they read the regular one."

*

The Glass Cathedral Restaurant had not opened yet by the time Misty started her speaking tour. She and Emilio had already hired a head chef, however. Luciano Abbado ran the famous Jesus Pizzeria in Tulsa. His specialty was a Passion Pizza that had lamb (representing Christ), tomato sauce (representing the blood of Christ), figs (like the fig tree Jesus had condemned), with the spices that Jesus mentioned in Matthew chapter 23: mint, dill, and cumin. The crust used the bread recipe found in Ezekiel chapter 4 verse 9.

Usually Misty spoke to church groups, first locally then in more distant states. But once she was the keynote speaker for the annual meeting of the Oklahoma Synod of the Lutheran Church. They even got Abbado to cater for them.

Misty had no intention of trying to convince anyone of the reliability of the evidence. And she told them so. She said that the scientific method required replication: to do the experiment over and over to see if you keep getting the same results. By definition, a miracle was a singularity, a unique event. You can't tell

God, *Do that again so I can measure it this time*. This never failed to get some laughs.

Instead, she told them her story about how she started as a missionary in Ecuador, how her mission partner and fiancé was killed, how she almost lost her faith, then what happened one otherwise ordinary day out in the desert.

She and Emilio got blasted by a withering article in *Skeptical Inquirer* magazine, which made it sound absolutely certain that they were using a natural phenomenon—sundogs, of course—to get donations from gullible people. The article made them and everyone associated with them sound crazy. It didn't help when a little group of Latter-Day Flagellants walked through the desert, the last mile of it on their knees, from Needles on the Colorado River to the nearly-completed cathedral, hitting themselves with whips and confessing their sins to Jesus. The magazine did a big story about this, of course. Emilio wrote a letter to the *Skeptical Inquirer* editor saying that he had no idea who these Flagellants were and he could not control what people did in response to what everyone now called The Appearance. The editor printed Emilio's letter in the next issue.

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Chapter 3

Emilio and Misty planned the big inaugural event for the Cathedral for a winter Saturday morning, seven years almost to the day after The Appearance. Two weeks previously, they had walked around inside and saw that every little detail was ready. Enough seating in the main arena for twenty-five hundred people, and seating in surrounding balconies for another fifty-five hundred. They could hear the motors adjusting the roof panels to keep the lighting just right. The roof was almost invisible, except for the light-control panels, thus allowing a view of God's beautiful creation. Hundreds of tropical trees formed a torus just inside of the dome, with labels and nature trails. There had been a few small rains as the dome was being built, and tiny tree seedlings of species normally found in desert arroyos had begun to grow there, mostly desert-willows and ironwoods. A local botanist, on contract, also planted some California fan palms, the only species of palm actually native to California. The restaurant had already become one of the most popular in San Bernardino County, and famous throughout southern California. The restaurant greenhouse already had herbs growing in it. The gift shop was open, and Misty gave guided tours of the Cathedral. The Villanuevas made sure they had plenty of stock for the gift shop, and plenty of food on order. They expected thousands of people for the grand opening, which the restaurant could not accommodate, but there was a metal building off to the side where food would be provided. The vendors were all on contract. Now all Emilio and Misty could do was wait.

*

The Board of the Appearance Proclamation Ministries met in the arena the Saturday before the grand opening. All of them had committed their lives, fortunes, and sacred honor to the Cathedral, just as the Founding Fathers had to a young United States. But when they saw how big the Cathedral was, and how small they were in relation to it, they were breathless with excitement.

Then, just as Emilio rose to the podium to welcome them, the worst possible thing that they could think of happened: an earthquake. They could see it coming. The mountains and alluvial plains rose and fell in a gigantic wave moving toward them. When it reached the Cathedral, they all believed—even Emilio—that the giant building would collapse. It was built for earthquakes, but there are limits to what a building this size can handle. Emilio stood still, awaiting death. But the dome just lurched and shook, like a giant prehistoric animal shifting in its sleep. There were a few creaking noises. Then the quake was past.

