

POOKOO

D.L. Shiloh
POOKOO
a Satire
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HOMEFIELD MULTIMEDIA

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Last, to anyone who reads this book: I hope you like it.

DEDICATION

FOR JENNIFER

THE CATALYST AND
THE ETERNAL,
THE DANCER
ACROSS THE SANDS
OF TIME,
WHO MOVES ME
EVERY DAY.

“The image is one thing
and the human being is
another ...it’s very hard
to live up to an image.”

Elvis Presley, at a press
conference in New York, 1972

POOKOO



A SATIRE

CHAPTER 1

The Real Truth

No one takes a photograph to forget.

There's a photo of Katlin, Julie and myself that was taken the night of the Party Of Dead Souls in 1991. I need to remember *all* of the sordid details; it's a way to take back the part of me that was lost. I just hope that this narrative doesn't turn out to be a *Fodor's* guide of Hell.

In the grand scheme of things it doesn't matter where a coffeehouse was or where someone lived. I used to avoid the Mehedrich & Associates Building after getting laid off. I know you can't stop memory's rage, but if you truly want to go on you have to go back and remember your personal ground zero to get through. It still hurts – pain just diminishes by degrees.

Along with that one photo, I also have Katlin's journal. *The Book of Katlin*, as I call his red leather book, isn't the airbrushed All-American tale that everyone read in the papers and weekly magazines. It's not the sanitized story told at katlinhillmacher.com. It's not what you watched on *Nightwatch* or a half dozen other prime-time TV venues. But that's what they *want* you to believe – the Hollywood ending.

There's the truth. Then there's the *real* truth.

I was there. I know what happened. I had a front row seat to it all; *these* are the true details.

Julie bought the journal for Katlin at the hospital gift shop. He wrote poems, journal entries, sketches and even a screenplay of his life in it. The Kiplings wanted to get rid of the journal because its secret pages puts their son-in-law, The Golden Boy, in a bad light. Did he have NDEs (Near Death Experiences)? Is the Green Room to Heaven or Hell a movie theater? Is *this life* the Afterlife?

Do you want to know the real truth? Forget everything you've heard or seen about Katlin Hillmacher. With the Internet, e-books, blogs, audio books and print-on-demand technology, I'm finally able to tell the true story about him. It's not a memoir, though. It's getting a thorn out.

Even with his issues, Katlin was the brightest star in our universe and the rest of us were mere satellites in his orbit. He was the touchstone that all measured to because he had been closer to the mountaintop than any of us – he did get a silver medal at the Olympics, for Christ's sake.

At times this won't seem like his story and you'll wonder if this wandering tale comes back to Katlin. Trust me: it does. It always does whenever someone is a human black hole.



CHAPTER 2 Personal Ground Zero

The world is a severely misspelled place; it's full of errors, it isn't aligned in justified columns and the figures don't always add up. There is no SOP to inspect it by. My line gauge, loupe, font books and dictionary are of no use in it. I have not received an answer yet on my query to The Great Author. Oh, how the world is rife with errors, but do you know why?

The world doesn't care.

The world also doesn't care about picas and points or kerning or the *Chicago Manual of Style*. You cannot proofread human beings but I did back then. I was laid-off from a lucrative graphics arts position in the River North section of downtown Chicago as the Senior Proofreader at a now-defunct Pre-press service bureau company.

Mehedrich & Associates.

El Dorado.

First shift Monday through Friday, rare weekends, full benefits, profit sharing, three weeks paid vacation plus a week off for Christmas shutdown.

I graduated from college at 22 in 1984 with a Bachelor's and entered the world; I was ready to work. I told myself I could always go back and get my Master's. I took a starter salary job just past the far northwest suburbs of Chicago at a small rural newspaper called *The Courier*, which should have been named *The Daily Struggle*.

It was a "glamour job", as many newspaper, TV and radio jobs are. They provide plenty for the ego, little pay and lots of work. For two years at an average of 60 hours-a-week I wrote articles, did paste-up and lay-out, proofread, set type, shot on the horizontal camera and even sold ad space all for \$20,280 per year. My wife Anna-Krista, would fight with me about money (and the lack of it) and how I wasn't spending any time with her. I had no time at all to work on any of my personal writing. I contemplated getting a bumper sticker that read

CANCEL MY SUBSCRIPTION
TO THE DAILY STRUGGLE.

Then one day I committed the cardinal sin of figuring out my hourly net wage. Don't ever do that.

My calculator revealed the sad truth. I bought a pin-stripe suit, got a haircut, and looked for a new job.

During my interview at Mehedrich & Associates I remember following the lily-white receptionist up two flights of a spiral staircase and looking at all that brass and oak and glass. The only thing missing, I thought, were wisps of clouds. I was led to a domed-shaped conference room with a skylight and a 30-foot oval table. The tan white-haired man at the table wore a hound's-tooth sport coat. He looked like God's older brother.

"You're wearing a tie," Mr. Mehedrich said, lighting an unfiltered Pall Mall. "It's good to see the entire world hasn't gone to hell yet. I get all these artist types in here with ripped jeans and earrings. I used to draw a little. But this is a business. Well, do you draw?"

"I write a little," I admitted.

Five years later (in 1991) as the Senior Proofreader I was making over \$50K a year. I was ready to put in 50 years. I was the Cerberus of Typos –

I proofread our proofreaders, and I didn't keep my disease at the office: *yes, I confess*, I used to proofread (and mark-up) Anna-Krista's grocery list. The way I *really* moved up the ladder was on my reputation for writing concise memos. Also, although overloaded, I was given the task of rewriting all of the SOP books. I only wore suits to the office, except on Casual Fridays when I wore my indispensable camel hair sport coat and khakis. My second-story office had a huge window 15 feet away from the EL train tracks there at the southwest corner of Erie and Franklin. I had my own business cards and letterhead and my name was painted on the glass door.

The early 90s saw the Apple computer revolution take place in the pre-press printing industry, with PageMaker and Quark Xpress leading the charge. Because of that, we lost our biggest accounts. Companies used to turn to us for typesetting annual reports and medical packaging. The big Chicago ad agencies would send *lines* of type (sometimes *just two words*, or a magazine cover *title* for kerning). As middlemen, who charged \$20K to set type for an annual report, we were too expensive. Mr. Mehedrich, my mentor, had a heart attack right on that grand spiral staircase – and died.

The company's V.P.'s took over the shop.

Two weeks before Christmas 1990 I survived what we called The Wednesday Night Massacre – a catastrophic layoff of 60% of the workforce. Glenn Lang, my proofreading mentor, used to tell me: "Proofreading is the last refuge of the alcoholic." When they fired Glenn during The Wednesday Night Massacre I became the Senior Proofreader. I did not look for other work, despite the corporate bloodletting, because the pay, perks and power were good. Then one day in the middle of March of 1991, I went to work and the front doors were shut with a lockout kit.

I fell from the sky.

In a panic, I bought some lottery tickets, cigarettes and a 12-pack of Budweiser. Then I updated my resume.

I thought it was pretty good (I was a writer and an English major, after all) and I mailed off a bunch of resumes from ads I saw in the *Sunday Tribune* and *Sun-Times*. Zip, nada, zilch. I quit smoking for a whopping six hours until Anna-Krista and I had a fight, and I stormed down to Sonny's, the corner store on the first floor of my building, and bought a pack of Marlboro Lights. For the next two weeks I looked for work. Nothing. The rejection letters claimed I was overqualified. I was 29-years-old and washed-up.

I learned that while on Unemployment I could work part-time to supplement my income. In April, I looked for part-time work in my far-north Chicago neighborhood of Rogers Park. One day I walked past the Elysium movie theater. It was a scuzzy place: Anna-Krista said she'd never be caught dead in it. I noticed a misspelled word on the marquee.

There was a HELP WANTED sign in the window.

I had a plan. Look for work by day, watch second-run movies for free at night. I could also get back to *Untitled*, the 'meaning of life' novel from my college days that I had never finished. My grand plan had me doing all of that for a month total or two. I was due for a sabbatical, after all. I filled out an application for an usher position.

Who was the Assistant Manager and full-time theater usher?

Katlin.

Katlin James Hillmacher (pronounced 'Hillmocker') was born on January 1, 1962. His resume was too long for any sports trading card. His college GPA was 3.8 but it wasn't padded with basket weaving classes: he read Nietzsche, Socrates and Camus "for fun."

I knew him because we were in the same Advanced Religion class, but we weren't good friends back then. He married Cassandra Kipling, his college sweetheart, on June 23, 1983, right after graduation and they honeymooned for two months at the Broadmoor Hotel in Colorado Springs while he attended the U.S. Olympic Training Center. I took that job at *The Courier* and went my way. As a collegiate athlete, Katlin was the NCAA javelin champion and won a gold medal at the Goodwill Games. He capped his career by earning the silver medal at the 1988 Olympic Games (he missed the gold by a mere *nine* inches). The last I heard Katlin was a track coach at Atlas State College, wherever the hell that was. When I applied for the usher's job, I was stunned to see him, a world-class athlete, married to a millionaire's daughter, working at the Elysium.

I got the job.

May passed and still no dream job. I didn't write much, either. My little sabbatical from the button-down shirt world was getting old. Anna-Krista thought so, too and it was our one daily topic of conversation. I was proud of my work history and felt good that I had made a decent living. I needed a job. But I couldn't take *any* full-time job that came along because if I started in a new field, I'd be back to square one with entry level pay. I also had to be careful that I didn't look like a job-hopper. I didn't want to pay the steep penalties for getting into my 401k and I'd been dipping into my savings. The bills piled up and Anna and me fought almost everyday.

Then it was late June. I wasn't ever supposed to be making a career out of the Elysium, but I was.



CHAPTER 3

The Field House

I had an hour to kill before my shift at the Elysium that Sunday afternoon so I headed up to Katlin's apartment, like I often did. I dropped my job search form in the mailbox and glanced across the street over at the Loyola Park field house.

The bodies were scattered across the athletic field house grounds. Some of the victims were on stretchers or backboards. Thick smoke swirled in front of the field house and out over the two softball fields toward the playground, the beach and Lake Michigan. Medics set broken arms and legs, dressed wounds, made tourniquets, started IVs, or CPR. There were serious burns and bad glass cuts and a lot of blood.

I crossed the street and wove through the crowd at the southeast corner of Sheridan Road and Greenleaf Avenue where a Chicago police squad car blocked traffic; the onlooker next to me watched it all from a hand-held TV (a news camera was perched near the trees). The fire in the brick and glass block structure was contained. Type A foam diluted with water 10-parts-to-1 made the ground soggy next to the building where there were no flowers. There'd been a boiler explosion in the field house.

I popped open my Zippo lighter and lit a cigarette (I wasn't trying very hard to quit). A man rolled a wheelbarrow-styled stretcher past me. I saw a man with a clip-on bow tie speak into a walkie-talkie.

"Can I help?" I asked, walking up to him. I sort of remembered CPR from high school and thought I might be of use.

"You're late," Bow Tie Man said, checking the clipboard. He handed me a box of 4 x 4 sterile bandages from a supply table. "Take this to Mrs. Herren now. And put that cigarette out!"

I put it out.

Bow Tie Man spoke into the walkie-talkie again.

I didn't know any Mrs. Herren.

"What are you waiting for? Move it!"

I wandered over to the West Entrance. An ambulance backed up over the curb and onto the grass; the crowd parted. The medics immobilized a teenage boy who had a spinal cord injury. There were other victims, from the stone flower garden on the corner to the Southwest Entrance and at the pitcher's mound of the softball diamond just north of the field house. The chain-link backstop served as a makeshift IV stand. A father, with large splinters of glass in his neck and arms, wrestled with a medic as he cried out to an unconscious little girl in a yellow sun dress and patent leather shoes.

"I need plasma, stat!" a woman shouted. "There's hemorrhaging of the abdomen, a ruptured spleen, and multiple lacerations and abrasions. Where's my plasma?"

A woman was in labor under a tree and her dress was soaked with blood about the waist and her swollen belly. Three medics attended to her: one on both knees in front of her, one kneeling on one leg near her head, and the other took vital signs. Her screams were violent. *Help, help me. I can't take it anymore. Stop it, stop. Please stop it.* Push, they told her. She made a deep cleansing breath and pushed again and the medics kept coaching her and she made the final push.

A basketball rolled out from under her dress.

The woman sat up, cackled, and fell back on the grass.

“Congratulations, Mrs. Naismith!” one medic said. “It’s a 7-pound bouncing boy!”

The medic at her feet picked up the basketball, bounced it on the grass and spun it on his index finger. He passed it to the woman.

“You gonna name the baby Spalding?”

“No, no – make it Michael.”

Mrs. Naismith didn’t say what she was going to name her “baby.” She wrapped the basketball in a towel and cradled it.

“Focus, people, *focus*,” one instructor said. “That’s what this drill is all about. Disaster strikes. Prepare, focus and adapt.”

“Focus pocus,” a medic muttered, stealing the ball away from the woman.

“Can you at least let the others learn?” the instructor snapped.

“Whatever,” the medic said, bouncing the ball.

An air horn sounded three times and Bow Tie Man used a bullhorn to address the people. Victims rose up, as if Bow Tie Man’s voice was that of a revival tent healer. Scorekeepers delivered the medics’ results to the fold-out table. Equipment and supplies were returned.

“Can we leave?” asked a victim. I thought I’d seen her when I filed for Unemployment. “I got a place to be at 4.”

“When do we get paid?” asked a man with a “broken arm.”

I returned the box of bandages to the fold-out table. A man with a half-severed hand drank coffee and he talked to a medic who was tying her shoe. Past them went a man who’d had a broken collarbone; he was carrying a heavy box on his bad shoulder. A burn victim, with flesh raw as steak, listened to the Cubs game on a radio while sunbathing. Three kids in bandages played Double Dutch with IV tubes.

“It’s over,” the father said, peeling the fake glass off his arms and neck. The girl lay on the ground. “Get up, honey.”

“But Daddy, I want to play dead some more.”

“No, it’s time to leave,” the father said. The girl laid back and had to be pulled up.

A TV reporter used the park as a backdrop for the mid-afternoon live weather report. The alderman was on the sidewalk passing out campaign buttons and bumper stickers. I heard the distant bell ringing of an ice cream vendor’s handcart.

The crowd thinned out. A Park District worker rode in the back of a slow-moving truck and stacked orange cones one on top of another. The yellow POLICE LINE: DO NOT CROSS tape was taken down and the flares were removed. I was mad at having been fooled by the mock-disaster drill and its unyielding sense of doom at the doorstep. I was mad at myself for believing in it (an old trait of mine). I just didn’t like to see anyone in pain. The traffic light was red. I waited at the crosswalk.

The corner news-stand machine’s headline proclaimed: “Chicago: The City That Walks.”

No shit, I thought, going through the crosswalk.

I used to drive – before I was laid off, before Anna-Krista totaled the Mazda 626 and got a DUI in the process. But who needs to drive? I had the CTA and walking was good for me. I was trying to quit smoking, anyway. The light turned green. I walked to Katlin’s apartment.



CHAPTER 4

The Apartment

Chicago comes from the word *shikaakwa* meaning *wild leek* in the extinct Native American Miami-Illinois language. That translates to the word *skunk*. It was nicknamed The Windy City for its long-winded politics, not the mighty breeze which comes off Lake Michigan.

Chicago was designed at a North-South East-West grid pattern starting downtown at Madison Street and Michigan Avenue (zero-zero). The Elysium was at 6400 North Sheridan Road. Anna and I lived near 7000 North Sheridan in a 60-unit apartment building.

Katlin lived alone a block north of us on the other side of Sheridan Road, cater-corner to the Loyola Park field house in a three-storied brick garden apartment. His Gerry-rigged basement studio was as big as a boxing ring. (It was almost as big as the marble bathroom he and Cassandra once had, which was once profiled in *North Shore* magazine.) I went through the alley and down a plain back doorway into a moldy hallway. Katlin's numberless apartment door was open all the way. Next door, in the laundry room, a clothes dryer ran.

I knocked on his door. "Katlin?"

I flipped the light switch and the round fluorescent light in the center of the room flickered like a halo with karma gone bad.

His collection of steel and antique wooden javelins lay on the floor like giant pieces of a Pic-Up-Stix game. I stepped over the javelins and a UPS-shipped cardboard tube. The top of an Ethan Allen dresser was full of trophies and another two dozen were in the room. An old baseball glove, with a cloth and a bottle of oil, was on a plant pedestal. The only thing on any wall was a velvet Elvis painting. The baseboards had stacks of matted frames of medals and magazine and newspaper clippings.

Katlin didn't have a couch – he used the weight bench. A pile of open mail lay on a wobbly coffee table and on top was a rejection letter from Roosevelt University for a track coaching job. One piece of a gourmet vanilla cake was untouched and the other was half-eaten. Two Waterford champagne flutes were set out (only one had been used) and there were two empty bottles of Cook's Extra Dry. His silver Olympic medal served as a drink coaster.

A combination TV and VCR set were on the floor and a video of his wedding was playing. He didn't own a radio but he did have an old Super 8 movie projector and camera. I looked at the cake, then at the date on the TV screen. *It was Katlin and Cassandra's 8th anniversary - June 23rd.*

Katlin and Cassandra were at the main table in the grand ballroom of the Hilton Towers. Silverware clinking against glass – Katlin and Cassandra kiss. I fast-forwarded.

Guests were interviewed, wishing the newlyweds well. More clinking glasses. The newlyweds kissing, the bride blushing.

I lit a cigarette and watched more of the videotape.

Cassandra's father, Thorne S. Kippling III, moves to a podium with a microphone. Mr. Kippling, the third-generation President and CEO of Kippling Industries, a Lake Forest-based fastener manufacturing company, removes a few notes from his suit coat, puts on his reading glasses and clears his throat. "I am proud to announce to our shareholders that our company had annual sales of \$120 million this fiscal year."

The crowd laughs.

"Oh, Daddy," Cassandra scolded. Mrs. Kippling smiled.

Mr. Kippling's speech ends by welcoming Katlin into the family and wishing the newlyweds all the best.

I fast-forwarded.

Katlin, in a black tuxedo, huddled with his groomsmen. The crowd clinks glasses.

"Our lips will chap!" Katlin shouts.

The clinking continues.

Katlin takes a Tiffany clock from the gift table and tucking it under his arm like a football, Katlin zigzags between tables and chairs, chats with guests over by the bar, then zigzags to the far side of the room and hands the clock off to me. He dashes across the entire room until he hops on the top back of a leather-padded chair, lands it gently, takes Cassandra's hand, dips her and they kiss. The crowd cheers. Katlin raises his hand in a fixed wave and smiles as Cassandra pulls him out onto the dance floor to the strains of Foreigner's "Waiting for a Girl Like You." Cassandra gazes into his eyes and whispers "*Forever.*"

I fast-forwarded and let the tape play during a shot of me in a dark corner palming the backside of Anna-Krista (we married the following summer). In the video Anna noticed we were on camera, and her hand slapped mine away, the both of us laughing.

The video kept playing.

I ate a snack of Triscuits and sharp cheddar cheese and headed to the bathroom. Blood pooled on the white bath tile and in the sink. I gagged and spat the snack into the toilet.

"Katlin!"

No answer.

Pain pills were in the pedestal sink and on the floor. The shower curtain and rod were ripped down. The window over the tub was broken out – *he had tried to jump out the basement window*. The medicine chest's mirror was splintered and smeared red with blood like it had been head-butted many times. There was a red punch hole in the white drywall.

The TV showed Katlin and Cassandra leading "The Bunny Hop" dance. The clinking glasses started in again. I looked around the apartment. His reading lamp had been whipped across the room like in the hammer throw event. I ran outside.

Across the street at Loyola Park the fold-out table, drill people and TV crew gone. The afternoon rush hour traffic buzzed along on Sheridan. Two paramedics were loading Katlin, and one of his steel javelins, into the back of the ambulance. The paramedics had assessed his condition and realized Katlin's blood was *real*, his wounds not mock-wounds. For a moment they thought Katlin's wounds were from the javelin.

"St. Sebastian! St. Sebastian!" Katlin shouted.

He was 6-foot-2, 215 pounds and had a 33-inch waist and 7 percent body fat. His blue-gray eyes were otherworldly, like light from a movie projector. He had good teeth set off by a chiseled jaw and his face was slightly chipped from time and the elements, and his thick head of black hair was matted down by dried blood. He wore a bloodied white football jersey with the number 28 on it, Lycra shorts and Nike cross-training shoes.

I ran across the street through the open spaces in traffic.

"St. Sebastian! St. Sebastian!" he cried.

"Hey! Stop!" I said, waving my arms.

"Hang on, buddy," the driver called back to Katlin. "St. Sebastian's, yeah. Hang loose. We'll get you there."

The driver hit the siren and traffic stopped. The ambulance slowly ran

CHAPTER 5 Beginnings

Robert “Bob” Aldrich Hillmacher had played single-A pro baseball as a left fielder before marrying his high school sweetheart, Peggy Miller. Bob worked on the production line at the tire factory in their hometown of Freeport, Illinois. Bob Hillmacher’s three greatest gifts to their only child included a ferocious drive to excel, a strong ego, and that amazing throwing arm. I once saw Katlin throw a baseball 400 feet.

Katlin had his mother’s love of books (she was a library aide at an elementary school). She ended up naming the boy.

My mother said she named me after a character in a favorite book she had as a child. I never found a book with that name, but a diary of her’s did mention she had a cat named Mr. Katlin when she was little.

I sometimes think it [the name] was to just rile my Dad, the factory worker.

According to my Aunt Meg, before I was born, my Dad was still groaning about my name to everyone at dinner that my first name should be after Jim Thorpe. “It’s a girl’s name,” he said. Dad was saying he was going to hire a lawyer and get my name changed. Finally, Mom stopped washing dishes and said, “If I have to keep dealing with that garbage, Bob, he’ll be your *last* child.”

Page 5, *The Book of Katlin*

Peg Hillmacher also gave her son an appreciation for Elvis Presley. Peg had all of Elvis’ records and even kept a “velvet Elvis” painting in the living room (across from the picture of Jesus). Peg used to tease Bob that The King was the only man she would ever leave him for.

“Well, if you meet him, it’s OK,” Bob said.

The third to last concert Elvis ever gave, on June 24, 1977, was in Madison, Wisconsin at the Dane County Coliseum, an hour north of Freeport. Originally Peg was going to make the pilgrimage to Madison alone. But Bob didn’t like the idea of her going alone to “the Mad City”, so he insisted that Katlin, who was then 15, go along.

“Aw, Dad, an Elvis concert?”

“Look out for your Mom,” Bob said. “Madison is a rough place. And Kat, say hello to your real father.”

“Oh, Bob,” Peg said.

Bob said they better get going.

“It doesn’t start for almost 24 hours.”

“You’ll need it,” Bob said, knowing how bad Peg’s sense of direction was, except for finding any garage sale in Stephenson County.

They left the house at 10 p.m. when the TV news from Rockford was on. (Bob preferred to take trips at night.) Elvis? Katlin would’ve rather seen Led Zeppelin, Boston or Kiss. He started to watch for beer-soaked drivers and deer, but the drone of the highway put him to sleep. It always did.

The dome light of the Buick woke him up three hours later. Katlin looked around. Peg was looking at an upside-down road atlas. They were at a downtown gas station and it was about 1 a.m.

“Are we in Madison?”

“I think so.”

“You *think* so?”

“I need to use the bathroom.”

“I’ll wait,” Katlin muttered.

“No. Go ask for directions to the Coliseum.”

They looked out and noticed two youths fighting with the gas station attendant.

“Dad’s gonna kill us,” Katlin groaned. He stepped out to help when suddenly a limousine wheeled into the parking lot. The door flew open and the main occupant began to break up the fight.

“Oh, my God,” Peg screamed.

It was Elvis.

The two youths and the gas station attendant stopped in their tracks. Everybody posed for pictures with Elvis (Peg had her Kodak Instamatic) and she got a kiss. The King and his entourage went on their way to the hotel. Katlin and his mom headed to the Coliseum parking lot.

“So we don’t need to go to the concert, right?” Katlin asked.

She laughed.

“You should get some sleep.”

“I can’t. This is the greatest day of my life.”

“What about when I was born?” Katlin asked. “What about your wedding day?”

“Oh, sure. Of course, dear.”

I had Sports in common with Dad. Mom and me had Books and Movies. We used to go to The State [Theater] a lot, especially in the summer when we didn’t have any school and Dad was busy working.

I grew up on green fields and in that dark movie theater. One taught me that Effort = Success, while the other showed me that we can escape and imagine and become what we want to be and that there is an audience for that kind of thing.

I was comfortable with meeting people (like the time Dad introduced the state’s senator to me). For Mom, meeting Elvis was a holy moment. He’d been on a 50-foot screen my whole life, so seeing him at a gas station in the middle of the night wasn’t that out of the ordinary.

When I saw 10,000 women swooning over the middle-aged Elvis in concert, in his Mexican sun-dial gold and white jumpsuit, I began to understand.

Page 6, *The Book of Katlin*

Katlin’s high school yearbook for his senior year has a picture of Elvis, Peg and Katlin. Along with being Homecoming King, Katlin was even voted “Most

Serious”, “Most Athletic” and, ironically, “Most Modest.” His plans were to attend college, although he wasn’t sure which school.

Katlin didn’t throw the javelin while in high school – he never had the chance. According to the IHSA, Illinois schools did have the javelin as an event from 1919 to 1939 but stopped due to a lack of facilities for it, available coaches and liability costs.

Meaning somebody got *speared*.

In his junior year of high school, Katlin won the state championship in the discus. Then as a senior, Katlin was a wide receiver for the Freeport Pretzels football team and received his first major concussion. It happened on the last play of the season in the 1979 state championship at Champaign, Illinois.

The local newspaper put a photo of Katlin’s game-winning catch on the front page:

PRETZELS HANG ON TO WIN STATE TITLE

Collins stepped back in the pocket and unloaded a last-ditch Hail Mary pass as time expired. Hillmacher burned down the sideline to the end zone and leaped between two headhunting Wildcat defenders.

Hillmacher flipped like a pinwheel and landed on his head, but miraculously hung onto the ball for the game-winning TD despite suffering a concussion. The win capped a season that will be remembered for The Ages.

Only *four* words on the concussion.

Bob Hillmacher’s Super 8 movie footage shows it all. After Katlin’s miracle catch, the football field was flooded with players and fans. Katlin escaped from the victory pile and staggered his way home – to the opposing team’s bus where he threw up at the foot of the bus’ steps. The bus driver thought that Katlin was taunting the Wildcats by deliberately puking on their bus and so he took a swing at Katlin. An off-duty cop (a Freeport player’s Dad) was the first one to reach the bus driver. The cop tackled the driver. The crowd swarmed the bus and Katlin’s concussion was compounded by the ensuing pig-pile.

One Saturday in January during his senior year, Katlin rode north up U.S. Highway 26 with his parents up to Monroe, Wisconsin for a day of shopping. On the way back, a mechanic’s truck pulling out of the Sky Vu Drive-in Theater slammed into the Hillmacher’s car. Katlin wasn’t wearing a seat belt (nobody did in those days) but he walked away with a few scratches, a bruised knee and his *second* major concussion in six weeks.

This is how Katlin wrote of the event in *The Book of Katlin*:

FLASHBACK - FREEPORT, IL 1962

FADE IN:

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM

Parents pose for Super 8 home movies with newborn baby boy

named Katlin.

EXT. BACKYARD - DAY

Parents and little boy in backyard have a Sunday picnic with relatives. Boy hugs mother and gives her a big kiss. Boy plays baseball catch with father. Boy flexes muscles. Father laughs and grabs son and they wrestle. Father lets son win and raises boy's hand in victory.

EXT. TRACK AND FIELD STADIUM - DAY

Teenage boy takes handful of dirt and brushes dirt off hands. Throws a discus at track meet. He throws the shot put at high school track meet. He holds up two gold medals, posing with parents for home movies, and puts a medal around each parent's neck.

INT. CAR - NIGHT

Son rides in back seat of car, while parents are up front. A pick-up truck runs a stop sign and the car is side-struck.

EXT. CEMETERY - DAY

Son takes handful of dirt and throws dirt into a grave at casket. He wipes the dirt off his hands and turns away from double graves in the comfort of an aunt and uncle.

FADE TO BLACK
END FLASHBACK

Page 3, *The Book of Katlin*

After his parents' double funeral, Katlin moved to Chicago and lived with his Aunt Meg and Uncle Tony to finish out high school. (Aunt Meg was his mother's sister.) Backed by his parents' \$100,000 death benefit insurance and a partial sports scholarship, Katlin studied a Liberal Arts education in college. He majored in English and a Minor in Secondary Education with the idea of becoming an English teacher.

One afternoon at the end of Track practice Katlin was "goofing around" and picked up a javelin. Within the hour he unofficially broke the school record. His coach advised him to drop the discus in his sophomore year and concentrate solely on the javelin.

The switch paid off. His photograph and name adorned the Sports section on a regular basis. He racked up medals and trophies and still holds the school record for the javelin: Katlin will own it *forever* – the school no longer competes in Track and Field competition due to budget cuts. By the way, Cassandra's father is on the school's Board of Directors and is the Chairman of the Budget Committee.

Katlin placed in the top 10 at the 1984 U.S. Olympic Trials in Eugene, Oregon. Good, but not good enough to make the Olympic team. In the intervening years he became a locomotive of determination and won the NCAA title and the Goodwill Games. Cassandra stunned her sorority critics by marrying Katlin right after graduation. Katlin was a trophy, and

he had the one commodity that money and education cannot buy: God-given talent.

The extended honeymoon in Colorado Springs was a ‘mission accomplished’: the deep training boosted his path toward the Olympics and Cassandra became pregnant. Katlin was made an official employee of the Kippling Industries Marketing Department. All was good in the Kippling Kingdom.

When Katlin wasn’t in hi-tech training with his coach at a private North Shore facility, he was on a pedestal in print ads or at trade show venues like McCormick Place as a Kippling Industries spokesman. (One ad even shows him throwing with a giant fastener, as if it were a javelin.) He trained and competed in Europe and the States and was the favorite to win gold in the javelin in 1988. But he “only” placed second at the Olympics.

Afterward, Katlin had rotator cuff surgery on his right shoulder – his throwing arm. He was never the same. Cassandra miscarried. Katlin finished up his education to teach and acquired a position at Atlas State College. Then he lost the job. The Kippling-Hillmachers retreated back to home turf in Chicago and wrapped themselves in the comforts of friends and her father’s money. Katlin was expected to go work for her father full-time.

“I’m not working for Krippling Industries anymore,” Katlin said.

Boom – they were cut off from the Kippling fortune.

Katlin took an Assistant Manager position at the Elysium at entry level pay with a few perks. The second shift hours allowed Katlin to train, without an expensive coach, in the daytime. The other perks were something Cassandra finally got tired of.

On New Year’s Day 1991 – his 29th birthday – Katlin went out jogging in their De Paul neighborhood. When he came back, Cassandra wasn’t home. He was in the shower when the doorbell rang. He answered the door with shampoo in his hair and a towel around his body. Maybe it was a singing birthday telegram or another custom-made jersey with his name and age (like the previous year). Maybe flowers from Cassandra, who worked in one of River North’s art galleries. The delivery *was* from Cassandra but it wasn’t a jersey or flowers or a new javelin. I remember well what a Sociology professor once said: Men can’t marry up.

Cassandra gave him divorce papers on his birthday.



CHAPTER 6

Julie

Julie loved him.

Julie Martin was the one who kept watch by Katlin's bedside, stayed late, spoke with the doctors, gave him sponge baths, read to him, kissed his wounds.

She was a 36-year-old bank loan officer from Kalamazoo, Michigan. Her mother ran off when Julie was nine and her brother was two. She still owned the Girl Scouts' Debbie Reynolds' 45 rpm record of "Follow the Piper." Her dad, a CNC machinist, never remarried and died from a heart attack when Julie was 22. Julie worked as a bookkeeper and receptionist at the machine shop where her dad worked. One month later Julie became engaged to Jamie Stonebridge, the eldest son of a family that owned an upscale country furniture store. Their latest TV ads in Michigan, Indiana and Chicago featured that the new 16-room bed and breakfast had a Jacuzzi in each room and that a four-star 18-hole golf course was under construction.

It was one of those terminal engagements where the date is never set. *Engagements*. Maybe there is something to be said for that whirlwind state of bliss, the anticipation, the dream building, that forever looking to *when* but never *being*, a ceremonial testament to the world of: here is something bright and new and it has a chance. The New Adam and Eve.

But in a terminal engagement the relationship stalls; all of its bright promise is withered away and it becomes an old dead marriage without the Wassermann Test or even the traditional chicken-plate dance party.

Julie's story from the gates of Paradise is that Mr. Almost-Right insisted that Julie quit her job at the "piddy bank" in Kalamazoo and work for Stonebridge Country Inn. After all, Stonebridge tradition, and the fiscal bottomline, outweighed any individual interests. Stonebridge only got revved up when he talked work and he was fond of saying, "Business moves the world." Stonebridge gave Julie a Texas Instruments calculator for her 27th birthday. For Christmas that year he gave her a new computer loaded with tax and banking software.

Julie realized she wasn't a bride-to-be: she was a fiscal free agent. Stonebridge didn't want her for love, and so she broke off the 5-year engagement and escaped to Chicago to work in the Loan Department of one of the largest banks in The Loop. She had been there for nine years.

Julie's office space had the soul of a furniture store display. Her desk was nestled in the center of the first floor of the three-storied bank lobby. The only personal items were photos of her and her dad: one when she was in Girl Scouts, and one taken at her high school graduation.

To describe Julie Martin in those days is to give a resume of prairie truth: her good soul and giving heart were the stunning elements of her beauty. From afar she was a demographic sample like millions of women who, unlike Cassandra, could not afford to shop at Fendi or Gucci.

Underneath that prairie soul was a network of streams and teaming life. But Julie's inner layers, like the land she was born from, would only be exposed by the effects of erosion or man's implements. Then the core of her full essence would be seen – but in a ravaged state.

The day after Cassandra served divorce papers, Katlin went downtown where Julie worked (he'd seen a CTA bench ad for the bank outside of the Elysium and decided it was the bank for him). Katlin asked for a \$30,900

loan, enough for 12 months rent – and a new javelin. Whether it was good sportsmanship, the threat of Mr. Kipling’s corral of North Shore lawyers, or sheer stupidity, Katlin wanted to keep paying the rent. Even much later, he didn’t want to divorce from Cassandra. Did he love Cassandra? Or did he just hate to lose?

Julie read through Katlin’s loan application. She didn’t believe he’d been in the Olympics until they looked up his profile in a fellow loan officer’s ESPN almanac, which included a picture of Katlin.

Julie told Katlin that she used to watch the Olympics with her Dad. Whenever the U.S. won a gold medal they would stand in the living room with hand-over-heart during the award ceremony. She’d never been big on sports, she admitted, but she liked ice skating, gymnastics and swimming.

“So, does somebody catch the javelin?” Julie asked.

“No, it’s thrown,” Katlin said, pushing aside the chair. “Like this.”

“No, that’s OK, Mr. Hillmacher.”

He stood back holding an imaginary javelin. He charged several measured steps, reared his arm back and to the side, and whipped it overhead.

“Hhyah!” he screamed.

Customers ducked for cover. A security guard and a bank vice-president rushed over. The VP learned that Katlin won the silver medal at the Olympics and got autographs for his family and friends, then goaded Katlin into signing autographs for bank customers. 20 minutes later Katlin was able to sit back down and asked Julie if she’d ever been in love.

“I was engaged once,” Julie said.

“Being in love is easy. Being loved, that’s the tough part.”

Julie adjusted the papers in front of her.

“Let’s focus on your loan, Mr. Hillmacher.” She skimmed over the application. “Could you find someone to co-sign, perhaps your parents?”

“They’re dead.”

Julie was an employer’s dream: she was never late to work, never sick, was conscientious and friendly, trained new employees, stayed late, and didn’t use her allotted vacation days. She lived in a hi-rise north near Belmont Harbor and on weekends she rode her 15-speed Schwinn through Lincoln Park. She even did her Christmas shopping before Halloween.

Then she met Katlin.

Some women fall for the wrong man. Are they nurturers? Do they see the good inside a man and want to bring the rest out? Are they looking for their father inside that man?

What attracted Julie to Katlin, which changed her life forever?

Compared to Stonebridge’s boxed-in future or the pale prospects she came across in Chicago, Katlin probably seemed to her like an adventure, a mission – hell, something to do that year. Was her biological clock ticking? Maybe she was attracted to the kindred spirit of those who suffered the early loss of a parent. Maybe she simply felt the crush of time ticking away.

The bank denied Katlin’s loan application.

Two weeks later Julie drove her station wagon to Loyola where he said he worked out. She saw him jogging around the track. What happened, happened. Once the snow melted you could see the two of them around Rogers Park in her Dad’s old Town & Country station wagon with its tailgate window down, the javelins poking out the back. Katlin and Julie seemed happy. She loved him.

CHAPTER 7

Pookoo

It is one thing to pick up an implement and throw and win and think it is Destiny, the logical mind knowing that it was DNA and a father who played semi-pro ball putting in a lot of time with me after making tires all day.

It is one thing to look across at that hi-rise here next to the hospital and predict that at 6:25 PM (as I've observed the last three nights) the couple in the one apartment on the sixth floor will meet up at home again tomorrow. (She watches TV in the bedroom while he works on the computer in the living room). But ever since I saw The Angel, at two or three second intervals, I'm able to tell the future.

Page 10, *The Book of Katlin*

I met up with Julie two days later at St. Sebastian Hospital, which is in the Lakeview neighborhood of Chicago. It's about five miles south of Rogers Park. There are five or six hospitals closer to Rogers Park but the paramedics heard Katlin ask for St. Sebastian. I know of no reason for Katlin to request St. Sebastian Hospital. I do know that St. Sebastian is the Patron Saint of Athletes.

The elevator doors closed.

"I don't like hospitals," I said.

"Poor Kat," Julie said. "It's all Cassandra's fault. I left her a phone message twice. You think she'd call back."

I knew how Cassandra was and how Katlin was. I didn't say anything to Julie about the videotape or the mock wedding anniversary cake. For better or for worse, Katlin and Julie had the best love around that I knew of.

As we rode up to the ninth floor Julie told me Katlin had flat-lined in the ambulance and that they had to shock him. His concussion was pretty bad and his condition scared her.

"I told him you were going to visit," Julie said.

The elevator doors popped open.

"953-B," I sighed, shifting the plastic bag of items from the drugstore. She gave me a hug. "I'll be out here in the hall."

The main nurse's station was across from the elevators and to the left was a round visitor's lounge. An intern was laughing it up with a nurse at the station. Good thing the huge desk was the dual-sided chastity belt model, I thought. The phone rang and the nurse finally answered it on the seventh ring. Down at the end of the hall on my right was a 4-foot statue of the Virgin Mary, her hands outstretched.

As I walked closer to the statue I remembered when I was 14-years-old and my Grandpa was dying of cancer and I was practically out in the hall thinking that I shouldn't touch the bed railing or anything else. But I moved forward as if guided. I still see his hand holding mine in the fading Sunday afternoon light and how his eyes suddenly lit up with a spark of life and he smiled and the fear left me and I think it left him, too.

But I still hated hospitals.

The hall smelled like bleach and antiseptic and air conditioning. The curtains in some of the rooms were closed to shade from the hot sunlight. I heard the sounds of “The Price is Right” TV show and the sloshy tumble of ice water pouring into a plastic cup in a room.

“How are you today, Mrs. Ellingsworth?”

“Fine,” croaked an old woman.

“We need to run some more tests,” the younger voice said.

I continued down the hall.

“Trent, I don’t know if I can live without you,” said a woman from the room across the hall.

An IV beeped.

“I’ll always be with you, in here,” the man said.

Here was Love unbroken, in a room at the end of the earth where Life mattered. I thought all of that had become extinct from the human condition, but, at last, here it was.

Then an oven cleaner commercial began.

Good gravy, I thought. I had been listening to a damned soap opera.

I was awash in sound waves of miracle cure pleas for aspirin preferred by eight out of 10 physicians, microwavable panaceas to end all meal-time dilemmas and rally the busy family unit to harmony in only five minutes, bleach that bleached better than other bleaches, a pain reliever better than aspirin that was preferred by doctors.

“Nnnnrrsse!” cried some distant thin-voiced old doll.

In another room an electric bed moved.

“Down,” a man snapped.

The bed moved again.

“Is that better?”

“Too high,” he barked. The bed went back up.

I approached the middle of the hallway.

“Nnnnrrsse! Nurse, help!” that one voice cried louder.

The P.A. announcement rang out: “Paging Dr. Mabry. Code Blue. Dr. Mabry...”

“Nnnnrrsse! Nurse, help. Nnrrsse, nnnrrsse!” cried the voice. The call light over her doorway was on. I looked in. She sat back against the headboard.

“Are you OK, ma’am?” I said.

“Nnnnrrsse!” she cried. “Nurse, help!”

After all that careful looking for 953, I found it: it was the last room on the left. I rolled my eyes. Couldn’t Julie have said *last room on the left*? I turned back toward the elevators and Julie waved and gave me a thumbs-up sign. I didn’t smile back. I walked in.

An older man in bed, who looked like some retired vice-president of an investment house, was holding an open *Wall Street Journal*. He wore pin-striped blue pajamas, cordovan slippers and a gold watch hung loose at his wrist. There was a box of chocolates and a blond woman at his side.

“My diabetes, Elise,” the man said. “My doctor doesn’t want me to eat sweets. But you know how much I love my sweets, don’t you?”

“Edwin, you should eat some of your breakfast,” Elise said, straightening his thinning hair. “For strength.”

“I’m strong enough,” Edwin bragged. “Besides, nothing tastes worse than cold hospital food.”

“Why didn’t you eat it when it was hot?”

“Because *hot* hospital food is the *second* worst-tasting food.” Then he coughed and couldn’t stop.

“Are you all right, baby?” Elise said.

“Excuse me,” I said. “Is this Room 953?”

“Yes,” Elise said, adjusting her red skirt over her black garters.

“This is my niece,” Edwin gasped.

“Huh,” I said. “I’m looking for my friend. He’s in 953.”

“Try next door,” Elise snapped, pointing to the closed curtain on my right. I moved toward the other curtain. Elise whipped the privacy curtain shut with the skill of a matador.

I drew open the other curtain. A smiley face helium balloon bobbed in front of me. There was a get-well plant in a football-shaped vase on the windowsill to my left. I stood in front of an IV machine and a bedside table tray and a night stand with a water pitcher and a drinking glass. On the right side of the bed was an orange vinyl chair with a half-read *People* magazine on the seat. The body in the bed was covered with a sheet.

“Pookoo!” Katlin yelled, his right hand throwing the bed sheet back.

“Jesus Christ!” I shouted, crashing into the bedside tray and the IV machine and grabbing at the curtain.

Katlin was amazed. “It’s like on cue.”

“You asshole!” I said, balancing the IV machine.

The curtain in 953-A ripped open across the ceiling track. Katlin’s did, too. Elise’s green eyes glared in.

“He needs to rest,” Elise hissed. “Do you understand that?”

“Ask that nut to knock off all that cuckoo crap,” Edwin called out. “Cuckoo, cuckoo. I’m tired of it. All damned night long.”

“*Do you understand?*” Katlin whispered.

“Do you understand?” Elise threatened.

I nodded.

“*Quit mocking me,*” Katlin whispered, talking to the wall at the foot of the bed.

“Quit mocking me,” Elise snapped. Then Elise looked confused – because he’d read her mind. She returned to Edwin.

“We understand.” I shut the curtain.

“This is too much,” Katlin said.

“You look like hell.”

He had a three-day beard and his hair was scraggly and he had a cravat bandage around his head. His eyes had blackened, like moist purple charcoal; the whites of his eyes were all scratchy red and the right one looked like it had a bloody crescent moon. His face was swollen and bruised from repeatedly head-butting his medicine chest. His javelin-throwing hand was in a soft cast while an ID bracelet and a Hep-Lock IV was attached to his left wrist. He was wearing a hospital gown, the kind of uniform guaranteed to strip all dignity from those who slipped one on.

“Dark place Hell. Dark. Dark as all Hell.”

The IV machine chirped. I heard the air conditioning. The IV machine chirped again.

He closed his eyes to slits, feigning sleep, and searched the room. Katlin jerked his head toward the privacy curtain and popped his eyes open.

“Pookoo,” Katlin whispered.

“What?”

“Go to the Light,” he told the privacy curtain, touching his hospital ID bracelet.

I spoke loudly. “They’ve got you on some strong drugs.”

“I’m not going to be here very long.”

“That’s good.”

Katlin pulled the bedside lap-table tray around on its wheels and propped open lid and looked in the mirror.

“13 stitches,” he said to the curtain.

“That’s what Julie said.” I’d seen his apartment. I believed it.

“Better not pull this IV out of my arm,” Katlin said to the curtain, switching hands. He peeled the bandage back and flinched at the eyes as the bandage snagged on the stitches. He kept peeling it back and flinching.

“Want some fresh water?” I said, standing up. I couldn’t watch. I took the plastic water pitcher off the tray and into the washroom. I let the water run cold then filled the pitcher and went back. He wasn’t tugging at his bandage. The tray was set back to normal. I poured water into a cup.

“*Bathroom water?*”

I sighed. I picked up the pitcher.

He put his hand up to stop me. He strained toward the cup and sipped from the straw. The cup started to tip over but I grabbed it and held on to it. His left hand bent the straw a little more. He sipped again and made a motion like he’d had enough and he fell back out of breath.

I rolled my eyes.

“I got these things for you,” I said, handing him the Walgreen’s bag.

Katlin sat up and put the bag in his lap to look at the items. He whipped his head over at the privacy curtain.

“Pookoo!” Katlin said.

“What?” I asked.

“Pipe down over there!” Edwin growled.

“Take a look,” Katlin said to the curtain.

“What medicine are you on?” I asked.

“Look, Aloe vera,” Katlin said, showing the curtain a can of Barbasol shaving cream. He showed the pack of disposable razors. He showed the comb and the little sample bottle of shampoo and a copy of *Sports Illustrated*. “Remember going into the Olympics? The three of us made the SI cover? ‘Good As Gold’ it said.”

“No.”

“Got a good look?” Katlin asked. There was no answer. He nodded and opened the shampoo. “Coconut! Yeah. Oh, yeah! I bet that smells really good, huh?”

“Who in hell are you talking to?” I asked.

Katlin dug around in the bag, like a kid at Christmas checking one last time under the tree. He pulled out a boxed pack of Marlboro Lights and showed the curtain again. “Pete’s trying to kill me with cancer!”

I snatched them away.

“Pete, tell Fowler I’m going back soon,” he said, finally addressing me. “Tell everybody at work. I’m going back soon.”

“When?”

“Not saying. But I will. I have to.”

“You need some rest,” I said, inching toward the door.

“I went to Hell.”

I nodded my head. We all have.

“No,” Katlin said, shaking his head. “I mean in the ambulance. I *died* in the ambulance. I left my body. I watched the paramedic working on my body but then I moved on and I ended up in total darkness. An abyss, absolute nothingness. Then I saw this light. The Light showed me my life. There’s a camera *right now* taking movies. The camera has filmed my whole life. It

has filmed *your* whole life. At the end of what I saw filmed I reached out for the Light but it faded away into the Abyss. Then I came back.”

The IV machine chirped through a few cycles.

“Huh,” I said.

“Good morning, Mr. Hillmacher,” a nurse said, walking into the room. “Time for your meds.”

“I’m going out for a smoke,” I said, moving out of the nurse’s way.

“He’s leaving now,” Katlin said to the wall.

I stepped outside and had two cigarettes with Julie. *I went to Hell. Go to the light. Pookoo. He’s leaving now. An Afterlife Camera.* What the hell *else* would Katlin say or do? I sighed and went back upstairs and down the hall again and down to his room.

He wasn’t there.

I went back to the Nurse’s station by the elevators and asked where Katlin was. The nurse pointed to the sun-drenched lounge.

The semi-round room was like a widow’s walk to the world: its ceiling-to-floor windows framed Lincoln Park, Belmont Harbor, the Lake and the great blue sky. The room had more of those orange vinyl-covered chairs and orange couches with blond wooden end tables and orange ceramic lamps. Katlin sat at a table writing steadily, looking out at the view once in a while then returning to his new red leather journal. He wore a sky blue robe, a hospital gown and his running shoes. The IV machine beeped. He turned around like he knew I was there.

I was going to ask him how he felt.

“I feel better,” Katlin said, smiling like he owned the world. He laughed and ran a finger under his hospital ID bracelet. I laughed. Good old Kat. Good. He was back to normal.

“That’s great,” I said, smiling. Everything had just been the medicine.

“Do you want to hear my account?”

“What account?”

“About it all. The Light. The Camera. And I saw him,” Katlin said, waving his journal at me.

“Saw who?” I asked, putting my hand out for the journal.

He touched his hospital ID bracelet again. “I can tell you. You’ll understand. I trust you. When I saw the Light, I saw *him*. I saw The Angel of Death.”



CHAPTER 8

The Angel of Death

The Angel of Death does not arrive in the form of a dark shrouded figure complete with scythe, but as a movie house usher with a flashlight. He leads you down the aisle.

The black limousine dropped you off. Walking past the angelic-faced crowd milling near the searchlights and marquee, you said a word into the microphone for the TV announcer and went in. The lobby's scent of popcorn with real butter and steamed hot dogs still lingers as you follow the usher down the aisle of the grand auditorium. The theater has a vast glitter-speckled ceiling, double balcony, box seats, stone-carved seraphs and gargoyles on the walls, and off to the right side of the orchestra pit a woman plays a pipe organ.

Ballpark-like vendors work the audience, selling popcorn, tossing bags of peanuts, pouring soda and beer; a cigarette girl strolls by you.

Hopefully no one is in your spot. If they are, you'll have to make do. The middle is *the* place. The usher stops and motions you into a middle row, halfway down to the curtain. You try not to step on anyone's feet. The seat, when finally reached, is cushioned in velvet and it even rocks: *you could stay here forever.*

The lights dim.

The room is pitch black. Someone coughs.

The air-conditioned theater is on the cold side; maybe you should have worn a jacket. It's too late now.

A stream of light, a mix of dust and smoke and celluloid, flows from the projectionist's booth. The Academy leader beeps, counting from 10 to two. The first frames flicker on the screen. At first the images are in black and white and very grainy. Two shadowy figures walk up a terraced hill in the darkness away from a '57 Chevy. It is then you realize the audience is made up of ghosts from the past; you sense their feathery weight, and it hits you: *you're dead.*

The frames flicker. You're in the movie of your life and you can feel and taste and smell and think what was being lived up on the screen. The ghosts behind you are a jury of truth. There you are in a darkened room existing in a captive way with the happiness or misery of your life, the joy, the heart-ache, the struggles, the drama, all of it. Pete is walking up behind me so I'll stop.

