

YOUNG ADULT & ADULT

SUSPENSE

Another Thriller from

GARRISON FLINT

Pursued from all sides
and with no memory of his past,
escape seems impossible for the main
character in this new thriller from Garrison Flint

red grass at twilight



Another Family Friendly Book from
The Family of Man Press

Red Grass at Twilight

**A suspense mystery
by**

Garrison Flint

Family Of Man Press

© 2014, 2017

The reader is reminded that this story is set well before the common use of cellphones or facial recognition programs.

CHAPTER ONE

Day One

I could not be certain if it had been the bright Spring sun warming my receding hairline or the feelings of thoroughgoing desperation and stark terror that first intruded into my consciousness. Regardless, the pleasantness of the morning there on that unfamiliar, time worn sidewalk was immediately overshadowed by an all-consuming apprehension and distrust of those about me.

My eyes darted about the strange world that met me, searching for some recognizable face or landmark - anything. Where was I? How had I gotten there? It was as if my life had just materialized from a dark cloud of nothingness.

I was walking into the sun - East I presumed - carrying a time-scarred, brown suitcase in one hand and clinging to the strap of a weighty, army green, shouldered duffel bag with the other. I was downtown - somewhere. Many of the old buildings were vacant. I passed a cleaners, a small cafe, a pool hall, a copy service, a watch and clock repair shop.

Presently, I came upon a large parking lot behind a bank. There were small oases of trees and benches positioned around its periphery offering solace from the hot, black, tar covered expanse which dutifully cared for its colorful brood of resting cars. It was the first friendly perception I had experienced. Finding a shady spot, I dropped my burdens and sat back on a bench. I closed my eyes and shook my

head hoping that one simple act would clear the cobwebs and restore some sense of sanity to my situation.

I held that position for some time. My mind remained a black abyss of emptiness. When, at last, I opened my eyes, I noticed two men standing together on the sidewalk not ten feet away. They were engaged in a cheerful exchange of some kind. Presently, one took out his billfold and presented the other with what I assumed was his business card. They shook hands and each went on his way.

Billfold, I thought. I felt for mine. The mere realization that I had one instantly brought some relief to the overwhelming sense of foreboding that had settled into the pit of my stomach. It was then I realized how fast and hard my heart was pounding. I put my hand to my chest and attempted several slow, deep breaths but that only left me gasping. Enough of that! On with the inspection.

I glanced around, moving only my eyes as if expecting something sinister to appear and threaten me should it see me move. That not happening, I began examining the billfold. It was well worn, hand tooled, black leather - perhaps a decade old. The empty picture pockets were tattered and yellowed with age. The considerable number of green bills it contained was at first of no interest to me as I was searching for something that might reveal who I was.

There was a shiny, tan stub from the Jefferson Bus Lines. It bore a purchase date of April first - a momentarily humorous thought. Further examination revealed one undeniable fact. Bus tickets were uncommonly complicated and not intended for the layman to decipher. Additional scrutiny led me to believe that it detailed a trip from Fayetteville, Arkansas to Joplin, Missouri. I wondered if this were Joplin. I thought Fayetteville was in North Carolina and had no recollection of one in Arkansas. Assuming this was Joplin, the seventeen-dollar fare convinced me that the Fayetteville involved in that transaction had to have been from Arkansas and not too many miles South.

Continued rummaging through the wallet, revealed no hint as to my identity. Exasperated, I ripped back the lining in search of a secret compartment but found none. I slammed

the wallet onto the green slats of the bench beside me as if blaming it for my current predicament.

With the return of reason a few moments later, I settled into counting the money. My suspicious nature moved me to go about it all quite privately, close in to my body, keeping the bills inside the wallet. I glanced up frequently taking time to make sure no one was looking on. It contained one thousand nine hundred and eighty-three dollars. A quick calculation suggested that was two thousand dollars, less the cost of the bus ticket. It seemed strange that one would begin a trip with exactly two thousand dollars. But then, what did I know about strange? What did I know about trips? What did I know about anything? I could remember absolutely nothing. My sense of emptiness was rapidly disintegrating into despondency.

What was my name? Surely, my mother had given me one. Surely, I had had a mother. I leaned my head back and closed my eyes once more, running down a mental list of men's first names beginning with Aaron and ending with Zorro. Ten minutes later, not a single name had rung a bell – not as being mine or even that of an acquaintance. There hadn't been so much as one facial image cross my mind during the entire search.

I sighed deeply - not that it helped but it seemed the thing to do. Still overflowing with apprehension, I looked up and down the street unable to remember having ever felt this terrified before. That brought a second fleeting smile to my face as I realized I couldn't remember ever having felt anyway before.

My gaze fell upon three words in a sign emblazoned in huge red letters across the back wall of the three-story bank building to my right. "Joplin's friendly bank." So, I was in Joplin. That much I had ascertained accurately. That single piece of knowledge leant some degree of security to my otherwise terrifying situation.

I was, however, already learning interesting things about myself. For one, even in the face of these terrible feelings and the incomprehensible situation, I seemed to see the humor in things. For another, the words I used when thinking were not run of the mill words but educated words.

How I knew that I had no idea but it seemed right. Also, I tended to go about things in methodical, carefully planned ways. Great! Not only was I a nerdy, paranoid amnesiac, I was also obsessive-compulsive! That induced another faint smile.

Noticing that the white knuckled grip on my wallet was beginning to hurt my fingers, I returned it to my left, rear pants pocket, taking pains to make certain the flap was properly buttoned. It was then I first took notice of what I was wearing - dark blue, somewhat baggy slacks and a light blue sport shirt tailored to be worn outside rather than tucked in. A glance at my feet revealed no big surprise - blue socks and black, lace-up shoes. A peek under my protruding shirt revealed either a nine-month pregnancy or a spare tire built for a Mack truck. The hair on my arms convinced me that I would not have been pregnant.

The time had come for some interim strategy. The passing attention to my stomach alerted me that I was hungry. I also realized I was quite tired. I gathered my luggage and pointed my weary bones back in the direction of the café, which I had passed earlier.

It was small, neat and clean, appearing to be a mom and pop kind of place. I had no sooner seated myself in a corner, far away from the front window and door, than a smiling waitress approached, handing me a breakfast menu with one hand and a steaming cup of coffee with the other. It was as if all Joplin residents were just expected to drink coffee in the morning.

"Cream?" she asked.

"No black is fine," I responded, returning her smile and wondering if, indeed, I took my coffee black.

I could see the cook through the pass through. He was a short, rotund man who I guessed to be in his early fifties. He was bald on top with a full beard hanging like moss from a cypress tree on his chubby face. I wondered if beards should not be covered in a kitchen but didn't linger on that thought as I began reading the menu. I caught my reflection in the side of the shiny, stainless steel napkin holder. Looking around to make sure no one was watching I picked it up and took a long look at myself. It would be merciful, I thought, if

the napkin holder were distorting the image that met me there. That prompted another smile but it soon turned to a look of consternation as I realized that the very plain, run of the mill, middle aged face peering back at me was, like everyone else, a total stranger.

It looked to be fifty or fifty-five and sported a five o'clock shadow, dulled in severity by the gray whiskers that matched the medium length, neatly combed, white hair. It was the first time I realized I was wearing glasses - large, dark gray plastic rimmed trifocals. I put down the dispenser and removed my glasses, looking around the room. "Thank God for spectacles," I whispered with a sigh, as I could not so much as see across the room nor begin to read the menu without them.

I was soon enjoying a huge stack of pancakes with sides of sausage and scrambled eggs (obviously, I wasn't a health nut). It was served on thick, heavy plates that would surely have withstood the force of an automobile crusher. The cook ambled out to ask how things were. I said, "Fine."

"You new, here?" he asked, wiping his wet hands on his colorfully stained white apron.

"Just passing through," came my unexpected reply.

"Well, thanks for stoppin' in. We're open from five a. m. to midnight seven days a week."

"That's good to know. I'm sure I'll be back. Thanks."

Did some part of my mind know that I was just passing through or was that merely a handy way of dealing with the question? If I were just passing through, to where was I passing? (I must be an English teacher!)

"By the way, Sir, I may need to stick around for a week or so. Do you know some place I might get a room by the week?" My general alertness and quick thinking impressed me.

"Myrtle. She has an old motel about eight blocks South on Fifth Street. She rents by the week. Ain't nothin' fancy, but she keeps a proper place. Tell her I sent you if you like. My name's Hank. Myrt and I, we go way back, ya know."

"Myrtle. A motel. Eight blocks South. Got it. Thanks again."

My interim strategy seemed to be taking shape. Breakfast finished, I paid my bill and walked in search of Myrtle's place. It was easily found and had been well described - not much of a place but neat and clean. The ancient, weather worn sign in front read: Rooms with kitchenette by the day or by the week.

I used my introduction from the cook - who's name I had failed to remember - and inquired about a room for a week or so. The sign in her window suggested that she had one available. When she saw I was interested, she put in her teeth and stepped outside where I was standing.

"Seventy-five a week and you forfeit it all if the cops show up at your door."

That sent a shudder throughout my body. What if the authorities were after me for some reason and that's why I was running. Was I running? It surely felt like it at that moment.

"I'll take it," I said, reaching for my wallet.

"I'll need to see picture ID if you're going to stay a week," she said, still never having looked directly at my face.

That stopped me in my tracks! I wondered what I should say. Should I make up an excuse as to why I had no ID or just leave and figure out another approach? I had no idea that ID would be a requirement just to rent a room. Evidently, my delayed response was not unfamiliar to her. Before I could devise something to say she began the second part of her well-practiced spiel.

"You can rent by the day without ID. That costs you fifteen a day. Same deal about the cops. You pay in advance."

With obvious relief in my tone I blurted out, "Let's do it by the day. I'm not really sure how long I'll need to be in town."

She bobbed her head from side to side as if to say, "Ya, sure!" As she turned and motioned me to follow her inside, she stole her first direct glance at my face.

"How many days Ya payin' for," she asked, rummaging through the papers on her tiny, wooden desk, apparently in search of a receipt book.

"Let's make it five. Is five okay?"

"That'll include today and take you through Tuesday. If you want to stay longer let me know by Monday evenin'. I'm in bed by eleven and don't never wake me after that. Who should I make the receipt out to?"

I had not prepared myself for this but the name Jim Johnson rolled off my lips as if it were totally natural.

The exchange of the seventy-five dollars for the receipt and key complete, she pointed down the line of doors.

"Number thirteen at the end."

I cringed at hearing '13'. First April Fools' day and now room number thirteen. Perhaps I was superstitious. That didn't feel right so I let it go.

"If you have a car, park right in front of the door. Don't back in. The Mayor don't allow it. Fumes in the air conditioners, you know."

I made my way down the broken sidewalk, serenaded most of the way by loud music and raucous laughter from several of the rooms I passed. Number thirteen was across a breezeway standing alone on the back corner of the lot. It should be both quiet and private. Perhaps 13, wasn't going to be so unlucky after all.

It was hot inside the meagerly furnished twelve by twelve room. There was a single bed in the far-left corner, a dresser beside it with a bottom drawer missing, a table and two unmatched kitchen chairs along the other side wall, and a painted felt picture of a bull and matador on the wall above the bed. There was a lime green, plastic, 1950s radio on the table. In the front corner, opposite the door to the bathroom, was a relatively new appearing three-foot high refrigerator with a two-burner electric hot plate perched on top. I assumed that was the kitchenette advertised on the sign. That called forth another smile. It helped to smile. I could feel the endorphins spreading across my brain. Endorphins! I was obviously an educated person.

I put the luggage on the floor beside the bed and began fiddling with the air conditioner. Presently, but for no single discernible reason, it roared to life. I wouldn't have to worry about too much silence. I sprawled out on the bed only to spring to my feet a moment later to lock the door. The terror that had momentarily diminished as I was settling in had

re-entered my being full-blown. I returned to the surprising comfort of the little bed.

My watch read one fifteen when I awoke, cold and shivering. The cooling unit was as effective as it was loud. I felt better, somehow. I had a home base and that seemed important. Best of all I remembered coming to the motel. I remembered everything that had transpired since I had discovered myself on the sidewalk. I was building a personal history, such as it was. The sense of foreboding was still present – my, was it ever present! There was an undefined anxiety that fed on itself each time I recognized its presence. I was afraid and sad - very, very sad.

Suddenly, I became aware of something that smelled quite foul. A quick search revealed that it was I. My armpits would have sent spoiled kraut searching for fresh air. I checked out the bathroom. A sink, a stool and a metal shower stall which sported a zillion coats of peeling, drab tan paint inside and out. I turned on the water and was pleasantly surprised to find it could be adjusted to a steady stream and pleasing temperature. As I stripped, I found a denim money belt around my waist next to my body. Inside it were two keys - no money, just one large, strangely shaped key and another smaller one. The keys held no meaning for me. I placed them on the dresser for future consideration.

The shower felt wonderful but it didn't wash away the terror or the deep sense of sadness that had crept into my life.

I discovered a long scar top to bottom down my abdomen. "Gallbladder," I said to myself as if I knew that to be correct. Later, looking myself over in the full length, though far too narrow mirror on the outside of the bathroom door, I saw a middle-aged man, whose bulging body was covered with gray hair. It was a body that was obviously in terrible physical shape and certainly thirty or more pounds overweight. There was a large mole interestingly perched in the area of my lower abdomen. Most disconcerting of all, none of it brought back a single memory.

"It's disgusting but it's all I have," I joked to myself out loud as I took one final look and finished toweling off.

I lifted the suitcase and duffel bag onto the bed and

began a systematic search of their contents. Mostly clothing, much like what I had been wearing when I had discovered myself on the street. In the very bottom of the suitcase, wrapped in newspaper with stiff cardboard for protection, were two pictures – 9 x 12 originals. "Pastels," I said to myself.

The first depicted the faces of two boys - young men, about fifteen. They were facing each other. My stomach knotted while my heart gladdened - a strange, elusive tangle of feelings. I knew those boys. I was sure of it. But who they were or where or when I had known them I could not recall. It had been sprayed with a protective coating to keep the colors from rubbing off.

The second picture was newly drawn and as yet uncoated. It was a landscape - rather abstract, surrealistic, bizarre even. It seemed to be set in a dark green forest at twilight with a brown building in the background and vermilion-red grass in front. My eyes teared at the sight and I found myself sobbing uncontrollably with absolutely no idea why. It became clear that my emotions knew something my brain just couldn't - or wouldn't - remember. I took that as a favorable and hope-filled sign. At least part of me understood something.

When the tears stopped, I re-wrapped the pictures and put them back. Earlier it had occurred to me that if I were on the run, it would be to my advantage to keep my belongings packed and ready to make a quick exit if that should become necessary.

I closed the suitcase and proceeded to dump the contents of the tightly packed duffel bag onto the bed. Again, mostly clothes and miscellaneous items - a robe, a towel and washcloth, an electric razor and assortment of toiletries. At the bottom were a set of carefully wrapped pastel sticks and several sketchpads. If that bag was mine, and I had no reason to think it wasn't - but then I had no reason to think anything at all - it might be that I was an artist. "Humm" I thought, again out loud. "An artistic English teacher." The thought was good for another smile but it was no match for the relentless apprehension that had now intruded into every corner of my body.

There was a loud knock at the door. My heart

stopped. I hurried into the robe and approached the door. Perhaps the masquerade was already over. What lay on the other side of that door? Should I answer it? Perhaps if I didn't, whoever was there would go away. The next, more prolonged knock prompted me to thoughtlessly set my fear and misgivings aside. I opened the door.

It was Myrtle. "Forgot to give you your toilet paper. You get one roll a week. Need any more than that and you buy your own or use the newspaper."

A broad, toothless smile broke across her tired, leathery, old face. I smiled back and thanked her as I closed and re-locked the door. Although I was relieved it had not been a dangerous or unpleasant encounter, there was also a sense of disappointment at not having learned anything new about myself. It had been that desire for information that had prompted the reckless, unthinking opening of the door. I would have to quell that tendency.

I selected clothes to wear and got dressed, re-packing the rest in the bag. I became alarmed when I realized there was no back way out of the room in case of an emergency. I wondered if having to make sure of such things was a part of my way of life - whatever that was. I examined the small window over the table and ascertained that if necessary I could exit the room that way. The window was prone to stick so I used the still damp bar of soap from the shower to lubricate it. How did I know to do that? Had I done it before or was I just a bright guy with quick, creative ideas? At any rate, it was soon sliding easily and I felt safer. I also felt a certain sense of accomplishment. I shut and locked the window, drawing the garish, green and orange floral drapes across it.

What next? It was time to eat again. Seeing the keys on the dresser, I wondered what locks they fit. I put them in my pocket and headed back toward the cafe. About half way there, while looking North up a cross street I spied the Bus Station. It drew me to it. I detoured the two blocks and went inside. The smell of diesel and the curious looking people who populated the large, austere interior seemed all too familiar. Regular bus riding must have been a part of my life.

Spotting the wall of lockers, I recognized that the larger key I had was the same shape as those protruding from the locks. Mine was numbered 19. I found the locker. Looking around as if expecting to be watched, I slid the key in and turned it, opening the door just a bit at first to eye the contents. Inside was a single tan envelope. Placing my hands well inside the locker where no one could see what I was doing I opened it. There were five computer disks inside. They were labeled "# ONE" through "# FIVE".

Had I put them there for safe keeping or were they waiting for me there when I arrived in town? The latter made the most sense since I had been carrying the key in the money belt, which had been worn under two layers of clothing. Why would I have not also carried the two thousand dollars in the belt rather than in my wallet? There were certainly more questions than answers. I slipped the disks back into the large manila envelope and removed it from the locker. Looking about again to see if I was being watched I began making my way toward the entrance.

I noticed a bald man whom I had seen earlier in the day outside the cafe. As I looked his way he turned and moved around a corner. I chalked it up to a coincidence. For some reason, I seemed to be more concerned about encountering the police. I continued on to the cafe.

As I ate - again at the table most hidden from the front windows - I began making notes on a napkin. I needed to find a computer on which I could read the disks. I needed to start a list of suspicious looking people who showed up too often. Should I go to the police and see if they could run a missing person trace and find out who I was? That might be helpful unless I was wanted for something terrible. My apprehension about even being seen by a policeman led me to decide that should wait. Perhaps I needed a disguise. For sure, I needed to find a way to support myself. How could I get a job without ID or a social security card? I couldn't. Next question: How could I get the necessary ID so I could get a job? I'd have to call the state ID granting office, whatever it was called in Missouri. If that didn't work, I'd have to find another way. The longer my list grew the more desperate I felt and the more hopeless it all seemed. Life should not be

that complicated.

Maybe I would just wake up in the morning and everything would come back to me. It seemed that I had read amnesia was sometimes caused from trauma to the head and after a short time, it cured itself.

As nonchalantly as one can be in a cafe full of people, I felt my head to see if there were bumps or tender spots. There were none. It was another disappointment. I did garner a set of strange glances from two older women a few tables away. I nodded politely and they turned without acknowledging either my presence or my gesture. I smiled again thinking that since they didn't appear to be either the gangster or federal agent types I wouldn't have to enter them on my list - a list of one, actually. Only the bald-headed man had secured a spot and I felt that was probably just temporary, my concern due more to run away paranoia than fact.

Once the two older ladies left, the bus boy was soon hovering - albeit somewhat indecisively - over their table. He looked to be fourteen - perhaps a bit older but small for his age. I caught his eye. He pointed to his own chest. I nodded. He looked around the room as if searching for a reprieve. Receiving none, he moved in my direction, exhibiting more than a little reluctance.

Wringing his hands under his still spotless apron, he spoke without pausing for a breath. "I probably can't help you 'cause I'm new here and really don't know nothing about nothing besides cleaning off tables and I'm not really even sure about that but I can get Mary if you want me to."

His self-deprecation and eventual gasping for breath aside, I decided to go ahead and risk asking him rather than Mary - whoever she might be.

"Do you happen to know where a stranger in town, like myself, could find a computer to use or rent for a few hours?"

A smile broke across his previously pained face.

"The library. They have lots of computers at the library that anybody can use. Just walk in and find one that's not being used. That's all there is to it. You don't need a card or nothin'. I do it all the time, myself."

Having gained in confidence and apparently feeling

himself on a roll he asked, "Is there anything else, Sir?"

"Well, yes, actually there is. Just where is this library?"

The lad paused to think. He then turned completely around once, his pointing finger poised in front of his chin, and then turned half way around the other direction before beginning.

"You go out this door and turn right and you go two blocks and then turn right again and go one block and you will be right beside it."

"Thanks, so much," I said.

"Hey, anytime. That's what I'm here for."

He went back to the table, cleaning it with renewed confidence and vigor. What a grand exchange that had been for each of us. I left a tip on the table for the waitress - Mary, perhaps - and, with a wink, slipped a dollar bill into the lad's shirt pocket as I passed him. He probably thanked me but I was too soon out of earshot, speaking with the cashier.

It was almost three o'clock as I exited the cafe and turned right, beginning my search for the library. Low and behold, the library was just where the young man had said it would be. Frankly, I was surprised. I guess that turning this way and that was just what it took. Perhaps I would try it myself. It had been comfortable - enjoyable even - talking with the boy. I would file that in my head since it might be a clue to who I was and what I did. (An artistic high school English Teacher with a sense of humor who actually enjoys youngsters. That seemed an unlikely assemblage of oxymorons!)

Once inside the library I found a computer section just as the lad had suggested and was soon perusing the first disk. With a little effort and some luck, I found it contained several children's stories. So, did two of the others - twelve stories in all. The other two were blank as far as I could tell. Not knowing the format or software program in which the material had been entered I could not be absolutely sure of that.

Gee, I knew some computer stuff. Taking a moment to reflect, I realized I knew a lot about computer operation although primarily just in the word processing and

spread sheet areas.

The author of the stories was recorded on the cover pages as Johnny Wilson. That name didn't compute - so to speak. The stories chronicled the adventures of a character called Freddie the Frog. I knew the stories word for word from beginning to end. That might indicate that I had read them many times before, perhaps using them in teaching. It might also mean that I had written them and that would make my name Johnny Wilson. Most importantly, it meant that once again, I did remember – well, at least recognize - something!

I copied down the author's name and the address as listed on the manuscript. All that was given was Fayetteville, Arkansas - another solid connection with that bus ticket. There was no street address and no phone number. I could call information and get that number and address. Things seemed to be falling into place rapidly.

As I searched the library for a pay phone, I felt in my pocket for change. In short order I was connected with an operator and requested the information I needed. Her response washed my being with an immediate sense of depression.

"No person by that name is listed in the Fayetteville directory, Sir."

I had passed a lounge area on the way to the phone and I went back and sat in a very uncomfortable, over-stuffed chair. What next? A moment before I had been on a roll but was suddenly back to square one - or nearly so. I supposed I should try both writing and drawing to see if I might have been the one who had created my newly found treasures. Perhaps those would become activities for that very night.

What was my most pressing need at the moment? That's what I needed to determine first and then set about meeting it. I needed ID. I went back to the phone book and called the motor vehicle department who connected me with the identification card desk.

"All you need is your birth certificate and I can fix you up in five minutes," came the cheery answer from the helpful lady at the other end of the line. I thanked her and returned to my chair, more depressed than before.

How else could I go about it? I went to the card files. They sported a sign reading: These files are no longer up to date. Use the computerized files in section "D". I gave it a shot and looked under "Identification." There was nothing helpful there. I looked for titles beginning with the words "fake" and "false". Still I found nothing of any use to me. Then, part of a book title floated through my head. It had the word privacy in it, so I looked that up. There I found several books listed having to do with establishing new identities. They looked promising. A thorough search of the stacks revealed they were missing. So, what's new? I went back to my chair.

In the mirror, directly across from where I was sitting, I caught a glance of the bald-headed man. Without thinking, I turned to look at him. In that instant, he had disappeared. Perhaps he belonged on my list after all. It was a very scary feeling that surged through my chest. I felt like a ten-year old alone at a horror movie. The main difference was I hadn't wet my pants yet - well, not that I was aware of, at least.

I cautiously moved to the rear door and slipped outside, rapidly pacing off as much distance between me and the library as I could before my aching legs said I must slow down. I looked back. There was no bald-headed man to be seen. I turned a corner and moved on down the street at a more leisurely pace but not without frequent glances over my shoulder. It was a terrible way to exist - in fright and suspicion and mental darkness.

It was well after five. Uncharacteristically I had no appetite so I headed home. What a nice way to be able to think about my little room at the motel - home. For the time being, at least, it was my only anchor in that barren world of uncertainty and chaos. I took a circuitous route, stopping often to make sure I was not being followed.

Inside my room at last, I locked the door and jammed one of the chairs under the doorknob as an added precaution. I undressed and lay back on the bed recalling the day - that first day of my "new life." New implied old and I had to wonder if I would ever retrieve those memories that would define and clarify my old life.

I was exhausted and, mercifully, sleep soon overtook me.

CHAPTER TWO

Day Two

I awoke early. The still faint light of dawn struggled to slip through the slits in my blinds. For one lingering moment, I did not recall the terror of my situation. Then it was upon me like a tidal wave. I was drowning in this awful misadventure. How long would I be able to survive it? How long would I have to survive it? I bit at my clenched fist wishing I had not awakened.

Sitting on the edge of the bed I closed my eyes and mentally compressed the all-encompassing horror of the situation into a more manageable level of anxiety - extreme but manageable. I was not sure how I did that or how I knew to do it. I reached for a pad of paper from the dresser and began making a new and immediately practical "to do" list for the day.

I needed to begin eating in my room both to maintain a low profile and to lower my expenses. Two thousand dollars wouldn't last long. I flipped to a second page and jotted down a grocery list of sorts. That was not a familiar task. It was complete in a few minutes, however, and appeared that at least I remembered what I liked to eat. Not taking much solace in that modestly positive discovery, I turned back to the first page.

I needed to check out some bookstores and find a source to help me with my I. D. problem. I needed to get a local paper for the help wanted section and to catch up on the

news. Perhaps that would jog a memory or two. The concept of communication with the outside world reminded me I had a radio. I turned it on, dialing through its various offerings - Country music, rock music, loud country music, downright vulgar music, whiny, depressing country music and static at both ends of the spectrum. I tuned it to a soft country station and turned it down - just loud enough for company in the background. It wasn't particularly appealing to me but I felt a definite need for company. So, country wasn't my kind of music. I wondered what was. I supposed I would know it when I heard it.

Again, I went back to my list. I would try some sketching before the day was over and see if that happened to be one of my skills. If it were, perhaps I could sell some. I wouldn't need ID to do that. I retrieved the art supplies from the suitcase and duffel bag, arranging them out on the table. That seemed like a familiar move. How about that! At last, there was something familiar!

I unwrapped the two pictures and found them a temporary home on the plastic, Wal-Mart shelf above the table. What a confusing rush of good and bad, pleasant and unpleasant feelings the sight of those colored sketches induced at the very deepest level of my being. They were bound to hold important clues for me. I was particularly drawn to the eyes of the two boys - one having brown, the other blue.

I wondered what color mine were. "Blue," I said out loud and a quick check in the mirror verified that. How could I have studied my face so carefully and overlooked the color of my eyes? My attention to the reflection lingered, as that face once again bewildered me. How mystifying this moment was becoming for me. My somewhat optimistic - though admittedly feeble - take on it all was that perhaps it would develop into an exciting adventure. For the time being, it remained quite grim and depressing

I searched the pictures for an artist's signature, which I hoped would provide a substantial lead of some kind. Instead, in the lower right corner they each sported three tiny green triangles sitting atop a vertical, brown brush stroke. Right handed artists typically sign their work on the lower right and those who were left handed on the lower left. I was right

handed but then, I imagined, so were ninety percent of other human beings. I wondered how I knew things like that.

There I was, an overweight, right-handed, blue eyed old white guy. How run of the mill can one be? I supposed that should make it easier to lose myself in the crowd if that were in fact what I was going to need to do. It couldn't hurt to be careful, unless, of course, someone who cared about me was looking for me. In that case I needed to be accessible - one more damned if you do, dammed if you don't type dilemma.

Back to my list. Perhaps an art gallery would recognize that strange symbolic signature. I would produce a copy of it and check it out later. I would also page through a phone book to see if that provided any clues. I'd begin with the yellow pages to determine if a job or profession seemed immediately familiar to me. It had not occurred to me earlier that I needed to check out the story author's name in the Joplin directory. Perhaps it was home for Johnny, whatever his last name was. It obviously hadn't left a lasting impression.

That set up my day. I would need to go to the library to study the telephone directory. I would find a gallery and a bookstore. If they didn't have the book in stock, perhaps they would allow me to look through a catalog and order one. Then, I would do the grocery shopping. There was a grocery about half way between the motel and down town. If I could satisfy myself that Baldy's apparent interest in me was nothing more than my own overactive imagination, I might go for a long walk later in the day and see what Joplin had to offer. The notion of a walk was a welcome and refreshing notion.

I looked down at my still unclothed legs. They were an anomaly of sorts, appearing to be quite firm, trim and fit, compared with the flab ridden upper body they were supporting. Perhaps walking had been a significant part of my life. Maybe it was only recently that I had gained weight. It was then, I realized that all of the walking I had done the day before - Friday - had not caused so much as an enduring ache or twinge in my legs. I added a calendar to my list.

I showered and dressed, and decided to begin my

outing by treating myself to one final pancake breakfast before I began my more frugal life style. As I shaved, I again spent a significant amount of time looking at that stranger in the mirror. I certainly knew my way around his face with a razor. It crossed my mind that the gods should have, at least, given a guy in my predicament, a good-looking face. I smiled. It smiled back. How nice! Perhaps a beard would be the ideal disguise for me - provided I determined I needed to camouflage myself. It could do nothing more than improve my appearance.

When it came time to open the door, I was unexpectedly panic-stricken. I moved to the front window and peeked through the blinds - an awkward arrangement at best bending as one had to over the ancient, oversized, air-conditioning unit under the window. As far as I could see, there was no one suspicious looking out there, but then how was I to know what a suspicious person would look like? I was also momentarily taken aback when I saw how clean the blinds were. In the entire history of mankind, no ones mini blinds had ever been that clean. I'd have to get to know the Myrtle lady a bit better.

With a deep breath and a growing sense of resignation that whatever would happen might just have to happen, I opened the door, locked it behind me and made my way to the cafe. At six a.m., I expected it to be a busy place, so was surprised to find there were no other customers. Along with no other customers there was, also, no waitress - Hank evidently covered all bases himself at that early hour.

"Same as yesterday," he suggested more than asked as his head appeared briefly in the pass-through window from the kitchen.

"That sounds fine," I replied with a nod and abbreviated wave that lasted well beyond his presence.

I watched - what little I could see - as he got things started. Presently, the green drapes, which separated the dining area from the kitchen, parted. He emerged to deliver the obligatory cup of coffee and my utensils wrapped in a white paper napkin.

"That was black, right?" he asked.

"Yes. Black. How on Earth do you remember

things like that?"

He smiled. "Been here thirty years. 'Bout time I learnt how to do something right, wouldn't ya say?"

I assumed that was his humble way of saying he had no idea how he did it but was pleased I had recognized the skill. I smiled back and agreed with a nod.

"The bus boy who was in here yesterday sure seemed like a nice lad," I said, trying to keep up my end of the small talk.

"He's my grandson. Been in trouble all his life. Nothing bad, just always in the wrong place at the wrong time. A real nervous kid. Immature. I just let him start working here. He needs a chance to do something right. You know the type - hyper."

Again, I nodded. Who knew if I knew the type or not, but I nodded. The boy's problems were obviously not a family secret and appeared to roll off Hank's tongue far too easily in the presence of a total stranger. Hank continued.

"Broke about as many plates as he's washed so far. Sure wish I knew what to do for him."

That last comment seemed strangely incongruent with my other impressions of that take-charge man. My heart said I should offer to help. My brain said to keep my distance. I had no idea what that internal exchange was all about.

"Well, he was sure friendly and helpful to me. Tell him I asked about him, Okay?"

"Ya. Sure."

Hank seemed appreciative.

"By the way is there a book store somewhere around here close?" I asked.

"Closest good one is out at the mall. If ya just want trash, I suppose you could try the place over on 6th street. It's about seven or eight blocks on east from here."

He returned to the kitchen and reappeared shortly with my breakfast.

"Looks wonderful," I said.

"Looks don't count much. That's what my wife says about me. She says if looks counted for something I'd die a bachelor." He shook his head, thoroughly enjoying his little joke.

"Married a long time, then, are you," I asked?

"Damn right. Why d'ya think I open at five and don't close 'til midnight!" He turned, chuckling all the way to the kitchen. "Help yourself to more coffee when you're ready," he called back over his shoulder as he disappeared through the curtained doorway.

I had met four Joplin residents and they were all nice, friendly folks. Add to that the two jovial fellows I watched talking near the parking lot, the day before and I had a sample of six very pleasant people. Though that survey excluded the mysterious bald man, the realization still seemed to lift my spirits.

Just as Hank had suggested, the bookstore was filled with trash. On the back wall above a sea of nudie magazines - which did attract more than my passing glance - I found just what I wanted: An Underground Guide to Privacy and Alternate ID by an author calling himself, Stickit Toem. From what I could determine, it seemed tailor made to my needs. It was sealed in plastic wrap so I had no way of ascertaining that for sure, however. It was all I had going so I would buy it. Feeling the need to appear less desperate than I really was about the ID material I also picked up what one might politely call an adult picture magazine.

As I placed them on the counter by the cash register, the proprietor - a frail old man, probably an octogenarian - remarked: "Nice boobs in that mag. Good choice, young man." I paid him the twelve dollars and some odd cents. I had to ask for a bag, which I was given, though begrudgingly. It came with an over the glasses glance that said, "If you're going to buy the filthy stuff you shouldn't be ashamed to carry it out under your arm!"

Deciding it was sensible to leave the grocery shopping until last, I got my bearings and made my way back toward the library. As I turned the corner onto the main thoroughfare I spied the bald-headed man sitting on a bench in front of the library. He was reading a paper. I stopped breathing. If I retraced my steps and went around the block the other way I could cross the street behind him and enter the library through its back door.

With my heart pounding, noticeably out of

proportion to the magnitude of the situation, I did just that. Perhaps this bald man was some villain out of my sordid past. That rang no bells. Perhaps he was a federal agent. Again, nothing came to mind.

Once inside I searched out a sheltered spot from where I could look out front and determine if he were still there. Sure enough! That was good. So long as he remained out there, he wasn't seeing me inside.

I found the phone book section and took the Joplin directory to a table against the South wall in the stacks where I had a clear view in all three directions. My paranoia seemed to be building. What was it with that bald man? If he was going to be a part of my life, he needed some name other than, That Bald Man. Let's see. Baldy. Bald head. ... Clean Pate. I laughed out loud! I'll just shorten that to C. P. Once again, I was experiencing that strange blending of terror and good humor. My attempts at comic relief merely added a new emotional layer, however, rather than replacing or even truly dulling the uncomfortable one that defined my being.

There was no John or Jonathon or Johnny Wilson in the book so that drew me into another blind alley. Evidently, neither Fayetteville nor Joplin was the author's home. I turned to the back of the directory. Several things struck me as I paged through the yellow section. Artist Supplies. That seemed reasonable but perhaps was just a reflection of my current interest in that possible side of myself. Children's homes. I couldn't dredge up a reason but it brought me the most comfortable feeling I had experienced since - well, since I had a memory. It occurred to me that had been just about twenty-four hours before. Put in the context of a day-old human being, I was probably coping with life pretty well.

Then the heading Psychologists hit a familiar note. Had I consulted one? Perhaps I had encountered this kind of amnesic reaction before and had been treated. Maybe I was currently in treatment. Should I find a psychologist and let him help me now? Was it from my past or in relation to my present needs that the term leapt out at me? The affinity was very strong.

I read down the list of names. I wasn't sure what I

expected to find. None of the names seemed familiar. I couldn't afford one anyway. How did I know that?

I looked for some sort of free clinic and found the name of what appeared to be a public mental health outpatient facility. I seemed to know the terminology. Perhaps I had been a whacko for some time. I jotted down the clinic's number and address just in case. I consulted the street map in the phone book. It appeared to be five or more miles from my motel. That would be within walking distance if there were sidewalks but not that day. There was no need to decide immediately, anyway.

I closed the book. Art, kids, psychology, possible whacko. What could all that mean?

I replaced the directory and walked the stacks searching through the Art and psychology sections in particular but all the sections in general. On the psychology shelves, I found some dusty, relatively unworn tomes with lofty names such as Phenomenology: the study of human perception by Snygg and Combs, and Human Behavior by James Oberholtzer. I decided on the first of the two. In the nearby medical section, a more recent volume, Amnesia, caught my eye.

In the art stacks, another huge book caught my attention: A History of Art. It turned out to weigh as much as a two-year old child so, though of great interest to me, I put it back. I could peruse it there in the library at another time.

Elsewhere I ran across one titled: A Concise History of Science. It immediately grabbed my attention. I added it to my growing collection. Adding one more from philosophy, I had selected four books from widely different fields. I stashed them on a ledge and went to inquire at the desk about a library card.

Unbelievably, all I had to do was show my rent receipt, fill out a simple six-line form and I had a card complete with my Joplin address. Some ID at last, I thought. That card became immediately precious - manna from heaven. I checked out the books.

During the process, I also inquired about and was given the names of several art galleries within walking distance. Not having remembered to sketch the three-triangle

symbol from the pictures, and thinking that to reconstruct them from memory was too risky, I decided to put that off until another day.

Baldy - that is C. P. - had left his station and was nowhere to be seen. I placed the library books into the bag with my purchases from the store and cautiously exited through the rear door, eager to get home and read through the books - and, yes, the magazine, promising big boobs.

My excursion through the grocery store proved to be instructive. I had no idea where things would be or how they would be organized. I got a cart with a wheel that fluttered, making a horrible racket. It was just what a guy on the lam needed! I noticed that I tended to reach for the most expensive selection first as if money had not previously been a concern. I thought better of those choices and took the generic brands whenever possible. After what seemed an inordinately long time, my shopping was complete.

The girl at the checkout counter asked if I had newspaper coupons. I said, "No," so she reached under the counter, rifled through some papers and found a current ad sheet. She tore out four coupons that I could use for things I had purchased.

"What a nice thing for you to do for a newcomer to your town," I said.

It appeared as though she had seldom been thanked for that service. I knew I had another friend. That brought a warm, safe feeling. The first hint of safety I had experienced since time began for me the day before. On the way out, I purchased a local paper from a vending machine at the front of the store and headed home.

