

## A CHILD'S TALES (A Journey from Darkness into Light)

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## EPIPHANY

It was a bright Indian summer day in mid autumn. Fluffy white clouds were just peeking out from beyond the eaves of a tall four-story stone and stucco house where the boy lived with his parents in an apartment on the third floor.

The boy sat in the shade of a large elm tree, on a low stone wall by his father, watching the clouds. The stone wall divided two driveways, the driveway next door was a bit lower down, and this made the boy a little nervous, as it looked like a good deal further to fall.

The boy returned his attention to a plastic model of the mercury rocket ship he was helping his father assemble. The boy was only four years old, but he knew all about the mercury rocket ship, he dreamed of being an astronaut.

The boy knew he really wasn't much help to his dad. He was eager to help, but there was so little he could do. His dad would pass his son some of the sturdier pieces to be broken free of their plastic ties, but too many of the parts were too fragile to trust to the boy's rudimentary skills.

The boy might sometimes get to glue some of the larger pieces or subassemblies together, but again, most of this work was done by his dad, because it required such a delicate touch. His dad had a very delicate touch.

His dad was a chiropractor like his Pop-Pop.

The boy watched his father's hands.

The boy watched the model slowly coming together. The boy watched the sun move west beyond the roofline of his house as a few fluffy clouds moved east and the bright blue sky grew slightly dimmer. The boy watched squirrels and falling leaves and a trail of ants creeping along the base of the wall below his dangling feet.

The ants were on their way to their nest in the roots of a large tree that grew through the wall. The boy watched anything and everything around him that might help keep him distracted from watching his father's face.

The rocket ship gantry was nearly done, the last of the hair-thin hand rails were being attached around the perimeters of the top deck. The rocket ship gantry was fascinating; it had many levels with little ladders to climb. The boy imagined climbing the gantry to the top and boarding the rocket ship where he could fly away into space forever.

The boy hated to look at his father's face.

Every time the boy looked at his dad's face, all he could see was sadness. Even when his dad was laughing and playful, he always seemed sad as well. The boy hated his father's sadness; it hurt the boy making a raw wound in his heart.

The boy felt helpless, he knew why his dad was sad, his dad was sad because of him. The boy knew he made his dad feel sad.

The boy's father made special efforts, such as today, to spend time with his son. They often played with Legos or Lincoln Logs together. Nevertheless, the father and his strange son were not close; there was scarcely any warmth or comfort in their relationship.

The small events in their lives that might have helped nurture their relationship were lost on the boy and his father. Neither one of them knew how to feel or respond to each other in such moments.

The boy's father seemed to feel close to no one, not even himself, it sometimes seemed. The boy was much the same, incapable of feeling close or comfortable with anyone, even his beloved dad.

Like father, like son.

The boy suddenly understood this with extraordinary clarity. It was an epiphany, a moment of insight that would change the boy's life forever. The boy now understood that he and his father would never be close, no matter how hard he tried to bridge the gap in their lives that should have been filled with warmth, companionship, and trust.

The boy realized they would both feel lonely with each other forever.

The boy wanted to cry.

The boy returned his attention to the ants following their trail below his dangling feet. He imagined he was an ant; he joined their long line, picking up a crumb of food to carry into their nest. With his heavy load secured in his mandibles, the mighty ant-boy followed his brothers into their warm, safe nest.

The boy ran away into his imagination, his only safe place. His tears would come later when he was alone and he felt safe to cry.

## ALONE

The boy was always alone.

Even when he was around other people, the boy always felt alone. The boy could see other people enjoying their company with one another, but the boy always felt like an outsider, he always felt left out of the simple pleasures of family and friends.

The boy rarely enjoyed anyone else's company. He was always afraid of being hurt.

Just now, the boy remembered being scarcely three years old. The boy was busy playing by himself, alone in his room. The girl was in the kitchen making a snack for him.

The boy liked the girl, she was special.

The girl's name was Audrey.

As the boy thought about Audrey, he resumed one of his favorite pass-times, punching holes in a piece of paper with a sharp pencil.

The boy's room was closest to the front of their third story apartment. He had a strange closet in his room, a closet with a door in the back of it. The extra door went to another apartment at the front of their house.

That door was always kept locked.

The closet had been built by the boy's dad and his Uncle Dave. Uncle Dave and his dad were best friends from college. The closet had pegboard walls and stood in the corner of his room furthest from his window and the door by the window that stood in the adjacent wall, cater-corner from the boy's closet.

The wall between his closet and his window, the wall shared with the front apartment, was covered with pegboard too, just like the closet walls. There was no plaster beneath the pegboard; instead, there was only a deep, dark, scary space that seemed too poorly hidden by the pegboard.

The pegboard walls were painted a pale blue color.

The boy would hold a piece of paper up against one of the pegboard walls and try to trace around the holes with his eyes shut. Sometimes his pencil would cross over a hole; the sharp point suddenly plunging violently through the paper.

The boy loved the feeling of the pencil punching through the paper, but the boy loved the challenge of missing all the holes with his eyes closed. It was a good game. Either way, he won.

But either way could cause him distress as well.

The holes in the paper were bad, they meant he had made mistakes. The boy didn't like to think what those mistakes might remind him of. The boy didn't want to make any mistakes.

But it felt good to plunge his pencil point through the paper, and sometimes he just tried to punch as many holes in the paper as he could, obsessively following the square patterns of holes in the wall beneath his paper, trying to keep all of his holes in the paper perfectly lined up.

The boy had no idea why he enjoyed punching holes in paper like this, it just felt good to him, so he did it.

However, as good a pass-time as punching holes in paper was, the boy could not keep his thoughts from drifting back to his sore spot. Not only did the boy always feel he was he alone, he also felt terribly lonely as well.

The lonely boy would sometimes follow Audrey around the apartment, often wishing he could go home with her. He liked Audrey better than some of the other women who would come to baby-sit him.

Audrey was the youngest, the prettiest, and the nicest of all the women he knew.

Audrey was very special.

Sometimes, on very rare occasions, Audrey would hug the boy, or kiss him, or play with him; the boy could almost allow himself to enjoy those moments, he could almost allow himself to want more moments like that with her.

The boy could almost allow himself to imagine he might even be in love with Audrey, but the boy was afraid her of too.

Audrey was black.

The boy's mom seemed to like black people; nearly all the women she hired to watch him were black, with one exception, his Aunt Edna. But that was ok, Aunt Edna sort of looked black, her skin was very dark, leathery, and wrinkled with age.

While the boy's mom seemed to like black people, negroes, she called them, the boy's Pop-Pop seemed to hate black people, he called them niggers, a word hthe boy's mom said he should never use.

The boy's Pop-pop was teaching the boy hypocrisy. While he seemed to hate black people, he always seemed friendly toward his black patients.

The boy was upset that his Pop-pop didn't like black people. When the boy was visiting his Pop-Pop and Nana, which was usually every day, he was never allowed to go across the street to the Black Oak Park to play because there were black children there.

Sometimes the boy would manage to sneak out of his Pop-Pop's house on his own, but he rarely met anyone to play with when he did. The boy had only met two people to play with here so far, a little red-haired girl about his age who lived down the street on the corner, with her sister, and a bigger black boy a bit older than him.

Both these kids seemed nice, but the girl was very cautious around the lonely boy. He got

the impression she was afraid of him. He looked forward to seeing her any time he could sneak out on his own, but he rarely got to see her, and he almost never got to play with her.

His Pop-Pop might have approved of him playing with the girl because she was white, but she wasn't as much fun to play with as the black boy, Michael.

The black boy was older, he knew many fun games. Sometimes he had a ball they could kick together. The two boys liked to run or to play hide and seek together. If they both had their toy guns they might even play cops and robbers or cowboys and Indians.

The two boys always had fun together. It was almost like having a friend on those rare occasions when the lonely boy met up with the black boy in the park.

But the black boy could not be his friend; his Pop-Pop had made that clear. Black people were dangerous, they should not be trusted.

But then why did his mother hire so many nice black women like Audrey?

Perhaps his Pop-Pop was wrong and black people could be trusted. Perhaps they could even be friends. The boy would like that. He hoped Audrey would be his friend. She was always very nice to him.

The boy used to believe he would grow up to be black, so he was very puzzled by his Pop-Pop's attitude.

The boys' Pop-Pop and Nana were some of the oldest people he knew, as was his Aunt Edna. They were all very dark-skinned for white people, so the boy had concluded that white people turned black when they got old enough. He had been eager to turn black and was sorry he would have to wait such a long time.

The boy did not understand that his grandparents were only very darkly tanned from working regularly outdoors on their weekend farm in Maryland.

Then one day, while driving near the Philadelphia Zoo the boy's family had passed some row houses with large open front porches.

On one of these open porches there had been a playpen with wooden barred railings through which the boy could see a small baby playing.

The baby was black..

The boy had had one of his first epiphanies that day, he had suddenly realized he would not grow up to be black after all.

The boy was terribly disappointed; nearly all the nicest people in his life, were black. The boy wanted to be black too, just like them.

Perhaps being black made you nicer.

If there were ever moments when the boy felt a little less alone, it was during the special

moments he sometimes spent with Michael or Audrey.

Audrey particularly was special.

Audrey was teaching him something secret. Audrey never spoke about their secret here in his apartment, but she might sometimes answer his questions about it with a gleam in her eye, a slight tilt to her head, a knowing wink, a short nod, or a bright smile.

The boy was completely fascinated by the secret he shared with Audrey. She could leave her body. She was teaching him how to leave his body. It was a lot of fun.

The boy had no words for what Audrey was teaching him; he had never heard of astral projection, but Audrey was teaching him how to leave his physical body. She was teaching him to how emerge from his body in an invisible spirit form like a ghost, a form that was usually only visible to other people when they were also out of their bodies.

Leaving his body was fun. The boy could fly when he was out of his body.

The boy remembered the last time he and Audrey had left their bodies.

Audrey had called a cab to drive them down to the Schuylkill River to a park near the end of the West River Drive. It had been a beautiful sunny day with scarcely any clouds, the cab left them by some benches in the shade of tall trees where they sat down together and watched the river flow by.

There were boathouses across the river from the park. Crew teams would practice racing on the river, their coaches yelling stroke, stroke, stroke, to set the pace of their oar strokes.

Audrey had been in an odd mood that day. She had brought him here several times before, he remembered one time there had been a hot dog vendor here.

On previous visits, Audrey had explained to him about how the river was like his spirit, that his spirit flowed constantly like the water of the river.

The banks of the river were like his body. The river flowed through the banks and received its form from them, but the river always passed beyond the local river banks to other banks along its shores; these other banks were like other lives his spirit lived in other bodies.

The river of his spirit connected his lives together.

The boy learned that his spirit flowed through many bodies, just as the river had many different banks in different places. His spirit was not a part of any of his bodies, his spirit was greater than any of his individual bodies. His spirit joined all of his bodies together in a long story about his life, a life with many lives in many different bodies.

Audrey had taught the boy that just like the river could sometimes rise and leave its banks to flood outward and find a new course to take, a new channel to flow through, so too his spirit could flow out of his body, to find a new channel, to explore a different terrain.

Audrey had helped the boy learn to emerge from his body.

On that occasion, the boy had enjoyed the beautiful river-side park from among the tops of the trees with the birds. He and Audrey had flown with a little way up into the sky, from there, following the birds.

Together they had flown a little ways out over the river, looking south to where the Art Museum stood above the opposite bank beyond the row of boathouses, near a long waterfall that held rising tidewaters at bay from the sweet waters of the river above.

The bank of the river had been built up into a wall below the art museum to the rear. A long broad patio with glass blocks set in the paving was framed on the two sides overlooking the river by a stone railing that sat on short bulging pillars in a classical Greek style.

A large structure resembling a gazebo stood at the nearer end of the patio. It had a sort of round roof with eight sides like a stop sign held aloft by eight pairs of tall Grecian pillars.

A smaller version of this structure could be seen at the far end of the patio, with still another smaller one higher up on a small outcrop of rock projecting out from below the upper parking lot at the rear of the Art Museum.

The boy loved this open, spacious, playful style of architecture. The spaces defined by these simple structures were appealing and always drew the boy in. He wanted to fly through their open structures, winding in and out through their columns to lurk under the roofs, hidden from the world in his invisible body.

Audrey allowed him to do this.

Audrey followed the boy as he flew through the air. Together, they crossed the river effortlessly. Audrey chased him in and out through the railings, between the columns, and under the roofs; teaching him to shrink the size of his astral body to become as small as he needed to become to slip through the narrowest places.

The boy saw that the patio below them was made of concrete in which glass blocks had been set in several long, narrow rectangular groups. There was something down below the patio something that needed the glass blocks for a skylight.

The boy had wanted to go under the patio and check it out but Audrey had said no, they would save that for another time.