CHAPTER 9

The Elysium

Two days later the St. Sebastian's staff cut Katlin loose. Maybe he was taking up precious bed space that could be used for revenue-friendly patients who needed expensive but recommended tests and procedures. Katlin only had a concussion, after all. St. Sebastian's healed his physical wounds but failed to look inward. They just let him go.

I don't think they knew about his NDE – Near Death Experience. I don't think they knew about The Angel of Death or about any grand movie house or The Abyss or The Light or The Afterlife Camera. The research shows that most NDE-ers don't go around talking about it. To reveal one's journey to The Afterlife is to invite shame, ridicule and suspicion. Naturally, most NDE-ers keep it hidden, especially those who went to Hell or had a negative experience.

The day after Katlin was released I was back at his apartment door ready to head down to the Elysium. *Afterlife*, I thought. He was full of it.

He had shaved, his hair was washed and he wore a fresh cravat bandage but he still looked beat up. He still looked like hell.

The Elysium's work uniform included black pants, a white shirt and tie, and a red sport coat. We also wore a name tag.

When Katlin answered his door, he had on a new uniform. Katlin wore an ankle-length maroon-colored wool overcoat, tapered at the waist, which had epaulets and off-center brass buttons and black tuxedo pants. He wore a white shirt and a red tie, black leather shoes, his hospital ID wrist bracelet and a red-stained cravat bandage. The outfit would have looked geeky on any other human, but not on him. If you're forged by an insane amount of sit-ups and push-ups and five-mile jogs along Loyola Beach, you can wear anything. Cassandra could wear anything, too – although I'd never seen her slumping in any Salvation Army wear. They were a runaway couple. You've seen the type – the type that made what the rest of us wore look like body bags. I must have been staring at his ridiculous costume.

"You OK?"

"Yeah," I said. "Mind if I get a glass of water?"

He sorted through his mail. "Hustle it up."

I went into the kitchen and got a drink. The apartment smelled of fresh paint; the walls were white again and the javelins were all back in a row. The bathroom window and screen were fixed, a new medicine chest had been installed and the sink was scrubbed. Hospital-sized samplers of Listerine, soaps and shampoo were on the back of the toilet. Julie had done "a little cleaning up." A little super strength Clorox, a little damp mopping, a little deep industrial strength elbow grease, a little gallon of carpet shampoo, a little 40 oz. can of Lysol, a little airing out for several days, a little Super glue, yeah, that made everything all better.

"Something wrong?"

"Nope."

He shook his head. "I worry for you, Pete."

We walked down Sheridan Road at a pallbearer's pace. At every red light Katlin leaned on a newspaper stand or a mailbox; he was worn out. I smoked a cigarette and focused on all of the apartment buildings lined by full-leafed trees, the convenience stores, the coffee houses, a restaurant or two, some dry cleaners, a music store and a gas station. We eventually made it to the Elysium's wrought-iron gates.

“It looks like a cemetery, doesn’t it?” Katlin said.

It did. A wrought-iron fence enclosed the Elysium’s brick courtyard and tall marquee. The gothic theater was built in 1924. It used to be called The Hades. The original owner, a man named Mabus who was the bohemian son of a Chicago industrialist, was a Dante and Rodin fanatic (A series of framed photographs on easels that Fowler put up in the lobby proves it.) Painted inscriptions from *The Inferno* could be found all around, even up in the balcony, which was still closed off. Mabus had painted The Hades’ ceilings and the local press proudly called him “Rogers Park’s Michelangelo.” Even now, you can imagine him dangling on the scaffolding. According to one of the old newspaper clippings, the theater opened to a grand affair of pomp and circumstance. Mabus was quoted as saying he would book vaudeville acts to supplement his “flicker factory.” Another clipping reveals that Harry Houdini, the greatest magician of all time, even graced The Hades’ stage with an exhibition of “necromancing and magic.”

In 1929 the stock market tanked (and so did his family’s fortune). To make matters worse, Mabus had let a case of syphilis go untreated and he went mad and was shipped off to an asylum in the Illinois countryside. His family was forced to sell the theater.

New ownership took over, gutted out much of Mabus’ work, renovated to Art Deco and changed the name to the Elysium. Oddly, the gold-painted gargoyles were never removed. Plaster angels and nude cherubs with trumpets were added. I never found out if that owner was a Milton or *Paradisio* aficionado.

Ownership changed hands again; it would again and again. The last time the Elysium had a face lift, in the early 1970s, it was in the classic American mall-style. The logic must have been that if you couldn’t fight suburban flight, then one should imitate it. That was when the existing marquee was installed – splat right there in the courtyard itself. That was before Chicago zoning laws even considered a limit to commercial signs of height or size restriction in residential areas. ELYSIUM was written in blue neon serif-styled lettering and that had an occasional wiring short. The blue-white painted background was chipped and flaked and the flashing lights were always burning out on us.

Tim Fowler was the theater’s GM. He claimed to have once been an Equity actor but I saw no evidence of it other than an old Equity card with “Timothy Jonathon Fowler” typed on it and a framed collection of cast-audographed playbills from productions that he’d supposedly “been in.”

Fowler said he met his wife at The Body Politic Theater during a run of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*: he was “Puck” and she was the prop manager. By the time their second of three kids was on its way, Fowler had quit acting altogether to start his shining career as the Elysium’s General Manager. The Elysium was owned by The Xanus Corporation, which held onto the property for “future development.” In the meantime, Fowler was left alone to turn a profit if he could (he couldn’t). A Xanus rep swooped down on the Elysium on a quarterly basis to check on Fowler.

When Fowler first took over as GM, he stated that he had grand plans to restore the theater to its former splendor. Fowler had lettering put under the marquee and a 10-foot vinyl sign over the concession stand that read: RESTORATION SOON. The signs were only eight-years-old.

Katlin grabbed at a paper banner at the front door that read WELCOME BACK. He broke through to loud cheers, as if he were taking to a school football field.

“Welcome back!” the other employees called out.

Katlin smiled and waved.

“Give him some room!” I said, leading in front of him like a lineman.

“Look at those hot threads,” Rita purred.

“Good to see you again,” LaToysha said, staring at Katlin’s black eyes and bloodied head bandage.

“Whoa-o!” Fowler snickered, flashing a set of ill-fitted capped teeth. Fowler was 33-years-old but looked 48 on a good day. He was perpetually red-faced and his hair was thinning. He ran a finger against his pencil-thin mustache, shifted his bony shoulders in his red polyester sport coat and hunched forward with his hands on his hips. “What happened to the other guy, pal?”

“We heard about your accident,” LaToysha said.

Fowler coughed and cleared his throat. It was some sort of OCD thing. He’d clear his throat whenever he was rebuffed or ignored. Sometimes when he cleared his throat you thought Fowler was about to elicit something profound, but that never happened. I suppose he could’ve been a good guy if he ever joined the human race.

“Did you get stitches?” asked Jill, pointing to his head bandage.

Katlin nodded.

“How many stitches did you get?” Rita asked.

“13.”

“Oh, your hand’s broken,” Sonya mourned.

Katlin held it out; the concessionettes touched the sacred cast.

“We got you a little something,” said Wendy, a 19-year-old Poli-Sci Major at Mundelein, the Women’s college a block south of Loyola. She wore an Elysium polyester sport coat but mixed it with bell-bottoms, an embroidered white shirt, clogs and a velvet neck choker (Wendy had a penchant for neck chokers). She handed Katlin a gold-wrapped box, kissed him on the cheek and dissolved back into the crowd.

He gently shook the box.

“Open it up,” Wendy said.

“Don’t break it,” Rita pleaded.

“Shake it, baby, but don’t break it,” Sonya said in a sexy voice and they all laughed.

Katlin opened it up. One of the concessionettes saved the wrapping paper. The present was an over-sized gold coffee cup shaped like a two-handled trophy.

“Read it,” Rita said.

“OUR HERO,” Katlin read.

I rolled my eyes.

“Speech!”

“Speech!”

“Say something, Katlin!”

He paused thoughtfully then smiled and held the loving cup up with both hands like he’d just won The Masters. “I feel better – now.”

Katlin left them in his wake to go punch in.

“All right, all right, let’s break it up,” Fowler said, walking with his arms around two concessionettes. “You’re on the clock.”

Katlin used the handrail to drag himself up the darkened stairwell.

“Want to use the service elevator?”

“No.”

I checked my watch and ran around him.

“Oooh, our Nero!” I yelled back.

“He thinks he’s funny,” Katlin said to the empty space. I punched in with two clicks to spare. During my entire work career, I’d had no absenteeism or tardiness. He set the cup on the time clock and punched in. “I don’t drink coffee.”

“Don’t blame me,” I said. “I didn’t help get it.”

“What do I do with it?”

“It’s a cup.”

“What if she sees it?” Katlin said, showing the cup to the wall.

“Julie will think it’s sweet.”

“No, *Cassandra*.”

I rolled my eyes and shook my head. We walked down the badly-lit hall, slower now that we were on the clock.

“I *thought* I heard voices,” said Floyd, emerging from the bluish dark of the projection room. He’d been the Elysium’s projectionist for 27 years. Floyd Mackinaw was 6-foot-five and 425 pounds and every day he wore a daily uniform of khakis, short-sleeved shirts with a ribbed sleeveless t-shirt underneath (even in winter), and scuffed black loafers. His hair always looked like it was about to be combed.

“Floyd,” Katlin said, smiling.

“I knew you’d come back. Welcome back, Kid.”

Katlin thanked him.

“Ho-oh!” Floyd whistled. “Look at those shiners! Hand broken, too?”

Katlin nodded.

“Broke mine skiing once,” Floyd said, pointing to a scarred hand. “29 years ago up at Devil’s Head. This pretty little girl on the slopes was watching me – then boom! I wiped out! Broke my fall with my hand. I stood up and my hand flapped back like a hinge. Ripped all the tendons and ligaments, too. I can’t bend it back more than this. It don’t have much feeling even now.”

“God,” I said.

“How many stitches?” Floyd asked, pointing at Katlin’s head.

“13.”

“Take it easy tonight.” Floyd pointed at me. “Let this one do all the work for a change.”

They laughed.

“Hey,” Katlin said. “While I was gone, did you take that pretty wife of yours dancing a lot?”

“You know it,” Floyd beamed.

We turned to leave.

Katlin stopped. “Whatever happened to the girl on the slopes?”

“She’s my dancing partner,” Floyd grinned and he crept back into his booth and shut the door.

“Remember, Floyd said to take it easy. You can polish your trophy.”

We went downstairs and Katlin stood at the theater’s center doors. He lurched forward and held onto the door handles.

“They locked?” I asked, catching up with him. It was a dumb comment; the theater doors had no locks.

Katlin whipped open the doors and I flinched back and caught one before it hit me; the other door locked in place with a snap. Floyd was cuing up the trailers. A burst of synthesizer strings and rapid light of a film company logo filled the dark theater. A piano echoed its hollow notes as an extra-long trailer started.

Katlin walked down the center aisle soaking it all in. Gargoyles and angels stared back. He turned and looked back at the bluish-white shaft of

light coming down from the sky. He advanced toward the stage's apron, his wounded hand touching the red velvet backs of the seats. He bent down and touched the worn-out carpet. He hopped up on the stage like he was scaling a fence, but it must have hurt him because he held his side and he was bent over breathless in pain. The movie light played on him and he seemed to soak it in. Katlin dropped to his knees and covered his head with his good hand while the broken one reached for the light.

"Katlin!"

He didn't answer.

"Hey Kid, you OK down there?" Floyd's voice boomed.

Katlin wept.

The movie light and sound whirred to a halt. The house lights went up. I asked him what was wrong.

"That Light," Katlin said, still on his knees. "It's so beautiful."

"It's only a movie," I said, pointing at the screen. "The damned thing doesn't mean anything."

"I know," Katlin sobbed.

I went down to the stage and helped him back up.



CHAPTER 10

All For Minimum Wage

I tightened my Playtex rubber gloves, threw a pile of Comet cleanser into the toilet bowl and scrubbed. It never failed; as soon as I put on those rubber gloves, my face itched. I scratched my face with my forearm. I was ready to gag. I needed a Level “A” Haz-Mat suit.

The name PETE was written in permanent marker on the toilet brush handle. I did not write it out of pride, mind you – I just wanted to keep track of *my* brush. I balked at any work tools. I balked at my having to wear a name tag. I didn’t even have my own coffee cup at the Elysium. To me, that would have meant I was permanent.

I scrubbed.

I used to have my own business cards and letterhead. My name used to be painted on my glass office door. I used to give the final OK on retail flyer press runs up to 40 million copies. I’d wield my four-color pen like a Death Row-minded Governor: reprieved or stopped cold.

At Mehedrich & Associates I had my own coffee cup, a calculator, a loupe, and a line gauge that read millimeters, picas and points, inches and even the arcane measurement of Cicero. I had the *Chicago Manual of Style*, *Webster’s 9th*, the *AP Style Guide* and *Roget’s Thesaurus*. I had up-to-date maps of the world but I kept the old ones, too. I owned six suits. And Mr. Mehedrich never made me scrub toilets.

I kept watch in those first two days after Katlin returned to the Elysium. *I looked, I listened, I waited.* I hid sharp objects. Katlin didn’t talk about The Angel of Death or Hell or anything; he just hobbled around the Elysium like a wounded ghost with his headband and hospital ID bracelet.

The concessionettes stood and tore tickets, swept the carpets with the Hoke vacuum, ran the cash and receipts to Fowler, and helped me pick up the theater’s floor after a show. For the record, Katlin didn’t ask for their help – the concessionettes just beat him to it. For the first time in his life, Katlin was *slow*. He was still worn out. A trip to Hell will do that to you.

That summer it must have looked like a wasteland inside the Elysium because the concessionettes wore homemade sympathy ID bracelets and headbands. I called it Victim Wear. The patrons asked if it was some tie-in to that week’s disaster movie. No, it wasn’t a box office gimmick. In time, even some of the Elysium’s die-hard customers showed up in ID bracelet and headband or crutches like they were at some midnight cult showing in Fowler’s Theater of Pain. They were oblivious to The Truth.

Not everyone who went to the Elysium “got it”, but then again, there really was nothing to get. The Victim Wear wasn’t some Madison Avenue marketing ploy or performance art: the concessionettes were simply Katlin’s paddock of cheerleaders. *Accident? Accident? He hurt himself.* No one wanted to acknowledge what really happened. But if the concessionettes had known the real truth, I felt they’d have slashed their wrists or OD’d in some twisted act of solidarity.

Even Fowler and Floyd got into the *faux* pity act because they let the concessionettes take their hand and fit them with a bracelet. They sat as the nubile herd pressed close and wrapped cravat head bandages on them. Fowler squirmed in protest, back and forth with his head, and the girls had to re-bandage his head. He was a lousy actor.

“It’s your turn, Pete!” Sonya said.

“I’ll pass,” I said, smoking.

I looked, I listened, I waited. *Go to the light. Pookoo. I can tell you – I trust you. I saw him. I saw The Angel of Death. I went to Hell. Then I came back.* I looked, I listened, I hid sharp objects.

But my suicide watch was cut short after only two days. Julie took Katlin to Wisconsin.

“He needs to get away from the ills of the big city,” Julie said. “He needs fresh air, the kind of nights when you can see all the stars, not your dreams dying.”

That enabled me to get away from his orbit and remember that I had a life – or rather, that I *used to* have a life. Anna was pulling double shifts down at the restaurant raking in good tips and I didn’t see her at all that week. I did laundry and house cleaning and the grocery shopping. I had coffee in the mornings across the street at the Ennui Cafe. I scoured the newspapers for proofreading jobs. I wrote a little. I watched the Elysium employees go about their business in head bandages and ID bracelets, even though he was gone. And I scrubbed.

The office upstairs by the time clock looked like any other: it had paper clips and folders and filing cabinets and a phone.

Fowler’s *real* office was in the storage basement. It wasn’t so much as an office as it was Fowler’s hideout. The crumbling limestone walls were papered with faded and curled posters and framed reviews of all of the shows that Fowler said he acted in. (One clipping said that Fowler played “a convincing Willy Loman” but I took it that the critic simply meant that Fowler *looked* old.)

Fowler’s basement office, which had red and blue track lighting, was where he kept the books and the office safe, the velvet couches with clawed feet, all the fish and aquariums, eight life-sized plaster gargoyles from Mabus’ original theater, an old round-edged Frigidaire from the 50’s, six lava lamps and anything else he could get in there.

I was scrubbing away in Fowler’s basement bathroom when I heard the freight elevator descend. The doors opened.

“Shit,” Fowler said. “Look, another one. Zeus died.”

“The poor little thing,” Rita said.

“I don’t understand. I read the book, I bought the food, everything.”

“You poor guy,” Rita said.

Fowler had started with a single goldfish and a simple globe to keep him company in his subterranean den. Fowler named the fish Willy Loman. Willy died. Fowler bought another fish. It was named Felix. Felix died. Fowler named all of his fish after characters he supposedly had played on stage. But one aquarium wasn’t enough. The 10-gallon aquariums were in every corner, behind every velvet couch in his office and as part of a two-sided 20-foot lane that started at the elevator. Every one of the fish died.

I blasted the bowl with Formula 409 and swabbed the seat with an over-sized sponge.

“You should get a cat,” Rita said.

The humanity, I thought. Dead fish and dead cats everywhere. Fowler couldn’t tend to plants, either.

“Cats? But they’d eat the fish,” Fowler told her. “It’d look like Vietnam in here.”

“No. I mean *instead* of a fish. Cats are very independent. Hey, Fowler, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” he said, sounding all choked up.

“Tell me.”

There was a long silence.

“Vietnam,” Fowler said. “I was in Vietnam.”

“Oh my God. What was it like?”

I stopped scrubbing.

“Not bad for a war zone,” Fowler said.

“I didn’t know. Come here.”

I did a little math. The last U.S. troops pulled out of Vietnam when Fowler was in middle school. Didn’t they teach History anymore?

I rolled my eyes and poured out more Comet on the toilet to soak. I moved on to the medicine chest. I plain refused to touch the shower. They kissed, she moaned, I heard a zipper, a belt buckle jingled on the floor. That was my last cue to leave but the only way out was *through* the room and back up the elevator. Crap, I was trapped.

“Does this make you forget about the war?”

They kissed and moaned.

“What war?” Fowler said.

Rita laughed.

“What would your wife think of us, you know, like this?”

“Mrs. Virgin?” Fowler guffawed.

I went back to scrubbing the toilet.

They kissed and moaned some more but then Rita screamed.

“What?”

“You’ve *got* to take care of that. I can’t have him looking at me.”

“Don’t look,” Fowler said, kissing.

“Hey, I can get into a lot but not an audience.”

Fowler groaned.

“Go on. I’m serious, Fowler.”

“Come here, Zeus! Come here, boy!”

“Fowler, be careful!”

“He’s freakin’ dead!” Fowler said. “Oh, Christ. Don’t cry. Here. See? It’s OK. I played Father Murphy once. Sanctum gloria sanctum inner sanctum. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, it’s the River Styx or bust.”

Fowler entered the bathroom in his boxer shorts and Victim Wear and flicked the net toward the bowl. The dead fish hit me in the head.

“Jesus!” Fowler hissed, shutting the bathroom door. “Would ya’ freakin’ tell me when you’re cleaning?”

“OK,” I said, holding the toilet brush up. “I’m here.”

“Look,” Fowler whispered. “You got to get out.”

“So what will Mrs. Virgin think?”

“You sonofabitch. You wouldn’t. Oh, you wouldn’t. Don’t say a goddamned word, OK?”

“I’m just here to clean. You told me to.”

“Clean later,” Fowler whined, leaning against the door’s mirror and rubbing his forehead while I scrubbed. “Aw, shit! Don’t clean any of them. Is that what you want, Warner? You know, I can’t just *ask* anyone around here to work. No. You all have to be *bribed*. What do *you* want?”

“I want my old job back.”

“If I was God,” Fowler shrugged.

I stared at Fowler and flushed the toilet.

Fowler coughed.

“Baby, I’m getting all cold out here,” Rita said.

“Coming!” Fowler yelled.

“You are? What are you doing in there?”

“Rita, you’re a kinky individual, that’s why I adore you!” Fowler said. “Hey, Warner, just clean later. I’ll create a diversion. Now don’t be so glum.”

At least your wife still loves you.”

“Huh,” I said, taking the dead fish off the floor and placing it in the bowl. I flushed Zeus to The Great Beyond. “Try not to kill anything else.”

“Hey, women fall for that tragedy shit,” Fowler said, smoothing his head bandage. “Those fish are the best 99-cent investments in the world. Now not a word.”

Fowler The Fish Killer dashed out into the main room and leaped over the backside of the velvet couch and the two of them giggled it up. I looked out and saw that they were covered up in a blanket with their clothes in a pile on the dirty mock-Persian rug. I escaped in the elevator.



CHAPTER 11

The Wrigley Suit

It had been a week of long, uneventful nights of chores and cigarettes, but that summed up almost every night I ever worked at the Elysium. It was 12:30 a.m. I was happy to get the hell out of there.

I triple-checked that the front door was locked then crossed the cobblestone courtyard and stopped to padlock the front gate at the sidewalk. I looked up through the orange light pollution and clouds at the only star in the sky. I yanked at the padlock then headed north on Sheridan Road to the pop of distant firecrackers. Above the tree line I saw the last of a Fourth of July bottle rocket.

I heard more firecrackers and saw another rocket over the treetops. Would some drunken idiot shoot one onto my apartment building's roof and set it on fire? *Untitled* had been entombed in a black satchel since graduation except for when I'd take it out and essentially stare at it. It should have been titled *Unfinished*. I told myself: finish the book, Pete, or go sell the computer at the pawnshop and buy a Smith & Wesson and finish the book *that way*.

I was about a block from home, checking for my keys, when I came across a "honey-do" list I'd scrawled out in the few passing teeth-gnashing moments I had with Anna-Krista.

TAMPAX MAX (Super)
cigs >
MB Lights
Benson & Hedges Ultra Light Menthols 120's box
choc ice cream (cheap)

I went back three streets near the Elysium to the White Hen Pantry convenience store. My eyes scoped the crowd for who would be the psychotic with a gun and ski mask and I was pleased that only three or four customers fit the bill. It was 12:45 a.m. but I had to wait four deep at the check-out counter. The guy in front of me bought chocolate milk and a Penthouse. I pulled out my honey-do list and recited Anna's Benson & Hedges brand for the clerk.

The clerk pulled out a pack from the overhead rack. He gave me the wrong pack. He tried three more times.

"Close enough," I said.

"Welcome to our country," the customer in back of me said to the clerk. "Take some fucking English lessons."

I turned around and locked eyes for a micro-moment. Then I thought *he* might have the gun and ski mask combo (well, the *gun*, at least). I snatched up my stuff and skedaddled.

Up near my house I passed Leona's, its sidewalk cafe empty now except for a kitchen worker who was using a garden hose to spray off the patio. He mindlessly let the hose spray in one spot so much, I thought he was going to hose off a layer of concrete. Further ahead I passed the closed Egyptian falafel carry-out place, a hair salon, the guitar repair shop with painted window fronts that sometimes had a Rolls Royce parked in front, and the Cafe Ennui coffeehouse at Sheridan and Lunt Avenue. The cafe was the other reason I moved to this segment of Rogers Park.

Ennui's night-time lights were on. A frothy *café au lait* was the last thing I needed anyway so it was just as well the CLOSED sign was on the door.

Sonny's Chafi convenience store, which shared the corner of my 60-unit building, was still open. I could have gone there with my honey-do list but 1) I didn't really think of it, and 2) to be honest, I didn't really want Sonny to know my wife was riding the red wave. I used to buy my condoms down at the White Hen when we first moved in but I eventually stopped buying them. Anna-Krista and I tried hard for a child. We used all the methods like taking her temperature to gauge the optimum time and charts and my wearing boxer shorts. When nothing happened, as time passed and reality set in and the drunken nights became the standard, we'd throw blame across the room at each other. At the end of each session all our old ghosts floated to the top like dead carp in the Rock River.

I put my key in the sidewalk gate and went through the big hollow lobby, past a large blank wall and around our storage space and I climbed the three flights to our apartment. I didn't hear music at the top of the stairs from either apartment like I sometimes did. I opened my door.

"I'm home." I put my knapsack and the bag on the brown velvet wing-back chair in the front hall area.

No answer.

No dog greeted me at the door, either.

I tossed my keys on the phone table and peeked in at the bedroom. I saw two dirty laundry baskets and the unmade bed. On my way back through I shut off the dripping water faucet.

I didn't see a note next to the phone or in the kitchen, nothing out in the living room on the coffee table or in The Ing Room. Anna named our second bedroom The Ing Room when we first got the place.

The Ing Room was a circular-shaped room with an antique settee with blue corduroy-padding, 7-foot tall cabinet bookshelves, brass-handled oak filing cabinets and a writing desk as big as a door commanding a southern and eastern view made by four large windows. The room was for reading, napping, conceiving, thinking, looking and my writing.

A framed print of Andrew Wyeth's *Evening at Kuerner's* hung over the settee. In the cold, leafless months I could see Lake Michigan not even 300 yards to the East. I could see the lake through a lot of leafless tree branches, but it was my Lake view. Along with the hardwood floors and Ennui were big selling points to taking the apartment. Sometimes at night I could hear the waves breaking down on the beach.

There wasn't a note in the kitchen. I put a piece of leftover chicken on a plate into the living room and sat on the tan sectional sofa I remembered paying cash for. I waited for the top of the hour to catch CNN's *Headline News*. The chicken was good, even with the artery-clogging fat on it, and I washed it down with a bottle of Coors. I looked over at the single French door of The Ing Room then I watched TV up through the Sports segment. The phone didn't ring. The beer tasted good and I thought of my rule that I wouldn't ever drink and write. It was a good rule.

I flipped through channels and watched an infomercial on how-to-play the "Star Strummer" guitar. I was amazed at the crap they broadcast while most of the first-shift world slept. The guitar looked easy to play and it came with a songbook and a tape or CD and a money back guarantee and three easy payments of \$39.95 each. It looked fun and I knew a lot of the songs from when I was a kid. While on the phone I was informed my VISA was maxed out.

I grabbed my cigarettes and went into The Ing Room. My dog's choker collar jingled at me there on the doorknob of the French door. The overhead light was too harsh. I stood up on a chair and removed the cover

and unscrewed the 100-watt light bulb and took it into the kitchen. There weren't any new bulbs in the kitchen. I switched it for the one over the kitchen table. I got another beer and walking back in the living room.

I powered up the stereo. I tossed in David & David's *Welcome to the Boomtown* album and its bleak chords of truth made its mark like a soul tattoo. It was the best album of the 80s. I zapped the stereo with the remote and turned the volume down to 3 as the soundtrack filled the apartment. I opened a window, booted up my computer and sat down. I got up and took out my Webster's *Ninth Collegiate* and the Roget's. The phone did not ring. I lit a cigarette but just to be safe I took the ashtray and flushed the old ashes and butts down the toilet.

"Shit!"

I ran to the phone alcove and rushed the ice cream to the freezer. It had melted but it would be OK. I took the Tampax box out and put it in the linen closet. I returned to The Ing Room. The distant firecrackers were just too much. I shut the window, flicked a fan on and lit a cigarette.

I clicked on a file and read over an old sketch I wrote after Mehedrich & Associates closed.

THE WRIGLEY SUIT

By
Pete Warner

Anna and I waited in the thick crowd on the corner in front of Cubby Bear on our way to the Cubs game. We'd been living in Chicago for two years. I felt someone's hand on my shoulder.

"You bastard, Peter," the man shouted, touching my camel hair coat lapel and throwing himself back as if he got an electric shock. "You sold out!"

I didn't recognize Ted Bowers at first. He was 40 pounds heavier and his hairline was back in Indiana. Ted worked on the college newspaper with me as a photographer. His sole claim to fame was taking that picture of Katlin qualifying for the Olympics.

"Hi Ted. This is my wife Anna. And you are?" I said, asking the woman who was with him.

"My God," Ted said, "you sold out."

"I'm Helen," Ted's wife said, shaking my hand.

"This guy sold out!" Ted yelled to everyone on the street corner. "You were our last hope. You sold out! You were supposed to be a writer. Did you quit writing?"

"I still write. Going to the game?" I asked, steering Anna and myself away from him and to the ticket gate.

"But did you get *published*? No? No. You did quit! And you're a *suit*. Oh, God. They got you. You're a damned suit. Peter. Oh, God."

"I've got a career," I said, smiling.

"Look how bad you got it." He patted the lapels of my suit coat. "It's *Saturday*! You're at Wrigley Field! You're wearing a *suit*. Do you think there's a nine-inning *play*? Aw, Jesus, oh, Peter, you brown-noser. Jeez-zus!"

"Oh, Ted," Helen said.

"Everyone gets a job, Ted," I said.

Ted and I were part of the black sheep crowd – anti-purveyors of collegiate pop culture: poets and writers, artists, actors, photographers, editors, a guitarist or two. We listened to The Clash and Elvis Costello,

Benny Goodman and Billie Holliday, the Beatles, and Sun Records rockabilly. We wore Army fatigue jackets, and ripped jeans before they were fashionably “distressed”; Chuck Taylor low-tops, Salvation Army bargains, ink on our fingertips. We lived on coffee, cigarettes, gyros, \$2 six-packs, and our gin mixed into anything. We would end up as telemarketers or millionaires. It was all or nothing. We weren’t going to work 9 to 5 for two weeks vacation and a pension and a gold watch. That meant death. A suit was a mark of giving up on your dreams. A suit was what they buried you in.

“What do *you* do?” Anna asked.

Ted reached into his pocket, took out a business card holder and handed her a card.

“Photographic supply sales,” Ted said, perking up. “Good money in it. So, Pete, what happened to you?”

“Poetry doesn’t pay the rent. What happened to *you*, Ted?”

“College loans, two kids, a mortgage, you know – what *everyone* has.” He showed us pictures of his two kids. Anna and I didn’t make eye contact with each other.

I finished reading the sketch, shut down the computer and closed down the house for the night. Reading over old work or tweaking a word or two isn’t the same thing as *actual* writing. But I had to get to bed because I’d snagged a great job interview in the morning. I looked at my watch and deliberately latched the front door chain but then unhooked it. I lay in bed in the dark and smoked a last cigarette (yeah, I know). An ambulance and fire truck screamed by and I got up and tossed the ashes down the toilet then laid back down and finally shut my eyes at 3:27 a.m. Anna-Krista was still not home but this wasn’t the first time.



CHAPTER 12

Public Relations Man

The hot job ad I called about early that week read

ADVERTISING/PUBLIC RELATIONS
Immediate Opening Experience Preferred

so I suited up the next day for my 10:30 appointment. I left a note for Anna, who still wasn't home, and took the train downtown through River North past the old office (I felt a stab of pain when I saw my old Mehedrich office window). The train passed The Merchandise Mart, continued across the Chicago River and down into The Loop. I got out at the Jackson stop and worked my way to the plaza where Alexander Calder's sculpture "Flamingo" stood. For luck I reached way up and patted where Calder had blow-torched his initials onto the orange-red I-beam.

Advertising/Public Relations, I thought. Huh. I *almost* had a Minor in Advertising Communications. I hadn't worked in The Loop yet. The train ride would only be a few extra minutes to what I was used to. I still had time to roll over my 401k without penalty. It would be good to be back under medical and dental insurance. My upper left wisdom tooth had been whipping my ass lately from all the free Milk Duds and Junior Mints and pop I'd scarfed at the Elysium. Ah, insurance. I could get my tooth fixed and enjoy hot and cold foods and drinks again without that periodic stab of pain. I could even get a full physical. After the interview I planned to celebrate by stopping in at that florist's in River North where I'd pick up a dozen for Anna and a bottle of Taittinger's.

The traffic was heavy down there (it always was in the daytime) but I made good time. 10:25. I was pumped up because the interview was being held at Poseidon's, the Windy City's legendary upscale seafood place. When I went to work at Mehedrich & Associates my second interview was at Chan's in River North.

"That means they want you," my father once said. "If they want to take you for a gyros, don't bother."

I announced myself at the Hostess' desk, saying I had a 10:30 appointment with Joseph Sartina, and checking her book, she walked me through the restaurant. Poseidon's had cherry paneling and sconce lights and charcoals and burgundy with leather chairs and booths. I'd heard all about Poseidon's but had never been here. The hostess told me to wait in the bar.

I was the only one in the bar. The bartender asked what I'd like.
"A job."

He served me a cold look. His name tag read RICK.

"Not your job."

"You wouldn't want my job," Rick told me, pouring a bucket of ice in a bin behind the bar.

I admit, I had given Bartending some thought while perusing the pages of *The Reader*. The free weekly newspaper came out on Wednesdays; by Friday, it was hard to find a copy. *The Reader* was the directory for the local music and arts scene. It printed in three or four tabloid-sized sections. Its potpourri of social issues, irreverent insight, entertainment section, whacked-out cartoons, and classifieds including an alternative job section slaked the thirst of the college population and

bar crowds. The funky job section offered promise to creative types and slackers. *The Tribune* and *Sun-Times* dailies were where you found *Fortune* 500 or factory employment. The job ads in *The Reader* promised a haven from 9 to 5 and the grind of the city. Make money *and* have fun *and* do what you love. One recurrent ad was for a three-month night course in Mixology.

Rick asked me again what I wanted to drink. Scotch. A Bloody Mary. I thought of my interview and ordered a Coke instead. I watched as he filled a glass using the fountain controller. He placed the Coke on a napkin that rivaled most wedding invitations in quality of paper.

“\$3.75,” Rick said. What a rip, I thought. I fished for four singles but only found a ten. “What do you do?”

“I’ve been in Pre-press.” Rick put my change on the bar and gave me the customary *what the hell is Pre-press look*. “And advertising. And I write.”

I failed to let him know my guardian muse was currently on sabbatical and hadn’t left a forwarding address.

“Got a cousin who writes.”

Everybody knew a writer, one of us countless hacks trying to fit in an hour or two or more in between a job and bills and a home life. But why did people point out other writers to me? *I know a writer, Pete. Hey, maybe you could meet on the island colony of mental lepers and read each other’s stories so I don’t have to.* To be a writer was unique, I thought. But in moments like this I’d find I was merely in the back of the line that wrapped around the street corner at OfficeMax. But I still felt I could reach my goals – if it weren’t for writer’s block, that is. Or if it weren’t for procrastination or sex or the lack of it or drink or a thousand other road blocks on the gravel path to Literary Eternity.

“Yeah, my cousin’s got some business books published,” Rick said. “Motivational crap. What about you? Are you published?”

There it was again. That put me under a spotlight and beat me with a rubber hose feeling – *are you published?*

“Well, I, uh, had some poems in local magazines. College anthologies. I’m working on a short story now.”

Oooh. A short story. A one-page rough draft of nothing. Oooh. And it’s called “The Proofreader.” Don’t strain yourself, Pete.

Rick didn’t say anything else.

“Who does your cousin’s proofreading?” I asked, taking a big sip and chewing on an ice cube using the good side of my mouth. Rick didn’t answer because he was stiff at attention yet kept cleaning the bar. I turned around and faced a heavyset man in his 50s wearing a blue linen suit.

“I’m looking for an Advertising man.”

I quit chewing on the ice cube.

“That would be me.”

“Joey Sartina,” he said, his hand extended. I introduced myself. He had a nice Rolex and a good-sized diamond ring in a gold nugget setting that bit when we shook hands. Mr. Sartina put an Italian shoe up on the bar’s brass foot railing and told the bartender he’d have the usual.

“On time. I like that,” Sartina said, checking his watch. “I’m a get-to-the-point guy. I need an Advertising man. It pays \$12.50 per hour.”

It wasn’t \$50K but I nodded. I looked forward to many years of service.

“I need you to start right away,” Sartina said.

I told him it would be no problem.

“Good,” he said, smiling. He extended his hand and I shook it; the ring

bit again. "Good."

"Do you want my resume?" I said, opening my mock-leather folder.

He shrugged. "Give it to Rick here. But you better get upstairs."

"What?"

"I'll walk you up and show you."

We went through the dining room to the kitchen doors and treaded across the slick-tiled floor through the gauntlet of chefs and bus boys and dishwashers and servers and a manager or two. I followed him up a staircase then down a hall to a storage closet that he unlocked.

He clapped his hands once. "Get cracking."

I saw a vacuum.

He jaunted down the hall and ran back with a stack of red and white paper equivalent in thickness to three reams of luncheon and dinner fliers.

Ah, Advertising. I scanned them. The design was simple, I would have put it on better stock but it felt good, once again, to look for printed errors.

"May I use a desk?"

"I want you to go as far as Union Station and back until they're gone."

Advertising. Well. I was pretty rusty at reading between the lines.

"You want me to pass out fliers?" I said.

"I'll shut the door so you can change."

"Change?" I asked, grabbing the door from him.

"Into the suit," he said, pointing.

It was a Maine Lobster costume. Lenny the Lobster.

"I'm not wearing that."

"It was a deal. We shook hands."

"But – I'm not – in a –" I stammered.

Sartina frowned. "Are you a *king*?"

No, I wasn't.

"You need a job, money, right?"

I admitted that I did.

"I need someone to pass out fliers in 20 minutes," Sartina said. "From 11 to 1. I pay cash."

I'd dragged myself all the way down to The Loop, and in the hullabaloo I tipped Rick the bartender my last \$6.25 on a half-empty Coke. So what if I was eight miles from home? A lobster suit. No. No, I couldn't do it. I could do a lot. I could stoop pretty far but not that far.



CHAPTER 13

The 6-foot Lobster

I was the only six-foot lobster in wing tip shoes on West Jackson Boulevard that day. To persuade me, Joey threw in a free lunch. The damp foam suit had a smell of sour sweat from the person before and the person before that. I walked – or rather, scuttled – up to Union Station and back and back again.

It was impossible to pass out fliers with my right claw so I removed it and carried the fishnet basket in my left claw.

I tried passing out fliers like Joey wanted me to, “no homeless bums”, only business types and well-heeled families on vacation. The tourists were easier to spot: they were in packs of two or more, not in business uniform, walking much slower, more weight packed on at the ribs and face or even a tan, not that city pallor one gets because of the smog that acts as a second ozone layer keeping out those UV rays. The tourists in Union Station to the Board of Trade and to the DePaul Music Center also didn’t carry a general malaise of expression on their faces, that *eh, I’m going to work* look.

Some people took their picture with me. Some avoided me like I was the lead rat on a European gangplank in the Black Death Age, as if the illness or circumstance which possessed me to be in a lobster suit might leap from me and infect them. At 12:02 I was knocked down by the starving horde. My flyers scattered across the sidewalk.

I was followed by some idiots who kept calling, “Lenny! Hey, Lenny!” until I remembered I was Lenny – the name LENNY was embroidered in yellow on the back of my waist jacket. I was the target of many epithets and a lot of people on the sidewalk and from cars wanted to boil me just to hear if I truly screamed. Somebody wanted to crack my claws. At a stoplight while in a big crowd I felt a tug on my shell.

“You must be dead,” a boy said. “Only 1 in 10 million live lobsters are red. If you were alive you’d be greenish-black on the top, on the carapace, and orange underneath and blue accents on your claws.”

I turned back around and waited for the green light.

“You’ve got pincers but you’re missing eight legs,” Fact Boy said, now in front of me. “That’s really more like a crab.”

“Thanks.” If a proofreader hated anything in this world, it was being told he was wrong.

“The American lobster, or *Homarus americanus*, is a decapod. It has ten legs. And lobster eyes are on movable stalks. Each stalk can have up to 10,000 facets and they see in dim light. But in the daylight they’re pretty much blind. Yours look more like crab eyes.”

“I didn’t make the suit.”

“So they see in black and white,” a man said from the crowd. “Kinda like dogs.”

The light was red.

“They touch, taste and smell more than anything,” Fact Boy said. “By shape or feel, if they’re blinded. Lobsters are scavengers. The world record weight for an American lobster is 20 kilograms, or 45 pounds. The oldest Maine lobster on record is believed to be 100-years-old. But on average, Maine lobsters are taken at seven or eight years.”

Eight years. No use in building a 401(k), I thought. The light mercifully turned green and I scuttled across the street away from the kid and

the crowd. I was back across the plaza where Calder's sculpture was. I sat down on the bench and took off my wing tips. Wing tips are only made for those who commute or walk 45 feet to the water cooler or washroom, not for long distance walking. It's a method of torture somewhere in the world. *Here: wear these. Now tell us about the secret plans.* I rubbed my black stocking feet. I sat there in a numb haze until an old-timer in a grimy Bears' Super Bowl XX cap stopped in front of me.

"Mister," I said. He started to totter off. "Sir? Got a smoke?"

"Don't call me sir," he said, coughing. "I worked for a living."

He wasn't fazed by my outfit. He dug in his pants pockets and withdrew a crumpled pack of Kools. (Menthols taste like burned candy canes.) But considering my cigarettes were back at Poseidon's, and the maxim was that 'beggars can't be choosers', I thanked the old fart for the cigarette. The tip felt ever so lightly damp; I hoped it was wet because of the humidity. He gave me a light. I nodded thanks. I sat back and he took up the other side of the bench with me.

He was wheezing badly. He was a crusty war-horse, his face all craggy and pockmarked, simple and hard like a wood carving of a New England fisherman. He wore suede Puma tennis shoes, ripped blue chinos and a nylon dart league jacket with two war medals pinned to the front. I sat there a good five minutes letting my feet breathe, sharing the view with him, wondering what his deep blue eyes had seen in a lifetime, the world history and changes he lived through, where he had been, what he had done.

War-Horse looked at me and smiled.

I smiled back.

"You know," War-Horse said, pointing at me, his medals jingling. "I got a case of them crabs in Kansas City, right after the war."

"Oh, really?" I threw the moist-tipped cigarette down. My shoes were on. I stood up.

"Never figured out who I got them from. Hey! Lenny, aren't you gonna tie your shoelaces?"

I limped a block west diagonally through the plaza, back up closer to the train station. I looked back. War-Horse hadn't followed me. I leaned against a wall and tucked my shoelaces in the sides of my shoes. I passed out some more fliers. I was about a fourth through the stack. I was on the bridge there at the river and Union Station when it started to rain.

I tried to go inside but a security guard said NO SOLICITORS so I dragged my tail across the bridge back towards the restaurant. The foam suit soaked up the rain. I slogged my way back to Poseidon's. The fliers were ruined.

I waited at a stoplight next to a crying baby.

"Oh, look," the mother said, pulling on me. "He won't bite, he won't bite. Shake Mr. Lobster's paw. Shake his paw. See?"

Where was Fact Boy when I needed him? It was a *claw*, not a paw.

"Mommy!" an older boy said. "Look, Mommy, play dead!"

I rolled my eyes and turned and stared at the boy. Enough. I'd been boiled and buttered, with people trying to crack open my claws all day long. But that was it. Play dead. I wielded a claw at the tyke to reprimand him but the kid was pointing, too, and there alongside the building on the sidewalk War-Horse lay with his legs curled up and his eyes open and his mouth open in an eternal gasp and the rain did not stop.



CHAPTER 14

Money, It's a Drag

It's hard to turn down a free meal and cash when you're unemployed. I went back the next day to the lobster gig. I didn't have any appointments lined up but I dropped resumes off in The Loop beforehand. The strangest thing happened. I went to Walgreen's and got an over sized plastic sand pail with a lid for my fliers and I brought a pair of tennis shoes and covered both blisters with a Band-Aid. I did so well I ran out of fliers and had to get more back at Poseidon.

How? Rick the bartender and Jose Ceurvo helped. For the sheer dread of my two-hour stint I had three shots of free booze; they worked pretty quick, especially on an empty stomach. Two blocks from Poseidon I was at a corner and involuntarily started to dance to a car's music.

"Hey, Lobster Man," the driver called out. "Give me one of those fliers!"

I did. That's the day the spirit visited me, the day I was taken. If I acted like I was *alive* then the more fun it all was.

I'd hit upon that it was easier to get by giving. I turned it into a show. I didn't look like I was on a death crawl to a pot of boiling water. I took my tennis shoes and sand pail and went to work. Instead of retreating into (dare I say it?) my shell, I *became* Lenny the Lobster.

I scuttled about The Loop and did tricks: I fetched a rolled-up copy of *New City* (a thinner version of *The Reader* newspaper). I cajoled pedestrians (usually tourists) into throwing the paper down the sidewalk. I danced to car music at stoplights. In the days to come I even juggled three slightly-weighted down taped shut Styrofoam doggy bag containers to keep with the food motif. Crowds gathered to watch my simple street theater. After a couple of tricks I'd pass out fliers. They came to me like pigeons and I was saved miles of walking. Volunteers from the crowd would hand out the fliers for me while I did my tricks. A little dance, a trick – and off they'd go with my message.

\$25 cash and a lunch. All Rick would have to do is keep the Ceurvo flowing and all Joey had to do was to make more fliers. I even caught a few typos that were on the flier.

As of my lobster gig, I didn't tell Anna-Krista. I didn't tell anyone else about my alter ego, Lenny the Lobster.

But every day I went back downtown and donned the costume, and in the end I even ended up losing about 15 pounds. I ate like a king and the free tequila was all right, too. Joey was too cheap to pay for any dry cleaning so I took eight air fresheners and duct-taped them at strategic parts in the suit and that helped a little. I was a good lobster. But I wasn't having any luck finding a real job down in The Loop or anywhere else. Sobered up, I realized that maybe I should have been juggling a briefcase, a phone and a computer mouse out on the street corner with a sandwich board that read

WILL WORK FOR
40K/year
PLUS PERKS.



CHAPTER 15

The Dream Girl

A week later another dead-end job interview was over by 10:30 so I beat it down to The Sutton Grill and got a table by one of the huge picture windows. It was Monday; Poseidon's was closed. I pulled out my Pen-Tab notebook. The sun was too bright so I put my Ray-Bans back on and lit a Marlboro Light. I took my Cross pen out of my suit's inside left pocket and began. I looked out the window. The pen touched paper.

I reworked the sentences I'd written about standing at the EL tracks at night in winter. I forgot to look out the restaurant window and kept writing. The waitress asked if I wanted a drink.

"When my other party arrives."

I wrote some more.

I didn't think about writing, or the blood and bones motor skill of holding the pen. I didn't think of the callous above the top joint of my middle finger's left side, or the bend in my back as I leaned into the table, or why, when you stopped, you felt the pleasant burn in the shoulders from it. It was automatic now. It felt good.

Doing what I loved I no longer felt any of the mundane inadequacies that visit a human being on a daily basis; there was no waiting, it was doing. I was whole. I was what I wanted to be.

I was no longer in a half-busy restaurant surrounded by five million people; I was alone on a beat-up wooden platform watching a train leave, the snow falling, the December cold biting at me. I knew what to write next so I stopped and closed the notebook. I looked outside for Julie. I'd forgotten about the picture window being there. No one was staring, but still, I felt bad. What was I? Some dog for sale? *The Hunger Artist*? I resolved to get a table in the back next time. I was done writing so I was safe to order a drink. I ordered a Tanqueray and tonic. The sidewalk in front of the picture window was littered with people. Some were tourists, some were workers; I knew by sight who'd take a flier and who wouldn't. I almost opened the Pen-Tab again but no. I knew where I left off; I knew what was next. Let it simmer, I thought. I pocketed my sunglasses. The drink came and I sipped it and skimmed over the last few entries in my notebook, ones I hadn't keyed into the computer yet. I smoked.

"Hello, Mr. Hemingway," Julie said.

"Not in our time," I said, still reading.

Then I looked up.

Julie's hair was colored reddish-black, cut short at her neck – a pixie-style with gentle spikes. The hairstyle accented how thin her face had become. She wore a maroon blouse with a flared collar that was opened by one button, a long black linen skirt that caressed her hips, black velveteen shoes with chunky heels, and a gold ankle bracelet. Her eyes were a rich, warm brown and her lips were painted reddish-black.

I rose from my chair. "My God."

"I worry for you, Pete," Julie said, laughing.

I was speechless.

Julie sat down and pointed to my drink. "Say, that's not fair. You have a head start on me. What are you drinking?"

"Beefeater and tonic," I said, sitting.

She scrunched her lips. "What should I have?"

"Thought you don't drink on lunch?"

"I'll just have one," she said. "But I'll make it one good one. Thought you don't drink and write?"

"I finished my day's work."

The waitress arrived with menus. Julie ordered a Margarita. I ordered another Tanqueray.

"Lobster?" Julie asked from behind the menu.

"*What do you mean?*"

"For lunch."

"Oh. They must pay well at the bank."

Julie ordered a Caesar Salad with lobster chunks. I skimmed the menu for Julie's sake (vaguely recalling one ate fast on lunch hour). I ordered the marinated London broil steak salad, served with cucumber and mixed baby greens in an orange soy vinaigrette with cellophane noodles. The waitress left.

"The four of us ought to go out to dinner sometime."

"I don't even know the waitress."

Julie looked at me wide-eyed, then laughed.

"OK," I said, hands up. "The four of us."

"How's your job search?"

"I interviewed today. Big Law firm."

"Great! Julie said, touching my forearm.

"Not great, I'm overqualified. \$8 an hour. They know I'd leave as soon as possible. I would. They want a college grad fresh from the cradle that they can work to death for 18 months. But they'll get that experience and quality, too. Enough of me. How's work?"

We had a second and third drink. When Julie left for the restroom I lit a cigarette and watched the people in the restaurant. An elderly couple walked to the cash register and the woman touched my shoulder.

"Your wife is so beautiful," the woman said, pointing toward the bar. "Her skin is so perfect."

Julie held onto the back of the barstool, leaned in, her face glowing with life, and laughed. She walked back to our table.

There is nothing in this world like a happy woman, I thought. In her face I saw the sun of twenty thousand dawns, felt the breeze along a country road in the haze of Michigan summers, smelled juniper candles burning low out on a porch beneath the stars as the crickets spun their music like dreams.

I muttered.

"What?" Julie said.

"Smoke?" I said, offering her the pack.

"No. I'm being good," Julie said. I took one out and lit it. "Oh, Pete, you said you wanted to hear about Wisconsin."

I wished I hadn't.

They left very early Friday morning (Julie had two comp days to use) and drove I-94 along Lake Michigan and cut over on Highway 41 to the EAA Air Museum in Oshkosh, where the large annual fly-in is held. Julie rented a wheelchair and pushed Katlin around as they looked at vintage war bird planes. In Appleton they stopped at the Houdini Historical Center and saw the Sidney H. Radner Collection of Houdini artifacts, handcuffs, strait-jackets, and wall-sized billboards in the staircases. They went up to Oconto County and made it to the campground before dusk. Julie led as they made camp; she used to go with her father.

The next morning, Saturday, Katlin woke to a campfire breakfast of eggs and bacon. Then they fished. Katlin got a bite.

“Don’t just watch it, reel it in!” Julie said, bumping into his side.

Katlin reeled while Julie held the net and scooped it in. Julie unhooked the fish and held it steady. The fish’s gills puffed for air.

Katlin took the fish.