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The meeting finished quickly, as there were no questions from the Board. They had all witnessed God testing the structure, and had all seen it withstand the test.

*

Dan came up from San Diego a day early, hoping he could talk with Misty. By now the office was a large building, though still frugal in its decoration. A large clerical staff answered phones and submitted information to a central data base through personal computers, quite unlike the terminals Misty used back at UCSB. The last time Dan had visited, the staff consisted only of three people, two of whom were Emilio and Misty. This time, Dan would never have found Misty's office unless someone took him to it. He found Misty sitting at a computer. Her office no longer consisted of a collapsible table and lawn chairs. Dan guessed, however, that the Villanueva house was the same metal-roofed building that he had seen before.

"Come on in, Dan," invited Misty, with a cut-through-the-red-tape smile. "Good thing you came today. There is no way I would have time to talk with you tomorrow morning. We expect thousands of people from throughout our market service area. We requested pre-registration, but we will turn no one away."

"Market service area," Dan repeated. "You make this sound like a business."

"We have to use sound business-based managerial practices, for efficiency. Disorder would cause us to waste our resources, especially time, which would reduce our ability to reach out and touch souls." She smiled, the way she always did when she said this on her speaking tours, and most recently at the Board meeting.

Dan became severe. "Misty, level with me. What's going on here?"

"What do you mean?"

"This Appearance, whatever it was, happened to all of us in Susurrus! But look who's making a fortune off of it! Not I! I continue to publish articles critical of your interpretation of the events."

"I have read your articles," said Misty, not smiling. "You are welcome to your interpretation. Thank you for not calling us frauds."

"You do not see *me* profiting by my message. Now, tell me, who is more likely to have ulterior motives for their public proclamations?"

"We are not profiting from the gifts sent by our friends." Misty furrowed her brow. "The money goes to..."

"Forgive me if I, and my readers, fail to make a clear fiduciary distinction between you and Appearance Proclamation Ministries."

"You may complain about our financial management to the extent that you have contributed to our funds." Misty's coldness was disjunct from the brilliant natural light and warmth of her office. "We publish all our financial transactions. You can read them."

"I have. I have also read all those books and pamphlets you and Emilio write," continued Dan. "Do you really think they help anybody? Do they help lift anybody out of a life of poverty, or get anyone off of drugs?"

"They might..."

"They're just full of Emilio's little metaphors. But making metaphors isn't wisdom. It's just playing with words." Dan picked up one of Emilio's books from the shelf on Misty's office wall. He paged through and found a paragraph at random. "Take this one. He says the Holy Spirit is like water in the desert. But later on, if I recall, he says that water in the desert is like the Spirit. A equals B, and B equals A. This is not wisdom. It is tautology."

"We have opened people's eyes to see God in the world around them," Misty said.

"People send you money for this?" Dan looked over his shoulder as he slid the book back into its place.

"Dan, I'm busy. Is this what you came here to tell me?"

"No." He turned and stared seriously at her. "I came to tell you that you're still my A-list."

"I beg your pardon!" Misty whispered hoarsely. "If that is what you came to tell me, then you can leave right now."

"I only mean that...well, let me explain. Back at UCSB, you wrote articles that were so alive with human feeling. You were really down to earth, in touch, and all those other things us journalists say. Now it's like you are, well, inside a crystal. Out of touch. Throwing out reflections of light, rather than reaching out to touch people. I remember not too long back when you wrote a series of articles for local papers about the sufferings of the poor Hispanic migrants—whom you actually knew by name—down in Indio. Now you coruscate theology. But deep down, inside that coat of iridescent mail, you still have a good, rich, human heart, and I still love that heart."

Misty stared at Dan for a few seconds, then she shook her head. "I can't do everything. I'm on the top, proclaiming. Other people have to do the personal, one-on-one, rubber-meets-the-road things you describe." She had not forgotten her journalese. "Wish I could do everything, but I'm not God. Still, I have to thank you, Dan..." She touched his hand. "...for being able to understand me. You're right, in some ways, it's just that I can't do anything about it."