I sensed a new spring in my step as I approached my front door - my only door actually. That only door, however, was standing ajar. I gulped but couldn't swallow. I put my sacks down on the sidewalk next to the building. I went around to the side and tried to peak in through the window. I had done such a fine job of covering it with the curtain that I couldn't see a thing. It flashed through my head that was one of those, good news - bad news situations.

I guessed it was another of those, do or die confrontations. Did I run away without knowing what was

going on or did I confront the situation head on? I would check it out a bit more thoroughly before making that decision.

I inched around the building toward the door with my back to the wall, feeling ever so much like a secret agent. I cautiously peeped in through the narrow opening between the door and the frame. Someone was in there, all right. I couldn't see them but I heard them. I looked around outside - for what I wasn't sure but James Bond always looked around outside just before bursting in on the bad guys. Interesting, I thought. I do remember who James Bond is - at least the Sean Connery and Roger Moore versions.

Then I saw him - C. P. - not in the room but strolling down the other side of the street, pipe in his mouth and newspaper under his arm. Our eyes almost met but again he turned his head and hurried on as if on purpose. That man was somehow connected to me. Why didn't he make contact? Perhaps it was his henchman who was searching my room at that very instant. "Henchman!" Was I losing it completely?

At that point, I felt angry more than scared. It was a new emotion for me. I pushed the door open a few more inches. The person was standing at the rear of the room, back toward me, leaning over the dresser. It was a shadowy figure that turned toward me as the door squeaked open.

"Oh, Hi, Mr. Johnson," came Myrtle's friendly greeting. Saturday's cleaning day for number thirteen. I probably forgot to tell ya that. Hope ya don't mind I let myself in. If ya do mind, you'll need to be here next time or you'll have to clean it yourself. You keep a nice, tidy place."

If Myrtle was anything, she was direct. I felt honored that she had her teeth in for the occasion.

Hiding my trembling hands behind my back I responded slowly in what, surprisingly, turned out to be a remarkably calm tone:

"Hey, that's just fine, Myrtle. I appreciate your helping out this way. It's no chore at all to keep such a spotless place clean. I appreciate that."

The single wrinkle, which emerged across her forehead, made me think she wasn't used to my style of speaking. That passed both quickly and without comment. She went on about her business. I took the bags inside and

began depositing things in the refrigerator. It suddenly became apparent there was no storage place for non-refrigerated goods. At about that same instant Myrtle recognized my predicament and made a suggestion.

"I got a extra little white cabinet down in ten you can use for storage if you want."

"Thanks. That would most certainly be helpful."

Once again, I got that forehead thing and a twist of the head.

"I'll open it up if you'll carry it back," she said, gathering up her broom and bucket, apparently having finished all she intended to do at my place.

I assumed she meant right then as she disappeared through the front door. I followed. Soon my room was sporting a well-stocked pantry - of sorts. It completed the ensemble nicely, I thought.

I was tired, feeling as if I had been 'run through a wringer,' I believed the saying went. I lay down on the bed and stared at the yellowing, rain stained ceiling. It was covered with those billion holes per square foot composition tiles. I mused that they may have been the very first ones ever marketed. I had to wonder if they were made from asbestos. Somehow, I knew those were dangerous to one's health.

Moving my head slowly from side to side, I surveyed my domain. The color scheme was an artist's nightmare: dark paneled walls, burnt orange carpet, a green bedspread, maple table with one yellow and one black chair, a blue dresser with pink drawer pulls and a white cabinet. A grin of sorts formed at least in my mind if not on my face. "What would Beth say if she could see me now?" I said to myself shaking my head.

That momentary pleasant feeling disintegrated immediately. I sat up straight and stiff! Beth! Who in the World was Beth? Why would she be interested or concerned about me? Beth? Beth? I couldn't remember a single thing about anyone named Beth. Yet, I had remembered the name. My stomach churned. I moved the pillow to my lap and leaned back against the wall. My gaze blurred off across the room. Tears began streaming down my face. The desperate

sobbing and the chilling, frightening feelings I had experienced the day before returned in all their pain-filled ugliness.

I buried my face in the pillow. When would all of this stop? I couldn't take it much longer. I remembered another expression, 'being on an emotional roller coaster'. It was an apt description of the terrible experience I was going through.

Sometime later I sat back and took several deep breaths, gradually returning to the reality of my situation. I went into the bathroom and splashed my face with cold water. It felt good. I looked terrible. Enough of this feeling sorry for myself. I had things to do. I shook my finger at the face in the mirror. It took on an expression of determination. I had to get focused and get on with my list or should that have been on with my life. At that point, they were synonymous.

My watch said nearly two o'clock. I was hungry. I stared at my larder for a few moments and reached for a can of pork and beans. Not having had the foresight to purchase a can opener the beans went back on the shelf and I settled for a peanut butter and jelly sandwich with a glass of milk. With a sweep of my arm I cleared the art supplies to one side of the table and sat down with my food. While sitting there eating, I was able to chuckle about the can opener fiasco. I wondered what the "Beth" person would have thought about that.

I noticed that saying her name produced a set of mixed emotions much like looking at the pictures. I placed the pictures on the table in front of me as I began the second half of my sandwich. Perhaps one of the faces was actually that of this Beth person. Close perusal suggested otherwise. Both faces were of boys. That looked right and it felt right. I added hair spray to my list so I could set the colors on the eerie, more recently finished landscape. I had no idea how I knew to use hair spray.

Finishing my milk, I set the glass aside and arranged the sketchpad and pastels. What should I draw? How about an empty glass sitting beside a folded newspaper since that was the image closest at hand?

To my delight and total gratification, the picture that took shape was actually quite good. I felt so much at home with the material. I was soon lost in the creative process

oblivious to other aspects of my situation. Half an hour passed. Upon examining the finished product, I was amazed at what I found nestled there in the lower right corner - three small green triangles atop three dark brown wisps.

As it came to me I pushed away from the table and began promenading about the room in wild exhilaration, arms raised in victorious thrusts. That was my signature and they were not triangles. They were pine trees - three, little pine trees. It had come close to being a memory.

There was something else about pine trees. What was it? I hit myself in the forehead with the heel of my palm as I paced back and forth. What was it about pine trees? Try as I would, I could get no further. That part was distressing but the rest was thrilling! Oh, how I wanted to tell somebody. Oh, how I needed somebody. Oh, how saddening it was not to have anybody. My spirits took a sudden tumble.

Sometimes things happen, that make you wonder if in fact the gods just may eavesdrop on your most private moments. There was a knock at the door. It was not the direct, get your pants on and open up before I unlock the door and barge on in knock of Myrtle. It was not the typical, sturdy, rap, rap, rap of the more usual visitor. It was not the heavy thumping which I imagined would accompany a police raid. It was tentative, non-rhythmic, soft and just plain unusual. Regardless, my heart, which was still pounding from excitement, switched gears and began pounding from apprehension. I peered through the blinds. All I could see was the back of a head sporting short blond wispy hair. The knock was repeated displaying all of its former 'erraticness'. "Consistent erraticness," I mused.

I was reminded of a character on a radio program when I was a boy. He was a salesman who hated to sell, so as he would knock on a door he would say to himself, "I hope no one's at home. I hope no one's at home." That was the tenor of this rap.

Approaching the door and simultaneously taking deep breaths had become wedded into an automatic ritual. I opened the door.

"Hi?" came the timid greeting from the bashful, smiling, impish face of the bus boy. It was delivered more as

a question than a salutation. Almost cowering, his arm completed a tentative, open palmed arc from left to right.

"Well, hi there," I said, undoubtedly telegraphing my bewilderment at his presence. "Come for my dirty dishes, did you?" I added in an out of left field attempt at humor. "I didn't realize you made house calls."

Every time I opened my mouth my monologue became more bizarre and the grooves across his forehead deepened. What was this groove thing with Joplin foreheads?

"What can I do for you?" finally tumbled from my lips and that he seemed able to handle.

"I just wanted to thank you for the buck you laid on me yesterday. Gramps told me where he thought you were staying and Myrt pointed me down here. I just wanted - you know - to say thanks. I never got a tip before and I was so shocked I don't think I said anything, maybe."

His still averted face got red and his feet and fingers fidgety.

"I guess I oughtn't have come, huh?"

"No. Not at all. I'm delighted - uh, glad - that you came."

I was going to have to make a conscious effort to talk more simply. The boy's face lit up.

"Really?" he replied, finally looking in the general direction of my face though still skillfully avoiding actual eye contact.

"Sure. I was just thinking how nice it would be to have somebody to talk to - me being a stranger in town and all. Want to come in?"

"Guess so?" he answered, with another question mark in his voice and a modest shrug of his right shoulder. He had quite clearly not thought very far ahead about that visit.

I stepped back from the door but he just stood there. Social skills were not one of this lad's long suits. In some way, it all felt quite familiar. I was suddenly feeling very comfortable - obviously not so for the boy.

"Well, out there's not in here," I said smiling, pointing from one place to the other, attempting a humorous nudge to get him moving. He grinned, actually looked me directly in the face and stepped inside. He stood stiff as a

freshly starched collar, directly in the line of the closing door. One thing I could say with certainty about this young man: there was nothing less than tentativeness about him!

With the door closed at last, I tried for more small talk.

"It's not a very fancy place," I said, addressing my total domain with a sweep of my arm. "But you're certainly welcome."

I pulled out the kitchen chair just opposite from where I had been sitting at the table.

"Have a seat," I suggested, as he stood there askew, one leg stiff and the other bowed at the knee. I wondered what kept him from falling to the floor.

"Okay," he said as if responding to a direct order. I sneaked a glance up at the gods. 'This wasn't exactly what I had in mind, guys,' I thought to myself. On the other hand, it did feel good and that was intriguing. I took a seat in my chair.

"So Hank is your Grandpa is he?"

"Ya, he's my Grampa, all right. Has been ever since I was a kid."

That had not apparently been meant to be humorous.

"How old are you?"

"I'm fourteen. No, that was last year. I mean I just had a birthday and got a year older and so now I'm older."

"You're fifteen, then?"

"Yes Sir, I'm fifteen then, er, now. I know I don't look that old. I've always been a little squirt."

It seemed the appropriate thing to say: "You appear uncomfortable here with me. I didn't mean you had to come in, you know."

"Oh, I'm always nervous. I'm pretty relaxed right now, really. My friends, well the guys my age at least, they call me Rev 'cause I'm always like revved up I guess."

"And what does your mother call you?"

"Richard. That's my name, Richard."

"Is that what you like to be called?"

"No Sir. I like Rick. Just Rick. Rick, that's what I like."

"Okay, then Rick it will be. My name is" - my

hesitation was worse than any of the uncertainty he had just displayed - "Jim." It had been the first time I had been called on to just routinely offer the name that I had made up for Myrtle the day before.

As Rick awkwardly endeavored to look occupied he spied my drawing materials and eyed the pictures on the table.

"Are these your grandsons?" he asked, leaning over the table and examining the picture with genuine interest.

At least that confirmed that they both looked like boys to someone else. I was somewhat taken aback, yet pleased, that he had actually initiated part of our conversation.

"No. I'm not lucky enough to have grandchildren. They are just some kids I knew once a long time ago. Do you like to draw?"

"I'm no good at it." He carefully touched the surface of the picture.

Chuckling as I spoke, I said, "That wasn't what I asked you know. I asked if you liked to draw."

Once again, I got a full-face glance. "Ya, I like to draw. I used to like drawing cars a lot."

"And now? What do you like to draw now?"

Another full-face glance, head nodding, followed immediately by the matter of fact response, "Naked girls."

For all of his bashfulness, he possessed a refreshing element of forthright honesty.

"Well, I guess that's pretty much the way it's supposed to be for a guy at fifteen, isn't it?" I added, pleased with both the quickness and the quality of my response.

He shrugged - both shoulders that time. "I hope so."

"Believe me, it is. How long have you been working for Hank?"

I carefully removed a page from the sketchpad and slipped it in front of him.

"Just started."

He opened the box of pastels.

"What are these?"

"They're called pastels - sort of a cross between chalk and colored pencils."

He moved his hand back and forth for some time over the box before settling on a flesh tone pink.

"How about if you draw me and I draw you?" he asked, looking up at me, but making no move to proceed until he received my sanction.

That seemed downright pushy for Rick! How nice!

"Sounds good to me," I said.

With both of us drawing, conversation no longer needed to be forced. Sometimes we talked and sometimes we sat in silence concentrating on our sketching. It was a fine opportunity for us to look each other over and feel each other out. Rick looked more thirteen than fifteen. There was virtually no hair on his, surprisingly well built, arms. He had the fine, blond hair of an even younger child. Even facial peach fuzz was still just a dream for him. His upswept nose and rounded features gave him the appearance of an oversized little boy, which was in no way unpleasant.

I timed my sketching to coincide with the completion of his. He certainly had artistic talent, though clearly no training. I hadn't considered making any suggestions. His ego seemed too fragile. Perhaps he would take some pointers later on after we knew each other better. I was intrigued that I had pointers to offer.

He became immediately excited about my drawing of him. So did I, but I kept that to myself. I had intentionally flattered his good features and played down those that were less so. He also seemed pleased with his own attempt, especially after I pointed out to him the very best aspects of it from my perspective. He wanted me to keep both drawings.

"What you need is some masking tape so we can put them up on the wall," he said looking around for a place to hang them.

"What would Myrtle say about tape on her walls?" I asked.

"Old Myrt, her bark's worse than her bite," he said. "You just gotta get used to her. She'd bitch about it at first just because she's supposed to but then she'd never say no more."

I had the feeling he knew a lot about people's barks and bites and bitching - perhaps a lot about people in general.

Rick was an interesting puzzle.

"Gotta go. Can't be late for work or I get docked."

He got up and moved toward the door. As he reached for the doorknob he turned and asked, "Can I come back sometime, maybe, d'ya think?"

My heart broke thinking that he had to ask that question.

"If you don't come back I'll be really disappointed," I said.

One thing about this lad's face, it wasn't designed to conceal his feelings and at that moment, it acquired a face splitting grin.

He opened the door and then came back, offering me his hand. He wanted a hug. Somehow I just knew that, but it didn't seem appropriate that early in a relationship so I took his hand and shook it, placing my other hand on top of his to prolong the shake.

"Have a great evening, Rick," I said patting his hand. "Say hello to your Grampa for me. Can I count on seeing you again tomorrow afternoon?"

"You bet!"

He left. I watched him tear out of the driveway at a full run, cornering, as if an airplane, while making the turn East onto the sidewalk. I closed and locked the door. What an unexpected turn of events this was. I was really good at something - well at two things, actually. It turned out I was a pretty good artist. I wasn't a great artist but what I drew looked like what I was trying to draw and it came to pass all quite effortlessly. I could live with that. And, I was good - very good - with teenagers - at least that one teenager. Both of those things made me feel somehow valuable - another brand-new feeling.

I really had my heart set on pork and beans. I'd take my can down to Myrtle's and see if she'd let me use her can opener.

CHAPTER THREE

Day Three

Generic corn flakes, the least expensive brand of grapefruit juice and toast emblazoned with the circular brand of the electric hot plate provided a pretty good breakfast. All that was missing was butter for the toast and a bowl for the cereal. My coffee mug filled and refilled became an adequate substitute for the bowl. A little sugar for the cereal would have been nice, also. How could a grown man be so helpless when it came to laying in the basic necessities of life? I added a few more things to my "can opener" list. Later in the morning, I would stop by the grocery when I went out to pick up a Sunday paper.

The evening before I had read the ID manual from cover to cover and had learned - no, more like confirmed - several ideas that had been percolating in my head. (That reminded me to add instant coffee to the list, so I could indulge my morning whim for a caffeine high.)

I would need to search the obituaries until I located the right candidate for my ID needs. There were two ways to go about it. The first was to find a man my age - I was guessing early to mid-fifties - who had just died, obtain an official copy of his birth certificate before the death certificate had been linked to it in the records and use that to get a State ID card. That would give me an identity that would work in most settings like getting a bank account and cashing checks. It would not supply the social security card I needed to get a job, however.

The second was to find a child who had died, obtain his birth certificate and, posing as his guardian, apply for a social security card for him through the mail. That way I would be able to work even though the birth certificate would be of no help in getting me an ID card because of the obvious age discrepancy. I figured that even apathetic, harried public employees would notice I was indeed not a youngster. Both avenues gave me the willies but there were times when one simply had to do what one had to do. Both were illegal of course and I was pleased that part of it distressed me. I chose to believe that meant I wasn't a habitual criminal, at least.

I pondered the pros and cons as I worked my way through breakfast. Considering all the methods available to me were unlawful, perhaps my needs would best be served by seeing a lawyer or a mental health worker first. I wondered about the confidentiality laws in the state and how they applied to psychologists and social workers. I still felt more than a little uneasy about contacting the police - frightened out of my gourd would have more aptly described my response. That caused me great concern. I seemed like a nice guy. Why would I be so frightened of the police? Interestingly, I could not recall even having seen one since arriving in Joplin.

I fixed a third mug of cereal and opened the previous day's paper to the obituaries. The only age mate was female. The onset of my post middle age male breast development notwithstanding, I doubted if I could readily pass for Matilda Waring.

I turned to the classifieds. Under help wanted there were several positions that I believed I could handle. One was a clerk in a gift shop. Another was an assistant to a carpet cleaner. The city had listings for grounds workers in the Parks Department. Those required drug testing. I had no reason to think I couldn't pass that, but then, who knew? I had hoped something special would pop out at me but it didn't. That was disappointing.

I did up my dishes - the cup, glass and spoon - in the bathroom sink and set them to dry on a towel spread atop the back of the stool. I finished dressing, gathered up my library books and glanced at the cover of the as yet unopened

girly magazine there at the bottom of the stack. Sex clearly wasn't near the top of my priority list. Looking myself over in the full-length mirror, I seemed prepared to set out in search of a park where I planned to read the morning away. My face looked scruffy since I had decided to let my beard grow, at least for the time being. It felt right to change my appearance -safer.

As I approached the door, those familiar, unsettling feelings, which had been largely held at bay throughout the early morning, returned in full force. Again, I felt the need to peek through the blinds. Again, I had no clue what I was looking for. At least C. P. was nowhere to be seen. The night before I had reconciled myself to the fact that since he had not assailed me in any way and, in fact, appeared to be actively avoiding direct contact with me, whatever he was up to, was probably not life threatening. I would deal with that later. It was to prove easier said than done.

There being no actual park within easy walking distance I returned to the lot behind the bank and settled onto a bench in the largest of the several, small, grassy havens there. How thoughtful someone had been to provide them. I stated my appreciation to the mimosa canopy overhead. I wondered if only wackos talked to trees.

There was virtually no traffic and not a soul to be seen - provided one could actually see a soul. I chuckled. What a bizarre sense of - well, I called it - humo I possessed.

Which book should I look at first? I began with the one on top, Phenomenology. By the middle of the first chapter I was convinced I that I was so familiar with the topic it probably held nothing new for me. I turned randomly to a spot near its center. A few more pages and I had confirmed my original impression.

I moved on to the second book, A Concise History of Science. The author's name was unfamiliar. I paged through the opening leaves - table of contents, dedication, and publication data. That brought nothing special to mind. Again, although fascinating, after the first chapter it appeared that it was going to contain very little I didn't already know.

I found the third book simply riveting, Language and Thought in Action, by S. I. Hiakowa. Again, it did not contain

new revelations but it was a gifted presentation of linguistic thought. I easily finished it within a couple of hours. Another discovery: I read rapidly.

My brief sampling of the topics of higher learning had confirmed that I surely possessed a college education. That helped account for my language pattern and generally wide range of knowledge. I smiled: there I was with a college education and not a single marketable skill to my name.

I opened the final book: *The Causes and Treatment of Amnesia*. Although familiar, the material fascinated me so much that I read, with interest, even the most basic information. Each page seemed to light a new candle of knowledge deep within my brain. It was exhilarating. Perhaps this would be all I would need I thought - hoped - all quite irrationally. Perhaps by the end of the book it will have all come back to me. It appeared that my desperation had become a breeding ground for optimism - a strange development, I thought.

By noon that book was also finished. Sadly, I remained a nameless, middle aged, overweight, educated white man with no past, no clear future and few job options. The perpetual tightness in my chest cinched itself up another notch. I hadn't thought that possible. Like the grassy spot, I was occupying, I was an island, seemingly unconnected in any meaningful way to the rest of the universe.

A few carefully staged deep breaths later, I felt life was still possible. It did seem, however, that the more I learned about myself the more hopelessly bewildered I was becoming. If I were to survive the turmoil, I would have to re-construe it all as a resolvable puzzle rather than a chaotic quagmire. Even though I could not yet begin assembling many of the pieces, I could at least be sorting them out so each could be examined individually.

At the grocery, along with the paper, can opener, a plastic bowl, butter, sugar and packages of plastic plates and utensils, I purchased a pack of three by five cards to use in structuring the puzzle. Actually, since the cards were only sold in shrink-wrapped bundles of three packs, that's what I purchased. After searching out two or three more illogically placed small items (salt shakers beside the extension cords) I

checked out.

I felt some urgency about getting home. Perhaps it was because of that I had not noticed my recently acquired shadow walking a half block or so behind me. It was not until I turned into the driveway of the motel that I became aware of his presence. More than startled, I was annoyed. It was the omnipresent C. P. Pleased that my previous reaction of terror at his sight had mellowed to mere irritation, I proceeded to my room, not even trying to protect the location of my hideaway from his prying eyes.

It seemed that every time I turned around it was time to eat. It was not that I objected. It just seemed curious that the organization of one's life was so closely tied to obtaining the necessities for living and that the process transcended conscious memory. A search of the refrigerator produced macaroni salad, cottage cheese and canned peaches. That would require the initiation of my new can opener which, as it turned out, had been packaged in plastic for eternity! Not to worry, I had also purchased scissors. Unfortunately, they had been similarly enshrined in an impenetrable transparent time capsule. Adding to the absurdity of the annoyance was my empty cup, patiently waiting for the coffee I had forgotten to purchase. I had a good laugh. It felt so good to laugh! I prolonged it well beyond what would have been a reasonable response. It was a wholly unpleasant let down when I stopped. I wondered if that were how addicts reacted as they felt the last vestiges of a fix draining away.

Eventually, I sat down to Sunday lunch. My eyes teared at the realization that it was Sunday lunch and I was alone. Of course, I had no idea why but I was proud of myself. Instead of wallowing in self-pity or panicking, I took out a card and jotted down the experience. It became the first officially entered piece of the puzzle.

As I ate, I filled in several dozen additional cards, each holding just one clue. Some were facts, some were events and my reactions to them and some were questions that needed answering. It had been a good exercise if for no other reason than to see what a sizeable number of things I actually did know about myself and my situation. It brought a

sense of ... well, if not hope, at least progress or a belief in the possibility of progress. Perhaps that was hope. It also relieved my irritation at having had to buy three packs of cards when I had only wanted one. It appeared likely that I would need them all.

Not knowing when Rick would arrive, but having the definite feeling that he would, I did the dishes and straightened up the room, placing the nudie magazine out of sight in the dresser door. Its destiny seemed to be getting worn out before getting ogled. I then positioned myself on the bed, pillow at my back, sitting against the wall, and began going through the newspaper.

Once again, the gods, who I apparently didn't take all that seriously, seemed to be smiling in my direction. The obituaries contained one of a fifty-year-old former Joplin man who had just died back home in Alabama, and - tragically - another of an eight-year-old boy who had been killed in a motor cycle accident in Utah - the grandson of a local couple.

Refusing to accept or address the sadness of the situation, I methodically copied the information onto cards. That finished, I consulted my newly acquired bible on such matters and found the appropriate addresses in each state from which to obtain official copies of the birth certificates. Soon the letters requesting those materials had been written and the envelopes addressed. They awaited only stamps and money orders for the processing fees, which I would purchase at the post office on Monday. I also wrote to the local social security office and requested a New Number Application Form.

By the time I had finished with that task, I found myself trembling uncontrollably. I got up and tried to walk it off, shaking my arms and hands, twisting my head and neck this way and that. It took some time before the quivering stopped, leaving in its wake a deep-seated, free floating cloud of anxiety. That stemmed, I assumed, from the fact that I had now started down the first blatantly illegal path of my new life. That wouldn't be official of course until the certificates were misused but since my intention was clear, the deed was as well as done.

My uneasiness was interrupted by Rick's

unmistakable knock at the door. I smiled, partly because his unusual manner amused me and partly because I had been genuinely looking forward to having him return. As I opened the door, he barged right in without having to be urged like the day before. Sporting his characteristic grin, he actually looked me directly in the eyes from the opening moment. I was pleased. Somehow, our relationship appeared to have matured while we had been apart.

"Like surprises?" he asked, omitting the conventional 'hi', 'hello' or 'how ya doin'.

"So long as they don't bite or get me dirty," I replied.

He chuckled and nodded. From behind his back he produced a sizeable, white, foam, carry out box. He took it directly to the table and began opening it.

"Hope ya haven't had desert yet," he said as he carelessly tore off the top section of the box, thereby making two dish-like containers. Since he was positioned between the surprise and me, I still had not seen what it was, though I assumed it was something edible.

Looking at me over his shoulder he said, "Well, come on and sit down. You got forks?"

I moved to my chair and pointed to the glass on the table holding a variety of plastic utensils. As I caught my first glimpse of his treat and before I could respond he announced:

"It's peanut butter pie. My Gramma makes the best in the world. Grampa serves 'em at the restaurant."

He seated himself, taking two forks from the glass and handing one to me as he slid one of the makeshift dishes in my direction. He lowered his head nearly to the level of the table and attacked his slice with a vengeance. From time to time he would close his eyes and move his head from side to side, displaying his intense pleasure with its taste. I was so engrossed in what was taking place across the table from me that I just sat there watching the lad scarf down the pie. He seldom even surfaced for a breath.

"Don't ya like peanut butter pie?" he said, noticing I had not yet begun.

"Oh yes, I love it. I was just watching you. You tickle me."

"Yeah. How come?"

He smiled up at me as he pressed the remaining crumbs onto his thumb for delivery to his mouth.

Could that take charge, forward, inquisitive boy possibly have been the same one who had cowered on my doorsill the day before?

"Oh, never mind. Let me give this pie a taste."

It was delicious.

Kneeling on his chair and supporting himself on his elbows, he leaned across the table. "Like it?" he said eagerly, as if my agreement that it was the best in the world was truly important to him.

"It's the best I have ever had," I said.

Perhaps the initial motive behind that phrase was to be supportive of Rick, but in truth, it was absolutely accurate. The taste was familiar but its unique essence was magnificent.

He rocked back and perched there impatiently as I savored every morsel.

"It was sure thoughtful of you to bring a treat," I said.

"I thought you'd like it," came his reply, obviously thrilled that I liked it.

No sooner was the last crumb on my fork than he whisked both containers away and deposited them in the wastebasket in the bathroom.

"So, can we draw again today?" he asked as he re-entered the room.

"Sure. What do you want to draw today?"

His wonderfully impish grin forewarned me of his forthcoming answer and together we said: "Naked girls."

"You can draw naked girls on your own time. I doubt if your mother would approve of my encouraging you to do that here. How about a picture that you just make up out of your head - maybe something you've seen somewhere?"

Again, that delightful playfulness surfaced. He closed his eyes moving his head about as if surveying his inner world. "I'm afraid all I see is ..." and together we finished the phrase ... "Naked girls."

"I know," I added. "Push yourself and I'll bet you can think of something else - a car, a scene in the country, a covered bridge in the winter time. How about one you could

take home for your mother."

Before my string of suggestions had hit his ears, he was already selecting colors and getting to work. The covered bridge sounded good to me. We each worked on our own project and made small talk for the better part of an hour. It took some skillful maneuvering to avoid answering some of his legitimate questions about me. He didn't press me when my responses were obviously feeble. I wondered if his questions were, like a four-year-old's, just his way of making conversation or if he actually listened to the answers.

In the course of the afternoon I discovered that he had recently been expelled from school for truancy (an absurd consequence for non-attendance, I thought - provided it was the whole story.). He lived with his never married mother in the basement of his grandfather's house. He had never known his dad nor did he know who he was. He disclosed that to me by saying, "I guess you'd say I'm a bastard." He didn't look up but hesitated as if it were a truly important moment in his life. Silently, he waited for my response. Receiving none, he pushed the limits a bit further: With a fleeting glance up at my face, he asked, "What do you think of bastards, Jim?"

The boy was getting to the point with one swift flanker movement. Would I like him anyway?

"I've known some bastards I liked a whole lot and I've known some bastards I didn't care for much. It's like any other category of people, I suppose. How about you?"

I had let him know that his language didn't upset me and I suggested his question was far too general to receive a useful answer. I had also put the ball back in his court. He added some bits of color here and there to his trees and stream and remained quiet.

Presently I added, "You understand, don't you, Rick, that you had nothing to do with being a bastard so that can't have anything to do with whether or not I'm going to like you."

He continued piddling over his drawing, lowering his head a bit. He sniffed a moist sniff and swallowed uncomfortably because of the unnatural position.

"Can I see your drawing yet?" I asked as if the

former exchange had been concluded and forgotten.

"Sure."

He turned it around and slid it in my direction. "It's trees and a stream," he said as if feeling some explanation were necessary before I'd recognize it.

"It's a real place. Maybe I can show it to you someday. It's only about an hour's walk from home. It's like my secret place."

"I'd really like that. We'll just plan to do it. Maybe we can pack a lunch and make a day of it."

"Really? When?"

This lad seemed to have only two gears: indecisive and pell-mell.

"I'm not just sure when, Rick. It depends on ..."
Suddenly I realized it really depended on almost nothing at all. "Well, when would you suggest?"

"Tomorrow. How about tomorrow?"

It hadn't been on my schedule but why not? It appeared that for the moment at least he and I were about all each of us had.

"Okay. Can you meet me here about eleven o'clock?"

"Great. I'll get Grampa to fix us lunch. He'll be happy to do that. He really likes you."

An afternoon of surprises! I had to wonder what I had done to deserve that kind of status from old Hank.

"Well, if that doesn't work out, I'm sure we can throw a lunch together from the stuff I have here," I said.

"I think my mom would like that picture you drew of me yesterday better than this one I just made," he said.

"Well, I'll tell you what. Why don't you take both of them?"

"Really? That'll be great!"

I took a moment to point out the features in his new piece that I thought showed good skill and color work. He was clearly pleased as well as moved to comment on what he liked about mine. His comments were not random - they had artistic merit and I told him so.

Together we put his pictures between two plain sheets of paper from the sketchpad, taping them together to

form a large protective envelope. As I was finishing that, he helped himself to the masking tape and put my new picture up on the wall under the shelf.

Receiving the impression that he would just hang around and stay the month if I were to allow it, I said, "Well, I have some business I need to take care of so I suppose you should be on your way now."

It seemed to pose no problem for him. I imagined he had been asked to leave far more often than invited to stay. That was sad. He took careful possession of his pictures and, reminding me to be ready at eleven the next day, he prepared to leave. With both hands needed to manage the flimsy package, we both sensed that a handshake wasn't going to work. I put my arm around him, patting the far shoulder several times. For that moment, he melted into my side.

Again, I watched him walk up the drive way and around the corner. I sensed a bit of a strut in his stride that day. He was a likeable person, but in all of his fifteen years, he had clearly not yet discovered that.

I straightened the table and took a soft drink from the refrigerator. My first swig suggested that cola in a black and white can left much to be desired. I positioned myself into what had become my reading spot on the bed and began going through the paper page by page. I wanted to see what I could learn about my recently adopted hometown. It was a fine paper with excellent writing. I was especially impressed by an article, which carried the by-line of Mary Guccione. Whimsically I wondered if her husband headed up the local wing of the Mafia. Without warning, that whimsy quickly turned to panic. I'd not kid about the Mafia anymore – not even to myself. It deserved a large entry on its own card.

The city seemed to be nuts about baseball. The college team was apparently something special. There were also sign-up notices for adult softball leagues for the summer. Since none of that stirred my juices, I assumed those weren't my sports. I wondered which, if any were. "Sumo wrestling," I said, laughing out loud as I patted my bulging mid-section.

The college itself intrigued me. I would walk the campus someday soon and see if I could determine why.

The classified section was huge in that Sunday

edition and I read every help-wanted ad as if it were Keats - well Spillane at least. The more I read the tighter my chest seemed to become. Work was obviously a major concern; as well, it needed to be. I had existed for just a little over two days and had already spent nearly ten percent of my two thousand-dollar stake. Something had to give in a hurry.

I did some quick figuring on the margin of the paper. My rent came to \$105.00 a week and it appeared I would need at least \$50.00 for food. Add another \$20.00 for miscellaneous items and I had a total of \$175.00 a week. I should probably keep a few hundred in reserve as an emergency or escape fund in case things suddenly took a turn for the worse. With \$1500.00 left, that would keep me afloat for about eight weeks. Two months. That wasn't so bad. It was more of a cushion than I had imagined off the top of my head. Those figures provided some sense of relief. The panicky feeling began to melt away. That was good! That was wonderful! I could survive for two months.

I scooted down into a reclining position, put the paper aside and was soon asleep. Apparently, I had slept several hours before I awoke, panic stricken, from a terrible nightmare. I was running through a woods at dusk, trying to make my way toward a clearing at its center. The clearing was filled with police cars, their lights flashing. There was much hubbub, with uniformed men hurrying this way and that, their flashlights playing on the trees and underbrush. Each time I would come to an opening in the undergrowth a policeman would grab me and take me back into the woods. I repeated those attempts several times - all unsuccessfully. Strangely, the grass in the center was vermilion red. Circling the open space were huge ominously dark pine trees swaying severely as if in a gale, although I could feel no wind where I stood. Sirens began sounding and the lights grew brighter. There were white lights, blue lights, red lights and yellow lights. They all blended together casting constantly shifting shadows painted in a thousand eerie tones. The sound became deafening and the light blinding. The scent of pine was overwhelming, causing my eyes to water. The accompanying emotion combined terror with the deepest sadness I could imagine.

I moved from the bed and paced, frantically, around my tiny room. My face was wet with tears. The terror had been far too real. The images, though frightening and vivid, remained meaningless. The grim feelings from the dream matched perfectly those I had been experiencing over the past several days. I went into the bathroom and ran cold water over my head. I was exhausted. I felt desperate - hopeless - totally overwhelmed.

I flung the front door open as if to say, 'Come and get me. Do with me what you will. I just don't care anymore! Let's just get it over with.'

It was twilight, the first twilight I had witnessed outside since my new life had begun. Whether it was a remnant of the dream or a new feeling I could not be sure, but twilight itself was terrifying. Recklessly, I walked outside shirtless and barefoot and took a turn around the lot desperately needing to grasp just what it was about the dimness of the day that was so frightening. It was like a frightened child trying to make it home from a friend's house before the scary blackness of night descended. I only succeeded in arousing strange glances from behind the blinds of numbers eight and nine.

What must they already think of me? A reclusive, fat, old man who talked in snooty English and had a young, male, visitor two days in a row. Yipes! That would not be the picture of myself I wanted projected and yet at that moment I could have cared less what anybody thought.

I went back inside and locked the door. I undressed and took a shower, attempting to wash away both nightmares - the one in my dream and the one I was living. It was half an hour later when I emerged into a darkened room. Night had fallen so I struggled to remember exactly where the light switches were. I was momentarily distracted by the interesting observation that even after two days in that place, I still didn't know where the crummy light switches were.

I didn't want to go back to sleep so I searched for something to occupy my mind. It was not until that moment that it struck me. The picture there on the shelf was composed of the same images that had been in my nightmare - the trees, the clearing with the red grass, the all-

encompassing foreboding mood of the piece so aptly titled, "Red Grass at Twilight". I held it in my hands as I walked around the room trying my best to recall what it all meant. I hoped against hope it didn't merely represent a recurring nightmare because that was something I did not want to repeat.

Nothing meaningful came to mind so I placed it back on the shelf and opened still another can of acrid, black and white cola. Sitting at the table, I fumbled with, and eventually unwrapped, the colorful strips of child's clay I had purchased at the grocery store. I mused for a moment about the strange variety of items now available in such places. They sold rakes and potted plants, litter boxes for cats and books by the pound. It was not the grocery of old. Although I knew that, I could only vaguely visualize other grocery stores. Even a memory that indistinct, felt like a heartening beginning.

Before long and without any conscious effort I was busily at work on a small bust. By the time I realized what I was doing, it had become apparent that a likeness of my young friend Rick was emerging from the marbled clump on the table. Using various parts of a plastic knife, I added details and depressions here and there. His ever ruffled, wisps of hair presented a special challenge and had to be re-done several times. In the end, I was satisfied.

As I was complimenting myself on how quickly I had been able to fashion it, a glance at my watch revealed it was going on four a.m. I had been sitting there almost nine hours. It had been a profitable nine hours as it had accomplished just what I had needed. My emotions were back under control - if despondency, lying on a bed of abject apprehension could be considered 'back to normal.' Perhaps now a period of restful sleep could come.

Hesitantly, I pulled back the covers and sat on the edge of the bed, shedding my pants. I fluffed the pillow and turned off the light. Then, virtually in the same motion, I turned it back on. There was no great universal law that prevented a grown man from sleeping with the light on, was there? I turned my back to the brightness of the room and told myself to relax and sleep. I was almost three days into my new life. I wondered what day four would bring.

CHAPTER FOUR

Day Four

Early Monday morning found me busily marking entries onto my new calendar. Before evening I needed to pay Myrtle for another five days which would take me through the following Sunday. I counted out another seventy-five dollars from the stash I had placed in my money belt. I could have paid further in advance but had I needed to leave suddenly I didn't want any more cash tied up than necessary. Later in the morning I would visit the Post Office and get the birth certificate requests mailed. The pit of my stomach knotted at the very thought. I pushed on trying to ignore it. Rick would be arriving at eleven so I needed to take care of my personal business early in the day. It was already unseasonably hot - at least I imagined so. It would be a good day for a hike in the cool of the woods.

Through my open side window, I heard Myrtle talking toothless with someone outside. I peeked out to determine if it might be a good time to catch her. It appeared to be, so I slipped into my shoes, picked up the money and walked toward her room up front. She saw me coming and ducked into her room. I wondered why. My question was answered momentarily when she reappeared wearing her teeth. I wasn't sure why I rated teeth, but I wouldn't question it.

"How about another five days' worth of rent?" I asked as I drew near.

