



CONVERSATIONS

with a retired businessman

George Bouklas, Ph.D.
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This book is dedicated to Bella and Harold Chaim, who faced the worst the world had to offer, and yet found the strength to raise a most perfect human being, Naomi, my wife.

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Murray gave up finally and he screamed at his son Arnie, “Yes, for the love of God, I’ll see somebody! Are you happy now?” Arnie decided he wasn’t happy now and he would never be happy again. It fell to him to locate the foolhardy soul who would take on his father. Murray made it clear that visits were one thing, but therapy was out of the question.

Their physician mentioned a psychologist who might be willing to make home visits. He’d written a book about the elderly. What’s more, Murray knew him.

Chapter 1: Thursday, March 20

Murray looked down at his hands, turning them this way and that, and speaking more to his hands than to his visitor, he said, "Tell me a story, doctor."

"About what?"

Murray said, "You pick it. I'd rather it was something of your own. Just go ahead and tell it. I'll sit here and listen."

"Anything in particular you want to hear?"

Murray said, "Don't stall now. And don't ask me questions. This is not going to be about my life. It might be about your life, but that's your choice. Just go ahead."

The visitor had already formed a mental picture of these meetings. He'd be sitting with a man who didn't want him there, and who didn't want him to leave. No great conflict would erupt. These two desires in their waxing and waning would act as marvelous mirrors of each other. Murray would seem to be laid-back and deliberate, and the only hint you would get of the truth was the agitation that grew in you over time, until you felt you had to flee.

"Okay. Here's a story."

The garden never knew of fall or winter. There were only the buds and the blooms of the warm seasons. It was spring now, and the orange tree was covered with white blossoms that shone like silver where they caught the sun. They could be seen from far away, from the very edge of the spacious garden. The tree gave off an aroma, more a familiar scent, and by the midday it aroused the animals of the wood as if it were one of their kind.

In the center of each blossom was a seed, and the white beginnings of a rind that would grow in size and change in color, protecting the seed until it was ready to travel. In time the blossoms fell away to carpet the ground under the tree, revealing tiny beads of fruit. The tree enjoyed its commerce with the rain, the sun and the rich soil, and its many seeds grew. The destiny of the seeds was to move far away from the mother tree, and in her wisdom the tree surrounded them with sweet orange flesh that perfumed the air with its thick oils. "Come to me," the tree announced in this way, "and gladly take my offerings." The tree knew without knowing that this was the way to propagate, and although she was one with the animals that she would summon to her, she was also apart, in a way that she needed the animals to send her message, her essence, far and wide.

The girl had watched the orange tree metamorphose, had watched in fascination as the bright fruits grew larger, and she was drawn to it. Of all the trees in the garden, this one riveted

her attention. For though she knew she was separate from the tree, she also realized a terrible desire was growing within her to connect with it, terrible because this desire announced to the girl the idea at the horizon of her awareness. She was becoming like the tree. She shared the tree's essence. The boy stared at her as if she were an orange blossom. He closed his eyes and held her hair in his hands, breathing deeply and seeming to swoon from her scent. And she felt within her something like a seed. How strange. How alarming. The tree called to her, but she feared what more she would discover if she were to come under its spell.

The fruits of the tree grew in size and ripened, pulling down the branches, falling tantalizingly within reach. To take the fruit in her hand, to bite into it, to drink its juices, these were the pleasures positioned against awful realization. Finally, the urge of the tree to propagate found its resonance within the girl. She would furnish the earth for the seed to grow.

She cupped the orange in her uplifted hands, pulled it and snapped it from its stem, closing her eyes, head skyward, taking in its smell and feel. She bit into the orange—the first taste was tart and bitter—but then her mouth filled with sweet. She ate the orange, all of it, moved to understand that she must seek and find something like this, with which she had always been connected, that it must separate from itself and propagate through her agency.

The girl cupped the rinds in her hands, squeezing them. She must also draw to her the boy who, though separate, was inseparable from her, and together they must create a seed that would grow and propagate in a new place, part of them but separate, too.

The knowledge broke the girl, and she was not the same after that. She recognized that the orange tree was with her and that she was with it. She discovered the cycle of union and separation, each condition making her grieve for the other, and each condition making her forget the other. Transformed, she could not go back to the way she was, and so she became a woman. She carried the seed of the orange tree far away, and soon her own children filled her garden, and spilled out far beyond it.

Murray rolled his chair back and turned to the window. He took his time, and his visitor could not tell exactly what he was looking at. He scratched lightly across his cheek, but was otherwise still.

The men did not speak again for a while. Murray was the first to comment on the time, "Looks like we're done. I want you to come again." The visitor answered, "Next Thursday, same time."

Chapter 2: Thursday, March 27

“So what story do you have for me today?” said Murray. “And leave out the women. No women.” The visitor thought about a story with no women.

Father spoke to Son one day: “Come on a visit with me. We are adopting a grandfather.” As intriguing as this might sound, Son was not interested. “Why do we need a grandfather? We’ve done well enough without one.” But Father was adamant, and so they made their way to the next town, where the man lived, Son lagging behind and muttering to himself. As they approached the door of a little cottage, the adopted grandfather greeted the two, nodding ever so slightly to the boy, perhaps even closing his eyes for a moment. This seemed queer to the boy, and he confronted the old man. “Grandfather, why did you nod and close your eyes?” The old man smiled. “It is my way of saying, ‘I celebrate you.’”

The three sat together in the kitchen, for their new relative had prepared food and drink. The boy slurped his cool tea loudly. “Son, watch your manners,” Father reprimanded, but Grandfather smiled and then he loudly slurped his own tea. They ate with gusto, and grandfather sucked and chewed on the bones of the roast fowl just as his grandson did. Father finally gave in and all partook in a noisy feast. The boy found himself warming to the old man.

The three then walked along the wooded paths behind the cottage, and each had a turn to talk. The boy had accepted his parents’ strong beliefs as his own, and he spoke to the old man about right and wrong, good and evil, crime and punishment. Grandfather acknowledged the boy’s opinions, but also paid attention to the volcanic forces the opinions revealed. He remembered his own power and fury at fifteen, and he smiled, his eyes trained on the path before him.

“Grandson, I admire your beliefs,” he said, bringing together two opposites into one, for he not only appreciated the boy’s containments, but also the passions that made them necessary. The boy had not been exposed to such an invitation before, and so he could not be faulted for the rush of expression that overcame his good sense. “I hate my brother,” he growled and he almost yelled out, so powerful were his emotions, and so long unannounced. Grandfather nodded, “I hate mine, too.” Father knew it was so for him. The three finished their walk in a contented silence, knowing each other and known to each other in this way.

At the end of the day, Father and Son both hugged Grandfather. They promised to visit again within the month, and they returned to their home. As they walked up the steps to their porch, a younger boy opened the door in happy expectation. Son nodded his head ever so

slightly, not so that his brother could catch it, but so that he himself had known for sure that he had done it.

Murray turned and pulled close to his visitor, irritated and offended. “Do you think such a grandfather exists?” He spread his arms as if to gather an assembly to attention. “Why is he slurping tea? He’s not going to slurp tea unless he was a slurper from way back. He has no reason to slurp tea! No one’s like that! No one slurps tea just to cut the other guy a break. I would hate to think that you would slurp tea just because I did. I’d hate it because it wouldn’t be real, because it would be staged. So what are you, an actor or real?”

“How do I seem?”

Murray said, “You seem real, but the more I find out about you the less I like it. You have some smarmy idea about a magic orange tree somewhere in an imaginary place, and then you set yourself up as the grandfather who always knows the right thing to do. Who are those three men, anyway? Who would accept such an adoption? Why did you have to go so far? Wasn’t brunch enough?”

“What should I say?”

Murray thought about this. “I want you to say that you’re a dreamer, that this is your fantasy life, that you make up stories to help you get through the night, that you’re whistling in the dark, that at least you know that you can’t put up with reality, and so you whisper these wonderful little things in the dark to get by.”

The visitor answered, “I’m a dreamer. This is my fantasy life. I make up stories to help me get through the night. I’m whistling in the dark. But at least I know I can’t put up with reality. These are the wonderful little things I say to myself to get by.”

Murray talked over the visitor’s last words, “The father should not reveal such things to his son. He should not tell the boy that he hated his own brother. You don’t say this to your children. Not if you love them. You could provoke a murder.”

“Anyway, these people are not real for me. You made up these stories. You made these people pose for you. They’re your inventions. A dangerous road, here. To magnify something very small in the human heart and make it seem like everything. It’s not even half the story.”

Something had been touched in Murray, and there was no stopping him. “Are you trying to comfort me, Bouklas? Or are you trying to aggravate me? I can’t tell which. Don’t you get it? That girl I fell in love with was not the woman I married. And these men never existed. I never

had a grandfather like that.” Murray was flushed, disturbed. He looked down at his hands again. “Okay, next.”

The visitor thought for a bit, then nodded.

First period was less than two hours away, and Chester still had a mass of chores to complete. The sun would be coming up soon. He would probably miss his shower today. People didn't care to name their children Chester anymore, although it was a fine name, with a square and right feel to it. Chester was always there. Dad counted on him to feed and water the animals, to clean the stables and restock the barn. It didn't matter if it was raining cats or dogs or even if hailstones were pelting the trees and pastures; the work had to be done every day, and it got done. Chester's natural movements were now so in tune with the digging and the mixing and pouring and heave-ho of the mornings, that he allowed his mind to move on, to rehearse the school day and its occurrences. By being alert to its predictabilities, he hoped to pick up any sign of change, so he could be ready.

Those city bullies would be bothering him in the halls and even in the classrooms—forget the toilet area with its shiny new urinals screwed against the wall. He had not ventured there since a group grabbed him and stuck his head in the swirling, cold water. It was a strange element that had moved into the little cape cods at the edge of town, rough, scrapping kids who did not listen to the adults and fought merrily through every recess. Who knew what brought them out here from their dusty and scarred precincts? Who cared?

Chester wondered if he could take them in a fair fight. Although on the thin side and wiry, the gangly youngster could jerk almost twice his weight. Years on the farm had developed a strength in him that put him in his own league. But he could not match the savagery of their attitudes, the total disconnectedness in the way they whaled on each other, and then sauntered off for a smoke. Sometimes, an all-out contest would end with the teens wrapping their arms around each other, lighting up together, and heading to the lunchroom, tattered shirts and bloodied faces, under the approving eye of the adults.

Oh yes, this scrapping was condoned, as if the sleepy little high school was a secret training ground for Army Rangers, who would be asked upon completion of the program to wrestle with attack dogs, face off tanks, skip through waves of machine-gun fire and throw themselves on live grenades. One teen brought his father's automatic to school, and peppered the physic teacher's high-finned Chrysler with .45 slugs because he felt he was unfairly graded. It wasn't that he cracked under pressure. He was basically being himself. He fit into the ruling subculture of the school.