"And even though I am a hell-bound sinner..."

"Dan!"

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"Well, that's what you think I am, don't you?"

"God isn't finished with you yet."

"I knew you would say that. But there is only one conclusion I could reach that would satisfy you. I seem to recall that was the problem you had with Emilio that morning, right before The Appearance."

"The Appearance changed everything for me."

"Not for me, Misty."

"Is that what you came to talk to me about?"

Dan looked down at his feet. "That was one thing. But I have more practical matters to discuss with you. It may be too late to do anything about them, but I wouldn't want you to be taken by surprise tomorrow morning."

"Go on," prompted Misty, who checked the clock.

"You realize a storm is coming," said Dan, looking back up.

"Of course. But the Cathedral has already withstood a major earthquake. Not a single crack."

"Have you ever heard about interacting factors?"

"Yes, I've heard about them. Your point being?"

"The Cathedral might withstand an earthquake by itself, or a storm by itself, but what if they happen at the same time? The storm might enhance the effect of the quake, or the quake of the storm. The effect would be greater than the sum of its individual parts."

"Dan, that's not likely. Are you just trying to make me worry? I'm too busy to worry."

"There's more," said Dan. "The centerpiece of your celebration is a big Band-o-Rama, right?"

"Fifty bands from throughout Southern California are invited. Only a couple have canceled due to worries about the storm. And twenty-five choirs."

Dan did quick mental calculations. "That would be somewhere around one to five thousand musicians, all playing or singing at once inside the Cathedral. And you have that gigantic pipe organ, too."

"Yes. It will be the most amazing experience anyone will have ever had. They will all play the Hallelujah Chorus at the same time. Praise God."

"It will certainly be loud," said Dan. "The panes will reflect a great deal of the sound back down. I won't miss it, that's for sure," said Dan. "And you plan to have a loudest tuba competition."

"Then all the tubas play at the same time. A tuba transcription of Leroy Anderson's *Bugler's Holiday*. It will be awesome, Dan."

"It will be full of awe, yes. This brings me to my first point. Do you know anything about resonant frequencies?"

"I have heard of them."

"Every building has a resonant frequency. If all of those bands happen to play the note with that frequency, it might make the whole building quake and totter. Had you thought of that?"

Misty was visibly shaken. But not for long. She started plunging through paperwork on her desk and found the architect's report. She looked at the index, then turned to a page near the middle.

"Primo—that's Primo Respighi, our architect—wrote about this. The resonant frequency of our building, he says, is 55 Hertz, that is, vibrations per second. It's been a long time since I've been in band, back in high school, but I recall that middle C is 256 Hertz. That would mean..." She grabbed her calculator and pressed in some numbers. "Fifty-five Hertz would be lower than the C below the bass clef."

"Tubas can play a lot lower than that. And loudly. And the pedal notes of that organ. If they play the right note, the whole structure could start shivering."

Misty thought quickly. "Another thing I remember from band, Dan. Even though bands always tune up before playing, it is extremely unlikely that they will all be perfectly in tune. Especially on the lower notes, there is a lot of variability. That would sort of drown out the resonant frequency effect, right? You feel notes that low more than you hear them."

"The building will perhaps feel it. That's precisely the problem."

"It can't be as bad as that earthquake, Dan. Maybe God sent the earthquake to reassure us to not worry about this problem—one that only smart people like you and Primo thought of."

"The earthquake, in order to function as a sign of God's approval for you and Emilio, was worth the thousands of dollars of damage it did out in Indio?"

"Some other time, Dan."

"Besides," continued Dan. "Resonant frequencies that damage buildings and bridges usually come from the wind blowing. The wind creates notes, below our range of hearing, as the air molecules collide with eaves, cantilevers, and such like. Or the plates that open and close for temperature regulation?"

"I very much doubt that the wind will blow at a uniform velocity that just happens to create a 55-Hertz vibration."

"And the joists that hold up the clear panes," said Dan. "They might have a considerably higher resonant frequency. If they start to shake, you may be in trouble." Misty just looked at Dan, who continued. "I just wanted to warn you, Misty. I hope I am wrong. Now, my second point."