Today they would finally go to see what lay beneath the glass block patio.

Audrey helped the boy, as he eased himself out of his body; then, together, they flew across the Schuylkill River.

On the far side of the river, they paused, high above the patio, higher than the boy had ever flown before.

Audrey held out her hand to the boy and the boy took her hand. Her hand felt both warm and cool. How strange. Their astral bodies were insubstantial to the rest of the world but they could still touch each other, they could still hold hands, just as if they had real bodies.

Audrey smiled and winked at the boy and then they plunged down through the patio into the dark space below it.

The boy was delighted.

The place below the patio was dim but not too dark. Aside from the glass block skylights, the cavernous space below the patio was illuminated by lights that shone above many, many fish tanks set in niches all along the outer walls or standing on pedestals in open spaces between the columns that supported the patio roof.

It was an aquarium!

The boy soared about in the open spaces of the aquarium examining all the different fishes.

Some of the fishes had blue and yellow stripes. Other fishes were pink, or tan, or silver. Some were black with tiny pinkish or yellowy freckles.

Many of the fishes had elaborately shaped and veined fins that swept through the water in graceful flowing motions, billowing out around them.

The fish were beautiful!

The boy was ecstatic, enchanted.

The boy scarcely noticed the other people visiting the aquarium, they all seemed somehow unreal to him, like ghosts; the people in the aquarium seemed very insubstantial, as if they were not really there at all.

Finally, it was time to go, and the boy followed Audrey out of the aquarium, back into the sweet shining sunlight of the world above. Even in his astral body, the boy could feel the warmth of the sun on him.

The aquarium had been dark and cold. The aquarium seemed almost frightening now. Had there been any real people there at all, or had they all been ghosts, dead people?

As they flew across the river back to their waiting, yellow taxicab, the boy reflected on his visit to the aquarium. There had been something wrong there, but he couldn't put his finger on it. Something there was really terribly wrong, he just knew it!

He let go of Audrey's hand and raced back to the aquarium, the fishes were in danger!

He was too late.

It was much darker in the aquarium now, all the lights were off. The tanks were all bone dry, the fishes were all long gone. In the dim light from the many tiny square block skylights above the boy could see thick dust had settled everywhere.

The aquarium looked as if it had been closed for many years!

Where were the fishes? Where were the visitors? How could they all have disappeared so

quickly?

Trails of tiny footprints could be seen in the dust. Tiny footprints that led off in all directions in trails that crossed over one another in a maze of activity. The boy looked for who had made these tiny footprints and he saw the rats!

There were hundreds of rats down here, maybe thousands. The rats had eaten all the fishes. How had the rats gotten in? When had the rats had time to eat all the fish? The boy had just seen the fish here a few minutes ago, and yet now this magical place was like some barren dusty tomb, fit only for vermin to live in.

Audrey found the boy sobbing, hiding high above the dark dusty floor, hovering just below one of the rectangular skylights made of glass blocks. She took his hand and led him back in time to another bright sunny day when the aquarium was open and full of people and fishes enjoying themselves.

Audrey and the small boy departed the aquarium again. Flying across the river, they rejoined their waiting bodies. A bright yellow cab had pulled up to take them home.

The boy was dying to ask Audrey about their visit to the Aquarium, but he knew she would refuse to talk to him about it here, in the cab, or later at home, in his apartment. Audrey would only talk about their secrets outside, outdoors in the sunlight. It was as if it might not be safe to talk about their secrets away from the light of the sun.

The darkness of the aquarium still frightened the boy.

There was another kind of darkness that scared the boy even more, a darkness that seemed to pull at him as he left his body, a darkness that might swallow him up forever if he were not careful.

Audrey did not need the sunlight to leave her body. Audrey could leave her body safely, any time she wanted. But the boy was another matter. He was too inexperienced to keep himself in the light; he had a strong fascination with dark places, so she held his lessons only in the bright light of the sun where the darkness was banished as far from the boy as it ever could be.

Audrey would not risk losing the boy to the darkness by talking to him about spiritual matters away from the full strong light of the sun. The boy did not understand this; she couldn't tell him about the darkness without putting him at greater risk of losing himself to its inky-black, dangerous depths.

Knowledge was a powerful thing. The boy must not know too much too soon. He was already pushing himself to the brink of death.

This boy seemed far too young to be exposed to such dark knowledge, but Audrey had her job to do, she must prepare the boy to meet his teacher.

The boy left his task of perforating paper with his pencils and went to look for Audrey, maybe she would take him to the park by the river again today.

But when the boy found Audrey she was weeping. He tried to put his hand on her shoulder

to console her but he couldn't bring himself to touch her.

She was leaving today. Her work here was done. She would never see him again after this day.

The boy was devastated; he leapt into her arms howling. He held her tightly, but he could feel her already slipping away from him, becoming more distant, until it felt like an infinite gulf separated him from her even though she held him in her arms.

The boy was losing his best friend. Audrey had taught him a good deal more than just leaving his body, she had helped teach him to meditate.

The boy watched as Audrey's spirit left the young black girl's body. The woman who now held him in her arms frowned, she pulled back, holding the boy away from her and set him on the ground.

Audrey was gone, the woman who stood before him now was a complete stranger.

Where had Audrey gone? The boy felt all alone again. Perhaps he could run away and find her.

## RUNAWAY

The boy had had enough. He was not yet five, but it was time for him to leave home. He would run away to go live at his Uncle Dave's house. Maybe his Uncle Dave and Aunt Pat could help him to feel loved. Maybe he could feel close to them in a way that he could never feel with his own parents.

Maybe their daughter Alison would be a little nicer to him.

The boy imagined that living anywhere else had to be better than living in his parent's apartment, but his Aunt Pat and Uncle Dave were the only people he could think of whom he might be able to go live with. He was sure he knew the way to get there, to their house, his parent's drove there every week, sometimes several times each week.

Uncle Dave and Aunt Pat were still best friends with his parents, they had met in college.

The boy didn't think he needed to carry much with him. He considered making a bindle-stuff, after all, wasn't that how runaways carried their belongings? But in the end he decided he wasn't interested in taking anything with him at all, he just wanted to leave.

So off he went.

It was several steep flights of stairs down to the street below, going this far was easy enough, he had climbed these stairs every day, for nearly as long as he could remember. The boy considered saying goodbye to his friend next door, but he couldn't screw up the courage to do it. He could walk away from his parents without any goodbyes, but he knew it wouldn't be so easy to walk away from his only friend.

The boy was familiar with the first leg of his journey which would take him west to the corner of 40th street and then south several blocks to the corner store near Baltimore Avenue.

The boy would not be going into the corner store today, oh no! The boy was afraid to go back in there after his mom made such a fuss there. He still didn't see the big deal.

Not long ago the boy's Aunt Edna had given him a shiny new copper penny. He was rich! He had money! The boy's mom scolded him for taking the money, she reminded him how poor Aunt Edna was. She reminded him how poor Aunt Edna was every time Aunt Edna gave him a present. She made him feel guilty for accepting Aunt Edna's presents.

Aunt Edna often brought him presents when she came to baby-sit with him, and the boy's mother always scolded him because Aunt Edna couldn't afford to buy him gifts. The gifts were just cheap toys, never anything expensive, but the boy felt terribly guilty whenever Aunt Edna came to visit. The boy had become accustomed to being upset whenever Aunt Edna came to visit so he no longer liked her, even though she brought him toys. Instead, the boy grew afraid of her and always wanted to hide from her.

The boy would not miss his Aunt Edna much either.

The boy had taken his shiny new penny straight down to the corner store, slipping out of the apartment door when his mom was busy in the kitchen.

It had seemed like a long way to the corner store, all by himself.

The boy was comfortable with going outside on his own; he often played out front or went next door to look for his playmate. The boy considered taking his friend with him to the store but held back, sometimes his friend didn't answer the door when he rang the bell.

The boy was in no mood for disappointments right now, he had his heart set on adventure.

The walk to the corner store was maybe four or five blocks, a walk he had made with his mother several times. He couldn't possibly get lost. He soon arrived at the corner store with his shiny new penny in hand.

The boy shopped carefully, just as his mother always did, he finally decided the best value for his money would be a set of plastic toy cars. He solemnly carried his cello-wrapped package of tiny toy cars to the front of the store, eager for his turn to pay so he could run home and play with his new cars.

When his turn at the register came, the boy plunked his shiny new copper penny down on the counter with glee. His part of the exchange now complete, the excited boy dashed out of the store, running all the way home.

When he got home his mom was on the phone. She sounded cross. When she got off the phone she scolded him for stealing from the store.

But the boy hadn't stolen anything; he had paid fairly with his only penny!

The boy's mom dragged him to the corner store where she embarrassed the boy terribly by making him apologize to the storekeeper even though he hadn't done anything wrong. His mom had shamed him in front of everyone in the store. He could never go in there again.

So today, running away, the boy passed by the corner store, afraid to go in.

Just past the corner store, 40th Street was only a very short block before intersecting with Baltimore Avenue which ran at an odd angle a bit south of due west.

The boy new his Uncle Dave's house was many blocks to the east, but he had deliberately set out to the west to get to 40th Street because that was the way his parents always went when they drove their car.

The boy didn't understand very well about one-way streets. When his parents drove, they drove several blocks out of the way to avoid problems with dead-end streets or one-way streets.

The boy was familiar with the journey in the car up to this point, but now he stood a short block away from the furthest place he had ever been from home, alone, on his own. The boy got nervous; he began to forget which way their car went on from here.

This was a complex intersection. The boy would have to cross two converging busy streets and the converging tracks of the subway-surface trolley cars. The boy was getting scared.

A stranger asked the boy if he needed help.

The boy began to cry. He was lost. He knew the way back, the way home, but he was never going back there, never!

The boy had been sure he had known the way forward from here, to his Uncle Dave's house, but things just didn't look the same from the sidewalk as they did from the moving car, and the car was always going the long way around.

Intuitively, the boy understood that his Uncle Dave's house was nearly due east from where he now stood, but the car always went southeast from here, around one end of a cemetery whose entrance was nearly due south, cater-corner, across Baltimore Avenue and the street converging with it.

The boy couldn't decide whether to trust his intuition which told him to go due east, or trust his memory of how his parents drove which went southeast through this large, dangerous intersection to follow a curving road that turned further to the south.

The boy was crying because he was frustrated, he couldn't make up his mind.

The stranger assumed the boy was lost.

The boy was comfortable with that assumption. If the nice man thought he was lost then the boy couldn't be expected to know his way home. The man walked the boy across 40th Street to the west, and then walked him a short way down the next block on Baltimore Avenue to a house with wooden trim neatly painted a rich, dark-green color.

The man took the boy up some stone steps onto a front porch enclosed in wood-mullioned, glass-paned walls, into the large house. The floor of the enclosed porch was littered with many tiny shoes, some of which were neatly placed along the walls. Before the heavy door between the enclosed porch and the rest of the house could be opened the boy could already hear the playful shouts of many children reverberating from within the house.

The boy was very excited; there were lots of kids in this house! Did they all live here? Could he live here too?

The boy's thoughts raced furiously as he tried to figure out if he had found a new home or if he would have to run away from this place to continue his journey to his Uncle Dave's house.

The man asked the boy for his name. The boy acted shy, he didn't really want to tell the nice man his name. However, the boy's mother had trained him like a parrot, it was all the boy could do to resist spouting off his name, address, and phone number, exactly as his mother had taught him to say them if he ever got lost.

However, the boy wasn't lost. Not really. He knew where he was. He knew where he wanted to go. If he could not stay here where everything seemed wondrously exciting and fun he could still find his way to his Uncle Dave's house. He wasn't really lost, he was just a bit confused about which way would be the best way to go to get to his Uncle Dave's.

The boy never considered that his Uncle Dave might not let him stay once he got there.

The boy believed the act of his choice to leave his parents and live with his Uncle Dave's family would have to be respected, he believed his Uncle Dave would have to take him in.

The man watched the boy play with the other children in his day care group.

The boy didn't appear to fit in well, he was clearly shy and hesitant to interact with the other children, even though he seemed to be making lame efforts to do so.

It didn't bother the man very much that he could not find out who this strange boy might be or to whom he belonged, the boy could not have traveled far from home all on his own. Perhaps when one of the visiting mothers came to pick of their children might recognize the boy or know who his parents are.

The boy overheard the man ask each mom about him each time someone would arrive to pick-up her child.

One by one, the kids were all going home to their families, the boy began to realize that he would not be able to stay here. The nice man would make him leave; the nice man would make him go home to his parents.

From time to time, as the children left with their mothers, the nice man would return to the boy to ask him his name. The boy was always well-guarded, he refused to tell the nice man his name.

However, the boy was starting to feel bad because he knew he was disappointing the nice man. The boy didn't want to disappoint him.