"Always glad to take other people's money," she said in what seemed to be a more open and friendly manner than I

had sensed before. She continued: "Did I see Richard down by your place?" Silence ensued. We both knew that she had.

I supposed that I was expected to offer an explanation. I hoped that having him there hadn't broken some unspoken rule. I also wondered why she called him, Richard.

"Yes, you did. He's a nice lad. I met him up at Hank's cafe. We sort of hit it off I guess you'd say. He seems like sort of a loner."

I handed her the money, which she counted out loud before turning to re-enter her room. I moved close to the door, remaining outside since space was at a premium in her excessively furnished little home. I'm sure she thought of it as cozy. My terms would have included cramped and cluttered.

"Here's my deal," she began.

I had no idea from the tone of her voice whether I was about to be kicked out or sainted.

"You're an okay guy."

So far so good!

"Not like most of 'em who stays here. I'm gonna give you the weekly rate anyway, no questions asked. Just don't be mouthin' it around, okay?"

"Okay. Yes. Well, that is very kind of you. Thanks a lot."

Apparently my short and to the point phrases were more to her liking as I didn't get the forehead thing so much as once.

She took her well-filled calendar off its hook above her desk and counted out two weeks. "This'll take you through the fourteenth." If you want to stay longer, pay me before evening on the fourteenth. I'm in bed by eleven and don't never wake me after that."

It seemed I had been privy to that speech before. I wondered how she knew Rick. I supposed it was because, as Hank had said, they went way back. I didn't feel free to ask as Myrtle had given me the impression she was a private person. I didn't want to offend her - if that were even possible.

I thanked her again for rearranging the payment plan and turned to leave, folding the receipt and tucking it into my wallet before stepping away.

"He's my grandnephew. He's a good kid at heart. Just always in a bind. Always had ants in his pants. Never could sit still. But, he's a good kid underneath it all."

She turned and went inside. For some reason, she had felt the need to fill me in with what she thought was his relevant and important background. Not doing so face to face seemed to be a family trait.

Figuring relationships beyond the first cousin level suddenly seemed quite complicated. If Rick was her grandnephew, and he didn't know his father, then Myrtle had to be on Rick's mother's side of the family. That would make Myrtle a sister to either Hank or his wife. Was that right? I imagined Rick would offer the information during the course of our afternoon together if I could find a way to broach the topic. He certainly seemed candid and straightforward about most things.

I returned to my room and prepared to go to town. Looking at my watch, I realized it wasn't even seven o'clock yet. I had no idea when the post office opened but I imagined it was still too early. As I extended the rent-paid-days on my calendar it occurred to me that I had just made – well, saved – fifty-five dollars. That should allow for one more of Hank's great cholesterol lubricated feasts. It seemed my philosophy about food was; 'any excuse is a valid excuse'. I liked it! All quite automatically I double folded three pieces of writing paper and slipped them into my shirt pocket securing it with a ball point pen. It was obviously a well-practiced ritual. "Never be without paper and pen," I verbalized with a deliberate nod attesting to a growing understanding of myself. It felt just right. How nice! Perhaps there was some of the writer in me after all.

As I walked the eight blocks to Hanks, I mentally rehashed the several things about myself, which I was becoming comfortable with. (A misplaced preposition! Perhaps I was not an English teacher, after all. I suddenly hoped with all my heart that I was not an English teacher!)

I liked my gentle approach with people and the response it drew from others. I enjoyed my sense of humor - eccentric though it was. I even had to admit that for all the fear and unpleasant emotions that were filling my life, I was, in

a curious way, enjoying the conundrum in which I was involved. I was also impressed with my skills in dealing with it and the level of intellectual competence I seemed to possess. I was pleased I had artistic skills and I truly enjoyed pursuing those activities. I was delighted that it seemed to be of no great consequence to me that I was not a great artist and that I was content with the skills I had.

What a profitable walk it had been. In seven and a half blocks I had discovered a very comfortable and likeable new person - me. I stopped to dispatch several tears. Although uninvited and unexpected, they had nevertheless invaded my cheeks. With that accomplished, I entered Hanks. There was a Help Wanted sign in the window. I hoped 'Rick the Rev' hadn't already blown his opportunity there.

I settled into my usual - and now comfortable - back booth, before I realized that at the rear counter, facing the pass through, sat my ill-defined antagonist, C. P. Surprisingly I just sat there quietly, not letting the sudden pounding in my chest rattle my mind. On other occasions, he had seemed eager to disengage from me. I doubted if he had seen me come in so I just stood - well, sat - my ground.

Once Hank spied me, any refuge I had been enjoying there in the corner vanished. Suddenly I merited more than a friendly acknowledgment from the window. He disappeared from view for several minutes and then reappeared with my coffee and utensils - that morning they were wrapped in a genuine cloth napkin. Even a glass of water was soon gracing my table - something usually procured only by special request.

"Where you been?" he said extending his hand as if I were a long lost something or other. "Missed you yesterday. I'm open Sundays too, Ya know," came his opening barrage. "Got your breakfast workin'. It'll just be a few minutes."

I assumed his opening question had not been meant to be answered. His enthusiastic reception seemed out of proportion to anything a relative stranger like myself deserved.

"It sure smells great and, by the way, thanks for that delicious peanut butter pie Rick brought over yesterday. My compliments to your wife."

"Ricky tells me you're going out to Sumner Creek this morning."

"Well, I wasn't sure just where or what it was but Rick - y seems to be more than familiar with the spot. Hope whoever owns it won't mind."

"It's my kid brother's place. Ricky's welcome there anytime. He's a loner, you know. Kids just never have taken up with him. He spends a lot of time out there. I just don't have the time, the restaurant and all." He cleared his throat.

"Well, I'm looking forward to the excursion" (bad choice of word). "I only hope I can keep up. Ricky seems to have lots of energy."

"He has that. Always has. Drives his mom and grandma completely wild."

Hank seemed to derive some distorted pleasure from that state of affairs.

"I'll go put your breakfast together. Be back in a minute."

With my eyes, I followed him back to the curtain wondering just what his full story really was. Sometime in those last few minutes, C. P. had disappeared. I noticed a five-dollar bill beside his unfinished plate. Once again, I had dispatched the bald one. I was confident that his malevolent intentions had now moved from conjecture into the realm of fact. It distressed me and it still frightened me, but more than either of those, it intrigued me. Just because he had not yet accosted me, I did not dare become careless or unconcerned about him. I was certainly not yet ready to confront him.

Hank delivered an extra-large portion of everything.

"Hank, you out did yourself this morning. Trying to fatten me up for a turkey shoot, are you?" Although I had no idea where that saying had come from, his response suggested it was both appropriate and appreciated.

He pointed at the seat across from me. "Do you mind?" he said, hushing his tone as he asked permission to join me.

"Mind? No. Please, make yourself at home - well, I guess this is your home, isn't it?"

Again, he seemed to appreciate my brand of humor. I was afraid I was in for the third degree and I had not

yet contrived a personal history for such occasions. I would have to be very careful since what I would say would very likely be shared among all three or four of the people I now knew in this World.

"You're a high-class man and I'm sure you have other more important things to do than go for hikes with Ricky but we all really appreciate it. Just kick him out when he gets on your nerves. He's used to that. He sure likes you. You're all he talks about anymore."

It was related in a matter of fact manner with no hint of jealousy or rancor.

"Well, I like him, too. We're sort of soul mates in some ways, I guess. He's a talented little artist. I'd like to give him some pointers but I'm afraid he might take them as a put down. He seems pretty fragile that way."

"He's had a rough life. I think he'd take anything from you, though. He may have to end up a artist since he keeps getting kicked out of school. If you can help him get better at his drawing that sure couldn't hurt none."

I was amused that 'ending up an artist' seemed to rank pretty low on Hank's status ladder. I wondered what Hank wanted for the boy, so I asked. His response was circuitous.

"I didn't have any sons - just three girls. I hoped to pass this place on to Ricky but he never took any interest in it and now I see he's really not got any sense about the place, you know. Left on his own, he always chooses to do the thing that needs doing the least at that minute. He's immature. Always been that way. My wife says he's always been so on the go that his real age never could catch up with him."

"Is that sign in the window looking to replace him?" I asked, pleased with my phrasing.

"That sign? Oh no. I need some help around here early mornings. I'm looking for somebody to come in and open about four o'clock, get the place straightened up and do some prep work in the kitchen. That way I could sleep in and not have to get here 'til six - seven if I could find a decent cook. Good help just don't exist no more. I don't know where it went but it sure ain't around here."

"I was wondering how you manage to get any sleep

at all with the hours you keep here."

"I usually have a closer who comes in at eight and runs the place 'til midnight. I just lost him a couple of weeks ago. I figure an opener might be a better way to go. Probably don't matter 'cause I doubt if I'll find anybody I can trust to be here on time, let alone to do the work right."

I wished I had work credentials because I would have liked to take a crack at that. Just then, however, I wanted to learn more about Rick without seeming to be nosy.

"I'm sure Ricky's not mature enough yet for that kind of responsibility, is he."

"No way. I will give him this much. Since he started here he's never been late and never asked to leave early."

"Those are pretty good traits in an employee, I'd think," I said trying to reinforce even the smallest positive side to Hank's image of the boy.

"You're right there. You're right there, okay. If he just wasn't so hyper, you know. Back in kindergarten, the doctor put him on some kind of a hyper drug. The teacher said it helped but we never saw a difference at home, so we stopped giving it to him. His grandma never like dopin' up kids, you know."

"What did Ricky think about it, do you remember?"

"Ya he threw a terrible fit when we stopped buying it for him. I figured that just showed he was already addicted to it, you know."

I understood the situation, though I didn't know why or how. It was like *deja vu* - as if I had been a party to such a conversation in the past. Perhaps I had once had a son in a similar situation. Perhaps I had been that way myself. My heart again started pounding. Against my better judgment, I was moved not to keep my mouth shut.

"Are you open to a little advice? Will you give a crazy sounding scheme a try? I think it just might help the lad. If it won't you'll know soon enough. Can't hurt him."

"If you know something that has a chance to help him I'll sure give it a try, Mr. Jim."

Such unwarranted faith in me - a virtual stranger - was immediately bothersome. It indicated to me how

desperate Rick's family must have been. What a difficult way to live.

"Does Rick-y drink coffee?"

I received a surprised look but a deliberate answer. "I've never let him have it. Didn't think it was good for kids."

"Well, I agree with you on that. I think you used good judgment. Thing is, Ricky is no longer a little kid, is he?"

Hank nodded that he understood.

"Here's what I'd like you to try and you'll have to do it on faith because otherwise your judgment about the results will be clouded, do you understand how that could be?"

Again, he nodded. "Yes Sir. I can understand that. What should I do?"

"I'm going to suggest that you make sure Rick drinks one cup of strong, black, unsweetened coffee three times a day - with his breakfast, at noon, and about three in the afternoon."

Hank looked skeptical but I could tell he sincerely wanted to feel otherwise. "That's it?"

"Well, there's one other thing. Could you see that he had lots of peanuts and pecans to munch on - maybe both here and at home. I know it sounds really weird but if it achieves what I think it will, I believe Ricky's life will become a whole lot better really fast."

"Coffee it is then, three times a day, black and strong and no sugar. And lots of nuts. You a doctor or something?"

My immediate urge was to say, 'Yes, a nut doctor,' but I controlled myself.

"I've been associated with some pretty good ones in my day. By the way, if you can think of a way to get Ricky to do this without giving him any weird sounding reason, that would be best."

"He's asked for coffee sometimes. I'll just tell him now that he's fifteen I want him to be my drinking buddy and we'll have a cup together. I can just set the nuts around without saying nothing. If there's food available, Ricky'll eat it."

Hank showed a lot of savvy. Another customer entered. Hank reached across the table and patted my hand, then excused himself saying, "Breakfast is on me, this

morning."

I wasn't about to let him start that, so I left a five-dollar bill under my coffee cup and made my way outside. In light of my earlier encounter with C. P. I looked around uneasily before heading off in the direction of the Post Office. I was excited, pleased and somewhat uneasy about what I had just laid on Hank. Probably I shouldn't have done it but everything in my heart said it was the correct thing to do. I would, however, have to be more cautious in the future. I just couldn't go around giving advice that seemed right when I didn't know the basis for it.

By the time I wound my way through the waiting line at the Post Office, my mouth had become a saliva-free zone. Even so, I went ahead and purchased the two money orders and a few extra stamps. With the deepest breath my lungs could muster, I deposited the two envelopes in the out of town slot and left the building.

My mind had been filled with random thoughts and without any real awareness of the trip, I soon found myself turning into the Motel.

"Got mail," I heard as I passed Myrtle's open door. Thinking it couldn't have been for me I just walked on. Once again and louder, "Got mail," came her raspy voice.

I turned in confusion. "Mail for me?" I asked.

"Says Mr. Jim Johnson, Room # 13, Midway Motel. It's got a Joplin postmark."

"Oh that," I said, moving to play down the surprise I had initially exhibited.

"Thanks a lot. Didn't think it would get here this soon."

I took the envelope and hurried to my room. With the door locked and after an admittedly paranoid search of the bathroom and shower stall, I sat at the table and opened the bewildering envelope. My shaking hands made it a more difficult task than it should have been. It appeared to be a run of the mill number ten white, dime store envelope with no return address. My name had been hand printed in blue ink. How could anyone know I was there? How could anyone know me by that name I had invented out of thin air? A smidgen of relief surfaced when I thought it might be

something from Rick or one his several relatives – all of whom had suddenly taken such an interest in me.

The contents did not reflect those possibilities however and my heart returned to my throat. A chill worked its way up my back. Inside were a three by five card and a stamped envelope, return addressed to a box number in Joplin. In the center of the card near the top, written in pencil, was a question mark. Under that, at the center, in ink, was a dollar sign followed by a line - the way you might indicate a space to be filled in:

\$ _____.

Things were getting weird, eerie even. I had to think. What could it mean? From whom could it have come? How could I find out? Did someone else from my past know I was in Joplin? Perhaps it was from C. P. Was it a reminder for me to make some kind of payoff or a ransom payment, perhaps? The more I thought the more fantastic the whole thing seemed. I glanced up toward the gods and said, "Look guys, enough is enough!" Neurotically, I checked again to make sure the door was locked and cautiously pulled back the curtain to check the window lock above the table.

I got a cola and began pacing. It was almost nine. In two hours, Rick would be there. I wondered that if by allowing him to be with me I was putting him at risk. I certainly would not want that. I had to calm down and take this thing one small step at a time. I seemed to think best on my back so I laid down on the bed, spilling some cola down my neck in the process. Perhaps I would appreciate the humor in that later on.

What was the data at hand? I had a cryptic note on a card and an address. The only thing I knew for sure, was that someone expected me to mail something in that enclosed envelope. It bore a stamp to make that easy - perhaps not only easy but quick. I only needed to figure out what it was that I was expected to return in the envelope.

Looking at the card itself several things seemed apparent. First, was the question mark. A question mark has but one purpose - to ask a question. So what was that question? Why was the question mark written in pencil and the rest in ink? Could the question mark have been an

afterthought, perhaps?

Another matter was the blank space. For what does one use a blank space? It indicates the need for information. You fill in a blank space. And what kind of information did that space require? A money amount since it already had the dollar sign in place. It was asking me to fill in some dollar amount, but why? How was I to know how much? Should it be one dollar or one million?

Okay, so I didn't know how much. If I made a mistake, what was the worst that could happen? I had no idea. Of course, I really didn't have to return the envelope or, did I? Bewildering was the proper descriptor, all right.

What benefit, if any, would I receive by either returning or not returning the card? I didn't know. Well, I didn't know what benefit the sender intended but there just might be one benefit I could force onto the situation. My heart raced in an invigorating manner as if it were suddenly on my side for the first time. If I returned it and then staked out the Post Office box, chances were good I could find out who was at the other end of this mystery. That appeared to be a sound plan. What could the downside be? I could be spotted and then no one would go to the box and I wouldn't gain any information. That was certainly not a disastrous downside. I could be caught by some bad guy and worked over. It wasn't a pleasant thought but more Mickey Spillane than real life, I imagined. Standing there in the busy Post Office didn't seem like a dangerous place – well, not unless a disgruntled postal employee decided to grace us with his presence and riddle the place with an oozy. Once said, that was not as humorous as I had first imagined it would be.

Okay, then, I would return the card immediately. There was a late morning pick up at the box in front of the motel. Now all I had to do was decide what figure to put in the blank. How about one hundred dollars? That's a nice round, innocuous figure and it would fill in the blank quite adequately. Suddenly it all seemed absurd though the terrifying edge remained. If it had been intended for me to include the amount of cash that I had indicated on the line, someone was just going to have to be disappointed. Had that been the case, would that line not have already been filled in telling me

how much to enclose?

I completed the deed and mailed the envelope. It seemed that every time I approached a mail slot my heart did its best to escape my chest. Perhaps that was all behind me now. Back in my room I tried to resolve the issue of allowing Rick to be near me. It actually might be better for me to be away from the motel for a while. I would have to make certain we were not followed as we left together. If we were followed I would just have to make some excuse - I could feel ill. That felt like a good plan. Since there seemed to be no intellectual basis for analyzing any of this, I had to go with my feelings. I smiled when I recognized that Rick probably knew a whole lot more about survival than I did. Maybe I should invite him to move in! It was, of course, an attempt at humor.

As punctual as Big Ben, Rick's knock sounded at precisely eleven o'clock. I had to assume it was Rick's because it seemed to have more cohesiveness than I was used to.

I was sitting on the bed putting on my shoes.

"Come on in, I called, a blatantly stupid thing to have done in light of the unfamiliar cadence of the knock. The door opened briskly and in waltzed Rick, a nap sack on his back and one under his arm. On his head was a brand-new ball cap sporting the local college insignia. Without a word of greeting, which seemed to be his style, he placed the nap sacks (which I would later be told were backpacks) on the table. From one of them, he immediately extracted another ball cap. He came over to where I was sitting and placed it on my head. After a bit of repositioning he seemed satisfied.

"You look great in it," he said, unable to control his pleasure. He tugged at my arm. Come and look at yourself. He shoved the bathroom door closed so I could get a direct view in the mirror.

"Thanks Rick. This really is great. It makes me look ... months younger."

The boy chuckled. I think I could have said the World was coming to an end and Rick would have chuckled - just the kind of audience I needed. I administered a quick arm around the shoulder and squeeze thing. Again, he melted into me. If I had ever seen a touch deprived youngster, Rick was

it. He made no move to proceed with life until I loosened my grasp of his shoulder. Then, without a word about it or even a glance in my direction, he moved back to the packs.

"I hope you like junk food 'cause I got gobs of stuff." He began unloading the packs. My first inclination was to ask him to wait and show it all to me after we got out to the creek but seeing the pleasure he was experiencing from displaying it all, I just watched and agreed about what great stuff he had selected - cayenne flavored pork rinds? He stopped short of unpacking the actual lunch that Hank had prepared but acknowledged its presence in the bottom of the second pack.

"It's gonna be a great day. Do you still climb trees or not? If you don't you can just watch me. I'll bet you never seen nobody go as high as I can."

"I imagine I'll just watch, but that will be super."

This was one happy lad. Had I grinned that hard for that long my cheeks would have cracked. We replaced the goodies into the packs. He had saved a spot for the sketchpads and box of pastels. Once they were in place he hefted both packs and determined which one I should have. I wasn't sure if I got the heavy one or the light one - I imagined the light one. Rick's new mission in life seemed to be taking care of me.

"You know how to get into one of these things?" he asked and then just assuming I didn't he added, "Here, let me help."

He was meticulous in making sure the straps laid flat and were not too tight so they wouldn't dig in. His enthusiasm thrilled me. I wondered if I had ever before been a part of something that was so intensely important to another human being.

The walk would have been easier had Rick not opted to stay so close to my side. We were like Siamese twins joined at the hips but this was his time and as I had previously observed, he just cried out for physical contact.

"I'm kind of like a man, now, I guess you'd say," he announced out of the blue.

I wasn't at all sure I wanted to hear what might follow so I didn't respond.

"Grampa says I'm old enough to be his coffee

drinking buddy now and we sort of set up a schedule. Me and him are really getting along good, lately. I think he finally likes having me around. Lots of good stuff is happening to me all of a sudden, you know, it's like a dream."

I couldn't resist the setup he had just created: "Except in your dreams you're surrounded by lots more ..." and together we said ... "Naked girls." Actually, he said naked girls and I said naked ladies, which only made it seem that much more hilarious to him. It gave me reason to consider a side of my life I hadn't thought much about. (Wonderful! Another misplaced preposition!) I would pursue that later - ladies, not prepositions.

It was necessary to belly under two barbed wire fences and traverse several fields before we arrived at the spot Rick had been describing non-stop during the preceding fifty-five minutes. I had kept one eye to the rear and was satisfied we had not been followed.

Presently we descended what was clearly a seldom used, virtually hidden, trail that took us down the steep side of a beautiful, wooded hillside into a narrow valley. Through the valley ran the creek I had been hearing so much about. Its water was so clear we could see the bottom even in its deepest parts. There were frogs and flowers, turtles and trees, red birds and rocks. There was a sense of peace there. I could see why it had become such a precious spot for Rick.

Presently we came upon Rick's permanent campsite.

"This is my camp. It's like my secret place. I've never brought anybody here before. You're the first."

His grin was another cheek buster.

"Well, I'm honored, Rick. This is one of the most special things that has ever happened to me. It's every bit as beautiful here as you said it was."

I looked around.

"That's the scene you drew, right there, isn't it?"

I pointed off to my right.

"Ya? You really recognized it, huh?"

"Certainly. You did a fantastic job of capturing the details."

I thought the lad was going to wet his pants. He

was simply elated about every aspect of his life at that moment. He helped me out of the backpack and pointed to a log on which I assumed he thought I would want to sit and rest. It wasn't that Rick was short on words. He just didn't waste them on the obvious.

"Want a fire? I like fires. I got a safe place for one, see."

"Did you build that pit yourself?" I asked as he went ahead and began laying the sticks inside - my feeling about a fire not really a contributing factor in his decision.

"Ya. See it's lined with really thick flat rocks. When they get hot, they'll stay that way for a long time. If you put a pup tent over it after the fires out, it'll keep you warm most the night.

"So, you stay out here all night by yourself?"

"Ya. Lots of times. I was even out here last Christmas Eve. I had my tent set up over there, like I said, over the pit so I'd stay warm. I even decorated that little pine tree with a string of popcorn. It was great."

I was pleased he had such a wonderfully comfortable place to come. I was saddened that he had been there alone on Christmas Eve.

Personally, I thought it was delightfully cool there in the shady valley, but Rick, perhaps out of habit, shed his shirt immediately.

"I'm starved. How about you?" he said once the fire was going.

"Yes. That walk made me hungry, too."

Out came all the food again. It was then that I first noticed the rock shelves he had constructed back against the side of the hill. He stacked the boxes, cans and sacks on the shelves in a far more organized manner than I would have expected. He could have fed an army - well a Cub Scout Den at least. Moving one, interestingly leveraged, large flat rock he revealed a pit he had dug into the hill.

"This is my refrigerator. It keeps pop and milk cool for quite a while. Not cold unless you put a sack of ice in with it, but good enough."

I had discovered a regular frontiersman. Nothing we ate required a fire but I soon came to realize that was

beside the point.

"It sure looks like I'm in good hands here with you, my friend," I said repositioning my self onto the ground, back against the log.

I thought the word was innocuous enough but it stopped Rick dead in his tracks. He turned toward me.

"Are we really friends?" he asked in the most solemn tone and with the most serious face I had yet witnessed from him.

"Well I can't speak for you, but I certainly think of you as my friend, my good friend in fact."

"Ya. Me too. I don't really have any friends. Kids don't like me and I always make adults really nervous."

Silence ensued for some time as he pawed his way down to the lunch in the bottom of his backpack. I could see the wheels turning and anticipated the question, but waited for it to come. I didn't have to wait long. His tone continued to be somber. His voice was soft. It was an important moment, which I suspected required great courage on his part.

"Why do you like me?"

"Why do I like you? Well, let's see. It could be that wonderful smile you always seem to wear for all of the World to enjoy. It could be that you always laugh at my stupid jokes. It could be that we like doing some of the same things. It could be that, like you, I'm kind of a loner so I think I can understand some things about you. It could be your great sense of humor. And it probably is all of those things, but its something else, too."

If one can perk up from a state of rapt attention, he did.

"Sometimes between two people there is just something special you can't describe that says they were somehow meant to be friends. I guess that's what I feel most when I think about you - that it just seems like we should be friends."

More silence. Then finally:

"Coke or Pepsi. I brought both."

"Pepsi sounds great, thanks."

We ate. We joked. We felt close. We hiked and Rick climbed trees like a monkey. He worked for a while on a

low rock wall he was building around his encampment. I sketched him as he worked. At days end I had a half dozen drawings of my new friend. He had also completed several. It had been a truly grand day from my perspective and I, unsuspected, one of the best days in Rick's entire life.

We were packed and he checked to make sure I was hitched appropriately into the backpack. It was time to leave and yet he hesitated. I knew something was on his mind. It appeared appropriate for me to nudge him a little so he could say or ask whatever it was.

"You look like you have something on your mind, Rick. Is it anything I can help with?"

"I been thinking all afternoon how great it is to be friends." He looked directly into my face. "With a friend, you don't have to be anything except what you are - at least I think that's what you meant."

"That's exactly what I meant, Rick. I agree. That kind of friendship is pretty special."

"Is it okay to thank somebody for being your friend, I mean if you felt like it?"

"I think that is one of the best parts about being good friends. Think about it, we have been thanking each other all day."

"Huh?"

"Well, I enjoyed watching you climb and work on the wall, and you enjoyed the pictures I drew of you. Helping a friend have a good time is sort of like thanking him, isn't it?"

"Ya. I guess I see what you mean."

"Just now when you checked these straps for me. That was sort of like saying you cared about me, right?"

"Yeah."

"Well, when you let someone know you care about them, that's another way of saying thanks for being my friend."

He sighed a massive sigh, and just stood there in front of me, arms dangling like the proverbial dishrags at his sides. I slipped out of the backpack and opened my arms. Without the slightest hesitation, he was ready for the hug of all hugs. He put his arms around me and laid his head on my chest. I could see the tears rushing down the gentle contours of his still soft, little boy's face. They were soon joined by an

abundant supply of my own. I guess he felt them dropping on his hair because he looked up into my face. We reflected each other's faint, damp smiles.

"Friends can cry together sometimes, too," I said.

He snuggled his head back against my chest. I patted his back. We just stood together for some time.

When he was ready at last, he gently separated himself from me and nodded as if to say - well as if to say so many things that words could not effectively communicate. I nodded back. We both understood.

"Can I get you to fix these tangled straps for me one more time?" I asked. He did of course - with great care - and we were soon on our way.

I hoped I hadn't done Rick a disfavor. Allowing such an important friendship to develop with no promise that it could continue might eventually seem more like a bad joke than a loving gesture. I would have to confront that possibility with him openly and directly in the very near future.

The day had obviously been a wonderful experience for Rick. That, however, could not possibly match the fantastic day of self-discovery it had provided for me. True, I had grown to know this boy much better than before, but more importantly, I had uncovered a wonderful part of myself that I would treasure forever.

My chest tightened and my stomach knotted as I wondered just how long "forever" might be in my case. The chills and terror, and the tormenting uncertainties returned in a rush. I suddenly felt myself falling apart.

CHAPTER FIVE

Day Five

By morning, some semblance of self-control and short-term perspective had returned. Not knowing how early the mail would be available in the boxes, I arrived at the Post Office promptly at seven o'clock on Tuesday morning. Within minutes, I located the box to which I had mailed the envelope. It was the smallest size available and as far from the front door as physically possible. I wondered if that had been intentional. Perhaps it had been all that was left when the person needed to rent it. In either event, that's where it was and I needed to find some clandestine spot from which I could watch.

That area of the Post Office was one, wide open expanse. At first inspection, there appeared to be no available hiding place. Further exploration revealed a door marked "Emergency Exit Only" directly across the room from the box. It had a small horizontal window just a bit below my eye level. Making certain no was watching I gave it a gentle nudge and found it open. I had feared it might set off an alarm. It didn't. It led into a stair well. I positioned myself on the landing and began my vigil.

Eight o'clock came and went. No one had approached the box or, for that matter, had even set foot in that remote area of the room. The window through which I was peering was three or four inches below my eye level and a crick soon developed in my neck. It made me wonder how

tall I was. Either, I was on the tall side of average or a rather short workman had put the window in place.

Nine o'clock came and went. Still there was no activity. The small of my back was aching.

By ten o'clock, the crick had engulfed my shoulders and spine down to the middle of my back. Undaunted, I peered on. It had become obvious that the stake out business was not for the faint of heart - or back.

Ten-ten arrived. Someone was walking toward the wall in which the box was housed. I perked up. The awareness of my aches and pains slipped into the background. He was a slender man of average height wearing a dark suit and carrying a black briefcase. He wore gold, octagonal, wire rimmed glasses, had a close-cropped black beard and bushy black eyebrows. His stride was long and he bobbed up and down slightly as he walked. He was too far away for me to make out any more specific details. With more than a hundred boxes in that section chances were slim that he would be the person for whom I had been waiting. As far as I could recollect, I had never seen him before. He looked the part of some sinister, shifty-eyed, character from a black and white, late night TV mystery movie.

I hardly breathed for fear of giving myself away. He walked directly to the box. Perhaps the gods were with me. Without so much as looking around the room to see if he were being watched, he referred to a small slip of paper and worked the combination. The box open, he removed my envelope. Giving it only the most cursory once over he slipped it into his inside jacket pocket, methodically closed the box and strode off toward the front door.

The whole scene was disappointingly less dramatic than I had anticipated. I was clearly annoyed that he had not been on the lookout for me. It would have made more sense to feel relieved, but I was annoyed. Perhaps if he had understood the pain I had just endured he would have flashed a compassionate glance in my direction.

I re-entered the main room and followed him out the door. He stopped to purchase a paper from a machine at the corner, tucked it under his arm and crossed the street. I kept my distance until he was nearly out of sight around the corner

by the library. Then I picked up my pace and followed a half block behind. As I turned the corner I glanced around and who should I see behind me but C. P. What an interesting circumstance - as if right out of Spy Versus Spy. My anxiety level rose markedly but I was determined to follow the bearded man. An unanticipated turn of events was soon to shatter that plan. Mr. Whiskers got into a parked car, started the engine and drove off. I copied down the license number even though I had no way of tracing it. It was just one of those things you were supposed to do in such a situation.

I turned, nonchalantly, and found that C. P. was nowhere in sight. Surprised and relieved, I made my way down the street to my bench under the mimosa tree where I could sit and reconnoiter. Initially it seemed my first effort as an undercover operative, had been a disaster. Though disappointed I had to smile as I reflected on my part in that bumbling cloak and dagger scenario. Strange as it was, however, things actually seemed to be a bit brighter than before. At least I now knew that there were two villains in my story.

In the back of my mind, I had postulated that it would be C. P. who I would find at the Post Office but that had been wrong. Why did he continue to follow me? How had he known I would be leaving the Post Office? Perhaps it had been a coincidence. Maybe he had followed me from the motel earlier and was merely still tailing me. Perhaps he, too, was following Whiskers or were the two of them in cahoots? Had he known about the envelope? Why did he not approach me? Perhaps I just needed to approach him and get it all out in the open. Where's Mike Hammer when you need him?

My mind spun with questions, most of them phrased as if from the pages of a nineteen forties dime novel. I knew so many things but I had no connections. I didn't know how I knew things. I couldn't connect my knowledge with the time or place or circumstances of having acquired it. There were no images of home or work or of friends or relatives. How could I know so much and yet possess so little that was of any value to me? I was physically exhausted and emotionally drained. I needed a piece of Rick's grandmother's pie.

Hank was, of course, happy to see me and his joy was uncontrolled as he related that Ricky hadn't broken a single dish the night before.

"I still can't understand it. He did his job like he'd been doing it for twenty years. He kept up with the tables - I mean he never once got behind up front. He kept the dishes washed up in back. He even stacked them all in exactly the right places. Whenever I reached for one, it was always there. I mean I had to remind myself it was really Ricky. He was even opening the door for folks up front as they left and telling them how nice it was to have them here. I was so astonished just watching him that I got behind in the kitchen."

"That's really great to hear," I said, referring to the part about Rick and not getting behind in the kitchen, of course.

"Great? It's unbelievable! What did you do to the boy?"

A good question if, in fact, it had been anything I had really done. How was I to respond to all this?

"I'm sure it's a combination of things. I can't take credit for it. Some kids just take a little longer to get the hang of new situations, you know?"

"Well, whatever it was you did we can't thank you enough," he said, completely ignoring my disavowal of credit.

As his waitress appeared from the back room, coming on shift, Hank scooted into the seat across from me. His voice became hushed - all quite confidential.

"You know what he did when he left here last night?"

The old man's eyes became moist. Without allowing time for me to venture a guess, in Rick-like fashion, he plunged ahead with his story.

"When his shift was over he came back to the kitchen, clocked out and hung up his apron. Those things were amazing enough. Then he came over and gave me a big hug and said, 'I love you, Gramps.' And it wasn't just a short 'Hi and goodbye' kind of hug either. We haven't hugged since he was five. What do you think of that?"

"Well, I think it's great. Ricky was obviously feeling pretty good about things - and about you - wasn't he?"

"I'd say so," Hank said shaking his head in disbelief. "You're just an Angel, Jim. Just an Angel."

"Now wait a minute, Hank," I said, feeling the need to reduce my status as the newly ordained saint of Hankdom.

"It was you the boy hugged, not me. Don't you suppose that means it's you who's doing something right?"

He sat in silence for a moment.

"I hope that's true, Jim. I hope that's true. I just never knew what to do for him when he was a little fella, you know. He just ran around and screamed most the time, destroying anything that wasn't nailed down. Maybe we do have more in common now."

I got my pie and coffee and, at Hank's insistence, this time I did allow him to tear up the check. After all, being a Saint should procure one some perks! Who knew how long those golden wings would be mine?

Promptly at eleven thirty Rick popped in through the front door. He spied us in the corner and was soon sliding into our booth beside his grandfather. For just a moment, he rested his head on Hank's shoulder. I'm sure it appeared to be a playful gesture to outsiders. To the three of us, however, it was teeming with meaning.

"Morning, Jim," he said, reaching out and patting my hand. "How about joining Gramps and me for our cup of coffee?"

He looked up into Hank's face as if it were important to receive the man's nod of accord. It came, coupled with an expression which combined love and pride and disbelief. Rick returned a quick nod, reinstated his patented smile and shivered in a double shrug of delight.

"Sounds great to me," I said, "but I think I already have a head start."

"We'll catch up, won't we Gramps?" he said eagerly playing along. "What's with the whiskers?" he asked.

The word, whiskers, brought an automatic flush to my face and a sudden jump in my heart rate before I realized he was referring to my face and not the bearded man.

"Just trying to become as handsome as your Grandfather," I snapped back, hoping I had covered my rush of anxiety.

We chuckled as Rick reached across the table and felt my cheek.

"Guess I'll have to let mine grow, too, then" he said, sitting back and theatrically feeling both sides of his own totally fuzz-free face. Again, we chuckled. It was a good time.

"I hear you were a regular Superman around here last evening," I said at last.

Rick grinned his ear-to-ear grin and looked up at Hank, scooting a bit closer in the process.

"Telling stories on me are you, Gramps?" he said playfully, displaying no attempt to hide the pride he felt about it all.

"Me, brag on a sorry puppy like you? Never!" came Hank's response with an abbreviated elbow to the boy's ribs, maintaining the lingering eye to eye with the lad.

In a manner that seemed all quite natural, Rick slipped his arm around his grandfather as the horseplay continued. He then got up and served us coffee all around.

Hank's eyes stayed moist. Rick's grin became permanent. My happiness soared.

Just how I had known that caffeine sometimes has a calming and focusing effect on certain hyperactive youngsters, I did not remember. How I ascertained that Rick was a good candidate for that treatment I could not say. Although I was gratified - elated, even - that it seemed to be working in Rick's case, I shuddered at the thought that I had actually suggested it with so little knowledge of either the process or the boy's situation. It had either been a very lucky happenstance or I was some kind of outstanding doctor. In either case, I would have to watch myself in the future.

Somehow, I also knew that the effects of the zinc from the nuts on his behavior and physical immaturity would not kick in for several weeks, if that soon. In one way, I hoped I would be there long enough to witness the outcome. In another, I hoped my nightmare would have ended well before then and that I would be getting on with my "real" life, whatever it was.

The time with Hank and Rick had been a much needed and appreciated break from my own chilling personal plight.

Back in my room, the recent slice of pie notwithstanding, I made myself lunch and then laid down for a nap. I couldn't sleep. My mind kept wandering not to my own predicament but to Rick's. The boy needed to be in school. His suspension had been for a full month. By the time he got back, he would be so far behind, he would never be able to catch up. It also seemed likely that the grades he had racked up earlier in the semester were low. Perhaps I could tutor him. I was sure I could if the school would just agree to provide his books and assignments. I would pursue that later. The mere possibility allowed me to sleep.

If sleep implies rest it was sleep in name only. After ten minutes, I awoke in a cold sweat. It had been another terrible nightmare. The police were shining their flashlights in my face. Through the blinding lights, I could make out enough of the features from the pine forest dream to realize I was revisiting that same setting. All of the police seemed to be talking at once. I couldn't discern if they were telling me something, or asking me questions. Finally, I was screaming back at them, as they rushed to restrain me. Screaming at anyone was something I found hard to imagine myself doing under any circumstance.

The same emotions were present - fear, terror, deep sadness, desperation and this time anger. I had not felt raw anger before but I certainly recognized it when it welled up within me in that dream.

I sat on the edge of the bed shaking my head and pounding the pillow in my lap. Tears poured down my cheeks and onto my chest. I walked to the mirror and beheld a mournful face, which defined anguish and despair. I could see my temples pulsing and my chest still heaving. I attempted to regain control of my breathing. What was it my heart was remembering and my mind had buried? The vision could have been of me in terrible trouble with the police. It could have also represented tragedy, or fright, or any one of a dozen other distressing circumstances. Why could I not remember?

I took a cola from the refrigerator, and rolled the can across my forehead, hoping the coolness would help me reclaim control. The tears had stopped. I opened the drink and took a sip. For a long time, I just stood in the middle of

the room, drained and feeling desperate. Presently I realized my breathing was back to normal and the intense constriction in my chest had eased. My legs were unsteady. I sat down at the table. I momentarily mused at the idea that perhaps the caffeine in the cola had affected me in the same way it had Rick.