“Houdini escapes!” Katlin said, tossing it back in the water.

“That was our lunch!” Julie yelled, watching the fish dart away in the clear water.

Katlin looked into her eyes and touched her face with his wounded right hand, as if by touching her he could heal the both of them. Julie could hear the water as they stood along the grassy bank of the stream. The sun fell in shafts through the early-morning haze into the thick woods of pine trees that surrounded Katlin and Julie. Then he kissed her forehead.

“What?” Julie asked.

“You mean everything.”

“Quit, you loon,” Julie told him. Katlin said he meant it. He’d never said that to her – ever. He kissed her on the mouth and she kissed him back. They grabbed their gear and headed slowly back to camp for lunch. It was the best peanut butter and jelly sandwich and chips lunch she ever had, Julie said. That evening they made cold beef sandwiches from the meat stored in the ice chest, heated baked beans, and for dessert had cantaloupe cubes and strawberries. They went for a gentle walk around the campground’s gravel roads holding hands, talking about nothing, nodding at other campers, watching the children romp around the swing set. Katlin walked with a large stick and back at their camp he instinctively hurled it, like a javelin, as best as he could. It still hurt him to throw. They sat by the fire on Coleman chairs and roasted marshmallows and watched the fire’s embers and sparks rise upward into the darkness.

“Look, a shooting star!” Katlin said.

“Where?”

Katlin’s marshmallow had caught fire; he flicked the skewer stick into the sky. Later on they doused the campfire and ended up cuddling under a sleeping bag. They each had a pair of binoculars and they looked at the swirl of stars before turning in.

On Sunday morning they broke camp and drove into Green Bay and had lunch and afterward went shopping. It was time to head back to Chicago.

“We didn’t get to the Packer Hall of Fame, Pete,” Julie told me as I smoked and ordered another drink. “I said I was sorry. Kat was sweet. He touches my face and kisses me and tells me we can go next time. Then he says, *I need you*. I start crying right there on the sidewalk. And then you know what he does?”

“Hard telling,” I said to Julie.

She reached into her purse, which was down by her feet, and pulled out a pristine over-sized envelope. She opened it and showed me. It was the Hallmark card of All-Time: a marriage license.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I said.

She smiled and shook her head. “It’s just the application form. Good for 30 days. Of course, we can’t *use* it. Kat’s still legally married. He’d go to jail. I would, too.”

“Sure.”

“You should’ve seen us at the County Clerk’s office. We giggled like teenagers, Pete. We kissed, signed our names, our addresses, our mothers’ maiden names. The whole nine yards. We couldn’t turn it in. Out on the sidewalk Kat carried me down the whole block like the world was

our threshold. He shouted *Will you? Will you?* And I said, *I will, I will!* We knew we couldn't, not right now. But we almost forgot that we couldn't. It was the first time in a long time I've felt *whole*. Do you know what I mean?"

I dug into my spumoni. "Huh."

"We stayed up there longer and rented one of those paddle boats. You know, that you peddle?"

"Like near Lincoln Park Zoo."

"I'd never done that. And he bought me this," Julie said, showing me the back of her left hand. A blue coral ring graced her ring finger. "Two bucks. I know. Silly but it's cute. Besides, I don't love Kat for his money."

"How could you? There'd be nothing to love."

But she didn't hear me. She looked to the sidewalk, smiling, still there at the license bureau, the paddle boats, the gift store, in the woods at the stream in the sunlight.

"He loves me."

"You have that effect, Julie," I said, smiling at her. She put the license application away like it belonged in the Newberry Library. I had some more spumoni. "You better have some before it melts."

I looked out the window and watched the masses go by. Where were they going? Where did they come from? Were they loved by those that were there? Were they unloved? Did they live alone? Were they happy? Who was between marriages? Who subscribed to a dating service? Who called 1-900 numbers? Who hoped, who waited, who found, who gave up?

I looked back at Julie.

"Hey, what's wrong?"

She shook her head.

"Tell me."

"Lawyers," Julie said, drinking up. "They screw it up for everybody. Can't two people love one another if they want to? There's all this hate in the world. It's OK to hate, OK to be negative, OK to not care. That isn't illegal. There's no law against *not feeling*. So why can't we just love each other? Why? Why must there be rules if you love someone?"

I said I didn't know why.



CHAPTER 16

T-shirts and Bumper Stickers

It hardly rained that July and the hot breeze off Lake Michigan made everybody itchy. I worked at Poseidon's five days a week. Luckily, the lobster suit came with a vest-like plastic body ice pack that could be refrozen. Life was stale, despite the summer blockbuster schedule of flicks like *City Slickers*, *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* and *Terminator 2*.

Then one day, as if out of the blue, Katlin started to work out again and everything changed.

It was no easy task for him to work out again and he had to adjust and modify his workouts. He couldn't throw, of course. Sometimes I'd see him look at his hand as if it weren't his, like it had betrayed him and he couldn't believe it had broken. The cast was coming off in three or four weeks. In the meantime, he was able to do legwork on the weight bench and for a cardio workout he walked for a few days but it wasn't enough. When he began jogging again the bouncing gave him shooting pains through his hand but it didn't stop him.

"I'm going back," Katlin said.

He'd tell this to *all* of us. The concessionettes asked him about the Olympics. He could talk about qualifying for the Olympic team. He could talk about arriving in the Olympic Village. He could talk about everything up to the night before losing the gold.

"I'm going back."

They were good words for Julie to hear. She needed to hear them. She needed some good news.

He was going back.

To lift Katlin's spirits (and his cash flow), Julie had 500 lanyards made up for him to sell for his Olympic quest. Katlin only wore one out of *need*. As a rule he despised self-promotion; it had nothing to do with *throwing*. The lanyards were white with black lettering, the five Olympic rings in black (color cost extra) and a slogan of his own words:

I'M GOING BACK

The concessionettes continued to cheer him through the healing process with their Victim Wear, which now included the lanyard. Throughout Rogers Park you saw them for sale with a big jar that had a U.S. flag sticker and a flyer that had his picture and mission statement (which had a couple of typos). The jars were on counters at the Elysium, Ennui and The Heartland Cafe, at the EL Stop and Sonny's (Katlin didn't distribute them). Whenever he had an afternoon rehab session, I covered for him at the Elysium (I wondered why the hell he didn't schedule sessions for the morning). I chose not to wear a lanyard. Julie saw me without a lanyard one day and her warm fingers draped a lanyard around my neck. I didn't take the lanyard off.

Katlin was working out again. The world was good again. Julie smiled through it all and rubbed at her \$2 ring with her thumb.

He was going back.

But I saw the usher's outfit, and the ID bracelet and head bandage that weren't necessary anymore. Going back, yes. The Olympics, no. That's not what he meant. *I looked, I listened, I hid sharp objects.*

Katlin was out jogging one overcast morning late in July when he came

across a four-unit apartment building in flames and saved that elderly woman from that fire.

An amateur videographer from across the street caught the whole thing on camera. WGN's 9 o'clock news ran the tape. The Videographer, a man named Eddie McCall, called 911, but instead of running across the street to help, he grabbed a camcorder and began filming the holocaust.

Katlin was jogging on the sidewalk. He passed the house, stopped, ran back and called out. From a second-story window an elderly African-American woman cried for help. Katlin opened the front door to a wall of flame. He slammed the door, hopped on the porch railing, scaled the porch's support beams and (using only his good hand) pulled himself onto the roof to the woman's window. She was hysterical and wouldn't leave. A squad car pulled up, then an ambulance but no fire truck. The woman wouldn't jump – it was too far up. Katlin looked around, saw a painter's ladder propped against the neighbor's house, hopped off the roof and mounted the ladder against the house and brought the woman down.

"My baby! My baby!" she cried from the lawn. The house looked like a volcano.

Katlin ran up the ladder and climbed through the window. The flames were rolling off the house and far into the sky. Katlin emerged on the roof with a blanketed little one cradling a blanketed little one in his arms. The fire truck showed up. Soot-faced, Katlin was helped down the last few steps of the ladder and gently handed the bundle to the woman.

"Oh, my Baby," Mrs. Blair said, hugging a little barking dog.

Katlin was interviewed for the Chicago newspapers – STAR ATHLETE SAVES FIRE VICTIM ran one bottom corner article on the front page. The article jumped to 5A included Ted Bowers' picture of Katlin throwing the javelin in college. It ran a sidebar story on Katlin along with his year-by-year stats and records from prep to college seasons. I wondered why there wasn't a Katlin Hillmacher trading card in the Sports section.

The other big daily newspaper ran a series of freeze-frame video stills of Katlin in action: Katlin climbing the roof, Katlin seeing the woman to safety, Katlin handing Mrs. Blair her dog named Baby.

The news story was continued the next day in the second paper along with a health update on Mrs. Blair. USA TODAY's article had an illustration of Katlin's rescue effort, the kind of drawing usually reserved for the doomed flight path of an airliner (the cartoon even featured Katlin with his hand cast). The Associated Press and Reuters carried the story on their wire services.

The story was picked up from coast-to-coast from Spokane to Buffalo and everywhere in-between. CNN Headline News ran it on their National Ticker under news from Illinois. They showed the video at the end of the half-hour broadcasts where warm and fuzzy human interest stories are placed right after the Sports segment. In fact, they called it their Sports "Play of the Day" and played it in real-time and then some of it in slow-motion. The network prime-time TV series *Incredible Real Videos* picked up the rescue video later on and even included it on one of their \$19.95 Home Video offers.



CHAPTER 17

Java

The morning rush for coffee was over at The Cafe Ennui there across from my apartment. Ennui was staffed with college students who played a mix of Robert Johnson, Karen Carpenter and early Pink Floyd. I warmed up with journal notes in a separate NOTES mock-marbled Pen-Tab notebook. I recounted the latest news including my MIA wife, my job search, life at Poseidon's and Katlin's media rise.

Then I started.

I was on my fifth cup of coffee at Ennui when the bell above the door jingled. I looked up from my other Pen-Tab mock-marbled notebook and waved Katlin over. He stepped down onto the sunken black and white hexagon-tiled floor and got a bottle of orange juice, a bagel and a glass of ice water at the counter. Katlin came over to my green marbled two-seat table.

"I'm supposed to get that."

"Buy the next one. Good writing?"

I capped my pen and closed the notebook.

"Two hours," I said, scooting back my chair and crossing my leg. It had been a while since I put in two good hours in and I celebrated by lighting up a fresh Marlboro Light off my old one. Maybe it was nothing. But scribing away, at anytime, was something and it beat everything. The session was the hardest work I'd done since getting laid off. "How was your workout?"

"Had to change the route," Katlin said, out of breath. "There was a crowd in front of that house."

"No way."

"Last two days. Both political parties called. Wanted me to run for Alderman as a write-in. *Pete, I was out jogging.*"

"Did you tell them you have a proofreader who can also write speeches?"

"No job yet?"

"No."

He took a big slug of juice.

"Yesterday, a Marketing guy from a ladder company called. Asked if I'd endorse a new sturdy retractable ladder –"

"You're kidding," I said.

"Is this the kind of ladder I used?" I asked him. I mean, Pete, I do have a little debt."

I nodded. We all did.

"He says, 'It's just like that ladder, only made of aluminum not wood and shorter.'"

"How much does it pay?"

Katlin worked the juice some more and looked out the window as a brunette bicyclist, in cycling pants and jersey, rode by looking at Katlin.

"She's wearing a helmet," Katlin said, nodding.

"So what did you tell this ladder company?"

"I said it has to be the *same* ladder. Even then. After all, I wasn't out looking for a shoe deal. I was jogging. You wouldn't ever do anything just because it pays, right?"

We talked for a while then I saw the mailman deliver at my building. I didn't need another cup of coffee but I had one anyway and I

bought Katlin a juice. Then I looked up at the third floor apartment with its turret-shaped Ing Room. It was time. I packed up my knapsack and told him I had to get going.

“Want to have lunch before work?”

I told him that I couldn't.

I jogged across the street and checked my mail at the front gate. VISA wanted an immediate \$500 payment. MasterCard was threatening to revoke my Platinum status. Discover said I had preferred pre-approved status and wanted to give a \$2,500 line of credit and a gold card. The electric bill was \$74.21. I could always bust out the old Royal manual typewriter and use candles at night after work; I could even go back to using a pencil and paper. I shuffled the 21% loan with its \$7,705.13 balance to the back of the pile. My student loan wasn't due for another 13 days. I could always say I didn't get it but that's one thing creditors never fail to do: they could find Amelia Earhart.

I saw my old 10-speed in the storage shed as I passed it and thought I'd have to get it out when I quit smoking. I climbed upstairs and went in. Anna-Krista was in bed on her belly in only her underwear, the ceiling fan moving her hair, but not any of that sour alcohol smell.

A few hours before I'd been dead at 5 a.m. and was woken by Anna-Krista's slurring voice on the telephone. In the background I heard the strains of Derek and the Dominos' "Bell Bottom Blues."

“Come home,” I said.

“Did you look for work today?”

“Yes.”

“Did you get anything?”

“I have nothing full-time.”

“You get a job by November or you can get a tent,” she said. My Unemployment ran out in November. I didn't get into the old argument that I wanted to stay in my field or that the Pre-Press industry had a current downturn.

“Come home.”

“I'm not living in a tent, Peter.”

“Where are you? Let me come get you. Anna, where –”

Dial tone.

Remembering that wonderful phone call, I bent down and kissed Anna on the head. I got my backpack, a fresh pack of cigarettes from the kitchen cupboard and locked up behind me. Down the carpeted staircase on the second floor I heard hard thumping on wood flooring from an apartment and then the music and the shrill voice of a sadistic exercise guru leading a video workout.

At the bottom of the stairs I glanced at my storage area. Could I fit a sleeping bag and a TV in there? How much did it rent for?

Out at the gates I hung a left into the basement apartment that Graystone LTD, the building's corporate owner, used as its main office. I dropped off the rent check and asked the receptionist how much a one-bedroom went for.

“I don't know. I'll have to ask Bob.”

How didn't she know? Didn't she work in the Leasing Office?

She paged Bob and in a little while he entered the front office through a French door just like my Ing Room's. He was reading an issue of Forbes.

“Yeah, Kelly?”

She motioned to me.

“Oh, hi. Bob Cannova. What can I do for you? Looking to rent?”

“I already do here.” Corporate landlords.

He stepped back. “Oh,” he said. “Is there a *problem?*”

Which one did you want to hear about first? I thought.

“No problem. How much do one-bedrooms run? I can’t remember.”

“What are you paying now?”

“\$785.”

He removed a black vinyl-covered three-ring binder as thick as the phone book. “Are you here? Thinking of staying on at Sheridan Towers?”

Towers? Towers? It was three freaking stories high...

I nodded.

Bob flipped through the vinyl binder and eventually stabbed a page with an index finger. “Ah, here. 650. Your storage space would be reduced, of course.”

The Ing-Room was \$135 extra.

“When’s your lease due?” Kelly asked.

“We’re in until January.”

“Mmm,” she said. “There will be a charge of \$125 for adjusting your lease.”

I must’ve had that look on my face. *She knew. Kelly knew. See, she knew how much it cost. Liar.*

“It’s in your lease,” Kelly said.

Have to ask Bob. Fucking sharks.

“When were you thinking of switching?” Bob asked.

“Oh, I’m just price checking. You know. I wanted to free up some cash. Vacation and Christmas and stuff.”

Crap. I wondered if I should have said that. If I could afford a vacation, I could afford them jacking up my rent.

Kelly rifled through a Roledex and after consulting with my rent check, she pulled out a card. “318. Peter and Anna-Krista Warner. She’s at Diamante’s Restaurant, you’re still at Mehedrich & Associates?”

Mehedrich & Associates. Was I still there? The building was still there; the space was rented out to a salon and to a consulting firm now. But was I still there? I was still collecting Unemployment they paid in.

“Yep,” I said, adjusting my backpack to the other shoulder. “Just checking. We’re pretty happy where we are.”

I thanked them then delicately closed the front door as if it were attached to a house of cards.



CHAPTER 18

I Shore Up My Resume

I was getting \$150 from Joey Sartina to shoot, direct, edit and star in Poseidon's latest TV commercial.

"I'm not standing in the street to get the shot," Mark Hoffstetter, my cameraman, said. The cars whizzed by along Jackson Boulevard.

"Can you walk in the crosswalk and up to me?" I asked. I was in the lobster suit and smoking a cigarette.

"If the light's green."

I knew Mark from Ennui. He worked as a waiter at The Heartland Cafe, a vegetarian restaurant-bar-coffeehouse two blocks west of my apartment. He wore bushy sideburns, a rainbow-dyed goatee and a black *Remote Crow-trol* stocking cap. Mark co-produced and did camera work for a monthly public access cable show called *Remote Crow-trol*. The show was supposed to be a public access documentary about life in Rogers Park but mainly it was a bunch of T&A footage along the bike path and on the beach. When women saw Mark spying on them with his camera, he whirled the camera in a nauseating pan shot to the nearest crow or pigeon strutting or picking at garbage. He did it so much it got to be on purpose. I had always kept a mental index card that he owned a camcorder. He was perfect.

"Of course when the light's green."

"OK."

It was the first time since my inaugural day as a mascot that I wasn't at least a little lit while doing the lobster gig. As for the cars, I swear they were aiming at Mark and me.

A video camera on the street attracts the wrong type. People in the background wave hi, stare, flip the bird. To reduce editing time, Mark and me shot "in the camera": we videotaped scenes to the sequence of the final commercial.

I danced at stoplights. One driver rolled up her window on me and burned rubber while the light was still red. I sat on War-Horse's bench and read a newspaper. I mis-juggled microwave-safe plates with a menu that time – my clawed hands weren't very good with odd-weighted items to juggle.

"Can I go now?" Mark asked.

"We're not done."

"I've been here for an hour and a half. You said it'd take an hour, man. I'm doing this for free, you know."

I knew. I remembered telling him it'd take an hour. But anything planned takes twice as long to do. Remember this: if it takes less time than thought, you're ahead of schedule. If it's ahead of schedule, it's considered brilliance. So for any project give yourself extra time.

I offered Mark \$20 to stay longer but he sold me on \$50; he agreed to work another hour. Then we shot the fetch trick several times with extras from off the street. A teenage jock in a letter jacket heaved the copy of *New City* clear across the plaza there at the Calder sculpture.

"Nice follow through," I said.

An old woman, whose hair was in rollers covered by a scarf, basically dropped the newspaper. "How much do I get paid?"

"I can offer you a two-for-one coupon," I said.

"I'm allergic to shellfish."

“Well, then I can offer my gratitude.”

“Screw you.”

Mark and I continued with the shoot. A perky college student named Angela helped us with the last shot and was ecstatic to take the two-for-one coupon.

“Go get it!” Angela said, flicking the rolled-up newspaper. I fetched it. “Come here, boy!” and I did. She patted my head. The script ended with her taking Lenny home.

“Cut! Oh, that’s tight!” Mark said, adjusting his hat. “Have you heard of the TV show *Remote Crow-trol?*”

“No.”

“It’s on Cable. I produce. Life in Rogers Park. Nature. You know.”

“Cool beans,” Angela said.

“Yeah,” he said. “We’re pretty excited by the return of the Lake Salmon run. Loyola Beach is choice to see the early-morning run from up north. That shoot’s coming up.”

“When is that?”

“Next week. I’m parking the camcorder on the beach, as always, at sunrise. Maybe you’d want to help crew?”

“And then maybe you can watch the submarine races,” I said.

“Submarine races? Really?” Mark said.

“Let’s wrap it up,” I said. “We haven’t much more.”

“Where are you studying?” he said to her.

“UIC.”

“Let’s wrap it up, Mark.”

“Junior?”

“Oh, no, I’m a freshman.”

“What are you studying?”

“Art History.”

Jesus. Same as English Literature. What was there to study? A very few made it, most didn’t, some went crazy and no one ever made any money. I thought of Mabus. The Patron Saint of the Almost. Saint of the Next Best and The Never Was.

“Mark,” I said.

“Art History, cool.” He rattled on. When you’re wrapped in red foam about to be dipped into the great buttercup no one takes you seriously.

“Mark!”

“Yeah, man?”

“Take five.”

“If you want.”

“Your helper’s really grumpy,” Angela said.

“Him? He’s just crabby.”

I lit a cigarette and leaned up against the spotlight pole. I watched them talk for 10 minutes. I was trying to work. Instead I saw it happen. You know. *It*.

It happens when you least expect it. It happens when you aren’t looking for it. *It*. I smoked a second cigarette. One day you are busily at your life thinking about work or that you forgot your cousin’s birthday. You’re shopping for a lamp or getting quarters for laundry. You’re writing out your bills in a coffee bar or trying to up your GPA at the library or you go to the bar and it happens.

True love.

The gray ashes of the world turn to bouquets of promise, and lo and behold, there *is* clear blue above in the sky. Every day of your life up to this

point has been a mere preliminary task. Nothing beforehand ever really mattered. Telephone calls. Dinner. A movie. A kiss. Before you know it you're in bed.

Then one day you're planning and dreaming, dreaming and planning. You look for a place to live. Do we spend Thanksgiving at your parents or mine? Christmas? Where should we go for vacation? We can go anywhere. Paris. No. Wyoming, Idaho, London. Anywhere. Yes. What about children? Yes, we want children. Two. Four. Oh God, no. I'm kidding. Two. Good. Two boys. No, one of each. OK. What names do you like? Maybe we should see a doctor. What do you mean we're 'unable'? I don't understand. This happens to many couples. We're not other people. Take a test. Take some other test. Isn't there some pill? Some exercise or food? It's your fault, you bastard, Peter. I didn't do anything wrong. Anna, where are you going? Anna, come back. Who needs children, anyway? So that's when you bring home a chocolate Labrador puppy. Then you lose your job. She gets rid of the dog. You hadn't even named it.

"Come on, Pete," Mark said, adjusting his hat. "Break's over."

I flicked my ash in the street.

"Is she coming back with a minister?"

"I got Angela's phone number," Mark said, holding a piece of paper up. "I'm in love, Pete. I'm in love."

"Well," I said cheerfully, "you'll get over it."

We filmed some more in sequence to my script. Mark and I edited the footage at his apartment on his computer, laid down a voice-over track, re-edited the order a bit, added the titles and turned in the final 30-second opus to a tape transfer place that made a 1/2" broadcast format tape.

\$150

-\$50 to Mark

-\$11.99 editing 12-pack of Budweiser

-\$5.99 digital tape

-\$4.00 CTA fare to video transfer place

-\$30 transfer to 1/2" tape (final broadcast format)

= \$48.02 net profit

Divide that by eight hours of labor and my handy work made me \$6.02 an hour. I vowed not to spend it all in one place.

I hadn't seen it on TV yet. Joey said he bought local air-time on CNN, ESPN and The Weather Channel. I waited and watched and waited. It was OK that I didn't make any real money off it; that wasn't the point. I had a copy and I knew I could now use the commercial to shore up my resume: albeit a very slim one, I had a *portfolio*.

I was on my way back up the mountain.



CHAPTER 19

Medium-Rare Limelight

I remember being at The Steak House in Freeport with my parents the time after winning [the] State [football game] and Dad's boss came walking through the dining room. Other men from the plant saw him and there was an ill-quiet that the Boss was on their turf.

The Boss walked over ready to say something with attitude. He taps my Dad's shoulder once and nods politely at Mom, and said, "Nice game, young man." Then he left.

About a minute later Dad finishes chewing a piece of steak and says, "Kat, don't ever forget what first place does for you."

Page 12, *The Book of Katlin*

The August sun had scorched the earth and it was hot and muggy the Saturday night I went to Kessel's with Katlin and Julie. There was water rationing across the Midwest and rolling brown-outs in the West. Anna was working a lot. Kessel's is a famous prime rib steak house over on Western Avenue near Howard. Julie was buying. Katlin insisted we take a non-smoking table. That forced us into a 45-minute wait.

"The bar, gentlemen?" Julie said.

I nodded. The bar was dark and cozy like a nicotine womb. I waved at the bartender. He nodded. There were two seats in the middle.

"I see some seats. Hurry," I said. I pulled the barstool out for Julie. I insisted Katlin take the other barstool. "I drink better on my feet anyway."

"Well, you drink *more*," Katlin said.

"Like I said, better."

"I worry for you, Pete," Julie laughed.

The bartender used the blender to make a drink. Katlin watched the baseball game on the bar TV. Julie asked me for one of my cigarettes and I lit it for her. She asked if I had found any work.

"No."

It always hurt. No. No work yet. No Monday through Friday, no 401K, no bennies, no.

"You'll find something," Julie said.

The bartender strolled over, laid napkins on the bar and asked what we wanted to drink.

Katlin laughed and pointed. "I'll drink whatever he's having."

"Ha!" the bartender said. "What a hoot!"

"Oh, no," Julie said.

"Good God – how much did *he* get paid to do that?" Katlin said.

Lenny the Lobster was on TV fetching a newspaper.

"How come those things are so stupid?" Julie asked.

"It's a case of classic product recall," I said. Louie was scuttling through the crosswalk. Then Lenny juggled the mismatched items. "So we remember. It's a standard advertising practice."

The bartender slapped the bar. Katlin howled, rose in his barstool and laid his upper body over on the bar.

"It's not that funny," I said.

"Oh, that poor man," Julie said. "He must have 13 starving kids to feed. Oh."

Everyone in the bar guffawed at Lenny.

"Uhh. I love my job again," the bartender said, wiping away tears. "I needed that. What can I get you fine folks?"

"I'll have one of those blender drinks," Julie said, pointing down the bar. "What are they?"

"Pina colada," I said.

The bartender clicked his teeth and fake-shot me with his hand.

"But I'd like one with more pina than colada, please," Julie said.

He winked at her.

"Beefeater and tonic," I said, still looking up at the TV. "Double."

"Orange juice," Katlin said. He waddled around the bar. "Look! I'm Dufey the Lobster!" The customers laughed it up.

"Lenny," I said. "Lenny the Lobster."

"Oh, Pete," Julie said. "Do you have to be a proofreader all the time? Let's all have a good time."

The bartender gave Katlin a screwdriver.

"Sorry, thought you wanted vodka and orange juice."

He started to toss it down the sink but I stopped him. It was a double, too. We finally got a table. Katlin clunked through the full dining room as *Dufey the Lobster*. I never waddled, I might tell you. Lobsters don't waddle – they *scuttle* and Katlin had it all wrong. It was a good little commercial, my first one after all, but I wasn't going to let on that it was *mine*. I'd had enough of their savagery.

They sliced away at their prime ribs like veteran surgeons. I kept my eyes on my plate through their rowdy banter and sawed through the 16-oz. porterhouse. Julie played footsie with Katlin, her eyes lovingly on him but she was mistakenly rubbing my ankle. I about lost it. Then Kessel stopped by our table and asked how everything was. Restaurant staff always asks you how it is when your mouth is full. It's a ploy, I tell you.

"I'm stuffed," Julie said. She had at least three-fourths of a rib eye left. She never ate anything.

"I saved enough room for dessert," Katlin said, slapping his gut.

"We have a lot of nice desserts," Kessel said, smiling all around. *Saved*, he mouthed. "Hey. Hey! You're the guy on TV!"

"No," I said.

"Hey, George! George!" Kessel called to the bartender. "Here's that guy, the guy on the TV!"

Shit.

"No," I said, lighting up. Non-Smoking section or not, I had to. I had to hide.

Kessel pulled out the empty chair at our table and stood on the seat and whistled. He raised his hand and the room quieted down.

"Ladies and gentlemen! Thank you. Please excuse my interruption. I just wanted to point out to you right here in our middle here we have a genuine TV star."

I hot-boxed the cigarette.

"You saw him. He saved that lady at the fire!"

The Fire. Like it was the *only* fire. *Ever*.

The patrons gawked and cooed and applauded and Kessel slapped Katlin hard on the back and shook his hand. People reached over and shook Katlin's hand. Kessel made Katlin stand. There was a jump ball for

our table's check. Well-heeled strangers begged to pay for our meal but in the end Kessel had our waitress come over and hand him the check.

"The City of Chicago thanks you," Kessel said, ripping the check in half. The crowd roared.

Katlin waved. George the Bartender bought the three of us Courvoisier. I didn't touch it.

Julie took the unlit Marlboro out of my mouth and placed it in hers.

"It's OK, Pete," she said, pushing the drink back in front of me.

Katlin gave me his drink and ordered a bottle of Perrier.

I remember being woken up in the back of Julie's station wagon. What time was it? It was two hours past late. I was lying down; I saw Sonny's yellow and black sign upside down. The sky spun and swirled and I felt sick. Oh, I was soused. Katlin hauled me out of the double-parked station wagon to the front gate on Lunt. Julie dug into my front pockets to grab my keys while I laughed and squirmed and felt a jolt of electricity through my loins. Katlin carried me up the three flights of stairs. He was making too much of a career out of using that damned fireman's carry.



CHAPTER 20

Tylenol

Jean Rose Brinkman, 75...

No.

...with rosary recited by the Rev. John O'Brien, Pastor Emeritus, at 6:15 p.m. Memorials have been established in memory of Lakeview Nursing Home...

No.

William C. Dorn, 53, of Chicago, departed this life Thursday in his home after a sudden illness. Born Jan. 20 in Chicago, the son of Earl and Dorothy Dorn...was a student at... loved to bowl... enjoyed life and dearly loved his sons and daughter and brothers. Survivors include...Owned and operated Dorn Valve Systems...

Martin T. Gile, 46, of Skokie...after a brief illness...Lifetime member of Redeemer Lutheran...employed as a machinist...

No.

I was now scanning the daily obituaries in the papers as part of my job search – maybe some hot-type schooled proofreader had turned in his pica stick, loupe and font books and gone to the Great Break Room in the Sky.

“You’re morbid,” Katlin said.

“It’s a valid resource,” I countered.

“I worry for you, Pete,” Julie laughed.

It was Monday morning and I was still feeling the effects of my industrial self-embalming from Saturday night at Kessel’s. I spent Sunday in bed with Anna-Krista watching WGN’s action movie marathon with separate hangovers. Instead of some movie romance-inspired magic, we had sex with as much passion and life as two dead people who are forced to wash dishes at gun-point. At 9 p.m. I finally got enough gumption to get out of bed and walk down to Sonny’s store and buy the Sunday *Trib* and a pint of Ben & Jerry’s. There was nothing in the Job section.

While drunk Saturday night, I eagerly agreed to hang out with Katlin and Julie on Monday before going into work at the Elysium. After grabbing a red eye to go at Ennui, and a *Trib* and four Extra-Strength Tylenol at Sonny’s, I let them drag me up to the north side of Loyola Park’s field house. I had scheduled myself to write on Monday (Poseidon’s was closed on Mondays) but I wasn’t in any shape to even write a postcard. Julie and I lounged on the cement bleachers. Katlin was down on the grass stretching out. I fired up my Zippo and gave my lungs a workout.

“I need a job. I bought my first carton of generics today,” I said, holding a pack up.

“The end is near,” Katlin said in a brittle voice.

“Anna told me that if I don’t have a job by November, I’ll have to go and get a tent!”

“She wouldn’t make you do that,” Julie said.

“You don’t know her.”

“She’s only saying that to put some fear of God in you.”

“I fear God plenty,” I said.

“Anna loves you,” Julie said, like she was rubbing the head of a puppy.

“I can believe a woman saying that,” Katlin said to the Afterlife Camera. He trotted down the steps to where Julie had backed her station wagon right up onto the asphalt parking area next to the bleachers. He picked a javelin out and moved out to the grass and started harpooning the earth

point-blank with one of the spears.

I wasn't sure if having a cigarette made me feel better or worse. I was sure Brand A got their tobacco from the same field Brand B did, but my mind believed the supreme difference. Some cigarettes were harsher, some were smoother, all did the same to you. (Boy, I'm glad I got the primo stuff. Getting that cancer sure tasted good.) The design of a premium package was the most obvious difference. They used Times New Roman and Copperplate, not Stencil. It doesn't cost extra to set one typeface over another so I never understood that. On top of that the generic's design looked like a 30-year-old can of foreign motor oil. When I got laid-off from Mehedrich & Associates I panicked and bought a pack of generics. Lo and behold, I caught a typo on the pack. They spelled it *cigarettes*. I Fed Ex'd the company a letter, and enclosed the empty pack complete with proofreader's marks, my resume and a cover letter.

They never wrote back.

"Sig-er-ettes," I said, tracing the pack's error with my finger and showed Julie. "Er-ettes. Err-ettes. Sig-er-ettes. Er. Er. E. E. Sig-er-ettes."

"I worry for you, Pete."

Hmm. Canser. Kanzer. Khantser. Er.

I didn't say anything else, just laid my head back on the cold step and felt the morning sun on my face. I wanted to throw up. I closed my eyes. I still wanted to throw up. I listened to the distant voices from the water's edge that was about 100 yards away, the voices sounding like some far off yesterday. Melville was right about the magnetic draw of people to water, I thought. I kept my eyes closed, the sun making my eyes see pink then bright white as I listened to the hum of engines over on Sheridan Road. A dog barked in the distance.

"Hhyah!" Katlin grunted.

"Good one, baby!" Julie yelled.

The noise continued as I heard a bell ringing from a hand-pushed ice cream cart down on the cement bike path.

"Ooh, ice cream! Want some Pete?"

"My tooth's killing me."

"Kat! Katlin! Hey you with the cute tush! Want some ice cream?"

"No."

"Save my place, Pete," Julie said, standing up and stretching.

"I'll try," I said, looking at the empty seats.

She bounced down the steps and walked over to the beach. Katlin was running wind sprints through the 70-yard gap from where he threw the javelin and where it pierced the earth. His hand cast was off and he was back to full workouts.

I set my head back down.

"Hhyah!" Katlin cried, hurling the javelin at the sky. There was the silence, then the *stick* and the ch-ch-ch-ch of his feet across the starched grass as he chased after it. I closed my eyes, the sun feeling good. I was sure I was tanning. That would look all right at interviews, I thought. That winning look.

I wondered what to get Anna-Krista for an anniversary gift; our sixth wedding anniversary was in six days. Six years. 2,190 days. I could get her a lantern, a double sleeping bag, or maybe a poncho for the new living room. Then again, maybe a bouquet of rose thorns.

A trumpet blasted out "When the Saints Go Marching In." I flinched and the back of my head snapped on the steps. I rubbed my head and turned to look behind me. An old trumpet player with a fleece vest and a

white mustache was atop the last step on the far side of the bleachers.

Katlin continued throwing, back and forth, back and forth.

"I thought it was a radio," Julie said, licking the side of an ice cream cone. "How cool?"

Julie clapped a hand to her leg to the beat and nudged me to do the same. I did. She yanked me up and we danced a bad jitterbug.

"Hhyah!" Katlin grunted again.

Katlin finished and set his javelin back in the station wagon and then started running up the stairs to the right of us. But he didn't just run up the stairs, he *attacked* them. He reached the top, touched the wall, then turned and ran down one at a time.

"It's good to see him back," Julie said.

I nodded.

He ran another sprint up.

A seagull bobbed toward us, flying against the wind. Julie and me ducked and laughed.

The trumpeter played "Sentimental Journey."

"Oh, yes, that's nice," Julie said, putting her hands on my shoulders. I put my arm around her waist. Katlin ran past us. I spun her to a gentle seating on the bench and we quit dancing. I smoked and looked around.

The trumpeter played "In the Mood."

"I feel like writing," I said.

"Go ahead."

"I'll write up here," I said, tapping my head.

The ice cream vendor worked his way to us, by the east end of the field house, ringing the brass off the bell. Julie leaned over the side of the stairs and called down to him. "Ningún gracias," she said, holding up the ice cream cone. The vendor turned away.

Katlin ran up and down the stairs.

Julie laughed and got up and danced in the aisle, pirouetting slowly to the song. Katlin ran up and down, up and down the stairs.

Julie stopped and sat back over by me. Katlin tore at the steps, his head slightly down, his legs churning. He had the rare quality to turn an inane task into a *drill*, meaningless only until the end result.

"He's dedicated," I said.

"He's happy."

"His life is good again because of you."

Julie beamed as Katlin ran up past us again.

"Pookoo!" Katlin shouted, jumping off the top of the bleacher's side. He plunged down to the asphalt.



CHAPTER 21 Walking on Water

*I hovered
and removed
the ceiling panels in this hospital room
and floated from this cage.
No pain.
free,
unbound.
Then I returned
and it worsened.*

Page 8, *The Book of Katlin*

Most of Katlin's body had landed on the mat; his head smacked the asphalt. (I can still hear that thud.) He was given another round of X-rays, an MRI, and a Cat-scan. He suffered another concussion but no internal injuries or broken bones. (Throughout his entire life, Katlin had never *broken* a bone; he only had hairline fractures.)

Other ill effects included a bad headache, dizziness, and he had thrown up twice in the ER. Both eyes were re-blackened and he had blurred vision. The cut above the left eyebrow and the one on his cheek were sewn up. The neck collar that the paramedics put on him was removed. The ER staff cut off his old hospital ID bracelet. Katlin tried to go after it in the trash but he calmed down when it was replaced with a new bracelet.

"Good for another 3,000 miles," Katlin smiled.

"I need a cigarette," Julie said, shaking her head.

I followed her outside.

Julie leaned against the wall and stared at the ground, hugging herself tightly with one hand. Her mascara had run on her cheeks. I rubbed at the scratched skin of my Zippo and watched the thin parade of workers in their green scrubs detour around the construction. A hospital vehicle rattled by and kicked up a cloud of dust. A jet made a white scar across the blue sky.

"Are you all right?"

She took one last drag. "We should go back in."

Katlin was in the ER waiting room down on one knee consoling the family of a gun shot wound victim. An intern found Katlin and herded him back down the hall. Julie and I followed. Katlin walked over a puddle, right through where there was a WET FLOOR sign. The intern slipped and fell.

Katlin held out a hand and tugged the intern back up.

"Thanks," the intern said, walking next to Katlin. "You know, you don't act too DOA."

"It comes and goes," Katlin shrugged.

After Katlin was all tested, patched up and given pain killers, he was moved to an eighth floor room – the room *below* the one he had before. The room faced that same hi-rise, and at the end of the hallway was *another* Virgin Mary statue. Katlin leaned forward in the wheelchair.

"Give me 10, Mama!" Katlin said, slapping the statue's open hands.

The attendant and a nurse's aide helped him into bed. A nurse took his vital signs then left.

We were alone.

I sat in one of the orange vinyl chairs and stared at the cracked floor tiles for a while. I didn't see any magazines. I tied my shoelaces. I rolled my Zippo through my fingers over and over. There was a page over the PA system and I leaned forward but I couldn't hear it. Julie scraped at her left forearm and the back of her hand with her fingernails, then she slowly rubbed her fingertips so the dried blood fell to the floor. I heard a siren.

"I need some coffee," Julie said, standing. "Pete?"

"Right away," I said, rising.

She put her hand up and asked me what I wanted.

"Black coffee," I said, handing her two dollars. She made a face at the money in my hand. "Want me to go along?"

"I won't get lost. Remember? I've been here before."

Julie left.

The IV beeped a few cycles.

I shifted in my chair.

Katlin stroked the corners of his mouth. "Bosch was close. He was *very* close." Katlin referred to Hieronymus Bosch, the 15th-century Flemish painter, and his work titled "The Ascent to the Blessed." I remembered it from that Religion class we had in school. In Bosch's depiction of an NDE, floating nude souls on bended knee are being escorted by sharp-winged angels to a cement-colored tunnel with light at the end of it. "You should see the Light, Pete. It's beautiful."

"That's OK. I'll wait."

"Nice of that old musician to get my javelins."

"What?"

"Oh, that's right. You didn't see him do that."

"Me? You were unconscious," I said. "I don't get it."

"I was above, drifting. That old musician waited out front for the ambulance and flagged it down. As the ambulance drove off he put my javelins away and moved Julie's car off the grass and parked it on the street. He locked it up. Keys are in his left vest pocket. Lives in my building. A girl in an orange swimsuit was there with a Frisbee guy and a dog. But I don't know if the kid is theirs."

"What are you talking about?"

"I saw all that while I was drifting. It's OK to not understand, Pete. I didn't. I didn't believe any of it, either. You will."

No, I didn't. I didn't believe him.

"Are you OK, Katlin?"

"At the end of the movie this time I noticed my shoulder's too low while in the follow-through. Saw that. Can fix that. I can stop and start it, just like slow-mo on a VCR. It's so cool. But it's better than a VCR because with this I can see it all from any angle: above, below, the side. I can *feel* the running, the release, the field. Forget a camcorder, I can *feel* everything again and again if I want. I can even feel my PR's, like at NCAA. I can feel *that* and compare to my throws *now*. I can feel the wind. I can even smell the grass. It's the ultimate instant replay."

I walked over to the window and looked out at the traffic and the golden statue down below at the southwest. I watched an entire circuit of the stoplights.

"The Light's also warm. I was still in the Abyss but it's getting brighter – it's the Light's intensity. Then that paramedic yanked me back."

"He saved your life!" I yelled.

He pulled the sheet up.

"What life is that, Pete?"

“Does Julie know about all this dying crap? The tunnel, the light, the instant replay – “

“If she didn’t know before she knows now,” Katlin whispered.

“You’re a fucking work of art,” I said. “How the hell she puts – ”

“One black,” Julie said, handing me a scorching hot paper cup. She was wearing a new hospital scrub top; her bloody shirt was gone, her eyes clean and clear, her hair brushed and pulled back into a ponytail.

“Thanks, Asbestos Fingers,” I said, quickly setting the hot cup on the windowsill.

Julie shrugged and took a sip of coffee. “What can I say? Women have a higher pain threshold.”



CHAPTER 22

Icon in the Making

There was no time to think about pain or NDEs because the phone calls started a little after that. Julie fielded calls from the AP and one of the Chicago dailies. When the third reporter called and Julie repeated the details, I waved goodbye and headed to the Elysium.

A tourist's video of Katlin made its way on TV. As I traveled north and the daylight faded, I saw those dark boxes of electric grief scattered about like burning oil drums. I saw the video in a hi-rise lobby where a security guard and a custodian watched, then further on through the windows of an electronics store, and even on the news kiosk up on the Fullerton EL stop platform. I got on the train.

"He won the gold medal, didn't he?" a rider said.

Another rider nodded. "He throws the shot put."

I tried to read *The Big Sleep*.

"I saw it at the Union. It's horrible to watch."

"But you can't help it," the young man nodded. "My Current Events prof let us watch CNN. God, you could hear him cry out 'Ooo, Ooo!'"

"It made my stomach sick. The news kept playing it over and over and over. Is he OK?"

I tried to read the book.

"He's in critical condition. They've got him in ICU."

"Oh, no. Did you see when he saved that woman?"

I closed the paperback, picked up my backpack, and moved to the next train car. The train crawled north and unloaded its belly at each stop and the passengers scattered away into the blue-black of dusk. When I bought a pack of cigarettes at the Loyola EL stop people were talking about it. I saw it on TV in the window of a bar on Sheridan. The Elysium's lobby was empty except for the newest concessionette who stood sentinel over the stand.

"Where is everyone?" I asked.

"They're upstairs watching TV. Did you hear? Isn't it terrible?"

I fixed a tub of popcorn for Floyd and brought it upstairs and punched in. A blue-white light from the projectionist's booth flashed against the hallway wall. I went down to the booth and looked in.

Katlin was on TV: the jostled camera, the back end of the leap, the jerky zoom onto Katlin's lifeless face bloodied by the asphalt. Everyone in the booth gasped.

"Shit," Fowler said.

LaToysha nestled up against the corner. "I can't keep watching it."

"Poor Kat," Sonya cried.

Floyd patted Sonya on the shoulder with his big paw.

"Extra butter, lightly salted," I said, handing Floyd the popcorn.

"Hey, you're a lifesaver," Floyd said, moving the three hot dogs wrappers off his table. Floyd scrunched each one into a ball and flipped them 1-2-3 into the wastebasket. Floyd took the popcorn from me and shoved in a handful and moaned while he chewed. "Pete, did the new gal make this?"

"No, I did."

"Aw," he sighed, licking his thick fingers. He squeezed an OK sign at me. "How's Katlin?"

The projector clicked and rolled. Everyone looked at me.

"Up and talking," I said.

They turned back and watched that little box for crumbs of truth. Floyd flipped through the stations but it was like watching the Kat Channel: about every five minutes Katlin's "fall" was somewhere on TV.

"The judges give him 9.5 on style and presentation," Fowler holding up his hands as if he were holding a sign.

LaToysha gave him an elbow to the ribs.

"What?" Fowler yelped. "Does he deserve a 10?"

"Fowler, you deserve a five," she said, holding up a fist.

"Shh!" Floyd and the girls hissed.

I went downstairs, checked the theater, and had a cigarette.

"Tell me the truth, Pete," Wendy said, coming up to me in the lobby. "Is he OK?"

"When I left he was very lucid."

"Oh, no," Wendy sighed. "I didn't know. That bad."

Wendy left before I could explain. I went to the concession stand and poured Floyd a 64-ounce soda that had lettering on it that read THE BIG THIRST (I called the monster cup THE BIG WHIZ).

I walked over to the freight elevator. The elevator was descending to the main floor. Through the wire-gridded window I saw LaToysha pressing up against Fowler in the corner. The elevator continued to go down. I took the stairs up.

"Any new information?" I asked, handing Floyd his drink.

"*Nightwatch* has a Special on the whole thing."

"Huh."

"You were on TV," Wendy said to me. "They showed it. They showed everything"

"*Everything?*" I cracked.

"Hey, hey! It's back on," Floyd said, jacking the volume up with the remote. "Shh."

Wendy and Sonya settled in cross-legged on the floor two feet from the TV. The others lined the wall or sat on their knees. I stood back in the doorway.

The raw uncensored video was played: the descent, the splat, the bloody close-up, Julie crying out, Trumpet Man meeting us at Katlin's body.

"Play it back," the TV Host ordered. "Just the audio."

The TV screen showed a freeze-frame of Katlin running up the Loyola Park bleachers. The trumpet rose frantic in pitch. The Tourist's kid welcomed his grandparents to Chicago.

Then "Pookoo!" and that splat.

"Play Audio Loop Two again," the TV Host said.

They played it three times through: the trumpet, the kid, "Pookoo!"

"You see there," the TV show host said. "*Ooo-noo. Ooh no-o!* Oh no. Oh no. Chilling. Simply chilling," the host said, shivering. He shuffled his papers at his desk and sighed. "We're going to a break. In our next segment the Videographer who took that dramatic footage will be on the phone from Chicago with us, then we'll take your calls."

On TV a car elegantly skidded across a rain-soaked road in the desert.

Sonya, in tears, got up and left.

Floyd slurped at his drink and flipped over to one of the sports channels. Katlin was at a state-of-the-art weight bench working out; the phrase "file video" was on the lower part of the screen. The camera zeroed in on his sweaty face: Katlin exhaled when he pulled the overhead weight bar down to his shoulders, then inhaled when he drew the bar back up

slowly. The voice over spoke of the NCAA champion “closing in on the inevitable next level”, the Olympics. The camera pulled back. Katlin was wearing a gray t-shirt with black letters that read:

PROPERTY OF
KIPPLING INDUSTRIES
“We fasten the World”
XL

“You can send Hillmacher your cards and wishes to the addresses on your screen,” the sports news anchor said. The network flashed the addresses of St. Sebastian and Kipling Industries.

Lenny the Lobster scuttled across the TV screen.

“Oh, watch this! This is classic,” Floyd said, leaning in. Lenny juggled. Lenny fetched a newspaper and begged. Lenny went home with the woman. Floyd chuckled and then bellowed, “God, I’m famished!”

I went downstairs, made a round of the entire theater and had a cigarette at the back dock. Then I brought Floyd three more hot dogs and another Big Whiz.

Nightwatch was back on.

“They’re talking to the guy who made the video,” Floyd said.

“I’ve got to work,” I said.

“That guy and his wife were watching this Hillmacher,” The Tourist said. On TV Julie and myself were lounging on the bleachers.

“It’s Pete and his Mrs!” LaToysha said.

“How many people were in the park when it happened?” TV Host asked. I wondered, *what did that have to do with anything?*

“I’d say, oh, a good thirty people by the end of it. Here’s that Trumpet player. There’s my son, Austin. Oh, look, there. See? The poor guy is running then he slips and falls.”

“Yes,” TV Host said.

Anyone with any power of observation could see Katlin leaped off the bleachers, but no one was seeing it. The sequence was repeated while the TV Host probed The Tourist for his impressions and reactions as the video ran on and on and on. The ice cream man rushed over; his cart’s bell rang as he ran across the park’s field. A man with graying hair, lamb chop sideburns and sunglasses was there with his Frisbee-catching Labrador. A woman in an orange swimsuit joined the crowd. The paramedics told everyone to step back. The Tourist kept recording but moved a few paces behind Swimsuit; too many people were in the way. The Tourist crouched low, scooted over and got a clear shot of Katlin on the ground by aiming the camera through the gap between Swimsuit’s ankles. The dog sniffed at the camera.

“A doggy!” said the kid, moving toward the dog. “Daddy, Daddy, look! A doggy!”

“He’s not breathing!” Julie cried out.

“Is he dead?” asked Swimsuit.

“That’s a 30-foot drop,” Sideburns told Swimsuit. “No one lives from a 30-foot drop.”

Julie turned and glared at Sideburns.

“Katlin! I’m here!” Julie said, turning back to him.

“He’ll be OK,” I said.

The kid said he could see blood. The Tourist’s camera zooms in on Katlin.

“No, Junior, he spilled a cherry pop.”
“Daddy, that’s his blood.”
“No, that’s cherry pop. Where’s your Mommy at?”
“I’m hungry,” the kid said, yanking on his Dad’s arm. The camera shook.
“Daddy, I want ice cream.”
“You’re gonna be OK,” Julie said, holding on to me. “He’s gonna be OK, Pete.”

That night after work, I stopped at White Hen. No one was in a ski mask holding a gun. I didn’t have much in my wallet. I picked up a 12-pack of Milwaukee’s Best and a pack of generics. Again, no wife and no dog.

I checked my phone messages.

VISA still wanted a \$500 payment. My phone company threatened to shut off service. But that was fine since the only people who ever called me anymore wanted my money. If I defaulted on my student loan, would I be stripped of my degree? The next call was a hang-up. The next voice was Mark Hoffstetter’s.

“Ye-ah. Hey, this is Mark. They busted me for possession again. It’s so bogus. Hey, man, could you spare five hundred bucks? I’m at – and he yelled out, “Hey! Where am I? What precinct, man? I’m at the 19th Precinct. If you can, great. Bye-yeh.”

True, Mark helped me a lot with the Lobster commercial but he’d gotten paid for it. I didn’t have \$500 to bail him out of jail. I understood why he didn’t call his work. But why didn’t he call Angela? *Why me?* What the hell was he doing, anyway? Laid-back is one thing. Stupid is another.

The next call was a telemarketer.

The last message was Anna-Krista; she was all nice and lovey and said she’d be home at 11. It was only 1:30.

