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## Wraith Walking

Jason Coley  
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

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WRAITH WALKING

by

Jason Coley

Bachelor of Arts  
Thomas Edison State College  
1999

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the

**Master of Fine Arts Degree in Creative Writing**  
**Department of English**  
**College of Liberal Arts**

**Graduate College**  
**University of Nevada, Las Vegas**  
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**Thesis Approval**  
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Jason Coley

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Wraith Walking

is approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

*Examination Committee Chair*

*Dean of the Graduate College*

*Examination Committee Member*

*Examination Committee Member*

*Graduate College Faculty Representative*

ABSTRACT

**Wraith Walking**

by

Jason Coley

Pablo Medina, Thesis Examination Committee Chair  
Visiting Writer  
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

With this work I wanted to explore the space between memory and imagination: namely, how much imagination fills the fissures that run through our knowledge of our past. The protagonist, Joshua, has been estranged from his family for nine years and learns of his father's death while in China. But without explanation, Joshua is awakened one morning by an old fabrication of his childhood imagination—a character now very real—who accompanies Joshua on his search for a fantastical object.

Pareidolia is the phenomenon of seeing figures and faces in vague stimulus, such as clouds and wood grains. It is commonly believed that human beings are hardwired for such activity; our minds involuntarily try to put order to chaos. This idea has been made popular in behavioral psychology with the use of the Rorschach inkblot tests, in which inkblots are used to assess a subject's mental state. My intentions are to demonstrate the effects when Aristotelian logic encounters unexplainable phenomena--specifically, how pareidolia can reshape reality—by using narrative instead of inkblots to assess characters' mental states.

The characters here come from a Pentecostal background. I think this a good vehicle to express the supernatural (literally, that which is above nature) for two reasons: First, I have great intimacy with Pentecostalism, and therefore believe I can respectfully deliver both the awe and fear that comprises the strong undercurrent of that faith. Second, Pentecostalism has a fantastic mythos: glossolalia, the Holy Ghost, and resurrection are reality to some communities. The protagonist has to reconcile his existentialism with his Pentecostal heritage. For the first time in his life, he considers that answers to some important questions may not exist.

As for the setting, the narrative begins in China and spans two more countries. I believe it is important for the protagonist to literally be the stranger in a stranger land: He has turned his back on his community and has made the last nine years of his life as transient as a person can. This is important, for identity is one of the lenses we perceive reality through; we comprehend the world in part from how it is different from us, and to do that we must first have an understanding of who we are: for Joshua, that is the realization that time and memory are not linear, but rather the past exists all around him and is inescapable.

The reader will also find the archetypical Holy Grail. Holy Grails have traditionally represented the boon of a long quest and granted its founder with magical powers. Here, the protagonist has spent these last years searching for a legend. He doesn't believe all the stories he hears about it—a caravan of vagabonds aimlessly wondering the earth—but suspects that there is something behind it all. This is pareidolia: Joshua is convinced that there must be a cause, that within this ephemeral myth must be some unseen form. His

obsession for finding the Caravan is the protagonist wandering through the fog with his hands stretched out.

The mind also employs pareidolia when it sifts through memories and glues them into some kind of idea: a happy or a sad day, an experience, or even into a value. The same can be said of a story.



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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To my brother.

Until now, I have never admitted to talking to imaginary people. I confess that when Alex found me at my youth hostel thousands of miles from home—I had unceremoniously left him behind in America—my first thought was that I had lost my mind. But I was being too hasty. I know Alex is not my overworked imagination. You would see him too if he were to walk up to you and steal your drink from your hand (he does these sort of things). That day I woke up to find my phantom brother staring down at me—the first time had had laid eyes on him in nearly ten years—I knew my past had finally caught up with me.

Alex believed that God led him to the Cool Donkey Guesthouse. I thought it was chance. I had only been in Beijing an hour and picked the first hotel the guidebook recommended. When I walked in, I saw a young man settling his bill at the counter. Before I heard him say anything, I knew he was an American—he layered a shirt over a t-shirt, and sported a ball cap and goatee. He also had on a khaki shorts and knee-high white socks. His attire was peculiar because everyone else here was a hobo and wore the same underwear days at a time. I handed the receptionist my passport, gave my name, and signed the guestbook. The American gave me a long, steady look before leaning into my face. He smelled like sweat and car exhaust. “I know you...we went to school together.” I told him I had never gone to college. “No, I mean high school. You’re Joshua-something. You look different with that beard, but I still remember you.”