It had been a graphic representation of another piece of the puzzle so I took out a card and wrote a detailed description of what I had seen and felt both in the dream and during my response to it. With that finished, I placed it on the growing stack of clues. I would need to purchase more cards the next time I was at the grocery. I took out a sketchpad and began doodling. The scene that arose from the page was that of the vision in my nightmare. Having preserved it in that manner made me feel better, somehow.

I got up to stretch and discovered an hour had passed. I peeked through the shades on the front window. There was a patrol car parked in the driveway near Myrtle's door. That was not what I needed at that moment. Those awful feelings began to return - magnified ten-fold. My chest tightened. I panicked and cinched up the still packed duffel bag. Then I hurriedly collected things from the bathroom and tossed them into my suitcase, securing them in place with my robe before closing it.

I returned to the window. The policeman was sitting in the front seat of his car and was talking on the radio as he looked in my direction. I quickly ascertained that he would be unable to see the side window from where he was sitting. I could make my escape through it. My panic was rapidly heading toward hysteria. I had to get myself back under control. I moved the table from under the window and slid in a chair to stand on. Pulling back the curtain, I checked to make certain the policeman would not be able to see me. I unlocked the window and slid it open. It smelled like my shower – the soap.

At that moment, the patrol car rolled into sight. My heart sank. It was too late. It appeared that the time to face my past was about to be upon me. Then, all quite unexpectedly, the car kept going. I moved to the front window. It was turning around in the parking lot and

apparently leaving the premises. I cracked the door and watched it all the way out of the lot to make sure that was really the case. It was. I collapsed spread-eagle onto the bed and cried the terror away.

Sleep had apparently overcome me, for my next awareness was rolling over and glancing at my watch. It read five thirty-five. For a wonderful, split second I felt rested and renewed. The recent events escaped my consciousness. They then washed over my being with the full force of a driving rainstorm.

After a moment of reconciliation to the reality of my situation I got up and stretched. I rearranged the table and chairs, sat down and took out the stack of clue cards. I sorted through them time after time. Nothing new appeared in my thoughts. I put them away and took out the sketches I had made at the creek. I was soon at work putting the finishing touches on them. I drew a few more scenes from memory. They were pretty good - saleable, even, if I could only find a place to sell them.

The rapping on the door, lead me to look at my watch again - ten after eight. I recognized the knock and called for him to come in.

Again, there was no greeting.

"You really oughta lock that door, ya know," Rick said as if addressing an irresponsible child. He locked it immediately and then came over to the table. "Promise you'll lock up at least at night?" he said, repeating his concern.

"Promise," I said, holding up my right hand, courtroom style. Just why it hadn't been locked I didn't know. After the events of the last several days, one would think I would have nailed it shut. I would have to be more mindful of such things.

With one hand still behind his back, he asked, "Chocolate or coconut?"

The silence that ensued as I tried to ferret out his meaning caused him to repeat himself. "Chocolate or coconut?" Then, without being able to wait for my response he said, "I'll bet you like chocolate best." From behind his back, he produced another white, carryout box.

He meticulously separated the top from bottom and

placed the piece of chocolate pie in the top section for me, licking his fingers as he went on talking.

"I just got off work. It was another Superman performance. I did great! Even Mary said so. She shared her tips with me. I guess the busboy is supposed to get ten percent of the waitress's tips or something. Nobody told me that."

He methodically emptied the change from each of his four pockets and pushed it into a pile in the middle of the table.

"What do you think of that?"

"I think it's just great, Rick. I'm really proud of you."

He grinned uncontrollably.

"That's the same as what Gramps said, "I think it's great and I'm really proud of you." Rick had the quote memorized. I was not in the least surprised.

He went to the refrigerator, got the milk and poured us each a glass - never asking if I wanted any, of course. He then positioned himself on the chair with his right leg folded beneath him. (Oh, to be fifteen again!) We both attacked the pie as if we hadn't eaten in a month. Rick didn't let a full mouth interfere with his continuing monologue.

"Mrs. Clapper and her husband were in for dinner - she's my English teacher. I talked to her just like she was a regular person, ya know. I mean I got her water and took their plates when they finished and brought them coffee. We even talked about stuff. She introduced her husband to me just like I was somebody. He likes to fish. It was just like it wasn't me who was doing all of that, ya know?"

"Who do you suppose it was, then?" I asked, hoping to direct the comment toward some kind of personal insight.

Without hesitation, he returned, "It's Jim's new Rick."

"Jim's?" I said, underscoring a question with my delivery.

"Ya. Everybody says I'm some kind of new person since I met you. Gramps calls you my Guardian Angel."

He stopped chewing and looked directly into my face. "Are you my Guardian Angel, Jim?" he asked with all

the sincerity of a naive little boy.

"What do you think?" I replied, playing for time.

"I think you're like a Guardian Angel but I think you're a real person."

"Is that okay with you?"

"Okay? It's great! You can't go to the creek or eat pie with a Angel, can you?"

"I suppose not," I said, more than a little amused with his position on it. "You've been giving this a lot of thought, haven't you?"

"All the time. It's like all of a sudden I can think about stuff I never could before. Mrs. Clapper said I was so thoughtful and careful that she hardly recognized me. At school, she hated me, I think. ... Thoughtful and careful! That's what I can't understand either. How did you do it to me?"

Here we go again, I thought to myself. "Why does it matter who did it or how it got done? Can't you just be happy with how things are going?"

"Oh, Jim, I've never been so happy with myself in my whole life. Nobody else has either."

A tear rolled down each cheek and he made no attempt to intercede.

He continued: "You're not going to tell me how you did it, are you? That's okay. I figured it was some secret thing you probably learned in Tibet or Poughkeepsie or somewhere. It's like in a X-file thing or something."

There was a long pause - well long considering the non-stop chattering of the previous several minutes.

"Even though me and you are friends, I want to thank you, Okay, Jim?"

"If I have been able to do anything that has been helpful to you, you are most certainly welcome and I appreciate your thanks. There is one other thing I think you need to pay attention to, however."

"What's that?"

"Who is it that's being this 'New Rick'? Was it Jim in the restaurant this evening? Was it Gramps out there clearing tables? Was it your Mother doing the dishes?"

"No. It was me."

"And that is what you must never forget, Rick. It is you who is doing all these things and nobody else. Give yourself credit for what's going on, okay?"

Silence overtook the room. Slowly he began nodding. When at last he looked back into my face his expression remained subdued. In typical Ricky style, without mincing words or belaboring the point he responded slowly and deliberately: "Isn't ... that ... great!"

With that, he cleared the plates. That conversation ended and would never be rehashed.

He looked through the pictures I had been working on.

"These are really great, Jim. I bet you could sell these at Gramps' place, you know. We could hang them up on that long wall that leads to the rest rooms. It would look better with something on it anyway. That way everybody would see them every time they went to pee."

The thought had entered my mind (selling them at Hanks, not the part about liquid bodily functions). However, I seemed to be the kind who had a difficult time pursuing things that might put someone else out - especially when they might do it because they felt obligated to me for some reason.

"You think so?" I asked.

"I'll talk to Gramps about it. He'll love the idea."

"I suppose that should be my job - talking with your grandfather about such things, shouldn't it?"

"Well, he'll think it's a great idea either way, you'll see," came Rick's enthusiastic reply. I had the feeling that regardless of my statement about personal responsibility for the deed, the suggestion was going to beat me to the restaurant.

"What makes you think Mrs. Clapper hates you at school?" I asked, nudging the conversation toward a more growth producing direction.

"She makes me read in front of the class, for one thing. I hate doing that. I'm a lousy reader and she knows it. She must hate me to make me do it, ya know."

"Since you're doing so well in other areas all of a sudden, do you suppose your reading may have also improved?" I asked in as matter of fact and low key a manner

as I could forge.

"Don't know. Hadn't thought about it. Got something to read around here? Let's try."

He spied the library books on the dresser and, bringing them all back to the table, opened the top one to the first chapter. With the exception of those words which he had no reason to have ever seen before - ones I supplied for him before he could become frustrated - he read exceptionally well.

"Is that about the way you usually read out loud?" I asked trying to ascertain whether he was in fact putting himself down for a problem that hadn't really existed.

"I don't think so. I mean, heck no. I can't read that good. I never could."

I chuckled. By now Rick knew that particular snicker meant I was tickled about something he had just done or said.

"What?" he questioned, a grin replacing the expressionless face that had entrenched itself while he had been reading. "What?"

"Did you just hear what you said? You said you can't read as well as you just read. Now, does that make any sense at all?"

He laughed nervously, nodding this way and that. Then, without answering, he picked up the book and resumed reading. Before he closed the book, he had finished chapter one in Phenomenology. It was ten o'clock.

"That was pretty good," he said in what I misinterpreted as a self-evaluation of his word reading skill.

I agreed. "You read great!"

"No, well, yes I did read pretty great, but I meant the stuff in that book - it's pretty good stuff. Can I finish it?"

"The book?"

"Yeah."

"Sure." I said, taken aback, somewhat. "Maybe you can read some more tomorrow night after work."

"Cool. I never thought about stuff that way before," he said quite philosophically.

"What stuff?" I asked, wondering what he thought he had just learned from that college level text.

"That we each see things different from each other because of the stuff we think we know is true. So, what I think is real is probably different from what you think is real. We can both see the same thing and think of it in two different ways. That's probably why the school and I fight all the time, huh? I see one thing as real and they see real some other way."

I was astounded! If there had ever been a diamond in the rough, this lad was surely it. He wasn't asking if his interpretation was correct. He knew it was. It seemed like a good time to pursue the big question in my mind.

"What's the chance we could get your books and assignments from school and help you keep up while you're on suspension?"

"We'd have to talk to the principal and quite frankly, me and him hate each other's guts."

Silence. Then he continued.

"I think I'd like to try that though. I just figured I'd fail 9th grade like I did first grade. That would be real embarrassing, ya know."

"Well, what would you have to do first?" I asked.

Get Mom and Gramps to go talk to Mr. Lampley, I guess. Maybe you could go too."

"I think your first plan was best. Keep it in the family. Do you suppose Mrs. Clapper might take your side on this?"

"Never! Well, maybe. I don't know. I guess I could ask her. That would really be hard to do. She really was nice to me tonight, though. That wasn't in school. She's really different in school."

"And do you suppose she thinks you are also really different in school," I said, my fingers thumping on the closed book from which Rick had just read.

His face beamed, reflecting total understanding of what I was trying to indicate.

"That reality thing, again, huh?"

"Could be," I said. "Why don't you think about it and we'll talk more later on. You better be getting on home. Your Mom must be wondering where you are."

"Oh, she knows I'm here. I called her from the

restaurant before I came. Can you believe that? Dimwitted Ricky Rife actually remembered to call his mom and tell her where he'd be. She's probably still laid out in a dead faint on the kitchen floor."

Our laughter at his last comment reduced the need, which I had initially felt, to apologize for having underestimated him. As I continued to chuckle he stood up and readied himself to leave. There was no longer any doubt about it. When Rick left, we hugged. It was a lingering hug, less intense or clinging - more tender than the previous ones had been. There was less urgency in it that night. How nice!

Again, I watched him to the street. He turned and waved, and then took off on a full trot. I went inside and locked the door thinking that Rick would have been proud of me - perhaps even dispensing a gold star. What a wonderful evening!

The chapter on reality had dredged up some of the questions I had buried amid the happenings of the past several days. I sat back on the bed with a supply of blank cards.

Why had there been no ID of any kind in my wallet? What were some possibilities? In the least, it meant something was not as it should have been even before I began the bus trip. It wasn't as if it were a brand-new wallet and I had just not taken the time to fill in the card. I was sure I knew how to drive. Why was there no driver's license? Had I expunged the data or had someone else done that? If not me, who then? Why? How could it be of any value to be without identification? It might make sense if I had been afraid someone would be able to identify me from it and do so for some malevolent reason. But why would it take ID to identify me. If that person didn't know me on sight, ID might be necessary. But how could that person find my identity information in my wallet if they couldn't recognize me in the first place? Perhaps my pursuers did not know me on sight. But then how would I explain C. P.?

Most puzzling was the coincidence of amnesia and no ID. I could understand losing the ID perhaps. I could understand someone getting amnesia. But getting both, at the same time? It seemed at least strange if not improbable. It

made some kind of foul play seem likely. Clearly, I was raising more questions than I had answers. I convinced myself that was all right, for without the right questions I would never find the right answers.

From where had the name, Jim Johnson, come? The phone books were filled with Jim Johnson's. To find one that was relevant seemed impossible. Perhaps, when faced with the necessity for a name my quick mind merely produced as innocuous a name as it could author. Perhaps I was a writer and just very good at coming up with names for new characters.

I wrote the name over and over in several styles. None produced so much as a spark of recognition. It was likely that at some point I would need a signature. Should it duplicate the one on the motel register or on my library card? Since the library signature was the only one I was privy to, I would use that one. I took out the card and practiced reproducing it until the moves seemed natural. My penmanship was nothing to be proud of. Mrs. Clapper would probably have something to say about that.

Why were there computer disks in the locker rather than the money? That tended to give credence to the theory someone other than I had placed the disks there. Had I actually found all the relevant information that was stored on them? How could I go about determining that? I would need to recall the programs with which I was familiar - the ones I might have used to encode the disks. The only one that had come to mind at the library was MSworks. The stories were there. I couldn't dredge up a single other format name. I did know about the possibility that there were other formats, however, so I knew something about computers. A visit to a software store might help. I'd plan to do that in the near future.

A set of children's stories, authored by a person I could not locate just didn't seem to represent a significant enough - precious enough - piece of information to lock up for safekeeping. Perhaps the stories contained clues of some kind. Maybe it was a code. Maybe I was getting carried away or more probably, becoming delusional.

I felt my chin. I had acquired considerable stubble

for such a short time. Being composed of white whiskers, I imagined it hardly showed from across the room. That meant it would take a longer time to develop a proper disguise than I had expected. I felt my neck. It needed shaving. I'd take care of it in the morning. I was tired. It seemed I was always tired - and hungry. I had to begin an exercise program. Walking came to mind as the most accessible method. Perhaps I could begin walking in an early morning turn around town and then another in the cool of the evening. That sounded good - and almost familiar. I'd see how well I could stick to such a routine.

Life was on hold until the birth certificates arrived and I could take the next frightening, illegal step - applying for a social security card. In the morning, I would approach Hank about placing some of my sketches for sale in his place. I really hated to do that. It was an interesting side of my personality: 'Don't be a bother to anyone.' There was another side I liked better: 'Help those who need helping and expect nothing in return.' With those two traits solidly entrenched in my personality I couldn't imagine how I could be in trouble with the authorities. I was certainly in trouble with someone. If only I had the definitive clue.

////

CHAPTER SIX

Day Eleven

While showering and getting dressed that Monday morning, I reflected on what had been a very pleasant week just past. Rick was doing better on his schoolwork than anyone had imagined. He was enthusiastically spending more time at it than we had scheduled. I was selling at least one sketch a day at the Restaurant. I could live on that. In exchange for the privilege of exhibiting my work there I talked Hank into letting me come in early mornings and put the place in order - vacuum, arrange the tables and chairs, wrap the silverware in napkins and fill the containers on the tables. Somewhat to my surprise, I fully enjoyed working there and it was clearly a genuine help to Hank. He insisted that a free breakfast be a part of our arrangement. A meal a day was like earning money without having to face the worrisome payroll deduction predicament. I took him up on his offer. I wouldn't be able to retire on that fiscal design but for the time being it would suffice nicely.

With the exception of the, ever-present, C P, and the occasional appearance of Whiskers, life had settled into a fairly comfortable routine. I still experienced periods of terror and deep sadness and I continued to wrestle almost nightly with the tormenting nocturnal apparitions from my subconscious. No new insights had emerged. I was becoming reconciled to the fact that it would take time.

Rick had become such a frequent visitor that he had given up knocking which was fine except for the time he

caught me perusing the nudie magazine. He came to take great pleasure in razzing me unmercifully about that. He began coming in with his hand over his eyes saying, "Innocent young boy on the premises. Hide the naked lady pictures." Soon after, I found the centerfold was missing. I was sure he intended it to merely be a loan.

The patrol car had visited two more times. It turned out the policeman was Myrtle's youngest brother. There came an amazing sense of relief from simply knowing his visits did not pertain to me. I had spoken briefly to the officer on one occasion. My blood pressure went off the scale but I managed a good five minutes of small talk. He had heard about the time I was spending with Rick and suggested the local Big Brother program was looking for volunteers. One little brother was all I could handle, thank you.

It was a quarter of four and, of course, still dark outside. I needed to be on my way to Hank's place. He had found a closer for the evenings so he worked the morning shift arriving a few minutes before five. That gave me nearly an hour there by myself. It was always a good time. I had several new sketches to put up that morning. It certainly pleased me that people would actually pay for my landscapes and pictures of old buildings. Hank, Mary and Rick made up an effective sales force. They tickled me. Sometimes I think the patrons bought things just to get them to shut up.

Mary tickled me in more in than one way but I couldn't bring myself to ask her out. She was probably a few years younger than I and rather plain in most ways. She was very sweet and caring and she was available. Maybe later. I wondered why I so resisted entering that whole man-woman arena. It was another clue but, like the rest, it had lead nowhere.

My work went well. I found myself whistling while I attended to all the odds and ends. A corner of the carpet had come loose so I glued it down, holding it in place with a bucket of cooking oil until it set. An old wound to the plastic upholstery in one of the booths had reopened so I taped it shut with the care of an ER surgeon. Several napkin dispensers popped open when filled, so I bent the catches and made them ready for another day of selfless service. It was

fascinating to me that such menial, mindless work could be so rewarding.

As usual, Rick met me there for breakfast at five. He may have been the only fifteen-year-old in the state who voluntarily rolled out at that early hour every day so he could get a head start on his school work. He and I were both naturally early risers so no one ever heard a complaint about it from either of us. While he feasted on a western omelet, I enjoyed yet another short stack with sausage.

He accompanied me back to the motel and got right down to his studies. I started the coffee in my brand new, bright yellow, Yumaguchi coffee maker. Eyes closed, Rick raised his head sniffing the air, delighting in the aroma. It was just such natural, honest, unfiltered reactions like that were so delightful to me and yet those same behaviors set him apart as dramatically less mature than his age mates. It seemed a shame that society insisted such spontaneous, unaffected traits had to become controlled or replaced before one could be considered acceptably socialized.

"Is that the best smell or what?" he remarked. Not waiting for an answer, he returned to reading his history. Although the aroma of bread baking ranked first on my list of best smells, disputing the lad's contention would serve no useful purpose.

I arranged the pillows on the bed against the wall and sat back with my sketchpad and pastels. We had worked out a good arrangement. I drew or wrote and he studied. When he had questions, I was right there to help. It had become a truly enjoyable relationship. We both looked forward to our time together each morning.

When the coffeepot began sputtering and popping, signaling its work was done, Rick sprang from his chair and poured a mug for each of us. As we sipped the aromatic brew he sat on the edge of the bed and critiqued my drawing. He had good ideas and a natural artistic sense about what worked or didn't work visually. His approach to such things was still often more blunt than would be acceptable to most of his peers. He was aware of it and had begun catching himself, often making attempts to reword things.

From my point of view, Rick desperately needed at

least one boy his age for a friend but it didn't seem to be happening. He appeared far too content with me for his buddy. I had pointed that out to him and we had talked about the fact that I probably would not be in Joplin a whole lot longer. He didn't like to hear that and would cover his ears, singing, "La la la," at the top of his lungs whenever I brought it up. It was an issue we would soon have to face and resolve. I didn't want to leave him hanging if I had to depart suddenly, though that appeared less and less likely the way my new life had been unfolding.

Coffee finished, he returned to his work. Before we knew it my watch read nine o'clock and time for a break.

"Let's walk over to the park, this morning, okay?" came Rick's suggestion.

"Sounds fine to me."

We were soon on our way. It was a good mile and a half from the motel and made a fine walk.

"Your belly's not as fat as it used to be, you know that?" Rick remarked out of the blue poking it repeatedly with one finger.

"Really. You think so?" I said.

"I should a said that different, huh?"

"How do you think you should have said it?"

He thought for a few moments.

"How about, 'I think you're losing weight. You look thinner'."

"That would have been a very nice way of putting it. If you had said it that way in the first place I wouldn't have to give you this Dutch Rub."

I quickly secured his neck in the crook of my left arm and rubbed the top of his head with the knuckles of my right hand. He giggled and squirmed, not so much to free himself, as to just play the game. He loved to be touched and held and that was one legitimate way I could provide it.

I released him and he immediately re-combed his hair, clawing at it from the center of his head down toward his ears, spread finger style. Appearance was suddenly becoming important to him although I had not yet convinced him of the value of carrying a comb. He did want to look nice, though. Virtually every morning he asked if I thought his outfit

looked good. It hadn't dawned on him that a peer's opinion would have undoubtedly been superior to that of an old man. I tried to take that fashion gap into account but found it difficult to elevate jeans with intentional slashes across the buttocks to a top spot on my list of style preferences.

Socially, he was far more interested in finding a girlfriend than another guy to pal around with. As I pondered that situation, an inexplicable thought welled up from somewhere deep within my mind. "Perhaps he will be fortunate enough to find a buddy and a girlfriend in the same person the way I had."

What in the World did that mean! – 'the way I had?' It certainly deserved a clue card. I liked the rush of feelings that accompanied it. That was a first! An uninvited emotional response rushing to the surface that was actually comfortable and untroubled - delightful, even. Clearly, I had or had once had someone very special. How nice! Dozens of questions invaded my thoughts. Where was she? How had we known one another? Had I abandoned her when I became amnesic? Had I become amnesic because she had abandoned me? Was she perhaps mourning my loss or the fact that I was missing? Perhaps that was Beth. Had she been my wife? Was she my wife? None of it struck a familiar chord. The disappointment instilled by that continuing void was dulled somewhat by the lingering delight which had accompanied the original thought.

During my reverie, Rick had taken off and had run the final half block to the park. He loved to swing. There was something about the motion and the rhythm that entranced him. He would close his eyes and swing as high as he could maintain a comfortable, sustained arc - just short of going so high as to insert that, jerk and fall sequence, at the top.

When I arrived, that was exactly what he was doing. I found a friendly looking spot, sat back against a tree and began sketching. He looked around once just to make sure he knew where I was and then continued his ethereal flight. I wondered what he thought about, if anything, as he soared up and back. Perhaps it was just pure, nonverbal sensation that engulfed him. He looked so happy. To be a part of it was wonderful - no rewarding, well, probably both. A tear dropped

onto my page. I had to wonder, if being this freely emotional about everything, was a part of the real-me, or just a by-product of my present circumstances.

After another fifteen minutes, Rick bailed out with a great flourish and the obligatory, "Geronimo!" bellowed at the top of his lungs. He trotted over to where I was, plopped down on the ground beside me and took possession of the second sketchpad. I so wanted to know what was going on inside his head at that moment but it was, of course, his private territory. I would not intrude.

Still panting from the sprint, Rick spoke.

"You oughta try the swings, Ya know. It's the greatest feeling I've ever had - well, the second greatest, really."

I snorted more than laughed at the totally unexpected remark. Rick doubled over on the ground in rials of laughter. Nothing more would be said. I just shook my head and continued working on my sketch. Presently he regained control but couldn't settle down to drawing. I suggested we start back because he had an English test to take. Rather than moaning and groaning, which I felt would have been a typical reaction from most boys his age, he said. "That's right! Let's go. I'm going to nail that one. I know I am!"

He lent a hand to pull me to my feet. Such assistance was not as helpful as he intended it to be, but we made it work. Rick was determined to take good care of me and I wouldn't interfere with that for anything. Upon reflection, I realized that, unbeknownst to him, it was probably Rick who was, in fact, making the larger contribution in our relationship. Having someone else who needed me had provided a stabilizing underpinning for my life. Without that presence, I was not sure what would have become of me.

He finished the test and was pleased with how well he thought he had done. He wanted to know if two of his answers were correct. I looked them over.

"Number 22 is correct and 40 is not."

He took the test paper in his hands and re-read question forty.

"It must be a gerund then, huh?"

"Right, that would be a gerund. Do you understand why?"

He demonstrated that he did and repeatedly thumped his forehead as if punishing himself for having been so dumb. Then with a great flourish he made a dramatic check mark beside it, indicating that he understood there would be no changing it before Mrs. Clapper had a chance to score the test. He sealed it inside an envelope and addressed it to the school. I offered him a stamp, which he and the bottom of his fist affixed with great gusto.

Done for the day we had our hug. He took the envelope to deposit in the mailbox at the street and departed.

Sixty seconds later, he was back.

"Myrt gets mail for you. One's from Alabama and one's from Joplin." He shifted to a teasing manner, sniffing at them and raising his eyebrows. "You got a girlfriend in Alabama you're not telling me about? Sure, looks like a girl's writing."

Holding them over his head, he tried to play keep away. I went directly for his ribs, as he was the most ticklish youngster I had ever known - well, he was very ticklish, at any rate. The letters and Rick dropped to the floor in unison. The letters lay quietly. Rick continued to gyrate with delight.

I addressed his question: "It's none of your business where my girlfriends live. Skedaddle!" I gave him a hand up and sent him on his way with a considerable swat to the behind.

He left giggling and happy. What a kid!

Sitting on the bed, I opened the Alabama letter first. It contained the man's birth certificate and a receipt for the money I had sent. I felt some relief. The second envelope was somewhat bulky. I opened it. It contained five, twenty-dollar bills, a return envelope and another three by five-inch card with the same markings as had been on the first one.

'My golden goose?' I asked myself in surprise. I sat there perplexed and intrigued. I had asked for one hundred dollars, and a week later I received one hundred dollars. There was no note of explanation. I looked at the handwriting. It was the same as on the first one and probably a man's. Was it Whiskers' writing? Was he sending me money? Why?

I laid back. What on Earth could be going on? If he wanted to give me money, why didn't he just come up to me and offer it? For some reason, he couldn't do it that way. Perhaps he couldn't be seen with me. But why was he giving me money? Perhaps he was repaying a debt but then why would he ask for an amount to pay each week? That didn't make sense - as if any of it did. Had I been blackmailing him? It seemed a more reasonable solution but it just didn't fit anything I had come to know about myself. Anyway, who in his right mind would only blackmail for one hundred dollars a month?

I got out the book on amnesia and reread several sections. I found that personalities of people experiencing amnesia had been known to sometimes be quite different from the original one. That didn't comfort me in the least. Could it be that I had really been a bad guy of some kind and that unbecoming behavior - or something else - had gotten to me and produced a mental breakdown that created this person I had become? I was grasping at straws.

People just didn't give away money week after week for no reason. No, there had to be a reason. Whatever the answer one thing was sure, Whiskers, or someone he worked for, was, in fact, giving me money. The reassuring feeling about having a new source of income was quickly blocked by a disconcerting question: 'What if they get tired of paying me off and decide to kill me?' I decided not to dwell on that. Blackmailers have to have something incriminating on the person being blackmailed. Maybe that's what was on the disks!

I moved to the table. I had asked for \$100 last time. What should I ask for this time? How about \$150? I filled in the card, sealed it into the envelope, and took it out to the mail box.

I decided to walk down town and see if I could locate Whiskers. I would follow him and see what I could find out about him. If I didn't run into him, he would surely turn up at the Post Office the next morning. I wanted to visit the software shop anyway, and, with a fresh supply of twenty dollar bills in my wallet, lunch at Hank's suddenly seemed like a grand idea.

Whiskers was nowhere to be found so I proceeded to the computer store. I rummaged through the programs they had available. MS publisher jumped out as one with which I was familiar. It cost more than I wanted to pay and I had no computer in which to install it anyway. Perhaps one of the units at the Library already had it installed. I looked further. Nothing else seemed even vaguely familiar. Perhaps I wasn't such a computer whiz after all.

Still looking for Whiskers, I left the store and made my way to the library. In front was C. P. sitting on the bench. That seemed to have become his spot. True to the other occasions, he was reading the paper. I decided to just walk right on by him. As I approached the bench, however, he hurried off.

I went inside a bit shaky but not as bad as it had been the week before. I inquired about MS publisher and learned that the program was installed on two of their public use computers. The librarian pointed them out to me and handed me a set of guidelines for their use. I tucked it into my pocket and left. I had not brought the disks with me since I hadn't considered the possibility that the library would have what I would need.

I walked the several blocks to Hanks. It was well after one o'clock and the noon crowd was pretty well gone. Mary brought me coffee and water, and her appealing smile. I ordered and then made some notes. A State Trooper came in and looked around the room. Mary pointed toward the kitchen door and he disappeared behind the curtain. I was moved to leave but decided to stay my ground.

Presently he reappeared and took a seat a few tables away, smiling in my direction when he took notice of me. I smiled back. It became immediately clear that he had just visited the rest room and there was nothing menacing about his presence. The paranoid edge, which had earlier been my ever-present companion, was clearly still easily activated. 'Whose reality?' I said to myself, quoting Rick's most frequent current saying. My lunch arrived. I finished it more hurriedly than usual and went to the register to pay.

"A hippie type was in here earlier asking about your sketches," Mary related all quite casually as she counted back

my change. "He seemed more interested in you than in the drawings, though. He didn't buy anything."

"What did he say?"

My stomach began to knot.

"He wondered what your name was as where you lived."

"Did you tell him?" I asked, trying to conceal my gut wrenching concern.

"I told him your name but not where you lived. Didn't think that was any of his business. I just said I didn't know. That was all right, wasn't it - to tell him your name?"

"Sure, Mary. That was fine. I'm just curious as to why he was so interested but didn't seem to want to buy anything?"

"Didn't say. He seemed to recognize those little green triangles you use."

"He did?" The knot pulled tighter.

"Yeah. He looked at 'em on every one of your drawings like he was studying them. I figured maybe you knew him."

"Describe him for me."

"Well, he was tall and skinny and wore a pony tail."

As she talked I picked up a sheet of notepaper from the counter and began sketching a face. She looked down at it with interest as she continued, timing her pace to fit my drawing.

"He had a long narrow nose ... and really thin eyebrows. I don't remember the color of his eyes but they were real pleasant. ... Sort of gray, I guess ... His hair was brownish-red but his beard was more reddish-brown."

"That's him, all right. How did you know he wore those little half glasses?"

I had no idea. How would I get out of that one?

"Well, you said hippie looking. I guess those kinds of glasses are just part of what I think of when I think 'hippie'."

That seemed to satisfy her.

"Did you see what he was driving?"

"Sure did. He parked right out front. It was a VW van right out of the '60s. Even had flowers and those psychedelic swirly things on the side. Do you know him?"

"Maybe. Maybe, not. I've met a lot of hippie types at art exhibits. You know."

My heart raced. I thanked her for the information and left. I did know that face right down to the scar in the middle of its chin. I had no name to attach to it and no idea how I knew him - but I did.

Just when things were looking so bright and I was feeling so secure, my world was once again about to be dashed to pieces. I seemed more concerned that I couldn't remember what he was than who he was. If he were trying to find me, however, I doubted if it could be good.

I had not seen such a van around town and Rick and I had been out and about for quite a while that morning. I searched up and down the street with my eyes but it was nowhere in sight. I picked up the pace toward home wondering how long it would continue to be my home? I would prepare my things for a quick exit if that became necessary.

Once inside my room I locked the door and checked the window, pulling the open curtain across it to hide myself from the World. I needed to write a note for Rick in case I did have to leave. I poured myself the last of the morning coffee - more accurately, sludge - and sat down at the table. What could I say without hurting him or revealing things about myself I didn't think he needed to know? Nothing came to me. I got up and paced. I laid down and counted holes in the ceiling. I could pack at least and something might come to me as I worked.

I had become lax about keeping myself ready for a quick departure so it took some time to round things up. I needed to do laundry so sorted the clothes as clean or used and put them in separate bags. I took the pictures down and rolled them into tubes, placing them inside a pair of toilet paper cores that I taped together.

By the time I was done, the place looked pretty stark. I scribbled a note to attach to the library books: 'Please return these books to the library for me. Thanks, Jim.'

It was time for the big decision. Did I just pick up and leave immediately or did I stick around for some additional sign there was really a problem brewing? The first alternative

would protect me for sure in case some bad guys were closing in on me. However, it wouldn't provide me with any new data I could use in solving the mystery. The second might risk my safety - though just how much I could not determine - however it held open the possibility that I might learn something of value.

I opted to stay. Unless Hippie followed me, there was no way for him to find me. Once again, I became concerned about Rick's safety when he was with me. If I felt I was safe there at the motel, then Rick would be safe there also. Whether that had reflected logic or rationalization, the notion made me feel some better.

I felt the need to count my money - two thousand and nine dollars. Since I arrived, I had increased my stake by a total of twenty-six dollars. I was at least keeping my head above water. That, too, provided a sense of relief.

I wondered if I needed to remove the drawings from the restaurant. Since they had already been seen, I supposed that would serve no purpose. The more of them I could sell the better off I would be financially. I would leave them up.

My thoughts kept coming back to Rick and making sure he would be able to properly deal with my departure. I had allowed him to put all of his emotional eggs in one basket - me. At that moment, it seemed like the most foolish thing I could have done. I had probably allowed it more because of my own selfish need for him than his need for me. Regardless, the deed had been done and I had to plan a way out.

It didn't seem possible that a person with my concerns about the welfare of others could be a bad guy. I had read, however, that the Dons of the Mafia were very loving, caring people where their families were concerned. Rick was like family - the only one I knew, at least.

"Dons of the Mafia:" The phrase sent chills bolting throughout my body. My skin became prickly. Terror reclaimed my being. What could a hippie have to do with the Mafia? It was far more likely that C. P. and Whiskers could be connected with it than Hippie. And what could my connection possibly be?

It was then I realized that I had three antagonists. I

had undeniable evidence that C. P. and Whiskers were in some way connected to me and that it was reasonable to conceive of it as malicious. Otherwise, why would they not contact me in person? Then there was Hippie. I knew his face and something about it had filled me with terror. That seemed like good evidence that he was also in some way a hostile adversary.

What a muddle, things were becoming. Perhaps to just move on under the cover of darkness, and as quickly as possible, would be my wisest choice. I could take steps to see that none of them followed me. It seemed clear that I had not been able to do that just prior to leaving Fayetteville.

Maybe I needed to revisit Fayetteville and see if that would provide any useful clues. If I had left there, I probably had good reason. I would have to assume that and therefore to revisit it seemed too risky. I wondered if I had been amnesic during my stay in Fayetteville as well or if that had only occurred at the Joplin end of the trip.

More and more, amnesia seemed to be a misnomer. Arriving in a strange place with no memory of who one was or where one came from was technically a fugue. It was far rarer and was more commonly induced by emotional trauma rather than a physical blow to the head. That seemed to fit the facts as I understood them, since there had been no discernible tender spots on my head and I certainly was overflowing with emotional turmoil. Of course, if the blow had occurred weeks or months earlier there would have been no tenderness.

So many questions and I couldn't even add, 'so few answers,' since there seemed to be no answers at all. In a halfhearted supplication to the gods I asked, "Can't you guys provide just one really positive thing for me this afternoon?"

There was a knock at the door. My heart stopped. Then, I heard Rick's cheerful voice. "Unlock the door or I'll huff and I'll puff and I'll blow the darn thing down."

His version of the quotation amused me. I looked at my watch and restarted my heart by administering repeated thumps to my sternum. It was time Rich was heading for work. What was he doing on my doorstep? I released the dead bolt and in he waltzed, tugging on the shirt of a lad

whom I had not seen before.

"This is Ned and this is Jim," he said, pointing back and forth to clarify his attempt at introductions. "Ned's the new dishwasher at the restaurant. Gramps said he needed me to spend more time helping the customers out front."

I extended my hand toward Ned, a move that took him by surprise. After some awkward hesitation, he eventually managed a shake - of sorts. If the boy's grip reflected his strength as a whole, I whimsically questioned whether he would be capable of lifting a dish, let alone washing it.

"I just needed to tell you if it was okay I wouldn't be by to read in my reality book after work tonight 'cause I'm going over to Ned's to play pool in his basement?"

"Got your snorkel?" I asked in fun.

Rick cracked up. Ned truly didn't understand. Then I responded to Rick's question, which had really been intended as a statement.

"I think that's really neat, guys. Have a ball."

Grinning, Rick turned to Ned gesturing toward me with a toss of his head. "He talks that way sometimes. It's like they talked back in the olden days I guess."

That earned Rick his second Dutch Rub of the day. Ned clearly didn't know what to make of it all, so he just stood there, turning red and looking over the ceiling while desperately trying to find some place for his hands to light. Ned's retiring, uncertain behavior made Rick's earlier tentativeness look like brazen confidence.

"Thanks for letting me know, Rick. That was really thoughtful."

"I'm just a thoughtful kind of dude," came his impish response.

After they left, I gave the gods a wink and a thumbs-up. "Nice going god guys!"

More accurately, it was probably, "Nice going Grampa Hank." I could see his fine hand in all of this. I doubted if the restaurant really needed a dishwasher. Rick, however, did need a friend. Hank was finally getting the hang of this boy-raising thing.

The next morning Rick bubbled over with a blow by blow of the night before at Ned's place - more details about

their adolescent conversations than I really wanted to hear. Nevertheless, it was wonderful to see the lad so happy.

"I think I'll be able to really help Ned come out of his shell, Ya know? It's my turn to do that."

The comment caught me off guard. I managed to say, "I'll bet if anybody can you can, Rick."

He nodded in a confident, almost cocky, way. Without saying the words, the lad had indicated his intention to do for others what he felt I had done for him. What greater gift could he ever give me?

"So, what gives with your girlfriend in Alabama?" he asked, eyes sparkling. "Are you going to go visit her?"

Unknowingly, of course, Rick had provided me an interesting opportunity. Without giving it the deliberation it probably deserved, I answered.

"Maybe. You never know what us old, gray-haired Romeos might do."

My answer instilled a quietness in Rick. He took out his English book and began diagramming sentences - something he and only he in the entire history of English students actually thought was fantastically fun.

During the coffee break, he brought it up again. His tone was soft and his manner serious.

"If you go to Alabama will you ever come back? I mean will I ever see you again?"

What was I to say? I had baited the hook but the first catch seemed way too big for me to handle. My mouth started moving before I knew what I was going to say.