I took a can of beer and looked over at the Ing Room. The white computer keyboard looked like a garden cemetery tombstone. What a great-looking room to work in, I thought. I moved to the living room and smoked generics and watched the *Nightwatch* re-broadcast and I even taped it.

The TV showed his “fall.” It showed him bleeding. It showed it all.

I stopped the tape and rewound it. Katlin is being attended to. In the background, Trumpet Man is parking Julie’s station wagon. Trumpet Man locks the door and puts something in the left pocket of his vest. The shot swings over to The Tourist’s kid feeding the dog ice cream. Swimsuit pets the dog. Sideburns has his arm around Swimsuit’s waist.

Afterlife. I didn’t see a tunnel or any Light. I didn’t see anything except how Katlin exactly described his NDE.

Shivers.



CHAPTER 23 The Other Truth

It was a slow news week. No airliners crashed that week. No school shootings. No hurricanes or earthquakes or elections. Because of that, the concrete bleachers and asphalt ground at Loyola Park became a visual fixture in the global psyche as much as The Grassy Knoll or The Dakota.

That week the world watched Katlin running in front of the vastness of Lake Michigan, throwing the javelin, running the stairs. The Tourist's kid waving – then a jumbled shot of a falling body.

Ted Bowers' file photo of Katlin at the Olympic Trials was plastered onto six continents and every air wave. By week's end Katlin was the topic of talk radio from coast-to-coast. (Nowadays, the Internet is clogged with all of this. Chat rooms, blogs and tribute web sites about him have popped up; *hillmacher.com* and *katlinhillmacher.com* are beacons of national and global grief. One claims to be the source for "all things Katlin.")

Even back then, he had metamorphosed into a *subject*.

There is supposedly a reference about Katlin in The Bible Code, among other things. And a weekly tabloid reported that Nostradamus predicted the event with this "lost quatrain":

Par année des douleurs d'est-ouest
le grand athlète d'Olympia,
le fils de Vulcan,
tombe la tête la première sur le fleuve noir

In the Year of Sorrows from East to West
the great athlete of Olympia,
the son of Vulcan,
falls headlong onto the black river

In the days to come, Chicago's florists made a small fortune off Katlin. Flowers, stuffed bears and balloons from as far as Australia and Argentina were sent to St. Sebastian's and Kipling Industries. Elementary school classes sent giant get-well cards. Everyone from movie stars to heads of state sent their best wishes for a speedy recovery.

I stayed away from St. Sebastian's the next day. If I wanted to know how Katlin was *really* doing, after all, couldn't I just check the news?

I tried to go on with my life and went to the lobster gig. But the tequila failed to lift me; I passed fliers out as if on auto-pilot. Over on War Horse's bench there was a leftover national newspaper. I stole a few seconds to read the page one article with its headline of OLYMPIC-SIZED TRAGEDY.

CHICAGO – A native Chicago Olympian plunged from a three-story height in Rogers Park on Monday. Katlin Hillmacher, a past NCAA javelin champion, was currently in training for another Olympic bid as a javelin thrower on the next U.S. Olympic team at a local workout facility when the accident occurred. Hillmacher is listed at St. Sebastian-Chicago Hospital in critical condition.

According to eyewitnesses, Hillmacher slipped on wet cement and fell thirty feet during a stair-running drill at the top of Loyola Park Stadium.

Hillmacher was most recently brought to national attention in August during a heroic rescue. While training near his Rogers Park facility, Hillmacher dramatically saved Norma Blair, a disabled retiree and several prized AKC show dogs from a three-alarm house fire. He was awarded The Mayor's Civil Bravery Medal at a late August ceremony.

Hillmacher's career started as Illinois All-State Prep Champion in the discus and javelin. Hillmacher was a Pan-Am Games alternate as a college senior and placed second at the Olympics. Hillmacher's personal record is currently 257 feet three inches.

Hillmacher is married to Cassandra Kippling-Hillmacher, daughter of fastener magnate Thorne S. Kippling III of Chicago. Mrs. Kippling-Hillmacher could not be reached for comment.

The Truth is not a damned Rorschach test, I thought. I shook my head in utter disbelief at all the misinformation and looked up from the paper and around at all the rows of yellow and white news machines that littered the streets. Katlin's front page Orwellian image haunted the gray canyons of downtown like dirty snow. *We're winning the war in Eurasia*, I thought.

"Who are you?" a little girl shouted, ramming into my foam-padded crotch.

"Winston Smith," I groaned.

"Oh, how silly," the mother said, glaring at me. "Honey, that's Lenny the Lobster, remember? *Lenny*."

"I saw you on TV last night," the girl said, hugging me. "I watched you on the news. Mommy let me stay up late and watch all of it."

"Mommy did? That late? What part did you like best?"

"I didn't. The news was scary. That man kept falling and falling and falling. He fell *a lot*. But I liked your tricks," the girl said, knocking me in the exact spot again.

I buckled in pain.

"Lenny!" a motorist with Indiana plates called out. "Hey, Lenny! You the man!"

"No, no -*you* the man," I said, limping away from the girl. I handed the motorist a flier and he gave me a high five. His girlfriend leaned over and tossed a dollar into my wire basket.

The rest of the shift was like that; it seemed *everyone* had seen the commercial on the news. I ran through my fliers like I was handing out free money. They did The Lenny Scuttle, they asked for my autograph and took my picture, or wanted to take me home in a doggy bag. The oddest part, though, was that I received an unusual amount of hugs and handshakes. I swear, it was like Lenny was a conduit for grief.

That night, the Elysium staff continued its watch over the sacred TV as *Nightwatch* and other programs provided continuing coverage of the story.

Nightwatch was featuring The Panel of Truth: a round table discussion of guests that included Tourist Man, Swimsuit Model and Sideburns, and The Director of National Sports Safety. The TV Host said that they tried to contact Hillmacher for the discussion but was told he had been recovering.

“Our prayers are with him,” the TV Host said.

I kept out of Floyd’s booth and did my job.

The next day I finished the lobster gig and headed up to St. Sebastian’s. First, I went to the Human Resources office. They didn’t need a proofreader. There were no openings for any other position in the Media Relations Department but I put in an app and a resume, anyway. If nothing else, I could list it on my weekly job search sheet. Then I stopped at the Gift Shop and bought the two main city papers and a pack of Juicy Fruit gum. At the elevator a delivery man bumped into me.

“Oops,” I said.

“Eight,” Delivery Man barked, loading an enormous Track and Field winged-foot flower arrangement and an easel onto the elevator. Three other people were already inside. An old man pressed the button for Floor Eight. I squeezed in and we rode up.

“That for the Kentucky Derby winner?” chuckled Elevator Man.

“It’s for that Olympic guy who got hurt,” Delivery Man said.

“The poor sonofabitch,” Elevator Man said. “I saw that on TV. The bastard’s lucky to be alive.”

“Dis town’s favorite son,” one rider said.

“He got wracked up bad,” Elevator Man said.

“Everyone’s nuts for that Olympic boy,” the first rider said. “Dis town’s favorite son, all right.”

“If that’s what it takes,” Delivery Man said. “They can all go to hell.”

The elevator stopped at several floors but could not take on any more riders; the flowers were just too large.

On the eighth floor, Delivery Man matched me stride for stride down the hallway past The Virgin Mary statue into Katlin’s room. Delivery Man rapped twice on the door and burst right in.

“Hello,” I said.

“Pete shouldn’t have,” Katlin told The Afterlife Camera, marveling at the winged-foot.

“Pete didn’t,” I said, talking to The Afterlife Camera.

“Bobby,” Julie laughed, “if we see you any more we’ll have to put you on our Christmas card list. Put it with the others.”

“No problem, ma’am. But where?”

That was a good question. The room looked like a damned float in the Rose Parade. The Delivery Man shoved the winged-foot at me, pushed the tray up against the wall then snapped open the easel and set the flowers on it. Julie was pinned in the far corner next to Katlin’s bedside. Julie wanted to tip Bobby but her purse was lost. I found it under the bed and handed it to her. Before Bobby left, he got Katlin’s autograph and a \$10 tip.

Katlin clicked through the TV stations while Julie told me of the phone calls she’d taken the last two days from fans to sports agents to news media to lawsuit attorneys to potential sponsors.

“Huh,” I said.

The phone rang and Julie answered. I watched Katlin watch TV.

“Have you ever acted?” Julie asked, covering up the receiver.

“I was a tree in the 6th grade play,” Katlin said.

Julie whispered. "I don't think that counts."

A tree. I remembered that in Dante's *The Inferno*, in the Wood of the Suicides, the Damned were made into trees. When the trees were pecked at by The Harpies (which is probably where the word *harp* comes from), the trees bled. Then and only then could the trees speak their tale of misery.

"We made that one video," Katlin said.

Julie's eyes grew big and she blushed.

"I'll tell them," Katlin said, playfully reaching for the phone. She stiff-armed him and kept the phone away.

"Be serious."

He thought for a moment.

"I am a fastener spokesman, remember?"

Julie looked hurt.

The three of us watched TV that afternoon and I learned about all of the deals swarming Katlin so far. None of them had anything to do with NDEs. None of them had to do with a suicide attempt, either.

"Look at your follow-through," Katlin groaned, seeing archive video of his Olympic throw.

"You've shown me, baby cakes," Julie said, digging into her purse and handing me a \$20 bill. "Pete, I haven't had a chance today. Would you go buy papers for us?"

"Which ones?"

"All of them," Julie said. "All of the papers you see."

All of the papers at the Gift Shop were sold out except *The Sun-Times*. I bought the last copy and asked for silver change (much to the annoyance of the cashier), and then I went outside to the news machines and took the opportunity to grab a smoke. *All the papers*. I loaded the change into the machines like a Vegas gambler at the slots. *All the papers*. I knew these weren't *all* the papers so I ran down to a chain bookstore three blocks west of the hospital and bought more papers. A block up at Clark and Broadway just before The Century Mall there was a corner newsstand. On my way back I stopped at a bar and had a shot and a beer. *All the papers*.

What was the story 24 hours before?

But how could I denounce Julie and Katlin? Weren't the drones of debt collection at my own door? Everyone I knew owed something.

I downed another shot and beer and scanned the front pages of all the papers I retrieved for Julie and then I went back to the hospital. The grisly details were in *USA TODAY*. The *Crain's Chicago Business* article focused on funding for athletes. *The Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times* had mentions on Page Two.

"*Sun-Times*," a salesman said to me in the lobby.

"I'm not the paper boy."

"You've got three copies."

So I sold him a copy for two bucks. *Hmm. Maybe Sales was my niche*. I adjusted my stack of papers and pressed the button for the eighth floor. The booze hit my legs and toes and I was all tingly. *All the papers*. I had all the papers. Katlin watched more highlights of his Olympic performance. Julie was on the bed cuddled up next to him.

"We got more calls and contract offers," Julie smiled. "We're gonna need a proofreader, Pete!"

"A proofreader? But they're all extinct, right? They died in the Typographic Wars."

"Oh, Pete," Julie laughed.

"Look at that form," Katlin moaned to the TV.

“Was there anything in any of the papers?”

“Papers?” I asked, plopping the huge stack on the foot of the bed. “Why, read all about it! Read all about it!”

Ted Bowers’ file photo was all over the place.

The picture showed Katlin rearing back to launch his steel missile, muscles flexed, jaw set: it was the throw that sent him to the Olympics. Katlin is forever fixed in black and white: the javelin will defy gravity. But it was not just a throw; for all those dead and gone, it was a stab at the final resting place of kings and paupers alike. With that throw, Katlin would cast a steel shadow over Antaeus.

Julie and I scoured the papers like a clipping bureau. I knew that the next day would bring more calls and more golden offers. Julie and Katlin were happy – it was the happiest I’d ever seen them. I was being a pill. I needed to loosen up. Anna told me that all the time.

So I put out of my mind the gnawing facts that brought the three of us to this room. Kat and Julie were happy, and I was, too. The alcohol diluted my doubt and guilt. I wished the hospital had a bar.

Life was calm and good again and the afternoon sun shone through the windows. Never mind that the eye of the world was dirty. Never mind that to make it all better the only thing that was needed was a new bracelet or a fresh bandage or a clean apartment.



CHAPTER 24

Everybody Wants You

Everyone wanted him.

Some people, who had seen him on TV, only wanted to wish him well. Others just wanted an autograph or to chat with him or shake hands or have their picture taken with him. People called, wrote or faxed Katlin (at the Elysium) to ask him for money in all sorts of amounts. Bill in Missouri was laid-off from the factory and needed \$500 for rent. Megan had cancer. Tyrese in Detroit wanted to start up a nail salon or go to college or maybe see Paris: she wasn't sure. A benefit flier said Danny in Baltimore needed a kidney transplant so he could see his sixth birthday.

Katlin even got Federal Express letters for requests of money.

"They spend \$12 to ask *me* for money," Katlin said.

But he was on the verge of having money. Nike, New Balance and Addidas and other athletic apparel companies jockeyed for position to handle Katlin's identity. One campaign took a regal approach that was befitting of his status as an Olympian: their pitch was archive video of Katlin's Olympic-qualifying throw at the U.S. Trials. The approach, that throw – silence – fade to black, the crowd roars. In white lettering across the screen:

THE WORLD REMEMBERS

Another pitch with storyboards showed Katlin sifting through fan mail that had a kid asking Katlin "how to succeed." Katlin considers. There is a blinding NDE-esque montage of training and personal highlights (including a stair-climbing drill).

"Don't stop," Katlin replies.

Another proposed campaign had Katlin training for gold. One storyboard showed Katlin saving a super model from a fire (she looked like she was from Robert Palmer's "Simply Irresistible" music video). Another storyboard shows Katlin high-jumping over The Sears Tower. One has him bench-pressing the National Budget. The ad read:

HEROIC SAVINGS AT OVER 500 LOCATIONS NATIONWIDE

One company wanted him with to *re-create* his Loyola Park 'accident' for a product line of non-slip soled shoes.

"And what about the *ladders*?" I mocked.

The Jerry McGuire-wannabe's of the world were lining up, too. But Julie and Katlin were still up in the air on whom to have as a sports agent – or if Katlin even needed an agent. They didn't know it, but his indecision only made Katlin a hotter property.

Fowler had left phone messages at St. Sebastian's. Katlin's aunt wanted him and Julie to come for dinner. *20/20* wanted an exclusive TV interview, but he hadn't talked to the Media. VISA wanted him to have a platinum credit line with an introductory APR of 0% (afterward, it leaped to 21.9%). The one VP at Julie's work, who'd gotten autographs from Katlin, wanted to talk to Katlin about future investment options. Katlin's landlord wanted to up the rent. Floyd and the concessionettes wanted Katlin to take his time

and come back to the Elysium when he was ready to.

What did I want? I wanted Katlin to fucking get back to work and help swab toilets.

I had pulled another shift as Lenny the Lobster. I was certain that after two months at it my DNA was tinged with tequila. I resolved to switch to gin and tonics.

On my way back north I stopped by the hospital to keep Katlin company. Julie had burned up two more comp days to be with him and had since gone back to work. The rest of that week she went to the hospital until visiting hours ended. I had just bought the day's newspapers and the brand new issues of the big national weekly magazines at the gift store.

"I never met anyone famous," The Candy Striper said, pressing up against his bed's side railing.

"Fame is one thing," Katlin said. "Fame and money and happiness is another."

"I don't have any of those three," she sulked.

"That's OK. Nobody does."

The Candy Striper rubbed his shoulders and said she wanted to make him happy. Katlin leaned over to his night-stand, removed a red rose from a half-empty flower vase and accidentally pricked himself on a thorn as he handed the rose to the girl. The girl saw that his right index finger was bleeding. She placed it in her mouth and sucked it dry.

"Pookoo!" Katlin said.

I coughed. "Hey, Jerry Lee."

Katlin ignored me.

"So, do you go to Vampira Middle School?" I asked.

The candy striper ignored me.

"You're like The Boss," I said, showing him some magazines.

Time and *Newsweek* had cover articles with Katlin's "tragic event" serving as a backdrop to the *deeper* story in the sports world: "Victory At All Costs" and "Have Sports Gone Too Far?" *Sports Illustrated* had a re-created arty shot from the top of stadium stairs looking at blacktop, paramedics, a gathered crowd and a victim; the headline read: "Death-Defying: the Tale of Olympian Katlin Hillmacher."

"You can be my boss," The Candy Striper said.

"Hmm, you even made the cover of *People*," I said, shuffling it to the front. "Julie likes *People*."

He ignored me.

"Look on the cover," I said. "There's a still from The Tourist's video, oh, and an inset of you and *Cassandra* cutting cake at your wedding."

Katlin took the magazines.

But the Candy Striper took the magazines from Katlin and shoved them back to me.

"He said you're the boss," The Candy Striper said, rubbing his shoulders again. "You're married. So what?"

The Candy Striper didn't continue because a nurse entered the room.

"Heather, are you supposed to be in here?" the nurse barked.

The Candy Striper scurried away.

"She's leaving now," Katlin said to The Afterlife Camera.

"How are you feeling, Mr. Hillmacher?"

"Swelled."

"That's not good," the nurse said, laughing. She changed his IV and adjusted the flow rate of the IV and the yellowish

fluid, thick like Pernod, began dripping into the tube. She took his temperature and blood pressure. I started to say something but Katlin shushed me by putting a finger to his closed lips. The nurse read his temperature.

“BP’s 120 over 71,” Katlin said to the wall. “Heart rate’s 60. Temp is 98.6.”

“I want to take him to Vegas with me,” the nurse told me, tearing off the Velcro wrap. “He’s a psychic.”

“My heart rate’s usually at 50.”

“Don’t worry, you’re like a horse,” the nurse told him.

“You say I’m like a horse?” Katlin asked, checking under the bed sheet. “Ppphypp!”

“I meant as *healthy* as a horse!” the nurse laughed, turning a shade of Pantone 486. She said he could probably go home in a day or two and that the doctor would be in after lunch. I could smell the food cart that was down the hall. The nurse left the room.

“Uh-hhhh-hh! Uh-hhhh-hh-pphypp! Ppphypp!” Katlin whinnied and neighed, rocking his head.

“I’m going to lunch now,” I said.

“No, I’ll get them to send you up a tray.”

“I want some real food,” I said. Katlin looked hurt. “Hot hospital food is the worst-tasting food –”

“No. *Cold* hospital food is the worst,” Katlin smiled, correcting me. “Edwin said hot hospital food that’s the *second* worst-tasting food. I thought you were a proofreader?”

“I used to be,” I said.

The TV was on. There were highlights of Katlin throwing at the NCAA championships, a graphic of Katlin’s old and brand-new SI cover appearances with newspaper headlines, then video of him boarding the plane at O’Hare Airport on his way to go overseas to the Olympics. Katlin stops and kisses Cassandra, who looks like some war widow in-waiting. Katlin gives a “thumbs-up” as he walks up the ramp. The TV cuts to footage of the Opening Ceremony where Katlin was in the front row of the U.S. Team. A little girl runs out onto the track and hands him a small American flag and gives him a peck on the cheek. She’s about to get trampled by the entire American team, but instead, Katlin scoops her up and hoists her onto his shoulder and continues. The TV cuts to his throws.

“I used to be, too,” Katlin said to The Afterlife Camera.

I rolled my eyes.

“I’m going now,” I said, mugging at The Camera.

“No, this way, it’s over here, Pete!” Katlin laughed. “A horse! Ppphypp! Uh-hhhh-hh-pphypp!”

I ignored him, and his Afterlife Camera, and left.



CHAPTER 25 Gonna Fly Now

I was a little drunk off gin and tonics the day Katlin was released from St. Sebastian: I'd been working again at Poseidon's. On the EL ride north I wolfed down a doggy bag of smoked salmon with cashews. I had offered to help take Katlin home.

I swung by that newspaper stand and got the hard-to-find papers, then stopped at the shot-and-beer bar to maintain my buzz. By the time I got to St. Sebastian's I felt good.

As I rode up in the elevator I scanned the front page. Katlin was on *two* front page stories.

The first article, which anticipated his release from the hospital at 11 a.m., faithfully updated its readers by recapping the entire Loyola Park incident and Katlin's history. The media chokehold kept the event alive. The incident didn't happen a week before, *it was still happening*.

The article had a *little* truth – Katlin's health was bouncing back; that he survived relatively intact was truly miraculous; and he was scheduled to be released at 11.

It was almost 1:45 p.m.

The second front-page article was a little breaking news blurb with the headline of VIDEOGRAPHER QUESTIONED ON SUSPICIOUS ROGERS PARK FIRE. A house over on West Farwell Avenue had burned down over the weekend and the authorities had someone in custody – the same Videographer who filmed Katlin's dramatic rescue of Mrs. Blair that summer. As of press time, Eddie McCall (the suspected arsonist) hadn't been charged with anything but was being held for further questioning and was "a person of interest." The article glorified Katlin's heroic role in saving Mrs. Blair from "The Fire." Then it referred to Katlin's "fall." Katlin didn't need to hire an agent or a PR firm – the Chokehold Press kept it all rolling.

I tucked the papers under my arm then chugged down the hall to get his gym bag and help Julie take him home. Julie was out in the hall down a few doors from his sealed room. Several bodyguards the size of shot putters blocked the room and they wore dark suits and headset units. I stood on my tiptoes and saw Katlin and waved at him. Katlin didn't notice me. He stood in the center of his room in a taupe Kenneth Cole suit and he had a fresh haircut. Surrounded by his St. Sebastian handlers, he looked like a boxer before a prizefight.

"There's a limo, Pete," Julie said, wiping her eyes dry. "They took care of everything."

"But you should be at his side."

Julie said nothing and slipped her arm inside mine and we rode in the second elevator down to the main lobby (Katlin was in the first elevator with his handlers). A loving team of PR personnel, staff and executives greeted Katlin, riding in the obligatory wheelchair.

The St. Sebastian staff photographer snapped away as a set of official pictures was taken in the hospital's glass foyer in front of the hospital's logo. Katlin was wheeled past the revolving doors to the front steps and into the light. It was as if the sunshine was catered, too.

Katlin was a living, breathing photo op.

500 well-wishers, a battalion of Press and an award-winning high school brass marching band from the suburbs were

there to see Katlin leave St. Sebastian's. A podium, with the St. Sebastian logo, had been installed in front of the entrance's grand pillars. The marching band played a double-time version of Vangelis' "Chariots of Fire" as Katlin was led outside. *Did they forget the hospital was a quiet zone?* When Katlin raised himself from the wheelchair and walked to the podium, flashbulbs went off in a flickering constant stream of white light.

"I have a brief statement," Katlin said, reading from an index card. "First, I want to thank my insurance company for picking up the bill, *right?*"

The crowd laughed.

"I want to thank the staff at St. Sebastian Health Systems whose care and support was exceptional and second to none. Thank you Geoff Lindsey, CEO at SSHS, my teammates in Colorado Springs, the USOC, Kippling Industries, and the Press. I especially want to thank the people from around the world that sent cards and letters and all the flowers. I'm glad I'm not allergic to flowers because my room looks like the Botanical Society."

The audience laughed.

"We love you, Katlin!" somebody called from the back.

He waved his old fixed wave. "Thank you. I appreciate that!"

"Are you headed back? When are you going back?"

Katlin looked like he was trapped. He touched his suit cuff and ID bracelet. The eyes of the world, present and future, were watching him. Once, in a far away place, he had dared to climb to the mountaintop and the world watched. He'd been the odds-on-favorite, the golden boy, the one to raise the roof, the one who'd knock out the lights and achieve what few mortals could. He was the Dream personified, the Heartland Hero making good, the Great Defeater of Antaeus, larger-than-life, his parents' son, as good as gold.

And he lost by nine inches.

Now, again, in the heat of a spotlight that burned like the very sun, he was the icon rekindled, inspired to new heights in The Land of Second Chances, given the torch to bear by the starving masses.

He looked out at the jury of 1,000 eyes.

"Marry me, Katlin!" a woman called out.

"No, me!" another woman yelled.

"Katlin!" someone from the press corps called. "Tell us, are you headed back? When are you going back?"

He looked out at the crowd. Nine inches. He could not fail again.

The crowd clapped and chanted: "Kat-lin, Kat-lin!"

A band trumpet sounded the music for "Charge!" and the crowd responded. The trumpet sounded again. "Charge!" the crowd roared. The mighty pin-striped CEO of St. Sebastian and its giant health care system parent company leaned in toward the podium and tried to quiet the chanting crowd with his hands but the crowd ignored him.

"Go back!" chanted the crowd, over and over.

"Katlin!" a reporter yelled. "Tell us, are you going back?"

"Go back! Go back!" cried the crowd.

Katlin's eyes searched the crowd and the silence was uncomfortable. Finally he put away his index card.

"You want to know if I'm going back?" Katlin asked, gripping both sides of the podium. The crowd's decibel level was climbing; he had to shout to be heard. "I'm ready!"

The crowd cheered.

"I *want* to go back," he said, stabbing an index finger at the sky.

“Kat-lin, Kat-lin!”

He magically quieted the crowd with his hands.

“I don’t know when but I will. No one will stop me. I’m going back! Pookoo,” he said to *all* of the cameras.

Katlin broke away from the podium and marched down the steps. The marching band played “Gonna Fly Now” from Sylvester Stallone’s *Rocky*. Some of the crowd parted and gave him safe passage, while others rushed toward him. The security men quickly flanked Katlin on all sides and steered him through the crowd toward the curb to a black limousine.

“Oh, my God! I touched him!” cried a woman.

“Katlin!” another woman called.

We were only about two bodies away from him when someone yanked at Julie’s hair and I got an elbow in the mouth. A gauntlet of pens and hands thrust toward Katlin from the crowd: he touched hands, smiled, signed a few autographs, and kept moving forward.

“Go back, man, go!” a voice behind me cheered.

Katlin gave that old fixed wave of his before he ducked into the car. The door shut and the limo launched from the parking lot. The license plate read KIPP 1.

Julie looked at me in horror.

It was a done deal. Katlin was going back.



CHAPTER 26

Marble

Old Man Kippling was in the limousine that day; according to *The Book of Katlin*, Kippling was in Katlin's hospital room only moments before I showed up (which explained why Julie was acting the way she was). Kippling and his bodyguards walked downstairs to the limo and watched Kat deliver his "Going Back" speech. Then the bodyguards steered Katlin into the car.

"Let's go for a ride," Kippling said.

Katlin asked Kippling where they were headed, but the glance the bodyguard gave Katlin said to hang it up; he didn't give a shit that Katlin was an Olympian. The car scooted north on the LSD – Lake Shore Drive – in the direction of the Kippling Kingdom in Lake Forest.

Then the car headed west.

"Where are we going?"

"To put things in perspective," Kippling said.

The limousine pulled into Graceland Cemetery and finally stopped near a wooded swatch of trees. The chauffeur opened the door for Kippling, while the bodyguard nudged Katlin out and followed.

"You're family," Kippling said, crossing the lush lawn. "When we met you, you were a humble and talented athlete. An orphan. I took you in as I would a son."

"Yes, sir."

"I meant it when I said you're a part of this family, forever." Kippling put his hand on Katlin's shoulder. "Do you understand?"

Katlin looked up at the Kippling family mausoleum where Olympic rings and an inscription were carved for a reserved space:

KATLIN HILLMACHER KIPPLING

1962 –

Beloved Husband of Cassandra

He understood.

Katlin returned to his apartment with a quiet ultimatum in hand. Return to the flock, ASAP.

Being a champion gives one the sense of immortality, even when your own mortality stares at you in beveled type on a mausoleum crypt. Katlin had seen his name plenty of times in stone, bronze and elsewhere, and perhaps because of that, he was casual about Mr. Kippling's message.

Katlin did not think that the world owed him, but he did accept that it did want to give him things and he shrugged at the perks of fame like free steak dinners. As his second wave of fame gained steam, he found his personal checks (such as those for dry cleaning) were not cashed. Why? They had his autograph. (If you search on E-Bay, you'll find various Katlin items for bid from time to time.)

The day after Katlin returned home from the hospital, an installation man arrived and said he had a work order to install cable TV.

"I didn't order it," Katlin said. "And I don't have any money."

"It's free."

"What's the catch?"

"No catch," the cable man said. "It's from an anonymous donor."

Katlin let the cable man in.

These were good times for Katlin; his stock as a celebrity soared (even though he wasn't making a dime off of it yet). The proverbial streets were being paved for future gold. For instance, the street corner gypsies from Maxwell Street to Uptown sold unlicensed silk screen t-shirts and nylon flags with Katlin's image, right there along with ones of Jim Morrison, Che, the Southern Cross and the Ying & Yang logo. On the train I saw a couple wearing what looked like a hospital ID bracelet on each of their wrists.

The disease was all over.

Even the sport of Track and Field (long an under-rated spectator sport except every four years) had a renaissance in the public mind. A two-hour network rebroadcast of the Olympiad Katlin participated in was aired and it was like he got the silver medal all over again. The Nielsen ratings were astronomical.

One West Coast toy manufacturer sent him a prototype Katlin Hillmacher action figure, which had a javelin and a ladder. The figure didn't look like him (but it was a prototype, after all).

"It's like a creepy puppet," Julie said.

"Where's the ID bracelet and head bandage?" I asked.

I thought that the figure should be truly realistic and needed a few things. One play set could have a studio apartment that a wind-up arm could demolish in a frustrated rage. There could be the St. Sebastian scene, with an IV stand and a podium for press conferences. The Elysium set could have a trophy coffee cup and horny cheerleaders with colorful homecoming signs.

Notoriety isn't the best thing for a person who needs to focus for a living. With the 1992 Olympic Games bearing down on him, Katlin should have been working on rehabbing his shoulder and getting back to training instead of contemplating a book tour and TV movie or any endorsements or products. Then again, I wasn't very far with *Untitled*. Maybe I was jealous. Who the hell was I to question him?

According to *Entertainment Tonight*, there was a TV biopic in the works.

"News to me," Katlin said.

ET reported that it would be a full retrospective of Katlin's life. The producers admitted that there would be a Loyola Park scene. That a TV movie would be sparked by a suicide leap was *very* TV.

Supposedly Tom Cruise, Nicolas Cage, Robert Downey, Jr. and Johnny Depp were in the running to play him and were ready to hit the gym with a personal trainer. (Cage and Cruise camps took that as an insult and released separate statements that the respective actors were in good shape. Depp's agent said that regardless of the project, it was unlikely Depp would do TV again). Julia Roberts and Nicole Kidman were the front runners to play Cassandra. I asked Katlin who would play me and who would be Julie.

"One truth about the spotlight," Katlin said. "People will share it with you, as long as it's not burning you."

I wondered if that quip was aimed at me. I couldn't blame him if it was because I understood why he was guarded. So many people were after his fame in one way or another whether they were candy strippers or corporations smelling the green of WHAT'S HOT.



CHAPTER 27

Larry King Live

Within 48 hours of leaving St. Sebastian, Katlin was the guest on CNN's "Larry King Live": it was a wide-ranging interview that touched a lot of bases: his parents' tragic death, marriage, the Olympics, The Fire, The Fall, and *what's next?* King was at the network's studio while Katlin was in Chicago at an affiliate's studio.

"Tuesday, at your press conference you said, 'I'm going back.' King held up one of Julie's lanyards. "There's even merchandise to the effect."

"But I didn't start it," Katlin said. "It's a folk-phenomenon."

"Would you say 'The Comeback' is probably the biggest thing in sports? America loves a winner. Maybe even more, the underdog. You have a history of comebacks, winning the Illinois high school football state title for your team on a last second comeback catch."

Katlin nodded.

"And you came back, in a clutch effort, to win at the Olympic Trials," King added.

The TV screen showed video highlights of Katlin's track career and ended with Ted Bowers' famous photo.

"Yes."

"What happened in the Olympics?" King asked. "You were *nine inches* away from a gold medal."

"Yes," Katlin said, looking down.

"I guess nine inches would kill most anybody. Of course, second place is not small change," King said, cheerfully.

"Silver is not gold," Katlin said, running his hand through his hair and sitting back in his chair. He touched his hospital wristband. "But I'm focused now. I haven't ever been this focused, ever. I'm going back. I will succeed."

"You gotta like that chutzpah," King said, chuckling. "Tell us about what you remember about your fall last week. It's generated a lot interest."

"I was working out running up and down steps and then I went toward the ground. Smack! I hit the ground. Darkness, absolute darkness. And then I saw The Angel of Death!"

"The Angel of Death?"

"And then I saw the Angel of Death," Katlin said. He was talking to The Afterlife Camera again.

"This angel, did it tell you anything?" King said, listening to his producers on an earphone. "Did it have wings? Describe it."

"It had a flashlight." Katlin plunged into his 60-second evangelical description of the theater NDE. "I died, and I came back."

"So you say you flat-lined and had an out-of-body experience? That you died? Is that true?"

"Yes, Larry."

"True?"

"That's the truth. I was dead."

"Then you made the *ultimate* comeback," King said.

"Twice."

"Twice. How hard was all of that?"

"It's easier to comeback from the grave," Katlin said, "than in the fourth quarter down by two touchdowns."

"Are you a religious person?"

“This isn’t the end of life, Larry. I know. None of it stops here.”

Then they went to a commercial.

No one in history, I thought, needed more damage control at that time.

I was wrong. It got worse.



CHAPTER 28

Getting Worse

By 9 a.m. the next morning, 150 people and five TV cameras had trapped Katlin inside of his apartment. (His apartment was easy to find since it was listed in the Chicago phone book. Katlin was forced to keep his phone off the hook.) Larry King wasn't even headed toward the issue of NDEs, the Afterlife or any of that other radioactive crap.

"Jesus, Kat," I yelled, when he called me that morning. "You don't tell the Press just *anything*."

"It's only the truth," Katlin said.

Katlin had to tell the real truth and *all* of it, no matter its impact. He had lived with his Afterlife views the whole summer and had gotten used to them (including the years since writing that college paper.) It was unfair: the rest of the world had just one micro-second to adjust to everything.

The world wasn't ready to grasp that he came back from the grave. It wasn't ready to hear that NDEs could be used as the ultimate instant replay. It wasn't ready to hear that the Afterlife is a compilation of life moments. To the Western World, karma was simply something to put on a bumper sticker.

By noon that day, there weren't just supporters and hangers-on outside of his apartment, but also protesters.

One sign read:

NOT MY AFTERLIFE

Katlin's building superintendent feared that a large crowd of fanatics, with signs, looked like they were picketing the building (he'd had complaints before). The police were called in to keep peace but the demonstrators and bystanders weren't *removed*; the landlord pointed out that there were a few vacancies, after all.

The evening news showed Katlin leaving his apartment mid-afternoon on his way to the Elysium through the menagerie of autograph seekers, abortion protesters, Chicago Bears fans, entrepreneurs, tail gaters, and the Loyola Park ice cream man.

"Heal me!" a woman cried.

I thought it was ingenious that Katlin, in a warm-up suit, exited *naturally*, going with the flow of the crowd instead of opposing it, so he could leave and get to work. The thing that bothered me most was that on camera Katlin looked like he *enjoyed* being inside the crowd's vortex: he signed one last autograph, gave a fixed wave out by the sidewalk then accelerated into a decent jog down Sheridan Road. A couple of Vespa-powered paparazzi chased after him down Sheridan Road, but he lost them in the back alley by the theater dock. Regardless of popular opinion, he was human – he *had* bills, so he *had* to work. The Elysium was the last place in the world anyone would look for him.

There was immediate fallout from potential sponsors after the Larry King fiasco. That ladder company wrote him to "respectfully withdraw our offer, seeking another direction for our product." Would they have done that to Jacob and his ladder? Other withdrawals included a sports drink maker and an apparel company.

Katlin's admission of his NDE became fodder in the public debate between the Religious Right and the Liberals.

Controversy aside, his oddity was still marketable and of interest to

some. A New Age publisher pitched an idea for a book on the Afterlife. Tabloid TV reported that bookers for Johnny Carson, David Letterman and Arsenio Hall put in requests at Kipling Industries for Katlin to appear on the late-night TV circuit. Nothing came of that because Kipling Industries didn't forward the proposals.

That one West Coast toy manufacturer added to their proposal plans for a battery-operated dial-like tunnel of light as well as a second action figure, The Angel of Death, which looked like a bellhop with a sickle.

"Once in the public mind, you become the world's property," Katlin once said. News stories and jokes shaped you into somebody else's vision of which you were or wanted to be.

It happened to Lenny the Lobster, too.

True, I didn't invent the mascot at all but I felt ownership in him because I had put so much into it. I wanted to get it out there that Lenny was deeper than the commercial revealed. In my mind, I had already begun working on a series of linked-theme commercials. Lenny the Lobster was respectful of all, patriotic, silly, sensitive, self-effacing yet with a core of dignity – and delicious, too.

Lenny the Lobster was named after Lenny Sartina, Joey's slacker nephew. (According to the rumor mill, Lenny was given the mascot job as a charity case.) Sartina's move to put the commercial on cable TV news was marketing genius (or plain dumb luck). The commercial was in heavy rotation and Sartina wanted to make the most of it. Ambulance chasing wasn't part of Lenny's makeup. But it was in Joey's DNA.

"I want you to head up there," Sartina said when I checked in for work. "Lots of TV cameras. Take the suit with you."

"Up where?"

"Rogers Park. Did you see him leaving the house? Them TV cameras treat that Hillmacher like he's the Afterlife Groundhog."

My blood went cold.

"But what about the lunch crowd?" I panicked, not wanting anyone, especially in my own neighborhood, to know I was Lenny the Lobster.

"Don't worry about the fliers," Sartina told me. "Just get Lenny on TV. We need to hammer home the commercial. And pass out some coupons while you're at it. Hurry before those cameras leave."

"That won't happen anytime soon," I said.

"Take the bag with you. Tomorrow don't even come down here. Just head up there and get on TV."

"I haven't gotten over to Michigan Avenue," I countered.

"Fuck that. Get on TV."

I just stood there.

"Come on, Lenny," Sartina said, clapping his hands.

"Are you kidding?"

"Get on TV or I'm firing you."

I went numb as Sartina peeled off a twenty and a five from his money clip for my day's pay. He reminded me that I wasn't a king and that I should get cracking. He went into his office and shut the door.

I went downstairs and visited Rick. I shook hands with Señor Ceurvo three times – this trip would need a major boost.

"Joey's an asshole," I said, complaining to Rick.

"Tell me something I don't know."

"He didn't give me train fare." I finished my third shot. "If he's going to start making me travel in public, I'm gonna' need a raise."

“Good luck on that,” Rick said.

I took the train north. I regretted it instantly and wished I’d taken a cab but that would’ve eaten up my day’s pay.

A mascot, out in public, pops up like Magic – or Death. A lobster is not cute or cuddly and a poor choice for a mascot. If people are repelled by it, their guilt over the cruel death is erased at the dinner plate. *This lobster deserves its death.* Moments after I got on the train a man in his 20s, opening his eyes from listening to a cassette Walkman, screamed and threw a punch at me but I ducked.

How did I let myself get to this point? Why in the hell did I get sucked into the boomtown gold of Mehedrich & Associates? Why couldn’t I have been satisfied with my life as the town editor at *The Daily Struggle*? And what about my plans for further education? *I could always go back and get my Master’s.* Uh-huh.

I once turned down a magazine job in Seattle. Why did I do that? I liked *coffee* and rain and lots of trees and living so close to the ocean. Now I was in a costume riding the same train I once took to my old job. *I used to have my own office with my name on the door. I used to have three weeks vacation with time off at the holidays.* Now I was a seafood whore. Why on earth wasn’t I on the job trail? Was I so burnt out that I had to entertain myself?

I did a little tequila-inspired dance.

“Oh, look,” a mother said to a boy in a Cubs hat. “Lenny’s so cute!”

I was in the lead train car. The conductor got on the intercom.

“Attention riders, up front here in the conductor’s car we have a star of stage and screen, Chicago’s one and only Lenny the Lobster of Poseidon’s Restaurant situated in the beautiful Loop.”

Sartina would’ve loved hearing that.

“Juggle,” a rider yelled.

I put up my hands in mock protest.

“Aw, come on, Lenny!”

A college student dug in his backpack and handed me an orange while the boy handed me a baseball (they were going to Wrigley for a game). The last item they gave me was a set of keys.

“Don’t drop ‘em!”

“Are you kidding?” the college student cried. “Lenny’s the master!”

I tossed the items into the air. As they floated in that beautiful round arc of physicality, it no longer mattered that I was unemployed. I forgot that unemployment was running out. I forgot that I was supposed to look for a tent. The crowd loved my juggling shtick. The crowd loved *me*.

The rest of the way I walked up and down the aisles doing my best Chaplin, using a banana to “talk on a phone”, getting grumpy people to smile, sitting on the lap of out-of-towners. I signed autographs (the kid with the baseball had me sign the ball) and I handed out coupons. Because the conductor mentioned Poseidon’s out loud, I handed him the deluxe (and rarely handed out) FREE MEAL coupon, rather than the 50% off one.

“Hey, thanks, man,” the conductor said.

I waved and turned to go.

“You want to drive the train?”

I pointed, Me?

“Just for a second.”

I stood in the cab and he showed me what to do. *Hmm, maybe I could put Train Conductor on my resume.*

The train had an express run through one of the stations, but as we

neared the platform, we slowed down. Jaws dropped as people saw a 6-foot lobster at the controls.

It was all fun until I came to the Lunt station. *I can't, I thought. I can't do this anymore. Look at me.* The booze was wearing off and I needed to refuel. I left the platform and headed downstairs and blended into the red painted walls. I squeezed through foot traffic and down the stairs towards the main exit past the newspaper stand and almost escaped. Jollie the Cigarette Man called out to me. He was from Bombay and the friendliest man of all Chicago.

"Jim, I see you're all packed up, yes?" Jollie laughed, pointing to my bag. "Are you running away from home?"

Oh, shit, I thought. He knows its me.

Jollie called me Jim. Sometimes James, depending on however I was dressed. Back when I commuted to Mehedrich & Associates in my suit and tie all those years, I was James. But on weekends, when I was dressed down, he called me Jim. I never had the heart to tell him my name. Now after all these years it was too late.

Jollie would go home to his wife Cheri one night, which he always spoke of so fondly. She would have supper ready for him and she would ask him how his day went, expecting that he would recite the daily litany that he sold more cigarettes, candy bars and newspapers. *Jim is not Jim, Jollie would say. What? He is not Jim. He tells me he is Pete. I feel like a fool because all these years I have been calling him Jim. Cheri would say it was a shameful trick. The truth would not heal the silence.*

"It's been a long time," Jollie said to me.

I nodded.

It had been too long and I felt bad. When I used to proofread, I'd get my coffee at Ennui and then head off to the office. From there I'd catch the train, and if I hadn't seen the paper, I'd buy one from Jollie, and Marlboro Lights or I'd see him on my way home at night. The routine, and the small talk, was one I always looked forward to and in the city it meant a lot and it reminded me of how it had been in the old days when I worked at the newspaper. But then the Wednesday Night Massacre happened and I didn't see the signs and soon after everything was shattered. Not being able to do my small part in supporting vendors like Jollie was just another example of Trickle-on Economics.

"This will cheer you up, my friend," Jollie said. "They just came in. A hot seller."

He showed me an I'M GOING BACK lanyard.

"Don't tell anyone it's me." I put my claw to my lips, and backed away to the main exit.

"I won't Jim," Jollie said, smiling. "It'll be our secret."

Going to Rogers Park was a *baaaaaad* idea and I really wanted to go back to Poseidon's and tell Joey off and turn in the suit. But he'd only give me the old *Are You a King?* speech. The L-tracks were parallel to a cobblestone road with three hole-in-the-wall bars on the West Side and I made a NASCAR pit stop into one of them. Garth Brooks' "Friends in Low Places" was on the jukebox.

"Hey, no pets in here unless they're on a leash," one old crow said to the bartender. He faintly reminded me of War-Horse.

"It's a cockroach!"

"Git him, Tommy! Git 'im!"

"Cockroach of the sea!"

The bartender walked over with a fly swatter, brushing the air with it,

and asked what I wanted. I ordered two shots of tequila.

“No pets in here unless they got a leash,” Old Crow said.

“I got one,” I said, pointing to my left hand. “I’m married.”

I drank up.

Old Crow was still laughing at me as I hit the door. I stepped off the high curb a bit wobbly and tripped on the cobblestone. I decided not to take Morse Avenue, which was a busy street. I limped north to West Greenleaf Avenue, past the Heartland Café, and cut over to Sheridan Road. The TV station vans and cameras were there. People swarmed the apartment like ants on a sugar hill. I was ready to meet my public.



CHAPTER 29

The Afterlife Groundhog

The life of a mascot is unfulfilled and useless if no one sees you and let me tell you, there is nothing more pitiful than a depressed mascot. But an unemployed mascot is worse, so I heeded Sartina's threat and positioned myself to get on TV. The cameras and paparazzi were poised at every exit of the building. But I looked so *commercial*.

"Have you seen Katlin yet?" a woman asked.

"No."

"I've been here all morning."

A car slowed down near the crowd and the driver yelled out to everyone to "get a life."

"Screw you, buddy," somebody said.

I wove through the crowd.

"Do you remember when he saved the woman from the fire?"

The Fire, I thought. The Fire. Jesus Christ.

"He's so good looking," one woman crooned.

Another spoke. "He can take care of my fire anytime."

I did my dance.

"Look, it's Lenny."

I pretended to act shy.

"Oh, you're so cute."

I discoed right into a hostile part of the crowd with signs. The one sign bearer, with NOT MY AFTERLIFE, was still there. Others read JESUS SAVES, ABORTION KILLS and CHOICE IS A RIGHT.

I pulled out a yo-yo and started doing tricks.

"God is watching. He waits for you to change."

"You self-righteous, stone-throwing –"

I stepped forward as the yo-yo "rocked the cradle."

A TV reporter and a cameraman focused on the rising tempers. A news photographer stepped in and began clicking away.

"Where do you think you can take a life?"

"Where do you get off thinking you can run my life?"

"Go back to the suburbs, you cow!" one protester said.

Then one of the protesters ripped the other's sign and some slapping and shoving began. The yo-yo swung like a pendulum, but I leaned over too far with the yo-yo and stumbled and fell. The crowd thought both fighters had knocked me down. (It was the tequila.) The crowd gave me space and fell silent. I stood up and held up my hand in a "pause" move.

Then Lenny the Lobster committed a mascot cardinal sin. *He spoke while in costume.*

"Here's one thing you can agree on," I said, handing both of them a free meal coupon.

The cameras snapped away and caught it all.

Then the yo-yo danced along the sidewalk as I "walked the dog" and the crowd laughed. The two fighting protesters broke it up.

Hmm, I thought. Maybe I can work for the United Nations.

I hung around and handed out meal coupons and mingled and although Katlin hadn't left his apartment, the atmosphere turned into a lawn party. Suddenly it was late and I had to get going to the Elysium. At the corner of Lunt and Sheridan, while waiting for the light, I saw Anna-Krista.

She waved as the light turned green. Instead of going across Sheridan to go home to change, I cut across Lunt, against the red light, and dodged a few cars. Anna followed after me.

“Wait!” she said.

I scuttled down the sidewalk.

“Hey!”

I kept moving.

“What are you doing up here?” she asked, running up to me.

I said nothing.

“I don’t get it.”

I shrugged and covered my face with the red canvas bag.

“I’m really mad at you,” Anna said.

I pantomimed *why*?

“You’re running away from me. I just want a hug.”

She slapped me playfully with her serving apron then stole a long hug, which felt awkward and wonderful at the same time. I moved like a telephone pole. Could she sense it was me underneath the costume? And did she make it a regular habit to hug strangers on the street?

“Thanks, I needed that!” she said, then headed off to the L-stop.

Needed that? What did *that* mean? If she *needed* it, why in the hell was she out carousing for days on end? *Needed?*

I scuttled down to the Elysium, checking behind me once in a while for Anna-Krista. The throngs of people on the street and in cars called out to me. I couldn’t go into the Elysium dressed like that. I went further and stopped into an arcade and changed in the restroom.

That night on the TV news, Lenny and the protesters were the meat of the story since Katlin could not be found.

Tempers rose. Lenny stumbled, stopped the protesters cold, and gave them a meal coupon.

“Here’s one thing you can agree on,” Lenny said.

The TV crew enjoyed the action.

“While the pro-life pro-choice debate rages on, it seems that there’s no debate that everyone’s hungry for a good meal,” the reporter said.

“Peace, for now,” the anchor chuckled.

Then they broke for a commercial.



CHAPTER 30

The Mascot

I was one of about 25 mascots that descended on Sheridan Road the next day. It was no world record but it was still quite a scene. High school and college mascots from Illinois, Indiana and Wisconsin were there, as well as corporate ones that included a giant candy bar, a pair of lips, a coffee cup, and a submarine sandwich.

But not the Afterlife Groundhog.

Not the Mascot of Pain.

I had never seen any other mascots in my lonely travels as Lenny the Lobster. When you see one or two mascots, the magic is there and you can work off of each other. I knew most were paid minimum wage or a little above. Mascots tend to know how to act around a mascot – but the problem is many-fold. First, a mascot's uniqueness is diluted in such a sea of fur, foam and fun. (Lenny, with no fur and a shell the texture of a kitchen scratch pad, was an unfriendly choice for a mascot.)

The other problem is competing for attention.

That day I had a few drinks at home before I left for Katlin's but it wasn't as fun as having Rick pouring them and Joey paying for them. Anna-Krista was off on another late night tangent, which, for once, was all right. The red canvas bag with the Poseidon's logo was hidden in the Ing Room's book cabinet. I left home in costume. I felt safe that Anna-Krista wouldn't snoop around in the Ing Room. She wasn't one to do any *writing*, we weren't *conceiving* (or *practicing*), and she wasn't *reading* much, especially since as a dormant writer I gave her *nothing* to read.

The crowd was larger than the day before and there were more TV cameras. It had been four days since Katlin had been on Larry King and he hadn't been seen in two days. It was a national tragedy.

"He's been holed up in there too long," somebody said.

"I hope he's OK."

I threaded through the fur. I tried handing out two-for-one coupons, but many other mascots outdid me with freebie toys and genuine free meal coupons. Joey only gave me five free meal coupons a week.

I listened to the chatter of the crowd.

"I always knew there was the Other Side."

"I had an NDE of my own. I fell off a roof when I was a kid..."

The Ice Cream Man was there.

Katlin hadn't shown up to work the last few days and his phone line was busy; evidently, he still had it off the hook.

I dangled my yo-yo near a TV camera crew but they cared less.

"Chicago is here...and those wacky mascots...cheering the spirit of our own Olympian," another reporter said. "Keeping watch, waiting."

I tapped on the cameraman's shoulder. He ignored me. I tapped on his shoulder again; his camera was aimed at an upper window. I wanted to tell him that Katlin's home was underground, not in the sky. He brushed me away. It got late and I left the circus to get ready for work at the Elysium. I crossed the street and headed toward the front gate. No Anna-Krista. Good. I reached in my pocket for my key.

"Hey, Mr. Mascot!" little voices yelled.