The nice man surprised the boy when he was intently playing with some brightly painted wooden blocks. The boy was struggling with the unfamiliar shapes which were cut to different proportions than the blocks he had at home. The boy was trying to build his own special version of a castle with tall towers, a working portcullis, and a working drawbridge.

Startled, the boy let down his guard and blurted forth his entire name, address, and telephone number exactly as his mother had always trained him to do.

No!

He hadn't meant to say that, but it was too late, the nice man was already dialing his phone.

The last of the kids had already gone when the boy's mother arrived. The boy shut himself away from anything his mother tried to say to him, just as he had done when she had tried to explain to him why the penny he had given the man at the corner store hadn't been enough money to pay for the cars.

His mom had had to pay more money for his plastic cars because he had already opened the cellophane packaging before he took the cars home. Of course it was enough money! It had to be enough money. It had been all the money he had!

The boy did not want to go home; he was terrified of the horrible loneliness and deep currents of misery that consumed him in his parent's apartment.

## PARACHUTE

The boy played with his new toy soldier. His soldier was very brave and came with a parachute. The boy folded the parachute carefully to make it resemble a properly packed parachute, tucking it snugly against the paratrooper's back.

The paratrooper was bigger than his other plastic soldiers, nearly six inches tall. He felt hollow. The boy could see a thin line of lighter plastic running all around the paratrooper where the two shells of his front and back halves were joined together in a tight seam.

The boy had learned that if he tossed his toy soldier too high up in the air he would hit the ceiling and bounce back, abruptly tumbling down, his chute failing to open quickly enough to save him from a nasty fall.

The boy had also learned that tossing the paratrooper up too gently kept the chute from opening properly as well. The chute needed to be dragged open on the way up, as the paratrooper ascended to just below the ceiling.

If the boy tossed his toy soldier just right the paratrooper's chute would fully open just before apogee, the highest point he would rise to, a word the boy learned from studying the orbital motions of the Mercury space capsule. If he did it just right, the upward drag opened the chute and the plastic soldier would drop below the open chute and swing back and forth, as he gently glided safely to the floor.

The boy loved his new toy soldier. It was a gift from his dad. The boy had learned to feel guilty about getting gifts from his Aunt Edna, and a certain amount of that guilt was transferred to all other gifts he received; after all, it wasn't just Aunt Edna who was poor, his family was poor too.

His mom had to work to help his dad finish up with his chiropractic school.

His mom was gone a lot of the time because of work. The boy liked this. Some of his nannies had been nice, particularly the youngest one, Audrey. His nannies had been his babysitters when his mom was at work.

But the boy's mom was home now. The boy was afraid his mom would come in from the kitchen and make him feel guilty about his new toy. His mom was always making him feel guilty about things. He often wished she would just leave him alone.

Only he hated being alone all the time.

The boy didn't know which was worse, being alone with his mom or being alone by himself.

There were never any better choices, he always felt alone, even when his parents were home playing with him or reading to him.

The boy returned his thoughts to his paratrooper, improving his technique so that the chute began to open nearly perfectly every time.

As the boy drifted deeper and deeper into his personal world, carrying the paratrooper with him in his mind, the colored lights came back on.

The colored lights were usually just red and green, but sometimes there were other colors, blue and orange, or purple and yellow. Sometimes they would be all the colors of the rainbow. Sometimes they seemed to make pictures, but mostly they would just drift through the air slowly in currents of different colors, like schools of fish.

The boy loved the colored lights. He spent a lot of time watching them appear and disappear, moving in their swirling eddies that swelled or diminished in volume, curling about each other like serpentine clouds of light. The colored lights appeared in long trailing, undulating groups of tiny particles of light, pinpoint small, no, smaller than pinpoints, infinitesimally small.

The boy had tried to see how big the little lights were, but as nearly as he could tell they seemed to have no size at all, they were just tiny brilliant spots of color so small they seemed to vanish entirely if you looked at them dead-on.

The parachute became tangled. The boy had accidentally looped one string around the packed wad of the chute and its coiled lines, and the chute had failed to open properly. As the paratrooper fell from the sky, that one misplaced line had become looped around the rest and had held the chute firmly closed.

The paratrooper was plummeting to his death.

Suddenly the boy's perspective changed, time seemed to back up in a sudden leap. The paratrooper was falling safely below his open chute, still high in the air, among the clouds overhead.

The ceiling of the boy's living room had turned transparent like the thick plate glass of store windows that has a greenish tinge to it, only this glass was clearer, bluer.

The ceiling in Mr. Mixit's apartment, the apartment above the boy's, on the fourth floor, and the roof beyond Mr. Mixit's ceiling, and all the walls enclosing the boy and the rooms above him had all turned just as clear as his ceiling had.

The boy watched his paratrooper drop out of the cloudy sky above the house.

The image of the parat-roopper drifting down from the sky was like a TV picture, it was made of lots and lots of tiny colored lights, the same lights the boy loved to watch for hours on end. The paratrooper glided down through the roof of the boy's house, growing larger as he fell. The boy realized his paratrooper was no longer a tiny plastic toy, he had become a full-sized living man!

The boy could see his entire house was really made of clouds of tiny dots of light, just like the man falling through his roof. The clouds of light that assembled themselves into the falling paratrooper coalesced closer and closer to the ground, descending through the living room ceiling and down through the living room floor.

As he descended through the floors of the boy's house, the boy saw the paratrooper wave and smile to him before disappearing through his living room floor. The floor became opaque and solid once more as the paratrooper passed through it.

The paratrooper had been real!

The boy thought he might even have known the paratrooper from another time and place.

The boy knew many soldiers; far too many. He was certain now he knew this paratrooper, a man who had died in the Second World War. A soldier introduced to him by the boy's teacher shortly after the soldier had been killed.

Yes, the boy was certain that he really knew the soldier who had just smiled and waved to him.

The boy smiled and waved back, fighting his tears as the soldier vanished from sight. He had known this soldier in the man's worst extremis, when he had been killed in battle. The boy had helped his teacher comfort the wounded soul of the dead paratrooper. Together, the boy and his teacher had nurtured the paratrooper back to life.

## TEACHER

The boy's teacher was an odd fellow who sometimes seemed to resemble a devil. He had been the boy's teacher for a year or more now, perhaps longer. The boy tried to forget all the horrible things he saw on his visits with his teacher, so his memory of his times with his teacher was already full of holes, his lessons blurring together and safely forgotten for now.

The boy was getting very good at forgetting. Forgetting had become a very important skill in the young boy's life.

The boy's teacher was a small, stern, brown-skinned man, turbaned and dressed in white winding clothes. Sometimes the teacher's head appeared to be naked and the boy sometimes glimpsed something like short devil's horns; sweeping backward, these horns seemed to curve outward and upward from above his teacher's temples.

The boy was painting a picture of his teacher today.

The boy painted his teacher to resemble a devil, painting him red to be sure it was clear that his teacher resembled a devil. The boy did not know how to express all the complex things he learned and felt while working with his teacher, so he painted nearly everything black, black for the overwhelming sense of terror and despair he always feel on his visits with his teacher.

The boy's teacher always took him to terrible, horrible places. Places where people lay dead or dying in countless numbers, slain by their own follies, follies that lead to starvation, plague, or, more often, war.

The dead haunted the dying in these terrible places, and it was the dead who must always be helped, on every visit.

Although the boy's teacher spoke no English and the boy himself spoke only the rudimentary English of a precocious three year old, the boy always received three lessons each time he visited with his teacher.

The boy was now nearly five years old, his lessons with his teacher had begun when he was only three.

The first lesson of each visit was always Why. Why have all these people died? The reasons for their deaths were always due to human failings. Overuse of the land, poor sanitation or hygiene, starvation, migration, raiding, and particularly, war, all seemed to lead inexorably to huge numbers of people dying together.

Every visit with the boy's teacher began with a lesson learned from the multitudes of people who lay dead or dying where they had fallen. The first lesson always explained why so many people were dead or dying; the first lesson always explained how these people had been responsible for their own dooms.

The teacher never spoke in words, yet the boy understood his teacher clearly, it seemed as if each glittering movement of his teacher's eyes communicated vast, complex bundles of information.

The boy had no vocabulary for most of the things he learned with his teacher. The boy experienced his teacher's lessons in sets of tightly related, condensed, real-time stories. The boy watched many simultaneous, parallel events roll forward in time converging out of the past in waves that moved inexorably toward the present and the calamities these events helped define. The boy absorbed his teacher's lessons as his teacher traced out multiple trails of cause and effect that always seemed to lead inevitably to the demise of huge populations of people.

The boy's lessons were drawn from many different ages of the world, including times of recent history or ancient legend, across a seemingly infinite array of other times and places.

The boy held his tongue firmly planted against his cheek as he painted his Teacher's picture.

In the center of a great field of black the boy had painted across his paper he had left a small circular area approximately the size of his outstretched hand. Within this small area he painted an outer ring of fire whose flames licked away at the black edges of the void surrounding them. Within his ring of fire the boy painted a backdrop of towering, flickering flames among which his teacher stood.

The legs of the boy's teacher were obstructed from view by the lower edge of the burning ring of fire, so the boy did not have to struggle over how to paint his teacher's legs or feet. He wanted to paint legs with cloven hooves that bent backwards like the Devil's legs, just to make it clearer how much his teacher resembled the Devil, but these details seemed too difficult to bother with.

The boy painted a large smile on his teacher's face, a face adorned on either side by small sinister looking horns. A devil's tail swept into view from behind the teacher and seemed to almost poke out through the portal created by the ring of fire.

The boy's teacher appeared to be beckoning the boy to step through the ring of fire into whatever terrible world lay beyond, he seemed to beckon the boy to return to him, to join him for another lesson.

The boy knew that if he stepped through that ring of fire he that would always be transported to another world. He would always be transported to a terrible world full of people who were either dead or busy dying, people miserably concluding their collective dooms.

On each visit, the boy's second lesson was always about helping the dead. Never mind those who were still dying, the living were always left to die, their turns to be helped must always wait until they were dead. Only the spirits of the dead required the ministries of the odd boy and his stranger teacher.

The boy would minister to each dead person according to their need, seeing to the needs of all those who had recently died in whatever calamity had wrought their doom.

Helping the dead in these dread places was a very private, personal affair. Technique was learned, but the boy's memories of these lessons were almost exclusively restricted to matters of technique alone. Remembering any of the content or context of each dead person's private life was rarely ever allowed.

Forgetting these details was part of a sort of pledge of compassion, a pledge to never remember another person's times of shame or weakness.

Not all the dead would need their ministries, but every one of the dead must still be acknowledged, if only with a quick glance. These light glances measured the need of each soul, sizing them up for triage. Those who felt able to go on by themselves were free to do so. Any who hung back for any reason were helped.

Of those who remained to be helped, there were always many who would be difficult to help. Each recently deceased person must be helped to come to terms with their death and helped to choose to return to life, to be either reincarnated or resurrected.

Sometimes the dead would sojourn in the spirit world awhile before returning to life, but they would always return to corporeal lives of one sort or another. The spirits of the dead often chose to return to an incarnation where they had already died, to resume their former lives in circumstances similar to those in which they had left them; returning to where they had once died to carry on. Only this time, by some miracle or other, they would survive; the deaths that took them once before, to be resurrected into a world and life where the terrible death they had experienced was now nothing more than a forgotten memory.

The boy was finished with his painting. He didn't want to think about his teacher's third lessons. He didn't want to go there at all. The boy fanned his hands through the air and blew on his paper trying to make the smelly wet poster paints dry faster where they had begun to run in thick sags and drips.

The boy was very good at forgetting. He had forgotten nearly everything so far, and it was best to keep it that way for as long as possible, his haunted memories were just too terrible to endure.

The boy's third lessons were always about himself. With each visit, the boy and his teacher would finally come to the last person waiting for help. Often this person needed no help; it was rarely the boy's purpose to help this last person. Instead, it was the last person's purpose to help the boy remember who the boy had been in his past lives.

The last person always waited for the boy came to him. The last person was always another incarnation of the boy himself. Together these two shards of a single spirit would take their last breath in their broken, dying body and expire into the light. All the memories of the boy's dying incarnation would pass on into the boy's living incarnation, into the boy himself, as the boy collected yet another shattered shard of his own broken, fragmented soul into himself.

The boy could imagine all the stories of each of his lifetimes appearing like books on the shelves of a vast library. Each shelf of this library was a different iteration of one of the incarnations of the boy's spirit.

The bookends of each shelf of this fragmented library of the living storybooks were each life's individual moments of conception and death. The intensities of the memories of all of the times between these two epochal events paled in comparison to the intensity of the memories of special brackets that encapsulated each lifetime.

The similarities between the epochal events of birth and death in each lifetime were of a

higher order or intensity than the similarities of any other events. Courtships, weddings, and the births of new children ran a close second, with other special loves or passions trailing behind.