The grownups cheered for these kamikazes all right, they themselves soft and pliant, no calluses, never lifted anything heavier than a red marking pencil in their long work careers, and here they were betraying a hunger for bloodletting. "Do you think we like this kind of atmosphere, well do you?" Yes, Chester nodded to himself, I think you like it just fine. He wondered what kind of delinquents these grownups were raising at home, with a loudly renounced but ever-present interest in those confrontations.

There was a secret relationship the teachers enjoyed with the line-cutters, rule-breakers, pushers, muggers and maniacs, but what this relationship was, Chester could not fathom. They came from opposite ends of the social scale. The teachers were about proper behavior and learning. The hoodlums were about lawless flaunting of rules. They never seemed to last too long. The most deranged moved on, where to was anybody's guess. Cousin Martin in the City. Grandma in Brooklyn. Jail. Out to family in some other rural outpost so they might raise the children their girlfriends bore them. Maybe the adults were staying on the right side of these marauders to avoid getting whaled on, waiting patiently for life's next chapter to begin in the rapid story these teens were caught up in. Good bye. Ain't gonna miss ya'.

The farther from town these guys lived the better, thought Chester, as he thwacked a steel pole into place and pulled wire taut around it. There, he was done for the morning. He would miss the bus, but he could cut through the back fields and beat it to school anyway. On his toes, he made sure he used only those halls well-supervised by adults, steered clear of the smokers by the toilets, and gave wide berth to the feral groups that roamed the school in search of confrontation.

There were some things to get for the farm, so he took the afternoon bus to town. As he headed towards the hardware store, he noticed one of his tormentors coming down the street. This seventeen-year-old loved to taunt Chester. He could not keep his hands off him, messing his hair, knocking his books to the floor, but today he was not saying or doing much of anything. Chester watched him as they drew closer, more out of curiosity than anything else. Years later, even though he was to say maybe his stare was fueled by resentment or threat, he did not feel either at the time. But he was aware that this was where the boy lived. And out here, alone, without his phalanx of supporters, the hoodlum was fueled by something just as primitive: fear.

The boy quickly broke eye contact, and gazed at the floor as Chester walked by. My God, Chester had never noticed until that moment what danger his tormentor felt. He could sense abject fear in the boy, just like he sometimes sensed in the animals he cared for. The boy acted as if Chester was going to turn on him and flatten him like a pancake. Chester

veered off into the hardware store and conducted his business. When he returned to the street, his tormentor was gone.

Chester figured that he would pay dearly for this encounter. When would he be confronted? Just before English class? After lunch? Maybe he ought to pick the busiest spot in the school and allow a confrontation there, in order to soften the blow. He volunteered to help the librarian the next day, around the time Nick's class would show up. Placing books on shelves in the rear of the room, he overheard Nick ask the librarian for help applying for West Point. He came out and stood by the quiet and peaceful teacher. Maybe some of her restraint would rub off on Nick. She walked off and left the two boys together.

Chester surprised himself, for he felt neither fear nor anger in close proximity to this boy, but kinship. "I heard you asking Mrs. Willis about West Point. I could see you becoming a cadet." Chester said he could have never predicted the impact of those words. They weren't supplied for impact anyway; they just rolled out of him. The connection was there, and Chester had acknowledged it. After that, Nick always reacted to Chester's presence with an uncomfortable embarrassment, and always made sure to turn his gang's attention to something else, in order to let Chester pass.

They met again many years later, men with round faces and receding hairlines, with families and duties, men maybe a bit tired from the daily routine, but at that moment they were back in the power and urgency of their teen years. They stopped and faced each other for a bare moment. In his mind, Nick gave that smile we give when we know we're in good hands. In his mind, Chester snapped to attention and gave a sharp salute to the General before him. Both men smiled inwardly, and they went on with their shopping.

Murray fingered the edge of his cap and pushed it up a bit, "That was more like it. Both these guys turn to fat and they go bald. Real life. Nobody gets what he wants. It's only a romantic dream. It's all in their heads. One guy salutes another guy, who's standing there with a riding crop. He's whacking it against his leather boot. He's wearing pearl-handled revolvers. He's a general. But he's a frightened kid, too. So he accepts the kindness. He sees the other guy for what he is—a caregiver. Two strong guys, in their own way. One is a leader. The other is a nurturer."

"Is that us, doctor? I hope not. I hope it's not that simple. I like this one better. As long as you don't think it's about us. The story is real life. Life intrudes on dreams. It's a mean fact—these guys are decaying. The dream is still there, though. They just needed to get together again. Then they remembered. Don't get choked up, Bouklas. I instructed you not to

tell me stories about myself, and I feel you're getting dangerously close. Remember, this is not therapy."

"That's our agreement," said the visitor.

"It's our understanding. It took me all this time to get used to you. I'd rather not give it all up and decide I hate you, after all. I'd have to kick you out of this house. Murray looked over at the grandfather clock. Looks like I have to kick you out anyway. See you next week."

Chapter 3: Thursday, April 3

“So tell me another story,” Murray began, “but not one that’s going to upset me.”

“Okay,” said the visitor, “this one’s about someone else and you can’t mistake that.”

Dave still wrestles with the Roc, after all these years. He’s grabbed this giant pterodactyl by its moist, leathery wings, barely keeping the carnivorous monster in check, his feet planted wide behind the heaving and screeching bird, which is craning its head this way and that to get at least one peek at the dogged challenger of seventy summers and seventy winters. Pound for pound and muscle for muscle, Dave the unseen hectorer stays in dynamic balance with the Roc.

Dave has summoned the power necessary to equal the blood taste in the Roc’s throat, as it imagines busting Dave into pieces and swallowing him. As the bird pauses to rest, Dave strokes and admires its sinewy, lean wings. This bird is made for killing. Dave has been molded into the hero who mirrors the ravenous monster—he has allowed his maturation to follow its arc.

The circumstances of Dave’s life called the Roc into material form, realized the bird. The rest of us have our Roc, too, right with us now, but wedged into a universe askew enough from our own that we only get glimpses and glimmers of its presence. Therefore, the Roc is not real except to those few with an expanded or open consciousness who have allowed it to coalesce before them into a bodily form.

If you think this is overwrought, you have to see Dave lecture. But you really have to “see” what Dave is doing. I sat in his class in Education years ago, and watched in increasing awe as he quietly but methodically revealed his wrenching conflict with this monster. He was talking about how profoundly retarded people could be taught to eat, walk, and communicate. He talked about schizophrenia and severe emotional problems.

That was his cover, and because the content was so “correct,” I think he was able for thirty years to get away with portraying for us the one game in town, the only game: going after the Roc. We are called upon sooner or later to face this flesh-rending bird, and Dave has shown thousands of us the way.

He never said a word about the pterodactyl, but as he lectured that first day, his hands came forward and he spread his feet a bit. You could see him grabbing the bird just as it came into focus, wrestling it, moving his body this way and that, swaying in a trance of concentration,

in order to put into words the majesty and the enormity of his vision. He would find a seat by the end of the presentation, exhausted and needing to take in air.

If I thought I might have an overactive imagination, a collaboration of three decades has proved over and over that Dave is the seeker who goes into those dark places the rest of us would rather avoid. He is not self-destructive; he gets behind the bird. He is not overzealous; he's decided one bird is enough. He is not impatient; he knows this is a confrontation that may last a lifetime.

The bird has grazed Dave now and again over the years, and our friend has the scars to show for it. Maybe he wasn't proud of those scars as a youth. Perhaps they suggested a vulnerability he was not ready to admit. But now he knows he is defined by his scars as well as by his struggle, and his less than perfect symmetry is proof to others that they, too, can wrest control of their fate from the Roc, if only they are willing to fight this good fight.

Murray nodded, looking past the visitor, and then turning to him. "You admire this man. I imagine some skinny intellectual standing in front of a college class. A hippie beard. Maybe he's wearing sandals. An unlikely hero. And yet he goes after the Roc. Is this story true?"

"As true as I could make it."

Murray said, "And you could see the Roc?"

"I think the Roc began as a conclusion. It fit the shape of Dave's struggle. Once I predicted an entity, it was easier to locate."

Murray said, "I can see how you came to it. Yes. Why not? Why not a flesh-eating creature devouring your friend Dave, even though no one can see it? Aren't we being eaten up by things we can't see, or don't want to see? I have to ask, have you seen the Roc anywhere else?"

"No," said the visitor.

"So what is it about this guy?"

The visitor said, "He doesn't see a Roc. He's busy trying to express himself. He's trying to enter territory that's forbidden. He pushes, and something pushes back. He pushes harder, and the Roc's talons materialize, prepared to cut him to shreds. He feels their bite, but to him its muscle spasms from an old operation. He doesn't let go. He keeps pushing, and the harder he goes after it, the greater the roar in his ears. The noise brings tears to his eyes. He thinks it's high blood pressure. He hears the roar of the Roc, and he concludes it's a medical condition. But he doesn't let it get away. It's not going to run amok in the streets. When it attempts to lift off, Dave plants his feet more firmly into the ground."

Murray said, "You have a vivid imagination, Bouklas."

The visitor said, "I have an eye for primal things." That stopped Murray. Not another word was spoken, and the time passed with the loud clicks of the grandfather clock, and the far-off sounds of birds, their songs muffled as they flew by the picture window.

Murray said, "We're done. I'll see you next Thursday."

Intermezzo 1

Murray dialed his son Arnie that weekend and got his daughter-in-law on the phone. Kate was taken by surprise. "Is everything okay?" Murray assured her everything was going well, and he asked after the children. Kate cupped her hand over the phone. "Arnie, come here! It's your father!"

Arnie was alarmed and tripped over the toys strewn across the kitchen floor but Kate waved to him, "It's all right. He's all right."

"Arnie, do me a favor," said Murray. "Give the housekeeper walking papers." That would be the second one this year. He'd gone through a dozen since he'd fallen ill. But he called. And he spoke to Kate.

"Will do, Dad. We'll call the agency." Arnie waited and both men fell quiet. "Okay, okay," Murray finally broke the silence. "Thanks."

"You bet, Dad." Arnie looked at Kate as he hung up the phone and in that shared moment they tasted of the connection that could have been. To balance for that largesse, he had to knock off the housekeeper. Murray had given with one hand, and had taken with the other. But he had given.

Chapter 4: Thursday, April 10

"Talk to me. I'm ready for the next one."

Jonathan fumbled in the near darkness, losing his gold-plated cufflink in the water basin. He fished it out carefully and wiped it on the towel hanging next to the oval mirror, while looking up at his reflection, observing his pomaded hair, turning this way and that, to make sure his long, wavy locks were in place. He was excited all right, and he was running late.

He did not know what possessed him, but he had taken a quick breakfast downstairs, then hurried up to his room and grabbed jeans and a leather-frilled shirt, running over to the mirror. Some folks in the boarding house still dressed like that, and although he spent his days at the Mercantile with his neck trapped in a stiff collar and laced tightly with a black tie, he always felt he had some explorer in him. But it looked all wrong. It looked out of place, his face sitting atop this Dan'l Boone getup. He threw the clothes in the corner.