"Just how many points do you have?"

"This is the last one," said Dan. "All of these bands will play at the same time, perfectly synchronized."

"Of course. That's why we will have the president of CBDA—the California Band Directors Association—to conduct the Chorus."

"He will be at the podium, and the bands down in the arena."

"Uh, no, actually. The bands will be out in the balconies."

"You might want to consider moving them into the arena."

"Why? We've already sold tickets for all the arena seats."

"The musicians will see the conductor at the speed of light," said Dan. "But they will hear each other at the speed of sound, which is considerably slower. And, so will the audience. The sound will all slosh together. I do not think this is the effect you wished to create."

Misty froze when she heard this.

At this moment, Emilio walked in, greeting Dan with a Long-Time-No-See cliché. "You were just talking with Misty about the Band-o-Rama at tomorrow's Cathedral initiation?"

Dan saw Misty gulp. Misty thought that *initiation* sounded like the kind of hazing that frats do to new members. That might be what happens to the Cathedral, even if it is not hazardous.

"Yes," said Dan.

"We planned everything in advance," said Emilio. "We had to choose the band arrangement of Hallelujah that we wanted to use. Different arrangements come in different keys. No band transcription in the original D major is available, but there is one in D flat major. There are a lot of band instruments that can easily play D flat major. But still, that's a weird key. We found one in E flat major. We don't want a repeat of what happened in during the Crimean War. In 1847, a bunch of British military bands came together at a place called Scutari to play *God Save the Queen.* But each one played it in a different key. The Queen, as they say, was not amused. Well, that won't happen to us."

"Emilio," said Misty. "We have to talk. Now."

"I trust you that this is urgent, Misty. Meet me in my office straightaway."

When Emilio left, Misty said, "After all this is over, Dan, maybe we should meet out in Death Valley again. I shall be a lot wiser by that time."

"I can think of nothing I would like better," said Dan.

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Chapter 4

"I can't believe it!" exclaimed Emilio, running into Misty's office on the morning scheduled for the Band-o-Rama and Mass Chorus. Buses were already lining up in the vast parking lot. Misty was too tired to share his enthusiasm, even before she knew the cause of it. "You won't believe what's happening," Emilio practically jumped up and down. "Look outside!"

Misty walked out into the Cathedral arena. She saw a faint glow to one side of the sun. A sundog. "You invited God and He came," Misty said, not meaning to be sarcastic.

Emilio would not have recognized sarcasm even if it had been intended. "Not quite. I think it's just a sundog this time. Seven years—the heavenly number—almost to the day of the actual Appearance! Could this possibly be due to chance? God must have planned this special moment."

Misty had remained unconvinced when, in conversations long before the previous day, Dan told her that chance could lead to evolutionary complexity in small steps. But Emilio's argument sounded even worse.

By 9:30 the sound was already deafening as rowdy students tramped up hundreds of steps. Some of the less vigorous students, and those with the larger instruments such as tubas and euphoniums, rose in elevators. The arena was already packed. Television crews prepared.

Dan saw Misty and stopped her. She had only time to flash a fake smile at him and say, "Glad you could make it." Dan would never forget that smile, perhaps the only fake smile Misty had ever given him. Dan took his seat in the arena.

At precisely 10:00, Misty arose to the podium and the crowds became silent. She was, for the first time in years, fearful of speaking to a crowd, especially since it was Emilio's message she was reading. Emilio, the real force and glory, wanted to appear to be the servant behind the scenes. Her face fell as the sunlight disappeared. A thick bank of clouds approached. Everyone heard the rushing wind. She read Emilio's speech, in which he had at the last minute penciled in, "The wind may blow, but the sound we produce in praise of our God will drown out its fury."

But hardly anyone listened to her. They were all looking up at the sky through the dome. *It's the light in the sky,* exclaimed many people in different ways. The light began to take on a rainbow of colors. Emilio smiled, but just as he had done seven years ago, he wondered where the other sundog was.