I looked. A group of 20 pre-school kids were running toward me. I waved and searched for my key.

“Mr. Lenny! Wait! Lenny, wait for us!”

I rattled the iron gate. Sometimes it wouldn't close all the way. Nope, it was locked. I tried to enter at the rental office door, but Bob Cannova growled that the bathrooms weren't for public use and that if I didn't listen, he was going to call the cops.

The pre-school kids were closer. The front gate squeaked opened and I rushed over. It was a mother with another kid. “Well, hi, Mr. Lobster!”

Then Anna-Krista walked out.

I waddled up the alley with the kids screaming and laughing as they chased me but I beat them to the field house where I made a quick change in a bathroom. I didn't have the canvas bag. There was a new, unused plastic bag in the trash so I took it out and put the suit into it. I heard the kids yapping out in the main room. I left the bathroom.

“Where'd he go?” they all asked.

One of them screamed bloody murder.

“The bag! Look at the bag!” one kid said.

Lenny's rubber antennae hung out of the zipper.

“Murderer! Murderer!” a girl cried. “He killed Lenny the Lobster!”

There was nothing to do but to keep moving.



CHAPTER 31

Hollywood

I returned to Poseidon's the next day happy with the week's success. I had a bunch of ideas for a whole slate of new commercials.

One idea included Lenny driving the train down to the Loop, and at the end, all of the passengers rush to Poseidon's. The "Hollywood" ad series included an homage to *Casablanca* with Lenny clad in a white blazer and Rick the Bartender serving gin and tonics. The *King Kong* one had a 60-foot Lenny storming down Michigan Avenue, climbing the Hancock Building and getting buzzed by planes from Meigs Field. The commercial ended with Lenny pointing to Poseidon's.

Another idea had TV cameras swarming in a recreation of Lenny's Nobel Peace Prize "Here's something we can agree on" moment.

I'd seen some of the papers on the train downtown. The *Sun-Times* had a photo of mascots gathering on Sheridan Road, but the caption read ROGERS PARK OVERRUN BY MASCOTS.

When I got to the restaurant, I ran into Joey Sartina.

"Hey, Joey," I said, proudly. "I got on TV."

"Yeah, I saw that."

"We've got to go over some of the ideas I have."

"I ain't got time for that."

"Well, let me know when. I'll have them in a proposal."

"I thought I sent you up there to get on TV?"

"And I did."

"I meant with that Hillmacher."

"He was hiding," I said. "He wouldn't come out."

"But I didn't tell you to pull no stunts."

"What do you mean 'stunt'?"

"That protest crap," Sartina said. "Then yesterday there's a 100 mascots on TV and in the paper."

"Well, it wasn't 100," I said. Always the proofreader.

"I wanted Lenny giving Hillmacher a coupon. A ton of people called me up bitching about that stunt."

"You said to get on TV, to hammer home the commercial."

"With *him*," Sartina argued.

"You said get on TV or I'd get fired. Did I tell you about the L-train?"

"The train?"

"I got the conductor to mention the restaurant over the loudspeaker," I said. Sartina nodded. "And he let me drive the train."

Sartina moaned that he didn't have insurance for that. "Kid, it ain't ever about Lenny. Look, we'll talk soon."

I dressed and walked through to the bar. I grabbed a quick Bacardi and Coke from Rick and headed out. I walked the old beat. It was a good day. I finished my shift and got back into my street clothes and headed to the Elysium. I was seriously considering starting a mascot business. I was having enough of the concessionettes and Fowler and the games.

"Did you see all the buzz in Rogers Park in the news?" I asked, emboldened by Lenny's success.

"Unbelievable," Floyd said.

"I was happy with it."

"Happy? Why are you happy about a fire?"

The Fire. The Fire. God. Not again.

Floyd gave me the newspaper.

SUSPICIOUS FIRE CONSUMES ROGERS PARK EATERY

ROGERS PARK – Three people died when Hawk’s Diner, a Rogers Park landmark for three decades, was consumed by a three-alarm fire late Thursday afternoon in what Fire Department officials suspect was the work of an arsonist. The mid-morning fire demolished the restaurant, not far from the Morse Avenue elevated stop, and strong lake front winds threatened neighboring businesses. It is the third fire in as many months.

“We’re lucky it took place when there wasn’t much traffic,” Lt. Dan Sumners said. “If it had been during the breakfast or supper crowd, we might have seen a bigger loss of life.”

As Hawk’s burned, the street became a bizarre scene like a Disney disaster ride as a dozen mascots descended upon the neighborhood. The mascots were part of a larger crowd that had been harboring near the home of Olympian Katlin Hillmacher in what was a demonstration of part-support, part-protest. Hillmacher has been in retreat since an appearance on CNN’s “Larry King Live” where he divulged to a national audience that he suffered a near-death experience and was inflicted with visions of a grim reaper-type of figure and trips to what he termed as “the Afterlife.”

“Only in America,” I groaned and put the newspaper down.

“I think there are fires elsewhere,” Twana said.

I tried to explain. “I mean where a news story starts one place and *he* takes over...oh, never mind.”

“You are *so* jealous,” Sonya said.

“You ought to be thinking of Katlin,” Twana added.

“I thought you was his friend,” Floyd said.

“Remember, Warner,” Fowler said, putting his arms around the girls. “We’re all on the same team.”

“Team Elysium,” Rita said.

Fowler snapped his fingers and grinned. “TEAM ELYSIUM, that would be good on some silver or white tank tops.”

“My dancing partner would like one,” Floyd said.

I headed outside.

The iron gate clicked behind me as I walked down the sidewalk to the corner. I didn’t need a smoke. I was quitting, *right now*. I took a big breath of air and coughed. As the afternoon rush hour traffic hurtled north I heard a siren in the distance. (For the afternoon rush hour, orange cones were used to convert a southbound lane into a third northbound lane. The opposite procedure was done for the morning rush.)

As I looked up at the Elysium’s decrepit neon sign, I could almost feel the spin of the world. The daylight faded faster each day as we headed deeper into fall. There was a nip in the air, the cooler nights already drawing the green out of the leaves.

I was in the movie of my life and the movie sucked. I was waiting for change but I’d had enough change that year and anything new might only make it worse.

I went back to work.

CHAPTER 32

The Best Things in Life Are Free

I rounded the corner and walked up the alley to the gravel lot where the loading dock was. Wendy and LaToysha sat on the edge of the loading dock and smoked.

"It's sexy that he's been dead," Wendy said.

"Sexy," LaToysha said. "Shit, you're crazy, girl."

"He's already been to Tomorrow," Wendy said, sipping at a pop. "You get the vibe, like, he doesn't have the fear the rest of us have. That's why he lives like he does."

"Well, if you ask me, the whole thing's freaky," LaToysha said.

I walked over to the dock, popped open my Zippo and lit a generic.

Katlin appeared out of no where.

"Well," I said, "if it ain't the Groundhog. Where have you been?"

"Not at my place."

"The whole world thinks you were at home," I said. "The Media and everyone else has been camped out."

"I saw on TV," Katlin said.

"It's your turn to change the marquee," I said. "On second thought, I'll do it. You've got trophies to polish."

"If we work together, it'll go faster."

"It might be a nice ritual," I said. "Some good bonding time."

LaToysha spoke. "Sonya's right, you *are* jealous."

I ignored her.

"But – you're going up the ladder," Katlin said, sitting down. "You're the one who spells."

"I'll put it in my resume."

"I'm afraid of heights," LaToysha said.

"It's not the height that's bad," Katlin said. "It's the fall."

"Have you heard what the weather's going to be like tomorrow?" LaToysha asked.

"I have to walk regardless," I said, thinking about my Mazda somewhere in the junkyards of Chicagoland.

"It's supposed to rain," Katlin said.

"Really?" I said.

"Yeah," Katlin said. "Cable's great."

Wendy smiled. "Especially when you get it for free, Mr. Lucky!"

"I quit checking the weather." I stepped on the cigarette and lit a new one. As a first shifter, I used to watch the forecast every night at 10 o'clock. If it rained, I used to bring an umbrella and a raincoat. If it snowed, I knew to give myself extra time for the train ride. "What's the point anymore?"

"You shouldn't get so depressed," LaToysha said. "It's just weather."

"I picked this for you," Wendy said to Katlin.

It was a dandelion in bloom.

"A weed?" LaToysha said. "Girl, that should be in a plastic bag!"

Wendy handed Katlin the dandelion.

Katlin blew at the dandelion and the seeds scattered. His free hand followed a seed as it floated away. "Think of this as a soul set free."

He handed her the dandelion back.

Wendy touched his cravat head bandage, the new ID bracelet, and touched his face where it was scraped when he plunged to the asphalt.

“What did you see? You know, when you went ...*There*?”

“He don’t want to talk about that,” LaToysha scowled. “Leave the man alone.”

“What was it like *There*?”

“A bunch of angels playing harps and shit,” LaToysha laughed.

“No,” he said, laying back on the dock and closing his eyes. “No, but we do see whatever we think it is. What sticks with me is how I saw things *afterward*. I saw the sun...”

“I see the sun, too,” LaToysha said, pointing at the sky. “I don’t need to be dead to do that.”

“Shh,” Wendy said.

Katlin rose.

“I saw the dew on the grass as a robin dug at the earth, pulled out a worm and flew away to a tree. I saw an old widow at 5 o’clock walk from the kitchen to the living room window and look out to the empty driveway. Saw the silhouette of a kid race downhill on a sled in the fading light, his parents’ voices calling out to come home and he wanted to stay but he had to go. I heard the creak of a rocking chair at two a.m., a man’s voice say ‘go back to bed, I’ll do it.’ And I saw the hope in the eyes of a young woman who’s learning new things, reaching, like a flower does for the day’s warmth and light,” Katlin said, touching her face with one finger.

“Tell us more,” LaToysha said.

“I saw on the clock it’s time to get back to work,” Fowler said, standing on the dock with his hands on his hips.

“Aw, shut up, Fowler,” LaToysha whined.

“Come on, come on,” Fowler said. “I’m the only frickin’ one in there doing anything in there.”

“Fowler, we do more out here on break than you do in there all day,” LaToysha said, sticking her tongue out at him.

“I saw that.” Fowler shook a finger at her. “You better watch out!”

“I don’t have to watch nothing.”

“Get off my back,” Fowler snarled.

LaToysha took a little run and jumped on his back and rode for two or three paces, squealing as Fowler acted like a horse. Then she slipped off his back and they laughed all the way back into Fowler’s celluloid cave.

I took two last quick drags, crushed the cigarette out with my shoe tip, and kicked it off the dock.

“Ready?” I asked.

Katlin and Wendy were huddled.

I went into the theater without him. The movie was about halfway done. All was well.

At the concession stand I got behind the counter and took the broom and swept the excess popcorn off the floor; it just trailed in gobs from the machine. Before every show the popcorn bin was left open; popcorn rolled out as they scooped it into the paper tubs. The girls just worked around it.

“It doesn’t get much better than this,” I joked.

“Oh, yes it does,” Sonya said.

I swept more popcorn.

“50% off,” I said, raising the dustpan full of popcorn. I pretended to eat some. Sonya went into the auxiliary storage room for more. She wasn’t amused.

Katlin and Wendy walked into the lobby.

I headed toward the front door. “I need a smoke.”

“You just had one,” Katlin said. Wendy bumped into him and punched

his left arm. "Meet up at Ennui tomorrow morning?"

"Sure," I said. "How's 6:30?"

"Come on," Wendy said, punching his shoulder, over and over.

"Make it 8."

"OK, I'll do some writing."

Sonya rounded the corner and gave Wendy the evil eye.

I didn't really want another cigarette (I know, a first). I kept the unlit cigarette and my Zippo in hand and walked out of the courtyard and down the sidewalk. I kept walking at the corner and went past the sandwich shop and the bookstore and the arcade and the Loyola EL stop. I didn't have a token. If I'd had one I could have climbed the dank steps up to the fresh air, above the traffic and the bodies and the noise. I could have ridden the train down past Loyola and some dorm buildings (the one with a ELVIS LIVES sign in the window that had been there for years, and in the same building on a different floor a new window sign that read ELVIS IS DEAD). I could go past where the expensive hi-rise is where the old Granada Theater used to be, Root Photographers and down past a good Chinese restaurant and into the other neighborhoods. Rode the EL further, the city rolling before me to the side down past Argyle with its Asian carnival-like street food mart, down further to Uptown where I still banked for some dumb reason, those large tenements scattered in between with their quilt of many-colored windows and the backs of brick three-story apartment buildings like some back lot to an O. Henry movie. Continue on, further down, transfer at the State Center, head west on the EL and ride it all the way northwest to O'Hare Airport.

I only had a buck on me.

Back at the Elysium, Katlin was alone at the concession stand. There was a good claw mark on his face. I asked him how he got it.

He didn't say.

"So where's Sonya?"

"She just quit."

"Uh-huh. How'd you get that claw mark?"

"Where'd you go?"

"To get a pop."

"Why?" Katlin asked. "You can get everything here for free."

"I don't want everything for free." I went back inside.



CHAPTER 33

Ennui

The next morning I had coffee over at Ennui and settled into my routine as commuters rushed in and out for coffee. It was almost like the good old days. Katlin hadn't shown up so I reached into my backpack and pulled out my Pen-Tab and reported on all of the recent events. 8 o'clock rolled around and still no Katlin. I kept going. I sorted all of Lenny's news clips into a manila envelope. 9 o'clock and no Katlin. It didn't matter; I was fueled with caffeine and nicotine and all warmed-up for fiction. I took out my other Pen-Tab and worked on "The Proofreader." The story was a thinly-disguised version of my days at *The Daily Struggle*, my switch of jobs, and it profiled Glenn Lang, my mentor Mehedrich & Associates, who served as a Dickens' type of ghost of the future character. It was going good.

Mark Hoffstetter dragged up a chair. "Thanks for bailing me out."

It wasn't Mark's style to be sarcastic.

"Huh."

"The whole ordeal sucked the bag but it worked out."

"I've never been in jail," I said.

"The cool thing, I'm gonna start making some real cash."

Hope it's legal, I thought.

"Yeah," Mark continued. "It's so awesome. I've got *major* sponsorship. I just inked the deal."

Which head shops? I wondered.

"Huh."

"Yeah, Angela's doing the new logo. We're placing 24 closed circuit cameras all over Rogers Park. The sponsor's paying for it all. But don't say anything, though, OK? I'm to keep quiet about it. Oh, I'm getting a van. I wanted to put the R-C logo on the sides, but they said no. Hey, maybe you could write for the show."

"Does it pay?"

"Not right now."

"No thanks."

"The show's gonna be killer."

"Sorry, I need to find a full-time job. My wife is threatening that I'll have to get a tent to live in. I have three months left. And besides, I don't have free time to do my own writing."

"Bummer," Mark said, taking a big swig off his bottled water. "So, like, if you can't put in time, do you want to invest? It's the future."

"No thanks."

"Come on, man. We're even making t-shirts and hats. Black psychedelic swirl. \$20 bucks for the deluxe version."

If nothing else I thought, it'd make a good dust rag. "Sure, put me down for a shirt."

"Cool beans!" Mark said. "Well, I got shit to do. Bye-yeh."

That morning I'd spent time beckoning the muse from the grave. I didn't need to be distracted or interrupted. I had enough demons with writer's block and not finishing things. In the time it took to order one lousy t-shirt the muse was gone. There was nothing else to do except to plug in my CD player and put in Leonard Cohen's *I'm Your Man*.

Leonard Cohen, born in Quebec in 1934, is musical black licorice. His most famous song is probably "Suzanne" which folk singer Judy Collins covered in 1967. Another track is "Hallelujah", which makes the rounds in

TV and movies and is covered a lot. One more track is “The Future” (from the 1992 album of the same name) which was used for the ending credits in Oliver Stone’s *Natural Born Killers*. Leonard is a lyrical genius. He performed an edited version of “The Future” on Jay Leno’s *The Tonight Show*, and complained to Jay about having to do the edited version.

He never appeared again on the program.

Even with the flurry of activity of people coming in and buying stuff, I was getting some good writing in. The Cohen was working. The rain dripped off the eaves and it smack against the sidewalk and pooled in the little craters where the cement was chewed up. I wrote about a different time of my life than then. The rain eased up and I turned the CD player off and came out of my Cohen cocoon.

The front door opened and a chill seeped in and I heard the *shhh* of tires on wet pavement out on Sheridan. I smoked a cigarette and read over what I had written.

At 10:23 I saw Wendy hurrying down the west side of Sheridan Road, toward Lunt Street, her backpack slung over her shoulder, a large white t-shirt on and her black Elysium pants on. Wendy walked through the crosswalk and past the cafe back toward Mundelein. She was wearing one of Katlin’s javelin t-shirts.



CHAPTER 34

The Scraper of Life

I can still see my painted name being scraped off the office door at Mehedrich & Associates. After the Wednesday Night Massacre I should have made a change and sought other employment, but I was making good money and I liked all of the trappings of my life. We were working a lot after all (because we were severely understaffed). I thought I could ride it out.

After the Massacre, a building maintenance worker went around to all of the offices. He was at my office door, scraping my painted name off the glass door with a razor. (In an effort of efficiency, our offices were rented out, and we were corralled into one large room.)

The razor dug at my name and title in sharp, short squeaky strokes. He turned around, eventually, with just the letter P left to scrape. He saw me and pointed at the door, my name, or what was left of it.

“This you?” he said.

I nodded.

“Sucks to be you,” he said, scraping the rest off the door.

The Scraper of Life was the theme song for the year 1991.

I was at Katlin’s again, ready to head off to work, when there was a heavy knock on his apartment door.

“Come on in!” Katlin said.

“No Press,” I blurted, stopping the door as it opened. I turned and gave Katlin an incredulous look.

The heavy knock was there again. I opened the door for two men who wore suits and had short haircuts.

“Mr. Hillmacher?”

I pointed across the room.

“Yes?” Katlin said.

“Detective Young, Chicago PD,” one of them said, holding out a badge. “We’d like to ask you about a fire.”



CHAPTER 35 Nostradamus Sees All

Now the news is full of this arson business and I had nothing to do with it. I was out training, as I have for my whole life, and I'm in the wrong spot at the wrong time. It makes one not want to be a Good Samaritan.

The police asked me what I knew and I insisted that I did nothing wrong. There is no need to have an attorney. I haven't done a thing except save a life and they are trying to implicate me. How much of it is because of my stature and how much is a witch hunt and how much is headline hunting?

I wave at people all the time. I'm used to so many damn cameras that I do it by rote and people taking my picture and when you start to deny them that "right" (but it's not a right) then they begin to take it out on you so I let it go and just wave and smile and hope I can go on my way. There seems to be nothing one can do about these invading eyes. I predict that in the future cameras will be all over like insects.

Page 29, *The Book of Katlin*

According to one tabloid, Nostradamus also wrote about Katlin in another "lost" quatrain that went like this:

Dans le manteau du jour un contrat tandem est fait.
Le feu dans la brume boisée, un grand jeu;
l'oeil argenté voit la vérité
de celle tombée du drapeau des cercles.

In the cloak of daylight a tandem deed is done.
Fire in the wooded mist, a great play;
the silver eye beholds the truth
of the one fallen from the flag of circles.

"Who writes these things?" I asked, looking at the tabloid. "And what kind of idiot reads them?"

Julie gave me a dirty look.

"Sorry," I mumbled. "I do, too."

"Stick it," Julie said.

We were in Jake's Place, a West Rogers Park bar not far from Kessels. Julie drank Bacardi and Cokes, Katlin kept to Perrier and I had gin and tonics. It was before lunch and the bar was empty. Three days after Katlin was interviewed by the police the TV still emitted poison.

"Police have made an arrest based on compromising videotape made by TV producer Mark Hoffstetter," the TV anchor said. A mug shot of Eddie McCall, the Videographer, was shown. The news showed tape of McCall leaving an apartment building handcuffed and with a jacket

over his head. Then McCall's own famous video of Katlin rescuing Mrs. Blair played.

"Police have confirmed that Chicago athlete Katlin Hillmacher was questioned about the July fire, which McCall videotaped."

"He was *jogging*," I yelled to the TV.

"You need to tell them the truth, baby," Julie said from the video jukebox. She started to press buttons.

"She's right, you need to let everybody know," I said.

Katlin headed off to the bathroom.

Was he going to try to kill himself again? What could he do? Smash his forehead on the mirror again? Stick a hand in the electric dryer and one hand in the sink? Eat a urinal deodorizer cake?

The jukebox began to play "Hold On" by Wilson-Phillips.

"You better watch out," Jake said, handing me another gin and tonic.

"Why?"

"A buddy once couldn't keep his eyes off my wife. Had to beat the crap out of him. Just warning you."

"Huh. Sounds like a country song."

Katlin walked backed from the bathroom. "Pete says he wants to hear a country song."

"OK," Julie said.

"No, that's all right."

Julie came over and touched my forearm. "I need more quarters."

I gave her five bucks.

Jake coughed twice and organized the stack of crap by the cash register. He shuffled through the latest *Sports Illustrated*; its cover touted the mighty Minnesota Twins and the great Kirby Puckett as they headed to the 1991 World Series against the Atlanta Braves.

The walls of the bar had signed covers that ranged from the Chicago Bears to the newly crowned Chicago Bulls and Michael Jordan. When it came time to buy the first round of drinks, Jake didn't make us pay because Katlin autographed a *Sports Illustrated*. It was Katlin's second appearance on the SI cover up to that time (the first was when he won at the Goodwill Games). Katlin was on the cover with weightlifter John Turner and swimmer Amber Lynn Rodgers. It was, even for Katlin, over-the-top.

The cover read AS GOOD AS GOLD. (Katlin had mentioned it to The Afterlife Camera when he was first in St. Sebastian's.) Turner was dressed in a miner outfit wearing a hard hat with a lamp and smudges on his face and holding a pick ax. Rodgers, a chemist with an art minor, was a Swimsuit issue-worthy alchemist. Katlin the sybaritic was clad in a track singlet on a Grecian pedestal as Rodgers applied gold flake to Katlin.

"That was quite erotic," Katlin smiled, as he signed the cover.

The alternate cover shot, which was never printed, was a modest one of three hard-nosed sweaty athletes determined to do their best.

The next issue mentioned Rodgers captured two gold medals and one silver, and that Turner and Katlin grabbed silver.

Second place.

Not gold.

Failure.

"You missed by nine inches," I said, still not believing it.

"I have a daily reminder."

"What's that?"

"Jake, we're moving in," Julie yelled, as she wobbled up to the bar.

“Pete, I put in a song for you, “Guitars and Cadillacs” by a guy with a white cowboy hat.”

“Mr. Dwight Yoakam,” Jake said.

“Country?”

“You said you wanted to hear some country music,” Julie said, shimmying up to me. She bummed another cigarette.

How on Earth could I say no?

By the end of the night I was a true-blue Dwight Yoakam fan and I am to this day. Let History show that was the day I heard the Bakersfield gospel of misery, gin and longneck salvation. I saw the honky tonk’s neon light as Reverend Dwight stepped and strummed. Redemption was to be found in a crazy little thing called Love. Julie danced and kept asking for jukebox money and I kept giving it. Jake quit warning me.

We watched TV, too. We couldn’t stop watching. TV is shameless because it will put on whatever humans do or allow. As long as there is electricity the thing will live. TV is good for live sports, music and severe weather; the rest is froth.

Mark Hoffstetter was a guest on the early edition of *Nightwatch*. Nothing was mentioned about Mark’s arrest. Nothing on how he dodged the drug charges by offering the arson detectives two incriminating videos.

“If more people came forward like this,” the TV Host said, “America would be what it used to be again.”

“Hey, I’m just doing my part,” Hoffstetter said, wearing his black *Remote Crow-trol* hat and t-shirt.

The TV Host tapped his pen. “This is the famous video shown this summer when Hillmacher saved Mrs. Blair from the house fire.”

“No, I didn’t do that one,” Mark said. “I shot video of it being videotaped, from a sidewalk angle. This is what helped nail the Arsonist.”

I pointed at the TV. “I know that guy.”

“I’m letting him sell t-shirts and hats,” Katlin said. “He thought of it after I was on Larry King’s show.”

“T-shirts of what?”

He didn’t say because the TV showed Mark’s first video. Katlin ran down the street and waved at Eddie McCall, who set the fire and ran across the street to an open window. Katlin came back and rescued Mrs. Blair.

“My God,” another commentator said, seeing Katlin waving at the Arsonist. “He waved. That looks like a *signal*. Play it back.”

On replay, it did look like a signal.

“That’s *Hillmacher* again,” the TV Host shrieked, smelling an Emmy for Investigative Journalism. The second video showed the Arsonist burning down Hawk’s Diner. Katlin happened to be walking by the diner with a bag of groceries.

BREAKING NEWS flashed across the TV screen at 4:13 p.m. (I remember the time exactly because of the “13.”) The report was from South America and an interpreter was used. The woman being interviewed was extremely beautiful, with white teeth and long black hair and she had once been a model. She held up a boy named Roberto, age 6, who wore black shoulder-length hair and a USA soccer jersey. The two of them sat on a chair and proudly poured over a scrapbook of clippings from Katlin’s career.

“My Papa is a champion. I know he wouldn’t do anything bad.”

“Oh, God,” Julie said.

I choked on a piece of ice.

The woman spoke. "As you can see, he has his father's eyes."

Roberto's eyes were that all-seeing other-worldly steel-gray blue like light from a movie projector. She said she had to finally speak to the Media because Roberto kept asking, "Why does everybody think Papa set that fire?"

"It's a shame she's using that boy," Julie said, stirring the ice in her drink with her straw. "Everybody wants a piece of you."

"Men deceive the world every day," the boy's mother added, "but no true Olympian would lie to the eyes of his son."

The TV showed footage of Roberto heaving a baseball a respectable distance. The reporter claimed that Roberto, said to be named for his baseball-playing North American grandfather, had the legendary Hillmacher arm. When asked a question, Roberto even stroked the corners of his mouth like Katlin. His laugh was hearty and easy going. The mother denied any hard feelings after all these years. "How can I, when I have this beautiful boy to show for our love?"

"What bullshit," Julie said.

"Her name is Maria," Katlin said. "Her brother won the gold medal. I slept with her the night before the Olympics. We were up all night."

Julie had two more drinks and stated that everything was OK because "it happened before." She was working through it all as the evening news came on with a live remote report. Cassandra made a beeline to her Land Rover. Her lawyer deftly handled questions about Katlin and Roberto.

Finally, Cassandra said something. "I love my husband."

A commercial for painkiller began.

Julie ran into the powder room crying.

"Cassandra loves me," Katlin nodded.

I smoked. *You had the perfect life with Cassandra, an Olympic medal and an open road for the future but you fucked that up. Then you get a second chance with Julie and you're fucking that up, too. The sick thing is that Julie's in there crying right now wondering if she still has a chance with you while you're out here believing what you see on TV. That's just messed up.*

"What are you thinking Pete?" Katlin asked.

I took another sip. The weather was colder now. I should be switching from gin and tonics, a good summer drink, to scotch and soda. If I had been still at the newspaper I'd probably be wrapping up a story on a cross-country race, winding down for the weekend.

"Never mind," I said.



CHAPTER 36

Lenny

I could always count on going in to Poseidon's to forget the ups-and-downs of married life and unemployment, as well as the drama of others. Sure, it was nice to pick up a little extra money, but most of all, it was good to let the mascot magic work on me. I loved the job.

I finished another stint in the suit all the while thinking: it feels better than it looks on tape. It needs to be re-done. I was getting back into my street clothes when Sartina came into the storage room and tapped me on the back.

"Thanks," Sartina said.

"No problem. I want to re-shoot the video, and of course my fee will need to be upped."

"I mean *thanks*."

"You're welcome," I said. "Wait, what?"

"You're out of a job."

"*What?*"

"I found somebody else."

"It's my job."

"It's *my* restaurant. I hire, I fire."

"Fired?"

"I warned you," Joey said, palms out.

Again, the Scrapper of Life.

"What about the commercial?"

"So?" Sartina said. "You got money."

I had.

"You didn't invent Lenny."

But it felt like I had.

"And another thing. I ain't supporting no lush," Sartina said. "My boy Ricky tells me you been hitting the shots before you's go out. Says you said I said it was OK."

"I did not!"

"They got 12-step programs for you types," Sartina said. "Rule No. 1 in life, don't bite the hand that feeds you."

I wasn't in the mood to hear any maxims, least of all from Joey Fucking Sartina, so I gathered a spare change of clothes, half a pack of Zippo flints, and John Mellencamp's *Big Daddy* CD. I stared at the canvas bag then headed out. As I headed out through the bar room, Rick waved goodbye. I gave him the finger.

The Zen masters say that with every closed door, a new one opens. Huh. At that moment it felt more like an opportunity for the door to hit you in the ass on the way out. As I left Poseidon's doors for the very last time, I watched the grim parade of mid-day office workers. They didn't know how good they had it.

What was it like to have a car? What was it like to have someone to come home to or who'd be there when you got home? Were they setting money aside for the Christmas club? Where were they planning to take their next vacation?

I was a 29-year-old ex-mascot. Now I was really washed up.

"Oh, look, it's that Lenny again," a worker said, checking out the TV in the window of a sports bar. Lenny scuttled across the street, juggled, made the world laugh. "My kids love him."

"He's making a million off of it," another said.

If you only knew the truth, I thought.

CHAPTER 37

Running

To add to this strange year, Katlin called me up the next day and asked me, of all things, if I would go jogging with him.

OK, *this is the day I quit smoking*. I had one last cigarette and tossed the rest of the pack into the trash. 10 minutes later I was in front of Sonny's in a gray cotton sweatshirt and Levi's (I didn't have any workout clothes). A taxi pulled up and Katlin rolled the window down.

"Get in. They'll see us."

"What's wrong?"

"Where's to, Mr. Hillmacher?"

"The usual, Dev."

The cabbie saluted and drove off.

"I thought we were jogging," I said.

He didn't answer, and instead, the cab pulled out to Sheridan and up to the next light across from Katlin's building. The building now had a variety of graffiti on it and Katlin's landlord wanted Katlin to pay for the graffiti removal. After Maria appeared, the TV cameras and crowds returned in full force. Katlin ducked down.

"Hey! Jagoffs!" Dev yelled out the window at one of them carrying a NOT MY AFTERLIFE picket sign. "Hey! Yeah, you! Get a freakin' job and go to work, you jagoffs!"

"The Ferryman didn't do that," Katlin mumbled.

"You saw the Ferryman?"

"I've seen a lot, Pete."

The light turned green and we traveled north along Sheridan Road.

"I don't have any money for the cab," I said.

Katlin waved me off.

We traveled about a mile, Lake Michigan on our right, and at the city border a miraculous thing happened as we crossed into Evanston: the land became green and clean. The road zig-zagged. The cab slowed and the driver signaled to turn left.

"We're here," Katlin said.

I looked out the window.

"The cemetery?" I asked.

"See you in an hour, Dev," Katlin said, handing him a \$20.

"That sign reads NO JOGGING," I protested.

"It's OK. I know the management."

"Why do you know the management?"

He didn't say.

I hated hospitals, but I *feared* cemeteries. Katlin began stretching and he motioned for me to do the same. I mimicked his stretching routine. *This is the day I quit smoking*.

"So what's -"

"Shh."

Katlin ran. I followed.

There was nothing but birds and the distant hum of traffic and our feet kicking up stones. Then everything faded away. *This is what he likes about jogging. The peace. The quiet. The solitude*. I could see my breath in the cold morning light as we jogged past freshly-dug ground. With all of the bullshit that had happened that year - the TV, the newspapers, and the suicide attempts - it was easy to forget that Katlin *was* an athlete. He'd run

closed mouthed – that was how good of shape he was in. My mouth was all watery and I was dizzy. I kept spitting. As soon as I got my breath back, I wanted a cigarette. Five minutes later I staggered to a stop and hunched over.

“He’s gone a half mile and he’s done.”

“Pete will watch,” I said to The Afterlife Camera.

“We just started.”

“I’ve smoked for 10 years. When are we done?”

Katlin ran. “Soon. The end is near.”

I could feel my pulse throbbing in my head. I laid down in the grass and for a bit I didn’t realize I was on top of someone’s grave. Move over, I thought. I was in the middle of dying. Then it hit me – that was what Katlin was doing: *suicide by jogging*.

My hands warmed the frosty blades of grass. No one here in this place can ever do that, I thought. They’ll never see their breath, or cast a moving shadow. Katlin kept running. I had no money for a cab and I was in no shape to walk or run back home so I leaned against a tree. I crawled on my hands and knees for a few feet but couldn’t get to my feet so I leaned and brushed the leaves off a nearby bronze marker.

THOMAS W. SLADE
March 19, 1952 - April 17, 1987

He wasn’t very old.

“Hello, Thomas. Was any of it good?”

The slightly sunken ground, which did not have a grave liner, did not answer. As I watched Katlin run through the cemetery I looked at the sky and across the glistening field and wondered if there was a good place to die. I didn’t think so.

“Was any of it worthwhile?”

Slade didn’t answer.

“Did you believe in Heaven?”

No answer.

“Is it a movie theater?”

Some people find the spirit of a loved one in a cemetery. Some find it elsewhere, either a favorite place or where that person died. If I died that night, where did my own spirit reside? I didn’t think the Unemployment office was a good place to visit the dead.

Katlin ran another circuit around the cemetery.

I caught my breath and started thinking of all the dead people around me, in various stages of transformation. I was wiggled out. Katlin jogged on like like a nuclear core powered his heart. It was as if he were exercising his demons and that’s why he was tireless. He did, after all, have a lifetime supply of personal demons.

On the other hand, maybe he just liked to run.

To him, the tombstones must have looked like the backs of auditorium seats. The open spaces must have felt like the fields near small-town Freeport, the open sky like a deep blue pool of dreams. There was no chance to run across a house fire. No chance to run into autograph seekers, deal makers, or lawyers. It was a good place to run.

I heard his footsteps. “Are you thinking about working out?”

“No, Death.”

“Don’t start thinking about Death,” Katlin warned, walking with his hands on his hips. “Once you do, you’ll never stop.”

I saw a cloud of dust in the distance. The taxi was returning. I waved my arms like I was shipwrecked. “Over here! Over here!”

“Pookoo,” Katlin said.

Katlin ran at full speed away from the vehicle. A caravan of TV trucks and vans followed the taxi like a nest of hornets, the vehicles kicking up dust on the roadway. They blew past me, chasing Katlin across the cemetery. Katlin dodge headstones and hurdled somebody’s backyard chain link fence.

Devlin pulled up and asked if I needed a ride.

“I’d rather walk, you bastard.”

“We all got to make a living,” Dev shrugged, waving several \$100 bills that the TV people gave him.



CHAPTER 38

Notes on the Avalanche

The nation debated over one of the most important topics of modern history: what was a better hairstyle for Cassandra? Forget the crumbled economy with its trillion-dollar deficit, all we had to know was that she loved her husband. Forests were decimated so we could learn that Katlin's shoe size was 13. We also heard more about little Roberto. It was rumored that Katlin had left Cassandra, his *virgin* bride, at the honeymoon hotel to go work out, but in reality, met with Maria, who was hiding in a secret mountain cabin. I didn't believe it.

If you were an avid reader of *W* or *Interview* magazine in the 80's, you probably knew Maria's face (and hips) from the Guess jeans ad. She'd never reached the stature of a super model, but she was a steady presence on the Parisian and Milan runways for Oscar de la Renta, Valentino and Karl Lagerfeld. The tabloids detailed her failed relationships with a German industrialist and the Irish rocker (whose MTV video she was in). "It's the Olympian who owns her heart," the magazine said.

Maria's brother won the gold in the javelin that Olympics; was she a plant, set to sabotage Katlin's gold medal quest? One pro-Katlin editorial called for her brother to give up his gold medal and for Katlin to claim it. One columnist suggested that the only solution was to have a "throw-off" – where Katlin faced his opponent to see who was the true gold medalist.

Magazines ran pictorials of the Hillmacher's better days, including those from their fabled wedding. The columnists wondered how strong Cassandra's love for him was, and if their marriage could survive. Was the super couple breaking up? Was Camelot crumbling? A spokesman for the Kipling family deflected the questions that Katlin was "still training, still intent on going back." Cassandra and Katlin were together, solid as ever.

Julie kept saying everything was ancient history.

Within days of Maria's announcement to the Press, two separate paternity suits were filed. The paparazzi circled the Elysium. Fowler said it was good for business and gave the impression that there was a red carpet event going on. Katlin was gone. As far as I knew, he was *still* being chased by the media all the way down Lake Shore Drive.

"Where is he? Did he quit?"

Fowler jabbed numbers into a calculator. "Did you see this cartoon in the paper? The poor guy can't buy a break."

Fowler handed me the newspaper. A political cartoon had a shocked Katlin looking at a crib named RESPONSIBILITY.

"How's Mrs. Virgin?"

"You know, I thought out of everybody, you had some class. A moral compass, as they say."

"You set the example."

Fowler coughed and checked his watch. "Look, it's Saturday night, why don't you clock out early and go home to the wife?"

"I need the money."

Fowler's beady eyes set in motion. "I get it. If he quit, you want his job. Old fashioned competition. All right. Good. Since there's only an hour left, and I'm a nice guy, don't clock out. I'll fix ya up. Go see the wife. But don't tell anyone or they'll want a favor, too."

I didn't clock out and stayed to the bitter end because I was thinking I would have to file for bankruptcy and I needed the dough. I didn't want any

favors from Fowler. I stopped at the White Hen and got me a six pack of Milwaukee's Best. Fowler had no clue. *See the wife*. It was Saturday night so that meant that Anna-Krista was AWOL again. I put on the TV and drank five beers in record time and called Julie up.

"It's because he's famous," Julie said.

"I have cigarettes," I said, clicking my Zippo near the phone. "They're calling you, hear? Julie, Julie..."

"Everyone thinks he's rich."

"Julie, Julie..." I clicked the Zippo near the phone again.

"That's fucking loud," Julie snapped. "Can you stop it?"

I stopped and said I was sorry.

"I'm trying to quit. You're a bad influence on me."

A bad influence? Was it so bad? There she was, all curled up in bed or on the couch, the red princess phone cradled under her neck, warm in a pair of flannel PJs. "Are you watching TV? It's all so horrible. It's an avalanche."

There was no escape from Katlin's orbit.

"It's bad luck," she said.

No, I thought. It's just bad.

No one on TV was talking about how any man, if he did help create a life (or several lives) should be responsible. A few talked about how an Olympian should *act* like a champion.

I asked Julie how Katlin was taking it.

"He won't call me. I haven't seen him in days."

"He's not over at your place?"

"No," she said.

"He hasn't been to work at all."

Julie said she'd meet me at Katlin's apartment.

The superintendent wouldn't open the door. "I ain't opening it for the Press and no autograph seekers. I got orders."

"Please, I'm his girlfriend."

"They all say that, miss."

"She's not lying," I said.

"And who are you?"

"I'm a friend from college and work."

"No can do."

I reached into my wallet and gave him a Jackson.

"Why didn't you say you was *good* friends?" the super said, slipping the money into his shirt. He led us downstairs through the musty hallway, jingling his jumbo set of keys. We knocked and knocked on the door. *What the hell has he done now*, I wondered. The super finally opened the door and Julie barged through. Katlin sat on the weight bench reading a book, while listening to a Walkman. I could hear "Deacon Blues" by Steely Dan.

"I tried to stop them, Mr. Hillmacher," the super groaned. "They says you is friends. Is it OK?"

Katlin took his headphones off.

I pointed a finger. "Julie's been worried sick. What the hell have you been doing?"

A pile of Perrier bottles were on the floor. He had in hand Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Nietzsche's *Twilight of the Idols* and Kafka's *Metamorphosis* were close by. *The Book of Katlin* was there, too.

"I'm having fun," he said.

With a frontal lobe that was eroded through all of the head injuries

(mixed with the ego of a child and pampered athlete), it was only a matter of time before his wicked imagination took over. With a device like The Afterlife Camera, Katlin could do anything to see in instant replay.

It was a damp fall, with piles of rotting leaves collecting in the corners of the world. A lot happened in October, 1991. The Oakland Firestorm killed 25 people and caused \$1.5 billion in damages. Anita Hill was interviewed for sexual harassment allegations against soon-to-be-confirmed Supreme Court Judge Clarence Thomas. A gunman killed 23 people in Killeen, Texas before killing himself.

Finally, there was nothing else to do but cheer Katlin up, so we took him to a Halloween party.



CHAPTER 39

The Party of Dead Souls

All parties are costume parties, Katlin said.

The “Party of Dead Souls” was held at an old three-story factory east of Cabrini Green, across from the EL tracks that took you to River North. A start-up company with deep pockets named The Xanus Corporation used the event as their public launch for a business service that was going to use a new thing called the World Wide Web. It smelled of a corporate raider Wall Street scam. I asked Anna-Krista if she wanted to attend.

“No, one of us has to work.”

When I received my invitation, I knew my name hadn’t been removed from all of the Roledexes in Chicago. I still had hope.

Still, I thought it was a joke until I saw it mentioned in a business column in *Crain’s* on start-ups titled “Not Your Father’s New Money.” The theme of the Halloween costume party was:

All souls passed, famous or infamous,
Literary or otherwise
are cordially invited
to the Party of Dead Souls
By invitation only
Cocktails and hors d’oeuvres
@ 7:30 p.m.
11/2/91

Halloween fell on a Thursday night that year, but to maximize the event, the party was held on a Saturday night. The theme was tongue-in-cheek but was also meant to be a symbolic meeting of The Old School (The Dead Souls) and New Business (The New Souls) which used new technology and services. The Berlin Wall was down. The Cold War was over. Saddam Hussein was muzzled. Did the world need a party? Parties are never imagined without expectations and they almost never live up to what they are hoped to be. If nothing else, maybe the free bar would stay open late.

I almost didn’t go. I wished I hadn’t.

I agreed to meet Julie and Katlin outside at 8 p.m. I figured I’d network and leave in an hour. As I waited outside at the street I saw a sign that read: ABANDON ALL YE INHIBITIONS.

The sign would look better in *Sands* typeface, I thought. Music came from the building’s rooftop. A parade of famous departed souls passed by me at intervals. I saw a cab but Katlin and Julie were not in it. They were not in the next cab or the next. I smoked again.

A new Porsche rolled up. The driver, dressed as Columbus, tossed me his keys. “Use four spaces.”

I let the keys drop to the cement.

“I’m not the valet.”

“Are you opening the door?” asked his date.

“No valet? You gotta be shitting me,” Columbus said, picking up his keys. He hopped back in the car. The Porsche peeled off a strip of pavement, then braked. He drove backwards and squealed to a stop. His date, dressed in a Daisy Buchanan get-up, stumbled out and slammed the door. “Hey, Rhonda, take it easy with my goddamned car!”

“You’re such an asshole, Eddie!”

As Columbus went off to discover a parking space, Rhonda kicked at

the Porsche but missed.

“You have to forgive Columbus,” I said. “After all, the last thing he did was excarnation. It’s gotta hurt.”

She had no idea what I was talking about and she didn’t care.

“Aren’t you opening the door for me?”

Maybe I can work at The Drake as a doorman, I thought.

A cab coasted to a stop and presented one of the night’s strangest moments: *Katlin paid for the cab.*

Let me clarify. Katlin didn’t put up the money, but rather, Julie couldn’t pay because she was tied to one of Katlin’s antique wooden javelins, her hands tied behind her, bound by leather strips. The sheer dress was speckled with yellow and red foil flames so she crackedled whenever she moved. Her hair was cut short, like a swimmer’s cap. Her eyes and cheeks were sunken, even without the soot she applied as Joan of Arc.

“Your hair,” I said, shocked. “What will they think at work?”

“I know what they already think. I didn’t get that promotion, remember? Do you like my hair, Pete?”

“You look like Sinéad O’Connor.”

“Coach used to tell us,” Katlin said. “All or Nothing.”

How was Katlin dressed? Black Lycra shorts, a gray t-shirt, a running jacket and cross-training shoes.

“Nice costume,” I said. “*You showed up as yourself?*”

“What about you?” Katlin said.

“Hey, I’m networking for a job.”

“Let’s find a party,” Julie said.

I opened the door for both of them.

“Remember, baby,” Julie said to him. “I want to dance with you.”

We entered the building with the Marquis de Sade. He eyed Julie’s get-up and told her that she was his kind of woman. But the Marquis didn’t know that Katlin started the night in a pissed off mood because the cabbie allowed Julie’s wooden javelin, but not Katlin’s steel javelin. Katlin optically drilled a hole through Sade until he moved on.

Katlin handed me an old Kodak camera. “Can you hang onto this?”

“Is this The Afterlife Camera?”

He just smiled and shook his head no.

“Who calls?” asked the tall doorman; he was dressed as The Grim Reaper, his face makeup the color of wet liver, and he carried a real scythe.

“An updated Everyman,” I said, handing him my invitation.

The Grim Reaper looked it over. “You’re the first one to actually bring an invitation.”

I put the invitation back in my suit coat.

“If it isn’t Joan!”

“Hello! Happy Halloween!” Julie said. The Reaper kissed each other on the cheek; some of his black face paint rubbed off on Julie’s cheek. The smudge enhanced what Julie had put on.

“You two *know* each other?” I asked.

“Sure, Joan’s an old flame.”

Julie licked her lips. “I need a vodka and cranberry.”

The Reaper made a flourishing move with the scythe and ushered us down the hall. He jerked the scythe up and blocked Katlin’s way. “Whoa, there’s a dress code, sweetheart.”

“Every Jogger,” Katlin said.

“Garp,” I offered.

“Um, sorry, no entre-vous for you, darling,” The Reaper said.

“You don’t remember me?”

The Reaper looked Katlin up and down. “I’d remember *you*. Return, go now, from whence you came.”

Katlin turned away with shoulders slouched toward the elevator. He reached back, snatched the scythe and swept The Reaper’s heels and tripped him. The Reaper thudded onto the floor. Katlin spun the scythe with a flourish that I could hear a wind noise and he stopped it so the blade was two inches from The Reaper’s throat. Katlin gritted his teeth. “*I will not be denied.*”

“OK,” The Reaper squeaked.

Katlin tossed the scythe to the concrete floor and it rattled, and then he extended a hand. The Reaper, whose hands were still in surrender, shook his head no.

“You’ll have to excuse him,” I said.

“You’re a psycho, a fucking psycho!” The Reaper shouted.

“It’s just a game,” Julie cried.

“You fucking prick!” The Reaper added. “I’m calling the cops!”

We quickly moved down the hall.

“Don’t ever apologize for me,” Katlin snapped.

“Somebody ought to,” Julie said.

There were three levels to the old casket-making factory. Originally it had been The Chicago Casket Company – known as Chicago Casket. An easel near the front door, like at the Elysium, had a photo of the building in its heyday. Swedish craftsmen were shown marching into the factory, unaware that the factory would close eventually.

“Why?” I asked. “Death hasn’t gone out of business. I could get a job as the *real* Grim Reaper.”

“The Angel of Death is a movie house usher,” Katlin said.

Julie ignored us and read. “Post-war assembly line production led to the demise of the bulk of the hand-crafted casket-making industry.”

Downsized. I felt their pain.

The old factory made a spacious environment for any office, with some heavy-duty elbow grease. It was one of the buildings in River North that had yet to be gentrified. Mehedrich & Associates was only blocks away. The first floor of the party had lounge chairs, couches and kiosks – an art gallery’s version of a Chamber of Commerce after-hours mixer – it was where people attempted to sell swag. The other two floors were hedonistic. The second floor was dubbed “Fun and Games” and the third floor offered rooftop dancing.

We walked down a long hallway made of black plywood and the walls had shapes like boulders. The hall drowned in red light. The ceiling sloped as you walked. Julie’s costume, with the 8-foot javelin, was too tall for her to hop along, so we carried her down the mine shaft with Katlin taking her by the shoulders, and I held her by the ankles.

“Don’t drop me!”

“Pete’s got you,” Katlin said, toying.

“You *both* better have me!”

“You can trust me,” I said, grasping her carefully.

At the end of the mine shaft was a coat room. A splash of trumpet and light rolling drums played. It was Freddie Hubbard’s “First Light.”

The coat room was attended by a judge and a girl. The judge’s bench had a glass bowl of mints, red toothpicks shaped like pitchforks, and

business cards of the event's sponsor. But it wasn't any judge. It was the real-life handlebar mustachioed TV Host of *Nightwatch*.

He played the campy part of Judge to the hilt, tormenting a couple ahead of us dressed as Sonny and Cher.

We stood Julie up on her feet and I handed the girl my wool overcoat and Julie's wrap and she hung them on two large red plastic checks on the wall. TV Host eyed me in my suit. "What's your sin? Buy junk bonds?"

"I'm a proofreader."

"Ah, the most boring job on Earth."

"No, I like it. Really. But I got laid off."

"You, young lady," the TV Host said. "Your only crime is that you're with these two rogues."

"What's *your* mortal sin?" Katlin asked.

The TV Host suddenly noticed Katlin. He composed himself and called to a waiter. "This man needs a glass of truth."

Katlin stood, arms crossed.

"Mr. Hillmacher, the public has a right to know the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. For instance, Roberto, your *son*, wants you to come forward and claim him. I'm inviting you to be a guest this week on my TV show and help clear the air. Come on down to the studio. It can be a reunion show."

"I prefer to read."

The TV Host played it up for the crowd that was building up around us. "You like to read? Wonderful, fantastic. I have a syndicated news column. You can read what I have to say in my next installment."

Katlin ushered us on. "Sorry, I like fiction in paperback form."

"Roberto needs his father," The TV Host said.

The floor and partitioned walls of the next space were appropo, in light of the Judge's sentencing. Everything was painted with flames like a 1950's hot rod. The ceiling had 100-watt red bulbs. There were greasy workers shoveling paper into a kiln, while office girls dressed like strippers loaded paper into industrial-sized paper shredders.

"Tonight the Old Souls depart," a circus barker announced. "Tonight is the sacrificial burning and burial of old systems and methods. We are at the dawn of the Information Age."

The party's sponsor had khaki-dressed reps who doled out the company pitch and answered questions. It was the party's only catch.

"Does your company need a proofreader?"

The rep buckled. "That's rather specialized."

"But do you need a proofreader?"

"No."

This truly is corporate Hell, I thought.

A cocktail waitress, dressed in a flesh-painted body suit and a drink tray made with a built-in horse's head, headed out to the lounging area.

"Lady Godiva," Julie said.

A variety of partiers were dressed as famous televangelists. There was a troupe of dancing zombies like the ones in Michael Jackson's "Thriller" video. A man dressed as a mummy predicted that the King of Pop's new *Dangerous* album, set for release in November, was going to be a worldwide monster. The first hit single was "Black or White."

People suddenly scattered. There was bellowing, snorting and howling. A Minotaur in blue-black body paint and Spandex pants ran through the room. His head was done in a bull-type makeup. His clog-like shoes were cut with toe grooves to look like cloven hoofs. He carried a drink tray.