All too often dark clouds blighted these other lives, clouds of pain, misery, and fear.

The boy learned much from each remembered lifetime. The lessons would remain while the memories of learning them were banished, fed to the boy's enthusiastic forgettery.

For the young boy, forgetting was often a far more important matter than remembering.

Alas, there was simply too much pain and horror to be forgotten. Eventually the boy would remember; clouds of pain, fear, misery, and despair would often return to haunt him.

The boy loved the rich, earthy smell of the poster paints he used to paint his teacher's picture. All around him, other kids were also finishing up their paintings.

The boy's school teacher would come to collect all their paintings soon now. The paintings would smear if they were not dry. The boy fanned his hands faster and blew harder.

The boy became dizzy; his breathing grew difficult as he began to wheeze. He had breathed too hard and he was having an attack of asthma or anxiety. The boy did not know what asthma or anxieties were, or how they affected his breathing; he shrugged off the panicky episode as he began to recover his equilibrium.

The boy's school teacher frowned at him as she collected his dark disturbing painting and told him to go to the restroom to wash his face.

The other children's eyes all followed him to the restroom. He was afraid of what he might find there.

In a mirror in the restroom the boy discovered, to his abject horror, that he had painted a red devil's mask over the features of his own face. Odd, he couldn't remember doing anything like that at all...

## RESTROOM

The restroom was a scary place for the boy. He didn't like the toilets at all. The toilets towered above the floor, all mounted on a single long, tall concrete curb. Two small steps in each stall must be climbed before the boy could stand on the same level with a toilet.

The walls of each toilet stall descended the vertical contour of the long concrete curb, but to the boy's odd vision these walls often seemed transparent. He could sometimes see the entire row of toilets standing on their long pedestal; they seemed to vanish into the distance as the room suddenly expanded into a nearly infinite size within the boy's frightened mind.

The boy had to hide. He must go sit on one of the toilets. He suddenly needed to go potty number two with an irresistible urgency; he shit himself before he could make it up the tall plinth to an open toilet.

The miserable boy couldn't bear to leave his toilet stall. He knew his school teacher would come looking for him. A box with fresh underwear waited on a high shelf out of reach, a box with his name on it. He knew his school teacher would get the box down for him and help him get cleaned up.

He had shit himself like this in school before; he felt terribly ashamed that he had done it again. He had been scared of what he would find when he walked in here. He had been scared he would find his teacher waiting for him beyond a burning ring of fire that might one day swallow him up forever.

As the boy waited for his school teacher to appear, a tiny spot of light burst into flames in mid-air just before the boy, high above the tiled floor that swept below the long pedestal supporting the toilets. The boy's spiritual teacher beckoned him from beyond the ring of fire and the small boy instantly leapt through the open portal of the ring of fire. Leaving his body far behind him, the boy obeyed his teacher's summoning, joining his teacher in a far more terrible world than he had just shit himself in.

Roger heard concerned voices in the darkness around him. He desperately did not want to open his eyes. He was deeply dismayed to see where he was when he finally dared to look. Roger was in school, sitting on a toilet, and from the smell of things, he was in deep shit again, literally.

Roger hated this business. However, someone had to clean up after himself; it seemed like it was always his job to take care of the mess. Roger had work to do, important work, work that couldn't wait for this sort of thing, if only he could remember what he really should be doing here.

The voices outside were two teachers, only one of them sounded more like the principal; trouble.

Roger faded out as he went through the ritual of getting help with his messy rear end and soiled underwear.

The teacher and principal were getting a little too used to Roger retreating into himself in these moments. He wasn't their only pupil who had trouble with toilet training, but he was nearly five, too old to be allowed to continue like this much longer.

After cleaning Roger up, his schoolteacher set him in a corner by himself with blocks of wood, glue and paint. Roger loved to work with the blocks of wood, he could build anything with wood, but mostly he built boats.

Roger dreamed of sailing away to sea.

The teacher knew, that as lunchtime came along, Roger would return to the real world and join the other kids at lunch. He might not socialize with the other kids very much, but he would seem more normal then; it was easier for Roger's schoolteacher to forget her concerns about Roger when he acted more like the other kids.

But that episode with the painting this morning deeply worried Roger's schoolteacher. No other child had ever drawn such a frightening devil, and especially, no other child had painted themselves to look like the devil himself. Roger was really too strange for words and he only seemed to become stranger as the days wore on. She wondered what his private world must be like, but all that she could think was that it must be very terrifying.

Roger's teacher kept a ragged collection of some of his discarded paintings and drawings, things Roger had grown too frustrated with and had suddenly torn or crumpled up in rage. The paintings and drawings she had collected were much the same as those artworks he successfully completed and carried home to his parents, horrific images of people dying, of pale, apocalyptic horsemen, and battered, broken bodies littering battlefields.

There were pictures of his own home in flames, along with pictures of jails and prisons also burning, with their prisoners sometimes set free or else still held captive, burning alive in their cells.

There was a horrible, deep streak of violence, pain, and death that ran through Roger's artwork in a fascinating panoramic view of a worlds gone mad, worlds lost to madness in the mind of a little boy.

'A phase, just a phase, please let it only be a phase', the boy's devout Quaker schoolteacher prayed.

## PHASES

The boy went through many phases, sometimes he was one person, at other times he seemed to be another, entirely different person. The boy had chosen many names for himself already, but none of these names seemed to really suit him any better than the name his parents had given him. He did not like his name, Roger, he did not like to use his name or hear anyone speak it. He did not identify with his name at all.

Different people were responsible for being the boy at different times. 'Roger' usually got the most humiliating stuff. But there were many other Rogers. None wanted to admit to being a 'Roger'; most of them kept their secret names to themselves.

Some of the people who inhabited the boy's body were friendly, others seemed dangerous. A lot of the time the boy was required to work as a lab rat in experiments that often hurt him deeply, killing him, or scarring him for life. The boy forgot these things nearly as rapidly as they happened to him.

The boy was composed of many different minds or people, each person seemed to have a different purpose. Only those of his minds related to any specific purpose knew the details of that purpose.

The boy had learned to rigidly compartmentalize his minds. Some of the people who shared the boy's body were his idealized family; the boy's idealized models of his parents behaved in his inner world the way the boy dreamed they should behave in real life

In his dreams they would all be living together comfortably, happily, loving each other, close to each other. Those were the boy's brightest fantasies, fantasies with which he often compared his real life, his real parents, and found too much wanting, too much needing, too much loneliness.

The boy had no names for most of the people who lived in or used his body. He was much too rigidly compartmentalized to allow any of the people living within him to be aware of each other. The various people who lived inside him came out in turns to operate his body, to live his life for him; their reappearances were usually context sensitive so that in any given situation he appeared to act more or less consistently.

No one who knew the boy really knew him in more than their own unique context for him, so no one really noticed just how very much stranger than strange he really was as he changed from one person to another like the moon changing phases with the passing days of every month.

The boy was often aware of changing, but he repressed this awareness and everything that went with it, he tried to piece together a coherent story from his tattered lives, a story to convince himself of who he was, but his efforts to feel any stable sense of his own identity were in vain.

The boy didn't really like himself well enough to care much about his lost sense of identity.

The boy often allowed himself to be swallowed up by his forgettery, regularly reducing himself to a tabula-rasa, a blank slate upon which the next of his alternate inhabitants could take their turns to write new episodes of his life, episodes quickly forgotten if he was lucky.

## FORGETTING

The boy had a whole lot of memories that he wanted to forget forever.

The boy had already forgotten much of his short life, for which he was very grateful. His life already seemed incredibly long, and he was still only four, but almost five.

One thing the boy could not forget was a set of beach toys. Those toys would haunt him forever. The toys had been a gift last summer, from his dad, a plastic pail with a rake, shovel and various molds for making sand castle walls.

The boy had waited with his mother in a cab for his dad to arrive at the train station. His dad was coming home from his chiropractic school in New York. His dad was away at school a lot, but the school year was over, his dad would be home for the summer.

The boy had been terribly eager to see his dad, he had been alone with his mom now for far too long.

However, when his dad had finally showed up, the boy felt no warmth or closeness no sense of comfort. He felt none of the wonderful feelings he hoped his dad would share with him when he got home. Instead, his dad had been given him a set of colorful plastic beach toys mounted on a big piece of cardboard with shrink-wrap, and that was it. The little boy had been terribly disappointed that he didn't feel any less lonely now his dad was home.

Roger dutifully applauded the wonderful present and tore it open enthusiastically, while the lonely boy within him cried.

The lonely boy hadn't yet sat upon the wall with his father or had the epiphany that would mark the limits of his relationship with his dad to the end of his life. The boy still hoped his dad would come home for real, that his dad would love him and they would be close in a way the boy had already been longing for all his very long short life, more than three years, now, nearly three and a half!

The boy's short life already seemed unbearably long to him. He had been born already exhausted by his life, by his ordeal in his mother's womb. The boy had already been born exhausted by his life, ready and eager to die to be done with it all.

Thank goodness for forgetting.

The first two years of the boy's life had been a hell of an adjustment. The boy had already become compartmentalized within himself as a result of his ordeals in his mother's womb.

The boys living within the boy were only actively living in their shared body, each living only in context to their respective preferred settings or events. They were each deprived of time to experience, time to learn, to develop, to explore, time to become whole. They were each deprived of time because they all had to take turns sharing the boy's body.

Among the people who all shared limited use of boy's body were a group of scientists. The scientists set up elaborate experiments using the boy as their lab rat, their guinea pig. The scientists ran the boy through the gruesome ordeals of their experiments relentlessly, often killing the boy or tormenting him to the ultimate extremes of madness.

The boy died over and over and over again in countless experiments designed by the scientists to study the nature of human beings; tests ultimately authored by a machine, tests to help the machine understand what it means to be human, tests to help teach the machine how humans must be born and raised.

The machine required a wide array of data, the boy was killed in universe after universe, always reawakening in a new universe, a universe that was a cloned copy of whatever universe the boy most recently died in, a copy in which the boy had not yet died again.

The boy forgot most of these terrible experiences of death as they were all too painful.

Many of the experiments the boy participated in were designed to create and maintain his unusual isolation from his family and peers. The boy had few friends. Each new friendship was a torment to him. The boy did not know how to feel loved, he knew he loved other people, but he could not feel other people's love for him. This tormented him and made him feel more lonely.

Even with his closest friends, or with the people he loved most, the boy always felt alone.

## PLAYSCHOOL

The boy remembered being lonely at his playschool. He had been much younger then, only three years old or so.

The boy resented feeling lonely all the time. He was in love with Alison, he followed her everywhere, but Alison treated him badly when she was around her friends. Alison was only ever nice to him when they were alone and not always even then.

Alison was the daughter of the boy's Aunt Pat and Uncle Dave. Alison was a few months older than the boy. Alison seemed to know that the other kids in their playschool didn't like him; she wanted to be popular, so she pretended not to like him too. Only the poor, lonely boy could never really tell if she was really only pretending.

Roger sulked around Alison constantly. This seemed to annoy her, but Roger couldn't help himself. Roger peeped in through the window of the log-cabin playhouse where Alison and two girls were playing house at a toy kitchen sink. It was a neat toy sink with real water that could be pumped up into the basin.

Alison glared at Roger as the two girls fled. Roger entered the playhouse hoping Alison would play with him, but she turned and left, chasing after the other two girls, laughing at him over the cruel words of her friends.

Roger didn't understand.

Alison had sometimes played with him in the playhouse before; some of his best memories of Alison were of playing right here, where he now stood alone, wincing, because Alison had mocked him, she had been mean to him in order to get along better with her friends.

He understood being mocked. He understood being scorned. He understood why Alison sometimes mocked or scorned him in specific social contexts, contexts in which she was advancing her own social status at his expense by sharing the group opinions of the other kids who had ostracized him.

What he didn't understand was, 'why didn't Alison love him the way he loved her?'

Roger was frustrated and angry, he felt very hurt. He felt like he wanted to destroy the playhouse and everything in it, but he didn't need to get in any more trouble.

When the nursery school teacher called all of the kids inside for nap-time Roger felt relieved even though he hated nap times here at his play school.

The play school cots were set up along the walls of two hallways that met at right angles. It was always dimmer here, but for nap times it became almost dark. Big rectangular arches in the two shorter walls of the hallways were doorways that led into the large central room of the house used by the play school.

The cots were uncomfortable, but worse than the discomfort of the taught canvas sheets was the discomfort of being quietly surrounded by so many people and yet still feeling terribly alone.

Roger hated naptimes, but this time he was grateful to be called away from the potential scene of the havoc he yearned to create to avenge his pain. Silent tears ran down his face as he found his cot and lay down.

His spirit teacher would be here soon to take him away; he would have to go. As much as he hated this place of darkness and damp, canvas cots smelling faintly of mildew, he was more afraid of seeing his teacher.