A woman stood up from the arena crowd. "God is appearing in the sky again!" she yelled. "He is calling us to repent of our sins and give our lives to Je-

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zuz!" She ran up toward the podium but remained at ground level. The loud wind could not drown her piercing voice. "Oh, Je-zuz, I have wasted my life. But I am not dead yet! I call upon your promises of forgiveness. And I call upon everyone here who feels the same way I do to come down to the front."

Dan recognized Wanda.

"Who is that woman?" Emilio asked Misty after they found each other.

"I have no idea," said Misty.

"Perhaps she is someone God has raised up for this moment." And, in fact, several dozen people streamed into the aisle toward the front. Wanda knelt, and they all did the same. Then Wanda stood and proclaimed, "That's it! Jesus has forgiven us! What a burden off of our souls!"

Emilio went to the podium, smiling as always. "May I have your attention, everybody. We had not planned an altar call this morning. But when the Spirit of God moves, it moves! We want to thank the woman, whom we do not know, who led the irrepressible emotion of salvation. But we need to get on with the event that so many young people have come, some from great distances, to participate in. I invite our honored guest director, the president of the California Band Directors Association, Dr. Bob Burrud, to begin our musical experience."

Burrud, the bandmaster from Cal Poly in SLO-town (San Luis Obispo), arose to the podium. "Concert B flat," he announced to the bands. They all played the tuning-note, which was the fundamental tone of most of the brass instruments. The sound was loud and clear like a perfect unity of spirit that filled every cubic meter of the structure. "Tuning scale, F major," the director announced. He signaled each note of the scale by hugging the air with a big embrace. The tubas played the F below the bass clef. The notes were slow enough that nobody yet noticed the lag time between light and sound. The director looked around at all the bands, on two levels of balcony, on three sides. They were in uniforms of every color. The choirs wore robes of every color. It really did look like the gathering of the one hundred forty-four thousand saints, twelve thousand from each differently-hued tribe, in the heavenly rainbow described in the book of Revelation. They played F, G, and A.

Then they hit B flat. The tuba note was not exactly 55 Hertz, but close enough to it that this note sounded ten times louder than the preceding ones. Thousands of panes began to rattle. The musicians stopped, amidst yelps of surprise and fear. Misty had told Emilio, and Emilio the director, about the resonant frequency problem.

The director raised his arms and the audience raised their hearts in anticipation of the Hallelujah Chorus.

The sounds that now came, from a thousand wind instruments and voices, were certainly loud. No one in the audience had heard anything like it. A powerful

rush came from every direction except the front and swept everyone into the kind of whirlwind Job must have heard when God spoke to him in the Old Testament book.

The director's worst fears were confirmed. Just as Misty had told him, the bands could see his directions at the speed of light, but their music reached the ears of the audience, and the director, at the speed of sound. One fortunate person, an old lady from Hemet, who sat at the geometrical focus in the center of the arena, heard the music in perfect coordination; but to everyone else, including the director, some of the band sounds arrived before others. The director whipped his arms not faster but harder, creating more and more sonic spindrift. He resolved to keep going, even though overtones accumulated in the Cathedral as if in a huge bell tower in which bells rapidly rung in succession kept ringing.

Finally, in the Grand Pause before the final chords, when all the bands and choirs stopped, the sound did not. It was the deep bass B flat and its overtones. But it was also the sound of heavy rain, a heavenly drum-roll. Many of the people in the audience, including Emilio, had heard this sound before, but never so loud. The director never finished the piece, because everyone sat or stood in awe at the majestic peal of the rain on the windows, changing slightly in tempo and intensity as the wind blew.

It was a custodian, standing far to one side, who first noticed the muddy water rushing against the ground-floor windows. He ran to Emilio. All eyes were upon him. Emilio approached the podium, trying to be calm.