I stared into his face. There were traces of a boy I once knew around the eyes, the half-opened mouth with a capped front tooth. I remembered Buck McKenzie as a bully, a boy who enjoyed making smaller boys cry with fast headlocks. Buck McKenzie had started two classes ahead, flunked twice, and was the only eighth grader driving to

started two classes ahead, flunked twice, and was the only eighth grader driving to school. Buck McKenzie was not a marginal character of my childhood; I had been a regular victim of his torment. Memories I had shelved away years ago now fluttered around me—Buck had once stolen my bicycle, gave me a black eye in front of a girl I had a crush on, and when I had gotten older, the reason I had dropped out of school. It was as if pages of my diary had been ripped out and tossed in the air, me snatching at them but only able to read a few sentences at a time. All these years of ass-kicking fantasies I had harbored fizzled when he told me that he was a Pentecostal pastor. Buck had found the Lord (or the Lord found him, I can't remember) and told him to go to China and preach to condemned men and women before they were executed. He told me this as if none of the things he had done to me had ever happened. His accent was distinctly rural: I thought of Alex speaking through the nose, drawing out words over extra syllables. Buck McKenzie was late to the airport and apologized for cutting our reunion short. With great agility, he slung his thick arm around my neck in a hug.

“It’s a miracle,” he said. He picked up his suitcase. “Two guys from the same small town in Oklahoma bumping into each other in China. What are the odds?”

“Coincidence often justifies miracles,” I said.

“I thought I was the only person who had ever left Texoma. I mean, after you disappeared.” He eyed my patch-ridden trousers and dingy undershirt. I only owned three sets of clothes and it showed. I immediately felt the urge to push him down a flight of stairs had he been standing at the top of any. “Where have you been all these years?” he asked.

“Avoiding people from Texoma.”

“God is clearly in disagreement with you,” he quipped. He gave me another look over and said, “I heard about your father. My condolences.”

“What?” Thus, Buck McKenzie, the man who was the boy who pummeled me so often I stopped leaving my parents’ house, was the first person to tell me that my father had killed himself.

I never expected to find somebody from my past on the opposite side of the earth. I hadn’t spoken to anyone from that town in years—not even my parents. What I had told Buck was mostly true. I wasn’t just avoiding a past life; I didn’t function well on even the most base of societal responsibilities, such as having gainful employment. I didn’t live with most of the burdens that people usually do—no home or car nothing to speak of in the way of possessions (all I had I carried in my backpack). I had no wife or children to answer to, no family or friends who I had to write once a month or else bruise feelings. For the last nine years, I had been backpacking around the globe on a shoestring living off a chance encounter with a lottery ticket. I drifted across continents and had traveled to over a 120 countries, seen almost every world capital outside the Pacific. But I have not one photograph or postcard of any of those places. I do have my memories, and often spend long days lying on a cot in some unpronounceable place thinking of my childhood. Ironically, a few days after seeing Buck McKenzie, I was doing just this when Alex had awoken me.

I had been sleeping in the upstairs dorm room of the Cool Donkey Youth Hostel when I felt his hand on my shoulder.

“Josh.”

It was strange to hear my own name. For years I have fibbed and given strangers false names for no better reason than boredom. These names often came with complete fictional occupations and lives. But I awoke to a start when I heard my real name.

I opened my eyes and stared at Alex for a long time, unsure if I were awake. He looked very much like when I had last seen him nine years ago. He was still thin, tall, but now he looked more worn, like a well-read book that had passed many hands. He wore the same Pantera t-shirt from high school, and his jeans magically clung to non-existent hips. A frayed cap trapped his long, dark hair behind his ears. His eyes were wide and fixed on me. He beckoned me with his finger, then turned and left the room.

The thick odor of too many people living in one place filled my mouth and woke me completely. The bed was just a thick blanket stapled over plywood. I still thought my brother might be the trick of mid-morning sunlight glaring through bare windows. I called out after him and my voice stirred the dozen other sleeping bodies in the room. Jackets and dog-eared books staked claims to beds, and parked in the trenches between them were backpacks of all colors and sizes from all corners of the world. Makeshift clotheslines crisscrossed over the beds, heavy under the weight of damp laundry. The room probably looked the same on any given day of the year. The people who were awake in their beds reading books, or writing postcards, or sharing whispered conversations all turned their heads toward me. A fart exploded at the far end of the room interrupting whispers and raising a few heads, turning their attention from me.

I sat up and scrambled for my pants and boots and then stumbled through the jungle of hanging wet underwear after Alex. Outside the door I found him at the top of the stairs with a cigarette hanging from his mouth. He waved at me to step out onto the rooftop.