"Quite honestly, Rick, I don't know the answer to either of those questions. You know I have told you all along I doubted if I would remain here for very long."

He nodded and looked down, turning away slightly. It was a difficult moment for both of us. He spoke.

"I'm a lot luckier than you are, you know."

"Oh." I had no idea what might follow.

"Ya. I got Gram and Gramps and Mom and even Myrt on a good day." There was a hint of a smile as he glanced quickly into my face. I managed to return it. "But, you don't have anybody but Gramps and me"

"And Myrt on a good day," I added.

A bigger smile though for no longer a moment.

"What I mean is, when you leave here, who will you have? Will you have somebody to ..." he hesitated, "to do stuff with you?"

"You mean will I have anybody to look after me the way you've been doing?"

"You caught on to that, did you?"

"Caught on is not the way I'd put it. I'd say I recognized it and I have appreciated and valued it more than I will ever be able to tell you."

"Really?"

"Really!"

There was a moment of silence before Rick continued thoughtfully.

"You've taken care of me, too, of course. I didn't mean you hadn't. It's just that I've never had anybody to take care of before and I really like doing it."

"Well, you're sure good at it, Rick, I'll tell you that."

"You really mean that?"

"Have I ever lied to you?"

From the moment that phrase left my lips I wished I hadn't said it. As far as he knew, of course, I had never lied to him. I had certainly never lied in a malicious way. How could I have told him the true answers to his questions about me when I didn't know them myself? I was sure that if later on I could share the whole story with him, he would understand.

"No, I wasn't really questioning you. I just wanted to be sure, ya know?"

"Yes. I do know. Looks like you may have someone new to take care of now, anyway."

"You mean Ned?"

"Yes, Ned. Being his friend will be a wonderful thing for him, I think. And for you too, I'll bet."

Rick beamed.

"I hope so. He might not be my first choice for a best friend but I figure we can just be plain friends until we see how things work out. When I get back in school next week, I plan to try and make some other friends. I'm different now and I think maybe some of the kids will like me - like you said - if I don't try too hard. I'll just let them see me like I am now and

wait to see what happens. I don't expect to be on the "A" list or anything but just find some good guys to hang with, Ya know? I really like just talking to Ned about ... stuff, Ya know?"

"Yes, I know. It sounds like a very wise plan to me."

He turned his chair so he could face me where I sat on the bed.

"I really do know you'll have to leave sometime. I don't want you to leave but that's just selfish. Mom and I talked it out. I know this is just a stopover for you. I'm glad it's been a stopover, ya know. Really glad. I told Mom you saved my life. You know what she said?"

"What?" I felt my eyes moistening.

"She said you saved all our lives."

How did one respond to that?

"Well, the way I see it, we've all helped each other, Rick. I'm glad you think I have helped you and maybe even your family. Just never forget that you have helped me, too."

"Yeah. I thought so. That's like the friends-talk we had out at the creek. Friends help each other just because."

"Yes. Just because. That's probably the best way to sum up friendship that I've ever heard."

He turned back to the table. A moment later he turned his head toward me and stated more than asked: "It's the coffee and the nuts, right?"

I smiled. The boy's mind grasped so much more than anyone seemed to recognize. I had known all along that there were eight powerful cylinders up there if he could just get the timing adjusted.

"That's part of it at least," I said.

"Can you tell me how it works?"

Much to my surprise, I was able to spend the next half-hour describing the brain and its various functions. I outlined for him the several theories about how caffeine might help focus attention and how zinc deficiencies were linked to behavior problems and immaturity in youngsters. I also mentioned the effect zinc might have on thickening his hair and speeding up his physical maturation - though that seemed less and less necessary. He accepted it in a matter of fact manner. Then came the question I feared the most - the one I

had hoped would never be asked because to answer it truthfully was impossible for me.

"How do you know all this stuff?"

I had prepared several scenarios and at that moment, decided to go with the editor story.

"Well, you know I'm a writer as well as an artist, right?"

"Yeah."

"A few years ago, I edited a book for a doctor about treatments for hyperactive children."

"What's edited?"

"It means I rewrote it. I sort of translated it from doctors' language into the kind of language most parents could understand."

He nodded that he understood.

"You can see how in the course of preparing a manuscript such as that I learned a whole lot of things."

I hated to lie, but I felt for his sake, I had to find a way to put some legitimate authority behind my actions. And who knew, it may well have happened in exactly that way. In fact, as I spoke, it felt right. My having edited books for a variety of professionals could account for much of what seemed to be my wide range of knowledge. So, I told myself that in lieu of the unavailable, absolute truth, it wasn't so much a lie as it was an entirely conceivable hypothesis about reality.

"Any other stuff in that book I should know?"

This lad just wasn't going to let me off the hook. I was pleased with his inquisitiveness and irritated at my perturbed reaction. Perhaps I was more defensive than perturbed.

"For right now I think you have all the information you need to have. Any more might be really confusing. When you're, say eighteen, and if you're still interested, you can find books in the library about the subject. Can you trust me on this one?"

He flashed his patented grin across the room. "Of course, I can trust you, Jim. You're my best friend."

"How about some coffee?" I asked, fighting my tears. "We can drink to our friendship."

As he prepared the coffee with the meticulous care

of a French Chef, I continued. "I'm really not sure when I'll be leaving. It may very soon or I may need to wait a while longer. It depends on a number of things that are just my own private business."

"That's cool," he said, carefully handing me my mug. "I can understand that. I got private business, too."

"Between you and Miss April?" I remarked, unable to resist the opening.

Another cheek splitting grin. Without missing a beat, he came back, "Well, you could say we've been seeing a lot of each other recently." He cracked up.

A knowing glance passed between our smiling faces. We each had our private business and friends respected that.

I was pleased that our leave-taking conversation had finally occurred and that it had gone so well. We were both sad at the prospect of parting but were overjoyed that - for whatever reason - we had been permitted our time together. It seemed a reasonable trade-off.

More from my doing than from Rick's, our hug, later that morning, was longer and stronger and more laden with emotion than before. I received no resistance of course - only ready participation. I had to wonder if that would be the final hug. Regardless, it would stand out as the most memorable.

///

CHAPTER SEVEN

Day Eighteen

Another Monday and, to my surprise and clear relief, I was still in Joplin. It was beginning to feel like home. I couldn't be sure if my sense of sanctuary was a fully positive state of affairs or not. I had gone so far as to consider finding an apartment rather than continuing to stay in the motel. Even though it was somewhat more expensive and far less spacious, I felt comfortable where I was so, for the time being, I would stay there. I had no particular need for more space, since I had nothing with which to fill it. Life had calmed down. I seldom ran into C. P. and Hippie seemed to have disappeared for good. All things considered, life - at least while I was awake - was pretty good.

The previous Tuesday I had ingeniously - I thought - followed Whiskers and located his home base. About nine thirty that morning I located the car he had been driving the week before. It was parked in the same block from where he had left me in the dust. I called a cab and had it park a half block ahead. I waited in the back seat until Whiskers drove off, presumably with my envelope from the post office box. We followed at a distance. The driver became totally absorbed in the whole affair. I got the idea he would have gladly paid me for the experience.

"I've always wanted to do this but in sixteen years as a cabby you're the first one to ever ask me to 'follow that car'."

Whiskers drove to the south edge of the city and

pulled into a motel. It looked to be an expensive place to stay. Again, it was a discovery that raised more questions than it answered. Staying in a motel suggested a temporary living arrangement. I had expected to follow him to a house. Why a temporary place? If he could afford an expensive motel, why would he be sticking around to pay me such a small pittance every week? It didn't make sense. That seemed to have become my by-word - it didn't make sense.

I dismissed the taxi and followed Whiskers to his room - 208. I hung around outside for several hours wondering if C. P. might show up. If so would they be in the same room? That would clinch a conspiracy of some kind, though I had no basis for such a suspicion. While I waited, I examined the car. It bore Missouri plates. It could have been a rental of course although I found no stickers indicating that. After two hours, nothing had happened so I went to the front desk with plan B.

"Excuse me, Ma'am. I'm a salesman and I'm supposed to meet a new client in room 208 but I'm embarrassed to say I have misplaced his name. Could you help me with that so I won't appear like a fool when I show up at his door?"

I seemed like a very clever, foolproof plan to me and I was quite proud of my budding detective skills.

"Sorry. I am not allowed to give out the names of our residents," came the clerk's, over-rehearsed though courteous reply.

Shot down, I waited another two hours to no avail, then found a pay phone and called a cab to take me home.

On Wednesday, both the second birth certificate and the Social Security application form had arrived. Plunging ahead with my plan, I completed the application as the child's guardian and mailed it. With that step, I opened myself to the possibility of mammoth federal legal problems. The prospect of that happening didn't seem to affect me in the least. Was I becoming hardened to lies and illegal activities? I hoped not. It all seemed familiar, as if I had done this very thing before. Life was such a blur.

An official social security card, like the birth certificate I already possessed, would actually be of no value

to me so long as I continued to have my present circle of acquaintances, since each required me to assume a different name. They had become the ace up my sleeve, solely for future use, in the event things changed and they might be needed. Clearly, I must have felt that likelihood was probable.

It was the Monday that Rick was to re-enter school. At breakfast, he was restless yet plainly overjoyed at the prospect. I suggested a second cup of coffee. He smiled as if we shared some great secret and he readily indulged himself.

Hank had informed the school that the boy's doctor had prescribed coffee at noon and had gone into great detail about how well it had been working. Apparently willing to try anything, the still apprehensive principal had assured him that coffee would be available any time Rick felt he needed it. I reminded Rick not to take advantage of that situation. He grinned and agreed. The self-serving potential of that offer had obviously crossed his mischievous mind but, on a most positive note, had already been rejected by his maturing judgment.

I was in my room thinking how I missed having Rick sitting there at the table when Myrtle brought my mail to the door. I felt special, since her usual approach was to yell out, "Got mail," as you passed her door.

It was my envelope from Whiskers. Its contents were somewhat puzzling. There were the usual return envelope and card with the dollar sign, the blank line and the small question mark. There was also cash. I had requested one hundred and fifty dollars but the envelope contained only one hundred and twenty-five. On a second card was a huge, black question mark.

Was Whiskers renegeing on our agreement, whatever that may have been? Was he playing some kind of payment reduction game? Did the large question mark mean I had done something he didn't understand or was it some second phase to our arrangement? I laid it aside. More thought would be required.

I was ready for a walk anyway. It would be strange not having my smiling, ever-chattering shadow by my side. I was eager to hear all about his day at school. He had promised to drop by after work and fill me in on every detail.

I locked the door behind me and turned toward the street. Pulling into the motel at that same moment was the hippie van. I panicked and ran around to the breezeway side of my room. Just across the side street that ran behind the motel, I saw C. P. sitting in a parked car. I was trapped! I had never seriously considered that they were working together. What was I to do? Having only seconds to think, I returned to my room and locked the door. If things got out of hand, I was sure Myrtle would call the police. I mused for a moment as to whether or not she would consider that grounds to keep my advance payment and kick me out.

My mind quickly returned to my immediate predicament - perhaps a life or death predicament. I made certain the window was locked and wedged a chair under the knob of the front door. Was there anywhere I could hide? I could squeeze under the bed, but they would surely look there. Hiding in the shower was too dumb to consider. There was no closet and there was no place to go.

Then the knock sounded on the door.

"Adam, you in there?" came a cheerful, friendly male voice from the other side. "It's Ben and Sarah and Red."

There was a moment of silence. Perhaps they would just leave. Who was this Adam person they were after? Why did they think it was me? In one way, I had to hope it was me. Who were Ben and Red and Sarah and why would they think I knew them? I was shaking uncontrollably. My mind refused to focus.

A second knock, more prolonged, but no more forceful than the first. "Hey, Adam. What's the deal? Let us in."

They seemed friendly enough but that could have been just a ruse to gain easy entry. I picked up the other chair ready to defend myself if they forced their way inside. Then came a woman's voice, quiet and close to the door.

"Adam, this is Sarah. We just don't understand why you left us in such a hurry and why you came here and changed your name. If you're in trouble, we want to help. Adam. Are you in there? Do you hear me, Adam? This is Sarah."

My dilemma seemed to be this: If they were friends

as they purported, it could be the most important break of my short, new, life. If they were not, they would have no trouble getting through the door once they decided to. It appeared I had only one reasonable option.

I peeked through the front blind. I could see the three of them. Neither man was the one with the scar on his chin. Both had long hair. One had a reddish-blond beard. I didn't recognize them though they looked friendly. The woman was wearing a tie dyed, full length, loose dress. She had long dark hair. The men were in colorful tee shirts, jeans and sandals. All three appeared to be in their late twenties or early thirties - hardly my peers by any stretch of the imagination.

It was then, I noticed two boys - five and seven, perhaps - following the action with great interest, noses pressed against the inside of the fogging and re-fogging van windows. Surely, these folks wouldn't arrive with children if they had plans to harm me. It was time to face the music. I would open the door and find out what this was all about.

Without a doubt, it was the most crucial decision I had made. My deepest breath was not sufficient to calm my trembling body. I unlocked the door and opened it just a crack to see if they planned to rush me although I had no plan if they did. They didn't. I looked them over and then slowly opened it further. The lady - Sarah - came forward immediately and administered a huge hug, which I accepted but didn't really return.

"We have been so worried about you, Adam. Are you really all right?"

She eased back and looked me directly in the face, brushing back a lock of hair that had fallen down over my forehead in the fury of the previous few minutes.

My first attempt to answer was to no avail, as I found my mouth and throat were bone dry. I summoned some saliva and tried again.

"I truly don't know you people. Are you absolutely sure it is I you are looking for?"

Apparently, my statement wasn't taken seriously. "That poor excuse for a beard and extra fifteen pounds can't hide you, Adam," the bearded man said as if assuming I would

think that was humorous.

When the children saw me, they flew out of the van toward my room and soon each had affixed himself to one of my legs administering a heartfelt, kneecap busting, embrace. That clinched it for me. These were friends from my past. The confusion was at once frightful and reassuring. Finally, it seemed I was close to some answers.

Sensing the awkwardness of the situation, I invited them inside. The children headed for the bed.

"I'm afraid I don't have enough seats for everyone," I said, offering a chair to Sarah.

Both men made themselves comfortable on the floor, backs against the bed. They seemed at home in those positions. I wasn't at all sure how to proceed but that didn't stop me from beginning as I took a seat in the other chair.

"Please listen carefully to what I am about to say. I assure you none of it is a put on. On the morning of April first, I found myself here in Joplin. I had no idea who I was or where I came from. I still don't, for that matter. I made up the name, Jim Johnson, and have fashioned a life - of sorts - here since then. I have made a few friends - very good ones, actually. None of them know about my amnesia. I believe that there are three - well, now, two - people who are in some way after me - against me might be a better way of putting it. I really don't understand their roles in all of this or what is happening. Now, who are you people and how do we know each other? I really don't recognize any of you."

They looked at each other, dumbfounded. No one spoke for the longest moment. The smaller of the boys, propelled himself off the bed and came to where I was sitting near the table.

"Well, my name is Chucky and I love you."

He worked his way up into my lap. It felt quite natural. It was an extraordinary feeling as he cuddled himself into my body. He loved me. Not to be outdone the older boy approached - though a bit more cautiously - announcing, "I'm Tommy. I love you too. We all do, you know."

He put his arm around me as he stood beside my chair. His little fingers patted my shoulder. It was his way of providing consolation for a situation I was sure he could not

possibly comprehend. It was an overwhelming experience. Obviously, it had been an openly affectionate relationship that I had enjoyed with these folks. I sensed the pain and apprehension begin flowing from my very bones.

"You're serious about all this, aren't you?" the taller man said as he rose and extended his hand. I'm Ben." he said, clearly confused and distressed. "Chucky and Tommy are my sons and Sarah, here, is my wife. This is my brother, Red. He's not married."

Red stood and also advanced to shake my hand. It seemed very awkward for them and they returned to their seats.

"So I'm Adam somebody, am I?" I asked as the tears began streaming down my cheeks.

"Adam Barry," the first man said, filling in the blank. "Doesn't that ring some kind of a bell - Adam Barry?"

"Not the faintest tinkle," I said. "Please go on. Have we always known each other?"

Sarah became the spokesperson.

"No, you just drifted into our area five years ago. You said you were from Iowa and had just decided you'd reached the point in your life when it was time to take off on an adventure. So you quit your job as a librarian and began wandering around the mid-west. You ended up with us in Arkansas."

"In Arkansas. How did I support myself?"

"You drew pictures and whittled little hillbilly statuettes. You sold them at our store. One thing though, you always seemed to have more money available than you could have possibly made from what you sold. We just figured you had some other source of income."

"And what kind of a store do you have?"

"We live in a rural area - sort of an unorganized arts and crafts colony I guess you could say. We have a store out in the middle of nowhere that attracts lots of tourists. We sell all kinds of arts and crafts along with books and food and other staples."

"It's like an old general store?" I asked.

"Yes, it's a lot like an old general store."

"And I lived close by?"

"I'll say close by," Chucky said, looking up at me. "You live upstairs from the store. Don't you really remember?"

I looked down into his big, momentarily sad looking eyes. "I wish I could say I did but I really don't, Chucky."

"Why not?" Came the next natural question from Tommy as he settled onto the floor Indian style beside my chair.

Sarah spoke: "He doesn't know, Tommy. We'll all have to help him remember."

Chucky kissed me on the cheek. "Don't worry Grampa Adam, we'll all take good care of you."

"We brought some things you left behind in a box on your table - in case you wanted them," Ben said with a shrug, which indicated to me that, upon reflection, he wondered if it had really been a good idea. "Tommy, please go out and fetch that box, will you, son."

Soon I was sorting through several dozen pieces of my past. Although they brought back no memories, they did seem to confirm who I was and that I had spent some time with these people. There was another picture of the two faces that had my three pine trees on it. Apparently, it had been one of my better-selling pieces. There were several photographs of me with these people and numerous other folks I didn't recognize either. There was an Arkansas State Identification card bearing my name and picture and a number I assumed was my social security number. It looked as though the illegal plan I had put into action earlier that morning may have been unnecessary.

"You'll have to get a new ID card if you intend to keep that scraggly beard," Red chided.

Under other circumstances, I was sure that would have seemed humorous so I managed a smile and nod in his direction.

"I know some things about you that might help your brain remember," Chucky said, pulling on my shirt.

"Tell me," I asked.

"Well your favorite things are lasagna, pancakes, twist cones and peanut butter, banana and marshmallow shakes."

"Not to be outdone, Tommy added," And you have

a big brown mole right beside your winkie."

If winkie meant what I figured it meant, not only was he correct but we had apparently not been an overly modest group down there in the hills of Arkansas. His contribution didn't make the adults appear the least bit uncomfortable. I thought that was simply grand. I felt myself relaxing in a way I had not felt for – well, forever, in terms of my new life.

"Those two people who you are so uncomfortable about - can you describe them?" Red asked.

"Easily," I said. "One I call C. P. - it's a strange story. He is bald, about five nine and in his late thirties. Otherwise, he appears very average. He is just always around and rushes off whenever he sees that I have noticed him. The other one I call Whiskers. He's a slight little man, considerably younger, with a strange spring to his gait. He has a full black beard, bushy eyebrows and wire rimmed glasses. I've never gotten real close to him. He looks somehow sinister to me."

They all recognized C. P. as someone who had put in an appearance when I had been with them at the colony. It seems I had been leery of him then, also. He had not contacted me - just stayed in the area. Whiskers, on the other hand, was not known to any of them.

"When I first arrived at your place, were you okay with my story about my past? I mean none of that computes for me either."

Red spoke again: "Raintance, he's one of the artists down there, fantasized that you were really an eccentric millionaire out slumming with us common folk as a lark."

"And Johnny spun a yarn about you being a bank robber on the lam," Ben added with a chuckle. "His account was that you had the loot stashed nearby and used it as you needed it. Other than that kind of foolish nonsense, none of us ever had any reason to doubt you. We've never known anyone more honest and trustworthy in our lives."

He looked at the others. They all nodded in agreement. That felt amazingly good. It seemed to coincide with the person I was finding myself to be there in Joplin - the person I so hoped I was.

"Did you ever see anything that verified where I had

come from? Did I ever contact anyone up there in Iowa?" In my short life, I had learned one lesson well - question everything.

They looked at one another as they thought.

"Well, now that you ask I can't recall you ever saying you were in contact with anyone," Sarah said at last. "Once in a great while you'd receive a letter from Ames but you never shared anything about them with us. We just tend to accept folks as they are, you know. Well, I guess you don't. This is so hard to comprehend. ... You also received a letter every Monday morning and you mailed something to a box number in Goshen every Monday afternoon."

She shrugged her shoulders, sheepishly.

"Sorry, but I snooped a few times just to satisfy my woman's curiosity. I thought, maybe, you were corresponding with a lady friend. I always thought you needed a special woman in your life."

"I wasn't married then as far as you know?"

"You never spoke of it. It didn't appear you had any family."

"Did I ever mention anyone named, Beth?"

None of them recalled that I had.

I went back to looking through the box.

"Did I leave much else behind"

"Your art and writing supplies and your computer. You used to write most every day," Sarah said.

"What did I write?"

"Well, lots more than we ever saw, I imagine. You are - were - kind of private about that. From time to time you mailed things out to publishing houses."

"You wrote stories for us kids," Chucky announced.

"And you always wrote a special story about us on our birthday." Tommy added.

"Were any of those about a frog named Freddie?" I asked.

"Ya. You write gobs of Freebie the Frog stories. I love 'em," Chucky said, his wide eyes verifying his enthusiasm. He would have continued but I cut him off, addressing the adults.

"Do you know if I used a pen name?"

"Yes, you did," Sarah said, snapping her fingers, obviously trying to remember. "I think it was John something.

"Johnny Wilson?"

"Yes, that's it. See you do remember something."

"I'm afraid not. I discovered that name on some disks I brought with me. It's still a blank."

"Well, what can we do?" Ben asked.

"Ya. Where do we begin?" Red added. "We want to help. That's the whole reason we tracked you down."

These were obviously good friends. They had come looking for me and hadn't stopped until they found me. That reminded me:

"How did you find me here and where is the man with the pony tail and the scar on his chin?"

"Randy." Sarah said. "Well, Randy is one of your good friends, too. He had been up to Columbia on business and on the way back he stopped for lunch at a little restaurant here in Joplin. He spotted your work for sale there. It was all quite a coincidence. When he questioned the waitress, she was really vague about things and gave your name as Jim Johnson. Randy had no doubt that it was your signature though. He stayed around looking for you as long as he could that afternoon. When he got home he told us what he had discovered and we were so relieved that you were apparently all right. We decided that we'd come up and try to find out what was going on. We have been worried sick over you. Today is the first chance we could be free to come."

"Is there any reason I would be frightened by Randy's sudden appearance?"

No one could think of any. Then Sarah continued. "He was the last person to see you before you disappeared. Maybe that has something to do with it but I can't imagine that our dear, sweet Randy could have ever seemed threatening. He's the one with a house full of injured turtles and birds."

"Do you know anything at all about the circumstances of my leaving?"

"No. Not really." She looked at the others and was met with shrugs. "When you come home and talk with Randy he may be able to think of something. He stayed to watch the store for us."

'Come home.' What a wonderful ring that had to it. Home. I was filled with hope - hope that I would soon be learning not only about my life in Arkansas, but also of my life in Iowa. At last, it seemed I was getting close to discovering who I was - who this Adam Barry really was. It should be simple enough to trace myself back to Iowa from the information these folks seemed to have.

None of this new information really shed any light on C. P. or Whiskers. And not so much as a shred of evidence had surfaced about what had happened that was so traumatic as to cause my memory laps and fugue. Should I just leave my Joplin home and friends and go back with them? No. I couldn't do that - not yet. I had too many loose ends to tie up.

I filled them in on my new life and responsibilities. They understood how I would need to take my time in deciding what to do next. Much discussion followed as we all weighed the pros and cons of several possible next steps. These people were bright and helpful and they obviously cared a great deal about my welfare. As we became re-acquainted things loosened up and we even managed a few chuckles.

"Well, whenever you're ready to come and see us or move back you just let us know. We'll come and get you. I don't feel right about just leaving you here in your condition, er situation, er I didn't mean that how it sounded," Ben said.

"I understand. I'm not sure what to call it either. I truly appreciate your concern. I have a lot of decisions to make. I'll keep you posted. I'll need an address."

Before those words had left my mouth, he handed me a business card from the store.

With that out of the way I said, "I don't know about you folks, but I'm famished. I just happen to know a wonderful little restaurant not eight blocks from this very spot that serves great home cooking and sells fantastic sketches by a local - or is that, loco - artist. It'll be my treat, since I do get a discount."

My suggestion met no resistance.

I introduced my new - well, old - friends to Hank and Mary and gave an acceptable, bare bones story about the nature of our acquaintance. We pushed a table up to a booth so the whole gang could sit together. Hank and Mary left us to

ourselves.

Conversation among the adults was suddenly clumsy and erratic. Thank goodness for the talkative children! They regaled me with story after story of things we had done together. "Remember when this" and "Remember when that." Although none of it jarred a memory, I delighted in their natural, unadulterated enthusiasm for life. It was easy to believe I knew and loved them.

Aha! I thought, as only part of my mind continued to listen. They're much like Rick in that regard. My life with Chucky and Tommy probably accounted for the ease with which I had established a relationship with Rick. Perhaps it even dictated my need for such a relationship, an attempt to fill a void my change in circumstances had created.

Though it couldn't be considered a memory in the usual sense of the term, I definitely felt myself easing back into a set of relationships that already existed somewhere within me. Perhaps there were memories - real memories - just below the surface just waiting to break through and clear up this mystery once and for all. I prayed that were true. I'm sure that surprised the god guys!

Near the end of our time together, one such memory did, in fact surface. Chucky asked if we could play the Itsy-Bitsy game. I had to ask him how it went.

"Well, I start by saying, The itsy bitsy ..."

"Bullfrog!" I added immediately, somehow knowing I was to fill the blank with something all quite absurd. Chucky and Tommy roared.

Chucky continued through his giggles. "The Itsy-Bitsy Bullfrog went up the ..."

"Ladies dress," I said. Again, they rolled in laughter on the seats of the booth. We finished the game and had several more great laughs. The adults looked on pleased with what they saw and felt.

I had remembered several things - not consciously. More like habits or patterns - certainly feelings. As insignificant as it may have seemed to the others it was unbelievably exciting to me. It was all I could think about.

After a fine meal and peanut butter pie all around, I walked them out to their van and got a gigantic, lingering hug

from each one. This time I could return those hugs and did so with great happiness. They waved until they were out of sight. I went for a walk to let it all soak in. It had not been the kind of revelation that had solved the basic problem but it showed promise of ultimately helping me find the answers I needed. Somewhere along the line it also just might help restore my memory. The basic questions remained. What had caused my amnesia? Who were C. P. and Whiskers, and why had they become a part of my life? Was I in any danger?

It was almost three o'clock when I, the newly consecrated Adam Barry, arrived back at my room. I laid down staring at the ceiling and was soon asleep. The events and revelations must have exhausted me or released me. It didn't matter. It was not until I felt Rick blowing in my ear and became aware of his wonderful, intermittent giggle that I awakened. He turned on the light as I sat up stretching myself into consciousness. Already babbling at full tilt, and with a cola in each hand, he returned and sat on the edge of bed, handing me a drink.

"This has been the most spectacular day of my life, Jim. When I got there Mr. Lampley showed me the grades I had made on the work me and you did. I had all A's and B's. Can you believe that - Rick the Rev Rife had a whole fist full of A's." He dramatized, fistful, with great gusto.

I scooted back and leaned against the wall. He mounted the foot of the bed sitting cross-legged. Old man - er - Mr. Lampley's really not such a bad guy, Ya know. I guess my teachers aren't really so awful either. Ya know what he said they were going to do?"

As was Rick's style, he left no time for my response. I had not anticipated that he would so just sipped my drink.

"He said that if I came to school every single day - on time - and didn't get sent to his office even once between now and when school's out in May, they would grade me for the whole semester just on the work I did from when you started tutoring me to the end of the year. I'm going to have all A's and B's on my report card and I'm going to frame it and keep it forever!"

He bounced up and down in uncontrolled jubilation. He rambled on for a good fifteen minutes more.

That day had been, without a doubt, the highlight of his life and of mine in so far as I could remember. At last, unable to control his enthusiasm, he leaped on top of me and we tussled there for another few minutes. In the end, he reverted to the little boy within him that still cried out for love and protection. I found myself holding him in my arms as he sat there close beside me. We were both content and just sat in silence for a long time.

I imagined our thoughts were similar - our fondness for each other, all the things we had learned from one other and the sadness we would feel when we had to part.

Rick spoke first. "I love you, you know," he said, still making no move to separate from me. It was the first time that actual word had passed between us.

"Yes, I do know that, Rick and I hope you know how very much I love you."

At that he looked up into my face and smiled a gentle smile accompanied by several slow, deliberate nods of his head.

"We're really like family, aren't we?" He said, returning his head to its former resting place against my shoulder.

"Yes. We are certainly family," I agreed.

We sat in silence for a while longer.

"Gramps said some friends of yours came to visit you today.

"Yes. It was a nice surprise. I had no idea they were coming."

There had certainly been no false representation in either of those statements.

"Are they like family to you, too?"

Gulp! Another of Rick's well planned flanker moves. I was caught completely off guard.

"They are like a family I had some time ago," I said, trying to smooth over any competitive element with which the lad might have been struggling. "One of the finest things about us human beings, Rick, is that no matter how many people we have to love, we always have more than enough love to go around. It is the one thing we can never run out of if we just choose to look for it."

He snuggled closer. Words were not necessary. We understood. I was both pleased and relieved. I already missed him.

Presently, after another period of silence, he got up announcing that he needed to get on home because he knew his mother would be eager to hear all about his school day, too. I followed him to the door. He turned and administering one last hug for the day, said, "Thank you for loving me into a normal kid."

Overwhelmed, I had no response. He left. I closed the door and cried. There were tears of joy and tears of sadness, tears of pride and tears of bewilderment, tears of consolation and tears of apprehension. Most of all there were tears of love.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Day Twenty-four

The fact that it was something I had to do made it no easier.

It had been an emotional morning filled with last times. It had been the last time I would shower in the tiny drab tan metal stall that had come to signal the fresh beginning of each new day. It had been the last time I would help at the restaurant, a comfortable place in which I had built so many of the memories I now possessed. It had been the last time I would have breakfast with Rick and receive his sincere, heartfelt embrace. It would be the last time I would hear Myrtle's, now, almost cheery, "Mornin' Mr. Jim," each morning as I passed her door on my way back from Hank's. It would be the last time that my sketches would adorn the wall in that memorable, little cafe.

From the restaurant, I made my way to the parking lot and the mimosa oasis, which in many ways represented my Eden - the beginning of my new life. Sitting there on my special bench I thought back over the month - well, twenty-five days - that I had spent in that neighborly little city. Putting the terror of my personal situation aside, it had been a grand time - a time in which I had learned everything I knew about myself and had made the truly good friends I was about to leave.

I would soon be going home to a place I could not remember, to be with people whose faces and personalities were unfamiliar and resume a life I could not recall having previously lived. I had wonderful memories to take with me

and that was more important to me than anyone could possibly understand - actual memories available for me to call up any time I pleased.

Earlier, at the restaurant, they had given me a going away party of sorts complete with a huge pancake with the words, '*Have a grate life, Mr. Jim!*' inscribed in powdered sugar. I was touched at the number of folks who showed up for the affair - most likely under threat of dire consequences from Master Rick if they didn't. There were Hank, Mary, Ned and Rick of course. There were Rick's mother and grandmother, and even Myrtle (complete with teeth!). Three folks I had not met before were also among the gathering: The Principal, Mr. Lamprey, the art teacher, Miss Mills, and Mrs. Clapper, Rick's nemesis turned ardent supporter.

Watching the people assembled there and observing how positively they were interacting with Rick, I felt satisfied and comfortable that I could move on without worry or misgivings about the lad's future. It was as if I had played the role of catalyst. Once begun the process would continue.

Tucking that memory safely inside my mind, I got up from the bench and, at a leisurely pace, which seemed to signify my reluctance to leave my little city, made my way home. It was nearly eleven o'clock when I finally ambled into the motel lot. Ben and Sarah would be there at noon to pick me up. My time in Joplin was essentially over.

"Got mail, Mr. Jim," came Myrtle's familiar call. At some point they had all begun calling me Mr. Jim. I assumed it was intended as some level of respect above just plain Jim but less distant than Mr. Johnson would imply. I had never asked. After a few moments of small talk about the party, I took the mail to my room. On the way, I glanced through the breezeway and noticed C. P. sitting in a car on the back street. It had become his regular spot the past week as if he suspected I was about to leave.

I went on inside. My mail consisted of two envelopes. One containing Monday's usual hundred and twenty-five dollars from Whiskers. I quickly filled in the card for another one twenty-five and made it ready to mail. Since that seemed to be the maximum I could receive, I had stopped asking for more. I would return the request form even though

I'd not be there to receive it. It was my intention to make things appear as though I had no intention of leaving.

As I was preparing to lick the flap, however, I wondered if I should go ahead and provide my new address. What were the pros and cons of doing that? The pro was that if I wanted to continue receiving one hundred and twenty-five dollars each week, someone needed to know where I would be. The major con - which was what I had been dwelling on - was that if I could leave town without him knowing it, he might be out of my life forever.

Even though the financial logic appeared to dictate I should provide the new address, I decided to stick with my original plan and not do that. According to Sarah it appeared that I had been receiving that same kind of envelope in the mail when I was with them, even in the absence of Whiskers. I would just wait and see what happened. Benign as they appeared to be, I really wanted both antagonists out of my life. Not until that happened could I begin feeling truly safe.

The second envelope contained the new social security card. I felt momentarily sad, thinking about the tragic fate of the child whose name it bore. I slid it into the manila envelope in which I was keeping my other important papers and returned it to the suitcase.

The refrigerator was essentially empty. I had told Rick he could claim anything I left behind. He so loved the bright yellow coffee maker and the two matching mugs we had found at a yard sale that I planned to leave them for him. There would be a few cans of food also. I had boxed the bust I had made of Rick several weeks before and put his mother's name on it.

I took out the last cola and sat back on the bed. I smiled to think how I had come to actually enjoy the generic drink in the black and white can.

Well ahead of the appointed time, I heard the familiar beep of the VW van. Interesting! I had not heard it the day they had been there and yet it did sound familiar. I so hoped that represented another step along the road to recovering my past.

They were overjoyed to see me. An unanticipated and most comfortable feeling rushed through my being, as

well. Its essence was a blend of safety, acceptance and joyful anticipation. I wondered if that defined love. Even before they jumped from the van, the boys were overflowing with the plans they had for us. I had very few things to stow in the van - the suitcase, the green duffel bag and one small box of newly acquired things. The deed was done in two minutes.

I went back inside and placed a letter to Rick under the coffee maker. Along with seven pages of my most sage advice, it contained my new address in case - well in case he ever needed me or just wanted to write. Had I tarried a moment longer tears would have engulfed me. I closed the door and walked to Myrtle's office to return the key. She tossed it onto her desk and then, as surprising as anything that had yet happened to me during my new life, she opened her arms and embraced me.

Holding me tightly, she said all quite confidentially, "I don't know who you really are, Mr. Jim, but thank you for coming, and God Bless you."

She freed herself, and without another word went inside and closed her door. Myrtle had unmistakably sensed I wasn't who I said I was, and yet, keeping it to herself, she went on to take me at face value. That certainly defined unconditional acceptance! What a compliment it had been. What a special lady I had known.

The journey to Arkansas was accompanied by chattering children, snatches of serious conversation among the adults and rollicking renditions of songs - old and new - sung at the tops of our voices. Ninety-Nine Parcels of Love in the Heart, sung to the tune of the bottles of beer song aptly reflected the tone of this wonderfully caring, young family.

Though I tried to appear calm and rational about things, the apprehension instilled during my last few weeks had not dissipated. From time to time, I looked back to see if we were being followed. I had no good way of ascertaining whether or not that was the case since C. P. had been driving a different car every week. Although I knew Whiskers' car, he had no way of knowing I was leaving town so I doubted I would see it. Still I would steal a backward glance when no one was watching.

As we drove into Fayetteville on highway 71-B, it

was as if I had entered a foreign land. Nothing clicked. We stopped for frozen yogurt cones in lieu of lunch - the boy's suggestion. The delicious taste was familiar but that could have been a memory hanging on from dozens of other places. As we passed the bus station at the bottom of a long, circuitous hill, I felt a fleeting sense of recognition but nothing specific enough to describe in words.

We were soon winding our way through the lush, rolling, Ozark countryside, east of Fayetteville. Chucky dutifully pointed out each and every landmark he thought I might recognize but tired quickly when he realized I just didn't remember anything. Tommy also tried to help by providing story after story of things we had done together. At one point, Chucky whispered to his mother, "Any chance this guy just looks like Adam?"

Though serious in its conception, it provided a good laugh, all around, relieving the building tension. It became Chucky's byline from then on. Every time I would have to claim ignorance about something, he'd employ his special phrase.

At four o'clock we descended a long hill and turned onto a white gravel road that served as a short lane to the store. Several folks waved their greeting as we pulled in and parked at one end of the parking lot. They didn't press to greet me. They had been well prepared and the homecoming had been carefully orchestrated.

The store was near the main road and had a dozen cars parked out front. Business appeared to be good. It sat nestled between two grand green hills. There was a small complex of homes and buildings spreading toward the horizon behind it. For a moment, I thought the setting was familiar but that soon faded into the mists of my mind.

"Which house is yours?" I asked Chucky.

He looked at me with a sigh and put his hand on my shoulder. "I can see this is going to be tough for all of us," he said, most seriously, in an apparent attempt to console both him and me. We adults could hardly contain ourselves.

"It's the two story one with the gold skylights in the roof. See those two skylights on the far-west end. That's me and Tommy's room."

The fact that I had no idea which end was west didn't prevent me from nodding that I understood. I ruffled his hair. He accepted it with a grin returning the gesture with a quick kiss to my temple.

Tommy chimed in. "Your room is up those stairs," he said, pointing to one end of the store building as we exited the van.

The roughhewn, natural-toned, vertical board building looked like something straight off the set of Little House on the Prairie. It was enchanting. Tommy continued: "Come summer, me and Dad are going to add a big room on the East so we can sell a lot more stuff."