"Friends, I must announce that the weather is rather severe," said Emilio. "No cause for alarm, but perhaps there are safer places to be than in this chamber. There is plenty of room in the conference areas and hallways, which have only one story and are on higher ground. When everyone has evacuated..." This was the magic word that made the murmurs begin. "...we can close off the doors to the Cathedral. Do not go outside. Repeat, do not go outside. The side buildings will protect you from the waters of the flash flood. Marching bands are noted for their discipline and orderliness. Please proceed in an orderly fashion..."

Everyone stood, and a babble of voices drowned out anything more Emilio might have said. The directors of each band prevented their students from piling into one another as they filed out of their rows of seats, but once the students reached the stairs they ran, slipping, dropping instruments and music. Emilio stood and visibly prayed at the podium. Reaching the bottom of the stairs, the students had no place to go, because two thousand five hundred people from the audience pressed against one another, forming globs that could not fit through the aisles and doors.

Then they all heard the loudest whoosh of sound yet. They looked up at the dome, the strong dome that nothing could destroy. And, in fact, nothing

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destroyed it. Instead, the wind tore it from its moorings and it swam away like a gigantic jellyfish trailing its rafters like tentacles. It shed some of its panes as it rose into the sky. It was the kind of sound Samson would have heard if the temple of the Philistines in Gaza had been made of glass when he pulled it down, according to the Bible story.

Emilio sloshed slowly down the aisle like a brave soldier ignoring shrapnel. One of the falling panes, a very small one, had shattered on his head and caused blood to pour out. He looked like Christ walking on the Via Dolorosa.

Misty stood at the door, directing traffic, helping to disentangle people, holding back impatient youth from trampling the elderly. Men pretended to be brave but ran when they got the chance. The audience had scarcely evacuated, and the bands only begun, when muddy water poured over the floor. It was not deep enough to drown anyone, but many students slipped, and all band uniforms and choir robes were ruined by the slurry of light-colored calcareous desert clay.

The Sousaphone player did not even notice when his large brass instrument, bigger than a coffin, knocked Misty down into the moving mud. She was trampled by a hundred people who did not even see her.

*

Several hundred people crammed into a Glass Cathedral conference room meant for seventy-five, but they stood on dry ground. Silence spread through the crowd as Emilio entered, walking slowly and calmly, with a pious expression on his face.

“Water is beautiful,” Emilio began. “We praise God for such a wondrous and wonderful substance. It is powerful, and when we have too much of it, or too little of it, we recognize its power. But we seldom acknowledge the power of God that flows through us and upon which our souls depend as surely as our bodies depend upon water. Jesus is the Living Water, and when His power rushes through us it can sometimes devastate us, as our Cathedral has now been devastated. Surely, He has humbled us today. All of us muddy, shivering people will remember this day for the rest of our lives, when we were humbled by God. *I* needed to be humbled. But I am now seeking my truly humble partner, my gentle wife Misty. Is she in this room?” He got no response, and turned to leave.

Emilio entered another conference room, similarly packed. Some of the people needed and found first aid kits for minor lacerations. Dozens of people from the hallways clustered at the door after Emilio entered. All listened to him. “Did you smell it when you entered the cathedral this morning? Before the rain came, there was the fresh scent of moist earth. We must live so as to be an aroma

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of blessing to other people. Sometimes our religion is like a flood of water. By organizing this big religious event and even by building this big Cathedral, I created a flood. I admit I was wrong. This whole idea of the Cathedral and the mass religious services was just too much. When we pour out our water like this, we only cause destructive flash floods that scour away what little soil and growth there is around us. Flash floods—that's one of the reasons that the desert is a desert, because when it does get rain, the rain washes away, not soaking into the soil. We must share the living water of our souls with the world like a slow, gentle rain or mist, which has time to soak in and create blessings. That is precisely the kind of love and blessing that has been coming from my beloved wife Misty. Is she in this room?" Again, there was silence. Emilio floated silently out of the room.