There was a great deal more to fear than the ghostly spirits of the dead or the wailing cries of the dying or the tragic events that were killing them when Roger visited with his teacher.

Every single visit with his teacher was scary, from beginning to end, every one; especially the ends.

But Roger was beginning to become scared of himself. What was his body doing when he wasn't in it? What did he get up to then, when he was not himself? He had to know, only he knew he wasn't brave enough to try to remember.

Nevertheless, he had to know, because whatever he was doing when he was away with his spirit teacher was scaring the other kids. None of the other kids liked him. Even Alison might not like him anymore.

Roger was never mean to the other kids. He never deliberately did anything to scare them, but he was scaring them nonetheless. He didn't know how or why. No one talked to him about it. He didn't have the words for most of what he experienced with his teacher, how could anyone else begin to understand his world when he scarcely understood it himself?

Roger appeared to fall asleep as he stepped out of his body to join his teacher.

Then someone else woke up in Roger's body.

It was too warm here. Roger shrugged the light blanket aside, listening for the sounds of teachers' voices. They were in the kitchen, one two, three, all of them.

Roger listened to the other kids napping around him.

Ever so quietly he rose from his cot. He walked down the aisle between the cots, toward the bathroom, carefully looking at each child as he passed them. Some were sleeping, some feigned sleeping, others looked up at him resenting him. Why wasn't he afraid of the teachers and lying in his cot like everyone else?

He was breaking the rules.

It wasn't that Roger was not afraid of the teachers. He was. He was always afraid one of the kids might rat him out to the teachers. He had no idea why he was out of his cot, or why he was breaking the rules by wandering down the hallway. He didn't need to go to the bathroom now, even though he had felt a terribly urgent need to pee just a moment ago.

Roger stopped before the cot of a small dark-haired girl. The girl squirmed, caught in a nightmare. Roger hushed her, crooning softly, wordlessly. She quieted, rolled over and

sank into a deep sleep.

Wow, that had gone really, really well.

The girl was dying, but she didn't know it yet, except in her dreams. In her dreams the girl died in an automobile wreck, over and over again. The wreck hadn't happened yet, but it would, and there was nothing Roger could do to prevent it. All he could do was watch her die, share her death with her, and help her take the next step after her death.

Roger's adventures didn't always go so well. Sometimes the girl woke up screaming. Roger was always right there, standing over her when she woke up screaming. The other kids blamed Roger for her nightmares.

Sometimes they blamed him for their own nightmares.

Oh well.

Roger's job was to help the dead and dying. He did his job as best he could. Pretty damned well for a boy who was only three and half years old!

Roger glared at one of the boys as he returned to his cot after completing his pretense of going to the bathroom.

It wasn't really Roger in his body right now, the one who called himself Roger most often felt himself floating outside of his body, following his body back toward his cot. The boy's spirit was off with his teacher.

Whoever was actually walking his body back to his cot was a mystery to him. At first he thought there was only one other Roger inhabiting his body, sharing his body with him. But over time he became aware that there was more than one other, there were really many others, some of whom were himself, more or less, while others were completely different, perhaps not even human.

One seemed to be a machine of some kind.

Roger glared at the boy because the boy had been about to cry out to the teachers and fink on him. The boy cowered back, Roger had treated him before, and the boy still had his nightmares, even though his death was over. The boy didn't like Roger even though the boy could not remember dying or how Roger helped him when he had died.

Roger was used to that. Nearly everyone Roger helped forgot about him afterwards. Most people could not bear to remember their deaths; they preferred to choose to forget them.

Roger could remember some of his own deaths. He had already had so many deaths that it was hard to forget them all. Roger knew that his teacher and his lessons about death made him special in a terrible way. Roger knew that he would always be set apart from other people because he knew about death and they did not.

Roger made it safely back to his cot and settled down just in time to avoid being caught by one of the teachers as she made her rounds of the napping children.

Roger's life was like that, full of remarkably well-timed coincidences. He sometimes got in trouble, but not nearly as often as he was naughty.

The Roger who was visiting with his teacher returned as the Roger who had watched himself in his absence fell asleep.

The returning Roger was wide awake. He lay on his cot struggling to forget the details of yet another incarnation in which he had died.

The memories of his other lives were rich with many details that Roger treasured. Roger hated forgetting these memories, but the very best memories were always bitter-sweet memories, memories of love and companionship, close families and friends, a bitter contrast to the reality of this incarnation. The best memories of his other lives always left Roger in more pain and anguish. So Roger did his duty to forget himself and he forgot.

Roger's other memories were easy to forget, much easier to forget than his memories of this life. He wished he could forget loving Alison and all the pain she had caused him.

He wished he could forget loving his mother or father.

He wished he could forget himself.

He wished he could just erase himself and die. He wished he could die and remain dead forever. But he could not die and remain dead forever. Each time he died he returned to this life and picked up where he had left off. He didn't understand why he was compelled to return to this incarnation each time he died.

He didn't want to go on with it, it was too awful.

He forgot.

## AWAKENING

Roger awakened inside his sand meditation. He could feel his sleeping body stirring on his cot and he knew he was dreaming he was awakening. Roger's sand meditation was a familiar, comforting place.

Roger was at the beach. He was little, not even three years old. The beach was a big place, full of lots of fun. But Roger wasn't having fun. Roger could see happy people everywhere laughing, playing, but not here. His parents weren't exactly fighting, there was no yelling, no screaming, no shouting, there never was.

But the cold deathly silence between his parents shouted to Roger. It screamed at him, gibbering madness in his heart. In this public place it was too easy to compare other families to his own family, to see all the warmth and love in other people's lives that he could never know in his own life.

Roger was barely two and half. He hadn't yet begun play-school with Alison which was good. Roger was safe, sitting here on the beach again in his sand meditation, far away from the awful play school and its dark hallways filled with hard, smelly cots where children slept and dreamed and sometimes dreamed they died.

Roger's hands were dirty, filthy, covered with sand. He hated having dirty hands.

He hated it!

He rubbed his hands together, over and over again, trying to remove all of the sand. He was nearly done, only one tiny, single grain of sand remained, and he could feel it trapped between the thumb and forefinger of his right hand.

The single grain of sand felt good to him. He enjoyed touching it, rolling it around between his thumb and finger. The more he rolled the tiny grain of sand around between his thumb and finger, the larger it seemed to grow.

He liked the feel of the grain of sand as it rumbled across the huge ridges of his fingerprints, making bumpity-bump sensations as it tumbled into each whirling groove and making pokey, pin-prickly sensations as it rolled over the top of each ridge.

The ridges of his fingerprints and the tiny grain of sand seemed to grow larger and larger, Roger found himself trapped within the tiny grain of sand as it tumbled across the ridges of his fingerprints which now seemed as tall as mountains.

Roger knew he still held the tiny grain of sand in his hand. He could feel it rolling around between his thumb and forefinger, but the world had somehow turned inside out, his entire world now seemed to be trapped inside the grain of sand with him.

As the grain of sand grew larger and larger it encompassed the entire beach, and then it grew to encompass the city, the ocean, and the world.

In a very short time, a time that seemed to be an eternity in length, the grain of sand grew to swallow the sun and all its planets. As it grew it swallowed up the Milky Way continued growing until it had swallowed up the entire universe.

The boy now held all of creation within the tiny grain of sand, a grain of sand he still held in his hand, rolling it around and around across the ruggedly ridged terrain of his fingerprints.

The boy was deep within his grain of sand, close to its ultimate heart, and there, from within its heart, the grain of sand began to speak to him.

The grain of sand spoke in huge, slow, long words that were geological and cosmological epochs, periods of time so vast that the boy's own short lives were scarcely eye-blinks by comparison, far less than eye-blinks really.

The boy felt insignificantly tiny by comparison.

And yet, the boy also felt like a titan, a god, with all of creation held in his hand, within his tiny grain of sand. The boy felt he held himself between his thumb and forefinger, not only was he the titanic being who held this tiny grain of sand, but he was also a being far tinier than this grain of sand whose entire universe and existence were encompassed by it.

The boy felt complete and at peace, divided into his titan self and his tiny self. Together they held their worlds in their hands in their tiny grain of sand. Together they released it and let it drop away to be lost among all of the other grains of sand upon the broad, undulating surface of the sandy, sunny beach.

The boy awakened from his dream in which he meditated with his tiny grain of sand, he awakened into the nightmares of his lonely life.

He wept.

The boy's playschool teachers and the other kids presumed he had had another of his endless nightmares, it served him right, spooking everyone the way he did.

## SPOOKS

The boy was afraid of his parents' new house. His dad said it was haunted. The new house was big, three stories tall, like his Pop-Pop's house. Just like his Pop-Pop's house, his Dad would have his chiropractic offices on the first floor.

The kitchen and living room were being moved to the second floor.

The boy's room was at the top of the stairs to the third floor. His bedroom was neat, with a wall that sloped inward towards the ceiling where the room was tucked under the roof.

A window stood at the end of its own tiny, little room that branched away through the short, sloping wall. His other window faced the front of the house, nearly opposite the door.

One wall of his room was plain, it had no windows or doors. Instead, this wall had a large gaping hole in it high up, just out of the boy's reach. This dark hole was just barely big enough to put his hand in it. There was another hole in the wall behind the first hole. The second hole was neatly aligned with the first hole, it went through the back of the wall to a larger room that connected by a narrow door to his parents' bedroom.

The boy did not like the holes in his wall, they spooked him. His dad said the holes were there because there had once been gas lamps there; the holes had been for pipes to come through the wall.

His dad said he would plaster over the holes in the wall after they got settled in.

The new house seemed very large and scary. The boy explored as much of the new house as he could.

A door under the stairs on the first floor led down rickety stairs to a creepy basement that smelled of old mold and dust. In one corner of the basement there was a huge old coal furnace to heat the house. The boy's dad said the furnace had been converted to burn gas, but an old coal chute and coal bin stood nearby, below a short, broad window with three large filthy panes of glass set high up in the front wall.

The stairs down to the basement came down from the middle of the first floor of the house, running parallel to the front wall. The rear wall was much closer than it should be but it only came up a little higher than the boy's chin. Above this low wall there was nothing but empty space all the way up to the beams and joists supporting the floorboards above

Two brick columns stood like piers atop the low wall to support the beams that ran from side to side across the middle of the house.

The boy's dad told him the huge empty space above the wall was a crawl space. The boy peered into the crawl space dubiously. He was sure he would never want to crawl in there. The floor was rough, covered with cobwebs, rubble and dirt. It was dark and dirty in there.

The boy hated to get dirty.

Everything down here in the basement was filthy, dusty. The basement made the boy want to sneeze.

Big rectangular pipes, hot-air heating ducts, according to the boy's father, came out of the top of the furnace and branched across the unfinished ceiling of the basement, some of them were low enough to hit the boy's head. These boxy ducts were covered with a thin rotting white fabric full of tiny holes that had been plastered over with some kind of crumbly white stuff his dad called asbestos. The asbestos was supposed to keep the heat in the air ducts according to the boy's dad.

The boy did not like the crumbling asbestos that broke off whenever he accidentally banged his head on an air-duct. Whenever he bumped his head the asbestos seemed to explode in a large cloud of white powder like baby powder that made his eyes sting; his lungs hurt when he breathed it in.

The basement was definitely a scary place. There was even a dead rat down there. The boy hoped his dad would get rid of the dead rat soon; the boy didn't like the idea of there being dead things in his house.

The first floor of the boy's new house was being remodeled to make chiropractic offices for his dad. His dad had an architect friend draw up the plans, but his dad was doing all the remodeling work himself.

There would be a changing room, an x-ray room, a developing room, a restroom, a waiting room and two treatment rooms.

One room of the first floor was strange, it had stone walls inside the house. This room seemed special, it had its own back door, separate from the back door for the washroom that had been behind the old kitchen. This was a Dutch door, a door with two parts, a bottom half and a top half that could be opened separately, the bottom part could be left closed with only the top half open.

The boy liked this room even though it had no proper windows he could see out through. The windows were too high up the wall and while they were much wider than most of the other windows of the house they were not very tall. The two inside walls of this corner room were made solidly of stone. The boy's dad explained that this room was clearly an addition built sometime after the house had originally been constructed.

The boy's dad was busy building his offices. There were wooden studs already in place where some of the new walls would be. The boy loved carpentry and watched for some time, fascinated by his dad's skill with the tools.

The floor was covered in sawdust that made him wheeze and sneeze.

The boy went outside to see more of the house.

There was a white fence made of broad wooden railings that ran across the front of the property, with a broken gate in the middle. Inside the fence were big bushes with long, dark, crispy leaves that curled into tubes, rhododendrons his mom called them.