Jonathan did not want to wear his work uniform, and after a brief and quiet give and take, he decided on his church duds. He felt his best in the well-fitted and soft clothing, and there would be women on the train with him. He kept his windows full open and warm breezes moved the peach curtains in smooth undulations, the slow and steady hiss of the locomotive's steam engine reminding him that the steel behemoth was waiting.

A gust blew a lock of hair onto his forehead, and made everything just so, a hint of wildness in an otherwise exquisitely contained and measured identity. He threw a pack over his shoulder and opened its flap, pouring in a few handfuls of 30-30 shells, and he grabbed up the long-barreled rifle, crimping the soft leather cover, this stunningly accurate extension of him nestled in his arms, and ready to proclaim itself at his bidding.

The locomotive was issuing short, sharp bursts from its whistle now, for it was getting to roll, but there was no need to run the cobbled streets. With one hand around the strap of his bullet pack, the other gripping the rifle modestly pointed towards the ground, the young man moved in big, long strides, pent up during the week as he tiptoed around boxes, balanced himself on ladders and planted his feet flat in order to heft weights.

He moved with purpose and loped the last few yards, bounding up the steel stairs of the rail car and entering the mighty machine. Folks were talking here and there in the morning light, but he was not big at socializing, and he found a shaded spot to sit. The buffalo they were

about to encounter were huge waves of muscle and dim mind that had never known defeat, not until now. He had heard about the time a buffalo threw a man up in the air and then ground him into the dirt, impaled him, snorting, kicking dust over the limp body as he trotted off. Dim maybe, but alert to the ways of death. Then there was a family that a group of buffalo had run down, and it seemed to onlookers that the leader had singled out the crying infant for a greedy murder.

The young man imagined this in his mind's eye, but also felt the drama in his vitals, at first as the marauding male but immediately shifting to the baby that lost its life that day. He had heard these stories in the chautauquas delivered after dinner in the boarding house's café. It seemed utterly fitting that he don his church clothes, bring to his shoulder the finest firearm a man could purchase, and even up the score, suppress this scourge, make things right. Despite the long ride, he found his excitement building without interruption.

It was going to be long, this ride—they had moved out at 8:30 in the morning—and it would take eight more hours to reach the thickest herds. The light of the prairie now blasted through the windows of the car and kept the young man at the peak of his awareness. It was not etiquette to bear one's piece until almost at the shoot, but the man was alone in the back of the car and no one was paying him any mind, especially the dusty Arapaho a few seats down, chewed-up fedora pulled down over his eyes, so only the deep, brown lines along his temple and cheek showed, his weathered and near-scarecrow hands folded over his small paunch.

The sun was still high when the conductor announced they had spotted a herd, a huge one, perhaps three or four thousand animals running parallel over a modest rise up ahead. As they descended off the rise, the buffalo would try to cross the tracks, and if the train got there first, there could be a fruitful intersection. The locomotive picked up speed and the engineer stayed off the whistle. No need to scare the stupid animals.

Things happened fast after that. The train and the herd seemed to be moving headlong to the same point, and the shooters grabbed their places at the windows and by the doors, a few of the more intrepid marksmen climbing atop the cars. "Yip, yip, yip!" crowed a fellow with a large handgun, and they let loose with ball and bullet, pistol and rifle, shotgun loaded with heavy lead slugs.

Animals tripped and fell, bringing down dozens with them. They careened into each other and threw each other off course. It was surreal in the beginning because they were still far off, a few hundred yards away. But as the train drew closer, their mooing and yelling became clear, and as they ran right next to the train, Jonathan could hear their frantic breathing and even the bubbling of their saliva. He was delivering bullets nonstop, going for the flanks

and the head, filled with a purpose he had never felt anywhere else. These buffalo would be gone one day, he thought as he reloaded.

The Arapaho kept his hat over his eyes and no one heard a peep out of him. Maybe it was not true what they said, maybe the Indians did not think of the buffalo as spirits or gifts from God. Not by judging the reaction of the old man. The herd veered off and the train roared past, another hour to its destination. There would be stories to tell, celebration through the night, for the hunters needed to put all this into words, to make the experience stick through and through, to get the most out of it. Excitement still rippled through the cars, as the train pulled into the station.

Jonathan had packed away the rifle, and had been watching the old Indian out of the corner of his eye. He did not like the smelly fellow at all. What was he doing on the train, anyway? He felt judged by the Indian, if truth be told, and he did not cotton to that, to someone who had no sense of things modern and clear, but could still regard him in a critical way. He felt emboldened by the afternoon—he counted no less than thirty buffalo falling before his onslaught, a few picked off far away before they had any idea they were in harm, and most of them so close he could smell their gamy hides and hear their symphony of breaths.

He waited for the train to empty, and watched the Indian. Finally, the old man tipped up his hat, stretched, and pulled his things together. He turned to leave the car, and he saw Jonathan. The old man's eyes were filled with love. He smiled at Jonathan as he walked by, holding him for a moment in his mind, and got off the train. Jonathan sat in his seat a while longer, fingers pressed against his lips, looking at nothing in particular, perfectly still, his mind emptied of concern.

Murray said, "You bleeding heart liberal. You showed your true colors with this one. An angry young man—a wanton killer!--saved by the love of an older man. This is a reprise of your grandfather story. The older man knows better. He conquers with love."

"Ah, Bouklas, you refuse to see things as they are. Okay, let's think this one out, the way you would. If the Indian hated John it wouldn't be a tragedy. It would only be natural for a hateful world, like our world. But then love turns it into a tragedy. John doesn't know it now. He needs time. To put it together, you understand? Right now he's happy as a clam. But as soon as he sees himself through the old man's eyes, that'll be it. Hate brought to hate wouldn't do it. Love in the face of hate. That will be John's undoing. Do you think John is going to kill again, or did you ruin it for him, Bouklas?"

"The story just came out of me. I don't know what happens next."

Murray said, "I think if he kills, it wouldn't be the same. Love ruined that. And if he stops, love wins again. The Indian is real. The earnest young man of European background—he's playing. He starts out as a big joke, standing in front of the mirror. Everything has to be perfect. A big Narcissus. He has to dress just right before he goes off to kill. It's a perversity. Even when he kills, it's not enough. He needed to connect with the Indian, the real hunter. It's like a little boy who has to prove himself to his father. Is that your history, Bouklas? Did you have to prove yourself to your father as a little boy?"

"I'm sure that was in my history."

Murray thought about this. "Would I be wrong to suggest that it's the other way around? You see what I mean? I taught my own father more than he taught me. Oh, sure, he taught me the obvious things, how to take the train to Coney Island, how to add and subtract, but that soon ended. By the time I was nine, I was real and he wasn't any longer. He became the guy who was going through the motions, while I was appreciating life. I know that you went through the same thing. Don't ask me how I know. I just know it. You were father to your father. That's how you were able to come up with this story." Murray smiled and looked directly at his visitor. "Bouklas, if we keep this up, we're going to figure out what makes you tick. Let's see."

He tapped lightly on the desk's edge. "We have a girl and an orange tree." After some thought, he pulled on a drawer. "A weird adoption." He pushed around in the drawer and drew out a pipe. "You getting your head kicked in by General Patton." He looked in the bowl and blew sharply into it. "Mysterious monsters only you can see." He unlaced a leather pouch and shook out tobacco. "The slaughter of the buffaloes."

Murray passed the rest of the time puffing away and glancing every now and then out the window. He did not respond when the visitor said his good-byes.

Chapter 5: Thursday, April 17

Murray said, "Next."

Deep in a moist and cool hold, the dragon regarded its wondrous treasure. It ran its hairy lips over the gold coins, let the gleaming metal tickle its mouth, and breathed in the special smell that emanated from it, dripped out of it like manna. That smell was more spectacular than any meal, as it gathered at the roof of the dragon's mouth and floated about, only dispelled when the mighty beast was forced to breathe. If the dragon could hold its breath forever, it would, just to sustain that moment, when the gold was something edible.

The dragon's gaze surrounded and suffused each coin, from above and from below, from the inside out. It ran its leathery paws over the sea of brightness before it, caught in fascination, bound in connection, its own stuff and sinew transmuted into gold. The dragon groaned in the pleasure of it all, grunts of approval interwoven with tiny snorts of conversation, delirious in its happiness, to not only have such full consort with its gold, but to be able to talk to it, too.

It slept directly on the stories-high pile, rolled about in it, sprinkled the coins across its gas-swollen belly, nuzzled its snout deep into the pile's innards. Gratification upon gratification, the dragon not only used its sense and extrasense to be with its mountain of gold, it kept a witness, the fairest and most beautiful maiden to be found anywhere. The dragon could then transport itself into the ears and eyes and heart of the woman, to regard itself from yet another vantage point. It could become the woman admiring the dragon in its replete fusion with the most noble of earthly elements.

How sublime was each moment. Humans laughingly struggled to describe their episodic and barely reachable moments of Nirvana, but the dragon luxuriated in it for timeless swoons. No wonder the monster guarded its treasure with such devotion. It had discovered the gate to heaven.

The dragon reached out with its mind and heart over the surface of the globe, feeling for even the slightest disturbances that signaled an interest in its treasure. It carefully teased out any wishful thinking, what was a dream, and was the seed of intent. The latter it followed closely, and if it sensed any intensification, it plotted out the arc of final confrontation, and began at that moment to metabolize methane, filling its belly with gas it would expel and ignite, practicing how it would consume its interloper, the stupid oaf who believed in the myth of

stealth, who had not understood that his every twitch and impulse had been catalogued and weighed.

The dragon owed it all to the gold. Before this, it had led an aimless life, making a rest in this province, devouring hundreds in that province, content to be an animal. Then it chanced upon a king's exchequer, caught its image sparkling back at it in the luminous glint of gold, realized how much more it really was, an animal, yes, but also a spirit I concert with the universe.

The gold civilized the dragon, gave it purpose, caused it to enter into a social contract with humans, whose numbers it had been reducing with methodical cruelty. Gold tribute, a fair woman to bear witness, these were all it took to stay the dragon's fleshly appetites. It knowingly and willingly entered into such an agreement, and withdrew from earthly concerns in order to undergo transmogrification.

All who went against the dragon never understood it. Whether they plotted to destroy it, steal its treasures, or marry its maidens, they were found out and defeated, not just by the dragon, but by the smallness of their effort against the tidal pull of the universe. More people in the world, many more, the overwhelming majority, a sea of humanity, understood the dragon, so never thought to bother it. It was a manifestation they connected to, though they never said it, probably never thought it out, certainly never breathed a word to their families. It was correct and proper to damn the scaly beast and its insatiable lust for gold, to pay tribute with hate, to scream and mourn when their children were chosen to be its witness.

But then, when things quieted down again, the dragon was accepted as a true manifestation, a real example of something that permeated the air and rocks and stars and sky. In a way that no one would ever say, ever, the dragon represented the closest thing to a god in their lives, not by its presence, which was awesome enough, but by the purity and wholeness of its commitment, how it allowed itself to be fully taken over by its worship, by its sacred nature, before which their own religiosity paled.