"Me, too!" Chucky added more than a little emphatically, "Me, too!" his face getting to within an inch of Tommy's jaw. "Daddy said I could help, too!"

A nod from Sarah, displaying one raised eyebrow, was all it took to keep the boy's discussion from escalating into all-out war. I was impressed and interestingly relieved to see that, given the opportunity, these two extremely well behaved boys could actually behave like brothers.

They all pitched in and helped take my belongings upstairs. "We didn't move a thing since you left," Tommy offered as he opened the door.

It was a spacious room with a bath and a real kitchenette at the far end. A stone fireplace divided all that from the large front room that doubled as bedroom / living room. It seemed like heaven though a heaven I could not remember having seen before.

Chucky opened the refrigerator to show me that they had stocked it with some fresh food to make it ready for my homecoming. Holding up a pop can, he announced, "Diet Pepsi. That's your favorite in case you were wondering."

"Why don't you get settled in and then come on down to the store when you're ready," Sarah suggested. "You're invited for supper at our place. We'll eat about five thirty."

"Thanks. Give me half an hour or so to try and get reacquainted up here," I said with a deep sigh.

Although the boys thought they should stay and help me, their father thought otherwise and soon I was alone

in my new - old - home. I had to admit it felt very good, though not familiar. It was as if my feelings remembered but my mind did not.

I looked through the desk drawer. I patted the computer. I peered into the bathroom and examined the small kitchen area with stove, refrigerator, sink and a surprisingly large amount of cabinet space - large at least compared to my single, little white cabinet in the motel.

Suddenly I felt lonely. I had to wonder if Rick had found his letter yet and if he was going to make it to work on time. Of course, he would. He always did. I didn't have to worry about him. That thought should have been reassuring but it saddened me further. Perhaps I needed someone to worry about - well, care about, anyway.

A shower and fresh clothes, held the promise of a new beginning, so a shower and fresh clothes it was. I inspected my beard in the bathroom mirror, wondering if I should keep it or shed it. Since I had not had it when I was there before I would appear differently to the folks who had known me. It felt right to keep it, however. Also, it was a nice reminder of my days in Joplin, and, frankly, I had grown to like my bearded-look. It felt comfortable and, in my opinion, it improved my appearance. Whether that was because it covered up the less pleasing, recently bloated, lines of my face or because it merely allowed some of my more attractive features to come to the fore was not important.

As I prepared to leave I noticed that although there was a dead bolt lock on the door which could be operated from the inside, there was no lock on the door from the outside. What a trusting place this must be. What a nice change it would bring into my life compared with the fear an unlocked door had so frequently unleashed during the month before.

I closed the door behind me and stood on the spacious deck at the top of the stairs inspecting the spectacular world that lay before me. A narrow, lush green valley harboring a half dozen neatly rowed gardens and numerous patches of park-like woodlands, spread out between me and the base of the, not so distant, mountains. There was a meandering stream that wound its way from the

horizon, passing within twenty yards of the store. The low-lying mountains just beyond, wore a hundred shades of green. They were crowned by gently rounded ridges, whose generally uniform slopes were occasionally interrupted by colorful outcropping of rust red rock.

I took a deep breath. It was as exhilarating as the view was inspiring. Reluctantly, I removed myself from that view of paradise and made my way down toward the store. Sitting on the bottom step, where the stairs merged onto the front porch, sat the ever-smiling Chucky.

"It sure took you a long time to unpack two little bags," he announced, indicating his mild annoyance with long wait. Before my feet hit the porch boards he had me in tow by my left hand and was escorting me to the store's front door.

"Now, if you don't know somebody in there just squeeze my hand like this and I'll whisper to you who they are," he instructed, his desire to take good care of me radiating from every one of his thirty-five pounds.

I assumed that plan was his own contribution to the re-socialization of Mr. Jim - I mean Adam Barry. I agreed, amused and actually, relieved.

Inside, Red approach us enthusiastically, hand extended and affection radiating from his eyes. He held my hand more than shaking it saying, "I can't tell you how great it is to have you back home all safe and sound, Adam."

My eyes moistened and my heart quickened. For just a moment, the still terrified and paranoid portion of my mind surfaced again. I found myself wondering if this could be some kind of an elaborate ruse, in which the story of my time there had been concocted to lull me into a false sense of security until they were ready to do to me, or get from me, whatever it was they had as their underlying evil purpose. Those thoughts soon passed but did not entirely exit my mind.

Except for Red, the store was empty so, as we attempted small talk, Chucky selected a spot on the floor under the front window, occupying himself with a wooden dump truck. I would later learn it was but one of many locally made wooden toys that had become a very popular product line offered by the store.

Red showed me some of my drawings that were

still on display telling me that they sold pretty well, especially when they were displayed in Sarah's colorful, homemade, heavy paper mats. I noticed that the bizarre picture of the pine woods was not among them. I inquired about it but Red had clearly never seen it. I must have produced it after having left the colony and before arriving in Joplin.

He then pointed out my little hillbilly statues. They were carved from basswood - that much I immediately recognized. They were painted bright, comic book colors. I was pleasantly surprised to see how appealing they were. Apparently, they sold well also. I did not recognize them.

We looked over the rest of the stock. I learned that most of it was handmade or otherwise produced by folks within a stone's throw of the store. There were quilts, moccasins and sandals, clothes of all sorts, bows and arrows, pottery, jewelry, candles, block prints, leather work, water colors and oils. There were also the basic food items like flour, sugar, butter, milk, eggs and salt, and a variety of fresh vegetables and fruit. It was a simple, homey place, with a frontier-like atmosphere. Being out in the middle of nowhere, I marveled they had any business at all.

Presently I heard a faint beeping coming from somewhere at the front of the store. Before I could act on my initial feeling of alarm, Chucky appeared, fiddling with his watch.

"It's time for me and Adam to go to my place for supper," he told Red. I examined his watch and he explained how his parents would set the beeper to remind him when there was something he needed to remember to do. I was intrigued and somewhat amused by the fact that modern technology had apparently not been entirely forsaken by these country folks and their simple life style.

I said good-by to Red and left the store with Chucky. As we approached the edge of the huge front porch, the lad made an announcement.

"You always carry me piggy-back from here to my house," pointing to the spot on the ground below where I needed to be standing so he could mount up.

He was a darling child, and I knew he and I were going to become good friends. As I backed into place for him,

I was not prepared for his unannounced flying leap. He lit on my back and just hung from my neck until my fumbling hands at last formed a seat into which he relaxed.

"I used to call you Grampa Adam but Daddy said I'd have to ask you if that was okay since you don't remember us or anything. That's still okay, isn't it?"

"I think that would be just wonderful," I said glancing back over my shoulder trying to establish eye contact with my young, delightfully straightforward passenger, as he bobbed up and down on in rhythm with my steps. He planted a kiss on the side of my face and squeezed my neck with all his might. I was pleased it was such an affectionate group of folks. That seemed a very natural part of me.

"I told Daddy it would be okay with you."

"Oh, you did. How could you be so sure of that?"

"Well, since you've knowed me all my life I figure there's no way all the parts of your brain could have forgotten me. I figured when I asked you that, you would have to remember just enough to say, yes. See, you have all these pictures of me stored up in a big, closed book inside your brain, and me and you just have to figure out a way to open it up again. Then you'll remember everything."

"I'm sure glad you have it all figured out and that you're so willing to help me," I said, amused at his interpretation of it all and frankly amazed at his insight.

As we made our way down the lane, he continued my re-education as if he had devised a master plan for my rebirth.

"Me and you have always been best buddies, see. You like Tommy a lot, too, and everybody else of course, but me and you have a thing. Everybody says so."

How wonderful that Chucky and I had a thing, I thought. I figured that was probably, exactly what was needed. Clearly, I was in good and caring hands. In fact, at that moment those same hands were cutting off the circulation to the very part of my body we were working to restore. Fortunately, we were soon upon his doorstep and he slid to the wood plank floor of the porch.

"Now, it's just going to be our family tonight, Grampa Adam, so you don't have to be worried about a thing,"

he announced quite seriously, mouthing, I suspected, words he had heard his parents speak. I realized that in Chucky I had an open and honest direct line to everything that was being thought and said about me. Like he had said: We had a thing! I hoped I could hold up my end of the relationship.

Tommy rushed out to greet us. "Tomorrow I get to come and get you for supper," he announced, as if not wanting to be left out. Apparently, I was a regular beggar at their evening table. There were so many things I would need to find out just in order to fit myself back in to my life there. In that way it was going to be more difficult than it had been in Joplin.

The meal was fantastic, even if strictly vegetarian. It had been obvious to me in Joplin that I was not a vegetarian. I wondered what I had been there in Arkansas. After dinner, Ben and I did the dishes while Sarah and the boys finished their schoolwork - they were being taught at home. It was a time when I could unload question after question. Ben was an understanding mentor.

"Do you know exactly where I came from in Iowa?"

"Ames."

"Do you know at which library I worked?"

"It was a public library. That's all I ever heard you say."

"Did I have a specialty - reference, children's, anything like that?"

"Sorry, you really didn't every talk much about it. My guess would be ... I really can't guess. You know so much about so many things."

"Did I ever mention people by name or maybe refer to them by occupation?"

"You had a friend who owned a grocery store. Let's see. What was it called? I know you told us because it was humorous or catchy." He raised his voice and called to Sarah. "Honey. What was the name of the grocery in Ames that Adam's friend owned?"

"Fred's Food and Fuel," came the answer.

"That's right - so it wasn't really humorous or catchy. What can I say?"

He was an easy going, easy to talk with, caring man

and there in the kitchen I felt comfortable with him. I went on with my questions.

"Did I mention anything else I had done before I arrived here?"

"Let's see. Ya, several things. You volunteered a lot at the YMCA teaching swimming and craft and art classes. Or maybe it was at the Boys Club, I'm not sure. You tutored kids, apparently for free - that's how you do it here."

"I tutor kids? What kind of kids? What subjects?"

"Jr. high and high school mostly. A couple of them are eager to see if you'll take them back. Most of the kids are home-schooled out here and by the time they're fourteen, some of them get a little testy with their mothers, you know. You were working with a couple of them who were going through that phase."

"What subjects?"

"It seems you can teach anything. We're all amazed at all the stuff you know."

"Anything else about my years in Ames?"

"I believe you said you got your degrees from a University there."

"Degrees? What degrees?"

"As I recall it was an undergraduate degree in education and psychology and a master's in library science. Sounded like after that you just took courses that tickled your fancy. And that reminds me of something else. You spoke about editing books for professors."

"In what fields? Did I say?"

"You talked about one psychology professor in particular. Apparently, he only spoke psycho-babble and you sort of translated all his books and articles into common English."

"Do you think I have copies of any of that work?"

"I've never seen it if you do."

The more we talked the more it all seemed to make sense. I surely knew my way around a library. I was a good teacher and I did seem to know something about most everything. I had found the psychology books pretty routine and my story for Rick about editing psychological pieces truly felt right as I was concocting it.

I needed to get back to my more recent past.

"What all did I do around here? Surely I did more than just tutor and generate average kinds of drawings and silly little statuettes."

"Ya. You worked in the store twelve hours a week. Everyone who sells things there works eight hours a week in the store in lieu of paying a consignment fee. It eases the book work and all the state and federal pay in red tape."

I had to ask to satisfy a curiosity: "1099's?"

"We'll file them for anyone who asks us to. Some do. Some don't. I don't ask any questions beyond that."

"Did I? I mean where did I stand on 1099's?"

"You wanted me to file them for you. Sarah can pull your earnings to date out of the computer anytime you want. May I ask a question? I mean if it's none of my business just say so and that's cool."

"Shoot."

"Well, Sarah and I were talking and you said you arrived in Joplin on April first, did we understand you right?"

"That's right. April's fool day which somehow seemed appropriate."

"Well, we first missed you on the morning of March second. Don't you have any idea where you were during those intervening four weeks?"

I was momentarily dumbfounded. I had just assumed that my departure from the colony had dovetailed into my arrival in Joplin. Another puzzle. My mind whirled. It meant several things. C. P. had not just followed me from here to there but he must have been keeping up with me during March as well. It seemed he was the only one who held the answers about that period and I had just tried to ditch him.

I needed to respond to Ben.

"No, Ben. I don't have any idea at all. I just assumed I left here on April first like my ticket stub suggested. This opens up a whole new dimension to the mystery."

Suddenly the memory of how I smelled when I arrived in Joplin wafted to mind. Perhaps this helped explain it. I had wondered how I could have acquired such a filthy body in just a day or so. But that was for later consideration.

"We'll just have to think about that one and see if we can come up with some way of pursuing it," I said.

"So, you are determined to figure all this out, then, are you?" Ben asked.

"Certainly," I shot back. A moment later, part of me sensed that last question of his had been an inappropriate one. A bolt of fear tightened my chest. Why would I not want to figure it out? Did Ben really know something he was not telling me or did not want me to find out? It was probably just the suspicious mentality I had developed those past few weeks. I tried to shake the feeling and go on. Before I could formulate another question, Ben spoke.

"You know we're all here to help in any way and at any time. We can take you anywhere you need or want to go. The boys are on the Internet, so we can look up anything in the universe if that would help. You just name it and we're here for you."

His speech should have been reassuring but it fell short. I dried the last dish and hung up the towel. Interestingly I knew where to hang it - around the corner from the refrigerator on the inside of a closed pantry door.

"Did you see what I just did?" I asked, a feeling that approached jubilation soaring within me.

"Ya. Pretty nice! I noticed something else, too."

"What's that?"

"You knew exactly which cabinet to open in order to put away each size of plate and glass and serving dish."

"So, I did," I added in astonishment. Were you ever going to share that with me or was I on my own to discover it?"

We both chuckled. He put his arm around my shoulders as we walked into the living room.

"I think he's on the mend," Ben announced, giving Sarah a kiss on the forehead.

"Really!" she said. Ben filled her in. She seemed genuinely pleased. It rated a big hug. Willing to participate in anything that took them away from their math work sheets, the boys were also soon upon me.

"May I ask if you have a plan?" Sarah asked. Again, it seemed a bit pushy for folks who had presented themselves as live and let live kind of people. Perhaps it was

just her genuine concern overflowing in an honest, frank manner.

"I have two plans. One is to get back into the swing of things around here. You'll just have to be straight forward with me so I know what I should be doing and how I should be doing it. If there are routines and such, I'll have to count on you to fill me in. Okay?"

They agreed.

"The second plan is to find out what really went on in my life in Ames. It shouldn't be all that difficult. A phone call to the Ames Library Department should be good place to start. A telephone book from six or so years ago, may also hold some clues - my address, other people named Barry, things like that. I can even go back up and search out neighbors and colleagues and finally get some answers if it comes to that."

Sarah, who seemed quite levelheaded, felt the need to respond. "If, as you sense, you are now in some kind of trouble or danger, it's possible you were in that same danger when you left Ames. Perhaps it's even the reason you left. It might be better if one of us went up to do any poking around. It might even be better if we made the phone call in case the wrong person might recognize your voice."

Ben chimed in. "We could call the library and say you were applying for a position here and you had given them as a reference. Sarah could do it. Before she hung up she'd have every detail including where you got your hair cut."

Sarah feigned self-importance and we had a good chuckle. What they said was well taken - if they were really my friends. If they weren't, this could be their way of keeping me away from Ames. But why would they have told me about it in the first place if they had any reason to hide something about it from me? Perhaps telling me had been a mindless slip and now they had to find a way to cover for it. Oh how I hated the suspicious nature that was once again surfacing in me.

One thing remained left over from my discussion with Ben. I figured it was probably insignificant but then what did I know? I decided to ask.

"Ben, you said the folks who sell things at the store

work eight hours a week, right?"

"Right."

"But you said I worked there, twelve hours a week. Why was that?"

"Oh. Well, the store puts out a little mail order catalog every month advertising some of the Ozark Crafts we offer. Anyone who wants to be in that agrees to work an extra four hours a week to help defray the printing and mailing costs."

"What did I have in the catalog?"

"Both your lines - your hillbillies and several of your pastels."

That satisfied my curiosity. I thanked them for the meal and their friendship and said my good nights.

"Can we walk Grampa Adam back to his place? Please! Please! Please!" came the boys' plea as they bounced up and down.

Ben looked at Sarah and Sarah shrugged her shoulders as if to say it was okay with her. "If Grampa Adam will have you, it's okay, but I want you home in fifteen minutes," Ben said.

"Sure. I might get lost without a couple of good guides," I said, cheerfully.

Tommy immediately moved to set the timer on Chucky's watch and Sarah checked it. "Nice job," she said, planting a kiss on the top of Tommy's head. He beamed.

The boys pulled me out the door, apparently wanting to make the most of each and every one of the fifteen minutes that had been allotted them. With one youngster attached to each hand, we paraded back to the store and up the stairs. Tommy sprinted on ahead and had the door open when Chucky and I arrived.

It seemed a well-established pattern: Chucky chattered all the time and, as openings appeared, Tommy jumped in to add his two cents worth. Tommy was more a man of ideas than of idle chit-chat. They were both touchy-feelie and naturally affectionate. They liked to make jokes and laugh. They clearly loved Grampa Adam and were immediately loved in return. Again, I found it easy to love and that pleased me.

It promised to be a good life there but I had to find a way of dealing with my misgivings about Ben and Sarah. It gnawed relentlessly at my soul and that did not please me.

My growing confidence that I was about to discover who I was provided a comforting end to and interesting, yet emotionally draining day. Sleep came easily that night. Even my dream demons gave me a break.

///

CHAPTER NINE

Day Thirty-One

A week had passed and I was getting into the routine. I worked down in the store on Tuesday and Thursday mornings and half days every other Saturday. I drew and carved as the spirit moved me. I was amazed at how my hands knew how to create those lovable little people. All quite privately, I began writing this after-the-fact journal of my experiences beginning with that first morning in Joplin.

I typically had dinner with Sarah, Ben and the boys in the evening and fended for myself the other two meals each day. I had become comfortable with all the people there - they were my family. Rick would have been pleased to know I had folks to look after me. Chucky and Tommy visited every day. I gave them art lessons three times a week as a part of their school routine.

I re-established my services for the two the high school age boys I had been tutoring before. That had become particularly enjoyable.

There were a dozen families connected in some way to the store and the colony. I enjoyed all the people very much. It seemed to me that as a group, they tended to be a bit over the edge in their suspicions about the intentional malevolence of the national government, but I kept quiet and tried to learn their reasons. Perhaps they knew things I didn't.

I was the oldest participant at the colony by 25

years. Almost everyone called me Grampa Adam. It allowed me a unique and enjoyable role. I loved it. It was not that of a leader. More like a confidant-on-call - a low key adviser but only when asked.

Although some things seemed vaguely familiar, I truly could not say that I had consciously remembered anything. The routine at the store came back automatically. It felt more "genetic" than remembered, however. I found things in my apartment with no problem but then there were so few places to look that may have related more to logic than memory. I did, however, remember the words to the silly songs Chucky and Tommy liked for us to sing. I had remembered the first name of one of the youngsters I had been tutoring, though I had no memory of him otherwise. Everyone was most understanding and considerate of my situation (or, as Chucky had dubbed it "His brain condition.").

I had decided to handle the Ames contacts personally and to just keep it all to myself for the time being. My initial calls to Ames had been of little help. The city library could not provide employment information without written permission from the former employee so I had sent that to them along with a request to verify the years of my employment with them.

The reference librarian had kindly agreed to search past phone books and I was to call her later that day to find out what she had found. The only positive outcome to that point had been that a call to the Ames police department asking if there were warrants pending on men named Adam Barry and Jim Johnson, revealed none.

To my consternation, a friend of Red's in the local sheriff's department had determined that no one with the name Adam Barry and my birth date had ever been issued a driver's license in Iowa. That was immediately puzzling and distressing. It raised doubts within myself that I didn't need to have raised. Perhaps I was using the wrong birth date.

At ten A.M., I placed the call to the reference librarian in Ames. Her search of the phone books went back ten years, which was as long as they kept old books on microfiche. She found three Adam Barrys, at a variety of addresses and numbers during those years. I took down the

information and thanked her. I asked her if she remembered ever working with someone by that name. She had not, but she had only been working there six years. Six years cut the timing to close to say yes or no about my association there.

I called the most recent number for an Adam Barry. His wife answered and assured me he had left for work three hours before and was living safe and sound there on St. James Street. She also confirmed that it had been they who had been at one of the other addresses I had on my list. She knew of no other Adam Barry.

All I had left were a few street addresses at which the Adam Barrys had lived more than five years before. The phone numbers for them were no longer valid. I called the research librarian again and asked if she would look up those addresses in a current residential listing reference book and give me the names and phone numbers of the people living on each side of each address. She was quite cordial and seemed pleased to be able to continue helping me. She had the book on her desk so I was able to obtain the information on the spot. She suggested I might also want the names and numbers of the people currently residing at the specific addresses, "In case they may have bought the house from this Adam Barry person." That was actually an insightful idea. I thanked her again for her assistance.

The short version of the next four hours, was that no one had ever heard of an Adam Barry who worked as a librarian in Ames or even one who vaguely resembled the description I had given them of myself - with or without the beard. None of them had purchased their house from him.

It was worse than back to square one. When my new friends had identified me as Adam Barry, I had immediately accepted it as fact and hung all my hopes on that premise. A sense of despair engulfed me like a bank of fog in the dark. I lay down on the bed feeling hopeless and totally baffled. I was soon adrift in a sea of tears.

Rather than shedding light on my predicament, each new discovery uncovered more uncertainties. At that point, it appeared there were no more avenues to pursue in the search for my identity. I glanced up at the gods in disgust and turned away from them onto my side. Some momentary

relief arrived as I briefly considered mooning them.

Somewhere in that process, I remembered the name of the store I had said my friend owned in Ames: Fred's Food and Fuel. I called Directory Assistance for its number. It didn't exist, either. Apparently, my whole story about life in Ames was a sham. It didn't establish that I wasn't Adam Barry from somewhere else, just that I wasn't Adam Barry from Ames, Iowa.

On the other hand, Sarah remembered that from time to time I had received mail with Ames postmarks. My previous search of my place had revealed no such correspondence. It was one more fact, floating un-moored in my sea of confusion. Taken as a whole the data marked my story about Ames a fabrication, pure and simple. I wondered how I should handle that with my friends. For the time being I would just avoid the issue with them.

It was back to the question of why I left the colony in the first place and where I had been during the month between leaving there and arriving in Joplin. There was now also the question of how I came by the name I had been using there.

"The obituaries," I said out loud.

I just need to check the obituaries and see if an Adam Barry died about the time I arrived in Arkansas. My momentary elation at hitting upon a new plan was quickly dashed when I realized I had no idea where I had been prior to arriving at the colony. It could have been an obituary anywhere in the United States. On the slim chance that it had been somewhere in northwest Arkansas, I could check out the several area papers but I put little stock in the strategy.

At that moment, I remembered, that upon the initial exploration of my room, I had run across a small strong box. Why had I not investigated its contents much earlier? I carried it from the closet floor to the table. It was locked. Looking around for something to use as a pry bar I remembered the second key that had accompanied me to Joplin in the money belt. I had forgotten it there in my wallet. I slipped it into the lock. Not only did it fit, it opened the box. Another question answered but what real purpose did it serve? If I had thought to take the key with me, it just might be the box held

something I didn't want either my "family" or my adversary to discover.

With renewed hope and energy, I began searching for a clue - anything that might answer an old question or merely raise a helpful new one. Inside were several envelopes and a hand full of loose papers. In the first envelope, I found several copies of the birth certificate for Adam Barry. In light of the revelations of the morning, that was the last thing I expected to find. It seemed to suggest that was, in fact, who I was.

I read the top copy and then shuffled through the others merely glancing at them. Why would I have so many copies of a birth certificate? They bore a birth date of January 22nd, the same as on my ID card. I was about to set the certificates aside when a discrepancy suddenly leapt to my attention. One certificate, apparently the original, was dated 1988. The other three were identical to that one except they were dated 1938. Even upon close inspection, I could not determine any other differences. It was clear that the birth certificate had originally been for a someone who had been born in 1988 and I had somehow changed it to read 1938 on the copies - a date more appropriate to my own age. It was, as a baseball wag once quipped, *deja vu* all over again! No wonder I had locked the box and taken the key. I had known all along that I was not Adam Barry.

I had obtained the birth certificate of a child who had died, obtained a social security number in his name, modified the birth certificate to approximate my age and procured an ID card. The still troubling aspect of that story line was that I doubted I would have risked showing the altered birth certificate to the ID card granting agency when there was a chance they would check out its authenticity in some way via computer. I didn't know if that were done, but it seemed a highly reasonable possibility. I set them aside and looked further.

Inside another envelope, I found a copy of the application for a social security card and the material which accompanied the card when it had been received. The application had been dated August 12th, 1993. The envelope was addressed to Jimmy Barry, in care of James Johnson at a

Geneseo, New York, address. The card was for one Adam Lee Barry. At that point I dumped the entire contents of the strong box onto the table. There were income tax forms in the name of Adam Barry, a man's expensive diamond ring, and other miscellaneous papers. I was drawn back to the envelope from the social security administration. The postmark was August 22, 1993. It bore a Rochester, NY cancellation. That had been a little less than six years before.

I called the Chamber of Commerce in Geneseo and the helpful lady at the other end of the line gave me the names and numbers of the papers most folks subscribed to in that area. They were papers from Rochester and Buffalo. I also learned that there was a college in Geneseo.

Pretending to be a Dr. Smith, I called the reference librarian at the college and asked if he could help me with my research. Apparently, the choice of names was fortuitous since, without hesitation, he was pleased to help. I asked him to search the obituaries in the area papers during the several months prior to August 22, 1993 for the obituary of Adam Lee Barry. He said to give him an hour. What service! I told him I'd call him back, because I wanted to get the information personally.

It had been a morning of surprises, which had provided the lowest of the lows and the highest of the highs. It was difficult to know if I should be down because of all the dead ends and disappointments or up because of the new possibilities. I tried to hold to a middle ground.

The newest version of the most important question in my life had become where had I been prior to Geneseo? Still another question to add to my growing list, was where had I been between late August of 1993 and April of 1994 when I showed up at the colony?

It was time to pick up the mail from my box at the foot of the stairs. As I went outside it occurred to me that it was May 2nd - the first Monday in the second month of my new life. So much had transpired in such a few days. I missed Hank's pancakes. I'd have to try and master the art myself. Downstairs, I stuck my head in the door to say good morning to Red. He was busy with a customer but took time to wave and smile. I removed the several pieces of mail from

the box and made my way back up the stairs.

There it was. I didn't know whether to be happy or sad, relieved or concerned, pleased or aggravated, so I just laughed out loud and shook my head at the gods. I tore open the familiar number ten, white envelope and removed my one hundred and twenty-five dollars. I set the enclosed card and return envelope aside.

There was also a contingent of junk mail. I seemed to have been on a number of mailing lists for everything from get quick rich schemes to "sexual enhancement products for mature men and women." They got trashed in the recycling container for flat paper. As a group, those in the colony were very conscious of the planet's health and wellbeing, and that pleased me. I was doing my best to get in step.

One envelope remained. I had passed over it on my initial sorting. It was from the library system in Ames. It only confirmed what I was sure it would say. There had never been an Adam Barry working in their system. At least it established that line of investigation was a dead end. Still, I had to wonder why I had selected Ames, Iowa as my bogus home town and who had been corresponding with me from there. I had to assume that I would have been at least somewhat familiar with the city I chose in case I had been asked questions about it. Nothing came to mind.

It was then I remembered an envelope in the strong box. As I recalled, it had an Ames return address. I located it. The return address was from P and F Enterprises. The name meant nothing to me. Inside was information detailing a letter forwarding service, which I had apparently engaged. I would send them an addressed and stamped letter inside an outer envelope, which was addressed to them and they would drop the enclosed letter into the mail, providing an Ames postmark. Perhaps that explained the choice of Ames as my hometown - it had simply been determined by where I could find a suitable mail forwarding service.

In my search, I had stumbled onto a copy of the procedure for obtaining an ID card in Arkansas. I read through the carelessly printed, single sheet with interest. A birth certificate was not required. Documents such as a W-2 form or income tax returns could be substituted. That cleared

up the question of how I had obtained the ID card. With the social security number I could pay into FICA and pay income taxes. Once I had an income tax return, I could obtain the ID card. It may have also answered the question as to why I had requested that the store file a 1099 for me when the income could have been untraceable for tax purposes. I had needed the income tax form. The idea that I may have done it in that way just because I was an honest, law abiding citizen would not hit me until later.

I pattered around the apartment for a few more minutes and then returned the call to the college library in Geneseo.

"The date you needed was August 9th, 1993, Dr. Smith. Would you like me fax a copy of the obituary over to your office?"

"No, that won't be necessary. Just read it to me if you have time."

When he finished, I thanked him. I had to wonder if he would ever mention it to Dr. Smith and what the good doctor's reaction would be. I'd count on him being an absent-minded professor. In any event, I had been an untraceable voice half a continent away.

So, what did that tell me for sure? First, that the name Adam Barry was one I had lifted from a deceased child. Second, that I had done that back in New York in August of 1993 while receiving mail in the name James Johnson, the very name that had slipped so easily from my lips to Myrtle that first day of my new life.

It then came to me that James Johnson just might have been the actual tenant living at the address to which I had the official mail sent. Perhaps he had been my friend and I had been staying with him. If so, I had found the ticket to my past at last.

I called the Chamber of Commerce lady back and after a dash of amiable small talk and a smidgen of flattery asked her to see if there was a James Johnson listed in the phone book. There was not. I asked if she remembered ever knowing someone by that name at the address I had. She thought back but couldn't remember.

"Angie Beck's owned that house for twenty years.

Let me give her a call and see if she remembers."

"Well, if she does remember him, would you please see if she can describe him."

"Sure enough. I'm going to put you on hold."

One thing I was confirming for myself during this uneasy time in my life: Most people were pleasant, helpful, compassionate folks. I waited to the strains of an instrumental medley of songs by The Mamas and The Papas. Even allowing the two ladies time to catch up on the small-town gossip it seemed to be taking an eternity. Half way through Monday, Monday, she reconnected.

"Angie remembers everybody. She said Jim Johnson stayed a very short time - like three or four weeks - but he had paid for two months in advance. She remembers things like that. She says he was neat and clean, and soft-spoken. He was a loner - never had a single visitor the whole time he was there. He went for a walk every morning and another every evening and always ate down at the hotel during off-hours. He kept his blinds closed all the time. As she recollects he was about six feet tall, large framed but not fat, sort of pale in the face with gray to white hair. He spoke like a college professor. He seemed really sad - depressed even - although he was always polite and courteous. If he hadn't been so nice and refined, she would have thought he was a criminal hiding out - that's how he acted she said. Does any of that help?"

"It certainly does, my dear. I can't thank you enough for all of your help. Tell your boss I said you deserve a raise. If he won't give you one, go find a better paying job with a detective agency."

She tittered her delightful giggle, and we hung up.

The description could certainly have been me just a few pounds lighter - well, quite a few, actually. The emotional state could also fit. If Mr. Johnson had no visitors, then the Jimmy Barry had probably been a fictitious name used to procure both the birth certificate and the social security card. Still open was the question of where I had been during the following year. I had more pieces of the puzzle but seemed no closer to solving it. It was just becoming a larger disorganized jumble.

I looked again at the birth certificate. It confirmed the college librarian's information that Springfield, Missouri was the place of birth. I wondered if that could be of any help. I didn't see how. The one city in all of this that I could get to relatively easily and it seemed to hold no promise of help.

It was lunchtime. I set my fruit bowl on the table and got out a loaf of bread, the butter and a diet Pepsi. As I ate I filled in the "money card" and dutifully put it back in its pre-stamped envelope. This time it was to be returned to a box number in Goshen, Arkansas, a small town just east of Fayetteville. I had not seen C. P. or Whiskers since returning to the colony. Neither had my friends. The arrival of the money signaled that I had not slipped out of Joplin unnoticed by someone. I assumed it was Whiskers, but the more I thought about it, the more I wondered. So long as my whereabouts were known, I saw no reason to forego the extra income.

After lunch as I was taking the envelope to the mail drop on the porch in front of the store I ran into Randy - the original Hippie from my Joplin adventure - just as he was finishing his shift.

"Got a few minutes to talk?" I asked.

"Sure. Always," came his cordial, smiling reply. "Mind if I eat my sandwich while we talk?" he asked, removing a well-worn brown paper sack from his knapsack - that is, backpack.

"That's fine," I said. We sat toward one side on the expansive wooden steps.

"What can you tell me about my last day here before I disappeared?" I asked.

"Well, let's see." He looked toward the sky in silence, collecting his thoughts. "It all started out like any other day I suppose. You weren't working at the store that day, the Purdy Boys - Jeff and Roger - were on. I left at noon as usual and was gone all afternoon. When I came back at five to count the register, Roger informed me that he had sold a picture you had marked 'For Display Only'. I told him that hadn't been a real smooth move. He explained that the man who bought it was quite insistent and finally offered three hundred dollars for it - ten times what you were getting for

your other pictures. Roger explained that he thought he was doing you a favor since he was sure you could just draw another one like you did of your most popular landscapes."

"Which picture was it?" I asked.

"It was the one of the two boys' heads looking at each other."

"Go on."

"Well, you came down to help us close up the store like you often did and I had Roger tell you what happened. At first you didn't seem to be bothered in the least - pleased in fact to have made so much money. About then, Tommy came in with his family's new Polaroid camera and snapped a picture of the four of us for his scrapbook. He wanted to showoff the pictures he had taken during the day, so we spread them out on the counter. Roger picked one of them up and said, "This is the guy who bought your picture. This is him!"

"You took the picture and looked it over. It couldn't have been ten seconds later that you turned pale as flour and the veins in your temples began throbbing. You asked if you could have the three hundred dollars right then. It wasn't according to how we operated but I figured you must have had good reason, so I gave it to you and you signed a paid-out. You turned around and left without helping us finish closing or even saying good night. It wasn't at all like you, Adam. It was really weird. You went up the stairs out front and that was the last any of us saw of you."

"I wonder if Tommy still has that picture?" I asked.

"Don't know but I imagine he does," Randy said. "He's a pack rat like his dad."

"I really seemed upset, then, did I?"

"It was something worse than just upset. It was like you had just seen a ghost or the boogeyman."

"And the next morning I was gone, is that all you can remember?"

"That's it. When you didn't show for work, I went up to your place looking for you. The door was standing open and you were gone along with most of your clothes. We talked about alerting the authorities but decided since there was no evidence of foul play it had been your business to stay

or leave so we didn't follow through on that. Sometimes I wondered if maybe we did the wrong thing there. We just don't like to mess, ya know?"

"Sure. I understand that. Anyway, it seems to have worked out fine, thanks to your eagle eye finding my pictures in Joplin. Thanks for the chat."

"There is one more thing I just remembered, Adam. The next day the older guy who had been with the young man who bought the drawing came back asking to see the artist. I told him you were no longer here and that I had no idea where you were. He looked at me like he wanted to threaten me or worse, but couldn't because he was under orders to restrain himself or something. He looked more like a man of action than of words, I guess I mean. Three-piece suit or not, he just looked plain mean."

"Oh, then there is still one more thing. I just keep remembering."

How nice that must be, I thought.

"Two days later Roger caught sight of someone coming out of your front door early in the morning. When I got here I went up to look the place over. It looked like the cabinets and closets and drawers had been searched, though nothing had been wrecked. Whoever it was had tried to be careful. Roger caught a glimpse of the person on your deck as he was leaving. Seeing that he had been spotted the man jumped the twelve feet to the ground, got into a fancy car and drove off fairly fast. He didn't get a good enough look at him to describe him. I imagine it must have been a younger guy to be able to jump that far, ya know. I don't know if any of that is helpful or not."

"It may be. Thanks for your time. Like I said, regardless of any of that, it's all worked out fine."

I was not about to fill him in on the confusing events that had taken place earlier in my day. I figured all that was my business. I'd only share it on a need to know basis. I wanted everyone to feel as though things were back to normal.

I strolled over to Ben and Sarah's and was welcomed with three sets of open arms - Ben had gone to town. Sarah soon scooted the boy's back to their schoolwork,

which gave me an opportunity to ask her about the Polaroid picture. She got out a shoebox filled with recent snapshots and we began sorting through them. Apparently, the pictures had never made it to Tommy's scrapbook.

"I think this may have been the one," she said at last.

It turned my stomach upside down. My chest heaved and I felt faint. Through it all I had no idea why that was happening. It dredged up only emotions - no conscious memories. So, what was new about that?

"May I just borrow this for a few days?" I asked.

"I'm sure it will be fine if you just keep it. Tommy really didn't photograph anything of family significance that day - well, other than this one of you guys at the store."

It was the typical shot of guy friends goofing off complete with Roger's two fingers sticking up above my head. I forced a smile, thanked her for her help, waved good-bye to the boys and went back home.

Although it had apparently evaded the notice of everyone else, it hit me right off the bat. The young man in the photo - an immaculate, suit and tie attired man in his early twenties - was the same face as the one on the left in my drawing of the two boys. That was the picture he had purchased. I compared them side by side. There could be no doubt. My drawing contained a slightly younger version of that same face. I estimated the age to be fifteen or so in the drawing and twenty to twenty-three tops in the photo. Another bewildering clue but no more answers.

That may not have been entirely accurate. The boy in the picture had made the effort to come out into the Ozark boondocks and purchase a drawing of him for ten times the asking price. His assistant was older and not very pleasant. They were interested in finding me. The sight of the young man in Tommy's picture terrified me - probably so much that I was moved to leave the colony under cover of darkness.

I wondered what form of transportation I had used and where I went. I wondered how the young man had found me. I wondered if they had returned that night and kidnapped me. Perhaps C. P. was his spy and his job was merely to keep up with my whereabouts until the boss decided to make

his move. That would help explain his standoffish approach in Joplin. If that were the case why didn't the young man - I began calling him Face - show up in Joplin or why had he not returned to the colony since I had been back there? I wondered if it had been the fright of seeing Face that had given me amnesia or possibly something else that had happened to me during that lost month. Perhaps, during that month, I had fallen into their hands and been brainwashed.

I was letting my imagination run far too wild. It seemed important to regain my composure so no one would suspect what was going on. There was no need to worry them and, more and more, I felt it was none of their business. Like Rick and I had agreed: some business is private business. Certainly, I didn't want some sordid aspect of my past to bring harm to any of them. Perhaps I should just leave in order to protect them. I had tried that once before and all I managed to accomplish was to entangle a whole new set of nice folks into my own danger.