“Dr-rinks? Who wants a dr-rink?” the Minotaur said.

“How many has he had?” I asked.

“Oh, Pete,” Julie said. “I think he’s a waiter.”

“So who wants a dr-rink?” The Minotaur took our order and clattered off through the maze of room dividers back over to the bar. A waitress offered a tray of red chili pepper snacks. Katlin eyed the waitress. As she turned to leave, I asked her if she had any Soy lent Green.

“I can ask,” the waitress said.

The Minotaur came back with our drinks. Julie couldn’t hold her drink, of course. Katlin didn’t offer, so I did. I held it up to her mouth and she sipped through the little straw. We walked around the first floor. Up ahead was a photo vendor offering a take-home picture.

“I want one,” Julie said. “We’ll all take one.”

Throughout history people thought that photographs stole the soul. Some thought that it shortened one’s life. Some thought photographs let demons in. *Was it true?*

“It’s not going to hurt,” Julie said.

Katlin groaned.

“OK,” I said.

The three of us stood in front of the camera. A TV displayed the photo. Julie looked like a model. The screen went blank.

“Can we see it again?” I asked.

The photographer gave me a claim ticket and said that the actual photo could be picked up in two hours’ time.

“Can’t we see it again?” I asked, pointing at the TV.

Katlin sighed. “Let’s check out the upstairs.”

“Wait,” Julie said. “The Minotaur.”

“Need me to *tackle* him for you?” Katlin asked.

“There’s got to be a bar upstairs,” I said.

We opened the door and hoisted her up the crowded stairwell.

“Excuse us,” Julie laughed. “Just passing through.”

“We are all just passing through,” Katlin said.

“Hang on, I have to write that one down,” I said, pretending to reach for my notebook.

“Don’t you drop me, Pete!”

Never, I thought.

I could tell the second floor was rowdier when I heard Billy Idol’s 1987 version of “Mony, Mony.” A few people in the stairwell complained how their costumes itched and made them sweat. *Huh? Try being a lobster every day, I thought. You’re doing this for fun.* As the notorious part of “Mony, Mony” played, the crowd upstairs sang in unison, “Get laid, get fucked!”

We had to wait to get through because the room was jammed. The song was over and a contest MC was whipping up the crowd. There were scores of icon look-alikes.

“Get the camera,” Katlin said, heading to the stage.

“Oh ... my ... God,” Julie raved.

The stage was full of people dressed as Katlin.

“Wait, looks like we have one more,” the MC said. “Make room for one more contestant. Here he comes. Any words, slowpoke?”

Katlin spoke into the microphone. “Pookoo.”

“Yeah, you and two dozen others, buddy,” the MC said. The crowd laughed. “All right, ladies and gentlemen. Let’s go down the line and let your vote be heard!”

Julie bumped into me. “The picture.”

I took a photo with the rinky-dink camera. The crowd voted by making noise and the top three contestants won a trophy and cash prizes of \$100, \$50 or \$25. Some memorable entrants included a red-head who had a prop javelin that was actually a broomstick, and one had a ladder. Half of them wore a blue wristband. Two or three contestants wore I'M GOING BACK lanyards. Contestant Number 6 wore a home-made POOKOO t-shirt. Contestant Number 9 had a "My Buddy" doll.

The MC puffed on his cigar. "Oh, I get it. *Roberto*."

Part of the crowd laughed, the other booed.

"Every contestant also gets a special prize, ladies and gentlemen," the MC said. "Here's Mr. Mark Hoffstetter, from Remote Crow-trol!" Mark appeared from thin air. The crowd went wild when Mark started launching free POOKOO shirts into the audience. When it was all over, Katlin returned to us with a triumphant look.

"Don't get upset," Julie said.

Katlin took off his old t-shirt and put the new one on. He looked down at it. "This is better than the Olympics. Pookoo!"

I rolled my Zippo lighter through my fingers. "You just got *third* place. I have to officially say now you're just talking gibberish."

"Do you like the shirt?"

Julie and me just looked at each other.

"Come on," Katlin said. "Let's get some photos."

He ran back up on stage for a group photo and somebody told the MC that Katlin was the *real* Katlin Hillmacher. The MC stopped everything and told the crowd. Everyone fumbled all over him. As I took Katlin's picture with a virtual Who's Who of History and Pop Culture, it struck me that despite his recent raking over the coals in the media, Katlin *loved* crowds. He was, after all, used to performing in front of them. Flashbulbs went off and he pressed the flesh and signed a few autographs. He should have been a rock star. He especially liked the photo ops with all the Marilyn Monroe and Janis Joplin look-alikes.

I readied the camera one more time and pointed to more look-alikes. "Do you want one with Elvis?"

Katlin winked. "Already got that one."

Not all of the areas on the second floor were devoted to boisterous forms of entertainment. On the other side of the factory was a room with beads and sitar music and people sitting on rugs.

"We all have a mantra," a Swami said. "A phrase to focus us in our time. A center point. By repeating it it's as if we become that. Now think. It binds us but also liberates us. What would you use?"

"*Jesus, Jesus.*"

"Good. Good. That's the idea. How about you?" the Swami asked, going around the room.

"*Money, money!*"

"That sort of detracts, doesn't it? What else can you think of? Remember, something that liberates you."

"Money liberates me," she laughed.

"I'll try," Julie said. "*Kat-lin. Kat-lin.*"

There was a chorus of warm, fuzzy *ah-s*.

"Got one," Katlin said, sitting in the lotus position. Athletes.

"Let me guess," I said, looking at his t-shirt.

Katlin closed his eyes. "Here it is: *Women. Women.*"

Julie knocked her knee into him.

“Girlfriend. Girlfriend.”

“That’s better,” Julie said, making us laugh. “How ‘bout you, Pete?”

“What about me?”

“Need to sit first,” Katlin said. “Don’t worry about your suit.”

Julie smiled. “Come on, Robert Palmer.”

A mock priest warned me. “Remember, keep it clean.”

I closed my eyes and thought of the magic phrase. “*Do they need a proofreader? Do they need a proofreader?*”

Some time later, I was blitzed. Katlin and Julie were AWOL. I sat on a couch and watched the circus. The sound system had switched from The Cure to The Rolling Stones’ “Waiting on a Friend.” I set my scotch and soda on an end table and pulled out a pen and notebook. I made a few notes. A woman dressed as Mata Hari approached me. She wore a golden brocade veil as thick as a curtain, and her eyes were heavily painted with mascara.

“So where’s your costume?”

I told her I had no costume, that I lost my job.

“You *lost* it? I’ll help you look for it.” She lifted the couch cushions and bent way down, her breasts almost falling out of the metallic gold brassiere. She rolled away from the couch, rose like a flame and gyrated her hips, clicking her finger cymbals. She kept bumping into my thighs. She was probably an office manager. *Run, I thought.* What kind of workplace drove a person to her level of escape during off-hours? The Belly Dancer touched my thigh. “Nope. No job. So you want a *job*?”

“No.”

“This mine?” she said, drinking from my drink.

“It is now.”

She whispered something in my ear.

“No.”

“Let go. Relax.”

“I am.”

She whispered and licked at my ear. I brushed her away like a fly.

“I don’t know how anyone can stand you,” the Belly Dancer said, standing up. “You’re so *boring*.”

She moved on down the rows of couches, clicking her cymbals and shaking her hips. She French-kissed with Jim Morrison.

“I saw that, Pete,” Katlin said.

“I acted good.”

“Everyone acts good...until they’re bad.”

At midnight Chicago’s best-known tele-psychic, Madame Salon, put on a Spiritualist presentation. Madame had a night-time radio talk show and a 1-900 hot line. She sat in a darkened walled-off area at a huge round table draped with a floor-length paisley tablecloth. There was a crystal ball in the center of the table, a Ouija board and a deck of tarot cards. Madame Salon had forewarned Charlotte, the receptionist at Mehedrich & Associates, of a cataclysmic personnel change at work. The Wednesday Night Massacre happened eight days later.

Someone wished to see Abraham Lincoln.

“I saw him here at the party,” someone said.

The medium raised her wrinkled hands. After the giggling died down, Madame called for the spirit of the fallen President. Suddenly an image of Lincoln floated in the air.

“Rest in peace, O Great One,” Madame said in a frail voice.

“Projector, somewhere,” I said to Julie.

Madame continued. “I now sense someone truly broken in spirit

among you in the audience. An old wound. A question unanswered. Ye who is in pain, come forward now.”

Katlin stepped forward. Madame saw Katlin; she was unnerved by his gaze. Her hand waved Katlin to sit down.

“Whom do you wish to contact, child?”

“My mother.”

“Her name?”

Katlin reached into his warm-up jacket and placed an old Polaroid® photo onto the table. Peg Hillmacher crouched next to Baby Katlin, who sat in a red high chair. “Peg. Died in a car accident when I was 17.”

“Gather hands, children.” She closed her eyes and breathed in and out. No one said a word. Katlin sat tall, breathed deep, relaxed his shoulders and closed his eyes. He breathed deep again. “Peg, your son is calling you from the Other Side. He has missed you for so-o long.”

Katlin reached back and with head down, touched Julie’s hand. She whispered that it was OK.

The medium arched and contorted, her eyes moving like she was having a seizure. Then she sat serenely and spoke. “Kit?”

“Mom?” Katlin asked, shaking. “Is that you, Mom?”

“Yes, my son.”

I rolled my eyes.

“Why? Mom, why did you have to go?”

“It’s no one’s fault. Sometimes things like that have to happen, Kit.”

“I love you, Mom.”

“I love you, too, sweetheart.”

“How’s Dad?”

“He’s watching. He loves you. I have to go now.”

“No, wait. I have a question.”

“Yes, Kit.”

“Do you believe all the crap Madame’s saying?”

Madame Salon’s body shook with tremors. “O ye of little faith,” the medium said, sitting back.

Katlin stood and gave a parting admonition. “Madame, the Living will meet the Dead soon enough.”

He picked up the Polaroid® of his mom and walked away. Julie and me pushed through the crowd and caught up with Katlin. He was at the bar. I pointed at each of us. “Stoli and cranberry, straight orange juice, Dewar’s and soda.” The bartender nodded. “That was good, Kat.”

Julie laughed. “But she didn’t even get it right. *Kit!*”

I threw a couple of singles down for a tip. I set the photo down. “They have a list. You know, Julie dressed as woman on fire. Bill as Valentino. That stuff. You’ve been in the news. Still, Ye Old Madame’s has a good little show. And it takes a great memory.”

Julie eyed her drink. “Oh, you’d have to have one. It’s a good little act. Reminds me of the carnival. Kinda cheesy, but fun. But you shouldn’t have been so rough with her, baby.”

The bartender handed us our drinks.

Katlin picked up the photo and put it away. “Only Dad knew. My mother’s pet name for me was Kit.”

He walked away.

“He carries a picture of his dead mother? To a party?”

She squinted her eyes. “That’s so shitty, Pete. If I had my purse right now I’d show you a picture of my Dad.”

I tried to say I was sorry.

Her eyes were moist. "You're too much of a fucking proofreader."

She left, but had to tip-toe away. I called her but she kept tip-toeing away and I called again.

"What?"

I held up her drink.

"*Fuck you*," Julie said.

I shook the thought out of my mind.

"Julie, who's going to bum you smokes?"

She still looked hurt.

The sound system played Robert Palmer's "I Didn't Mean to Turn You On." I finger-combed my hair back and lip synched to the song. Julie didn't smile. I kept fake-singing and buttoned up my suit coat, moved a little, unbuttoned the coat. I saw a bit of a smile. I kept lip-synching and reached into my coat and took out a light blue pack of French cigarettes. I popped open my Zippo and lit up a Gauloises. "You look famished."

"Famished?"

"You need a cigarette. I just happen to have your brand." I held out a new pack of Marlboro Lights.

"Let me try *that* one," Julie said.

"Gauloises? No. They doesn't have a filter."

She sighed. "Well, like he says, *all or nothing*."

"OK." I lit her a Gauloises and raised my hand to her mouth and brushed her lips with my palm. I felt a charge run through all of my body. I was impressed that she didn't cough from the no filter.

"Be careful," she said. "I don't think this outfit is flame retardant."

I laughed.

Through the night Julie would say "Fire" every time she wanted a puff off the cigarette, and she'd lean in and I'd put my hand to her mouth and her lips would graze my fingers. We smoked and drank like it was the last day on Earth. She said she felt bad taking all of my cigarettes and said we could just share and that I didn't have to hold two cigarettes. We'd been standing the whole time and she said her feet were getting tired. I moved and set her laying on a couch. I sat on the floor at her feet.

"Now you have me where you want me."

"You're a lot drunk," I said.

"It's a party, right? Are you having a good time?"

"This beats Christmas."

"I already have your presents bought."

"You have to stop," I said. "That's too organized."

"It's a disease," Julie confessed. "OK, Pete-ster, I have to pee. Help."

I set her upright and urged her toward the bathroom.

"Uh, I can do the one part alone, just untie me."

"Oh."

I freed her and held onto the wooden javelin.

She hung on to the doorway. "You both are perverts. Did you know he's a sexoholic? And he's big."

"What?"

She held her hands up like a fisherman. "Big."

"You're a lot drunk. Go to the bathroom."

"Stonebridge's was a nub, compared to Katlin's. I measured it one time. Nine inches."

"Huh," I said. "I didn't know that nor did I want to know that. I'm going to need therapy."

"I have to pee."

“Hurry before you need a mop.”

A flood of women marched into the bathroom. A Nixon look-alike walked by and tapped me in the gut, put up his hands in V-signs and said, “Pookoo” and kept going. More women streamed through to the bathroom. I looked at the leather straps and wondered what the hell I was doing. Julie came back in what seemed like 10 minutes.

“What took so long?”

“Didn’t Anna ever tell you about girl bathrooms? I suppose you don’t know about shopping, either. Nothing is a drive-thru for us.”

I imagined shopping with Julie, walking the clothes racks with her as she selected the season’s best. I’d find the lone chair by the big mirror and watch her give me a fashion show. I’d sit patiently and think that I’d have to get home and mow the lawn and she’d putter around the yard and spread mulch. We’d have a glass of sun tea and watch the kids play in the pool.

“If you would,” Julie said. She handed me the leather straps.

“You don’t have to pretend anymore.”

“Really. All or nothing. The only way to live.”

I put the straps at her wrists. “This is how my parents met.”

She told me to pull them tighter.

“I don’t want to cut off the circulation.”

“It’s got to stay on,” she said. “*Tighter*. I need to talk to Anna about your technique.”

“No, that’s OK.”

“Where is he?”

Who knew where he was? Keeping track of him was already a full-time job, with no pay and few benefits. I thought of the shopping and the yard and everything and looked for the future in her brown eyes. Where was he?

Who cares where Katlin is?

“I don’t know, Julie.”

“Well, I want to dance.”

“How about I get you a fresh drink?”

“You just want me to pee so you can tie me back up,” Julie slurred.

“No.”

“Oh shit, I forgot lipstick.”

“You look fine.”

“That girl there, ask her to borrow her lipstick. Go on.”

I asked and the girl said we could keep it. I dialed open the red lipstick and pawed at Julie’s mouth.

“You’ve never done this, have you?”

I stopped. “On what occasion would I have?”

She tucked her lower lip in. “Gentle. Be gentle.”

I moved the lipstick slowly, starting on the top and in the center and moving out to the sides. The stick tugged at her lip, and I moved as slow as a man trying to defuse a time bomb. “Better. *Gentle*.”

I kept painting the crimson on.

“I think you did it, Pete.”

“What?”

“You got it.”

“Sorry.” I put the lipstick away in my suit coat pocket.

“I don’t look like a clown, do I?”

“No.”

“You gonna be OK over there? You’re blushing.”

I didn’t say anything and she laughed and told me to take her to the dance floor. I would have taken her *anywhere* she wanted, if she asked me

to. I would have taken her to the Andromeda galaxy in a row boat. Hell, I'd have even taken her to a Wilson-Phillips concert. We danced, as much as anyone can with a human shish kabob, and I could feel her ribs and thought she was way too skinny but I didn't say anything. My fingertips felt alive – it was as good as writing – and I breathed in the rich scent of patchouli. I thought about backyards and play sets and shopping and everything.

"I've got to pee. Sorry."

I took her back to the bathroom and she teased me about the tying and untying thing. She seemed to get off on seeing me blush. She joined the long line and I took the opportunity to go, too. The lone urinal was in use so I took the stall. I thought about setting my drink down but thought better and held onto my scotch and went to the bathroom one-handed. While in mid-piss I heard laughter. At first I thought someone was laughing about me. *Nine inches. The daily reminder. What irony.*

There was a banging on the stall door. A man, costumed in a cardboard Dollar Sign, and a woman, dressed as a devil, barged in. The stall door hit me in the back.

"Hurry up, dude," Mr. Dollar said, palming a straw and folded packet made of slick magazine paper.

I zipped up. "I pissed on my shoes."

"Hey, it's Robert Palmer, baby."

She danced like a music video model and *oooh-ed*. I washed my hands while they entered the stall and locked it. I hurried out. Julie and Katlin were against the wall making out.

I coughed. "I should get going."

Katlin waved. "OK, see you tomorrow at work."

"Don't," Julie said. "We were going to play some games."

"I need to get going."

"Let's bob for apples," Julie pleaded. "It can be fun. I remember bobbing for apples. Didn't you?"

I had and I was going to say I'd done all that back when I was a kid. But I had let Life take all that out of me; the belly dancer was right. *How do you let go? How do you relax?* I wasn't spontaneous any longer. My writing word count confirmed that I struggled to get that back but didn't know how.

Then I wondered if I ever had that spark. Yes, but it had been doused. I was a self-editor. When that spark leaves you are left with that great thing fanatics have: *Appreciation*. It becomes intellectual, not animal, and I'd lost the animal happiness in life that is necessary for living. It wasn't pleasurable anymore in any natural sense, it was all artificial or induced, and it was replaced by cynicism and observation. That wasn't the same thing as being creative, and not the same thing as doing something with it. Just caution, *so cautious* that it was better that I didn't even cross the proverbial creative street anymore. Being Lenny the Lobster was my last stand. Now I just waited on the curb or hung on the same side of the street instead of new worlds. I could use a little foolishness. I could stand to get a little wet. Everyone at the party was experiencing that in some fashion – *that was the idea*. They needed a break. I'd lost the daredevil in my soul. I couldn't ever bring myself up to do even this: bob for apples. I had as a child. Why couldn't I now? *I can't do that*, it seemed I always said. I was a crossing guard. I saw when others should go and do but not myself. That's a double standard, right? Where did I get off being like that? Did I want entertainment at no cost to myself? You dunk your head in a bucket of water, bite into an apple and get up. You win or you don't. They even give you a towel and you go on, for Christ's sake.

It was as if I felt I was being asked to move The Great Pyramid. *Let go.* Atlas bore the world upon his brawny frame but if he had the strength, why couldn't he just throw it off? I think he just liked carrying the rock around. I knew the suffering that is brought on by one's self and it paralyzes you but at least you have a spot. Comfort zone. One can learn to love it. It's a sickness, I tell you, and you don't need to continue with it. And when you're in that beat-blues on a fire escape in a bad hotel mood of life: *is this all there is?* Well, it's what you've got. That's why people never move from the place or person that they don't love. It's safe. It's easy. It's known. They've lost that daredevil in the soul. *They're dead.*

Good scotch, I thought.

"Pete? Pete!" Julie said, jarring me with her shoulder. "Are you going to bob for apples?"

"I'll watch," I said.

You see? You see?

Katlin and Julie went over. I followed.

The next contestant in the bobbing for apples game was The Tin Man. He creaked down in his silver cage and handed his axe to the game attendant. "Oil me!"

"You're already oiled!" a man in a dog suit called out.

"Sounds kinky!" the Marquis de Sade said.

The Tin Man laughed and dunked himself. He came back up without an apple and without a nose. His nose had fallen off in the washtub. He said the nose kept him from reaching the apple and he could never bite it. Katlin had to wait while they dumped out the washtub and put fresh water in because the inside had a silver film from the Tin Man.

"Ready?"

Katlin nodded, took a deep breath, and his head plunged in.

The frat-like crowd yelled, "Go! Go! Go!"

Katlin struggled to bob for the apple.

"Go, go, go!"

"It's harder than you think," The Tin man said, dabbing at his face with a Xanus monogrammed towel.

"You can do it, baby," Julie cheered.

Katlin thrashed in the tub like a slew of piranha.

"Go, go, go!"

"No cigar," I said. I tapped him on the back. "OK, let somebody else have a turn."

"Go, go, go!"

"Pete wants his turn," Julie nudged.

"Go, go, go!"

"Stop it, Kat."

He tussled underneath the water. Suddenly there was no crowd – it was just the three of us again, like at Loyola Park.

"Why isn't he coming back up?" the Marquis said.

"Go, go, go!"

"Untie me!" Julie cried. "Pete, stop him!"

I grabbed Katlin by the shoulders but he held onto the metal tub. *I will not be denied, he said.* Shit. He was trying to drown himself.

"Untie me!"

I rammed my knee into Katlin's back and yanked at his shoulders but he didn't budge. The Tin Man untied Julie. We wrestled with Katlin but he hung on to the tub with even more resolve. Finally we tumbled to the side and the water spilled out and over the floor.

“You bastard!” she cried.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” I asked.

He had leftover silver paint on his face. Katlin spit out the apple into his hand and shrugged us off and raised the apple in the air. He tossed it to me and by instinct I caught it, or rather, what was left of the apple: he had eaten the apple to the core, *underwater*.

Katlin Hillmacher knew how to let go. He didn’t just bob for apples, and he didn’t float along in life, he *plunged*.

He’d gone too far with the apple bobbing stunt and knew he owed her a dance. We tied Julie back up and made our way to the next stairwell that led to the third and final floor, the roof. Julie hummed and sang the words *dance, dance, dance*. Katlin snapped at me to go, so I took her by the feet again and went up. Her dress rolled up, or rather down by gravity (she was nearly upside down). As we climbed I could hear “Groove is in the Heart” by De-Lite.

The stairwell was clogged with bodies and marijuana smoke. Katlin waved at the thick air with one hand. “Step it up, Pete, this crap will make me test positive.”

The walls shook with bass and trembled to the beat. As we ascended, somebody held out a joint and asked Julie for a light.

“You want a *fight*?” Katlin said, lurching.

“Chill out, man.”

“Dance, dance, dance,” Julie said, happily.

I stepped on somebody’s ankle and they yelped. I apologized. “I could go for some Soylent Green.”

“What’s Soylent Green?” Julie asked. I told her.

“You *are* weird.”

We reached the top of the stairs and set her down on the pebbled roof. We surveyed the scene. It was almost like a normal party, with all that insanity left in the lower depths.

The adrenaline from the apple incident burned off the booze and I was myself again. I took out the camera and snapped a candid picture of the two of them. Katlin’s hair was still wet. Julie was gorgeous in what may have been the ultimate Victim Wear. *OK, I thought. Knock it off. Be a friend.* I took out my notebook and pen. “Mr. Hillmacher, are you or aren’t you going to dance with this beautiful woman?”

He narrowed his eyes. “*You* dance with her.”

“You promised,” she said.

The DJ segued songs on the turntable and pumped Marvin Gaye’s “Heard it Through the Grapevine” to the stars and skyscrapers. The John Hancock building’s white-lit floor glowed like an electric half-moon. The night wind made the strings of blue lights sway.

“Untie me,” Julie shivered. “I’ve had enough of this.”

I quickly untied her and gave her my suit coat. We took to the dance floor. As the song continued, she gave her soul over to the earthy beat. She snaked to the back beat and moved her hips and my coat swung on her bony shoulders. Al Green’s “Love and Happiness” took over the speakers as we kept dancing. We were working up a sweat. A waiter, dressed in a white dinner jacket, threaded through the crowd with a tray of champagne. Julie took two glasses and spread her arms and lost herself in the beat and the booze. The driving R&B set was over. Julie’s transformation was complete: from a banshee to a bacchante.

She looked for him. Katlin was no where to be found, and the smile disappeared from her face. The loudspeakers shivered as Lenny Welch’s

version of “Since I Fell for You” rippled across the roof. I started to leave the dance floor. Julie clutched my shoulders. We hardly moved at all.

“You need to take care of yourself,” I said, feeling her ribs.

Julie said nothing.

Katlin was talking with Cassandra.

Cassandra was resplendent dressed as a fairy tale princess. She looked as if she had just walked out of the sea, as if the Heavenly Host Himself placed the garland of flowers on her head. I didn’t need to hear the words to know what was happening. I was a Charlie Chaplin fan, after all. Julie walked to the other side of the roof. When it was done, Katlin walked over to me.

“Well?”

“She says it’s over, for good.”

“Is that so bad?”

He didn’t say.

“What did she say?”

“Quote: It’s over for good. My father is getting papers drawn up and somebody will send them over. End quote.”

We walked along the pebbled roof. He was on the right, nearest to the roof’s edge. When the waiter went by, I took a glass of champagne. Katlin took one. Oh-oh. He was on automatic pilot now. His eyes said nothing. He started to take a sip but instead he handed me his glass. He crossed his arms and brushed a spot in the gravel and rubbed it to the tar and covered it up.

“Gets old.”

“Yeah,” I said. “What the hell are we talking about?”

“Job interviews.”

“How’s your search for a coach’s job?”

“I can understand how they’d want a gold medalist.”

“You got *second* place!”

He started walking again and hung his head. “I know.”

I told him to keep at it.

He mumbled. “The Roberto thing. Everything.”

“But they’re just stories, right?”

We walked in a circle, as if stalking the dancers. He planted his foot onto the gravel, like a horse counting with its hoof. He looked at the skyline. His fingers tapped the roof’s edge like he was playing piano. What song did he hear in his mind? We continued walking and his hand brushed against a lamp post. A series of lamp posts framed a rusty sign made of 15-foot letters that read CHICAGO CASKET.

Katlin stretched his hamstrings and walked out to the dance floor, toward Cassandra. The Princess of Lake Forest danced with a guy who looked like any lawyer.

The music stopped; the DJ was not in his booth.

“Pookoo!”

The crowd heard and cheered along. “Pookoo!”

I turned in time to watch him bolt from a sprinter’s starting position and a spray of rocks flew back at the dancers. Katlin sprinted across the gravel to the edge of the roof.

“Not again!” I said.

Katlin planted his foot and leaped up onto the roof’s ledge at the lamppost by the sign’s letter K, and stuck an arm out in mid-air like Gene Kelly, and spun back around landing back on the gravel roof.

The dancers clapped at his acrobatics. A few in the crowd surrounded

him with cheers of Pookoo.

“You sonofabitch!” Julie said, slapping him. He did nothing to prevent her. She slapped him again, and the slaps turned to punches and scratches. “Stop! Stop it! Stop it, will you?” The crowd stood back and watched. “Try! *Try to care!*” He stood mute and didn’t block any shots. His nose was bloody. “You see, you don’t care about me. If you did, you wouldn’t do that. *You’d try to live.* You’d try to go on. It’s not easy for anybody. I can’t handle you anymore, Kat. I can’t.”

He wiped at the blood. “I don’t care about *me*.”

“You’re so full of shit,” Julie said, leaving.

Katlin shook his head and spoke to The Afterlife Camera. “When are you going to learn?”

A half hour later I was making one more pass through the second floor. I heard a soft tell-tale moaning from across the giant room. I looked across the second floor and saw Katlin in one of the cloaked secret dark corners. The Belly Dancer embraced him and played with his I’M GOING BACK lanyard. Another woman, the devil from the bathroom stall, kneeled before Katlin like he was some golden god. She gasped for air. In *The Book of Katlin* there is a poem written about his favorite addiction:

SKIN

*is a drug.
I evoke a moan,
elicit a smile.
What you give you receive.
More.
Cool to the lips like water.
I want to drink
from the river.*

p. 47, *The Book of Katlin*

“So what was it like?” the Belly Dancer asked.

“The Olympics?”

“No, dying.”

“Don’t ask, *feel* how it was like,” the devil girl said, kissing Katlin’s knees. “*Feel.*”

Katlin moved with them in that half-light as I left the room. It looked like he was working the Olympic stadium one seat at a time, attempting to convince the crowd of his greatness.

I thought that sex, like any drug, wore off. It lasted for 15 minutes or an hour or only into the dawn’s ragged light. You could find it in a bed or a back seat or on the beach or a motel or at a park or in an elevator or an airplane or a kitchen counter at home for lunch. It was addictive in that people thought they needed it and so they led their life accordingly by its pursuit and were even driven in their actions by the lack of it, and found that they dragged through the hours for its next arrival. There are other ways for recognition. Sex is not love; it’s temporary, and I never knew of any human who truly felt whole by it. Being in bed only fends off the loneliness; it only patches what won’t heal in your soul. The winter never goes away. You can’t honestly expect anyone to make you complete when your clothes are off.

But it’s worth a shot.

Maybe it was never supposed to be an end-all heal-all. The intention was simply to make it feel good so we'd continue to reproduce.

Then it's 4 a.m. It had turned into one of *those* nights. You know the kind. You say you're going to stay for quick one. You've lost your hat and after thirty minutes of looking you realize you never had a hat. The music's loud and the world sounds like you're underwater. There are no fresh cups. You're smoking OPs. You've attached yourself to a group from Evanston which can give you a ride but will be going for breakfast in a while and you're invited. You head to the bathroom. You see in the bathroom mirror that your suit coat collar's half up. You're missing a shirt button. People knock on the door wanting to do some coke. You leave the bathroom and see Sonya, the former Concessionette, in the distance. By the time you're on that side of the room Sonya's gone.

You look around the party real quick for Julie one more time but she is long gone. You come back and the group is gone. You walk to the EL stop and stand on the EL platform and realize you don't have enough money. You walk too much, you think. You frisk your pockets. You look on the ground. Four beer bottles, a crumpled copy of *The Reader*, cigarette butts, chewed gum, a used condom and a ticket stub to The Steppenwolf Theater, an array of expired CTA bus passes but none are valid currency. You dig in your pockets one more thorough time. For an instant you think of calling Julie who lives about three miles away. But it is too early and you have no idea what shape she is in. *Don't call*. You don't haven't a phone card or change anyway, and no matter how good the rates are you won't call her collect. Robert Palmer wouldn't. *Don't*. It's an ungodly hour even for a weekend.

You resolve to walk. It will be good for you and only serve you right when you find a token in your suit's secret pocket. It is a mixed moment of supremacy and stupidity. You make a mental note to replenish the secret compartment. The train shows up and is not crowded and you find a seat. No one knows of your idiocy and panic only moments before. The sun is starting to creep up. Up by Belmont you try to see where Julie's hi-rise is but you shade your eyes because of the glare. You think of the horrible things you saw and want to stop and tell her. It's not your business, I thought. I reached in my pocket and took out the camera.

I turned it around at arm's length and snapped a picture of my jagged self against the blurred skyline. It didn't take, so I wound it to the next frame and checked to see how many exposures were left.

There was no film in the camera. Nothing.

All night.

I opened the camera. *No film. There never had been.*

What a bastard. What a cheap fucking trick. Julie had been looking forward to seeing the developed film. Me, too. But I knew Katlin thought he'd see the pictures.

"I'll see them in re-play," Katlin would've said.

He would claim to see it all – the drinking and carousing, the fights, the magic and the dust, his girlfriend whom he didn't care about, his fairy tale princess wife who didn't love him anymore, the celebrities, the dead souls and the nobodies. That night there was so much more that I'm not going to include in this account. There was plenty that I did not want to see. It isn't always good to see or remember it all.

I fell asleep against a greasy spot on the window (I was too tired to change seats). I was shook awake by the conductor at Howard Street. I was at the border of Chicago and Evanston. I walked home. Home, if that's what you could call it.

CHAPTER 40

Love Hurts

When we honeymooned in Colorado I trained in the daytime while Cassandra relaxed at the spa and played tennis and in the afternoon I'd come "home" to the hotel and we'd make love and everything was good. Sometimes we'd take room service and have dinner on our room's deck and look out at the mountains. Pike's Peak stood before us.

"I never thought I'd have this view," I said, sipping champagne.

"Of course you did," Cassandra said. She was dressed in a white dress.

"Well, yes, you're right," I smiled.

"God, I love that smile."

"I love yours."

She reached across the table and we held hands. "The first thing you ever said to me, when we met on campus was *"I'm going to the mountain."* I said you must be lost, we don't have mountains in Illinois. And you said the only thing worth anything in life was to go after our dreams, that we had only Today, and we had a duty to seek the dream until it was over. Look at you now."

Yeah, I said.

"You have such ambition, such drive, you're on the rise," Cassandra said in the moonlight. "You're like a rocket to the moon. I never said it, but that was what drew me to you. I knew immediately you were The One because of that fire in the eyes and it's still there, especially now, as you look at your personal mountain. I'm with you and when you go next year you'll climb the mountain and make it to the peak and every dream you ever had will come true."

Now it's all over.

Page 38, *The Book of Katlin*

Julie called me at the Elysium the next day, Sunday, November 3rd. I took the call in Fowler's upstairs office. She asked me how the party went.

"We got bored and left."

Half of it was true, anyway.

I could hear her smoking. "Does he want to see me?"

"You know the answer to that."

She gave out a primal scream. It hurt my ear. "Fuck, love hurts!"

"I think that's already a song."

She pressed a button on the phone, beeping me. Katlin said that was her way of flipping somebody off. "Don't be a proofreader."

"What do you want me to be?"

Katlin stepped into the office. His face was all scratched up and a bit

swollen. “You working today?”

I put my hand over the phone. “I’m talking to the Press.”

Katlin quickly shut the door.

Why didn’t I tell her the truth and the whole truth? Would she listen and see the light? When the weekend was over and she walked into the bank with her head almost shaved, what would they think then? *My boyfriend thought it was a cool idea. I wanted to be avant garde.* If she wanted to keep her job, better to tell everybody in that button-down world *the chemo is working.*

Julie had put up with so much for so long. She did everything for love; is that a crime? They didn’t have a relationship, they had a siege. But that’s Love. It isn’t always some Valentine card. She had to know her boyfriend was an asshole. (Correction: he wasn’t an asshole. Katlin was a *gold medal asshole.*) She had to know what he was like, right? After the bullshit at the party (hell, from the entire year) Julie wasn’t going to leave him. Cassandra was out of the picture. Julie could have him all to her self.

But she didn’t know the real truth.

What about the Devil Girl?

The Belly Dancer?

Just about every other female on Earth?

Don’t say anything, Pete. I wonder, was I looking out for her – or me?

“What do you want me to be? I *am* a proofreader.”

“I want you to be happy, Pete. You deserve it. Love is all we’ve got, Pete. It’s the only thing worth living for.”

“Are you drunk?”

“Maybe.”

It was Sunday, but one in the afternoon.

“Tonight go home and tell Anna how you love her, you hang on, you fight for it tooth and nail no matter what, are you listening?”

“Uh-huh.”

I heard her smoking. “I love these blue cigarettes. Did you know they have no filter?”

The package was blue, not the actual cigarettes.

“Did you hear me, Pete?”

“You said to go home and fight to the death.”

“No, no. Tooth and nail. *Tooth and nail.* If you don’t have love, all you’ve got is Soylent Green.”

I told her she needed some sleep.

Then she started crying.

I said I had to go and that we’d talk later. But the truth is, if I’d heard anymore, I’d have spilled everything I knew about Katlin. I might have told Julie something even more stupid than the truth. I went outside and swept the courtyard of the light layer of snow and heard a call from across the street. Mark Hoffstetter ambled over.

“What’s up?”

“Finishing my installing, dude,” Mark said, pointing across the street to an apartment window. “Last one. This sponsor’s got a hard-on to get these up. But you know, the cash is *serious*. Oh, I saw these new things at this party Saturday, a camera you can use on a computer. Works like a video camera. Computers are going to be *big*. The idea is that all around the world they’re all going to be connected.”

“Going to take a long wire,” I said.

He squawked like he’d been stabbed. “Wait a minute!” Mark danced across the road between traffic to his back of his new black van and took

something out. Hoffstetter returned with a black *Remote Crow-trol* t-shirt that was rolled up with one strip of clear packing tape. "Remember? Your very own deluxe model."

Great, I thought. I can do some dusting around the tent.

I started to peel the clear tape. "Well, let's see the design."

"No, no, later," Mark said, pressing my forearm and looking behind himself. "Later. Hey, I gotta get back to work. I've been at this all day."

Welcome to work, I thought.

"Good luck."

"Hey, I saw you at that party Saturday down in River North. That was a wild hootenanny. I waved, but you didn't see me. You looked like you were having *fun*, man. Did you see my shirts?"

"Yes."

"I got loads more. Look." Mark lifted his hooded sweatshirt and showed me his latest creation. The t-shirt read:

My Friend went to Hell
and all I got
was this lousy t-shirt

"Huh."

"I pre-sold 42 of these at that party. Hey, you want one?"

"No."

I turned to leave.

"Don't forget, \$20 for the deluxe."

On Monday there was no work anywhere of course so I stayed home. I received some good news. Well, not really. Right before the Dead Souls Party I had a strong interview and was on the short list for editor for a new magazine. They called Monday. *Yes.*

But it was only a courtesy call saying they picked the other candidate but that they'd keep my resume.

"I have one question."

"Yes?"

"Where can I get a tent?"

I hung up.

I told Anna-Krista about the near-miss opportunity and waited for Marital Armageddon, but to her credit, Anna Krista didn't press the button. I said that if by week's end I didn't get a new job, I'd cash in my beloved 401(k). We had to pay the rent, after all. If I couldn't make it to the New Year, who cared about Retirement? I'd seen *The Fisher King*.

On Tuesday my Employment Insurance (as it was formally called) was renewed until the middle of February, 1992. OK, I thought, Christmas 1991 will be a lean one. But we have Love and we can tough it out. Renewed. That also gave *Unfinished* a new deadline of three months. The cold weather and the reprieve were going to boost the Writing. I went into The Ing Room and emerged an hour later. She scanned the results.

"This old thing?" Anna-Krista sighed. "I'm going to work."

Why the fuck do I try? I thought. It was hell to be slogging away with the Doves of Love. I went back into The Ing Room and smoked. I looked out the window at Ennui. I rubbed at the dried ink on my fingers from my old Parker 51. I called a few job leads but no one was biting. I got dressed for the Elysium. When I got there, the Concessionettes asked me how I was doing. I said the book was going good.

"When will it be done?" Rita asked.

"I don't know. It *is* called *Unfinished*."

They didn't laugh.

I called up Julie on my break. I was happy to hear she wasn't drunk, but she did sound tired. She said to never loan her a cigarette again and that she had an Olympic-sized hangover.

"What's the best thing for a hangover?" she asked.

"Not drinking."

She beeped the phone at me.

"Hey, now."

"Are you calling to gloat over my misery?"

I told her I'd never do that. I was calling because I'd put her down as a personal reference and asked if anyone had called about me. She seemed pepped up by my almost being an editor.

"I'm not letting it get me down. I have the book."

"Is it done?"

"No, but I have the title. *Unfinished*."

"Didn't you have one named *Untitled*?" Julie asked. "What happened to *that* one?"

"I changed the title," I said.

"I'm confused, is it done?"

"It's unfinished." I changed the subject. "What did the office think of the new hair-do?"

"I said I was trying out for a charity play. They go *big* for that. They're progressive in that way. I think they believed me. So how is Katlin?"

I said at break he was reading mass market paperback fiction, bestseller stuff, not bleak European Philosophy. He even wore the stock red blazer, keeping his old school usher outfit at home. (He had hung the old get-up in his closet.) By the end of the week I got the full report. She invited him over for supper. He made his secret recipe spaghetti for her. They both ignored the scratches and bruises she put on his face at the party. He came over the next night after work and every night the rest of the week and they watched TV. Katlin didn't try to hog the clicker and let her choose whatever channel.

"That's love," I said.

"We don't watch the news, of course."

"Of course not."

"He doesn't talk about the Afterlife anymore."

I said that was good.

"Do you believe in the Afterlife?" Julie asked.

"I don't know. I guess so. Do you?"

"Doesn't everybody?"

She had let him back into her heart, despite his antics at the Party of Dead Souls. Did she not know it was just a few days before?

He talked about when he was a teen and worked as an activity director at the YMCA in Freeport. Julie dared to mention Roberto, and even showed him the old marriage application. Katlin didn't go off on her, and he even promised he wouldn't talk to The Afterlife Camera anymore.

"I love it when he's normal," Julie crooned.

Normal?

He could never be one of *us*.

They shopped early for Christmas gifts and daydreamed of camping in the springtime. Maybe they would move up north or to Colorado. With her resume she could work anywhere. He could rethink things, maybe go back to school. "Chicago is getting worn out."

“I’ve got my bag all packed,” I said.

Julie laughed.

“I’ll even have my own tent!”

“Oh, Pete, I worry for you. Seriously, I can just tell. This is going to be the best Christmas ever.”

On the 10th of November, Katlin walked down Morse Avenue and braved the hullabaloo of shopping. Maybe it was the beard, maybe it was the holiday spirit or that the world had gone onto other things but to their credit, the denizens of Rogers Park left him alone. He bought Led Zeppelin’s fourth album at the used record store, the one with the cat roaming on top of the record bins.

On his way back home he came across a man in the parking lot of the grocery store. The man was choking on red grapes. Katlin performed the Heimlich Maneuver on him before paramedics arrived. During the rescue, the victim twisted in panic. (This was before Illinois’ Good Samaritan law that exempted certified people from such occurrences as accidentally breaking a victim’s rib). He sued Katlin for breaking two ribs, and also sued the grocery store for selling “over-sized grapes.”

From 0-60, the media feeding frenzy started again.

That night after work I went to Katlin’s and watched the news. (The two of them weren’t getting together. Julie said on the phone that she needed rest. She’d been falling asleep on the job and had gotten a written warning. Julie also said she was getting sore as hell and could use the break.)

“Don’t watch that trash,” I told Katlin. “You saved a guy’s life!”

But he watched the fury of bullshit anyway.

The news dredged up his life-saving at The Fire. The timing of the Heimlich Incident, as they were calling it, couldn’t be any worse. McCall, The Rogers Park Arsonist, was in the courts, ready to be jailed.

The TV sidekick pointed a finger. “I’m wondering if an image consultant advised him to wear that beard?”

“Maybe he’s hiding behind the beard!”

“Another thing,” the Sidekick said, “You’ve got to admit, it’s suspicious that he’s rescuing people all the time. Reports say he was buying a Led Zeppelin album. He’s not trying to buy a “Stairway to Heaven”, is he?”

“We have to go to a commercial now,” The TV Host said. “Next, we’ll examine what Roberto may be thinking about all of this.”

Katlin walked over to his javelin rack and picked out his finest javelin (the one used to win the U.S. Olympic Trials). He aimed and released it. The TV sparked and blew out in a flash.

“What the hell are you doing?” I said.

“I’m so tired,” Katlin said.

When I called Julie for the usual update the following day, I didn’t tell her about the javelin-through-the-TV incident. I said we didn’t watch the news. She was smoking again. Julie wondered if she should throw Katlin a surprise party for his thirtieth birthday, January 1st.

“New Years? It’s not even Thanksgiving.”

“I like to plan, you know.”

“He’s had enough surprises this year, don’t you think?”

She sucked at a cigarette. I heard her tapping a fingernail. “Maybe something, you know, low-key. You and Anna. The four of us. Movies and pizza and *no drinking*.”

“What fun is that?”

“He black-outs when he drinks.”

“I mean, what fun is that with my date?”

Julie beeped the phone at me. “She’s your *wife*.”

“Wife, schmife.”

Julie beeped the phone again. “Hey, buddy, it’s late-November.”

“I didn’t know, since I’ve been adrift at sea.”

She beeped the phone in my ear again.

“I mean you don’t have a tent. She said get a tent, remember? See, I told you Anna loves you.”

“I got an extension on my Unemployment. It’s not love, it’s luck.”

“She sees hope.”

“Hope isn’t as good as luck. But I am asking Santa for luck.”

Julie laughed. “I worry for you.”

“I got you one better. Don’t be fooled, please. Don’t let your guard down. Worry for Katlin.”

“I haven’t stopped,” she said.



CHAPTER 41

The Return of the Hometown Hero

The days eroded past us and the Thanksgiving weekend arrived. The radio played a hearty portion of Christmas songs.

The media had just fired up all of the idiots into action. Not only were the Detroit Lions playing that day, the lions were feeding on Katlin. When Katlin dared to look, he saw a sea of shirts that shouted POOKOO. Not only did people hang out in front of his apartment, but they followed him *around*, albeit usually 100 feet away.

Katlin was in a wilderness, a fortress of dark thought, so distant from the glory days of when he was on Larry King's show.

Anna headed north to her family's. I stayed in Chicago and worked the Thanksgiving holiday at the Elysium. Fowler was ecstatic.

Julie came up with the idea to go to Freeport this Thanksgiving weekend. "To remind you who you are," she said. We are heading for a visit to Freeport this weekend and I haven't been back for quite some time. Julie wants to see where my parents worked, where I lived and went to school.

The downtown, like so many across America, has seen its better days but it's very easy to walk around. I want to show her the movie theater. I want to show her Krape Park. Julie says it would be good to visit the accident site up on Highway 69 and asked me where a good place was to get flowers.

How important is it to visit a final resting place? That's not cold hearted. If anyone asks, it hasn't been a long time since I've visited because I've never left that day.

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They traveled west away from the orange light of the city and the dirty streets and everything else. They traveled past O'Hare and the suburbs to harvested fields and farm houses, past Rockford.

The station wagon rolled down U.S. Highway 20. Freeport is about an hour east from the Mississippi River. The holiday traffic was heavy. Katlin slept on the way out (any long car ride did). There was still a sliver of summer in the air, she thought. No matter his state of life, Julie noticed, Katlin's face was serene whenever he slept. She liked the beard he was growing but it scratched her face. As they neared Freeport Julie woke him up.

The streets had long since been swept from the welcome home parade the town held for him after he won the NCAA javelin title. For the Olympics, the town planned another parade but Katlin did not attend and the whole thing was canceled.

Julie and Katlin got out past the tire factory, which opened in the mid-1960's. "If it wasn't for the javelin, I'd be working there."

"And we never would have met," she said.

The road forked, one north around Freeport and onto the Galena Territory and the other into a shallow valley and into town. They bore down on the city limits. The sky was bright and blue and the flat land looked like a landing pad into all that was good and safe. The sparse smattering of snow dotted the old fields. Ahead was the Ramada on the right (which changed names since) and the Ford dealership on the left. If you took South Galena Avenue into town, you'd go past the A&W drive-in (which isn't a root beer place now) and the Hillmacher's old house on Empire Street. Downtown there is a pair of bronze statues commemorating the Lincoln-Douglas debate.

Katlin pointed to a green highway sign. Julie slowed way down and reached for her camera in her purse and clicked a shot. The sign read:

Home of
KATLIN HILLMACHER
Illinois state football champion
NCAA Track champion, Olympic silver medalist

and in black spray paint a word in big letters read:

FAKE

Julie sped up, as if it would erase it.

"Turn the car around."

"No," Julie pleaded.

"There's nothing to look at."

Julie said they drove all the way out and that the trip would be good. Another vandalized sign read ROBERTO LOVES YOU.

Katlin smacked the dashboard. "Turn around!"

"I'm trying, I'm trying!"

That afternoon back at Julie's place they made love and she tried to push everything out of both of their minds. She had lost out on a "sure-fire" promotion and the water cooler whispers said she didn't get it not due to the Joan of Arc hair-do, but because she "consorted with that Olympian."

"You used every trick in the book," Katlin snarled.

"I read the latest *Cosmo*."

"Well, I felt like a pommel horse."

Just bite your tongue, Julie thought.

He stretched and got up and took some Vicodin from his gym bag and washed them down with orange juice.

She lit a cigarette and put on the TV. "What are you taking?"

"A prescription."

"Well, I'll take one."

He told her she didn't need anything.

"I've got pain from all these lanyards," Julie teased, undoing the ones on her wrists and placing them around his neck.

"Pommel horse."

She said nothing.

The theme music to the Poseidon's commercial came on TV.

"Hey, it's Dufey the Lobster."

"Um, I'm starving. Put some pants on and we'll go out," Julie said, slapping his butt as she headed into the bathroom.

Katlin took Julie's 10-speed down off the ceiling hooks.

She complained that she couldn't pee, so she ran the faucet. The toilet

flushed and she peeked into the bedroom. Katlin lay naked.

“If you think I’ve got more from *Cosmo*, that was everything, buddy.”

“Pommel horse.”

Julie laughed and threw his Girbaud jeans at him. She returned to the bathroom and did her make-up and summed up everything in the universe, speaking in grand Hallmark sentences.

“Nothing is worth worrying about. Stupid vandals. Love can break or mend us. Love heals wounds. I didn’t think anyone could change my life again. I didn’t think I could be close to anyone ever again. Someone dies you care about and you close yourself off. Stonebridge was no one special, just the first man around after Dad died.

“You have trouble with your divorce because Cassandra’s part of the family that became your family after your Mom and Dad’s accident. Do we love those people? Or what they symbolize? Anyway, I love you and you love me. We have to go on, right? It’s gonna be OK. We can defeat any sadness. They’re all a bunch of assholes, anyway, and you’re better than the crowd. I stand by you. You know I love you.”

“I’m ready to leave,” Katlin grunted. “Pookoo.”

She zipped up her make-up bag, squished out her cigarette and turned off the light switch. “OK, baby, I’m ready.”

The VCR flooded the bedroom with blue light from video of Katlin’s athletic highlights. She rounded the corner to the bedroom and screamed. Katlin was using the lanyards to hang himself on the ceiling hooks.



CHAPTER 42

The Target

There was no NDE that time. He had scratched on that attempt.

The lanyards gave Katlin a brown rope burn on his neck. As it aged, it looked like a brown tattoo. Nobody at the Elysium knew it was a rope burn. They thought it was a weird hickey.

As his feet kicked, Julie struggled to yank him down. That didn't work, so she dragged over a kitchen chair and reached up and cut the lanyards with a pair of kitchen scissors. An immediate care clinic doctor gave a new prescription for Vicodin.

He needed a wheelchair for his soul.

We watched, we waited, we hid sharp objects.

Trying to hang himself was a shitty thing for Katlin to do. Even after that, Julie didn't leave him. Why? If you've ever been in love, you know Love gets its hooks in deep.

She came back to him but quit wearing her I'M GOING BACK lanyard. I quit wearing mine, too. She felt guilty since she was the one who started the whole lanyard business. Everyone tried to go on with life as usual, like that ever happens. His soul had no flash of life except a mental reminder that he fell short again, just like he did at the Olympics.

We watched, we waited, we hid sharp objects.

My own personal funk was heightened by the fact that Joey Sartina was running new ads for holiday parties. Sartina was using a new "Lenny" (not the *real* one), although he did re-use the old juggling clip Mark Hoffstetter shot downtown. At the tail end The New Lenny did a little dance with a Santa hat on.

"Oh, I wouldn't do that," I said to the TV.