And that was why the dragon lasted through the discovery of writing and the rise of towns—humanity's first epoch, to the use of sophisticated tools to extend human reach—the second epoch, to the active reformation of the human body to suit every environment and challenge in the close reaches of the galaxy—the third epoch, to time travel which upended every advance and retreat made in a hundred thousand years of culture and created a fluid firing and nullifying of desire and action in every moment—the fourth epoch and end of history.

The dragon persisted through each of these, for it alone crystallized for the masses their own deification through worship, their own brush with the sacred. The splendid dragon only

perished when the solar system that spawned it blinked out of existence, and the steadfastness of the universe—its gold—overcame the movement of the universe—its chaos.

Murray smiled and tipped back in his large chair. “I know this dragon. You have spoken the truth. This creature, it talks to me. I understand what motivates it. I think you got this one just right. And if you’re talking about me, then that’s fine, too. So much in the world is unreal, Bouklas. Or if it’s real, it’s ugly. Except for the gold, and the dragon’s love for it.”

“This world of ideas that you live in, this world of feelings, it’s not enough. It’s never been enough. You know that. You didn’t make the dragon a horrid monster. You are talking about the need for something real. Oh, we throw around democratic ideals and protest our love for our fellow man, but when you take a close look, these disappear into thin air. Gold is forever.”

Murray leaned way forward in his chair. “The gold is proof that we exist. The dragon had no direction until it found gold. The dragon was mindless before it found gold. Gold made the dragon, and after that no one could think about one, without thinking about the other. Gold gave the dragon panache, you see what I’m saying? Just like gold ornaments dress us up. Their glitter makes us glitter.”

“Here’s a story you can sink your teeth into! The dragon has the power to control all the gold in the world, and he uses that power. And he’s right! It’s the way things are. He’s supposed to do what he was born to do. That gold belongs with him—no one else. If people are smart, they don’t envy the dragon. They certainly don’t go against him. The best thing for them is to put the dragon and the gold out of their mind.”

“The dragon is king. He deserves it. Only he knows what gold can give. He can go inside, he can inhabit the gold. Gold lasts longer than love. When the love is gone, the gold will still be shining. It’ll be the last thing anybody sees just before the universe turns off all its lights.”

Murray scratched the back of his hand. “Now, who is more important to you, the girl who bites the orange, or the dragon?”

The visitor did not answer.

“How about the wise grandpa vs. the dragon? The Arapaho or the dragon? Your friend Dave? That teenager who gets beat up in high school? Of all the characters so far, Chester is clearly you, isn’t he?”

The visitor said, “That was a real story. That’s how I remember it.”

“How can you show such admiration for the dragon then,” asked Murray. “That’s the curiosity here. Does it mean you have no values after all? Is that the role of psychologist, to remain amoral, not to take any sides?”

The visitor said, “I took a side. In that story, I sided with the dragon. I wanted to know it from the inside. Then I could see that the dragon knew the gold from the inside. I think it’s right to say that the therapist is willing to step outside his experience, even if it’s a dragon he’s confronting.”

Murray said, “You want to know about the monsters as well as the angels. I confess, I’m also interested in both. So, what monster have you cooked up for the next story?”

“Not a monster,” the visitor said. “A little boy.”

The boy’s tonsils had been red and throbbing for weeks. There was nothing left to discuss. They had to come out. The child might have avoided this, but he refused to take medicine of any kind. Whether his mother cajoled him, bribed him, or made like an airplane with the spoon, the boy clamped his teeth together and turned away with quick, sharp movements that prevented her success. His father was not so kind. He would pitch the boy’s head back and hold his nose closed, until the child opened his mouth to gasp for air. Then he’d splash in the liquid and hold the child’s jaws tight, but the medicine invariably came back through his nose, or he regurgitated it later on.

When they arrived at the hospital the family pulled the child, kicking and writhing, into the prep room. He got stiff as a board, yielding in this way, the fight out of him for a moment, he seeming to fall into a catatonic state. The adults did not trust this, and prepared for the next round of kicks and swings by strapping him to the gurney. This threw the boy into a flailing panic, punctuated by moments of rigidity. The boy’s eyes rolled back in his head and he shivered as does a dying man in his last moments.

The ether took hold and all fell quiet. The boy floated over a hill of flowers. He felt the warm sun on his neck, and smelled lavender and rose, honeysuckle and lily. There were reeds up ahead, and they sang in the breeze as he passed over them. Onward to the ocean, where the waves were slapping against rocks and pebbles. Clouds gathered and dispersed overhead, and the yellow of the buttercups gave way to the glittering greens and blues of dragon flies that were pacing him on either side. They flitted off in opposite directions, leaving him in utter peace.

An eternity passed in a moment, while the moment seemed to last forever. He had no will to return, no will at all. He belonged here. This place called to him all the time, and he had

somehow lost the message, in his grand fight to protect his boundaries. His life was filled with the imperative, "No!" and here, in this timeless place, all was "Yes," "Yes," and more "Yes." He erased the "No!" from his consciousness, and let himself drift, at peace and relaxed, gratified in every cell of his being.

His mother pleaded with him, shook him, called his name. He had been out for hours, refusing to wake up, and the adults were worried. Who was that calling? Who was talking to him? His father stroked his wet head and murmured to him, as he did when the boy was an infant, when he would walk him around the apartment late at night to soothe him, to get him to stop crying. "No!" the boy's mind yelled. "No! Go away." The meadows and hills evaporated, and he found himself in a hospital room. His hair was drenched with sweat. He was irritated and he cried. The nurse brought him a large bowl of ice cream and all the adults made a big fuss over this prize, as if it was the most valuable prize any child had ever gotten, anywhere in the world.

The child, who fought the hardest to stay himself, "here," grounded, inviolate, was also the least interested in returning. The universe was closer to his conscious awareness than anyone could imagine. He who seemed farthest from an understanding of the Great All, with his cantankerous oppositions and negativity, was in fact the closest to paradise. He had to fight with all his being not to give into it, not yet.

Murray did not look at the visitor again, not for the rest of the session. He sat perfectly still, in his chair by the window, and the visitor sat in the chair he was weekly offered, across the table. They passed the time this way, until Murray took in a more noticeable breath and announced, "Our time is up. See you next week."

Intermezzo 2

That weekend Murray scoured the house for his old photo albums. He could only find the one album he wanted least to own. Many of the yellowed rectangles were torn, alternately missing his mother or father, or his own image. Where were his favorite albums? His teen years? His early twenties? The witch had taken them with her.

It was an act of spite. He wished he'd never met her. He wished she'd never been born. He thought of chucking the album into the garbage, but after a bit placed it carefully back in the drawer, over an old trivet he'd saved from his first apartment, and under the stained table linen that was at least Arnie's age.

He slammed the drawer shut.

Chapter 6: Thursday, April 24

Murray called the psychologist early in the morning. "Bouklas, I don't want you to show up today. So don't bother to come." Both men were then quiet, each in their own homes, telephones at their ears, until Murray broke the silence. "That sounded hard. I'll call you later."

His visitor said, "What time is good for you?"

Murray relaxed. "You know what? I'll keep our appointment, but by phone. Only by phone." And later in the day, Murray called back. He said, "Why did you tell me stories? I ask, and I receive? Is that how it works? How did you know what might happen? You didn't ask me first. You didn't look at it from this side and that side. Dr. Bouklas, you did not protect me. Too soon you gave me a bite of the orange, too soon."

The visitor listened.

"And why those stories? I want to tell you what I think. The orange was a warning. Don't go looking for the truth. You'll never be ready for it. You hurt me with the orange, but you killed me with the child fighting his surgery. I don't feel I'm better off, Bouklas. Why did you have to do that?"

The visitor said, "What possessed me?"

"You couldn't leave the girl alone in the garden," Murray said. "You had to make her see. You used the smell of the orange tree. You took advantage of her lower senses. Then you blinded her with the light."

The visitor said, "Then that story is my confession. How many times have I interrupted the natural flow of things, when it wasn't necessary? And it wasn't enough to confess to you. I had to do it to you."

Murray said, "But your confession sheds little light on this, Bouklas. There's more here. The girl is like the Phoenix bird. She perishes, but then she comes back. Better than the Phoenix. She comes back new and improved. You take pride in that. She takes a bite out of a magic tree, and she discovers herself."

The visitor didn't argue with Murray. "Each moment we die, and we are reborn. We never stay the same. We are stopped by experiences we are not equipped to handle. They overwhelm and defeat us. The old version of us then unravels enough for something new to take its place."

Murray said, "I liked your lectures better. Your following couldn't wait for you to show up each week. You have an odd slant on life. That's why I let you come to my home. But you're different in a one-to-one. Not as funny. You're not entertaining me, doctor! You're deadly

serious. These are no fairy tales. I'm still stuck on the first one. Let's see if I follow your thinking."

"The girl and the tree are alike. They are separate, but then they both need each other, too. Otherwise it all stops. It is in the nature of life. So the girl relishes her individuality. But she gets drawn to the tree, the oranges. She is pulled to the tree, and to the boy. The tree is pulled to her."

"She bites the orange, and knowledge kills her. She is never going to be the same again. But she will be reborn. She will not be less than she was. She will be more. I think it's the same with all your stories."

The visitor said, "Very thoughtful. You have an analytic mind."

"Thanks," said Murray, "I wasn't asking for praise. Am I correct, Doctor?"

The visitor said, "I can't say for sure. I'm interested in your take. I didn't prepare the story. I didn't plan it. One evening it came as a whole thing, and I tried to get as much as I could on paper. All the stories. They formed somewhere else and pushed themselves onto me."

There was silence at Murray's end. After a bit, he sighed. "I don't know if I want you to come back. I don't know, because if you do come back, I'm going to want more stories." There was no further talk until the end of their time. Then Murray said, "Do you understand this? I don't. Am I a masochist, Doctor?"

The visitor said, "Does life give us an option?"

Murray said, "Make it a vice I can tolerate. Give it a better name than 'masochism'."

The visitor said, "It's the urge to know."

The visitor couldn't see it, but Murray's eyes had shifted to the picture window. His son had placed a feeder on a white birch just a few feet from the pane, and birds were flying back and forth, pecking out seeds and jetting off. Squirrels were playing a game of tag under the feeder, where a good number of the seeds had fallen. A black-and-white cat was stepping carefully in the woods beyond, taking in the scene.

"Until next week, the visitor said," and hung up.

Intermezzo 3

Murray held his Bible in his lap, with his hands laid flat over it. He didn't have to open it; he knew it. It wasn't the only sacred text in the house, but it was the one he was raised with. The Bible held in it the names of his family, the dates of their arrival and departure, and perhaps, as he touched it with both palms, the story of more children that never were, that never made it to this plane.

Murray thought things through in conversation, and proceeded logically from beginning to end. He was the most methodical reasoner around. Nonpareil. But when alone, he was "there," with all of it, in one long and suspended flash. And in that flash were his forbears, his brethren, his family, many present-days that had not materialized along with the one that had, and many futures that might or might not be.