I wondered how they were doing. It was not clear to me if I should be the one to reinitiate contact with them or let them make the first move. It might be easier on them to just let me fade into a memory. It was hard to know what would be best. I had sent them all a short note in care of the restaurant to let them know I had arrived safely and that things were going well. There had really not been time to receive a response so I would just let it be - at least for a while.

I took out my notebook and began making a list of the things which I seemed to know about myself and my situation.

The first clue about it all was in Geneseo, N. Y. in late August of 1993, when whoever I had been was taking the informed steps necessary to establish a new identity.

I had rented a room for two months under the name James Johnson, staying only about three weeks. I probably left soon after the social security card had arrived. I must have had enough cash to handle my expenses. I was reclusive and sad during that period.

It was there I obtained the birth certificate and social security card for Adam Lee Barry, birth date January 22, 1993. I had modified that to read January 22, 1938.

Nine, totally blank months later I arrived at the colony and took up residence for the better part of five years. While there I was accepted as a part of the greater family, worked as an artist, wood carver and store clerk. I seemed content.

I had informed the folks at the colony that I had been a Librarian in Ames, Iowa and had just decided it was time for an adventurous change in my life style. I talked very little about my past unless pressed to do so. I tutored children and got along well with everyone. I had engaged a letter forwarding service from Ames.

On the occasion of seeing the photo of a young man, I disappeared. It was somehow connected with my drawing of the two boys' faces.

A month later I arrived in Joplin, with two keys, five computer disks, almost two thousand dollars and no memory of anything in my past.

I lived for nearly a month in Joplin, selling my drawings and receiving money through the strange envelope routine. Two adversaries showed up: C. P. and Whiskers. I could not figure out C. P.'s role, though Whiskers seemed to be the source of my mail-money.

I discovered that I was an educated man with a wide range of knowledge and an interest in helping youngsters with their personal problems. It turned out that I was a nice person – something I had not been certain of in the beginning – well, in the beginning at Joplin. I seemed to have several 'beginnings'.

I had dream images of a green pine woods and a confused, emotional scene taking place there which involved loud noise, flashing lights and policemen who may or may not have been friendly toward me. The trees were always swaying and the grass was always red.

Randy saw my artwork at the café and the colony folks came to find me in an effort to determine why I had left. I returned to the colony where I discovered I had never really lived as Adam Barry in Ames.

Still unexplained was why I had opted to take the disks along to Joplin, hiding them initially in the bus station locker and where I had been during the month between

leaving the colony and arriving in Joplin. It appeared that C. P. might be an informant for the young man - Face. If that were true, I could expect another visit soon, if in fact, Face were continuing his search for me.

I had not even asked myself the important question about how Face had located me at the colony until Ben had explained about the catalog. Face could have seen my signed work in it, noted the address, and easily found me. It was really reaching but it was a possibility.

I had been assuming that there had been some terrible trauma involved in seeing the young man in the picture and that had triggered my amnesia. That would have required that sometime earlier in my life there had been some frightful event associated with him.

The first name I had used - at least the first I had learned about - James Johnson - may or may not have been my real name. As adept as I appeared to be in donning and shedding names, I doubted it was actually mine. With thousands of James Johnsons in the country, I had little chance of running down the right one in any case.

Had I begun the affair in Geneseo because I had started from somewhere nearby or because it was safely far away from my original home base? Why had the affair begun in the first place? It appeared to be connected with Face and some related set of alarming circumstances. From the emotions that stirred within me at the mere vision of Face, I had to assume he was an enemy of the worst kind. Yet, he would have been a mere teenager at the time of the original crisis in my life.

I now had the salient facts before me. I could study them and plan a next step. Sadly, it appeared the only way I would get to the bottom of this was if Face found me and offered an explanation. What a terrifying image that created for me. I had to wonder if knowing my true past was worth the price that might have to be paid. I needed a long walk to help me sort things out.

CHAPTER TEN

Days Sixty through Sixty-three

I was almost nine weeks into my new life. Although I had accumulated many facts about my past the three big questions remained: Who was I? Where had I come from? What had caused my amnesia?

Earlier in the month, I had made several decisions, which had clearly pointed my life in a more positive and stress-free direction. The fears I had surrounding Face were so overpowering that I had decided I would do whatever was necessary to avoid or evade him even though I knew he might be the only key to unlocking my past. It was a tradeoff I was willing to make. I had persuaded myself that Face was convinced I had left the colony for good so he would not come back there looking for me. Also, I had decided that I would no longer send for the money each Monday. I was making more than enough from my own endeavors and felt it would be best to cut that final cord to my past so I could begin focussing on my present and future. Although I had dutifully tossed the envelopes containing the inquiry cards into the trash each week, they continued to arrive in the mail each Monday morning.

It had become a good life there in the colony. I was surrounded by caring friends, and I was able to play important, and helpful roles in many of their lives. I enjoyed what I was doing for a living and could think of a no more magnificent place to live out my years than right there in the safety and serenity of the beautiful Ozark Mountains.

With those decisions in place, I had begun feeling more at peace with both myself and the universe. The nightmares came only infrequently and many days were completely fear free. I felt myself becoming Grampa Adam in every sense implied by that comfortably endearing term. It was good to feel that I was home at last.

With the end of May came the return of the humming birds and the blossoming of the colorful late Spring shrubs and trees. The hillsides were bathed in a dozen shades of green. The structured life of the school year was over so the boys had many more hours each day in which to just be kids. Happily for me, that translated into additional time with Grampa.

Chris and I were both early risers and more mornings than not he arrived on my deck at sun up. We enjoyed sitting together in the big, tan, canvas chair, waiting expectantly for the first glimpse of the velvety orange sun as it prepared to awaken the Valley. From the inky black of night, a collage of randomly changing heavenly hues slowly washed across the sky. Astonished anew each morning, we witnessed a fresh, hope filled day slowly emerge from behind the silhouetted, gently rolling hilltops. Then, all quite suddenly, as if in a race against time, the sun would spread its blazing fingers into every nook and cranny of the wooded slopes and quiet meadow below.

The bats, owls and armadillos had long since found sanctuary from the certain light of day. During those few moments every morning, we listened attentively as the valley came to life in its enchanting and predictable fashion. First was the Purdy's rooster, his familiar, raspy summons echoing along the valley walls. Next, were the joyful songs of the birds furthest up the hills, soon joined by a swelling chorus of their kinfolk on the valley floor. Later, as the shadows defined themselves as the last remnants of the night just past, the less-well orchestrated sounds of distant livestock drifted our way from the farms to the South. As a fitting finale came the first, arm stretching stirrings of the newly refreshed people we called our friends. There was something altogether reassuring about the dependable and orderly progression of that early hour. For me, it was knowing that some things didn't change.

For Chris, it was that at least some things about his future were predictable.

The two of us would then make breakfast and return to the table on the deck to enjoy it together. Once the dishes were done Chris would scurry off to other more active pursuits. I wrote at the computer until my next visitor checked in. Like clockwork, Tommy arrived at nine. He was a patient and thoroughly precise individual with a definitely serious bent. I would enjoy a second cup of coffee and he a slice of cinnamon toast and glass of milk or juice. Tommy preferred eating inside at the kitchen table. I had come to assume that he figured, inside, I was less likely to be distracted from the roster of important things he wanted to discuss. He and his brother were different in that way. Chris had things to relate and Tommy had things to discuss. What a delight they had become in my life.

Depending on the day of the week, the rest of my day was split between working at the store, drawing, carving and tutoring. I took time for long walks - sometimes accompanied by one or both of the boys but usually alone. The clarity of my thinking improved when I was walking and I always felt more alive after an hour on the winding, rustic trails in the hills.

Croquet was the evening pastime of choice among the colony residents. No one took the game seriously but it had become a comfortable and joy-filled diversion at the end of the day. All ages played together and the least adept child won as frequently as the most accomplished adult. There was never a voice raised except in encouragement or good humor. Those not engaged in the game of the moment, sat in lawn chairs or on blankets, and chatted, as friends will do. The kids played chase, that ubiquitously practiced, yet never officially named delight of childhood. What a wonderful time it was.

As I watched the goings on and eavesdropped on the conversations, it became clear to me that no one competed with anyone but himself. Each artist and craftsman strove to improve his or her skills but felt no pressure to become better than someone else. Each parent endeavored to improve his or her parenting skills but never for the purpose of appearing to be a better parent than another. Excellence

was appreciated and honored, but was never a basis of contention. Although the colony was not a commune in any formal sense, those who came by extra money all quite naturally used it for the benefit of the larger group. The acquisition of stuff, for stuff's sake, played no part in the lives of these folks. Watching them reassured me that the World was still good.

That morning the mailman (or whatever he's called these days) delivered a priceless gift. It came from Rick - the first communication of any kind I had received from the Joplin contingent. It was enclosed in a large brown envelope - obviously second hand as several things had been blackened out. That alone brought a smile to my face.

Inside was a piece of cardboard used to stiffen the envelope. It had been cut from a Cains Coffee box from the restaurant. Another smile and a warm, somewhat nostalgic feeling percolated within me. Behind that I found, off all things, Rick's report card. My hands began trembling as I opened it. I read down the list of subjects: English A, History A-, General Math A, General Science A-, Art A+, Physical Education B+. By the time I come upon the enclosed note, I was viewing the World through a moist, translucent fog. I brushed at the determined tears with the back of my hand. In typical Rick fashion the note cut to the chase.

Dear Jim,

This report card is the most precious thing I have ever had and I want you to have it. Thank you for never giving up on me. Because you didn't, neither did I. God bless you my good friend. Have a grate life.

Rick

Sometimes you just want to let the tears keep flowing. I was taken by the fact that tears of joy fostered a feeling of inner strength and a renewal of faith in the future. How wonderfully unlike most of the tears that had bathed my

cheeks during those past several months, that was. Using Rick's term, it was "grate."

I centered the open card on my little bulletin board on the wall beside my computer and secured it with thumbtacks carefully placed to support it though not perforate it. I hoped that in the future its presence there would provide me with continued joy rather than loneliness, hope rather than sadness. Sometime in the future I would return it to him but for the time being it was mine and I intended to make the most of that.

I did miss Rick. I had convinced myself that was as it should be because it meant I had a past - someone from my past that I missed. I tried to focus on the happy memories I held of my time in Joplin. Usually I could do that.

Upon further reflection, it seemed that in his final sentence Rick had released me from his life. He felt confident about going on without me. That was mostly a gratifying observation. My pangs of desire for a continuing relationship were strictly selfish in nature. Perhaps Rick, better than I, had realized it was necessary and healthful for both of us to get on with our own lives. That would be fine. Mere separation would never alter the love we had felt for one another. It had become increasingly obvious that I desperately needed people to love. Was that another clue to my past or a desire for a new beginning?

It was the last thing I had wanted to hear. At a little after three, Red came upstairs on the run.

"You're going to hate this Adam but they were just here."

"They, who, were just here, where?"

"The young guy in the picture. This time he arrived in a black limo and had three ugly looking, big lugs with him.

My heart raced! My mind whirled! My stomach knotted!

"Are they still here?"

"No, I said you were gone for the day. It was all I could do. He said he knew you had returned. All I could do

was put him off a little while. I wasn't sure how I should handle it."

"You did just fine, Red, just fine. Relax, old man."

There I was, taut flesh, stretched over terrified bones, telling Red to relax. There had to be some humor in that but it escaped me.

"He also said he would check with you tomorrow. And get this! He said he was a friend of yours from back in Buffalo - that you and he had a good friend in common back there - a Dr. Jack Watson - and he needed to talk with you about him."

"Anything else?"

"No, nothing else. He was real polite and had a nice smile. Actually, if it hadn't been for the goons with him, he would have seemed like an all right guy, Ya know."

"How old would you say he was?"

"That's one of the strange parts. He's no more than twenty-one or two. He's just a kid. Pretty young to be overseeing a pack of Neanderthals. Nothing about him seems to fit, ya know? Everything's out of sync."

"Yes, I know. It sure seems that way. Thanks for the information. You did great. There's nothing for you to be worried about. This will give me plenty of time to prepare for his visit. It will be fine."

I hoped Red had bought my assurances because I certainly hadn't.

When he left, I raised my fist, looked to the gods and declared with more than a little anger in my tone, "I hope you're enjoying the ride."

The roller coaster had come back and suddenly my car was a runaway, speeding down Dead Man's Drop toward almost certain destruction. If I followed the plan I had charted earlier in the month, my course of action was clear. I had to leave immediately and avoid contact with Face at all costs. The routine sounded familiar. This time, however, I had a destination - Buffalo, New York. I also had a contact person once I arrived - Dr. Jack Watson. Perhaps the young man had given me the key to my past without my ever having to meet him face to Face (so to speak!).

I wouldn't tell anyone I was leaving but this time I

would leave a note of explanation. Perhaps that wouldn't provide much comfort but at least they would know what had taken place. I owed them that much. Actually, I owed them much more. Perhaps I would come up with a better idea before I left.

I began packing and re-packing, becoming confused about what I should take. The two bags I had taken to Joplin had been cumbersome and certainly would have slowed me down through a chase scene. I'd just take whatever I could cram into the duffel bag - it was lighter, held more and was easier to carry and stow. I took out the money I had stashed in my strong box. There was nearly four thousand dollars. It was soon safely inside my money belt. I had another fifty or so in my wallet. I re-locked the box and dropped the key into my money belt.

I decided to take along one copy of the altered birth certificate and the previous year's income tax return. They would provide additional ID if I needed it. Then I began to waver. Perhaps I should not take any ID with me. If it were imperative to remain anonymous for some reason that I could not remember, any ID would be too much. It was, perhaps, for the first time since I left that I had understood that. That would suggest that I had not developed amnesia prior to my leaving. For some reason, I had deliberately removed all articles of identification from my wallet - pictures, library card, AARP card, and everything else - and left them behind where they could easily be found.

After struggling with the dilemma for a short time, I decided to risk taking it all along.

Since I had not cracked the secret of the computer disks - and I had a serious hunch they held one - I would take them along. I also tossed in the baseball cap from Rick and his Report Card. It was hard to prepare when you had no idea what you were about to face.

I called the bus station. The best connection I could make in a hurry was a bus leaving for Kansas City at ten fifteen that night. Actually, that would be fine. I figured my trip would be less traceable if I were to buy my tickets in small steps rather than one directly to Buffalo. From that point, I found myself quite methodical in my preparations. It was, like

I had noted before, as if it were a well-practiced routine. My paranoia was returning. I hated that. Perhaps it was justified. That would redefine it as reasonable suspicion. That revelation immediately improved my feeling of wellbeing.

I went down to the store and took young Roger aside. He agreed to take me into town in his pick up about nine O'clock. The families would be inside their homes by then so I would have a better chance of slipping away without notice.

"Let's just keep this between the two of us, Okay Roger? I'll explain on the way to town."

"No problem. Glad to. See you about a quarter 'til."

I had to concoct a reasonable story to tell Roger. There was still plenty of time. It was just noon. I wasn't hungry but considering the circumstances, felt I needed to eat. I paced as I grazed on leftovers from the refrigerator. A story began to take form. I would tell Roger that my friend from Ames called and he was ill - a heart attack - and I needed to go and take care of him for a while. I would keep in touch. If Roger saw the bus marked Kansas City, it would make sense that was the one I should be taking.

One question remained. What reason could I give for leaving on the sly like that? I would say that due to the recent events in my life I was still pretty emotional about things and didn't want to have to go through the routine of saying of good-bye. I knew it was selfish but also knew they would all understand. That should work.

I hoped the ease with which I constructed lies was related to my bent for creative writing rather than a skill I had developed during some former, objectionable way of life.

When the hour arrived, I found it difficult enough just saying good-bye to my room. I was glad I wouldn't have to go through it with my friends as well. That realization softened the lie somewhat.

Roger accepted my explanation at face value and offered to help in any way he could. He was a good person, reflecting the positive philosophy and way of life there in the colony. I wondered if I would ever return. I truly hoped so.

As the bus lumbered around the corner and lurched to a stop beside the small red brick depot, the familiarity of the

sounds and smells of bus travel returned. I was the only waiting passenger so we were quickly on our way up the hill and around the curves winding our way into the night. I wanted no memories to sadden the moment. I wanted no uncertainties to darken the future. I laid back staring mindlessly into the darkness and was soon asleep.

The trip was long and uncomfortable, the atmosphere oppressive and unpleasant. Being reconciled to the necessity of the undertaking, my spirit had numbed to all that. My mentality had shifted into the survival mode. Pleasure and pain no longer seemed to exist. Only doing what needed to be done held any significance. To feel nothing had become my only short term goal - solitude my only traveling companion.

It was early morning when I climbed down from the bus in Kansas City. Waiting for my bag, I stretched, unsuccessful in my attempt to work the kinks from my tired body. I was hungry. Perhaps that was a good sign. I headed for the lunch counter and seated myself on a stool at one end. From there, I could observe a considerable portion of the large open space. I ordered my favorite restaurant breakfast - pancakes and patty sausage. I felt for my wallet just to make certain it was there. I slipped my thumb under the waistband of my pants to confirm that the money belt was still in place. That garnered a strange glance from the man several stools to my left. I was moved neither toward a chuckle nor embarrassment. I could have cared less.

Gazing across the room, I examined the big board, which listed the arrivals and departures. There was a bus for Indianapolis in about three hours. That felt right. After breakfast, I purchased a one-way ticket and looked around for an out of the way place to wile away the time.

The complacent numbness, which I had purposefully imposed on myself, was shaken as I spotted my nemeses, C. P., strolling across the depot.

"This is just not fair, guys," I said reproaching the gods out loud, as I turned my back, hoping to shield myself from his view. How could that have been possible? I had been convinced for many weeks that he was gone from my life. Then, suddenly, hundreds of miles from home, he

materialized.

I turned slowly, trying once again to pick him out of the mulling mass of travelers. Not surprisingly, he was no more than thirty feet away, sitting on a bench, reading his ever-present newspaper. There was no doubt. He knew where I was.

All I could think about was losing him. I had to contrive a wild goose chase. Making certain he observed my next few moves, but not letting on I had seen him, I hefted the duffel bag onto my shoulder and leisurely made my way to front door. I entered one of the waiting cabs and requested a ride to the airport. "Take the scenic route," I said, hoping that would make it more difficult for C. P. to follow.

"You don't want to be followed, is that what you're saying?" the cabby answered candidly as he eyed me through his mirror, my motive patently obvious to him.

"You got it," I said in return, continuing as if I had intended for him to understand all along.

"No sweat Mister. For a Jackson up front, I can remember every alley in the city."

Candid and greedy! I accommodated his request.

When we arrived at the airport, I arranged to have him pick me up in exactly thirty minutes. He was clearly enjoying the drama my dilemma had brought to his morning and after drooling over a second twenty-dollar tip, he assured me he'd return.

I entered the huge structure, lowered the bag to make myself less visible and waded into the crowd. I found a distant rest room where I cleaned up, combed my hair and beard and took care of those other early morning imperatives.

Before exiting from the short hallway leading back into the main room, I searched the area carefully with my eyes. No C.P.! As it turned out that was to be one of those "good news - bad news" situations. I had lost C. P. but there was Whiskers. My heart sank.

It was the first time it had occurred to me that Whiskers would know what I looked like. My contacts with him had always been through the mail - or so I had thought. I ducked back into the rest room and took up temporary residence in one of the stalls. There being only one way out,

and with him surely knowing where I was, I had no choice but to leave and hope I could lose him before I got back to the bus depot.

With a sigh of desperate resolve, I stepped onto the main floor and calmly headed into the growing throng. Once a part of the herd I quickened my pace and circled back in the opposite direction. Half a block later I just milled around, remaining in the same area for several minutes. Then I headed for the front door - hoping I could locate the one I had entered. Either the gods had taken pity on me and decided to offer their help, or I was just plain lucky as I went directly to the correct door and immediately into the waiting cab.

"Back to the bus depot, please."

Without a word, the cabby had soon delivered me to my starting point. For an additional twenty, he agreed to move to another area of the city for several hours so he would not be available for questioning by my adversaries, should they wish to do so. I hoped that hundred-dollar chase had been worth the investment.

I waited outside in an area sheltered from the view of all passersby. At five minutes before the time my bus was to pull out, I cautiously made my way through the gigantic bus entrance and to gate four. I was immediately admitted on board. In contrast to the virtually empty bus on which I had arrived, the only seat left on this one was on the isle, three quarters of the way back. I stowed my bag above the seat and settled in.

The man in the seat next to me was asleep or at least feigning it. That was fine, since I really didn't want to be forced into conversation. Conversation is the wrong word. Experience had taught me that talkative riders on busses typically do all the talking - the second party merely listens and nods as a litany of tragedies and soured relationships rolls from their lips.

That observation spawned an interesting concept for me to contemplate as the next leg of my journey began: I had a vast amount of knowledge which had been accumulated in my past, but virtually no memories of that past or of the process of acquiring that information. I had realized it before, of course, but had not taken the time to think much about it.

Perhaps pondering it would provide a diversion from the disquieting incidents, which had just occurred.

Seven hours later it became clear to me that I should have opted for Springfield, Illinois, instead of far off Indianapolis. My legs were cramped, my back ached and I was sure my buttocks had been rubbed raw. If I actually were to survive the rest of the trip, it seemed reasonable to stay over for a day or so in Indiana before moving on. The vision of a motel with a shower and bed and a restaurant that served something other than Chicken fried steak and mashed potatoes seemed like heaven. Holding that dream in mind, I just might live to see another day.

The motel was large, fancy and too expensive but it met all of my requirements. Suddenly it was Thursday. One day runs into another and time itself blurs, when you are a bus traveler. I had not seen either C. P. or Whiskers since arriving in Indianapolis. Although relieved, I didn't let my guard down for a second. I remained in the motel, eating in the restaurant at off-hours. Through the emotional and mental strain, I had somehow managed to rest and rejuvenate my body.

My next destination would be Buffalo. Amazed and amused, I found that airfare was actually a dollar less expensive than the bus, provided I took the flight the airline specified. Mine was a milk run, leaving at one A.M., arriving in Buffalo several hours later and touching down at every out of the way airport in between. Because of the odd hour of arrival, I made a guaranteed reservation at a motel there before I left Indianapolis.

Upon entering the small plane, I was immediately disenchanted with the whole idea of flying when I noticed the pilot appeared to be about fourteen. I must have been getting old. Everyone under thirty looked fourteen!

The flight was uneventful except that it was all so familiar. I was sure I had done considerable flying back in my "first life." I deplaned without incident. The airport was immediately familiar. I had been there before - probably often, because I knew the layout like the back of my hand.

I made my way to the baggage pick up center. My bag was one of the first to roll into view. Shouldering it, I turned to go search for a cab. My attention was drawn to a tall slender blond man who had been on the plane. He had been seated a few seats ahead of me on the opposite side of the aisle. He was just standing there with no baggage, looking in my direction. That, in and of itself, would not have been so unusual, but when our eyes met, he turned and faced the blank wall behind him. Unless he had a fetish for large, poorly lit, tan expanses, he had tried to avoid my view.

I walked fifty feet toward the front door, put down my bag and, pretending to adjust the straps, stole a glance in his direction. He had turned and was walking in my direction. Again, that was not unreasonable because to exit the airport one had to move in that direction. When he spotted my glance he again turned away and stopped. Although I had come to think of my newly bearded appearance as mildly attractive, it seemed more likely that he was tailing me than having been otherwise attracted to me. I made several more starts and stops. From his reactions, I soon became convinced that he was indeed keeping tabs on me.

What a turn of events! I had shaken C. P. and Whiskers, only to have Blondie pick up my trail. Was he working with either C. P. or Whiskers? Was he working for Face? That seemed more probable but how could Face have possibly learned I had been in Indianapolis? How could he have gotten someone on the plane with me? It was as if I had been wearing a sign, which read, "Please call C. P., Whiskers, or Face immediately and tell them where I am?" I didn't even bother confronting the gods.

I found a cab and had the driver drop me at a restaurant, which he considered was within safe walking distance of my hotel. If someone were following me, I would, at least, make them earn their money trying to locate where I was staying. I took a seat in an isolated booth and ordered breakfast.

For all I knew Blondie might have been after me for some reason totally unrelated to any of my other antagonists. That's what I needed - a brand new terrifying issue, the foundation of which was aimlessly adrift somewhere within the

inner reaches of my mind. I felt my mood sinking. Part of me tried to maintain the proverbial stiff upper lip while the rest of me just wanted to throw in the towel. I was tired of running. I was tired of being scared. I was so tired of not knowing. In the end, I was just tired.

Before leaving the restaurant, I furtively checked the premises. The way seemed clear. I paid my bill and left, hurrying toward my motel, along the well-lit edge of a mostly deserted street. My room was waiting. I entered and locked the door even before lowering my burden. Kicking off my shoes, I collapsed onto the nearest bed. Looking around the room it seemed to be a clone of the one I had occupied in Indianapolis. That was one way to always feel at home - just move from one identical room to another. I imagined the chain had gotten pretty good mileage from one architectural design.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Day Sixty-four

It was nearly ten A.M. when I awoke, ten thirty by the time I had showered and dressed in fresh clothes. My plan had been to stay in a first-class motel just one night and then only because it had been the easy way to assure myself a room upon arrival. The card, secured to the inside of the door as though it were a priceless work of art, indicated that check out time was 12:30. I called several Myrtle-type motels to get their rates. Things were considerably more expensive in Buffalo. There were a half dozen places within my price range. I slipped the list into my shirt pocket and went down to the in-house restaurant for my second breakfast of the day. On the way, I picked up a paper to help get my bearings. It was if I had been in a time warp. It was Saturday, June third. In all the excitement, I had missed my second month birthday several days earlier. "Happy birthday, old man, whoever you are!"

My waitress - a middle aged, life-long, Buffalo resident - was easily engaged in conversation and more than willing to evaluate the several motels for me. Three were in relatively trouble-free neighborhoods, on bus routes and close to cafes and laundries. She rated a double tip that morning - something I enjoyed doing but due to my limited financial situation it was a pleasure I would soon need to forego.

Quite scientifically, I decided on Aunt Molly's Motel - I liked the name. It was eleven forty five when I arrived back

in the room. I placed a call and presumably talked with Aunt Molly, herself. She had weekly rates, an opening and sounded quite friendly. I made a reservation and arranged to arrive between noon and one that afternoon.

I repacked the few things I had taken out of the duffel bag and wound my way through the cavernous halls to the front desk where I checked out. The clerk called a cab for me. I took a seat near the door to wait for its arrival using the time to peruse the newspaper.

There had been no sign of Blondie since I left the airport. I felt safe in assuming that in a city of that size it would take forever for him to track me down. It was as if I were momentarily occupying a tiny, safe, comfortable island, in a sea of torment and subterfuge.

The cab arrived. I provided the cabby with the address and settled into the back seat. As we were pulling away, they pulled in. So much for tiny islands! I didn't think they had seen me, however. It was a late model black car with New York plates. A stranger was driving. C. P. was sitting beside him. Behind C. P. was Blondie and the rear left was occupied by a fourth man - large and most unfriendly looking. He could have easily fit the description of one of the men who had accompanied Face to the colony.

It was a twenty-minute ride. Not wanting to stand out in his memory, I didn't engage the cabby in conversation.

Aunt Molly's Motel was all the waitress had said it would be - set back from the street, neat and clean and handy to the several services I would need. I paid a week in advance though I had no idea if I would be in town another hour or another month. As she looked at my ID card she remarked, "I thought Fayetteville was in South Carolina." I had to chuckle to myself.

It was a standard kind of ground floor room, though considerably larger than the one at Myrtle's and with a more modern bath. In one corner of the room was a stainless-steel unit that combined refrigerator, electric stovetop, and sink. Under the sink were shelves, which held an assortment of pots and pans. The dishes were arranged neatly on a wooden shelf above the unit and were covered with a spotless dishcloth. Beside them, in an open, divided, plastic tray, was

the silverware. On a wooden stand beside the refrigerator was a small microwave with a red sticker on its door warning one not to use it if they had a pacemaker. I chuckled, as I thought about the effects of the microwave in my room on any pacemakers in the rooms adjacent to mine. It wasn't funny but in its absurdity, deserved a chuckle.

There were both front and rear windows with open-weave, brown, pleated drapes and matching valance framing ivory venetian blinds. The comforter-draped double bed was adequate. In addition to a kitchen table with two chairs there were a desk-dresser combination with phone, and a TV on a pole stand. Near the front window were two matching easy chairs on either side of a smaller, round table holding a large based, tan lamp. A monstrous, starving artist-type landscape "graced" the wall behind the bed. All things considered, it felt like a palace. It did, however, raise a fleeting question about why motel decorators had such poor taste in art.

Again, I opted to leave most things packed in case a quick exit was required. The rear window was high on the wall but I soon determined that it could be opened and used as an escape hatch if absolutely necessary. I asked that I receive no phone calls (they all went through a central switchboard) and no visitors - requests Aunt Molly seemed quite used to. I told her I was a writer and had come to work in peace and quiet. She seemed intrigued but kept any questions to herself. I figured that was just what I needed in a landlady.

I arranged the pillows against the headboard and took my well-established, motel room, thinking position on the bed. The new information was at once a relief and a worry. The fact that C. P. and Blondie were working together narrowed my opposition back down to the original three. That was the relief - such as it was. The fact that C. P. had apparently brought in reinforcements caused added worry. I still had no idea what they wanted and no well-founded ideas about why they just watched. From the data at hand it appeared they were most likely working for Face since he was the only solid lead I had which suggested someone was out to get me - well, out to find me at least. If that were true, my opposition was actually down to two - Face and Whiskers.

In a flashback to a misplaced dream from the night before I saw a face. I reached for my pad and pencil from the nightstand and began to sketch. Fifteen minutes later, the image of a middle-aged man had taken form on the page. The all too familiar feelings of terror began returning to my chest. The more I studied it, the more I realized that it bore a distinct resemblance to one of the boys in my picture. It was Face projected thirty, maybe forty, years into the future. Did the image hold some real meaning or was it merely the creation of some insidious part of my mind taking impish delight in befuddling my reality? My barren memory told me nothing. My abundant emotions guaranteed that it overflowed with meaning. If only I could dredge up even the faintest glimmer of an association.

I closed my eyes and redrew the image in my mind. It took on a more evil - malicious - appearance in my mind's eye than it had on paper. For an instant, I saw him standing over me, arms flailing, raging about something. My eyes snapped open in fear but the image would not leave. I was certain that it had been the vestige of an actual occurrence - a true memory! For the first time, a terror filled moment had brought me reason for celebration.

How could that man have been connected with the boy or Face? Was he still connected? Was this the Dr. Watson who Face had mentioned to Red?

For some reason, I began sketching myself without a beard and possessing the same countenance as in the vision I had just experienced. I was motivated by the possibility that it might have been an image of myself that had appeared in that dream. A comparison of the drawings suggested similarities in age, shape of the head and hairline, but not much else. The term, plastic surgery, crossed my mind. Perhaps I was that man and had undergone surgery to change my appearance. Perhaps that was how I had spent the missing year between Geneseo and Arkansas.

I felt overwhelmed. It was too much to consider at one time. I got up and paced a while. I made a grocery list. I examined the phone book to see if it included a bus schedule. It didn't. I rummaged through the desk drawers. Sure enough, there was a bus schedule surrounded by small block

advertisements for everything from Biggin's Bowling Palace to a Tito's Tattoo Parlor. I retrieved the last black and white wrapped pop tart I had packed to sustain me on the trip and sat back down on the bed.

With a clearer head, I returned to the hodgepodge of ideas that had most recently floated through my mind. The sum and substance of the speculation seemed to make far less sense than before. I had been grasping at wisps of smoke to provide answers to questions, which required solid evidence. Half the middle-aged men in America could have been made to look like either him or me with a few snips here and a few tucks there. Besides, I had never witnessed that wrathful expression on my own face and could not imagine it ever having been there. The solution to the puzzle continued to elude me and I remained terrified.

Since the moment I had arrived in the city, I had all quite consciously been putting off the next step. It would be the most important undertaking of my new life. Fortified by the crescendo of a sugar rush, I sat down at the desk and opened the phone book. It was time to find out about this Dr. Jack Watson. There was no Dr. Jack Watson listed in the white pages although there were two just plain Jack Watson's. I called the first number and inquired if it were the residence of Dr. Watson. It was not. The same result occurred at the second number.

Doctor could mean so many things. He could be a physician, an academician or any one of several other things. I called the general information number at each of the colleges listed in the phone book and asked for the office number of Dr. Jack Watson. The person was not known at any of the schools.

I turned to physicians in the yellow pages. They frequently omitted white page listings. There appeared to be hundreds of physicians listed under dozens of specialties. Methodically, I worked through the entire list. There was no Dr. Jack Watson listed.

I made a list of other professions that used the title, Doctor. I searched through the Chiropractors, Dentists, Family Therapists, Podiatrists, Psychologists and Veterinarians. The name was nowhere to be found. I

wondered if, perhaps, he had retired. That, however, would not account for why he was still not listed in the white pages - unless he had moved away. That would be a dead end. Speaking of dead ends, perhaps he had died and that was the message Face was trying to bring me. If that had been the case, he could have just written to me. It was bigger than that. It appeared that a trip to the library was in order.

I called to obtain their hours and to ask which bus route they were on. From the information I had jotted down, I could not determine how to get there by bus, although it would have been a cinch to have located, Tito's. Not being in the market for either a skull and crossbones, or a butterfly, I called a cab.

Upon entering the library, I asked for the section containing phone books from years past and was politely shown the way by a helpful young lady whose appearance was - shall I say - certainly non-stereotypical of old maid librarians. It was near the desk of the reference librarian. I approached her and laid out my problem. In just a few minutes, she had located the microfilm rolls containing the Greater Buffalo Area books back ten years. I thanked her and rolled up my sleeves.

There would be no easy way to go about this and quite likely, I would not finish prior to closing time at five. I had been right. By four thirty, I had only waded my way through three years. I would have to return the following day. That being Sunday, there were only limited afternoon hours. Still, that should be sufficient.

Riding one of those out-of-the-blue hunches, I turned to the book, which was seven years old. The name literally jumped off the white page at me: Watson, Jack, Ph.D. Ph.D. probably indicated a college professor or psychologist in private practice. I moved to the yellow pages and again there it was under the heading, clinical psychologists - Jack Watson, Ph.D. I copied down both the home and office numbers and addresses and returned the files to the librarian.

Finally, I seemed to have come upon a solid connection. Face had suggested this Dr. Watson had been a mutual friend or at least acquaintance. If that were true, I might at last be within a hair's breadth of the answers to all of

my big questions. The significant problem remaining was to locate him.

As if being directed by some mysterious force, I returned to the current yellow page listings for a second time and perused the addresses of the other psychologists on the off-chance Dr. Watson might have been in a group practice. No fewer than four other current psychologists gave that same address and suite number. Hope soared!

It was time to leave. Just outside the front door, within the air lock, were several pay phones. I called for a cab and waited impatiently. I paced. As I gazed repeatedly up and down the street, I sensed some kind of awareness reentering my being. Though that avenue was by no means entirely familiar, neither was it foreign territory. I had been there before and I knew it.

"Go, Brain, Go!" I whispered out loud, repeatedly pounding one fist into the open palm of the other hand, urging the old bean on toward something more. Any single memory might chain to yet another. Perhaps, at last, the old me was about to battle its way to the surface.

"Just drive me around Buffalo and show me the sights," I directed the cabby, handing him a fifty-dollar bill.

Some of what I saw I recognized although much of it remained just beyond my grasp. I began to remember some of the street names and found myself able to predict upcoming intersections. Soon, I found myself perched on the edge of the seat, delight flowing from every pore.

"This is the greatest day of my life," I said slapping the cabby on his shoulder.

"Ya, why's that?" he asked in a cabby's dutiful monotone.

"You'd never understand."

"You're probably right about that, Pal. Been a Cabby forty years and I still don't understand most of what goes on in that back seat." We exchanged brief smiles through his rear-view mirror - mine significantly broader and more sincere than his.

Presently I directed him to my motel, gave him an outrageous tip, and, without even looking to see if any of my antagonists were present, trotted all the way to my room.

Once I stopped panting like the out of shape old man that I was, I made myself comfortable and began looking through the newspaper in earnest. By eight O'clock, not a single paragraph, or the tiniest advertisement, had escaped my inspection. There had been dozens of names, places and organizations, which I had recognized. Laying the paper aside, I felt myself revving inside. It momentarily reminded me of Rick the Rev, which immediately produced a warm feeling complete with moist cheeks and broad smile.

I referred to the notes I had taken earlier as the waitress had listed good eating places nearby. It was time to celebrate. Visions and aromas of a Caesar Salad, porterhouse steak and a twice-baked potato swimming in butter floated across my mind. At Mike's Café, I settled for less but as far as I was concerned, it was a feast.

By the time I finished my second piece of chocolate pie and 6th cup of coffee, some semblance of caution and common sense had returned. I made my way the two and a half blocks back to my motel with renewed vigilance and discretion. "The Guys" were nowhere to be seen. I was truly expecting them since it would have taken very little skill to obtain my new location from phone records at the first motel or from the clerk there who had called the cab for me. They knew where I was, all right. They just weren't showing themselves.

On Sunday afternoon, I returned to the library armed with my computer disks. Dr. Watson's office - well, his former office - would not be open until Monday so I needed to find some other way of putting the day to good use.

There were many computers, most of them manned by children and teen teenagers. I suddenly felt old, awkward and dumb. There was one available in a corner near a window. I made myself comfortable and slipped in the disk marked # One. It contained several stories. I reread them. That seemed to get me nowhere. Perhaps they contained some kind of code. Although I was adept at speeding through the cryptograms in the daily papers, I wasn't sure how to attack such a nebulous decoding problem.

The first approach, which came to mind, was the first-letter-of-each-word type code. I tried it on each of the

stories but to no avail. I sorted through the remaining disks. On Disk # Five there was a story I had previously overlooked - perhaps because it had been at the end and I had tired or had been interrupted before reaching it. There was only one story on the disk and it had the strange title, "The Flight of the Head Man." It hardly fit the pattern of the other stories. I began reading it with a sense of renewed expectation.

"What untrained sophomore wrote this crap?" I asked myself out loud. The comment drew glances and a few chuckles from three boys working nearby. It was an artless, disorganized catastrophe. Either I had not written it or ...