This time Emilio entered the cafeteria, built for two hundred fifty, and in which over twice that many people stood. Emilio plowed through the people slowly like the bow of a ship, accompanied by two or three jolly porpoises from his congregation who cleared the way before him. There was a dais here, for after-dinner speakers. The flow of blood had streaked widely across his face, making him handsomely ugly, like the Christ lamb whose face, the prophet Isaiah had said, we could scarcely recognize as human. Emilio spoke into the silence created by his arrival. "Seven years ago, God appeared here. But He appeared again today, in a different form. Once in glory, now in terror. Some of us were privileged to see a special appearance of Him seven years ago. However, He has appeared to every one of you, even those of you who do not recognize Him. As Elijah found out when he sulked in the desert, there was an earthquake, but God was not in the earthquake; there was a great wind, but God was not in the wind; there was a fire, but God was not in the fire. God appeared to Elijah in the still small voice, on a day when nothing appeared to be happening. Mark this day on your calendars, but give God praise for the other, uneventful days in which He appears to you all day long.

"I focused so much on planning for today, in which I was going to show off," Emilio continued. "I was going to show God how great of a display I could put on for Him. I did not take time to notice the quiet appearance of God in the daily gentleness and love of my partner Misty. I'm looking for her. Has anyone seen her?" Again, he was greeted by silence. The ocean of humanity closed behind him, leaving a wake of amazement, as he left the room

Emilio tried one last room, the nursery. People stood and sat, trying at first not to get mud all over the toys but finally giving up and positioning themselves wherever they could. Some even sat on hobby horses. Here, the people were very noisy. Some of them heard him say, "Be prepared for the Day of the Lord. You never know when *your* Day of Judgment will come. What will you do when *your*

Cathedral collapses? I wasn't ready. Will you be?" He turned and made a circuit of the room, inquiring for Misty. Having determined that she was not there, he left.

*

Emilio walked faster and faster, becoming less like a lamb led silently to slaughter and more like a bull in a bullfight. Faces, none of them Misty's, looked up at him as he stumbled through hallways. Rounding a corner, he came face to face with Dan.

"Hail, brother," Dan was astonished to hear Emilio say.

"God, you're bleeding like hell," said Dan.

"I deserve it, brother," mumbled Emilio.

"I'm looking for Misty," said Dan.

"I, too, of course. She's not in the two conference rooms, the dining hall, or the nursery," said Emilio.

"I checked all around the other side of the building," said Dan.

A weak voice came from a woman sitting on the floor. "The last I saw her, she was directing traffic at the hallway entrance."

Dan and Emilio shot in that direction.

"Brother?" asked Dan. "You called me Brother!"

"I have something to admit to you," Emilio said as they ran gingerly over the mud slickened by many shoes. "You may not have your theology all figured out, but you are a good man, and that's what matters."

"You mean, you don't think I'm going to hell?"

"Well, it's not my decision, but I'll just say this. The first epistle of John gives as concise of a statement as you will find anywhere in the Bible about who is going up, and who is going down. *Love one another, for love is of God,* he says. *He who loves is born of God and knows God.* That's up." Emilio pointed up. "*He who does not love does not know God*. That's down." He stopped, panting, and pointed down. "John concludes, *for God is love*. Dan," Emilio stopped Dan and looked him fully in the face. "You claim to not know God, but you have love in your heart, and the Bible says that means you know God. Who am I to claim otherwise? Now, speaking of love, where is that woman who has been such a good lover to me?" They began running again. Blood dripped in a trail behind Emilio.

"If God is love," wheezed Dan, "I'll go along with Him. I don't believe in a God who throws hailstones at Philistines and damns all the tribespeople who were unfortunate enough to live before the missionaries arrived. But let's get

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together, you and me and Misty and Margaret and Wanda, and meditate awhile about this God of love. Not that I see much evidence of Him around here..."

Emilio said, "As President Kennedy said during his inauguration, *Here on earth, God's work must truly be our own*. You want to see God's love? Then make some."

It was right then that they saw Misty, bedraggled in the mud, who had slowly pushed herself up into a painful sitting position next to the door.

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Chapter 5

Years later, Misty and Emilio ran an overnight homeless shelter in downtown Los Angeles. Their entire staff was Wanda the receptionist. Wanda gasped with excitement as she saw Dan enter the office. A woman was with him.