He imagined what it would taste like to bite both the rind and the fruit of an orange, and in the motion of dispelling that idea, he'd already done it, tasted the tart and the sweet, one forgiving the other for its excess. All happened together in an instant without any space between, getting ready to imagine, imagining, dispelling the scene, and a crowd of other scenes seeking expression. But Murray had moved on.

Chapter 7: Thursday, May 1

Murray, said, "I want to hear more about the boy. Do you have something about him?"

The stone couched in the wall carried so many stories in it, stories that came so quickly and in such profusion that although it registered them, it could neither remember nor appreciate them. The acids of the last century that left deposits of sulfate across its face, the winds and the rains, the snow and the blinding sun, were a blur to the stone, occurring in half a heartbeat, there forever but impenetrable.

It knew the millennia of staying put, and holding up its part of the wall, but that time had passed so rapidly that it would take many thousands of years for it to step back from what it was experiencing and make its first, rudimentary reflections. The rough hands of the masons that chiseled and placed it, the molecules drifting off from kings and serfs that permeated it as their mutual worlds touched, the rays and matter that passed through it, all occurred in a blink of an eye, in much less. If the blink of an eye could be compared to a thousand-mile journey, it was a portion of the first step.

Its silvery veins and mottling reminded the stone that it was mountain, but it had a difficult time raising up that image for inspection. What it could ferret out was the breath of the universe blowing lightly on its being.

So the stone stayed put and held up the wall, and a ferocious battle once raged for days at the wall's base, but all the stone caught of the whole thing was a flash of light, and in the glimmer it sensed that things were going on, a small far-off echo. Later in its life it was treated to the shimmerings of a supernova, which, in its centuries-long death ebb made a plea to the stone that there was so much more than the other stones against which it was tucked.

But the stone was most comfortable in the community of the wall. The other stones vibrated as it vibrated, and they mirrored the stone, establishing and re-establishing its stoneness, bringing its attention back to staying put and holding things up. Then one day a child approached the stone and spread his small body across it. He dreamt the stone, became one with it in his own mind, and at the point where his imagination fully connected to the hard and cold reality he was hugging, the stone jerked awake. In a press of oceanic swells the stone fell before the touch of the child, being with the child in everything that he experienced.

A superflux of stories, every story that was ever told layering the child's awareness and soaking him in the history of humanity, arced over the to the stone without a library index, a direct delivery that was as if all the letters from all the post offices everywhere in the world came

to one doorstep and demanded immediate reading. The stone's realization was full and sudden, and it gasped in the sturdy and unyielding hold of the child. But then the child was done with stoneness. He got up and ran away into the meadow.

Overcome by the swift and consuming panegyric, the stone was transformed in ways that would take eons to discover. The stone had all the time in the world, and it got to the work of sorting out what had just happened, while still keeping its place, holding up the wall.

Murray grinned a satisfying grin. "I know this story. I've heard it before. And you know what I mean. The wall is the boy and the boy is the wall. You made the wall more important, but that didn't matter. The stone is a human being, and the wall is society. Don't stop here. Tell me another. I believe the next one is going to reveal you."

No reason to be superstitious just because it was Hallowe'en, All Hallowed's Eve, the night the dead drifted out of their coffins and had a delicious time hunting down the living to terrify them out of their wits, give them a taste of what was to come. The night was absolutely still, and when a twig broke many yards off, it sounded like the Giant dropping to the ground and throwing his knee out, hunting for Jack and the valuables he'd stolen. It was a nasty and blunt report that shook the air.

The moon shone as the teen made his way up to a clearing by the farmhouse and gathered wood. There was one chore left—to boil a few hundred pounds of potatoes in a pot that wasn't quite a cauldron and was thankfully cast out of light aluminum, sporting a bright look. It would take a big fire to boil that amount of water, and he got to it right away, on his haunches, lighting an assortment of small twigs and dry grass. The grass exploded in a fluff of light and that ignited the twigs, which burned quickly, so that he had to feed the fire with larger twigs, and then branches. There was enough room under the pot for a couple of large logs, hoisted as it was on cement blocks. Soon the fire was roaring and licking the sides of the pot, sending sparks high, lifted by heat convection, until they dwindled out of sight.

The crackling of the fire sounded more ferocious the closer he sat, so he got up and walked along the cold perimeter way outside the light and heat. There was no other sensation quite like that one, being warmed by a campfire and then turning to feel the cold caress of night. It did not take long for the water to boil, and no, there weren't any ghosts out tonight.

He had seen a ghost the year before, out at eleven, doing chores deep in the woods under a long stretch of bare light bulbs dancing in the night air. At the farthest point he could get from the house, he had sensed a presence—heard nothing—but felt someone or something close at hand. He knew he oughtn't look up. But his instinct got the better of him and he turned

to see exactly where that presence was. There, pressed against the chicken wire fence, was a figure cowered in a white sheet, two holes for its eyes and nothing else. The presence could not have been more than fifty feet away. But instinct hadn't ruled completely that night. Duty was stronger than desire. He finished his last chore before looking up.

So it worked out pretty well. He was all done by the back edge of the farm before the action commenced. He let out something like a bark, ran back to the barn, killed the light switch and hotfooted it back to the house, barely stopping to throw open the screen door and the wooden door behind it, breathlessly reporting his sighting to his brother. "We'll check it out tomorrow," the younger brother drawled, although it was obvious that he also was in no mood to meet up with any stranger from another dimension. The next morning they found evidence that someone had walked over to the fence, not an insubstantial wraith, but some heavy-booted son of a gun who got his hoots scaring the bejeebies out of farm boys.

But that was a year ago. He was fifteen now, and the night held him comfortably, he in it and moving around it, rather than hovering by the campfire. Heck, anyway all that light made him a target, he smiled to himself, and he was in much better shape blending in with the cold stillness that lay outside it. The aroma of the potatoes overtook the woods, provender for the animals but clean and healthy food, no rake scratches or rot on them. He poked one with a branch and pulled it out, one of a dozen he'd consume before his work was done.

It had been a chilly week, below-freezing temperatures following a spate of rainfall. All over the bumpy ground were little puddles frozen over into panes of thin glass. He felt no urge to disturb their beauty. Each captured the moon in its fullness, so that he was surrounded by an array of pale footlights. Then he stepped back on a frozen patch, and it cracked into an assortment of pieces, fracturing the reflected moon. He pulled his foot over and leaned over to get a better look.

There was a piece of moon going this way, and a piece going that way, more moon than before, but broken up. The moon was still there, all right, over his shoulder, but here it was in pieces, less of itself and more of itself. The simple act of stepping had wrought this change, revealed the night's secrets, and there was no one to tell, at this moment that reality struck him.

He had felt the broadness of his shoulders as he wielded a sledgehammer, or bit into the earth with a posthole digger. He knew his body that way, but this was a different experience. He became himself, more fully. He filled out. At that moment he did not fear the dark or the light. He discovered who he was.

The farm boy stored the cooked potatoes in the cooler, poured what left of the water over the fire, and set the pot high on a steel girder in the farmhouse. To this point, he'd done

his chores either as an unwilling slave, or he found a way to transform them into play. But tonight was different. He pulled off his thick gloves and folded them into his belt, striding back towards home. He needed to get some sleep. There was a lot to tend to tomorrow.

Murray said, "So what did you discover about yourself, Bouklas?"

The visitor said, "I saw the moon in shards. But it had not been destroyed. It was bigger for that. I knew that I was also capable of breaking into many pieces, that it was some kind of human art. I didn't have to always hold myself together to stay alive. I could do it by breaking off into all these little pieces."

"I understood things that year. Things that broke me up. Or maybe I was already broken up, and that year revealed my disintegration. I took the whole thing to heart, the concentration camps. I understood what I was capable of. There was no hiding it. The best I could manage was to crack into little pieces, like that ice, so I then had many faces to choose from."

Murray took a good and long look at his visitor. "I lost my family in those camps. You have to be clear here, Bouklas. You can't wax poetic on this. What are you telling me?"

The visitor said, "The moon has two natures. It is a round sphere. It is also a collection of many little pieces."

Murray said, "You're admitting to a lot, Bouklas. First you're hugging rocks, and next you're the commandant of a camp. But I accept what you're saying. This is like Dave and the screaming pterodactyl. John the narcissistic rifleman, the buffaloes, and the old Arapaho. The boy playing in the meadow, and the stone wall."

Murray looked at his hands. "Yes, you shook me up a few weeks ago. That's true. But not because I didn't know. Because I forgot. I forgot what I already knew. You offended me with the boy's surgery. You reminded me."

"I see what we're doing here. I've forgotten some things, and you're reminding me about them. You're lulling me with bedtime stories. But I want to remember. I didn't the first time, not then. I didn't want to talk to anybody. Us? That was my son's idea. I told him I wasn't interested in any therapy. But he pushed you anyway. Okay, we sorted that out. Since then, I want to remember. You know that you were wrong, and I was wrong. It's not masochism. And it's not the urge to know. It's the urge to remember." Murray took in a large breath and lifted himself half out of the chair.

"Okay, so our protagonist was a youngster, then a teen. What is he doing as a young man? Got a story for that?"

The waters surrounding Richard's homeland were black, so black that a finger dipped into them could no longer be seen. Even a leaf on the surface was in danger of losing its identity, as the cold and liquid tar enveloped its edges. If the ocean of void of color, it was teeming with activity, and the most dangerous work in the world was that of the mariner. Just as often as not, a ship sailing beyond the horizon would be lost and with each loss, a collective wail gathered up in the throats of the loved ones left behind. The people never know how the disasters occurred, for no one came back to tell of them.

As the families filled up the land with new people to love, the pressure grew to send more ships into the oceans on trading expeditions. None dared send a line into the waters for food. All had learned early on that such foolhardiness made them the hunted ones. Survivors of trips shared what they knew, and over the course of time some natural wit developed of the ways of the tenebrae, the black ocean. There were so many more ships leaving the ports, however, that losses ran to unconscionable highs. As the Earth was trapped and held in the midst of the Void, so were the lands being held at bay by the tenebrae.

Richard was a landlubber. He had no use for the waters. He surely felt their pull on him but he did not trust them. They meant grievous hurt against him, and that was definitely not an attractive quality. He was not reckless, like the mariners that stepped forward from their families to face the tenebrae. He wasn't so willing to court death. Then what was the pull? There were things down there, things he wanted to know more about. Still, his love of knowledge did not send him into the devouring waters.

No one asked him to go. His family did not want him to go. There were many who were brave and valiant, who routinely risked everything, and they would have responded if he challenged them, if he said, "Enter the waters. Find what lives there." The last thing he ever thought of doing was challenging himself. But it turned out that was exactly what he did. He gathered his supplies and without warning anyone he made for the ocean.