Yes, I would've.

But I couldn't.

The misery was compounded by the point that I had a full-blown case of writer's block. I couldn't face the white void of each piece of paper. I started asking myself when it was going to get done. The only answer I found was at the bottom of every scotch.

When Katlin did jog, it was at the Elysium – where no one could hound him. (The concessionettes saw to that.) He went up and down every step. But eventually he stopped jogging totally.

"The end is near," Katlin said.

He moved into the Abyss of the Living, a portal of dark souls, a narrow, knife-edged bridge which reached The Other Side.

In that zone you ask yourself if there is any hope. Macbeth's question is true. You ask if it is time to let go, if *'enough'* is the best answer to every question that runs through your head, and if it is, your decision is made. In that zone, all Ego is drained – although some would argue that The Zone is the place where all ego is *collected*.

The Zone is the most dangerous place on Earth. It is wicked and ugly and destructive. Despite all that, it is beautiful in its simplicity. The dramas of Life are boiled down into one remaining issue. Anyone with depression and ennui easily slides in and out of its borders and can be tempted by its easy charms and how the final step, once and for all, solves everything. But it is nothing to play with.

All that year Katlin played in The Zone as comfortably as he would on green grass, on a running track, or the sands of Loyola Beach. Women

salved his psychic wound, but The Zone was his true mistress. Like every other addict, Katlin felt he could stop being in the Zone anytime he wanted to and that was his license to continue to play in it.

“I figured it out. Katlin’s addicted to NDE’s.”

Julie didn’t want to hear it.

I ask: is this place of the soul known to everyone? Perhaps. Maybe that’s why (at least in the States) we shake at the very thought of someone having “dark thoughts.” Mortality and all that. How many people walk its corridors on a daily basis? How far do they get?

We can push this darkness back with helpings of drugs, drink, sex, TV, fast food, prescriptions, religion, hobbies, work, books, kids and responsibility, smoking or anything that keeps you holding on. For most, a combination of the above is enough to keep the wind of The Zone from howling too strongly. One thing is certain: once the line is crossed, there’s no turning back.

Katlin wasn’t ready, for whatever reason, to fully cross the line. Critics of suicides would argue that if someone wants to die, they will. Anything else is a cry for help. People may seem back in the world. But once the line is crossed, the moments of life are just scorecards in the column of evidence in why it’s time to leave.

It didn’t help Katlin’s state of mind that the protesters and on-lookers remained on his sidewalk like pieces of stubborn dog shit. Coming back from Ennui one morning I noticed that Greystone Ltd. actually used Katlin’s crowd in its latest sales pitch with a newspaper clipping of the throng outside Katlin’s apartment.

Sheridan Towers
*security and comfort in the Park
for the New Year*

I tore the ad down off the wall and threw it away. The next day a framed version of it was seated into the wall with wall screws.

Maybe Katlin should have moved into The Towers.

One day the police arrested one of the militant throng outside his apartment building – a celebrity stalker.

The Afterlife Groundhog had returned to the surface of the Earth and had gone to Sonny’s for a Gatorade. Katlin went over to Morse Avenue for a few groceries and chatted with a few people out on the sidewalk. One was named Frank Lennon, had been waiting for Katlin to return and had gotten an autograph from Katlin earlier. Lennon sat on the curb with a copy of Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse Five*.

“Pookoo,” Katlin said.

“Goodbye,” Lennon said, pulling a switchblade knife. “Hey, did you just say *fuck you*?”

“Pookoo,” Katlin said.

Lennon lunged toward Katlin, but Katlin’s world-class reflexes outmaneuvered the assailant. Katlin dropped his two plastic grocery bags, slapped the knife to the side and slugged Lennon in the solar plexus. Witnesses said when Lennon’s fell backwards his head snapped onto the sidewalk it sounded like “someone thumping like a dew melon.”

The video shot by a by-stander backed the description.

The news stations showed that video clip over and over again, with Katlin saying *Pookoo* again and again in a loop, along with the bleeping out the attacker’s cursing. The news pundits wondered about the meaning of

the word *Pookoo*. When asked by authorities why he had Vonnegut's book, the attacker said, "It's my *Catcher*."

"Good God," I said, chilled. This was the sad future of publishing.

"So it goes," shrugged Katlin.

Lennon filed a lawsuit against Katlin, claiming he suffered a concussion in the incident.

"He attacked *you*," Julie said.

The worst of it was that Katlin received two death threats via mail, including one which said Katlin was 'over the top and out of control.' The letters were leaked to the press.

"He *is* over the top," one sports network TV panelist said. "He's out of control. Athletes and celebrities get this free pass in society. I was getting a bagel this morning and somebody in line said Hillmacher deserved to be attacked. With what he's pulled this year, it's hard to argue with that. I can understand the frustration of the people."

It was a huge irony missed by the entire world. People were sending him threatening letters, writing sickening graffiti on his building and now trying to kill him. The irony was that he was a serial suicide.

"Don't you find that ironic?"

"Fuck irony," Julie told me. "I want the man I fell in love with."

And which one of Katlin was that? I wondered. But I knew better than to ask Julie that one out loud.

Katlin couldn't afford bodyguards ever since he was cut off from the Kippling fortune. The Chicago Police couldn't provide a SWAT task force to keep him covered (they had a *city* to protect, after all). Not even the Bank of Julie had funds for bodyguards.

Katlin just had to keep his eyes open and his back to a wall.

One night while we were tearing tickets, an irate middle-aged man stormed through the lobby. He looked like the father of the Candy Striper.

"Pookoo," Katlin said.

The irate man raced toward Katlin.

"Back away, sir," I said.

He tried to get past me.

I pushed him back.

"Look," the man snapped, pointing to the big wet stain at his crotch.

"What's your problem, weirdo?"

The man was embarrassed. "Where is your restroom?"

"To your left," Katlin said, moving me out of the way.

"Sorry," I said. "Oh boy. I didn't know. I didn't."

"Nice intent, Pete. Poor execution."

"Hey, I saw him moving in fast. You even said *Pookoo*. If you saw the whole thing coming, why didn't you tell me?"

"You can tell somebody something," Katlin said. "But that doesn't mean they'll do anything about it."

The fifth paternity suit that was filed against Katlin crushed him more than the rest. Floyd, Fowler and the concessionettes took his casual attitude as classic Katlin Cool. More companies were backing out of their endorsement deals. A local radio station started a fund drive for a ticket for Roberto to come to Chicago. Another radio station half joked that they were going to start a fund drive for the Katlin Hillmacher Home for Orphans.

Meanwhile, the misery just kept piling on.

The estranged wife of the Dean of Atlas State College (where Katlin worked) was going through a divorce. Her papers stated that her husband's cruelty extended professionally, not just at home. When the Dean found out that Katlin was his wife's lover, the Dean fired Katlin from the teaching staff and that his bad references put Katlin on a national hiring blacklist.

It was more fuel for *Nightwatch's* nightly Inquisition. More than ever, I was convinced that Katlin was only a moment away from hitting the Life Power Button to OFF.

We had cleaned up for the night. I still felt bad for mixing it up with the man with the bladder condition. I went upstairs to Floyd's.

"Let's go," I said. "We're not getting overtime."

"The Kid ain't quite ready to go home yet," Floyd said, pointing out the projectionist's window.

On the Elysium's 50-foot screen ran a series of old Super 8 movie film. The old projector was aimed out the window at the silver screen. Bob and Peg Hillmacher danced at Peg's parent's 30th wedding anniversary. Baby Katlin was being taken home from the hospital. I went downstairs inside the theater. Katlin sat two rows back in the center section and looked at the mis-colored, scratchy movies. Katlin pointed for me to take a seat.

"Sometimes at home I talk to the TV"

I imagined his life. He had his weight set, spaghetti dinners, a few books, old home movies – and free cable.

"I worry for you, Katlin."

I knew what Katlin's problems were; did he? No matter the size of the screen it couldn't bring his parents back alive. It could have been a 100-foot screen – hell, even a 1,000-foot screen. Through this reliving, he could be taken back to the edge of *then*, but only that far. Memory, after all, either saves or haunts us. All these years he'd been in the cycle of mourning; he did not grieve, and so he never went *forward*. His soul was strangled. As he grew older, his parents' voices did not guide him through the wasteland.

"How did it get like this?"

How? He *had* to know that *he'd* been the one at the proverbial bulldozer's controls. *Didn't he?*

Watching his face, it hit me: they weren't home movies – this was a look inside his head. "This is what you see. The NDEs."

He nodded.

Another montage began.

But wait. In this set, *things were going backwards*. The events of his life were in reverse, back to the womb. Back to where it was safe. Floyd's rigged NDE had things starting in 1991. First, Tabloid TV.

But not to worry.

With each scene, his life movie got better with fewer problems and fewer self-created dramas. Katlin left the Omega of Now and headed to the Alpha of Then. He was transported back to where there was no hounding Media, no scrutiny, no wrong, no misguided energy for love and acceptance, no double-dealing cabbies, no public that craved him (including those who wanted him dead), and no search for what could never be found. *Back, back, back* to where he wasn't separated from Cassandra. Katlin hadn't failed at the Olympics. He won the NCAA championship. His parents were still alive. There was Katlin, the boy wonder, peddling a bike down the sidewalk in Freeport, circa 1966. Everything was possible, everything was gold. I imagined the poster for the movie of his life:

Life is hard. Welcome to the show.

POOKOO

NDE PICTURES presents KATLIN JAMES HILLMACHER
“POOKOO”

IN A ROBERT AND PEG HILLMACHER PRODUCTION

STARRING KATLIN JAMES HILLMACHER

ROBERT HILLMACHER PEG HILLMACHER

CASSANDRA KIPPLING-HILLMACHER THORNE S. KIPPLING III

JULIE MARTIN PETE WARNER TIM FOWLER

FLOYD THE PROJECTIONIST MARK HOFFSTETTER

THE ROGERS PARK ARSONIST

MRS. BLAIR AND HER DOG ‘BABY’ and

ROBERTO HILLMACHER

Introducing RITA WENDY SONYA JILL LATOYSHA TWANA
as “The Concessionettes”

Special appearance by LENNY THE LOBSTER

SCREENPLAY BY GOD

PRODUCED BY ROBERT AND PEG HILLMACHER

DIRECTED BY KATLIN JAMES HILLMACHER

Katlin continued to watch his old home movies through December. The Christmas melancholia didn't help his mood. It made him think of his parents and simpler days when they'd go sledding in Krape Park. With his life crumbling around him like a set from a 70's disaster film, the home movies salved some of the wounds. But whenever he was done watching, he was more alone, more broken, more fragile, more distant than before.

Most men would die for the way Julie loved him.

But no one could clot the vacancy left by breaking glass, crushed metal and wounded cries that continued to rush back from the grave.

I looked, I listened, I waited. I hid sharp objects.

What could be done with a soul who entertained himself in a dark room with his ragged life to look at, locked away from all that was out there? What code or key could unlock the sadness built by tragedy and time? Was Eden a destination he could ever get back to?



CHAPTER 43

Wednesday

Wednesday.

I always worked Fridays and Saturdays at the Elysium, so I enjoyed no Wednesday mid-week “Hump Day” mental break like I did when I used to work weekdays at Mehedrich & Associates. The theater was closed on Monday so I did get to watch *Monday Night Football*.

It was an unusually slow Wednesday, which meant plenty of time for goofing off. The Concessionettes decorated the Elysium with Christmas crap. Everybody wore Santa hats except Katlin and me.

Fowler strutted by. “Hey girls, have you seen my Christmas balls?”

“Why, you *lose* them?” Rita laughed.

Fowler coughed and hid in his office the rest of the night.

I was late to work that Wednesday because I’d been hitting the job trail harder and didn’t show until the first show had already started. I punched in, fixed my tie and jogged to the lobby. Katlin walked out of the auditorium and a light flashed in my eyes.

“What the hell?”

He shut the flashlight off.

“Let me see it,” I said.

He flicked the light back on. The beam hit me in the eyes again.

“Do that again and I’ll kill you!”

“You’d *help*?” Katlin asked, flicking the flashlight off. He reached behind his back and threw another flashlight at me. It felt like a lead pipe. I flicked it on and flashed it on the lobby wall and aimed it at the ceiling. It could have lit the world, not just a dark theater. I flicked it off before the ceiling caught fire. “Where’d you get it?”

“You can get a lot of things at estate sales.”

“Impressive.”

“Impressive, most impressive,” Katlin said in a Darth Vader voice. “Obi-Wan has trained you well.” He put his flashlight on and swung the flashlight at me, mouthing a crackling laser sound.

I flicked on my flashlight. I made the laser sound.

He swung the beam at me. I jumped back out of its path. Once in a while we’d make the laser sound. We sparred around the lobby in a mock-lightsaber duel, leaping, bumping into walls. I swung at him. Katlin ran up the wall and did a back flip.

“Whoa,” I said, standing slack-jawed.

He swung at me. I’d been cut in half.

“No fair!” I said.

“Quit whining. You’re dead.”

I swung at him and he blocked it. I swung again and he took a hit in the shoulder (his javelin-throwing arm, no less) and he cried out in pain. He swung back with anger. I took it in the knee and dropped down in pain.

“Ah!” I cried.

Valerie shook her head. “Geeks.”

We looked at her. Then he chopped at me. I countered. I tossed the laser sword to my other hand. I jumped at the wall. The wall didn’t move.

“Boys will be boys,” LaToysha said.

I was on the ground, all out of breath.

“Life’s about fun,” Katlin smiled, running a hand through his hair.

“Not for everybody,” Valerie said, nodding at the concession stand where

Wendy was working the counter.

Katlin turned his flashlight off and talked to The Afterlife Camera. "This isn't fun anymore."

I walked behind the counter and poured a Big Whiz for Floyd. I also got him three hot dogs and extra butter on his popcorn. Katlin walked over to the concession stand.

"Small crowd tonight?" I asked.

"*Real cheap*," Wendy snapped. "They can't cough up a little money. They can't buy nothing."

"Maybe they're not ready yet," Katlin said.

"Yeah, well, Time marches on."

He shined the flashlight on the floor. I flicked on my flashlight, ready to play again. So was Katlin. His flashlight's beam danced at her feet and traveled up her leg. It traced it back down and rode back up and stopped at her thigh. "I'll buy."

"Is that what you want?" she asked, her arms folded.

"Is Julie meeting us after work?"

He flicked off the light. "No."

We went upstairs to Floyd, who was on the phone with his wife making their grocery list. He saw us and waved us in. "OK, think of what else we need. I'll call later. Now don't forget: dancing, Saturday night, you and me sweets. Gotta go." He hung up the phone. "What's going on, boys?"

I gave him the food.

Katlin walked around the projector.

"You sure are mesmerized by that machine, aren't you?" Floyd said, unwrapping a dog.

Katlin put his hand before the projector light. "Look at it too hard and the mystery and myth get taken away."

"There never was anything mystical about this flick going. And I've *looked*, 12 *whole* times."

Katlin touched the magic machine. "Too bad you couldn't just rewind the movie, you know. Go to only the good parts. Skip the bad parts. But you can't ever change what happens in a film. You think it might change. But no matter how many times you see it, everything that happens still happens in it. In the end you can only watch it. The only way to fix it is to stop it."

"I'm with him."

I headed out. "Come on, Kat, we've got to check on things."

We went back downstairs. I smoked a cigarette just outside the front door. It was cold and windy and sprinkling. Katlin looked around. I looked over the top of the building to the west. The sky was the color of a watercolor bruise. "*The Weather Channel* said there's freezing rain tonight."

"Oh great," I said, looking at The Afterlife Camera.

"No, it's over here."

I rolled my eyes. I thought it was supposed to be filming everywhere. I rubbed my cigarette out in the ashtray. An older woman came rushing out of the center theater doors.

"There's no decency. They should be ashamed!"

"Is everything all right, ma'am?" I said, remembering my previous crappy customer service skills with the man in the lobby.

"No, it's not all right. Can't you stop them? This is a public place. The world is going to hell in a hand-basket!"

She rushed down the sidewalk.

"Thank you," Katlin said.

There were three double-doors in the theater. Katlin took the left door. I took the center one. "You know, a hand-basket is awfully small."

I scanned the theater. Most of the patrons were in the left section. Only a few were on the right; all but two were down in front. I moved right. Up on the screen the bullets careened across a hollow factory. The main character leaped onto a steel beam in a hail of gun fire. Below him was a chasm and a polished steel fan. (Naturally.) He was out of bullets. (Naturally.) The gun fire below stopped. A villain cackled. Thin synthesizer string music echoed in the room. I walked behind the center section. The floor was sticky with half-dried pop. On the big screen hard-soled shoes clicked on the beam. I stepped on a glob of Jujus. Katlin quickened his pace.

"Pookoo. Hey, Pete, I got this one."

I peeled off the candy and moved toward the couple and kicked over a tub of popcorn, which spilled all over.

The villain and lead character traded barbs.

The couple in the theater were in the far right corner of the theater on the aisle next to the wall. They were on one of the broken, sagging love seats. I heard the creak of the love seat. The man faced the movie screen. His arms were on the worn upholstered red armrests. I coughed to let them know I was there. They weren't stopping.

The footsteps echoed across the movie screen. A single bullet ripped the air and missed. The villain cackled again.

The man wore a corduroy jacket and a chef's shirt. In the flashes of light I saw that he had his eyes closed.

"Excuse me," I said.

The woman sat facing the chef. Her head was tucked down to her left side with her long hair down around her face. She wore a winter coat, no hosiery, a plain blouse and a flowing skirt. The chef's hands moved from the armrests to her waist. The skirt bunched up and I could see her bare hips. The skirt fluttered a bit then draped over the armrest. Her hands clenched his shoulders then she wrapped around him.

"Miss? Sir? You need to..."

She scooted against him.

"Excuse me," I said. "You'll have to leave the, uh ..."

I didn't finish. Her back arched, farther, farther, in waves; she was in a swoon. I flicked on my new flashlight and aimed. She sighed, as if she had never breathed before, and her body went limp. She flipped the hair out of her eyes and gave me an annoyed look.

It was my wife.

Anna-Krista reached into the inside pocket of the chef's jacket and pulled out an envelope and handed it to me. I read it under the harsh beam. It was a very official-looking envelope.

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Katlin read over my shoulder. "It's not even your birthday!"

It was a photostatic copy of the divorce papers. I wasn't being served: only a County Sheriff's representative or private investigator in Cook County can legally serve divorce papers.

"Thought you'd like a *rough draft*," Anna-Krista said.

I placed the letter and envelope inside my coat. "I love you, too." I raised my arm, drawing the heavy flashlight way back.

Katlin snatched the flashlight and wrestled me for it. On the movie screen the hero did a roll across the floor. A wall of bullets cascaded across the factory after him. The music stabbed the air.

“You bitch!”

“Do you call your *girlfriend* that, Peter?”

“What girlfriend?”

“Dude, *everybody* says that,” the chef said.

“Stay the fuck out of this,” I snapped.

“You’re so sad,” Anna-Krista said, climbing off the chef. “I’ve seen you around with *her*. On TV, all over. For months you’ve just flaunted it in my face. You could at least have the decency to just say you don’t love me anymore. I thought, why try? Why go home? I can live my life, too. I’d been wondering why you weren’t getting job offers, I wondered why you were gone so much every day in the middle of the day. You hardly look for work. One day I followed you downtown and saw you two having lunch at Sutton’s. But that was just the start.”

“*She’s a friend.*”

“Oh, Peter.”

“She’s *his* girlfriend,” I said, pointing to Katlin.

“What a liar. I’ve seen his wife on TV. The beauty queen.”

“I can explain.” Did I start with Lenny the Lobster?

She dug into her purse and pulled out an item. “Can you explain this, Peter? I found this in your suit.”

It was the tube of lipstick from the party.

The chef zipped his pants up and patted Anna-Krista’s backside. “Man, you’re such a dip shit.”

I lunged for him, but Katlin used a half-Nelson headlock on me. I tried to grab for the flashlight.

“Give a friend a present and he tries to break it!” Katlin said. I cursed as Katlin moved me back up the aisle like he was pushing a hand truck. The lobby doors flew open. He herded me into the custodial closet and blocked the door with a nearby chair. I banged on the door. It felt like my hand was going to break. The room had a door window. I unfolded a step ladder and stood on it. I tried to reach the window, to see if I could pull myself up to climb out. His key opened the door and I glared at him.

“Get off that ladder!” He pushed me off the ladder. I crashed and hit my head. He took the ladder and re-blocked the door.

“You sonofabitch! Open up!”

“Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

That didn’t leave much.

I gritted and spat out each word. “Open the damn door.”

Silence.

“OK, if you don’t let me out, I’ll drink paint. I’ll drive a screwdriver through my heart! Put my finger in the light socket! Drown myself in the washtub! Open the door Kat or I’ll kill myself.”

“Pete?”

I sighed. “Yes?”

“I’d understand.”

I banged on the door. “Let me the fuck out of here!”

“I’ll be back,” Katlin said.

I finally gave the door a rest since it had done nothing wrong. I smoked. I was shaking. I tried not to look at the 100-watt bulb or the pale green walls. My hand felt like it was broken. I felt better except for the heartburn and the nausea and the adrenaline rush at my chest and legs. I wiped the

sweat from my forehead and pulled out the letter and read it. The envelope was dripping with gold leaf.

My name was misspelled.

I'm sure she had it misspelled *on purpose* just to spite me. (I proofread her grocery lists, remember.) I read the papers again and then carefully put them back in the envelope. I raised the envelope over the sink and popped open my Zippo and set the envelope on fire. I dropped it in the sink, turned the water on and watched the ashes swirl around and down into the pipes. I doused the cigarette. Five minutes later Katlin opened the door.

I snatched the flashlight from him and marched into the theater and stormed the aisles. I scanned the theater. I looked over to their seats with the flashlight. They were gone.



CHAPTER 44

Home Sweet Home

I took Katlin up on his offer to move in and split the rent – just until I got back on my feet. We'd both save on rent so it would cost out at \$200 a month each. Julie would like the idea so I could keep an eye on Katlin. He thought I could use one of Julie's camping sleeping bags. There was no room in the apartment for a second bed. It was set. In the morning I would get my things. Go to the bank. Talk to the old landlord. Find a lawyer. All that wonderful shit.

After work we skated on the icy sidewalk to White Hen and I splurged and bought a six-pack of Corona and some tequila. When Life has gone to Hell, you've got to have *something* good.

I went up to the gate at Sheridan Towers. I did not see any lights on up in my old apartment. "I just want to go up."

"What for?" Katlin said.

"I have the key."

"The key to *what*?"

I wanted to go up there. I wanted them dead. I wanted my wife back. I wanted my things. I wanted my Ing Room. I wanted my apartment with my stereo and my books and my papers. I wanted my storage space. I wanted my old job back. I wanted my computer. I wanted my dog back. I wanted her to love me again. I wanted to forget her name.

Instead, I made a snowball and hurled it against the building. I threw another snowball and it missed. I threw another at the brick, and another and another and another and another and another and another and another. I was out of breath. Katlin nodded and we walked up to his building.

"Think of all this as great writing material," Katlin said, opening his apartment door and flicking on the fluorescent light.

I saw theater seats.

"Theater seats? Why did you have to get *those*? Why couldn't you have a damned couch like the rest of the world?"

He touched his forehead like a psychic. "Sorry, The Great Katalino didn't foresee tonight's episode of *Love Connection*."

"When did you see them?"

"Three seconds before you."

"Tell the truth," I said, lighting a cigarette.

"Why don't I open the window for you?"

"The truth is that fucking bad?"

"For the *smoke*," Katlin said, walking into the bathroom. He talked to The Afterlife Camera. "He smokes like London did in 1666."

I kicked one of the turned-up theater seats.

"He's beating up furniture now," Katlin sighed, walking back in the main room.

I refused to sit in a *theater seat* – not on that night – and sat on the floor and cracked open a Corona. "Did you see them before?"

"For the sixth time – *no*. Only three seconds before you did."

He got an old sheet and blanket and a pillow for me and I laid out in front of the TV with the volume off.

"When will I get over this?"

"Never."

"Thanks for the pep talk," I said.

I watched TV and finished off the six-pack while he snored away. I was jealous. An athlete can drop into sleep mode in an instant. I fell asleep once the booze began working fully and dreamed that I was in the shower on my honeymoon – still in my tux (even though we never wore formal wedding clothes). Anna-Krista went down to the ice machine. The chef showed up with an ice bucket.

I woke and saw theater seats. I turned off the TV and smoked and stared at the theater seats. I drifted back to sleep.

I was tearing movie tickets at the Elysium.

“You’ll get used to it here,” Mr. Mehedrich said to me in the dream. Fowler pushed Mabus in a tricked-out golden 7-foot electric wheelchair down a red carpet. Mabus nodded and waved to one and all and tipped his crown of paint brushes. Fowler introduced him to Mr. Mehedrich.

“I draw a little, too,” Mr. Mehedrich told Mabus.

“We all draw a little,” Mabus said. His bejeweled hand waved at the ragged group. “Everyone draws a little. I hear this one writes a little.”

Mehedrich smoked and nodded.

Mabus spun his wheelchair around and reveled at Fowler’s elegant restoration which was made complete with dioramas using live actors depicting *The Inferno*. The whirlwind, the gluttons, the river Acheron at the sidewalk out front, my wife rutting.

I dreamed I was at Poseidon’s.

Anna and the chef were in the kitchen preparing a six-course meal for me. The chef took the meat’s temperature. He called out to Anna, who was in her wedding dress with a train that stretched all the way out the service door to Joliet, that the meat was done. I was at the center table in a doorman’s outfit. The chef brought the meal out on a pushcart. Anna lifted a silver lid to reveal my dog on a platter.

It was one of those ridiculous dreams where you know that you’re sleeping. You’re crying, in the dream and in reality, but you can’t wake up. You’re screaming, just screaming bloody murder but you make no sound and you try to wake from it but can’t. If you don’t wake the devil is going to grab hold of your feet and take you down. I screamed and cried but I still wasn’t making a noise. I called the dog’s name over and over but he didn’t listen. The chef was playing Frisbee with my dog and the dog licked him on the face. I was pitching a tent and calling for Anna and she just ignored me. The tent turned into a log cabin, then a Cape Cod then a Breakers mansion but Anna still ignored me. I woke up in a fetal position crying softly by the Pantone 294 blue light of 6:00 a.m.

At 9 a.m. I woke for good with a throbbing headache and a stiff neck and back. Floors. I wasn’t 18 anymore.

Katlin was sacked out still on the Murphy bed. I jumped into a cold shower. I opened the door and the blanket was off Katlin. He was buck naked and was in the middle of some erotic dream. His member was like a flag pole.

“Jesus, put on some pajamas,” I yelled.

“Huh?”

Julie was right – the bastard was built like a goddamned horse. He did have a daily reminder about his failure at the Olympics, losing by that much. “Cover up! I’m scarred for life, man.”

“Scarred? There’s some antibiotic cream in the medicine chest.”

Then he slept.

I didn’t have any clean clothes. I didn’t even have a toothbrush. Luckily, Katlin had a spare toothbrush all brand new in its package – in fact, he had

a stash of about 10 new toothbrushes, for all the girls who stayed overnight. He should've gotten a discount from Crest.

After I threw my clothes back on I went in to the kitchen to make some coffee. There wasn't any coffee. The tea bags were leftover from the Boston Tea Party.

I went to Ennui and had two cups of black coffee before I went across the street to pick up the first load of all my crap. At least the locks weren't changed. Anna-Krista wasn't there.

I went into The Ing Room. All of my papers and books were still there. I grabbed every notebook, the briefcase of my best writings and a box of computer disks. I got a suitcase out of the living room closet. I stuffed it with dress shirts, ties, polo shirts and my two best suits already in their dust covers. From the front closet I took my pair of tennis shoes. I vowed to start working out, and Katlin could help. I went into the bedroom and took several changes of underwear and socks, t-shirts and jeans from my dresser. I double-checked and looked in the closet. A belly dancer's costume, with finger cymbals and a golden veil, tumbled off the top shelf.

Jesus. Oh Jesus. No.

On my night-stand were a few cans of Old Style, a meat thermometer and six brown-filtered cigarette butts in the already-full honeymoon souvenir ashtray. Over on her side was a half-empty whiskey glass. Her ashtray was full, too. The candles were burned down; globs of white wax stuck to the blue cloth on the night-stand. On the unmade bed were two C-size batteries and an empty Duracell® package.

I went into the bathroom, ate four Tylenol®, and splashed some water on my face. I took some cleansing breaths. Then I threw up.

I washed up and brushed my teeth again. Then I took the toothbrush and Crest® with me. The last things I took were my black overcoat, a pair of wool gloves and my scarf.

I had so much shit but I really didn't want to leave anything behind. I had to be a damned pack rat, didn't I? It took four trips down the stairs to carry all my things. There was more if I wanted to ever come back. I stood in front of Sonny's and flagged down a cab but I passed it up because it had a Lenny the Lobster roof ad. I waved him to move on. The driver, who'd begun to pull over to the curb, swore and honked his horn. I finally got a cab.

"Trip?"

"Divorce," I said to the driver. *There. I said it. Divorce.* I might as well have said *Cancer*.

"Ah." He gently loaded my things with care and closed the trunk. We got in and he started the meter and drove off.

"Some shitty weather this week, eh? It's Biblical."

"Stop here."

"Say what?"

We had traveled one block. We were at Sheridan and Greenleaf.

He didn't really want to hear how I couldn't carry it all. I didn't bother him with the sad details. He muttered as he parked the cab half in the street. He moved faster than a repo man. I planned on giving him a great tip until he started to dump his trunk of my worldly belongings. I paid the fare and a minimal tip. "You probably drove her nuts, asshole!"

He hit the gas and burned rubber. I stood there with my suitcase, my life, on the curb in front of God and everyone.

"I got it from here," I waved.

CHAPTER 45

The Key

The next day I didn't feel like doing any laundry. I wanted to drink. But I didn't have quarters for that, either. I came across Mark Hoffstetter's deal of a shirt – the custom *Remote Crow-trol* shirt. I needed *something* to wear. I unwrapped it from its plastic. A plastic bag of marijuana unrolled and thudded on the theater seats.

"*Deluxe*," I said. "Oh shit."

I picked up the bag, spilling most of the contents on the theater seats and brushed everything into my hands. I took the whole thing out to the back dumpster and came back inside, and for some dumb reason, drenched the room with a fog of air deodorant.

Katlin came back from doing laundry folding his old high school uniform. It was orange and had PRETZELS on it.

"Pretzels?"

Katlin used the weight bench's barbell for a hanger. "My Mom loved this. What it stood for. Dad said no matter your school's colors, you've got to love your alma mater. It's where you once were. Who you were."

"Pretzels?"

"It's a real nickname," Katlin snapped. I gave him as much space as you can in a 20 x 20 room. He walked by where I sat reading the Friday job section. He glared at me. "It smells funny in here."

I looked on the theater seats for any residual marijuana droppings. "Smells funny?"

"Yeah, I just farted."

Athletes. Fucking athletes.

That day we got a spare key made at the hardware store over on Morse Avenue west of the El Stop. His own neck-chain key was already a copy – there was no DO NOT DUPLICATE stamped on it. The key-making machine's grinding agitated my bad tooth and I walked away and looked at the office supply aisle.

"Want a lanyard?" Katlin asked, after the key was made.

"No."

"You sure?"

I shot him a look.

"Where's the rope?" Katlin asked a salesman. "I need a rope."

The salesman, whose name tag read STANLEY, walked us to aisle 5 where there were spools of rope and chain. The salesman hovered as Katlin first looked at chain and made a face. He turned to the rope. Katlin gripped it, yanked on it, rolled out a few feet.

"How much does a rope cost?"

"Depends on how much and what kind," Stanley said.

"The real strong kind. About 10 feet."

Stanley took out his calculator.

"Comes to 4.44," Stanley said. "Should we cut it?"

"I'm only five bucks away from changing my life," Katlin said to The Afterlife Camera. "Pete, you got five bucks?"

"No," I said, talking to The Camera. "And let me say, Pete wouldn't give it to him."

Stanley chimed in. "We've also got it pre-cut and in bag form. What purpose is it for?"

“To hang myself.”

Stanley acted like he heard it all the time. “Have you tried God?”

“Don’t think He’ll help. I mean, He’s against it, right?”

“Stop by a church and see what He says.” I suddenly noticed a gold cross around his neck. “I go to St. Mary’s myself.”

Katlin thought. “How high is your church’s roof?”

“Let’s go,” I said, pushing Katlin toward the checkout.

“If you change your mind,” Stanley said, “we’ve got lots of product to choose in stock!”

“I might be back!” Katlin said.

We went up to the check out and I bought the key. “He doesn’t think you’re serious,” I said.

“Only \$5,” Katlin said to The Camera.

I was fed up. I didn’t have time for his bullshit. Afterlife. The end of life. Shit, I had to see if my new key worked. I spoke to The Camera. “A rope? Come on. You’re a *celebrity*. An aging world-class athlete, a faded American *icon*. A rope? A rope’s for *amateurs*.”

While we were out that day, I put in a change of address card with the Post Office. At the grocery store I bought a carton of generics and a case of cheap beer, instant coffee, a loaf of white bread, peanut butter, two packs of red beans and rice, and 10 packs of beef flavored Ramen noodles.

“You know, I used to proofread Anna-Krista’s grocery list.”

Katlin laughed. “And they say I’m a prick.”

Back at the apartment I put away the groceries while Katlin sat on the weight bench and watched TV. When I was done, I turned around. Katlin was wearing Lenny the Lobster’s head.

“Holy shit,” I squawked.

“Take it easy. It’s just a fake head. You know, a lot of people are scared of mascots.”

“How in the hell did it get in here?”

“I’m the mascot. Calm down, it’s not real.”

“You’re the *what*?”

“For that restaurant on TV.” Katlin dragged the rest of the costume from the old canvas bag. “Remember, Dufey the Lobster? But it’s not really worth the \$30.”

“*Thirty*?”

“I get free food, too, but I wouldn’t do it for that,” he said. “It’s a haul to get downtown. I know what you’re thinking. Forget it, Pete. You’ll find a job. A *real* job, too.”

“*Thirty bucks*?”

“Forget it,” Katlin said. “Get it out of your mind. Concentrate on the big things. Aren’t you running out of time?”

“Why do *you* do it?”

“To get past the gauntlet and into my apartment, of course. I saw him on TV the one time he was out front and thought *anybody* can do that. It’s *nothing*. It’s just a guy in the suit. Nobody actually pays attention to the mascot. And it’s great out in public because how many pictures of it can the reporters keep taking?”

“How long have you been mascoting?”

He took the ice pack out of the canvas bag and pretended to put it on his bad arm. “The day after they chased me from the cemetery, when we were jogging. The restaurant owner said he had a real slacker doing it before.”

“*Slacker*?”

“A real boozier. Wouldn’t follow directions. Stunk up the costume really bad. Get this, he tried to mask the smell with air fresheners.”

I almost hauled off and hit him.

Instead, I watched him blab on and on how *easy* and *boring* it was to be the mascot. *Easy? Boring?* Why couldn’t he ever call him *Lenny the Lobster*? Katlin wore the head and walked about his apartment like a dead robot and laughed. On top of it, he talked about how cool of a guy Sartina was. *Cool?* I bit my tongue: I needed a place to crash. *Steal my job from me. Get \$30, not \$25. Sleep with my wife. Fuck off, Mr. Silver Medal.*

I dragged out my resume. “Can you look this over? I’ve got to move out ASAP.”

He still had Lenny’s head on as he looked over my resume.

“Take off the head,” I said. “Be serious.”

But he kept Lenny’s head on and finished reading.

“Not bad,” Katlin said, finally taking the mascot head off. “I didn’t know you proofread travel books.”

“How does the resume *look*?”

“Why did you leave the job at the newspaper? You were the boss.”

“*How does it look?*”

“OK. But what’s a profreader?”

“What?”

“A profreader. Look. You’ve got a typo.”

I snatched the resume out of his hands and read. I had ‘proofreader’ spelled *profreader*.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” I moaned. “Oh, fuckin’ A. I can’t believe it. Oh, fuck!”

“You’re missing an ‘o.’”

“I know how to spell.”

“No, not really,” Katlin smiled. “Back in school they always said ‘you’re your own worst proofreader.’”

Profreader.

A typo. It explained so much. It was a typo as big as the sky.



CHAPTER 46

Working Out

The next day it snowed. The big flakes melted when they hit the ground. I went over to the field house park. Katlin was in deep left field.

I called but he didn't answer me back.

I went around the backstop, straight up through the ball diamond and trudged across the crunchy field. The grass was crusted with thin sheets of ice. It was windier out in the open away from the field house and the trees. Lake Michigan loomed before me. The heavy black surf pounded the beach and there were whitecaps out on the lake. I imagined the surf washing up and dragging me back.

He only wore black Lycra shorts and a Poseidon's t-shirt. He had a lanyard, too. A Poseidon's t-shirt? *Why didn't I get a t-shirt?* He had a competition javelin and was harpooning the hard, dying earth. He called it "doing bunny killers." It was an exercise outlined in that old red textbook of his. The book lay open on the ground; he used a discus as a paperweight along the bottom of the book.

"You'll freeze to death," I said.

"It doesn't matter. Don't feel anything."

Katlin laid the javelin aside and crouched next to his gym bag. He lifted the competition discus off the book, turned the page and recited from it: "Take a 10-minute sun-bath." He laid on the ground with his hands clasped behind his head, eyes closed, the hard cover book on his chest.

"We've got work," I said.

He just laid there.

"A sun-bath. Hmm." He nestled into the ground. The flakes fell on his face and body. Then he hopped to his feet. He picked up the javelin and threw it toward home plate. It didn't even go 200 feet. He doubled up and held his shoulder. His face went white with pain.

"What's up?"

"Can't throw anymore."

"What do you mean you can't throw anymore? That was good."

He looked at me like I was an idiot. "If I was in high school. That was 80 feet off my PR. My best is 50 feet off the world mark."

He walked away.

"Hey, all your gear!"

He kept walking toward the light.

I rounded up all his crap and picked up the other two javelins. They felt like they were 20 feet long. "Here. Your book's in your bag."

"You'll need it."

For what?

At the cross walk, Katlin stretched his right arm and began walking against traffic. I moved him back and pressed the WALK button at the Greenleaf stoplight.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing a little surgery didn't fix."

"Don't give up."

"I didn't, the arm did. The doctors say I need more surgery but I won't throw again."

"You don't know that."

He pressed the WALK button. "No, I know."

"Can't you switch sports? You're talented."

“Switch?”

He could run, jump and throw. He could do the decathlon. He could do about anything, if he put his mind to it.

The light turned green. I took the javelins in because they cost a pile of money and Katlin would replace the javelins before paying rent. Back inside the apartment it was warm but I kept my coat on and blew heat on my fingers. “You got a call from that lawyer again.”

He walked into the bathroom. I smoked a cigarette. He was out of the shower in 4 minutes. Athletes.

“Julie called while you were working out.”

The medicine chest closed sharply.

“She was pretty upset.”

“Makes sense. She’s a pretty girl.” He walked out of the bathroom in his black tuxedo pants, rubbing his head with a towel using his left arm. His right arm hung limp. He was wearing the old school uniform, long coat and all. I tried to focus.

“After everything, she still wants you. Why’d you dump her, Kat?”

“Anna and you in the theater made me really think. I put a lot of thought into things. It gave me clarity.”

“Clarity.”

He looked at *The Book of Katlin* at the latest entry then set it on the weight bench. “Look, I’m doing her a favor.” He threw the towel at his laundry basket and missed. He made a face of disgust.

“A favor?”

He gingerly slipped into a fresh white shirt out of the closet.

“You don’t know how much she’s a good woman.”

“Then *you* marry her! You *look* at her all the time.”

He struggled to put on his bow tie.

“She loves you.”

“That’ll teach her.”

“She said she still wants to marry you.”

He laughed and moved over to the freezer and took out a tray of ice cubes and snapped shut the door. “Marriage isn’t like the Super Bowl. The point isn’t to get as many rings as possible.”

I put my cigarette out under a stream of water from the faucet. “That doesn’t allow anyone to be human, does it?”

“Being human is over-rated.”

“You’re cynical today.”

“A little jading is good for the soul.”

“Don’t you love her?”

He cracked the ice cube tray down on the counter. He fished out five loose cubes with his good hand and wrapped them in the paper towel. Katlin pressed the cold pack to his shoulder. “I suppose she believes getting pregnant will help everything, too.”

“She’s pregnant?”

“I hope not.”

“Well,” I said, “you could run away from that, too.”

He stepped forward, about two feet away from my face. “Make up your mind: do you want to be her father or what?”

“I’m just saying.”

He applied the ice pack to a different spot. “She thinks she can change me. She’s always trying to change me. Sorry. Nope. You get the person you see. People don’t change, except for some earth-shaking event and that’s no guarantee. I’ve got too many broken parts. You know what my *real* problem

is, Pete? She wants to collect Mr. Right. I collect ID bracelets.”

And women, but I didn’t say that. I pushed the phone at him.

He tossed the ice pack into the trash. He slipped on his long wool usher’s coat and started to head out. As an afterthought, Katlin took one of the wooden javelins out of the rack and kicked at its center a few times. It broke, but he had to snap it over his knee to finish the job. He left the pieces against the wall by the front door. “There.”

“That was an antique!”

“It still is. Let’s get to work.”



CHAPTER 47

The Marquee

Most of the Concessionettes were gone. They'd taken their semester finals and had gone home for Christmas break. Locals like LaToysa and Wendy picked up extra hours over break. Fowler, despite his DNA, had to step up and fill the gaps.

"Maybe you can *act* like you work," I said.

Fowler just coughed.

"Got your Christmas gift," Katlin said, reaching into his wool overcoat and handing Fowler a small silver box. Fowler didn't know what to say except that he was surprised. "Don't worry about it."

Katlin led the way as we took leaping bounds up the staircase to the time clock and punched in. I planned that night to use Fowler's typewriter and fix my resume. The Cerebus of Typos? Shit. I checked the clipboard on the wall in Fowler's office, saw what movies were playing and scribbled the titles on a sheet of paper. Katlin jogged down to the projectionist's booth and gave Floyd a small box, too.

Floyd admired the box. "Thanks, Kid."

"Where's mine?" I joked.

"Oh, I got yours on the weight bench. *Let's get cracking.*"

I felt a twinge at hearing Sartina's old phrase. Katlin got the smaller box of marquee letters from the metal shelf. He set it on a chair and filled it with more white letters that were in a big box on the floor. It was easier and quicker than fishing for the letters in the big box. He picked the small box up and we charged down the stairs.

"Who's changing the marquee?"

"You," Katlin said.

"Why do I always have to do it?"

He shoved the box of letters at me. "You're the one who knows how to spell, old boy."

"One fucking typo."

"Yeah, I better change the sign. Can you proofread me?"

"Fuck off."

I gave him the movie list. I tucked the box under my arm. We went to the loading dock and got the 24-foot extension ladder and carried it back through the warehouse and in through the lobby. LaToysa, Wendy and the new girl Twana were stocking the candy shelves and making popcorn.

"Hey," I said.

They didn't say anything.

"See, your life is over," Katlin cracked. "You'll never get laid again."

It was probably true, I thought.

"Oh, look, Anna-Krista's life story," he said, pointing with his right hand at the top of the billboard on the lobby wall. "COMING SOON."

I set my end of the ladder down. I plucked a plastic letter from out of the box and flipped it at him like a Frisbee. He ducked. It whizzed past him, hitting the wall.

He stooped and held up the letter. "Give me a P!"

I flipped another letter but he caught it.

Katlin opened the glass door and kicked down the catch. It was snowing but what I call "movie snow" – nothing that stuck, but looked great falling down. It swirled off the roof and onto the brick courtyard; I'd have to shovel close to show time. We extended the ladder fully and laid it

against the iron catwalk on a dry patch of brick.

I handed him the box.

“Hurry up!” I said, holding the ladder.

“Let’s not rush it,” Katlin said, blowing heat through his hands. “I want to do it right.”

I lit a cigarette. Katlin fitted the first letter into the slots of the south marquee and popped in the second and third. The wind was burning the cigarette down too quick.

“Ought to be a good show,” Katlin said.

“It won’t be.”

“Just watch. *Lots* of people will see this.” He scrounged around the box. “We don’t have the letters I need. Run up and get the big box. We’ve got lights burned up here, too. Better get some bulbs. Hit the front lights.”

“Want me to do your taxes, too?”

“Those are a mess.”

The best thing about fetching all that was that it was warm inside. I ran up to Fowler’s office and got the main box. I put a bunch of clear light bulbs in the box. On the way downstairs I flipped the switch for the marquee so we could see which lights were burned out. I saved myself a second trip by getting the long-handled light bulb changer. In the lobby I spotted the billboards and realized they were old and it was a Friday thing to change them, too. COMING SOON. He *had* to say that, didn’t he? And two of them read NOW PLAYING.

I came back out. The marquee lights burned in the dusky light. The Elysium looked like an adult bookstore.

Katlin was at the foot of the ladder, massaging his elbow. He took the big box from me and climbed back up to do the north side of the sign.

I handed him the light changer. “I can finish if your elbow’s acting up on you.”

“Almost done. I will do it. Had any lunch?”

“No.”

“You should have something in your stomach.”

“Fowler said we have to stop that.”

“Tell him to take the damages out of my next check.” He scraped the box along the catwalk.

What a lazy ass, I thought. Mr. Silver Medal. Why didn’t he just say he wanted a snack?

When I saw Wendy moving slow at the snack counter, I told her, “Heard you weren’t feeling well. Hope you’re OK now.”

“He tell you?”

I nodded.

“I went to the doctor,” Wendy moped. “It’s all over now.”

I thanked her for the food and said goodbye to both. Twana chirped goodbye back to me. I ate my hot dog as I walked across the lobby and went back outside. It had stopped snowing and there was a break in the clouds. It was extremely bright. I wished I’d had my Ray-Bans.

The Milk Duds and Junior Mints were in my jacket pocket. Katlin was tap dancing on the icy catwalk over on the south side singing what sounded like scat-Broadway. He rattled the light changer like a saber. He spun and placed a new bulb in.

“Careful,” I said.

He pointed at the north side. “What do you think?”

I leaned against the iron fence and titled my head back and looked from the end of the sign. The north face of the marquee read

POOKOO

“Cute,” I said.

He danced and sang his way down the ladder. He stabbed at another bulb then trotted up the ladder on the north side, then back down. He put in another bulb.

“Put up the right title.”

He kept working.

“Down,” I said.

“Let me finish.” He put in the last of the new bulbs. Ever since Katlin and I became proactive about the Elysium’s appearance there were fewer and fewer bulbs to replace. He hurled the light changer like a javelin. He read the marquee, faced the buildings across the street and called out. “What do you think? Is it OK now?”

The traffic sped along.

A light flashed. It was from a Touhy Avenue glass company truck; the glare from the big sheets of glass on the side of the truck blinded him.

Katlin staggered backwards, slipped on the ice, and stumbled into the cardboard box, knocking it over. The letters spilled out like an alphabet waterfall; the bulbs smashed on the ground. I ducked by the iron-spiked fence. Katlin bumped into the black big-linked chain rope, and fell off the catwalk. He grabbed the black railing and held on, dangling by one hand.

“Katlin!”

His left hand stabbed at the railing but he kept missing. I heard his shoulder pop. His right arm went slack; he screamed out in pain. The left hand clamped around his right elbow, as if to strengthen it. He looked at the bricks. I could not get the ladder.

“Hang on. I’ll spot you!”

I stood under the marquee. His body spun slightly like a weight on the end of a string. He tried doing a one-handed pull-up with his bad arm. His left arm grabbed the railing and his legs kicked. He was losing his grip.

“You’re not that far. Just let go.”

Katlin looked down again, then at me. His face relaxed, and using two hands, swung his body back and forth, three times.

“Pookoo!” Katlin said – and let go.



CHAPTER 48

What Happened Next

Three days later, a Chicago TV station pre-empted “The Jerry Springer Show” to provide mid-afternoon live coverage of Katlin’s funeral. Mark Hoffstetter was manning his camera for *Remote Crow-trol*. Angela was positioned in the church balcony with a second camera next to an electrical outlet. Mark later gave me a videotape of the funeral and told me the ratings were sky-high.

I waited in line to pull Julie’s station wagon into the church’s asphalt parking lot. “What’s this shit?”

The other TV stations in Chicago almost seemed obligated to cover the service but not like the big send-up given by one station’s “Ode to a Chicago Hero” mournathon that lasted all day. It must have been another slow news day. The TV program even had Olympic-type theme music. The broadcasters sat in a wind-proof booth used for reporting the St. Patrick’s Day Parade. Politicians, local dignitaries, and business types crowded into the church. The TV van, its remote antenna raised up, was parked across from the hearse. A helicopter circled overhead. CNN even picked up a few minutes of coverage from Chicago.

I got out and opened the door for Julie. The valet who took the keys from me wished I had a Jaguar.

“Who’s this now?” the male broadcaster asked.

I escorted Julie toward the black canopy.

“Phil,” the woman announcer said, “even *complete strangers* off the street seem touched by the life of this Chicago track and field hero. We’re still waiting for the arrival of the loved ones.”

We stood in line. I watched the TV monitor by the announcers. It showed aerial footage from the news helicopter, video from inside and outside of the church along with video highlights of Katlin’s career and Katlin and Laura’s wedding.

I walked up to a man at a podium. “I’m one of the pallbearers,” I said, taking my Ray-Bans off. “Peter Warner.”

He checked his guest book. An oven cleaner commercial music bounced in the background from the TV.

“No, that’s already been taken care of, sir,” Podium Man said, snapping his black book shut. We were handed red tickets.

“I didn’t tell you,” Julie said.

“There’s a mistake,” I said. “I’m a pallbearer.”

“Pete, it’s OK,” Julie said, steering me to the big doors on the right.

“It’s not OK,” I said. I didn’t have the will on me. When one of Mr. Kipling’s goons came calling at the apartment I naturally handed it over. I’d found his Last Will & Testament in that red track and field training book. No wonder Katlin kept pressing me to look at it. But if I had it as proof that his last wishes should have been followed – it wouldn’t have mattered. “His will also said I’m supposed to *say* something.”

“That’s been taken care of, too,” Julie said, moving me along. Podium Man checked in the next set of people.

“What do you mean?”

“Someone from Kipling Industries called me. Look around.” The sanctuary was SRO. “Can’t you see what happened? *They took over.*”

“But he loved you,” I said.

“I *still* love him,” Julie said. “And you were his friend. But that doesn’t

matter. They *own* him.”

“This is bullshit,” I said. It was the social event and business mixer of the year. “Are you OK?”

“It doesn’t fucking matter anymore.”

“Stay to your right,” an usher said, handing us a 24-page program.

I guided Julie toward the main doors.

“Sorry,” another usher told us, tapping the red passes in my hands. He was big enough to be a lineman for the Bears. “This line views the body. Stay to your right. The balcony is open to the public.”