The rhododendrons had other plants growing on them, morning glory. The boy's mom showed him how to pick the morning glory off the rhododendrons. The morning glory would kill the rhododendrons if it had the chance to grow bigger.

The boy's mom walked him around to the side of the house that faced toward the city. They weren't in the city any more, they were half a block outside the city now, near City Line Avenue.

City Line Avenue was a highway.

On this side of the house there was a row of trees, short holly trees, bracketed by taller pine trees, and one humongous pear tree as tall as the house, maybe taller. A flowering tree stood below the pear tree.

The largest of the pine trees stood near the house between the windows of the new second story kitchen and the breakfast room. The boy's mom showed him a thick sturdy vine growing up the side of this tree.

The vine was strangling the tree, it was already deeply embedded in the bark in many places, it was slowly choking the tree to death. Wisteria, his mother called it. The morning glory would kill the rhododendrons the same way the wisteria was killing this tree.

That was creepy. Plants that fought and killed each other.

Some of the holly trees had bright red berries which the boy's mother said were poisonous. The leaves of the holly trees had sharp barbs that could poke through the boy's skin and scratch him. This was a plant that could fight animals.

Because of all the trees, it was dark along this side of the house all day long, even though this side of the house faced the south and should get more sun. A rusty, old chain-link fence stood along the property line on this side, concealed among the trees.

Further back, the fence was made of rotting wood, tall narrow wooden half-pikes nailed side-by-side across longer wooden runners made a fence that could not be seen through. Except that this fence was missing many pieces, with several holes already large enough to climb through.

The holes opened onto trails leading through the weeds and bushes that had overgrown the empty lots on the other side.

The giant pear tree stood by the largest of these holes near a stable.

The boy was scared of the stable. It was big, with lots of windows, a carriage house really.

The windows on the ground floor of the carriage house were large wood-mullioned panels of smaller glass panes. Many of the panes and some of the mullions were missing, leaving big gaps in places. Ancient white paint curled and peeled from every surface, leaving the wood bare, bleached grey by the sun in many places.

The huge mullioned windows were to show off the carriage.

The stable was about half the size of the house. It had a second story with a loft door that opened onto empty space below a beam that could hold a block and tackle to lift bays of hay or straw. The loft door faced the main yard and the back of the house.

It looked like a long way to fall if you weren't careful.

The stable loft was reached through a tiny set of wooden stairs that turned a corner as they rose up from the stable room which was behind the carriage room. The wall between the two main rooms had another large mullioned window for light.

The loft was like the boys bedroom, with walls sloping inward, except that the walls began sloping inward much closer to the floor. There were two rooms in the loft, the hay loft was the larger room it ran across the ceilings of the room where the horses had been stabled and the carriage room. There was a big rectangular hole built into the floor of this room where hay or straw could be pitched down into the stable room below.

The small second story hay loft door that opened dramatically upon thin air was at the front of the loft. It was only for bringing in bales of hay and straw. There was a stout beam projecting several feet from below the peak of the stable roof, just above this door with a tackle block hanging from large steel hook.

The hay loft was dusty but dry. The walls were unfinished. Where the walls met the floors the floors stopped. There were deep empty spaces where floor joists, wall studs and roof rafters met in a triangular manner at the margins of the floor.

At the top of the stairs to the loft, just to the left was a small doorway leading to a room with walls finished in smooth redwood tongue and groove boards of a much better quality than the floor boards which were simpler tongue in groove planks. This room was over the tack room. A stovepipe from a cast iron stove in the tack room led up through the floor and ceiling in one corner of the finished room, next to the only window.

The boy liked this room.

The tack room walls were finished in redwood tongue and groove boards like the small room above it. A fancy metal grill that had once been finished with brass stood rusting in the ceiling above the stove. This was to let heat from the stove rise into the room above.

The tack room floor was below the level of the ground outside. It had its own separate door leading out, with a single tall stone step to climb to reach the level of the gravel driveway that curved around the carriage room on three sides.

The carriage room had three huge doors that were made of wooden panels below large mullioned, paned windows. The wooden panels each had an X shape made of wood on them. The doors at either end of the carriage room were so large that they took up nearly all of the wall space; the mullioned windows to either side of these doors were only two panes wide.

The windows to either side of the larger doors on the front facing the house were more than twice as wide as the side windows. The fourth wall, between the carriage room and the stable room also had a row of mullioned windows in it and an ordinary sized door with a six paned window like the door leading out from the tack room.

The gravel driveway was partly overgrown by clover, grass and weeds. Instead of leading west past the front of the house to the street, the driveway ran from the back of the property north to a different street. There were dogwood trees to either side of the driveway, at the

end of the lane, and a cherry tree and crabapple tree stood along the east side. The crab apple tree stood nearer to the stable and was nearly as tall, perhaps taller.

This was a big property. The back yard separating the house and stable was a bit longer than it was wide perhaps a hundred feet or a bit more. The property was shaped like the letter L with the longest side on the south facing the city and the shorter side facing the rear neighbors to the east.

Nestled within the legs of the L was a smaller property with a house similar to their new house, except, the shingles of the neighboring house were stained brown, whereas the shingles of the boy's new house were painted white.

The house next door stood on a small hill a few feet higher than the boy's house. The yard of the neighbor's house was on two levels with a patio on the same level as the house at the rear of the house, and a grassy lawn below it on the same level as the boy's new house and yard.

Instead of a stable, the neighboring house had a single tiny, flimsy looking garage; its driveway ran parallel to the boy's new driveway.

A short hedge separated the two houses, running back past the corner of the neighbor's garage where it turned and grew taller and ran up to the side street.

In the front yard, close to the house and the hedge there was a blue spruce tree. A magnolia tree stood near the rear of the house, also close to the hedge. Several very tall maple trees lined the street in front of the two houses. The house stood on Maple Avenue.

The boy had spent all day exploring the new house, yards, and stable. He was excited. He could hardly stand to be put to bed that night, but he was exhausted too, and he finally relented and went to bed.

He was not very happy about his bedroom though.

His parents' bedroom was also on the third floor, cater-corner from his bedroom; as far as it could be from his own room. His parent's bedroom had two doors. One door led through a rectangular arch into their dressing room. The bathroom stood at the top of the stairs between the dressing room and the boy's bedroom.

The other door of his parent's bedroom lead into the room that shared a wall with the boy's bedroom. The wall with the two holes in it. The boy did not like those holes.

Just as the boy began to drift off into sleep a low moaning noise began; it sounded like it came from behind the boy's dresser which stood on the long wall below the holes. A scratching noise followed the moaning noise, becoming more distinct as the moaning noise tapered off.

The boy's hair stood on end, he was scared! The boy's dad had said the house was haunted. It sounded like his dad was right. The boy didn't like ghosts, they scared him. Ghosts reminded the boy of all the dead spirits he had served.

The boy didn't want to remember them.

The moaning noise began again, growing louder this time. The scratching noises became more urgent. Something was moving behind the dresser.

Slowly, hesitantly, a pale white shape began to rise from behind the dresser, a ghost! The boy screamed in terror.

The ghost flew upwards suddenly then flopped down on the dresser before rising and to bob gently up and down. It seemed to sway slightly from side to side like a pendulum as it bobbed up and down.

The ghost had made a clattering noise as it landed on the dresser.

The boy's mother came into the room.

The lights came on.

The boy's mom yanked the ghost away from the wall. A fishing line trailed out of the hole in the wall, tied to the ghost. The ghost was a just an old bed sheet tied to a clothes hanger.

His dad was up to his old tricks.

The boy had been terrified.

The ghost had been revealed to be a trick, but the boy was still upset. He would never feel safe in his new room; it gave him the spooks.

The boy did not want to deal with the spooks. They had made him miserable enough already. His dreams were haunted by nightmares of dead people. Now his new room was haunted too. It didn't matter that his dad had only played another prank, that only proved his dad was mean. It didn't prove that there really were no ghosts. It didn't prove that at all.

The boy could not be re-assured by his mother that there really were no ghosts. His mother could not be trusted. The boy's mother scared the boy. But unlike his dad, who was constantly spooking him with mean tricks, his mom scared him in a way he couldn't put his finger on. He didn't know exactly why she scared him so much, but his mom was a constant source of fear and anxiety for the boy.

She could not be trusted.

His dad could not be trusted.

He was alone, with no one he could rely on.

The boy fell asleep exhausted by his panic and tears.

He was barely five and half years old.

## SCHOOLBUS

The boy dreamed a beautiful dream.

The boy sat in a small, bright orange-yellow school bus with black stripes on it, watching the countryside roll by. It was dark inside the bus, but the sky outside was a cheerful and sunny, a brilliant, bright blue.

The school bus was traveling into the country through fields with crops and cattle in them. The fields were separated by stone walls, rail fences, and trees. The trees clustered into small groves that dotted the hillsides.

The groves of trees grew larger, converging, becoming dense woodland areas.

The cheerful, bright blue sky disappeared above tightly woven overlapping branches of tall pine trees that seemed to close in on the road from both sides to leave only a narrow, dark tunnel through which the bus drove.

The bus drove deeper and deeper into the dimly lit, slumbering forest. The boy's mood changed from sunny and cheerful to dark and gloomy.

The boy recognized this bus ride now; this was a familiar dream. No not a dream, a nightmare! The boy was beginning to remember how this nightmare would end. The boy grew steadily more frightened as he slowly remembered what would happen next.

The bus turned off the dark, hilly, winding road into a bumpy, rutted dirt and stone driveway. The trees drew back from this lane on both sides, and the bus pulled into a clearing full of swimming pools where it came to a sudden stop.

The boy was terrified by the sudden opening of the door of the school bus. The boy wanted to leave this place right away. He wished the door would close, that the bus would start its engine back up and take him away from this place forever.

Against his wishes the boy stood and made his way past two empty rows of seats to the front of the bus. He silently turned and climbed down the big stairs leading out of the bus.

The boy hated himself because he could not save himself from what would happen next. His feet seemed to be carrying him deeper and deeper into his nightmare against his will. The boy felt helpless.

Everywhere the boy looked there were swimming pools. Some of the pools were large rectangular in-ground pools. Others were round pools that stood above the ground in different sizes. Some of the pools had fancy shapes or patterns, while others were very plain. All of the pools were filled with water.

The boy knew he was dreaming but he could not wake up. He knew he was dreaming, but his terror was real. The boy walked to the nearest pool, a circular pool perhaps fifteen feet wide and four feet deep.

Suddenly the boy found himself in the pool. The water was nearly over his head. How old was he? This dream had begun when he was only two years old. The pools had seemed

much bigger to him then, their dangerous waters had seemed much deeper.

How did he get in the pool? There was no way he was gonna get in any of these pools!  
How did he get in the pool?

The boy tried to reach the wall of the pool to climb out but the water was moving in a swift circular current; a whirlpool was forming in the center of the pool and it was sucking him down into the depths of the pool.

The center of the pool was bottomless; it sank away into the earth through a broad concrete pipe that grew steadily narrower. The pipe closed in on the boy from all sides as he was swept away into it feet first.

The boy held his breath as he was dragged down the pipe. The pipe turned through a bend and leveled out, now running only slightly downhill, but the force of the water pulled the boy through the pipe faster and faster as the pipe continued to constrict itself around him more and more tightly.

The last light from the pool faded away far down the length of the pipe beyond the boy's head as his last breath escaped him and he began to drown.

Suddenly bright light surrounded the boy. He was plummeting through the air in a cascade of water that poured from the pipe where it emerged from the side of a tall cliff and abruptly ended.

Far below him a small lake nestled among trees at the foot of the cliff rushed upward toward the boy.

The boy awoke. He was soaked in sweat and urine. He fled to the bathroom.

This was not the boys only nightmare. It was a familiar nightmare, like his other nightmares. The boy had nightmares nearly every night.

Sometimes the boy would not go to sleep until very late. His mom was nice and let him stay up late into the night with her. He kept her company when his dad was away and she told him bedtime stories late into the night.

## BEDTIME STORIES

The boy's bedtime stories were not your run-of-the-mill bedtime stories. Sure, he was told the tales of Three Little Pigs, Red Riding Hood, Hansel and Gretel, and Snow White, but he was also told all the myths and legends of ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome.

The boy's dreams were populated by all of the gods and goddesses from ancient times and their heroic adventures. He had followed Sinbad, Jason, and Ulysses around the earth. He had explored the depths of the underworld along the banks of the rivers Styx and Lethe and met the ferryman who would carry your dead soul into Hades for a single copper coin.

The boy was well versed in myths and legends. So far, though, the boy's favorite bedtime stories were about Bilbo Baggins, the Hobbit. He liked Gandalf, the wizard, and he liked Beorn, the stranger hunter nearly as much as he liked Bilbo Baggins. But the boy also liked Smaug, the dragon and many of the other characters of Middle Earth as well. But not the spiders. Oh no not the spiders.