He descended the stunted palisades along the southwest corner of the land, and lowered himself into the waters. He decided against the shore or the docks. He had no interest in announcing his arrival by wading into the tenebrae. Instead, he slipped down massive boulders, and pressed against them as the waters surrounded him and swirled around his head. And then he was in a new world, one bereft of sight and smell. He was instantly assailed by the demons in his head. Grisly fish came up to him and sniffed him, on the way to gobbling him in one large snap, things with sharp fangs and haggard fins, sickly colors and voracious appetites.

But it was all in his mind, and Richard tried to keep silent and still, hugging the underside of a boulder. Nothing happened. He came up for air, and descended again. The tides rocked him gently, but that was all he could sense. He knew there was more. He dove again and again, learning how to observe and listen in this new world. Days passed, and the people of his town discovered what he was doing. His wife was frantic with fear, and he tried to convince her that this was his duty to their homeland. She could only conclude that he no longer loved her and the children, and she moved inland, to live with her parents. She could not bear the waiting, found him in her dreams night after night being devoured by a huge and amorphous pestilence, the tenebrae itself.

Richard sensed that the waters were teeming with a life he could eventually understand. But he could not hold his breath for too long, and a wet suit only interfered with the growing feeling in his body that he was becoming one with the ocean. He asked for gills. He asked, and the people of his homeland thought about it, and finally they found a way to grant his request. Sporting rows of gill slits along the sides of his head and down his back, Richard entered the waters again. He was a freak, a monster, he could never go back to his former life.

The tenebrae finally spoke to him. It used a language no man had ever learned before. Unlike air, the waters held everything as one, and soon Richard could tell what was going on a thousand miles in any direction. It could not be said that he was responding to these surroundings, no. He was immersed in them and part of them. A disturbance many miles to the north and along the ocean floor was a disturbance within him. Richard learned where the ships could travel, and what they had to avoid. He guided his countrymen to safety, and as cultures moved and technology grew topside, he took a different route, protecting himself less and less against the instructions of the deep, spending more time there, learning all its secrets, without ever seeing one thing.

It took a long time, but necessity and creativity conspired to bring light to the tenebrae. The bulbs of the inventors held within them the power of small suns, and Richard's people were ready to answer their burning questions about what lived down there. Before the day was out, the void would become an antiquated idea. The lights were charged and ready, and thousands gathered for their first glimpse into the opaque waters. Richard floated close by, and at that moment he acknowledged what brought him to the tenebrae. It was his desire to transform, to take on a new shape. When they flipped the switch and the lights blazed, Richard turned away and closed his eyes.

Murray said, "You have a quaint way of telling a story. The tenebrae. So you have a little child that melts into a stone, a teenager that melts into the night, and a grown man that

melts into the ocean. There's an awful lot of melting here, Bouklas. Then there's knowledge. The stone feels the history of the world through the boy that hugs it. The teenager discovers man's inhumanity to man, and realizes he could run a death camp. The grown man finds out all he needs to know with his many senses. But he doesn't use sight."

"I don't know, Bouklas. These stories are beginning to swim around in my mind. You have to leave me copies. I want to look them over. I want to spread them out on the table. Here you thought you were entertaining a fellow who could use some company. But you're laying out your own life here. You know that, don't you?"

The visitor laughed. "If you only knew the half of it. Absolutely serious men and women do research and publish carefully crafted studies. They write utterly factual books. There is nothing more important to them than scotching the influence of their history, and so they will do anything for objectivity. But in the end, autobiography hovers over us like a hungry animal. I'll bet there's nothing written, ever, that's not autobiography."

"I like it that way," said Murray. "I like that you are talking about yourself, that you don't dare psychoanalyze me. I find the ideas of doctors foolish. As you say, Freud was talking about himself. I didn't find that he was accurate about my life in the least. I will tell you one thing. We're alike, because as you reveal your life, I feel much better. I bet that hurts. Your devotion to the Freudian method is well-known. That's all you talked about in your lectures."

The visitor said, "Forget about psychoanalysis. You're right about remembering. These stories came to me as a form of memory. I got back to things that I had lost."

Murray said, "Let's not forget Freud! I don't mind psychoanalyzing you, Bouklas. Hah! Did you ever hear of such a thing? The analyst takes the couch!"

"It's a bit like treatment," the visitor said, "where the patient and the analyst are both able to say everything to each other."

Intermezzo 4

The Internet was a wonderful invention. Murray located, rented, and ran through every John Wayne movie he knew and loved. *Tall In The Saddle*, *Back To Bataan*, *Red River*, *Fort Apache*, *Rio Bravo*, *McClintock*, *The Sons Of Katie Elder*, *The Commancheros*. Now this was a man. And this man knew who he was. He did what he thought was right. *The Quiet Man*. Reviled by the world and at war with himself, he found solace in Ireland. He became himself again. He could do it because he'd never lost his compass. Even when he couldn't face the murderous pummeling he'd given that other guy in the ring, he still had his center and that saved him.

True Grit. A man for all time. *The Shootist*. Murray remembered the star had been stricken with cancer during that time. That should be the most upsetting movie, because of the terror Wayne had to be facing in his real life. But Murray was caught off guard by *The Horse Soldier*. He grew sick with worry as Wayne faced the fear of his son dying in battle. With Wayne, he felt frozen and unable to do anything about it. With Wayne, he found himself caught in a conflict of his own making, his persona as a commander making it impossible for him to save his son.

Murray wished his ex-wife had left him some pictures, but the witch was out to punish him good. When the housekeeper tried to make conversation, "You like the John Wayne, Mr. Murray?" he yelled at her to get out of the house.

Chapter 8: Thursday, May 8

“Something different that’s happened to you,” said Murray, pointing at his visitor to accentuate each word. “Describe something different, out of the ordinary. Something I have to think more about. You’ve gotten too transparent, and I don’t trust that.”

The visitor was reminded of a dream.

It was a curious thing, but Paul’s car kept changing as if he was flipping the pages of a desk calendar with many hundreds of pictures on it, and he was getting more excited about it. It was that brand-spanking-new Dodge Demon he’d picked up in ’72, green metal-flake with a tan top. It was clearly his canary-yellow GTO, and then his black, green and white Beetles, his robin’s-egg blue Buick convertible, his gun-metal gray Olds with the blue visor, his Fords.

It was the ocher-red turbine showcar at the ’64 World’s Fair in Queens. It was a boxy and spare flivver, the kind with a crank where there ought to be a bumper. It was a twelve-cylinder Deussenberg. It was every car he’d ever driven or seen, it was conveyances of every kind, wheeled, hovering. It was Fred Flinstone’s surrey with the dinosaur pelt on top.

Paul steered hard and jumped the curb, pulling onto the scrubby grass next to a large building. It was scrubby grass, yes, but underneath it was a new parking lot, a sandlot, a wooded plot, hard ground, soft ground, a golfing green. It was every kind of ground at once. Behind him was a little development of ranches that had just been put up. They stood mostly on barren ground. But at the same time they were nestled in a hardwood forest, they were surrounded by palm trees, they were empty of life, they were filled with laughter and commerce and movement, their breezeways and rooftops sparkling with multicolored lights in the growing dusk as party time began.

Paul had a job to do this August day. The new high school was almost finished, and he was there to check it out, inspect every square foot of it, to see if it was ready for occupancy. It had been his job to conceive and design the building, and he had lavished love on the project. He had picked the red brick of the main hall, the tinted windows that ran stories high and met in an arc. He wanted to create a cathedral effect, pull on the spiritual potential of the children he loved so much in this small community. He’d gone to school in this district, returned to teach, he had run the elementary school by the lake, and when the district elders needed a man for buildings and grounds, they awarded their job to him, their devoted employee.

But what was this? His building was somehow “being” every other building in his memory, and there were more enclosures underneath, mounds, tepees, high huts, long houses

made of leather, stick and bone. There were biospheres and tents, all finding a way to be together without taking away from each other. Paul was not upset by this. He was plain excited. Everything he viewed seemed now to be only the top card of a very thick deck. And now he had the ability to see through to every card, capture the stack in its entirety, and he suspected there was an infinity of images in each stack. No, he knew it.

Conveyances, grounds, enclosures, agoras, his experience moved forward as he drove up to his building, it moved backward, it was morning, it was night, the area was empty and it was busy and soon he was capturing everything behind everything else. Boom! It was one. And a multiplicity, too.

Paul awoke from his dream. He had decided to wake up. It was one of those dreams where he was both in it and on its outskirts, noticing all that was going on. That was why he had it in his firm grasp, if it is possible to say that about a dream. The dream spilled out into his morning. He recognized every room behind his bedroom, and every floor under his floor.

His wife, Angie, came up the stairs with a basket of wash. She hadn't seen him yet, and he watched her closely. There! Angie was all women. She was tall women and short women, large women and little women. She was an Irish colleen, she was an Indian looking up at him with burning eyes, she was an African whose teeth gleamed in contrast to her gloriously burnished skin. All beautiful. They were all strangely beautiful. He had always know this, that all women were beautiful, and yet it struck him as a surprising insight.

He hurried over to Angie and took the basket from her. The whole universe was right here, right where his hand touched hers. And he was everywhere in the universe with her. The rest of the day, he held onto that. This thought left a permanent smile hovering in Paul, and after that he could always find it.

Murray leaned way back in his chair. He closed his eyes and held his hands almost in a prayer, the fingertips of one hand pressed against the fingertips of the other. "Do you know that's never happened to me before?" He kept his eyes closed and nodded his head as if he was counting every single time that it had never happened to him before. It took a long while, and it looked for all the world like he was ticking off each and every time, just to make sure, just to know for sure that this was truly the first time.

He looked serious now, and the visitor could see he was trying to breathe slowly and carefully, but was having a difficult time. Murray grabbed at the tissue box on his desk, and blew his nose. He grabbed another and rubbed his glasses, exhaling on them and rubbing them some more. "Not once."

The visitor answered, "Well, it's about time."

Murray blew his nose again. "You're a broken human being, Bouklas, a collection of ideas. You're a bunch of little mirrors. You can be everything because you're nothing. And it seems to be okay, you don't mind being nothing. Why did you show yourself to me? Why did you have to listen to me?"

The visitor knew why. "This relationship is four years in the making. It's become compelling. You asked, and I wanted to give you what you asked for."

Murray shook his head. "Disturbing. Every single thing turns out to be everything, so it might as well be nothing. You went so far that you disappeared. So who is Bouklas? What's his story? His worst story. Don't keep anything back. It's your analysis, not mine. I know you're going to tell. I know you're not going to keep anything back."

Bouklas was dead, in the way that only humans can be, still animated, acting with outward utility, the cloud over his eyes put to service as a filter against the light, the slag in his heart acting as a regulator against unseemly urges, the impassive weight in his arms and legs stays to heated energy. To be killed and to go on is to be forever furious. Bouklas' was a masked and frozen fury.

Nothing at home prepared him for the dance of the wider world and he had evaporated on the spot, only to participate as a shell. He had been killed by his separations. He knew each one as a death. But there were old deaths before that, deaths that he had forgotten, piled on one another until he was broken to pieces.