“Balcony? Public? I’m his *friend*.”

“To the right sir, then up the stairs,” he said, waving like a traffic cop.

I tried to get past to go to the sanctuary.

“To the right, sir,” another strongman said.

We went to the right.

“This is crazy,” I said. Julie just kept walking. The lower level was reserved. Our place was the balcony, assigned for the general public and the press. “How are *you*?”

“He never divorced. That makes me the mistress.”

It was more accurate to call him her gigolo, but it wasn’t time for me to bust out the dictionary. Up ahead I saw a bright face and an orange-clad torso bathed in a blue-white spotlight. As we neared closer to the casket, Julie leaned harder and harder on my arm; my forearm felt like it would snap. The line’s rocking cadence was like the workers at the shift change in Fritz Lang’s movie *Metropolis*, only much slower.

There Katlin was for the world to see.

I was surprised that it was an open casket service, but after all, his torso was only impaled on the spike-tipped fence. I’d held out my arms ready to catch him. It was just a short drop. So maybe he would have sprained an ankle. But instead, Katlin had flown out too far, too high, too fast. He was like a gymnast dismounting from the uneven parallel bars.

The police report blamed it on the ice.

Julie and me moved through the mourning line. Down at the bottom of the steps a woman at a white grand piano played Beethoven’s “Moonlight Sonata.” A single rose and a framed picture of Katlin, a portrait of him taken at their wedding, were on the piano.

When we were about twenty people from the casket a woman in her mid-50’s from the front row went over to Julie.

“Julie,” she said, hugging her.

“Aunt Meg. This is Peter, his friend from school.”

“I’m very sorry for your loss, ma’am,” I said, shaking her hand. She did not let go of mine.

“The Kiplings are having a *private* reception,” Aunt Meg said.

“I was informed I was not invited,” Julie said.

“Well, we’re having something at our house,” Aunt Meg said, still clasping my hand. “Nothing fancy. Please, Julie. You know where we’re at. You must come, too,” she told me. I nodded. Then a man, Katlin’s Uncle Roger, got up and took Meg back to her seat.

We moved closer.

The face of the body had that waxy make-up look of the dead. It wasn’t him. This wasn’t real, but rather some stunt. The body was quiet, unnatural and peaceful. Katlin – the *real* Katlin – was kinetic. This thing in the golden box wasn’t moving – *at all*. The thing in the casket wasn’t ever moving again on its own volition.

The chest did not rise, it did not fall.

Five mourners away.

The word PRETZELS was on the front of his orange high school track jersey. They buried him in his high school track uniform.

No, this could not be him.

Closer.

“He looks so peaceful,” the woman in front of us said.

I kept expecting him to break into a shit-eating grin, open his eyes and yell “Pookoo!”

What an elaborate move for attention. I waited for his chest to rise. It wasn’t moving. Houdini could hold his breath for four minutes in his 50’s: Katlin’s all-time record was even better.

OK, *breathe, motherfucker*, I thought. It’s not funny anymore. To the woman next to us, to all in the sanctuary, to all of those watching it on TV, I wanted to yell: *Don’t believe this! He’s not dead. I’ve seen him die before. He does it all the time.*

Julie moved in back of me. “You go first.”

The broken antique wooden javelin was in his right hand. I realized why he broke it: at full length, it wouldn’t have fit in the casket in one piece. I whispered. “Wake up you sonofabitch. *Pookoo.*”

He didn’t answer.

I was aware of the roomful of people at my back and the mourning line beginning to jam up. A look, a nod, next. Not even 10 seconds.

Speed mourning.

I moved so that I was past his head but still looking over his right shoulder. Julie touched his right hand.

Next.

We left the stage apron down the carpeted steps. Now we were just two souls of the hundreds of others. I spotted two seats in the third row. I grabbed Julie’s hand and made a beeline for them. A security usher in a black suit with a headset microphone met us at the aisle.

“We’re just taking our seat.”

“I’ll be happy to see you to *your* seats, Mr. Warner,” he said, making me lead the way.

We were escorted up the aisle to the steps of the balcony. The fucking balcony. The usher herded us back up the aisle to the back. We went through the sanctuary doors. I looked over at Julie as we took the steps side-by-side. We rounded the crest of the steps and looked out over the sanctuary. The huge pipe organ dominated the horizon as we rose. Huge cream-colored silk screen cloth banners with Katlin’s image on them guarded each side of the pulpit and the altar. Wires snaked along the carpeting and led to TV cameras and monitors and a huge PA mixing board – one for general sound and one for the radio broadcast. There were large projection screen TVs on either side of the stage wings for the mourners.

The usher escorted us to our seats.

“You’d think no one ever died,” I said.

Julie didn’t say a word.

“He was an Assistant Manager. Never before in human history has so much attention been lavished on a mere Assistant Manager.”

Julie stared straight ahead.

Katlin had a \$5,000 death benefit life insurance policy attached to his work medical insurance. That wasn’t enough for this circus. I’m sure that the expenses were shared by Kipling Enterprises, the funeral home (commercials for the venue played over and over during the televised

event) and through TV advertising. 10 days later a video hit the streets celebrating the tragically-cut short life of Katlin Hillmacher. The video had everything from home movies taken by his Dad, news footage of his Olympic quest, interviews with his old coach and teammates, and Cassandra. The weirdest part were clips of Katlin taken at Loyola's track courtesy of Mark Hoffstetter and *Remote Crow-trol*. Shots of Katlin running laps, running down Loyola Beach, talking and comparing Life to Track and Field.

I got tapped on the shoulder. I looked up.

Fowler wore a regular suit with a bolo string tie and a Western silver dollar belt buckle and ostrich boots, and his hair was slicked back. LaToysha and Twana wore black low-cut dresses.

"This is amazing," Fowler glowed, marveling at the whole event. "The goddamn bastard was really someone, wasn't he?"

"Hi, Pete," LaToysha said. She turned to Julie. "Is this your wife?"

"I'm real sorry," Twana said.

"You got to hand it to him, he was one of a kind. A real class act. Look at what he gave me for Christmas. This gold coin. It's got some Latin or something on it."

Fowler reached into his suit jacket and pulled out a high school gold medal. He turned it over. It read 1980 IHSA DISCUS.

"It's nice," Twana said.

"Don't these two lovely ladies look like my backup singers?" Fowler said, pocketing the high school medal and putting his arms around both of the concessionettes.

"Need anything hosed down?" I asked, glaring at Fowler. I was referring how Fowler had me hose blood off the courtyard.

Fowler coughed.

"Well, see ya at work."

Julie held both armrests like the seat was an electric chair.

The TV showed more mourners filing in. Pan shots of the sanctuary revealed it was standing room only; there were about 500 outside the church. I spotted Wendy crying on TV. I looked around the balcony. I didn't see Wendy. An usher looked at me. I didn't see Sonya. Floyd, all out of breath, staggered up the steps. I waved and he waved back.

"Floyd's here," I said to Julie.

The big man strode over and his eyes welled up soaking in the spectacle. "The Kid gave me a Christmas present, and I didn't even get a chance to give him one. I don't even think I thanked him."

He opened the silver box. It was Katlin's gold medal from the Pan-American Games.

"Whoa," I said.

"I've got to go sit," Floyd said.

I opened the program and scanned for typos. The booklet was an offset four-color printing job, which looked more like a corporate annual report than a funeral program. The souvenir's cover had a ghosted image of a javelin flying through a backdrop of deep blue sky and clouds with a Herb Ritts shot of Katlin inset in the middle. The inside had a typical list of the service. But it had images such as Katlin, wearing safety goggles, waving to the camera at the Kipling factory during a visit around the time of his Olympic quest. It even had a list of his records and distance achievements and a full spread photo of his retrieved medals and trophies (minus the ones he gave away) on satin with a U.S. flag and the Olympic circles. There was a center spread of action pictures of Katlin and Cassandra feeding each

other wedding cake. The next page was a collage of honeymoon pictures and from the happiest of days.

The back had ads from various corporations like you see in the back of high school yearbooks. It reeked of death – *prepared death*, as if the booklet was set in galleys beforehand and the death date was added before it went to press. I thumbed through more of it.

One had a formal wedding picture and had the ad copy in Apple Chancery script lettering that read:

Your fairy tale goes on into Eternity...

“Touching,” I said, slapping the program shut.

I looked around.

“Where’s Cassandra?”

“She’s *everywhere*,” Julie said.

I looked at the TV. The show concentrated on some second-row mourners: his old college coach along with some stocky, muscular types – shot putters and linemen, I guessed – who were identified as pallbearers as well. The TV blared with a musical fanfare and showed a pair of cartoon hands lovingly folding meat into a blanket of dough. The cartoon hand grabbed a hand truck – to the sound of a racing engine and brakes – and parked the meat turnover next to a row of other turnovers and popped the tray into a cartoon oven. A wacky dial was cranked to 350 degrees. A close-up of a timer – ding! A cartoon oven mitt grows fingers and snaps, then a woman pulls a tray of puffed-up golden brown turnovers up to the faces of some amazed kids who scream, “Wow! All right, Mom!”

The announcer glowed. “Warm, flaky turnovers in only 8 minutes!”

The next commercial showed a woman standing in a field of flowers feeling fresh and clean.

Julie leaned into me.

The commercials ran their course and the commentators started whispering like they were covering a golf event. The line of mourners ceased. All had paid their last respects.

Cassandra, dressed in black satin and lace and a veil, was escorted down the aisle by her father to her groom one last time. A few photographers stepped out into the aisle and reverently took a few pictures; I swear that I even saw Cassandra turn her knee in and pose. The Kipling’s cadence took the photographers into consideration. Cassandra and her parents hovered over Katlin’s body like wasps.

She spoke ever so low, a sweet whisper.

I looked at the TV monitor in front of me.

Forever.

Cassandra kissed Katlin on the lips.

She took a step back.

“Oh, Daddy, he’s gone now!” Cassandra cried, stumbling to her bare knees in a swoon. She clasped the golden casket. A gasp emitted from the crowd. The cameras snapped at high-speed; the camera flashes made the room stark white.



CHAPTER 49

Valet Parking

I thought the walls were going to cave in when the organist laid into J. S. Bach's "Tocatta In D Minor." (The song was used in the 1975 James Caan movie *Rollerball*.) Julie grabbed her purse and rushed up the aisle.

"Julie! Wait up!"

She was down the steps and across the marble entrance. A security usher spoke into his microphone as I went after her. Julie slammed open one of the heavy wooden church doors and bumped into the hearse driver.

"Where the fuck is my vehicle?" Julie asked.

A valet snapped to attention.

"Where's my fucking car?"

I brushed past the hearse driver and pulled out my parking number and handed it to the valet. I started to console her.

"Shut up. I've heard enough bullshit today."

Julie fired up a cigarette while the valet got the car. I lit up, too. The valet set Julie's station wagon next to the hearse. I went around to get behind the wheel but she beat me to it and jumped in. Julie punched the gas pedal before my door was shut.

A mile down the road we passed a 7-11. Julie cut the Town & Country hard into the parking lot. "Let's get some beer."

We took our beer to the interment ceremony at Graceland Cemetery and parked a good hundred yards away from all the hoopla. The EL tracks were directly in back of us; a little further north was the Wilson EL stop. The bare trees looked like giant arthritic hands grasping for the sky.

"It's warming up," I said, cracking open another beer and handing it to Julie. I opened one for myself.

The TV cameras captured the hearse and mourners' cars as they snaked through the cemetery's gravel road. The cars parked. The beefy pallbearers took hold of the casket and marched across the snow up to the tent set at the marbled family mausoleum. The Kiplings faced the pastor and sat on wing back chairs that were set on the big green Astroturf rug and everyone else stood behind the family.

"It's not right," I said, pointing with my beer bottle.

The pastor spoke through a PA system but I only heard a gibberish echo. Julie looked out over the cemetery at the trees as if she were looking across some Michigan field. The train moved with a metal lurch and a grinding thud.

"Julie," I said.

The train gained speed. She stared ahead.

"Julie."

The train pitched and rolled and shrieked in back of us and sounded like it was going to derail. We were all too far away from him to help him, I thought. The train passed and the roaring sound left us as it traveled down the tracks. The electrified mumble of the pastor continued.

"What?"

I took a good pull off of the beer.

"Nothing," i said.



CHAPTER 50

The Afterlife After-Party

There was no valet parking out where his Aunt Meg and Uncle Roger lived. No TV crew. A news helicopter did not fly over the white two-story house that was on the northwest edge of the city limits. This was not the “A-List” post-funeral party. There is not any universal, well-known phrase for a reception after a funeral. The Afterlife After-Party is as good as any other.

Julie parallel parked the station wagon. As I smoked a cigarette, I stood out on the sidewalk and looked at the two-storied house all lit up with Christmas decorations. The weather had warmed up; what tried to become snow was only mist. Cars let passengers out and then stalked the narrow street like metal sharks for a prized parking space. A Lincoln Town Car attempted to parallel park in the last available spot on the street, but he gave up quick and double-parked. More people arrived. I finished my second cigarette. His Aunt welcomed me at the door with a chiropractic hug, took my trench coat and told me to make myself at home. I saw Julie in the kitchen.

“What do you want?” Julie asked.

I wanted to help her pour coffee, cut more cake, clean up. Most of all, I wanted to heal her soul.

“Go get a drink. You’re in the way.”

I walked into the breakfast nook. There were two separate coolers full of iced beer and wine coolers. The hard liquor was over on the breakfast bar and I waited my turn behind a man with horned rims and a sweater.

“I’m gonna cure the world!” he shouted. I remembered hearing someone in the family worked for one of the research labs in Chicago.

“You’re a scientist?” I asked.

“No, I’m bartending! What’ll ya have?”

I told him a Black Label and soda. I thanked him and took the plastic glass and went back to the kitchen.

“Got my drink,” I said, holding it up.

“Good boy,” Julie said.

I grinned.

“Now go play,” Julie said.

The women laughed. Julie rinsed a bowl and set it in the draining rack. She dipped her hands back into the sink and scrubbed at a casserole dish. I smiled and took a good sip off of my scotch.

“What?” Julie asked.

I grinned some more.

“What?” Julie snapped, setting the sudsy dish down on the rack.

“You look good enough to marry,” I said.

“Men never marry the right women,” Julie said, her eyes welled with tears. She pulled me close by the back of the neck and kissed me hard on the mouth, grabbed a hand towel and rushed out of the room.

Wendy walked into the kitchen, glared at Julie and steered me down the hallway and asked if I would help her find her coat. I nodded, touching the wad of soap bubbles on my neck.

“What does your coat look like?” I asked.

There were coats everywhere. The door closed swiftly and she turned the lock. Wendy set my drink on the dresser and pressed up hard against me and grabbed at my shoulders and kissed me. We fell backwards onto the huge mound of coats on the bed and her hair tangled in our open

mouths.

“Hey!” I said, struggling to sit up.

The tip of her tongue lightly flicked at mine.

“No,” I said.

Her moist mouth moved in slow open waves on my mouth and her tongue touched mine and she kissed me softly, with her hand touching my head, then hard open-mouthed kisses. Her hand pulled at my hair. The blood surged through my legs and groin and my chest and then I kissed her back like she kissed me, hard kisses, then soft and not clumsy, a little tongue, my right hand straining as it touched her head, my left hand being pulled to the small of her back and down. Her other hand reached between our bodies at the middle and tugged at my belt. It was everything I wanted or everything I thought I wanted.

“Julie,” I said, breathlessly.

Wendy sat up, still straddling me. She bent down, bit at my lower lip then rolled off of me.

“Bastard,” she said, crying. “You’re just like him!”

I put the back of my hand to my mouth. Blood. She sat curled up on the corner of the bed with her back to me.

“No, I’m not.”

“Except he was always calling me Cassandra. *Cassandra*. Why does a guy cheat when he doesn’t want to cheat?”

“I’m not married,” I said. “Well, we’re separated.”

“He said that, too.”

A passing car’s headlights flashed at the bedroom wall.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“He made me get that abortion.”

“What?”

“He paid for it but I had to get it,” she said, sniffing. “I was the one who had to get it. It was me. He was there but not for *support*. More like to make sure I got it.”

Wendy dug into her purse and took out a piece of paper.

“I thought he loved me. I believed him,” Wendy said, showing me the paper. It was a Cook County marriage license application.

“What else?” I asked, mockingly.

“Now don’t get any ideas,” Wendy said, turning her back to me and lowering her skirt. The tattoo on her lower back read POOKOO.

“Pookoo,” I said.

“He said it meant *beautiful* but I think it meant piece of ass,” she said, tugging her skirt back up. She pushed at me and I got up off the bed and flicked on the bedroom light. She used the side of her hand to wipe away the tears. I had a hold of the doorknob.

It shocked me. Then again, none of it did.

“Everybody thinks he was fucking perfect. You thought so.”

“No.”

“You did. You idiot. You believed! You fucking *believed* whatever he said to you.” She laughed and laughed louder. I opened the door. I was halfway down the hall and she was still laughing, only hollow. I entered the living room and the laughing changed.

“Somebody tell a good joke?” Floyd asked me.

“What?” I asked.

He pointed down the hallway with his drink. “Hear a good one?”

“It’s official,” I announced. “I’m numb.”

Floyd grinned. “Numb? What did you *do* in there?”

A woman spoke up. "What happened to your lip?"

Where did I start the story?

"This is Joy," Floyd said. "Baby, this is Pete. I told you about him."

Joy was Floyd's wife. We shook hands. She was five feet tall, blond, and wore lots of makeup. I still couldn't imagine Floyd and Joy line dancing together. Still, it was essential for the well-being of any couple to have a hobby. Drinking, smoking and fighting weren't much of a hobby. "Have you seen the family room with that fireplace? *Nice.*"

"No," I said.

"Speaking of families," Joy said, straightening my tie, "when are you and that wife of yours I hear about starting a family? How long have you been married?"

"I told you, baby," Floyd said. "Six years."

"Well, it's about time to start having kids."

"I think she's initiated the process," I said, looking across the room. "Will you excuse me?"

I threaded through the traffic.

"Floyd, isn't that a darling phrase? *Initiating the process.*"

"Instead of *dancing*. Should we go home and *initiate the process?*"

"Oh, Floyd," Joy giggled.

I drifted through the house.

There were four bedrooms and lots of pictures of people I'd never seen before. The Uncle had a supernova brewing in each fireplace. There were crocks of potpourri and brand new pieces of decorative soap in each of the three bathrooms and embroidered towels that looked too good to dry my hands on. I used one anyway. It was good to see that my lip didn't need stitches. I stumbled down to the kitchen. Julie wasn't there. I got a scotch soda and headed to the basement.

The stairwell was thick with cigar smoke. I heard a radio. There were eight wooden cabinet Philco radios in the dry-walled basement. Uncle Roger looked like a museum guide showing one to a few people. People leaned against the pool table, sat around the Rec Room and some stood. There were the thick paper plates with half-eaten cake and sandwiches on every table and plenty of kids.

The kids clicked all of the other radios on. The radios were the old vacuum-tube kind that took time to warm up.

"Thanks for coming today," Uncle Roger said, coming over to greet me, resting his thick hand on my shoulder, his eyes red. "Our family appreciates it. It's been difficult, what with his accident. He lived with us, after his parents died. Did you know Katlin well?"

The radios were soft in volume, at first. The noise started to rise, the different stations clashing.

I knew him from school. I was at his wedding. We lived across the street from each other. Kat and me worked together. We used to get together for coffee. I watched him workout. Except for Julie, I was the only one who visited him at the hospital after his other "accidents." He was there when my wife served me papers. A week ago I began rooming at his apartment. I even watched him die.

The Rec Room blared with music.

"No, not very well."

The hand left my shoulder.

"We appreciate you being here, anyway," Roger said. "Hey! Turn those darn radios off!" The kids screamed with glee and ran and hid. Roger went around and turned off each radio.

“He sure liked those radios, Dad,” shouted a balding eye-glassed man in his 30s. “Remember the home movies?”

“I hope so,” Roger said. “I took them.”

“When we were little, we’d play hide and seek and he’d pop out from behind and say ‘Peekaboo.’ “Peekaboo! Peekaboo!” the cousin said to me, imitating him.

The kids popped up and back down behind the radios chanting “Peekaboo!” over and over. It sounded like a bird shop of cuckoos.

The cousin laughed.

“Charlie! David! Stop it!” said Roger, dusting off one of the spotless radios.

The kids kept it up.

“He liked it so much that’s what he’d say whenever they went home. That’s what Katlin would say instead of goodbye. ‘Peekaboo.’”

“Pookoo,” I said. “He’d say Pookoo.”

The cousin snapped his fingers.

“That’s right! Pookoo!”

The kids started chanting “Pookoo! Pookoo!”, bopping up and down behind the radios.

“Yeah, Pookoo. How’d you know?”

“He used to tell me a lot,” I said, excusing myself by saying it was too smoky. I went upstairs. Julie wasn’t in the kitchen. I asked where she was. I was told she left. I set my drink on the counter and got my overcoat. Wendy was gone. I headed toward the front door.

“You’re leaving already?” Aunt Meg asked.

I nodded.

“Do you want to take some food with you? There’s plenty.”

I declined. She asked again and I said no, I’d had enough.



CHAPTER 51

Another Nice Catch

It was still drizzly outside, only darker. Julie's car was gone. I made my way back to the Morse EL stop. I touched the scarred red doors that led down to Lunt Street but I walked away and took the Morse exit. The stairwell was wet. I pushed through the turnstile, the one next to the agent's booth. The floor was almost all puddle.

"Hello, Jim!" Jollie smiled, reaching for cigarettes. "Marlboro Lights and Virginia Slims Ultra Light 100 Menthols."

"Camels." I pulled out my wallet.

He held up the Virginia Slims and nodded.

I shook my head. "Just the one."

"Oh," he said, putting the other pack away in the overhead rack. "Oh. OK. See you tomorrow night, yes?"

"I hope."

He smiled and bobbed his head.

"Can I get you anything else?"

"How's things with you and Cheri?"

"Let's say she treats me nice."

I nodded. "A man can hope for the love of a good woman."

He laughed. "I'm going to go home and give attention to her," Jollie purred. "And the beautiful thing is, she'll give me the love I need."

"You don't know how lucky you are."

"Absolutely, Jim." He reached underneath the counter and pulled out a brown sack and showed me what was inside. *It was a bottle of sherry.*

I shouted to the stars. "*Anything fucking thing else I'm not catching?*"

"Jim," Jollie said. "You should get some counseling."

I went across the street for my counseling appointment and bought a pint of scotch. Outside on the sidewalk I had a bit then slipped the brown bag into my coat and headed east on Morse over to Sheridan and finally down to the Elysium. The marquee was lit; Dustin Hoffman's flick *Billy Bathgate* was on the bill. Fowler also had KATLIN HILLMACHER – RIP on the marquee. The street was well-lit by red taillights. Cars were double-parked on Sheridan Road, backing up traffic, as people ran through the rain up to the iron gate and added flowers or trinkets.

Ahead the harsh floodlights of three TV crews were helping beam pictures into every living room the obscene view from the courtyard.

Underneath the marquee a bevy of college women with umbrellas circled an acoustic guitarist who played in front of a kerosene lamp. The pile of mourning items had grown since Friday night. There were stacks of flowers and Olympic ring arrangements, as well as front-page newspaper pictures of Katlin wrapped in cellophane. Somebody was hawking leftover funeral programs at \$10 a crack, and the street corner t-shirt and flag gypsies had set up shop.

"I started with two hundred and fifty," the program seller said out loud, shaking a near-empty box. "I'll need more."

I waved at LaToysa and Wendy but they were in a trance of grief.

"Such a sweet guy," one woman said.

"It's a shame," said another.

"Lanyards, memorial lanyards," another hawker said, picking up on the I'M GOING BACK fad.

Fowler coughed, straightened his string tie, nodded to a reporter then

pointed up to the Elysium's facade. I walked through the lobby. The bodies were four deep at the candy counter.

"It's a madhouse," Fowler said, tapping my arm. "I need you to work tonight. We're short-handed."

"Huh."

I headed to Fowler's downstairs office.

"So?" Fowler asked. "Are you taking over for him?"

When I got downstairs, I dug for the cabinet key in my pants pocket then remembered I had it around my neck. I opened up the cabinet and got my flashlight. My personal name tag was at home on my jacket so I picked out one of the dozen of Elysium name tags. The name tags were like little gravestones for all the little souls: Sonya, Jeremy, Rachael, Bill, Cynthia...

Katlin's bloody name tag was still pinned to his jacket in the heap at some landfill or maybe it was being cataloged for a museum.

I found a blank name tag that had a trace of sticky residue on it. Who had it before? I wiped at the grime and pinned it on my jacket lapel and locked up the cabinet. I looked at the light switch key chain around my neck. Assistant Manager. No. 2 Man, Fowler said.

The Assistant Manager's position wasn't much more money per hour with no OT, about 50 hours a week, a week's vacation after a year. It did have medical insurance. The \$5,000 death benefit wasn't enough to bury me in the event of my death. No, it wasn't proofreading. I had to clean and work late hours but on the other hand, I never had to break up cement with a sledgehammer. I could do it for a while and live until I figured out my next move and, as they say, got my shit together. Worst come to worse, I could even sleep in the office, if I dared to.

I sat on a velvet couch. I needed aspirin. I reached over to the wobbly coat rack and snatched the scotch instead and took a good swallow. I sat leaning against one end of the couch with my hand through my hair. The fish swam in their tanks, round and round, inspecting corners. I reached over the back of the couch and tapped a tank.

I held the pint up to the fish tank. "Drink?"

It swam motionless, its little translucent fins propelling it stationary, popping its lips at me. I popped my lips.

"No? Already drink like a fish?"

I watched the other fish swim and swim, aimless, never to leave this room and this place except through one of the toilets I cleaned.

"Not much of a life, eh?"

I spotted a murky figure out of the corner of my eye.

"Ah, the new Assistant Manager," I said, raising the pint to the dirty mirror. I blew hot air on the name-tag and polished it with my fingers and straightened my tie. I staggered up off the couch and brushed at myself.

"Assistant Manager, Pete," I said in my best imitation of Fowler.

I took a sip.

"No. 2 Man," I imitated.

I took a blank sheet of paper from my backpack and scribbled on it and signed my name. There was no need to proofread it. I saluted the fish and bumped into the doorway on the way out. Downstairs in the lobby I walked up to the busy counter and handed the note to Twana.

"I don't get it," she said. "What's it mean?"

"Just give it to Fowler."

"But what's *Pookoo* mean?"

I opened the lobby doors and went into the world.

CHAPTER 52 Hell-bound Train

Since moving in with Katlin, I'd kept the big 3 x 5 floppy disc of the book along with the daisy wheel printout in my backpack. I now also had *The Book of Katlin*. I walked to the Loyola EL stop. I didn't know where I was going but it didn't matter. I waited for the train up on the concrete platform that crossed over Sheridan Road. I need to complete *Unfinished*, I thought.

I opened up the backpack and looked at the manuscript. I had started it so long ago. For years I puttered with it with no real interest. Did I really believe in it? Did I just like the idea that I had a book? So what? Was I willing to work for what could not be handed to me, but only earned by sweat, blood and time? Big deal – the book's title had changed from *Untitled* to *Unfinished*. What I really had accomplished in all those wasted years was to parody myself. I had strayed from who I was and what I wanted to be, and what I felt I could do. You can take years to write a book, but I don't advise it. You have to write with passion. You have to strike while the iron is hot. You can't hem and haw, you must have real conviction. You enter a room and fight for your life. It's the only way to beat the eternity of mortality. Everything else in my life was gone. It was time to find out what I could do. I needed to quit being afraid. It was OK to make a mistake. It was OK to let go. It was OK to go on. I stepped on the floppy and threw it and the book into the trash and left it there. I breathed in and out. I didn't die.

I wiped off the pay phone receiver on my knee and dialed Julie's number and got her machine.

"Good news, I finished my book."

Of course, there was no reply.

"Julie, you didn't say goodbye."

The train pulled into the station. I touched my swollen lip; it wasn't bleeding anymore. I wanted to tell Julie that I was dropping by. I wanted to say more, but the words didn't make it out.

"He – " and I stopped.

I remembered a poem that was in the second to the last page of *The Book of Katlin*:

*She is a fool
to believe
I can be healed.
You can't fix what was broken.
The manual has been missing
all these years,
the parts one-of-a-kind.*

Page 75, *The Book of Katlin*

What good would telling her any of that do? Did she already know about Wendy or any of the countless others?

"I just wanted to tell you..."

Could I tell her? Would it matter? Sometimes our illusions are better than our reality. Who was I to say what was in my heart, like *that* would do any good. Maybe in a different time and place, maybe if we'd met before,

things could have been different. Maybe we did in some parallel universe, and that's why we could connect but only so much in this world.

"Julie, I, uh..."

I thought better.

"He didn't know how, but he did love you."

I used both hands to put the phone back on the hook.

I got on the train. Up ahead in the first seat was a young couple who were cuddling. The woman laughed, pressed closer and kissed him. The man rested his hand on the back of her seat. Both wore wedding bands. They might even be married to each other, I thought.

It was time.

The ring stuck at the knuckle. I wet it with my tongue and pulled the band off with a slight tug. Everyone on the train was watching me. This moment shook the universe. All week long I'd felt like a fake. There. It was done. To have it off felt good and it felt horrible. Statistics showed that single and divorced people didn't live as long and had worse general health. Someone on the train sneezed and my body instantly weakened.

Cancer was next.

Anna-Krista used to say she was going to Super Glue the 14k ring to my hand. Super Glue. Ha. Why? There was never any need – I loved her. As for the ring itself, I liked the weight, the presence, the look and the symbol of the unbroken circle. I even wore my ring in the shower. I used to take it as a bad sign whenever Anna-Krista didn't wear hers. I was just being weird, she said. It didn't matter if she didn't wear her ring. She loved me. I knew that. I knew she loved me even when she stayed out late at night or was gone for a few days. I knew she was safe. I was just paranoid. Huh. And the chef was just giving her cooking lessons.

Pulling into Wilson I read a painted NO-FAULT DIVORCE and BANKRUPTCY advertisement. \$60 + costs. I jotted down the number. The brick wall sign looked so old, it looked like it had been commissioned to Mabus. Maybe Counselor Wojonowski still practiced his cheap brand of salvation and simply cut his overhead by not sprucing up the weathered ad campaign. The ad promised a simple, clean and painless surgery just like the CTA overhead ads for everything from domestic violence shelters to podiatrists to walk-in dental clinics. A pair of crooked and yellowed BEFORE teeth snarled at the captive riders. The AFTER photo showed a smile good enough to get you magazine work as a model. The BEFORE photo in the car repair shop ad showed a near-totaled Vega while the AFTER photo a showroom new Porsche. \$99 for a paint job. Pay and you can be fixed. Ah, but the hidden costs were always what got you.

I looked at my bare hand.

Divorce.

I understood Katlin's fear that a personal Apocalypse was just around the corner. I used to not see how anyone could marry again. But romantics never want to be alone. What good is a heart if you know it's going to break again? What good is it to know that tomorrow means one more day to fall headlong into the arms of the grave unloved and alone? Why does this world need to turn? For our children? Why? One bright day they may grow to face the Civil Court Judge, to hear his gavel reply of Love's ending decision. *Dissolved, dissolved, dissolved.*

Marriage is an institution, a contractual *business* with June and August as its fiscal Alpha and Omega. Give a cut for all of the middlemen from the flower shop to the dressmaker to the jeweler to the priest. Shell out more for the marriage counselor, the lawyer, the bartender, the mortician.

The train unloaded and took on more passengers then crawled through the rail yards near the big train sheds at the Wilson stop. The train stopped, for no reason it seemed, as it always did. The great necropolis glowed in the darkness. I saw Katlin's grave site where the green tent, that universal symbol of death, used to be. Other riders looked out there, too.

Some lousy drunk eased his way around the K-9 patrolman who wore black fatigues and the muzzled dog and stood by the door. The drunken idiot looked like he was going to fall on the dog or puke. He got out at the next stop and watched the train leave.

I leaned into the window. I wanted a drink.

Better yet, I wanted to sit at a table in a booth and look across at *her* and see how her eyes sparkled at me, to dream of far away lands together and the years to come, to do the day-to-day little things like laundry and dishes and going to the store or riding in the car. How on a Saturday night I'd see the room flower as she walked in and asked me if she looked all right in her new dress. Every time that I'd ever see her my heart would break because I knew, looking out now at the cemetery, that one day one of us would be taken away from the other and be put into that cold, nasty ground. But I didn't have anyone and I wasn't anyone's.

I *needed* a drink.

The train stopped and started through all of the stations. Then the train dove underground and shot through the subway, the orange strobe giving it a psychedelic sense. The train screeched as it jumbled into the long turn near Clybourn and then straightened out.

My bare hand was now horribly disfigured. Everyone on the train saw it. I sat feeling my left ring finger had been amputated. A ragged man standing next to the EL doors had a limp, another man had a network of scars across his pockmarked neck. No wedding bands. I was another lone passenger on the Victim Train.

I was doomed.

The train rolled in to Clark and Division. Through the rain-beaded windows I saw an older man beating the crap out of a 3-piece drum kit. His hands whacked and flailed between the snare drum and the hi-hat. The doors opened and I got out. The frenzied echoes slapped against the ceiling and walls like the heartbeat of madness and they chased the departing train that sparked down the tunnel.

I was the last passenger left on the platform. The drummer finished. Then he re-set the duct-taped stool and switched from brightly painted drumsticks to brushes. He laid out a slow snap-scratch dragging beat. His voice scat sang; he moaned and cried at the sky. I took out my bottle and had a slug and put it away. I fired up a Camel and blew smoke at the dripping ceiling. Then he sang:

*Oh, my woman
she went and done me wrong
done and left me
for a low-down heel.*

*Put a hurt on me,
yeah, she stole my soul,
spent all my money
but money ne'er matter to me at 'awl.*

I flicked the cigarette butt onto the subway tracks, found a torn single

in my pocket and dropped it into one of the open drum cases. Then, as he continued to sing, I went up the stairs slowly and my hard-soled shoes scrapped against the gritty steps. The littered stairwell smelled of urine and bad perfume.

I pushed through the turnstile and felt the far-off tremor of another advancing train and from the stairwell there was the river of stale air. The express train barreled through and left. The music was gone.

I took the northeast exit and went up another flight of steps to the street level. The rain had lightened up. I had a nip from the pint to warm me up. That was the exit near the Jewel grocery store, the video store, the donut place and the bank I never saw open. There was a line at the ATM. I headed east on Division towards Rush Street past the drugstore.

The steamed-up bar storefronts were dressed with young men in white shirts and ties and women in blouses and permed hair-dos, all drinking and laughing, talking, dancing, yawning, the jukebox or band pumping at the big windows as I walked by. On the crowded sidewalk were the wind-chapped doormen, a roll of movie tickets in hand, advertising dollar watermelon shots, Kamikazees and Rumpelminze, and there were kids with red plastic milk crates asking if you wanted your shoes buffed for a dollar.

“They need it real bad,” a kid told me.

I said I knew.

Traffic was heavier on Rush. It was a retail strip of restaurants and bars, upscale hotels and another drugstore. In front of the florist's a cashier sold poinsettias out on the sidewalk from a long fold-up table. I moved past the city's best cut-out music store and all its windows had mock snow from a spray can. I looked across the street and watched the valet from The Claridge take the keys to a new bronze Mercedes while a bellboy hauled the Vuitton luggage toward the marbled entrance. I crossed the street at the light and went in front of the hotel. I moved on past the multi-storied chain music store. Its PA speakers blasted out a version of “Ring Christmas Bells.” Next to that was Mustard's bar, which I almost went into. At Rush and Oak a jazz saxophonist wailed out “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas.” I checked my pockets. \$15 and my CTA pass. My last Unemployment check didn't arrive until Wednesday.

A bicycle courier in a Blaze-orange vest zipped in front of me. A bus farted a cloud of exhaust. I felt sick. The bare trees were wrapped in white Christmas lights. A late-night delivery man leaped from his step-van into the sprinkling rain to an office building. I turned east. The designer stores were open. I got to Michigan Avenue and the wind picked up. It was like that even in summer; it came off the Lake and Oak Street Beach and past The Drake and Playboy Building and hurled down Michigan Avenue. I went a little faster. I didn't want to look like a tourist, after all, so I quickly looked up at The Hancock building glowing in the clouds and fog. I felt dizzy, like the building would suddenly fall. I put my head down and moved past the plaza and over to Water Tower and stood in front of Lord & Taylor's out of the rain with a handful of people.

The rain let up.

I walked south.

A carriage horse clip-clopped down the street. Riding in the back were two well-heeled 20-somethings. The driver steered the horse to a side street. The man cracked open a jewelry box.

“Oh, Michael!” she said, kissing him again and again. “Yes, I will. I do! Oh, Michael, it's so beautiful!”

“Oh, Michael, you poor dumb sonofabitch,” I mumbled.

The carriage moved along in the rain.

I was out front across from Neiman-Marcus. Ahead of me was a small woman whose brown hair was pulled back in a ponytail. She wore a red wool waist jacket, black jeans, boxer-styled black shoes and smoked a cigarette.

“Anna-Krista?” I asked.

The stranger turned around.

“For a hundred bucks, you can call me anything.”

I waved the prostitute off.

I continued south in search of a bar or a good spot out of the rain or something or nothing. In 1947 a developer nicknamed Michigan Avenue “The Magnificent Mile.” When I first saw all of the postcard landmarks I was an awestruck teenager from the green fields of Wisconsin. But now there was no lift from seeing it, not even with its million Christmas lights. It had all become just a piece of land, another street, and too much concrete and steel and glass that crushed down on me. In the city you don’t go over every square inch, your world is a few square miles; your life is like a milk horse on its run. The spark is lost when you settle in and the world becomes just another bedroom town in a gold rush village that is interesting in all the wrong ways. I’d had enough of odd and interesting.

I had another drink off the pint. Outside the Wrigley Building I stepped on a piece of gum. I went past the Sun-Times building and the Tribune Tower then crossed the Chicago River and onto South Michigan Avenue. I walked by a liquor store.

As I headed south on Michigan Avenue, I figured it out.

I knew why liquor stores did brisk business. I knew why people smoked even if they read the Surgeon General’s Warning. I knew why drivers didn’t buckle up. I knew why people used drugs. I knew why people had affairs. I knew why overweight people overate. I knew why anorexics didn’t. I knew why people overspent. I knew why people dropped out of school. I knew why people stole. I knew why people killed or raped. I knew why people abused their spouse or kids. I knew why people used pornography. I knew why men went out for a gallon of 2% and never came back. I knew why an athlete killed himself.

No hope.

I’m in the movie of my life again. I see myself taking Randolph Street eastward through Grant Park, stumbling by Buckingham Fountain, which is shutdown for the winter. A stray tourist takes a scenic shot as I move like a ghost through the slushy snow. I move on to Petrillo Bandshell, the place where the Bulls and their fans celebrated the championship. The asphalt was pockmarked by the feet of fold-up chair legs. I leaned up against the stage, lit a cigarette and drank more of the pint.

In the days to come after the TeleFuneral, Joey Sartina admitted that Katlin worked for him as Lenny the Lobster – and he had the photograph of the two of them to prove it. The news stations plastered it on the airwaves – Sartina and Katlin. Katlin committed a mascot’s worst sin of taking his head off and showing his human face.

Then the world finally saw the truth (or what it *thought* was the truth): *Katlin was Lenny*. Whoa. It was *Katlin* mingling with souls on the sidewalk after the Barry King fiasco. *Oh, God*. It was *Katlin* who was offering the world a two-for-one coupon to solve its ills. *They thought it was Katlin as Lenny all along*.

“I was *there*,” one woman on TV cried, summing up the longing of a

generation. "It was so *brave* of him. If I had only *known*."

"The guy was reaching out, wanting to be around people, the only way he knew how," somebody else said.

"You don't know fucking shit!" I said, screaming at the TV.

The people in the bar gave me plenty of room.

The TV rebroadcast his spot on Larry King Live, and re-ran the tapes from his athletic career, the ceremony at St. Sebastian with all of its 'inspired' talk of going back, the video of "The Fire" and all of it hammered home with the unmet promise of *him* and what could be. The nation put on a black band of sorrow on its collective arm which read KATLIN HILLMACHER and wouldn't let go. The mourning went so far out of hand that when the State of Illinois debated what it should put on its state quarter, Katlin's name was one bandied about. Mercifully, in 2003, the state went with a portrait of Lincoln and the Chicago skyline.

The City of Big Shoulders remembers and I suppose it always will. Head down to Poseidon's and you can touch the framed photo of Joey and Katlin, along with the other 100's of photos of celebrities Joey has known over the last 30 years. Kipling Industries donated a physical education workout room to our college in his name, and Cassandra was there for the dedication ceremony. Up at Loyola Park there's probably an old holy shoelace once worn by him if you look hard enough.

Nowadays it's hard to go through Chicago and not see *some* reference to him, one of its favorite sons. Funny how the Mascot of Pain turned into a Mascot of Hope, and that was never one of his intentions. The biggest irony of all is that no one knows how *hopeless* he was.

The greatest spot of mourning, of course, is at the Elysium. It's where his psychic energy was left – if you believe in that sort of thing. The Kiplings couldn't manipulate the locale where Katlin died, although Hollywood might prefer that he died working out or saving someone else from a fire and not in a 'workplace accident.' (It wasn't an accident.) The Kiplings would have preferred that he didn't die on the job while putting up letters at a run-down theater that was one step from being a porn venue.

Hoffstetter's closed circuit cam caught the whole truth.

After Katlin's death, there was a morbid outcry for that video to be released, but the authorities (meaning Kipling money) found it unfit for public consumption. Hoffstetter's tapes remain locked away until the 100th anniversary of Katlin's birth in 2062.

How did Hoffstetter fare? With *Remote Crow-trol Productions*, he became one of the founders of the new reality TV movement.

The Kiplings could have torn the building down or go on. But no. The truth *could* be camouflaged. But I still insist that the Truth is *not* a Rorschach Test, although every indication proves otherwise. To further the manipulation, the Elysium was bought out by Kipling Industries. The dry cleaner next door was bought out – it had been part of the original building, anyway. Renovating the Elysium cost \$8 million. So far the National Historic Register has not deemed the place historic enough – maybe if Katlin had been saving someone else at the time of his death, the Elysium would have made the cut.

For a while, it was turned into a four-plex cinema with cabaret seating which got the wine and cheese and fondue crowd revved up but no one else. Fowler was canned and I heard he moved out of state with Mrs. Virgin and the kids.

Kipling Industries used the Elysium site for administration offic-

es for a year then returned it to its former glory as a theater under the guidance of Cassandra's hands. (She had to do *something* with her life.) Christmas pageants, ballets and VIP shindigs are put on there. They even rent it out. A bouquet of fresh mourning flowers is always outside the gate, every day. The gaudy ELYSIUM neon sign was demolished, and in its place they raised a 10-foot bronze statue of Katlin based on Ted Bowers' photograph. (A 6-foot statue wasn't enough). The courtyard is now half-open in the air and the brick work he once bled on has been replaced by terrazzo with a design of Katlin that looks like a cross between a gold medal and a Roman coin. The gift store even sells a pewter coin, along with the commemorative video and book; both are titled *Katlin Hillmacher-Kippling: A Life Unfinished*. The Hillmacher cottage industry hasn't made as much money as a screw factory, but that isn't the point. Sometimes PR buys a little feel-good truth.

The other physical point of mourning is Katlin's hometown. A simple brown road sign replaces the old green vandalized one and now merely reads BIRTHPLACE OF OLYMPIAN KATLIN HILLMACHER, although it seems to be a collector's item among dedicated fans.

Another Kippling gem: the morning of the funeral I discovered that the "free cable" included a surveillance video camera hidden in the laundry room's wall. I ripped it out of the wall.

The frames flicker on. I throw the bottle in the trash. My hands are in my pockets and I've begun heading west back over to Michigan Avenue. To the left is the Hilton Towers where Katlin and Cassandra had their wedding reception. Up ahead, on the right, is the Art Institute of Chicago. Across from there is that little sidewalk cafe where Anna and I once sat holding hands when it was warm long ago and –

I could walk farther north. In the long shot of my life from an aerial view you could see the whole of drizzly Michigan Avenue and Lake Shore Drive, the skyscrapers wrapped in a gauze fog, the bright lights stifled and spread out. Through black sheets of rain the shot widens to include Lincoln Park Zoo and the harbors and St. Sebastian Hospital. For a moment I was going to head back up to the cemetery to keep watch but mourning never helps the dead. We can get trapped in Mourning. Grief is what we need – grief lets us go on.

I couldn't help Katlin anymore. *Did I ever help him?* The first attempt isn't necessarily a javelin thrower's best attempt and a javelin thrower is used to getting more than one chance. I see now, when I came across his wrecked apartment in June, that it was just a warm-up. He was testing the wind. *Katlin still had time to get it right.*

As for Anna-Krista, I couldn't help her either. Everyone always says it was best that we never had any kids. I guess so, but that sigh of relief seems like a back-handed way of saying "or else things would *really* be fucked up." Weren't they fucked up as it was? When I thought of Anna it didn't tear me up at all. Never. Not at all.

Looking back, I wasn't really devastated. Devastation is being burned up in a building. Devastation is dying in a war. Devastation is having so much to live for and not seeing it. Me? I just should have never married the bar waitress near the college I went to.

I'll tell you now, it doesn't pay to care about the self-destructive type: they'll wreck you, use you and think nothing of the carnage they leave in their wake. I was tired of sharking it out in Chicago.

There I was, on one of the most famous streets in the world, all that was

good and bad about America. I was hollow, depressed, unemployed and unloved; but the cold and the rain and the fat lip were signs of life. *Do you want to know the truth?* If you're alive, you have a chance.

It was a cold winter, with piles of snow burying everything in the corners of the world. A lot happened in December, 1991. The USSR officially dissolved. The Egyptian ferry *Salem Express* sank in the Red Sea and took 450 souls down with it. An Olympic athlete died, released from all of his pain.

The following year there were brown-outs in major urban areas. Heat waves seared the inner cities, while monster tornados ripped across the plains. Hurricane Andrew ate Florida and recurrent plagues such as N5N1 ("the bird flu") hit England. The gypsy moths headed west. The Great Flood happened the next year. Everything that ever was afterward started with that one wicked, lonely winter.

Winter means buckling down, keeping warm, frost on the windows of smoky coffeehouses and cafes and hot drinks. It means while waiting on a train or in a dirty bus stop you're pushing on the overhead heater button again and again and wondering why you live *here*. It means that in the Spring you'll get a new job and a new apartment, quit smoking, exercise once and for all, diet, buy new clothes, get a hobby or join a league, catch up on mail like you've been meaning to, call up old friends, find new friends, subscribe to new magazines, spring clean the old out of your heart and fall in love and resurrect your soul like in the old days, if that's ever possible.

The odds are against it, but once in a while it happens. You find a new lover and a new cast of friends to fill the days and nights. It's tough at first, and you fight off the suspicion that they are only replacements who'll exit stage left one future day to the off-screen of Forever.

It hurts to live – oh, how it does, and that's the real truth. Some days it gets worse, and just when you think it's bottomed-out, it gets more bleak. You wonder how you let it all go wrong.

I used to think that what I had was the end-all. We all crave for something better. Call it what you want: El Dorado, Elysium, Eden – a place that's perfect, insular. A place like a darkened movie theater. A candy-coated womb of dreams and music and light and images of wonderful things to come, of childhood and Tomorrow. I know better now.

Losing what one once had is not what's worse – *it's in quitting*. If Life is ennui, the hopelessness us cynics think it is, then taking it as far as we can is what it's all about. The struggle, which includes waking to face another day, *is* the victory. Just to let you know, it took a fucking long time for me to get to that Zen moment. It also took me a long time to realize that if being the Senior Proofreader at Mehedrich & Associates had been such a great job, I wouldn't have ever been laid off. If my marriage had been one for All Time, we would never have divorced.

OK, so what to do? You can't merely sum up that *Life sucks and then you die*. Big deal. That's a t-shirt.

Start from scratch. Build it from Brick One. Keep the good, toss out the bullshit. I had to build it right this time. No one else would champion my life; it was all up to me to decide if it was over or not. I had to turn my back on the boomtown's tempting lights. This wasn't the end and I wasn't going to believe anyone who said otherwise. What can you do in the dark night of the soul? You can give up or take it to the end and find out what happens. When your heart breaks, only two things can happen: it gets fixed

or it doesn't. It's up to you.

No, I couldn't go back to Eden. I had compromised myself. I let my expectations and myself down. That was my worst sin. It was all my fault. When I could have been my best friend, I was my worst enemy. I gave up on myself and it led to everything wrong.

I reached into my overcoat and took out *The Book of Katlin*. I turned to the last entry, ready to tear it out. I once believed in its grim reality, but I ask, what good is truth if you can't use it?

I now see that there is no point. What I do is not part of anything lasting and the day's meanderings and mis-steps taint any past deeds. People will believe what they will, anyway. So if Life is what we make of it, if Life is what we want out of it, and so much is a struggle and the day comes where Eden is so far out of reach...

When you can't have what you want, your best option is to make that final choice. That is when your soul is at rest, and if you can't have it soar, at least it can be over. You know what I want out of Life? *I want out of it*. I'm too tired. I'm leaving now.

p. 78, *The Book of Katlin*

The frames flicker. I'm in the movie of my life.

It was raining and dark on the street and the traffic had thinned out. There were no taxis for hire. People ran for cover. A newspaper blew across Michigan Avenue and tumbled into the gutter and onto the sidewalk in front of me like a black cat. The bell atop the Midwest Bank and Trust Building chimed again, marking the top of the hour. I heard the shriek of braking wheels at the EL stop a block west at Wabash and Adams.

I heard a loud, tin voice.

Across the street a clean-shaven man stood on the top of the front steps of the Art Institute of Chicago. He was under the arched doorways clenching a microphone. A small plastic-covered amplifier was at his feet. Above him, imperial flags and Elysium blood-red banners snapped in the gusts of wind.

"Repent! Change! The End of the World is at hand!"

I pulled my coat collar up, checked traffic then hurried across the street. The doom-sayer looked like my ex-brother-in-law-to-be, only taller, and in the other hand he carried a hand-painted picket sign that read THE END IS NEAR. The letters bled in the rain. He held the sign using the Finnish-style javelin grip.

"The End of the World is at hand!"

I walked diagonally up the cement steps between the museum's two green-tainted bronze Kemeys' lions. With each step I took the doom sayer's hoarse voice grew sturdier, his hollow eyes brightened and he smiled. He could have used a hot cup of coffee or someone to talk to. He lowered the microphone away from his face and spoke. "The End is near!"

I decked him with one punch. I adjusted my sleeve and coat, walked down the steps and kept going.

THE END

about D.L. Shiloh



Pookoo is D.L. Shiloh's first novel.
He is working on a new novel about mid-life crisis
in the Chicago suburbs titled
The Pilgrim Commuter.

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