The spiders had carried Bilbo's company away into the dark forest. Luckily Bilbo had his short sword Sting with him and he was able to get cut himself free of the giant spiders' webs. That part of his bedtime story had terrified the boy.

The boy had nightmares about giant spiders.

The giant spiders of the boy's nightmares came to live in the holes in the wall in his room. The boy could hear them scuttling about inside the walls at night. They might be too big to crawl out through the holes in the walls at night, but in his dreams those holes crumbled open and released the spiders who came after him in a huge swarm, smothering him, biting him.

He woke up screaming.

The boy's mother made a magic potion to spray in the holes in the wall. She promised the boy it would kill the spiders just like an insecticide.

The boy wanted to believe her but he didn't trust her.

She still frightened him.

He still did not know why she frightened him.

## TERROR

The boy was closed in on all sides. He was warm, wet and frightened. Terror was the boy's ruling emotion. He had not yet been born.

The boy was scared because he couldn't feel terrible things all around him, fear, misery, anxiety, anger, sorrow and shame swam in his blood. The hormones that were the biological products of all of his mother's emotions surged through the boy's tiny body constantly, communicating all of his mother's anguish, all of her loneliness and her depression directly into him.

The boy was completely overwhelmed by all his mother's terrible emotions.

This was the source of the boy's fear of his mother. He had learned to fear her in her womb.

To the boy, his mother's emotions were like wickedly thorned vines that wrapped him in their tight embraces and patiently strangled him to death while their thorny spines sank deep into his body making him weep blood from a thousand burning, piercing wounds.

The boy had no words for what he experienced. He didn't know what pain or anger were. He could not know why he hurt so badly all the time, he could not know what death was, but already he wanted to die. He already wanted to end his miserable life of pain and torment even though he was scarcely three months old, an unborn fetus living in terror in his mother's womb.

The boy's terror came began with waves of mild panic that slowly grew stronger and stronger until he was completely possessed by his fear. The terror would transform to a blinding, white-hot, furious anger as the pain came on.

The pain that punished the pre-natal boy was a soul wrenchingly deep agony; it tore the tiny boy's heart asunder with its vicious, malicious wrath.

The boy escaped the pain by dissociating himself from his body. The boy learned to watch himself writhe in agony in his mother's womb with a clinical sort of detachment, an unearthly indifference to his own terrible suffering.

In this detached state it was easier to bear the pain and fear that consumed the boy's brief and miserable existence. But it was difficult for the boy to remain apart from himself for long. It took a lot of the boy's energy to maintain his distance from himself and his body. The boy became exhausted by the effort and fell asleep every time, only to be reawakened by another cycle of hormones flooding through his body re-initializing his anxiety, building it to the crescendo of fear that would finally be washed away once more in blood and agony.

The boy was much too young to understand death but he wanted to die.

The boy died.

The boy's mother was relieved by the emergence of her still born child. With her relief came a brief moment of regret.

Each time her son was stillborn her regrets lasted longer and grew stronger.

After a while she was began to love her miscarried son she began to wish he had not died.

After a while the boy became aware that his mother no longer wished he was dead. His death wish diminished, his miscarriages subsided. He had now died in an infinite number of universes in which he was miscarried or stillborn. The peace following his deaths, the peace of his afterlife experiences, calmed him. The peace helped him reconcile himself to the pain and misery of his mother's womb, it helped him grow a little older before the misery of his existence once more overwhelmed him and he yearned for death again.

Slowly the boy adapted, until, when he was nearly six months old he could feel his mother's heart begin to change. She no longer wanted him to die, she no longer hated him. Slowly, bit by bit, she was learning to love him. But the boy could not take that last step, he could not recognize or trust his mother's recently discovered love for him.

For the boy it was too late to ever feel safe in his mother's womb. For the boy it was too late for him to ever be able to trust his mother's love. For the boy, it was too late to un-harness himself from his death wish, a death wish that had been born as his twin companion deep in his mother's wounding womb, a companion that would torment his future life for years to come.

The boy did not know how to trust his mother.

## TRUST

“Don't believe in God, believe in me”.

The boy was scarcely four years old when he told his mother this. His mother was trying to teach him about God. But his mother seemed confused about God, as if she didn't really know what to believe about God herself.

The boy was frustrated.

It was hard to believe in something as intangible as God. The boy himself felt very intangible as if he did not exist at all sometimes. The boy was not ignored, his parents made efforts to be loving, kind, nurturing, caring, toward him, but most of this was lost on the boy.

The boy kept himself at a great distance from everyone in his life because he did not trust them. Deep down the boy expected to be hurt by everyone around him. He only had to look at his parents to feel their pain.

The boy didn't understand his parents' pain, he didn't know why they hurt each other, but he saw them in pain every time he looked at them. His parents' pain hurt the boy; their pain awakened pains inside him that the boy had always tried his best to ignore, to bury and forget.

It wasn't just the boy's parents who hurt him when he looked at them. He felt pain with his Pop-Pop and Nana too. Unspeakable, unknowable pain was buried in both their hearts, pain the boy might never understand; pain that made him wince because their pain made the boy too aware of his own pain and the roiling torments of his own emotions.

The boy was deeply empathic. The boy understood this about himself even though he did not yet know this word for what he was. The boy felt other people's feelings; he could sometimes even think their thoughts.

Everything the boy had ever felt he could recognize in other people.

Unfortunately, most of what the boy had felt so far had been a lot of pain, anguish, misery, despair, terror, anger, and loneliness. So most of what the boy perceived in other people were the same pain, anguish, misery, despair, terror, anger, and loneliness the boy was already too familiar with.

Because the boy rarely ever felt other people's joy or pleasure, every person the boy met seemed to have a much greater potential to hurt him than to help him, so how could the boy trust anyone?

In order for the boy to break free of his self-imposed isolation and be able to feel loved and nurtured he would have to learn to trust; but so far, the boy could not trust anyone, not even himself.

The boy knew he had to learn trust himself, but he was afraid. There was no consistency to the boy's life. He never knew who would step into his body and use it, or how it would be used.

The boy was severely challenged with regard to trust. If he could not trust himself, who was there to trust?

So far, everyone had let him down.

Year's later, and on rare occasions thereafter, the boy's mother would remind him of what he had said today, she found the innocence and naiveté of her son's simple plea to put himself before God very endearing.

The boy's mother did not seem to trust God, the boy agreed with some of her opinions about God. What kind of God creates so much misery?

If God were all-knowing, all-wise, all powerful, and all good, wouldn't God always keep everyone happy, healthy, and safe from harm?

How could the boy trust God when God had already made his life a living hell?

The boy's pain was so immense that he didn't know what to do with it. The boy did not think of killing himself. What was the use? If he killed himself he would wake up in the afterlife and return here, to his misery, he was sure of it.

Death would never let the boy escape his suffering. That was something the boy felt he could trust; he felt he could trust Death to always return him to his miserable life.

As it turned out, the boy was wrong.

This refers to the boy's first vacation, the nuclear war when he was 8 years old, a good experience for the boy, but also a highly traumatic experience. The 'vacation' will help the boy appreciate his life more, a transforming event after which he is much less aware of his other selves and learns to accept being Roger. This specifically does not refer to the boy being wrong about returning to life from death, although the reader is likely to jump to that conclusion.

## DEATH

The boy was eight years old, nearly nine now. The boy still had his terrible issues with trust, loneliness, and fear. The boy still felt the pain and sorrow written upon other people's faces, particularly the faces of people he loved or dreaded.

They were the same things, really, love and dread. The boy dreaded being with every person he loved.

It was Thursday, Thanksgiving. Aunt Pat and Uncle Dave would be here soon. Alison and her little brother Jon-Jon would be with them. His Aunt Kitty would be here too. Every one of their guests would upset him, they would all make him hurt; they would make him feel helpless and ashamed.

They all called him by names, names he did not feel he belonged to. His Aunt Kitty and Aunt Pat would call him Roger. His Uncle Dave would call him Rogie, his infant sisters called him Ra-Ra. He hated these names, they didn't fit him, they all missed who he was.

He was none of the people he was expected to be when he was called by those names. He didn't know who he was, and the more people there were, the harder it was to for him to be present. The more he simply wanted to run and hide.

Alison was still treating him poorly. He was still madly in love with her, but he knew it was hopeless.

He would still try to get her to visit with him in his room, to talk to her alone, but he would be lucky to have her alone to himself for even a few minutes, and she would probably be mean, cool, distant, disinterested in him, always making it clear she did not want him to be in love with her.

In short, Alison would give him the cold shoulder, exactly the way the boy's mother always treated his father. There was not a shred of warmth or love to be found between his parents, the boy realized on some deep intuitive level that it would be the same for him with Alison.

The boy was miserable; his loneliness so painful he did not know what to do.

The boy's pain and misery grew worse as he remembered past moments when Alison had brushed him off, ditched him, or put him down in front of her friends.

Why? Why did she always have to hurt him?

The boy's loneliness, misery, and pain transformed into anger. Anger was becoming a familiar emotion to the boy. Anger was safer than loneliness or pain. Anger was something he could handle.

Or so he thought.

As the boy's mind wandered through memories of his past torments he tried to imagine things finally going well with Alison. But all the boy's fantasies slowly turned to sour as, time after time, the boy found his fantasies challenged by his own inadequacies.

The boy didn't know how to be happy or comfortable with other people. His own uneasiness put other people off. People made less of an effort with him because their efforts were poorly rewarded. The boy did not know how to respond to love or kindness in any manner other than to run away.

The boy was afraid of love, he was afraid of comfort, he was even afraid of security. These were unattainable things that he longed for but could never have. Even if they could ever be attained, someone could take them away.

Love, comfort, and security would always be a threat to the boy, things to be feared, things he could never trust.

The boy hated family gatherings, even when it was only with members of his family whom he loved.

There were plenty of people in his family whom he hated.

Roger loved Alison too much to allow his anger and frustration with her to be directed against her. He sublimated his rage with memories of his cousins whom he loathed. He hated his cousins with a deep and sincere passion. His cousins were always mean to him.

As he remembered some of the torments he had endured when visiting with his cousins the boy's rage grew worse.

The boy had seven cousins in the Green family, on his father's side of the family, the children of his father's half-sister, Ginny. Several times a year the boy's father would drive him out to Broomall with his mother to visit them.

Uncle John and Aunt Ginny were Catholics, the boy's mother made it sound like it was bad to be a Catholic. She said they had too many children, that it was irresponsible of them to have so many kids.

Whenever the boy played with his cousins they would tease him. They would show off their treasures and toys but never let him play with them. They were old enough to shoot guns, some of them younger than he was, but he was never allowed to shoot their guns. They had a super-colossal race track setup in their basement where they would race their tiny electric cars, but he was never allowed to race them. It was always like that, or worse.

One time they tricked him into playing in the runoff water from their septic tank, then shamed him for being such a disgusting idiot.

The boy hated his cousins passionately.

When the torment of recalling his past disgraces at the hands of his cousins had reached a climax the boy was in a furious rage. But the pain of remembering these past times with his cousins drove the boy to shift mental venues, the boy's mind leapt from his nasty cousins to other people who had hurt, humiliated, and angered him, until it seemed to the boy that he hated everyone and everything.

The boy just wanted to kill everyone, to destroy the entire world.

The boy could hear guests arriving.

He weighed the advantages of continuing to sulk and stew in his pain and anger over going downstairs, to greet the guests.

He was in a foul mood and didn't want to see anyone, but he knew if he stayed in his room that his absence would be noticed, drawing attention to him. Part of the boy craved that attention, but the greater part feared it.

The boy knew that if he made an appearance own his he could act more laid back, blend into the background, even become invisible like his dad.

The boy's father was a master of invisibility.

But the boy was in a furious rage, the last thing he wanted was for anyone to see how upset he was, and he didn't think he could bring his rage under control. He needed his rage to hold back his pain and tears.

Quietly, the boy crept down the stairs. The guests would be busy removing their coats, no one would notice if he made a quiet appearance. He wouldn't have to say or do anything; his silent, withdrawn presence should be enough to ensure he would be ignored.

Only a conspicuous absence was likely to draw unwanted attention to him.

It was terribly hard for the boy to make his way downstairs to greet the guests. He felt too many conflicting emotions. Part of the boy still hoped someone would be nice to him, would notice how upset he was and try to help him. But the boy knew he would be disappointed if he sought the love and affection he craved.

Part of the boy knew silence and invisibility were the only way he could survive the night, but he was so angry he didn't see how he could avoid making a scene and calling attention to himself.

Every part of this situation was stressful for the boy. He froze midway down the stairs to the foyer where people were arriving.

The boy's anger burned higher. He hated these family gatherings. He had to act like everything was fine, as if nothing were wrong at all. But everything was wrong. Everything. He couldn't bear any more pain. He fled upstairs to his room on the third floor.