And worse, he'd participated in each one, taken both the position of aggressor and victim. He killed the first sign of life outside himself and killed himself too. He would have to go on with this legacy he created for himself, enough mind to do mental damage and not enough to consider his options, to stand back, to assess the situation. He'd done his most damaging work in his earliest days.

He was frightened by this terrible story, but he couldn't avoid it, and so he accepted it. He moved with fear, but he did move nonetheless, animated by something other than himself until he himself caught up. It was like that always, things in motion and he needing time to catch up with them. This was how he worked around the dead stuff, and brought more life to each moment."

"You're horrible," Murray muttered. "I believe every single thing you've said, and you're horrible. I don't think a man like you should call himself a healer. No answer to that, right? You

have no answer. You knew there was something terrible inside you. How did you convince yourself it was all right to treat people?"

The visitor said, "I'm not treating you. I'm telling you stories."

"What gives you the right to call yourself 'doctor?' You belong in prison! You belong in a mental institution! Well, don't you belong behind bars?"

"Maybe I do."

"Then do us all a favor and turn yourself in! That was the most hateful, the most hateful thing I ever heard. It disgusts me! You disgust me!"

The visitor said, "I thank you for your candor."

"He showers me...you thank me for my candor? I just said you disgust me! You are a disgusting human being!"

"I accept that," said the visitor.

"Immoral! You don't even care! How can you live with yourself? How can you go on?"

The visitor answered, "In that peculiar way that human beings do."

"Yes, yes, dead, like zombies. You bring us all into it! I disagree, Bouklas. Vehemently. I protest your view of humanity. I hate it with every bone in my body, it's true, it's true. You heard me, don't make believe you didn't hear me. It's true. People don't matter. Only gold matters."

Murray turned his wedding ring this way and that, "Oh, this wasn't any therapy of any kind. You proved it. You're dead, and by your statements, I'm dead. I know I'm dead. But I get animated by gold. Not by you. By gold."

He smiled grimly, more relaxed, and repeated, "Horrible, horrible guy." The time was nearly up and Murray announced, "We're finished here. I've done what I've could. I listened to my son. That's why you're here. And you, you listened to me. I don't think there's anything else you could possibly say. And if you thought there was, I wouldn't want to hear it. You'd backslide. You'd try to take back what you just told me. Don't say no. You let it all out in here. It should stay that way. Take care, Bouklas. You take care of yourself."

With that, Murray pointed to the door, and his visitor stood up, gave a slight bow, and left the room.

Intermezzo 5

Murray cancelled the Internet that week. He cancelled Cablevision. He wrote Sears a scathing letter about his washing machine, even though the repairman had fixed it lickety-split and charged him only a hundred and ten dollars. He called the bank and accused the manager of stiffing him. All right, it wasn't the matter of eleven cents. It was the principle of the thing.

He closed up every box of every thing he'd bought that month with tape and got the housekeeper to send it back. He spent the mornings steaming open junk mail, slipping pieces of aluminum sheeting among the papers, sealing things up and sending them out to the mailbox with the confused but compliant housekeeper.

He accused the oil company of a fraudulent delivery. The electric bill was too high; someone must be tapping into his lines. He called his HMO every day and harassed the ladies. "Raise me ten percent, huh?" When they threatened to drop him, Arnie interceded. He made sure Murray had electricity, the Internet, his telephone, his television, and he accepted this behavior as a matter of course.

"Aren't you ever going to get sick and tired of me" Murray demanded of his harried son? "No Dad," replied Arnie, "I'm never going to get sick and tired."

After Arnie left, Murray cried himself to sleep.

Chapter 9: Thursday, May 22

Two weeks passed before Murray asked for another meeting. It would be by telephone; he was not ready for a face-to-face confrontation. He had a lot to say and the phone was the best way. He sat as usual in his livingroom, which he had long ago turned into a study, filled with his books and artwork, he in a comfortably wide wheelchair behind his desk, the picture window just behind him.

He had read and re-read the stories and prepared his thoughts. A thousand books surrounded him, and he had pored over them too, books from antiquity to the present, which he'd begun gathering sixty years ago. They stood around him for this moment. They were the texts, the talismans against the text-destroyer he was about to address.

"Bouklas, you there? Good. Because I want to tell you that you left me with nothing. You took everything. You were out to eradicate me from the beginning, weren't you? That last story, what would you call it, 'The Story of Bouklas?' It was a disaster. My life has been stories, did you know that? I illustrated a hundred and forty seven books. I wrote books. I know books. But these stories—what am I supposed to do with them? Even the kinder ones are a slap in the face. Each in their own way, Bouklas, they offend."

The visitor said, "I am truly sorry that I offended you."

Murray had spread the stories across his desk. "First, who made you God in the Garden? You take the snake out of the picture, and so your absolve woman of all guilt. You take the God we know out of the picture! Where is He? You take blasphemy away. You take away our right to defy God. Eve, bless her sinful soul, had the nerve to take on God and talk to snakes. But you throw thousands of years of Western history out the window. Where's the blame? Without blame we're just animals."

The visitor said, "It was an act of hubris. I didn't think it through. I let the stories write themselves, and decided they could be shared in the way I remembered them."

Murray seemed not to listen. "I'm not going to go over every story, because they're all the same story. We're atavistic and regressed, but we can also act with the angels of our better nature. Oh, I got it. It's the way we separate, and the way we come together. We separate with love and hate. We come together with love and hate. There's communing and isolating, in acts of reunion and prideful destruction, and those are the two human songs you know."

The visitor spoke, "No good thing without a bad, no bad thing without a good. I took a clear world and I mucked it up. That would rob anyone of his peace of mind."

Murray snapped back, “Don’t try to get on my good side here, because you ruin everything with your confession, your superpositions. I know what they’re called. You’re so untangled from this culture, and so entangled with the tiniest particles of the universe that you ride the quantum wave! I love the glitter of gold because I am like you; I don’t really reside in this world, either. I’m responding to the hidden harmonies of every single thing I see and hear and know. A façade of integration, hiding a boiling smokepot, isn’t that what Freud called it? What a ruinous thing to reveal to anyone.”

The visitor replied, “Nobody liked it when he said it. Why did I think it would be any more palatable today? It’s still the wrong message for the times.”

Murray made that he was talking over him, but he heard. “You confess that you’re as unreal as you are real. You’re everywhere and everyone. That means you’re me, and it means I’m you. My life, my pride, has been a lie. I have been living a lie. The only thing that has spoken to me is the quantum glitter of gold atoms. It’s like finding out that you’ve lived in a dream, that you’ve been an alien your whole life and didn’t even know it.”

The visitor said, “There’s terrible danger in finding out who we are.”

“There’s nothing here for me,” Murray shook his head. “These are the nightmares of psychotics. And you ridicule all that is kind and good in the world by telling me this is where we live, that decency comes from this horrible place.”

The visitor said, “Fight me with all your will. Reject my message. Reject the messenger, too. Only a psychotic would thank me.”

What could Murray say to these things? The man was absolutely right. Murray was done before he even warmed up. “You’re so accommodating that I can’t think what to say next.”

The visitor told him, “I agree with everything you’ve said. I enjoy your ideas and your passion.”

“A gentleman to the end, right?” answered Murray. The men were quiet for a long time, and then Murray said, “Don’t leave me with that last story. That was my story. Who I am now. Don’t leave me with a mirror. Leave me with the truest story you have.”

The visitor searched his mind for the truest story. There was the time he was hovering over those fifteen-foot locust trunks, peeling off their bark with an ax and overcome by the catlike odor of their white flesh as he swabbed them with creosote, broiling in the sun, sweat dripping down his face and arms and back. He was fifteen and enraptured with life.

Then there was the time his friend decided he was going to take his life in a dramatic lover’s leap out of the campus’s tallest building, and the right words came out, the exact right sentence that talked the boy from the precipice. Calmed and centered, the friend went down to

the Canteen for a nice big lunch. He went to the bathroom and threw up for an hour. Washing his face and pulling himself back together, he ran over to the Registrar and announced, "Forget Biology! I'm going to be a Psychologist!" He was nineteen when he found out how he wanted to spend the rest of his life.

There were the births, seven of them, each one a miracle. The first time, he ran out and purchased a Yashica camera and had a friend drive him to the hospital. Karen Carpenter was singing her new song, "On the day that you were born, the angels got together, and decided to create a dream come true." He was twenty-five and erupting with excitement. And it happened six more times.

Murray was impatient, "What are you doing! You refuse to talk to me Bouklas, is that it? Or maybe I have to give you something. A reason to talk. Sure, you've had it, just like everyone else. You want a good reason to talk to me. So I'll give you a good reason. I was listening the whole time. I got every word you said. I didn't miss a thing."

"You're giving me options. The garden, for example. Eve wasn't done in by sin. It was knowledge that killed her, and remade her. I don't have to dwell on sin to know pain. My pain comes from remembering. And Cain doesn't have to kill his brother, no, not after hearing that his father's Father understands him. The first Cain felt misunderstood by God. This time God is able to stay the boy's hand."

"We must face down hostility with acceptance, the Arapaho, yes? And we must fight our Roc, hold it in check, for an eternity if that's what's in the cards. Most of the other stories are about your childhood and youth. You were frightened by your operation, but your fear was really your desire. What desire? To melt, like you did when you hugged that stone wall, when you dove into the dark water. You know this about yourself, and you use it. Conan the Librarian, turning a bad situation into a good one."

"The story about the gold is the same one about your dream. You are able to get loose from this time and space. You're suggesting that I can, too. I believe that. It's something we can all do, we're just afraid to recognize it. This has been a primer about humanity."

"So forgive me if I don't buy your last story. You're not a dead husk, you're not a zombie, and if you're furious I haven't seen much evidence of it. Why would you even say that? I know you weren't accusing me. Maybe saying it makes it not so. Maybe it's a mantra that keeps you honest. You hunt out the worst possible intentions in yourself so that you can be on guard for them. How's that, Bouklas? How did I do?"

The visitor said, "I do have another story."

*Stretching, and then stretching some more,
To make the sweet feeling last,
Undulating from the the center, shaking,
And fluttering at the edges.
Ripples of delight.*

*Opening to scents and sounds,
Looking but seeing nothing,
Craning this way and that,
Then falling back into bliss,
Tucking chilled parts together in the morning cold.*

*Rocking to a symphony of breaths and snores,
Touched alternately by softness and pinches,
With each turn and roll,
Suspended in half-sleep until aroused by flashes.*

*Feeling a breeze and shivering,
Tickled all over,
The flashes becoming more constant,
Being called to wakefulness,
Yawning, and stretching once more,
As the flashes blend to make continuing bright.*

*Peeping and cawing, snorts and roars,
Aromas that sting a bit, and that call seductively,
And make excitement.*

*Gripping and surrounding soft goodness,
Absorbing the wetness and sweetness,
Responding, alert, on-edge.*

*Wanting to move, and moving,
Amidst sudden screams of warning,*

*Terrified yells that used to find resonation,
But they fail to provoke flight into safety.*

*They heighten adventure instead,
What a change! What a change!
A change from pulling back, pulling in,
Creating safety.*

*Pressing forward, that is the hunger,
Using alarm to fuel engagement,
Out and away, far away,
From predictable experience.*

It stared at the new scene: What at first seemed like a blank wall was resolving into creamy-colored flatlands and blue sky above. Its imagination did not bring it to the full vastness of that expanse. The world might have ended just a breath away, an undecipherable image. There was nothing to prepare it for this. Its anticipation had not worked that way. It acted instead to provoke a search for something that would excite a vision. Moving out across the flat plains, it began to grasp the enormity of this place.