I began trying to decode it. The first sentence read: "Did Randy Weasel and Tommy Snake only nap?" I copied down the first letters: D R W A T S O N - Dr. Watson. Finally, I seemed to be on to something. My heart raced. My mouth grew dry. The second sentence: "Not on your life - they sneaked into the woods and scared the hikers." N O Y L T S I T W A S T H. It was gibberish. I sat back in disappointment. It appeared this was going to be more difficult than I had thought only a moment before. Then I had another idea. Perhaps each sentence utilized a different letter position as the code carrier or maybe it was just the first sentences in each paragraph that carried the code.

The second possibility being the easier of the two to test I moved to the second paragraph. "Beetle's uncle felt faint after leaning over." B U F F A L O. Buffalo. Another winner! I made my mental apologies for the earlier remarks about the story's appalling construction.

On to the third paragraph. "Now you've provoked his dander!" N Y P H D. N. Y. P H. D.

Paragraph four: "Could one nervous terrapin actually climb to the highest elevation before Randy Ocelot woke?" C O N T A C T T H E B R O W. Contact the Brow? That made no sense - well, only partial sense. Who or what was the brow?

Onto the next one. "Naughty Agatha Goat eagerly nibbled canned yams." N A G E N C Y. Nagency? Then the two came together. Contact the brown agency. I figured that was with a capital B - Brown.

Next: "Calling all long-legged insects!" C A L L I.

Again, there must be more in the next clue.

It read: "Gertrude Ladybug impressed all invited spectators including Spider." G L I A I S. Putting them together I got, Calliglias is or Calligli as is or call igliasis. There was no immediate significance in any of that.

Perhaps the next sentence would help clear things up. "Tommy Hamster enthusiastically entertained Natalie, exchanging many yarns." T H E E N E M Y - The enemy. The previous clue still was not clear.

Moving on, the next sentence read: "Snail is giving Natalie a lift." S I G N A L - Signal.

Then: "Each morning every raccoon gluttonously eats nine choice yolks." E M E R G E N C Y - Emergency.

"But yesterday each raccoon ate spinach instead." B Y E R A S I. By erasi - again, there must be more.

"Nine got quite upset. N G Q U. Still more was needed.

"Eating spinach turned into one nasty meal." E S T I O N M. Estionm. Onto the next, and final, paragraph of the story.

"Armadillos rarely kid! A R K. Ark. What would it say when they were all strung together?

All right, what was the entire message. "Dr. Watson. Buffalo, N. Y. PhD. Contact the Brown Agency. Calligli is the enemy. Signal emergency by erasing question mark."

Had it been written for Dr. Watson or was it from Dr. Watson? What was the Brown Agency? What or who was Calligli and why the enemy? What did that mean - the enemy? The final sentence began to make sense. It probably referred to the question marks on the cards I had received each Monday in the mail. If that were the case then it appeared that Whiskers had been on my side all along. Perhaps he had been my contact - through the mail - if I needed or wanted help. If I had just found this message two months before my life might well have taken a very different turn. Of course, I may have still been completely off base. I was a long way from being ready to run up and embrace the whiskered one the next time he appeared.

With disks in hand, I moved to the current phone

book shelves and removed the Buffalo directory. In the white pages, I looked up Brown Agency. It was there. I copied down the address and phone number and turned to yellow pages. It was not listed under agencies. I paged to the D's - detective agencies. Bingo! The Brown Agency. It had no display ad, only the regular, one line listing. I assumed that indicated either a new or very small operation.

Then I returned to the white pages to look for the listing, Calligli. It could have been a person's last name or the name of a company or business or foundation. The only entry that was at all close was Calliglio's Deli. Who knew, it might be a lead so I copied down the information.

Back in my room, I took stock of what I knew.

Dr. Watson was or had been a real person - a clinical psychologist. I had the address of his former practice and names of probable former colleagues. Could it be that I had been one of his patients, or even one of his colleagues?

C. P. had followed me to Buffalo and he and Blondie had teamed up. It seemed quite likely that they were working for or with Face.

Whiskers may have not only been my contact for money but also for help in case of an emergency. Why that would have been, I had no idea.

I had remembered the angry man's face in a genuine memory. I had remembered many things about the city of Buffalo.

My name was not Adam Barry. It may or may not be James Johnson. That was the one I had used in Geneseo and also had slipped off my tongue quite easily the first day in Joplin.

It appeared someone or something called Calligli was my enemy - perhaps, even probably, pursuing me.

At that point, an intriguing thought zipped across my mind: What if Face was either this Calligli or worked for him? The more I thought about it, the more it seemed to fit the puzzle. Calligi - the very name sent shivers up my spine! Interestingly, those shivers were nearly identical to the ones

initiated by the face of the older man I saw in my dream. Since young Face was obviously not that older person, it would make sense that there were two people, and that they were somehow in cahoots with one another. It seemed likely that the dream image was Calligi.

I took out the picture of the two boys and taped it to the wall. To one side of it, I put up the picture of the man in my dream, on the other side, the one of myself. I sat back and studied them. For no conscious reason, it felt as though the men's pictures needed to be switched. I sat back again, inspecting the new arrangement. The impression was indisputable. The boy I had come to call, Face, did, indeed, bear a striking resemblance to the man in my dream. Just as fascinating, the unnamed boy looked a whole lot like a younger version of the picture of me.

Had I been mistaken in taking the one boy for Face? Was that first picture actually a representation of the two of us - Calligi and I - as teenagers? Had we known each other that long? If we had become enemies, how had that occurred? It seemed like a long shot.

I took out my pad and made a pencil rendering of the photo of Face that Tommy had snapped back at the colony. I taped it between the picture of the two boys and the unknown older man. It certainly looked like a natural progression in the aging process from adolescent to young man to older man.

The coded message said Calligi was my enemy and told me how to contact someone if I felt the need for help. In some way, Dr. Watson played a part in the scenario. Why would I have written such a message to myself? It made no sense that I would do that. It did, however, help explain why I might have locked the disk up for safe keeping in Joplin - or did it?

The most logical answer of the moment seemed to be that someone else had put the disks in the locker in Joplin and had given me the key before I got there - or was it? Perhaps, I knew I was in danger. In order to help identify my assailants - should I end up missing or being killed - I put clues into a code, that would help identify my adversaries and my protector, and do those things in such a way that would not

be immediately recognizable, should the disks fall into the wrong hands. Certainly, the code that had been selected was a simpleminded one, as if it had been intended to be easily broken if someone had been looking for a code.

Perhaps there were no adversaries at all. It may have just been a concoction of my own sick imagination. Perhaps Dr. Watson had been treating me for some hallucinatory or paranoid disorder related to all of this. Perhaps Whiskers worked with Dr. Watson and if my outrageous fantasies got out of hand I was supposed to make contact and receive therapeutic help but amnesia had overtaken me and spoiled the plan. Whiskers certainly looked strange enough to be a psychologist or even a psychiatrist! Why the indirect connection with Whiskers? Maybe it was thought that I could become dangerous and it was for Whiskers protection. But, who would have been footing the bill for all that? The more sense it seemed to make the less sensible it seemed.

Face was a real person. Though I didn't know where he was, he was at that moment a part of my life. Quite likely, he was now a young man a few years older than when I had sketched him in the picture with the other boy. Assuming it was Face as a youngster, then it made sense to think the other boy was also an actual person - a peer of Face's. Since it could not, under those conditions, be me, could it be that it was a picture of my own son? Did I have a son and was he a contemporary of Face? How had they been connected? They must have been if I put them together in the same picture.

Merely stating the possibility of having a son released a flood of tears and wave after wave of distressing emotions. I sobbed out loud. My chest heaved with torment. But not the picture, nor the idea, nor the tears nor the sobbing nor the heaving of my chest brought to light a single useful memory. Why had it become my lot to be tortured so relentlessly? I looked to the gods but refrained from saluting them with the gesture I thought would have been patently appropriate.

The Yellow Pages ad for Calliglio's Deli boasted that it was Buffalo's only twenty-four hour, seven days a week deli. I opened the phone book to the city map and tried to

ascertain its location. It appeared to be less than a mile from my motel. I verified that with Molly and headed off on foot. It struck me that I still wasn't sure if, "Molly" was actually "Molly," but so long as I didn't call her by name I figured it didn't matter.

I was impressed by the deli's size. There were perhaps a dozen round tables with wire legs and chairs to match. They reminded me of an old-time ice cream parlor right down to the red and white checked gingham tablecloths. The place was neat and clean - all quite empty except for me. A single question to the proprietor, about its history, brought a thirty-minute monologue that continued uninterrupted as he went about his business in and out of the kitchen and from table to table in the dining area. Watching him refill the salt and sugar containers and situate them back on the tables with care and precision, I recognized the immense sense of personal pride and satisfaction the place brought him.

After a delicious, huge, hot corned beef on rye, a slice of scrumptious peach pie and three cups of coffee the old man finally slowed down enough so I could ask him about the Calligi name. Although there was at that moment only one other person in the place, my question seemed to bring an implausible hush over the room. As he wiped his hands on the towel cinched to his hip with the cord of his long white apron, the old man slid into the chair across from me. He leaned toward me and spoke in low tones and an inexplicable, confidential manner.

"You're not from around here, I take it?"

I leaded ever so slightly in his direction. "No, I'm from the mid-west," for some reason, my own voice automatically hushed to match his.

"Well, around here Calligi and syndicate mean the same thing. Old man Calligi got sent up a few years back on federal charges but you can't tell me his organization ain't still operatin', if Ya know what I mean!"

I nodded, more to encourage the conversation, than because I really understood.

"If I was you, I'd not just throw that name around so casual like. And don't never insinuate you want to meet them 'cause lots that has ain't never been heard from again. That's

all I'll say. It's not a family to be involved with - it's not even a family to be askin' about."

As he stood up to leave he looked me in the eye and gave me a serious nod intended to silently drive home his point. It did!

To say the walk back to the motel was less enjoyable than the walk had been to the deli, would be a serious understatement. I felt blessed to still have a dry crotch as I entered my room. I meticulously locked the door behind me. I shut the blinds and pulled the drapes closed. I lay on the bed, looking at the ceiling. My arms were spread and my palms were up, as if in supplication to the gods. What had I gotten myself into?

If Calligi were indeed my enemy as the coded message had said, and if he were the mob as the deli man had indicated, then it was the mob itself that was after me. Almost worse than that, I had just come half way across the country and deposited myself in their lap.

I closed my eyes expecting to cry. Instead, a revised scenario popped into my mind. Face was Calligi's son who had taken over the mob after the father had been sent to prison. Calligi had been after me and now in his absence the son was continuing the pursuit. The story line faltered around one point. Why would I have sketched Calligi's son six to eight years before? Could it be that I had been working for the mob and had somehow lost favor? The role of Dr. Watson was not explained either.

I was exhausted and fell asleep.

////

CHAPTER TWELVE

Day Sixty-Six

My sleep had been fitful. Even so, when I awoke to the unsettling realizations of the evening before, I re-shut my eyes and tried to return to the protective shroud of slumber. Not succeeding, I crawled out of bed and sluggishly prepared myself for the day. It was seven thirty by the time I had finished dressing. I still had not visited a grocery so there was only pop in the refrigerator. I opened a can and collapsed into one of the chairs by the front window. Sitting on a shoe was usually no big deal. That morning it seemed to have been.

The day had barely begun and already I felt spent. Taking a sip from the cool, sweating can, I pulled back the curtain and separated the blinds with my fingers. I couldn't see anyone suspicious. It felt like a rerun of the worst of my time in Joplin. The sweetener in the pop took up arms against the flavoring from my toothpaste. It seemed my whole world was a bit grumpy.

My objective for the day had not been changed by the discoveries of the previous evening. I would still go to the psychologist's office suite and ask the big question: Do you know where I can find Dr. Jack Watson? Based on nothing I could confirm, I told myself the offices opened at nine. That gave me time for breakfast. I dumped the pop, swished away the remaining, unpleasant aftertaste and headed toward the restaurant.

As I ate, I rehearsed several possible ways to

approach the question with whomever I met at the office. Each seemed more farfetched than the last. Perhaps I would be better off to just ask the question and wait until later to offer any explanation of my situation. That seemed like the best - the most efficient - plan.

Breakfast complete I hailed a cab. Fifteen minutes later I was dropped outside a four-story professional building. My hands were shaking and my legs trembling as I approached the front door. My breakfast was fighting to be released from its resting-place. I hadn't the slightest clue as to what awaited me inside. My hope was that it would be a single revelation that would free me from the world of shadows in which I had been struggling and return me to some safe, wonderfully fulfilling life that I had known before. I knew full well, however, that the visit might also put me in the most serious jeopardy I had yet confronted. Regardless, it had to be done.

In the surprisingly stark lobby, there were two sets of elevator doors to my right with a directory of offices on the wall between them. A door to the stairwell occupied the far wall. I approached the directory with its familiar, white, slip in letters on a black background of alternating horizontal grooves and ridges. The Psychotherapy Center would be found on the third floor. I entered the elevator and pressed the button. As I began the ascent, it felt as though my stomach had opted to remain on the first floor.

I could see my heart thumping against my chest and feel the veins pulsing in my temples. The elevator lurched slightly as it jostled to a mostly gentle stop. In the typical, unhurried - almost uncertain - motion of all elevator doors they parted slowly. My first view was that of a receptionist's area directly ahead. It was flanked by a half-dozen doors on either side. There was only one person seated in the waiting area to my right - a man I assumed although he was hidden behind a newspaper. Perhaps I was too early.

I took a deep breath, mechanically inserted a smile in front of my clinched teeth and moved toward the desk. It was my fervent hope that my jaw would release and allow me to speak and that the near blackness of my vision was not the precursor to a dead faint. The young lady smiled up at me

and asked, "May I help you?"

"Well, I certainly hope so. I need to talk with someone who might be able to help me locate a psychologist who used to have his office here, Dr. Jack Watson."

That had gone remarkable well.

"That would have been before my time. I've only been here about a year and a half. Dr. Jackson just came in and he's not with a patient yet. Let me go see if he can help you. Have a seat if you want."

I didn't want. My locked knees and nauseous stomach legislated against it. She excused herself and entered an office on the right side of the suite. I looked about the room. A welcome, though unexpected feeling of comfort began settling in around me. I felt a definite familiarity about the place: the receptionist's large oak desk, with matching credenza behind it; the deeply grained, honey oak office doors; beautiful pieces of art, tastefully displayed on the walls; living Ficus trees, sporting healthy, shiny leaves; and the gray door to the stairwell in the rear, looking all quite out of place amid its luxurious surroundings. I smiled. I had, at least, developed one talent through all the adversities of the past months. I could spot an exit sign a block away. It was too bad that wasn't a saleable skill.

Presently the receptionist reappeared followed by a middle-aged man in suit and tie. Although I could not name him, I knew - or had known - that man. The young lady motioned toward me and the man's face lit up. The initial look of puzzlement and surprise did not hide his genuine delight at seeing me. His pace quickened and his hand extended well before he reached me.

"Jack. Jack Watson! What the hell happened to you? Where have you been, man? We've been sick with worry for all these years."

The handshake was warm and sincere and never ending. The arm around my waist was firm, yet tender. The kind look directly into my eyes was familiar and comforting.

My expression must have projected the confusion that had overtaken me. He spoke again.

"What's wrong Jack? What is it?"

I was shaking my head attempting to clear it so I

could formulate a response when off the elevator stepped Face and two of his henchmen. Terrified and bewildered I bolted to the stairwell and made my way, running and stumbling, down the three flights of cement steps to the front entrance.

On the street at last I circled behind the building and made a bee line for a huge abandoned building. Only when safe inside did I stop to catch my breath. My chest continued to heave as I cautiously peeked through a broken window. For some reason, I had not been followed. Perhaps they had guessed wrong and had taken off in another direction. My back against the old brick wall, I let myself slide down into a sitting position onto the filthy, damp, cement floor. On one level, having my back against the wall seemed thoroughly amusing.

On another, my head was spinning inside and out. On the one hand, I was impressed with how agilely and quickly I had been able to move. On the other, I was genuinely concerned that I was about to have a stroke. I sat quietly, the fingers of my right hand pressed against the blood vessels of my left wrist, hoping against hope that my breathing and pulse rates would soon approach normal. Hands occupied, I tried to blow away the spider web that clung, stubbornly, to my nose and forehead.

At last, I struggled to my feet. Slowly working my way through the huge old, trash-ridden warehouse, I exited onto a narrow back street. I hailed a cab and asked to be driven to the library. From there, I caught a second cab. The change had been an attempt to protect my actual destination in case the first driver had been questioned. The second cabbie drove me to an inexpensive hotel he recommended which was, at my request, not far from Aunt Molly's Motel.

I checked in and flopped down on the bed, wondering if that was how such places had come by their name. The momentary smile was strictly internal. Sleeping most of the day away, I remained there until dark. Then, navigating alleys, which under any other circumstances I would have avoided at all costs, I cautiously made my way back to my motel. Making certain that no one was watching I entered the office, asking the night manager if I had any mail.

I did. It was my Monday envelope and exactly what I was counting on. At least one thing was going right. Not daring to risk staying the night there, I made my way back to the hotel.

Except that it bore a new box number at a Buffalo post office, it was the usual letter in all ways. Following the procedure outlined in the coded message from my computer disk, I erased the question mark. Ignoring the dollar amount, I wrote a note:

Whiskered One: I must meet with you. I truly believe that my life depends on it. Delaware Park, Wednesday at 12:00 noon near the Gazebo. This directive overrides all previous instructions. Make sure you are not followed by the bald man, who, I believe, is after me.

I signed it: Jim/Adam/Jack?

Within minutes, it had been deposited in the mailbox in the hotel lobby. The box bore a six A.M. pick-up time. I returned to my room upstairs and forced the chair under the doorknob for added security. I was hungry, tired and emotionally spent. There was no food to ease the hunger and no quick answers to allay the anguish. Mercifully, my third requirement was more easily met. Sleep returned quickly.

I awoke at four A.M. and cleaned up as best I could with none of my usual accouterments. I found an all-night cafe and ate more than I should have. It was a diner right out of the 1940's. Since it was virtually unoccupied, I remained there in the sanctuary of a back booth well past sun up, overindulging in the generous bottomless cup of coffee so pleasantly delivered by the far too young, far too haggard looking waitress. I felt it was imperative that I remain in hiding that day, biding my time for the meeting with Whiskers on Wednesday.

Having no idea how Whiskers would be able to help me but feeling he was my only hope, I would just leave it all in

his hands. If I had been wrong about him and he was one of the bad guys in my life, then so be it. I'd had it and just wanted things to come to an end one way or another. The mental and emotional numbness I had felt on the bus trip revisited me.

The fact that I was the Dr. Jack Watson whom I had been trying to locate brought a new dimension to my situation. It meant I definitely was not the Calligi character. It explained why I knew so much about how to help Rick. It helped account for why my response to the Dr. Watson character had been relatively bland - free of negative emotions. I had to wonder what Dr. Jackson was doing about all of this. Was he, too, looking for me now? Had he filed a missing person's report? It was my feeling that he surely had.

I was sorry to be putting him through even more pain about me. I felt certain he would gladly do anything to help but I could not risk putting him in danger. He would be my key and I would get back with him. He held the answers about who I had been, who I had known, what kind of family I had and where they were. I was eager to talk with him but understanding that at long last those answers were truly within my reach, I could suddenly relax and wait.

More and more, it felt right - that I was Jack Watson. I wondered if Jack was a nickname for John or if it stood alone. "Jack," I said out loud, as if trying it on for size and comfort. "Dr. Watson!" Although I still felt like Adam, I was eager to make the transition to Jack. The personage of Jim seemed like ancient history.

With the realization that the police were probably looking for me as a missing person, I decided I would need to remain in my hotel room the rest of the day. On the off chance there were some kind of warrants out against me in New York, I would evade all authorities for a while longer.

To sustain myself I loaded up on chips, fruit-pies, cans of pop and a hand full of candy bars. I grabbed a newspaper as an afterthought. The waitress rummaged in the kitchen and came up with a bread sack I could use to carry my purchases. In an attempt to foil any attempts to find me, I told her I was catching a bus for Atlanta later in the morning. That story, if repeated to the police, might delay them just long

enough. With due caution, I then walked back to the hotel. I paid for a second day's lodging at the front desk and climbed the stairs to my top floor room.

Although the temperature was still quite pleasant at street level, it was hot in my room so I opened the window. It let in more city noise than fresh air but even that was welcome company. I had become used too, perhaps, even, dependant upon, the companionship of my neighbors during this short life of mine. I was sadly lonesome.

The day would drag on. I was in limbo, not really wanting to rehash the past, or reformulate hypotheses and not yet possessing the necessary information to think accurately about my future. It had become obvious that uncertainty and boredom were to be the dual themes for the day.

At eleven o'clock on Wednesday morning, I went downstairs to find a cab. It took longer to find one than to get to the park. Twenty minutes later I found my heart sinking as the cabby asked me, "Which entrance, Amherst or Delavan Avenue?"

"It makes no difference, today. Just surprise me," I answered.

I had not done my homework well enough. I paid the cabby and began strolling along a wide walk that led into the park. An obliging jogger pointed me in the direction of the Gazebo, which I had noted on the park map in the phone book and indicated to Whiskers as the place of our rendezvous. It was a dilemma: I needed to make myself visible for Whiskers and yet remain secluded in case Face or Baldy were in the area.

By the time I came upon the meeting place, it was nearly noon. I began to panic. In the first place, I couldn't be sure he would show up. In the second, I had been assuming on strictly circumstantial evidence that it would be Whiskers who would meet me. Had he just been an errand boy for someone else, I would have no idea who to look for or how to confirm he or she was truly on my side. Had I been forced to wait much longer my paranoia would have surely reclaimed

me.

I took a seat on a bench near a stand of flowering shrubs and waited. I stared at my watch until the second hand signaled straight up noon. Had our watches been synchronized prior to the mission, he could not have arrived any more precisely.

As I returned my hand to my lap and looked around, Whiskers slid onto the bench beside me. The sight of him was at once a welcome relief and the basis for a new knot in my stomach. Relief won out as he said:

"What's shakin, Doc?" offering me peanuts from a crisp new sack.

In close proximity to him for the first time, it became clear that Whiskers was a light complexioned, young, black man, in his late-twenties. The eyes and nose behind the beard were familiar but brought no name to mind.

"I'm not sure where to begin, Whiskers."

He looked at me - startled.

"That name is part of the strange story I need to share with you," I began. The rest of the story poured from my lips.

"For at least two months now - perhaps longer - I have had amnesia."

A look of genuine concern crossed the young man's face and he shifted into a more alert attitude. His initially cocky manner turned solemn. Before he could respond, I continued. Fifteen minutes later I had laid out my story. He let me speak uninterrupted. When I finished, he began.

"I knew something was wrong from the way you said things in your note. You said Baldy was after you. I assumed you meant Fred Brown - he's bald as a cue ball and twice as white. He and I are your guys."

"My guys?"

"Ya. You hired him to watch over you before you left Buffalo after the trial and he hired me to help him. We've followed you all over the eastern half of the country. By the way, considering the circumstances I suppose I should introduce myself." He extended his hand. "Jerry White."

With minimal attention, I returned his gesture and shook his hand.

"Trial? Watch over me? Fred Brown?" I shook my head and shrugged my shoulders. Data overload was setting in.

"You really don't remember anything, do you, Doc?"

"I'm afraid not."

Jerry raised his hand, snapping his fingers as if signaling someone. Presently Baldy - Fred - appeared out of nowhere. I stood up and shook his hand. Jerry proceeded to efficiently fill him in on the nuts and bolts of my situation. Nervous tension overtook me and I chuckled out loud, as I realized the black man was named White and the white man was named Brown. At that, they paused. I said I'd explain later. The spreading endorphins brought a ripple of welcome relief to my tension-ridden system.

"To be on the safe side I think we better head to the car, Dr. Watson," Fred suggested, searching the area with his eyes. I agreed. As we walked, Jerry continued his rendering of my story, filling in details he had omitted in the short version. I added a few details.

Once safely in the car I told them I thought it was my turn to ask some questions.

"Let's begin with the trial that Jerry mentioned. What's that all about? What kind of trouble was I in that required me to go to trial?"

It was Fred's turn.

"We need to start back well before that. One of your patients was a fifteen-year old boy who was brought to you under the name Brian Smith. You were treating him for depression and recurrent night terrors. He became a real favorite of yours and likewise, Brian came to feel very close to you - closer to you in fact than to his own, very wealthy family. During one session, he carelessly confided in you that his name was actually Sammy Calligi, and that Ari Calligi, the mobster, was his father. One thing lead to another I guess and it soon became apparent that his problem was based in his deep hatred for his father and all that he stood for.

"During the course of your dozens and dozens of daily sessions with Sammy, the boy revealed the very private, very illegal activities of his family. You were caught in a dilemma. If the government had the information you

possessed, they could put Ari away forever, yet you didn't feel you could do that because of what might happen to Sammy when his father found out he had been the source of the facts and figures, names and places."

"You talked with Sammy about it and he encouraged you to go to the authorities. So did his mother. After a great deal of soul searching you contacted the attorney general's office and told them what you knew. They involved you and Sammy in finding out as much more as possible without giving away the arrangement.

"In the end though you had to testify. Ari was tried and convicted on the basis of information the government had been able to establish because of the leads you provided. The rumor was that from the beginning it had all been a scheme by Sammy and his mother to get Ari out of the business so they could take over. That was never proved nor disproved. What is known is that when Ari was arrested, Sammy and his mother disappeared."

"So, I testified. How does any of that fit into my present situation?"

"You need to be strong now, Doctor Watson. Probably stronger than you have ever been in your life. The rest of the story is just plain and simply the most tragic and horrifying set of occurrences I've ever known."

"Please go on. I have to know whatever it is."

I found myself sliding against the door and gripping the handle as if that contact would somehow support me through whatever was about to transpire.

"During the trial your life and the lives of your wife and son were repeatedly threatened. About a month after Ari was convicted, a messenger arrived at your office with an envelope. You had been working late as was your custom. It was about eight o'clock when you received it. Inside was a note telling you that your wife and son were being killed at that very moment and that in the future anyone who became important to you would also be killed, that is if the decision wasn't made to just kill you first."

"You called your home but the line was dead. You called the Sheriff, since your home was out in the country. You lived in the center of a forty-acre pine forest. By the time

you arrived, the scene was absolute mayhem. There were a dozen police cars, twice that many officers and the paramedics. The yard to the house had been cordoned off. The front lawn was red with the blood from the brutal murders. Understandably, you fell apart and were sedated. You fought off the effects of the drug and kept trying to get through the police line to your house.

"The next day the Attorney General's office urged you to go into the witness protection program. You refused, thinking you could handle it yourself. You were - well, are - a very wealthy man. That's when you came to me. You had decided to leave the area since you had no one left. Your plan was to give up your tremendous wealth and live the way you had as a child - poor but content. My agency took on the job of watching over you and providing you with enough money to live on - never over \$125.00 a week according to your own stipulation. You wanted to earn your way. Since you were determined to block out everything from your past, we were never to contact you and were to remain out of your sight."

Fred had been right. It was an appalling story and it made me sick. I opened the door and fed my last meal to the gutter. I had also been right. I had to hear it. I could practically feel my brain beginning the process of reorganizing itself. It flashed back to that yard and that night. It was the picture of the pine trees with the red grass. The terrible dreams of the flashing lights and the policemen trying to control me had also been a reflection of that night. The picture in my head gradually transformed into a memory of the actual event. I wept. It had been my son's face on one side of the picture and Sammy's on the other.

"His name? What was my son's name?"

"James. His name was James."

Yes. Suddenly I knew that. "And my wife was Beth."

"That's right."

When at last I had cried all that I had to cry, I realized we were moving.

"I want you to stay with us in our hotel until we get a handle on what's actually going on with Sammy," Fred

explained.

I nodded compliantly through my exhaustion.

Suddenly I had only one antagonist. Assuming the rest of my hypotheses were as inaccurate as the ones about Whiskers and C. P., I certainly needed to put myself in the hands of professionals. With that came a new feeling of security. I had felt it before during that new life, but in each case, it had been dashed to pieces. I wondered what else could go wrong and how much time I had until it happened again.

We arrived at the hotel. It was big, beautiful and very expensive looking.

"This is where you guys are staying?" I asked, surprise showing in my tone.

"That's right," Jerry answered.

"And on my dime, I assume."

"Right again," he said, this time with a broad smile.

They had adjoining rooms with few of the amenities missing.

"Just how is my money holding out?" I asked, feeling the silk pillow cases and grass cloth walls.

"Try as we will, we can't even find ways to spend a tenth of the interest," Fred said with another smile.

I let it go. Money was the last thing on my mind. We made ourselves comfortable.

"There are some things at my motel room I'd like to have," I said.

"I can go get them tonight," Jerry suggested.

Then Fred spoke.

"You should know that Ari Calligi was killed in prison last year by some rival outfit. That may explain the reemergence of Sammy in all of this. With Ari gone, not even his closest associates could contest Sammy and Cleo's claim to the family business."

Jerry added a thought.

"It could be that Sammy feels there's just one final piece of old business that needs to be dealt with before he can get on with his own version of the Calligi empire."

"Me?"

"Yeah, you."

I sighed and shrugged, signaling my growing despondency. What he said was what I had been thinking. So much had taken place since I arrived in Buffalo it was difficult to keep it all in mind let alone organized. The revelations were like trying on new sets of clothes during a buying frenzy - old ones being shed and new ones donned every time I turned around. I continued to be exhausted. Fred sensed it.

"Take my room and get some rest. We'll keep an eye out and handle any trouble."

He pointed to the door leading to the adjoining room. I agreed with a silent nod and moved to the door.

Before entering I turned to my new friends and said, "You know, I'll never be able to thank you adequately for what you're doing."

Jerry blew it off pushing the air in my direction with his open palm. Fred nodded and said, "You just get some rest now. We'll talk it all out tomorrow."

I closed the door behind me and made certain the hall door to the room was securely locked. Then, still fully dressed, I eased onto the bed. Fred and Jerry seemed like good people. I couldn't help myself, however, and had to wonder if they could really be trusted. What did I really know about them? Nothing except what they had told me about themselves. They could be the mafia itself and I would have no way of knowing. Resolving to verify their story with other sources in the morning, I fell asleep.

Sometime later, I was roused by a loud rapping on the hall door to the other room. It frightened me, but then so had the shadows of small children with cotton candy in the park. Still, I was curious so I put my ear against the adjoining door. I heard Fred speaking but could not make out his words. The voices momentarily became loud and then quieted. Ever so cautiously, I opened the door a crack. I could see both Fred and Jerry standing at the door to their room. The open door hid the person or persons in the hall.

My guys were doing the listening. Eventually, Fred motioned the visitors into the room. My heart stopped. It was Face - Sammy - and two of his men. What could have been going on? There were no guns in sight. Why not? Why were

Fred and Jerry not protecting me?

Giving them the benefit of the doubt for the next few seconds, I continued to watch. They talked in hushed tones, so even with the door cracked I could not understand what they were saying. They remained standing and for some time the conversation went back and forth between Fred and Sammy.

After five minutes or so, Fred pointed toward my room. I panicked. He was selling me out! Why had I been so trusting? I shut and locked the door and headed for the hall. Once there I ran to the stair well around the corner. I had seen enough detective shows to know that you always wanted to get to the ground floor so you could exit the building rather than going to the roof where you could be easily trapped.

I started down the first few steps only to be stopped in my tracks by loud male voices moving toward me from several floors below. Not knowing who they were or what their intentions might be I had no choice but to head to the floor above. It was a restaurant but the lock was arranged on the door in such a way, that you could always get out but never get in. I bolted up the stairs until I reached the door to the roof. I prayed it would be open. It was. I heard even more steps below me on the stairs. Inexplicably they were unhurried, methodical even. Then it came to me.

"They know they have me, so why exert themselves."

I looked for a way off the roof. There were no adjoining rooftops. I looked for a place to hide. There was nothing but a bevy of huge air conditioning units. In desperation, I ran to the edge of the roof and looked down. I estimated it to be a ten-story building. I hated heights. That was a hell of a time to discover that! There was a foot-wide ledge of sorts down about seven feet from the top.

"I'm dead for sure if I just stand here." I said aloud. "I have one slim chance."

Exhibiting a good deal less caution than was characteristic of me, I straddled the low wall-like structure which extended a foot or so above the perimeter of the roof. I lowered myself over the outside edge until my toes rested on the narrow ledge below. I hung onto the top by my fingers,

hoping that if I were not in sight they would think I had given them the slip and would leave in a hurry. I had not planned ahead well enough to figure how I would get myself back up onto the roof in case that opportunity came to pass.

What a time for memories to begin pouring into my blank mind. I remembered it had always been my worst nightmare that I might die by falling from a great height. More and more, it was looking like those dreams had foreseen my future.

I heard the door open and a volley of voices all calling, "Doc. Where are you? It's okay."

Yeah. I'd bet it was okay. Okay for the bad guys. Okay for my guys who sold me out. Not okay for me. If Sammy found me, I was dead. If he didn't I was also dead because I couldn't hold on much longer. It was not the way I had envisioned my final moments of life. From above, I heard a strange yet familiar voice. I looked up and there was the face of Sammy.

"Over here guys. Hurry. Over here." he called frantically.

Not only had he found me but he could hardly wait to have his goons do me in. My tired fingers seemed frozen in place, any feeling in them long since gone. Sammy appeared to be kneeling on the roof above and his hand moved all quite deliberately toward me.

"Good-bye sweet life," I said out loud.

Without a word, he locked his strong young grasp around my upper right arm. Seconds later Jerry's face appeared and he took hold of my other arm. I was terrified and confused. Could they not just let me drop? Did they have to save me for the kind of execution they had inflicted on my family? I freed my fingers hoping they would be unable to hold me. They could.

Gradually I was pulled back onto the rooftop. My arms were shot through with excruciating, prickling, stabbing, pain. They propped me up against the wall. Sammy placed one hand firmly on each side of my head and forced me to look him directly in the eyes. This is it, I thought. What last words would he have for me?

"Doc. You have to be the hardest person to help

I've ever run across! It's all, okay. Nobody here wants to harm you in any way. We're your friends."

I was too exhausted and bewildered to remain terrified. I blinked my eyes with little comprehension of what was transpiring. What was their game?

"What do you mean, help?" I asked, my sarcastic words slurred and my vision still spinning with vertigo.

I looked up at Fred, desperately - expectantly.

"It's Sammy's show. Ask him," Fred said. "Give him the word, young man."

I turned my pained face back toward Sammy.

"Listen to me," he began again, his harsh grasp on my face easing off and becoming almost tender. "When my father died, I closed the family business and delivered all his associates to the Feds. Mom had been sick for several years and died a few months after that. Then I set out looking for you to let you know that you didn't have to run and hide anymore. I wanted to try and somehow make things up to you."

Tears began streaming down his face as he struggled to continue.

"I know I can never really do that. It's a disgrace and heartache I will live with until the end of my days. I can't bring your wife and son back but I would like a chance to share my life with you. I have a wonderful two-year-old son who sure needs a grandpa."

I didn't fully understand and yet I understood more than enough. I opened my arms and he dissolved into them. We cried our lives back together.

EPILOGUE

Gradually, during the next several weeks, much of my memory loss cleared up. I felt confident that given time it would all seep back into place. With the help of my friends, I was able to clear up several questions that remained. It came as no surprise to me that my specialty within clinical psychology had been children and adolescents. I wondered how Dr. Jackson had recognized me in the beard I had grown to disguise myself. It turned out that I had always worn a beard there in Buffalo. Apparently, I had shaved it off in Geneseo to change my appearance. The name Jim Johnson seemed to have been picked out of thin air.

As my memory returned, I was able to trace my steps from Geneseo to Arkansas. I had stayed for short periods in several, small, out of the way places. I had known that I was really Jack Watson and was fully aware of my family's horrifying story right up to my first disappearance from the colony. Dr. Jackson and I surmised it was the shock of thinking that the Calligli family had found me that made me snap and run. It was as if my subconscious mind, in all of its illogical grandeur, had concluded that if I didn't know who I was, neither could anyone else. My leaving would protect my new loved ones from the horrible fate that had befallen my own family.

As I had speculated, Sammy had located me through the catalog the store had mailed out. We had shared an artistic interest. That explained both why he got on the mailing list and how he was able to recognize my signature.

According to Fred and Jerry, I had spent the month between the colony and Joplin in a flee-bag motel in Fayetteville. I still had no memory of that period and probably never would. Most likely it had been a terribly frightening period during which the amnesia recurred anew virtually every day, clouding my recollection of all the days that had come before. Eventually the underlying terror prompted me to run away so I got on a bus to Joplin. Why Joplin? Who knows. It may just have been the next bus out of town. Once there, however, I immediately felt safe - relative to the way I had felt in Fayetteville, at least.

That allowed the continually recurrent amnesia to cease and the more typical, long-term form to set in. My new life was thereby given a chance to begin building its own history and apparently had done so from the moment I awoke on that downtown sidewalk on the morning of April Fools' Day.

According to Fred, the code on the disk was something I had made prior to leaving Buffalo. Some part of my mind apparently knew that disk had to be protected so evidently the first thing I did upon arriving in Joplin was to place them all in the locker without consciously remembering having done so. I got a good chuckle when I recognized the full significance of the story's title: The Flight of the Head Man. The Freddie the Frog disks had been included to confuse things had they fallen into the wrong hands. Apparently, I had changed the city name on those stories to conceal their actual place of origin.

As I recuperated, I spent a good deal of time with Sammy, his lovely wife and delightful son. Although I certainly wanted them to be a part of my life, I needed to return home.

So, on Wednesday morning, the eighty-second day of my terrible and wonderful adventure, Sammy and his family, along with Fred and Jerry, saw me off on my flight back to Fayetteville. As I had said once before, I could think of a no more magnificent place to live out my years, than there, in the safety and serenity of the beautiful Ozark Mountains.

I would see Sammy and his family often and would make every effort to reestablish my friendships with Rick and Hank. I felt certain there would be room in their lives for an occasional get-together with an old, coffee drinking, buddy.

I dismissed The Brown Agency with a substantial gratuity and established a trust fund for myself. I framed the picture of Sammy and James and with warm affection hung it over the mantel in my comfortable, cozy, room upstairs from the store. To the back of its frame, I taped the surrealistic pine woods picture. It was a symbolic gesture, asking the gods to help me relegate to the deepest dungeons of my mind all visions of that terrible hour when the grass ran red at twilight.

The End