But they would find him here. Perhaps they would not find him in his parent's room. He felt sick. If they found him he would tell them he was sick.

The boy hoped they would all leave him alone.

The boy flung himself on his parent's large bed and wept.

Something alerted boy. He sat up and stared toward the door of his parent's bedroom, listening for voices. The hubbub of voices downstairs was calm; no one had yet noticed he was missing. Good.

A familiar spot of fire appeared on the wall. Bad.

As the fire grew into the familiar ring shape that would open a portal to another world the boy stared with dread at what he saw on the far side of the portal.

The portals opened by the boy's teacher always took the boy to strange places in unfamiliar worlds. Places lost in time, remote from the world the boy lived in.

Only this time the world on the far side of the portal was familiar, he recognized his parent's bedroom as he stepped through the portal at his teacher's behest.

His teacher had brought him home!

Where were all the dead? Where were the dying? This wasn't right. There were always crowds of dead people in urgent of need of help every time he stepped through the portal. Why was it different now?

The boy was scared. His silent teacher waved goodbye and left him.

If this was another world, it was exactly like his world. The boy couldn't tell the difference.

On an unconscious level the boy was familiar with parallel worlds, worlds so similar to his own it could be hard to tell the difference if he moved from one world to another. The boy had caught subtle differences at times, some part of him was aware there could be many worlds like his own and that he didn't always stay in the same world. What would be different here?

The boy went downstairs and joined his family for Thanksgiving dinner deeply troubled. In his confusion over the strange portal that took him from his parent's bedroom back into his parent's bedroom the boy felt horribly insecure.

Something was terribly wrong, but he had no one to talk to about it.

Dinner was a fiasco, he hated it. He was too awkward to make good conversation which meant he wound up answering lots of questions as people tried to encourage him to talk. No one asked the right questions, no one cared how he felt. The boy was still miserable, but the shock of his strange visit with his teacher had taken the edge off of his anger.

His sickness returned suddenly and he fled the table.

Exhausted from being sick, heaving up his guts for what seemed like hours until his empty stomach cried in protest as he continued to heave dry heaves, the boy quickly fell deeply asleep in his parents' bed.

The boy awoke suddenly in his own bed, disoriented. He couldn't remember being moved, but he was alone in his own bed.

Something was wrong. Had he heard something?

There were several sudden brilliant flashes of light so strong they seemed to shine right

though the walls. The house shook with the concussions of atomic bombs detonating to the south.

The boy was out of his body. He floated above the city and watched as the firestorm spread from the refineries, navy yards and an airport bordering the southern edge of the city.

Time fragmented.

The boy watched the missiles falling inward toward the city. There were three missiles, one for each target.

The boy watched as the missiles exploded above their targets, hammering them with radiation, light, heat, and shock waves.

The boy watched the missiles come in and hammer the city over and over again.

At last the boy let time roll forward; there was nothing he could do to stop the falling missiles.

Part of the boy was exultant, he had wanted this moment, he had craved it, and here it was, the world was being destroyed!

But part of the boy understood how awful this was. He fled to his parent's bedroom where they stood gazing out the window as distant fires spread rapidly through the city and air raid sirens sounded belated warnings.

The boy's father pulled his rifle from the back of a wardrobe closet and quietly loaded it. He considered a gas mask that hung in its canvas bag on hook in the wardrobe, then shook his head and left it wear there.

The boy could read his father's mind. His father would defend his family, but if a gas attack came his family would die, and he would die with them.

The refugees appeared with the rising sun.

Too late, his father pulled down the sign on the lamppost in front of his house that read Dr. Stanford Holler, DC.

The refugees had paid no attention to the DC on the sign which stood for Doctor of Chiropractic. Too many of the refugees were in desperate need of medical services. Hospitals that were still functioning were overwhelmed.

The doctor of chiropractic shingle had drawn many of the most desperate to their door. The waiting room was packed with sick, injured, dying people.

The boy understood now. This was one of his teacher's terror worlds. The boy understood he would soon die. Everyone would die.

The boy slipped out of his body to examine his father's new patients. He could see how

strong they were, how long they had to live, due to his experiences with the dying people on his visits with his teacher.

Most of the patients would last only a few days. A few patients were here mostly because they were in shock these would last a bit longer, but the boy could see everyone was growing steadily sicker, poisoned by the fallout, quickly growing inexorably closer to death.

Neighbors arrived. Some were looking for help; others were here to offer help. Few people kept sufficient weapons or ammunitions in their homes to protect themselves from marauders. Already, two neighbors' homes had been pillaged.

A neighborhood militia was formed.

The hodgepodge of the new militia's weapons would become the eating utensils of Death's dinner table, Death would feast. The dead were already arriving.

The boy new the drill, he understood what he must do next. Perhaps this was a just a test. Perhaps his teacher had left him alone to see how he would cope on his own. Test or no, the dead needed his help, the boy felt compelled to serve them.

## COMPULSION

Much of the boy's life had been spent acting out compulsive behaviors. He felt compelled to do many things. He had counting routines. He had arranging routines. He could make nearly every activity into a ritual.

Some of the boy's compulsive behavior had developed to help shield him from his awareness of other people and all of their pain and misery.

But some of the boy's compulsive behavior seemed to be directed by entities outside the boy, like the machine. When the machine spoke to the boy he would drop whatever he was doing to listen intently and obey.

The same was true with the boy's teacher. The boy knew he must obey his teacher and always complied with everything his teacher asked of him, in spite of his terror, regardless of whether he wanted to or not.

The boy did not understand his compulsions to obey his teacher, the machine, or some of the other entities whom he dealt with or whom inhabited his body at times. The boy did not understand why he seemed to have no choice when he was given tasks to do.

The boy obeyed his instructions instinctively, he felt incapable of disobedience.

The dead had always had a great deal of power over the boy.

The dead could compel the boy to serve them. The boy was not as strong as his teacher. Sometimes, when a particularly difficult dead person was running the boy around in circles his teacher had had to step in, to intervene on his behalf.

His teacher was not here to help him now. He was on his own.

The boy's body had fallen when he stepped out of his body. No one came to animate his body in his absence this time. This was strange too. The boy sent part of himself back into his body and tasked himself to follow his mother and help with her chores.

He could rely on that part of himself to do whatever she needed of him.

The boy then turned his attention to the spirit world.

The boy was at home in this environment, the boy was comfortable in his astral body. Years of experience with his teacher had helped him gain confidence in himself when he was away from his body.

But the dead, broken free of their bodies, attained incredible powers in the spirit world, powers that could often confuse or mislead the boy or they might cause him to become a thrall who was compelled to serve the dead.

The boy knew he must be cautious of such traps.

The power of any dead person increased with proximity. The boy knew that the closer he

allowed himself to come to any dead person the more potential power they would have over him.

The boy's teacher had shown him how to balance himself with the powers of the dead, he became a fulcrum of sorts, so that whatever the dead tried to compel him to do, he remain unaffected, while he provided them with a stable point, a place to begin working out what had gone wrong in their life and fix it.

One of the mysteries of Death was that every dead person had wanted to die.

Death was a way for people to escape from circumstances that were hopeless. The more hopeless things seemed to be, the more people wanted to die, and eventually, if they wished for death long enough, they would die.

Occasionally, such death wishes expressed themselves in catastrophes where many people all died together. The boy didn't understand the mathematics of it, but it was a sort of wave interference function. In an infinite number of universes, waves of collective unconscious death wishes converged, there would always be a few worlds where the collective will to surrender and die formed a consensus, a mutual, group will to die.

These events expressed themselves through whatever means were available. Storms, floods, hurricanes, and tornadoes were common manifestations of a collective will to die. Plagues and famines served as well.

War served even better; in this new nuclear age the means were at hand to destroy the entire world.

Every person makes their own destiny, and where deadly destinies converge, great catastrophic events may result.

The boy knew that all the dead and dying would find their individual ways home to the lives they were currently leaving. Death's scythe would sweep through them all and carry them all away from each other, but eventually they would all return to lives where they would find each other again and carry on in circumstances so similar that most would completely forget they had died.

Death is the final peace, a peace so attractive it can become a compulsion, a compulsion so powerful it cannot be denied. The boy would have his wish, he would die, and everyone would die with him.

One by one the boy, the boy served the dead. There were too many. This time, it would take many eternities to complete the task of serving all the dead. Too many had already died, too many more would die.

The world population stood at nearly three and a half billion people. Would they all die? Would they all require his services?

He knew they would. The mechanics of afterlife experiences required him to reconcile all of his actions with everyone he hurt. He had killed the entire world. He would have to reconcile himself with everyone on Earth.

The boy began to fragment himself. He gave a clone of himself to each dead soul that came to him. His clones were perfect replicas in every way, they could bargain on his behalf and do all of his work, exactly as he himself would, in their place. His clones allowed him to distribute his workload.

He got to work.

The boy's mother was pleased with her son's behavior.

Roger was a complicated boy, fragile in many ways, easily upset. But today, in the very worst of all possible circumstances, he was holding up well, she didn't know how she could have managed this day without him.

## MILITIA

The militia was burning houses. Roger had gone off to watch.

Most houses were indefensible, too many ground level windows and too few weapons. The houses could not be left to support marauders. Too many refugees had given up hope of finding help and had turned to looting.

Grocery stores, pharmacies, hardware stores, sporting goods stores, and banks were popular targets.

The looters fought among themselves, winners take all, and losers perish. The hardened veterans of these campaigns turned to looting peoples' homes as public stores were quickly stripped clean of every scrap of food or useful items.

The first looters were individuals, ashamed of what they were doing. They could often be driven off with words. But they were followed by more seasoned looters, looters that learned to work together, looters that formed bands of marauders.

And the bands of marauders were growing in size.

Everything useful was stripped from the neighbors' houses and taken to the Holler house which became the base camp for the new militia. The Holler house sat in the lowest point in the area, heavy rains turned their backyard into a swamp. Being low down was ideal, concealment and camouflage were ideal.

The trees around the property to the south and east helped hide the house from people emerging from the city. The hills and stone houses to the north and west provided a wall of sorts, surrounding the house in a shallow pocket.

The Holler house already had more provisions than any other residence. Their basement shelves were full of jars of vegetables from their gardens and fruit from their trees.

Barrels of wine testified to the skill of the boy's father as an amateur vintner.

The Holler's were already the best provisioned of all the neighbors. The new militia took this in account when setting up their home to be their fortress.

Burning the neighbors' houses prevented them from being used for shelter by marauders. If the marauders saw the entire neighborhood was burned out they might miss the one house whose burn marks and sooty walls had been faked, whose empty windows seemed filled with rubble fallen in from above to conceal the people and activities within. The rubble had been collected from the burned houses and was sturdy enough to secure the windows against attack.

The boy had broken free of the compulsions which drove him to serve his mother when the fires began. He had watched the fires burn for hours and listened as the sounds of gunfire sometimes erupted from the flames.

The militia had scored a coup. The gun store had not been hit by marauders. The boy's father and his Uncle Jack had understood the terrible threat those weapons would become

in the hands of marauders and had stolen them in the dark of night to prevent them from falling into the hands of dangerous people.

Now the militia was using the gun store as bait. Would-be looters eager to find guns and ammo, looters who were presumed to be eager to use whatever weapons they could find on helpless citizens were being shot on sight.

It didn't really matter who was killed in the looting. They would all be dead soon enough. Still, the boy was glad his home was as safe as it could be for now.

The boy had helped drag the sturdiest rubble from neighboring houses to use to secure his own house.

The militia secured several more houses in the neighborhood, all selected for characteristics that made them more easily defended, such as some of the houses with tall stone walls across the street whose ground level windows were fewer and smaller, much more easily defended.

The militia had formed around the boy's father and Uncle Jack. The militia had been formed by men whose homes were the most vulnerable and indefensible. The militia had formed quickly, and those with military experience, like the boy's father quickly established a command structure and began assigning duties.

The militia had managed to secure the massive grocery store across the street as well. The militia men had driven their cars through its windows, effectively barricading them, providing better cover for defending the horde of food within. The remaining local stores were quickly and effectively stripped of anything marauders had missed.

There would be enough supplies to last the dying through their final days. As the radiation sickness took hold people would stop eating or drinking anyway.

The boy waited to die.

## WAITING

The waiting was terrible. The sounds of gunfire could be heard occasionally as the militia continued to kill the looters and marauders.

The boy's father was busy with the sick, the injured, and the dying. He had been joined by several nurses, such as Aunt Ruth, and a doctor from two blocks down the road. Together they managed a small field hospital and did their best to make their patients comfortable as they died.

All of their busy work seemed like just another form of waiting to die. The boy understood their compulsions to try to help the sick and wounded. But the boy perceived that on a deeper level they had given up hope, just as he had, they were waiting to die, just as he was.

The boy's father taught him how to shoot his rifle.