So overcome by the newness, it turned back to its source. There, framed by the sky and flatlands, was a wide strip of green that had been its universe. It seemed so tiny now. The warning cries had died down, and it was surrounded by new sounds and smells. It arched itself so that it was as tall as could be, and it lost itself in the blue sky above.

*Back to the forest, amid the comforting chatter,
And beat of its community.*

But it came back as an accuser.

*For it looked at the others,
As it had never looked before.*

*It saw them separately,
One apiece.*

*It broke the spell of feeling one,
And being one.*

*It regarded each of the others
And under its stare
Each felt shame.*

*It created shame
By separating itself from the others,
And then seeing them as separate.*

*Resonations gave way to interference,
Static.*

The terrible feeling of aloneness.

And it would never go back.

Harry ran his fingers through his hair and scratched his head, his eyes still half-closed. He stumbled into the bathroom and began the ritual of washing and cleaning. He picked up the pliant and transparent sheet of organic floss, and impatiently guided it around each tooth. The vibrant, live floss did its job perfectly, shining each tooth and preserving Harry's gums, as competent as the dozen other living products on the shelf.

They would all go into the garbage in a month or so. With his new injections of therapeutic DNA, his body would repair itself without any work at all. He rubbed his face in a hunt for stubble. An organic rag would dissolve any hairs he found. He placed the sheet of floss back on the green shelf, poured a bit of water into the small pots of hanging ivy on either end, and wondered what delightful breakfast his automated kitchen had chosen for him this morning. The anticipation of a delicious meal excited him, and he hurried downstairs to see what awaited him.

Murray just stared at his visitor. At the end of the hour, he said, "Leave that story here. I have no idea what you just said. If this is your idea of hope, I'm a dead man!"

Chapter 10: Thursday, May 29

Murray smiled and shook his head for a while. All he would say was “A sponge. A stupid sponge.” The full expressions of each of his frequent laughs were pre-empted by disdain so that they presented like quiet hiccups, and together with the smiling and the head-shaking they created the impression that he was listening to a song that he didn’t really want to hear, but which pushed at him anyway.

“I ask for the truth and he tells me a story about a sponge. We start with Creation and end up with artificial life forms. From the sublime to the ridiculous. I don’t care! Don’t you get it? If I don’t care about humanity, why would I care about a sponge?” Murray took off his glasses and cupped his forehead with his large hand, pushing up his cap and starting high, massaging his temples and cheeks in one long, languorous action, still shaking his head.

“At least I know that you care, Bouklas. If you put so much time into a sponge story, you must think the world of me! Is that what I’m supposed to get from it? Oh, I remember, you’re just telling stories. It’s all about you.”

The visitor began his next story:

Tall sandstone figures dominated the landscape, and a driven wind whipped through the alleys and by-ways that the figures created, sculpting a neck here, a shoulder there, until it seemed to the visitor that he was strolling in the midst of a desert topiary, the equal of a nobleman’s manor crowded with bushes to resemble a metropolis of beings. As a boy, the visitor lived in this place, and he remembered a vibrant oasis of activity, the town surrounded by red mesas and hidden behind clusters of towering cactus plants. But then he developed a severe arthritis, found his body slowing down to a halt, his limbs getting more and more creaky. Far away from here, his body cured and he became whole again. But he loved his home and his family, and felt a need to return.

Where were they? And who had erected these sandstone pillars? Why did the wind whistle so? Why was it so intense? The visitor sought his family, went to the place where their cool, earthen hut once stood. But nothing was there. The visitor decided to lay out his blanket and start a small fire to warm himself, as the stars overtook the graying sky.

He tried to sleep, in order to remember. In his waking, he could not identify anything here that he had known. His sleep was fitful, he unable to get the voices of the wind out of his mind. There were thousands of people, talking at one time. There was a cataclysm, a renting of the world in two—that which flowed through his fingers and that which could be held. Images

of his loved ones intermixed with physical memories of his arthritic pain. But later in the night his dreams matched his present reality—the pleasure of his body, the wholeness of his connection to the universe, his undying potential felt many times during the day, the right to be where he wanted to be and do what he wanted to do, feeling his life and the life of the other with bliss.

The visitor awoke before morning, and decided this was a dead place. He scattered the embers of his fire, rolled up his blanket and left the land of sandstone pillars.

It was early and the sun was just rising. The townspeople got ready for another day of work. The rules of living were fixed, and there was no need to discuss them because they were exemplified in every breath the citizens of this group took. Children were born into structures that worked successfully for as long as the town could remember, and the ideal was met so overwhelmingly, that there was no sense things could be done any other way.

The population had grown and the valley between the mesas was now full of upright, capable citizens who knew the rules and functioned with every precept of town life ingrained in their being. Little children cried under the strictures which calcified their joints, and grown-ups felt their emotions split away from their momentary experience, so that there was an enduring pain and depression. But most everyone understood this to be part and parcel of living.

A mother tied her children into their ligatures in preparation for their leaving the hut. As she finished with her last child, she thought of her lost one, just as she had every morning since the time he left the town. And just like she did every other day during this grievous loss, she stared out of the hut's only window. But all she saw was a mesquite bush, wondrously wrapped in pale yellow and purple flowers, bouncing across the dry floor of the town, as it headed out into the desert.

Murray stretched his neck and scratched the grizzle of white and black growth along its wrinkled expanse, winced, as if he was trying to imagine that place the visitor described. He kept his eyes closed as he talked, keeping his focus on something, avoiding distraction.

“You save us both. It wasn't our fault. We were dying. And it wasn't their fault. They didn't know any better. A tragedy. But not our fault. That's what we have in common, Bouklas. We wanted to survive. And we did.” He smiled and his eyes crinkled even more shut. “The universe wants to survive. Even a sponge will live, if it has the chance. We are the universe. Murray, Bouklas, and the sponge.”

A contentment overtook Murray, but soon he shook it off. “It's time to go to your life, Bouklas, because I'm going back to mine. I can tell my son it's all right. I can lie to him. I can

say you helped me. You changed me. I saw the light. Of course none of that ever happened. But I have enough here to make my case. Maybe then he'll get off my back."

"It's about survival. I'm going to make it. How about you, Bouklas? Are you going to make it?"

The visitor said, "Why do you want to know?"

Murray opened his eyes suddenly and needed a moment to reorient himself to his room and his visitor. He smiled, "You're going to make it. I've heard about your marriage."

The visitor launched into his last story, the last one he would tell Murray before moving on.

The pond rippled, and the white hyacinths resting on its surface and along its edges bent backward in a wide circle as the sprite hovered overhead. She found her favorite rock at the pond's rim and she alit there, her busy wings losing their silver and purple sparkle as she left the sunlight and came under the shadow of the trees.

The rock was cool to her bare feet. Her wings settled around her, enveloping her so that only her hands were visible, flat against the rock, and her face above, as she peered into the steadying mirror below. She smiled into the water, watching as it became busy again, responding to movements in the woods around it.

The man had discovered her at her special place and he came by every day, resting his weight against a tree that had a bend to it, and could hold him up, so that he could be with the sprite. Everyone had heard of sprites, but no one ever said they saw one, and as he peered through the branches, he decided that anyone lucky enough to come upon such a creature would never dare share his find with the world.

The sprite knew the man by his movements, the ripples in her pond, and his aroma, mixed in as it was with moss, fern and tree, earthy and spicy. She did not have to look at him. He existed for her as a new complement to her world, which she once thought complete, but now recognized as missing his element. The man kept his distance, filled with love and admiration for this perfect creature, wishing to have more but afraid to lose her.

A love grew between them, despite their differences, for the sprite knew the outside world through the man's difficult path to contentment. The closest his heart got to any calm was in the woods with her, and his effect on her increased the more successful he was. The closer he came to his contentment, the more the sprite lost hers. They met in a middle place day after day, not fully in her world nor fully in his, until the sprite accepted the man into her heart, as he had accepted her into his.

This was the morning; the sprite stood and turned in the direction of the man. She looked at him as he looked at her all those times, and she walked to him. The man had seen her fly and he had seen her rest by the pond, on her favorite rock, but this was the first time he'd seen her walk, and her movements were those of the pond itself, as she straightened her shoulders and let her hair spill on her back. The closer she got, the brighter her wings became, until they were in a blaze of color, crackling with energy, whipping from side to side and blowing her long hair into her face.

Then all was calm again, and the man saw that her wings had come away from her body. They fluttered behind her, and then disappeared into the woods. The sprite came up to the man and rested her hands on the branch, touching the spot where he had rested his chest those many times.

Over the years, the couple made a large family of sprite-like human children, who were at the same time humanlike sprites.

Murray said, "Your wife, of course."

The visitor answered, "Of course."

"You know where the door is," Murray snapped. He didn't mean for it to come out so abruptly. But there it was; he'd said it and he wasn't going to take it back. The visitor collected his things and made ready with his umbrella. Murray wanted to say, "It's raining cats and dogs," but nothing came out.

As the visitor closed the front door and avoided the puddles in the driveway, Murray tried to figure this out. "It's your wife, of course. 'Of course!'" He didn't like the visitor's answer. Murray had come to the wrong conclusion, and the visitor just said "Of course."

Murray already knew the answer but his rational mind was at the same time moving toward it and pushing it from awareness. Murray knew in a deep and feeling way that had nothing to do with words. He knew that the visitor's wife had been a gate to the spiritual, and while she was the sprite, so was everyone else. Murray blocked that last conclusion out of his mind, the one he'd seen in a flash and felt and would never say. The visitor was not only talking about his wife. Murray had also relinquished grace for love.

Epilogue

September 12

Murray's old partner Sid had taken ill. He needed twenty-four-hour care. Sid accused his children of stealing his money and leaving him high and dry in the nursing home. He refused to talk to the family, and Murray knew that when Sid put his mind to something, he never backed off. After some negotiations through the staff in the nursing home, Sid agreed to take Murray's call. Only, he didn't want to hear any lectures. Murray knew better than to lecture his partner of thirty-two years.

It was good to hear Sid's voice. After a bit of comfortable silence, Murray offered, "You know, Sid, I heard this story, and I want to know what you think about it." And he began.

A Note From The Author

I hope that referring to myself in the third person wasn't too disconcerting; it seemed the best way to tell this story. I leave you to decide what it's about. Write to me. Let me know what you think. Murray is a fictional character, and I have met him in many incarnations over the years. Fiction has let me more direct than fact. It has let me tell you what is possible between people.

-George Bouklas