"Dan!" said Wanda, who got up to embrace him. She now seemed as frail and wrinkled like a woman much older than she was. "I wondered where you were." She cried as she clung to Dan.

"I wondered about you, too," said Dan. "Imagine how surprised I was when I got your phone call."

"No more surprised than I was when Emilio told me to call you. Thank you for coming."

"Wanda, meet my wife Margaret," said Dan. The two women embraced. "Margaret and I go back a long way. I'll just say that the Spirit, or whatever It is, has a way of bringing people back together."

"I can't wait to hear all about it. But Emilio wanted to see you the moment you arrived," said Wanda.

When Dan and Margaret entered Emilio's tiny office, he rushed to greet them. Misty sat motionless in a wheelchair. "Dan, it is so good to see you," he said. "I know it was a long trip for you and... You must be Mrs. Hardy? I know that Misty is particularly happy to see you."

Dan introduced Margaret to Emilio. Margaret grasped Emilio's hands and told him, in a few quiet sentences, how much Dan admired him. Dan used this opportunity to rush to Misty and whisper to her, "Remember when we were out in the desert and I said that you would still be beautiful if your face was all scarred up? Well, I was right."

Dan looked into Misty's face. Her bangs only partially hid the scars on her face. Her face appeared to be paralyzed, and gave no sign of recognition or understanding. She stared straight ahead.

"Will you go with us to check on some of our guests? I have to inspect the room for the women and children," said Emilio.

"Yes, of course," said Dan.

Emilio pushed Misty's wheelchair down the aisles between the cots. Some of the younger children looked in terror at Misty's dead and unbalanced gaze. Emilio smiled on Misty's behalf.

When they were back in his office, Emilio said, "Misty is so happy that you have come to see us. Look! She's smiling."

THE END

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Author's notes on GLASS CATHEDRAL

Part one

The shrubs in the Mojave Desert really are regularly spaced, due to the roots competing for water. The town that destroyed itself by suspecting neighbors: Rod Serling, The Monsters Are Due on Maple Street. I heard on a news report several years ago that there was actually someone who literally plucked out an eye in literal obedience to Jesus' command, reportedly in Kingfisher, Oklahoma, but I cannot find any online confirmation of this. The words of "We Saw Thee Not" are from Anne R. Richter, 1834.

Part two

I watched a scrub jay destroy a robin's nest from my bedroom window. Some congregations of the Church of Christ argued about whether heaven had "streets of gold" or a "street of gold." Carl Zimmer wrote a book called *Parasite Rex* (New York: Free Press, 2000). There really are Yokuts paintings, granite rocks, and ponds near Lindsay, on land owned during my childhood by the Vollmer family. Tules and tulares are actually two different species, but, though I am a botanist, I did not want to get into these details.

Part three

The UCSB communist newspaper really did feature a lot of articles about the workers' strike at Browning Ferris Industries about 1978. At least in 1989, all the scenes in Ecuador, including old cars, were real. One performance of Nanita Nana (arranged by Norman Luboff) is https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tuuX7SG8JwA. Two frat boys, or demons, came up behind me as I watched the sunset at UCSB in 1979. I said I was watching the power of God. They left.

Part five

The story about the bands at Scutari in the Crimea is true, as described in one of Richard Franko Goldman's books about writing band music.

About the author

Stan Rice is the internationally celebrated author of six books of popular science. He got his Ph.D. in plant ecology at the University of Illinois in 1987, and held several academic positions until he retired from Southeastern Oklahoma State University as Professor Emeritus of Biological Science. His writings are acclaimed for their insight and humor, especially the Creationist Funhouse series in the magazine Skeptical Inquirer. His science and religion blogs and his YouTube channel (StanEvolve, in which he is Charles Darwin) have collectively had a million and a half views. You can connect to his publications, including novels and stories, at his author website https://stanleyrice.org/.



No part of this book has been produced by or with the assistance of Artificial Intelligence. Everything is based on the author's direct knowledge, insights, and experiences.