Those first two minutes were an eternity: Me, cross-checking my logic to see if what I was seeing was really happening. He sat a table near the roof's edge, sheltered under a corrugated tin roof. Foreigners sat in pairs or alone, planning their days in guidebooks or writing in journals. At a nearby table, two Israelis with shaggy beards smoked pipes over a stressful game of mahjong. The rooftop was backdropped against a yellow haze that had blown over Beijing, a haze that clung to skyscrapers and slowly settled down onto windshields and windowsills and the backs of necks. I knew that a few kilometers behind Alex's back hid the Forbidden City, but I could only see the shadows of cranes and scaffolds and watch pedestrians below step around fresh concrete. Construction rolled over whole neighborhoods blocks at a time in preparation for the upcoming Olympics. Under all this yellow dust, Beijing was swelling like an over-inflated tire as peasants fled to cities looking for new lives under china's economic reform. The unemployed waited on street corners below wearing signs advertising their trade. I sat down at the table, my mind racing for an explanation. "Jesus Christ...Alex?"

"Don't blasphemy," he answered.

"How did you find me?"

"A better question is: How did you ever think I wouldn't?"

I had to touch him. I stood and opened my arms. We hugged. My hands could feel the row of bumps between two sharp shoulder blades. He was as real as the table, the café...as real as Beijing itself. This is how I knew I wasn't crazy.

"I didn't know about Dad's death until Buck McKenzie told me," I said.

"I know. He told me. That's why I'm here. To take you home."

"You talked to Buck McKenzie? He *saw* you?"

"Did he tell you how Dad killed himself?" Alex asked. For decades, our father had worked and saved to restore his 1963 corvette convertible. He washed it every weekend, even though it rested on jack stands in the carport. He spent his evenings sitting in that car with his hands on the steering wheel. Even when he left Mom and Alex and me, the only thing he took to his new family was that car. Though I had never visited my father's house after he left, I had often imagined he was still sitting behind that wheel going nowhere but in his mind. Three months ago, Alex told me, he finally drove the car out of the garage. I imagined the corvette with bucket seats and white-walled tires, all slathered in a red so cherry it made you cross your legs. A week later, he drove it off a cliff without a note.

After Dad left us and moved away with his second wife and her kids, Alex and I only saw our father when he came to town. He said he didn't want to take us to his house because it made his new wife uncomfortable to have us around. Over the next few years, the Christmas cards arrived less frequently and I stopped hearing his name around the house. Mom hadn't attended the funeral service. Alex told me that neither he nor Mom had attended the funeral. Mom had learned of Dad's death three weeks later from an



embarrassed family friend. If my father had any regrets, I don't know where he buried them.

“Are you hungry?” I said. “I can't have this conversation on an empty stomach. Try the sweet-and-sour chicken.”

Alex gave the menu a look over. “Nah, I don't like this chop suey shit. I'll just have fries and a beer.” He lit another cigarette. “Fuck, seventeen hours without a smoke! I've got to catch up.” Alex looked around as though he noticed his whereabouts for the first time. “Yeah, this bitch stewardess cut my drinks off. As I see it, free drinks mean free, not free for the first five.” He drew on his cigarette but quickly exhaled. “It took five of them little bottles just to calm my nerves. I had to ask the lady sitting next to me to sneak a few more—”

“Did you bring anything? Do you have a backpack?”

“Don't need one.” Alex stood from the table and slipped his arms through the carrying straps so that his duffle bag hung from his back. His arms stretched out like a scarecrow, his cigarette drooping from his lips. He was the shadow of a man who frightens others away. He dropped the bag and sat back down. “What the hell are you doing in China? I figured you for a tropical beach kind of guy.”

I had to search the back of my mind for that answer because I still didn't know what the hell was going on. My father might be dead and I was keeping company with my imaginary brother.

“I was looking for something.”

“Did you find it?”

“No...I don't think I ever will.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know where to look.” I eyed his bag. “You can’t carry a duffle bag like a backpack. Those straps will cut your shoulders—goddamn, Alex, what are you doing here?”

“Josh! Don’t say G.D.”

I flinched from a phantom slap. My mother’s faith was so strong it spanned a generation. I still brace myself whenever I hear blasphemy. My mother never tolerated it from her children. Our father, however, only mentioned the Lord’s name in obscenities. Whenever we cursed our Nintendo too loudly in the back room, he’d yell from the front of the house, “Shut your goddamn mouths, the windows are open! The whole fuckin’ neighborhood can hear you!” I had never seen him in church, but often we went to church on account of him. Mom would fight with Dad over his heresy and drag Alex and me to church with her. I knew my mother was torn up about this. She prayed vehemently that God would spare my father and urged us to pray for the same. But when I asked her what would happen if Dad doesn’t go to heaven with us, she said that God will make us forget about him.

Suddenly, Alex dug his hands into his pockets. He struggled until he pulled out a few wadded bills. “Hey, what do I do with this American money?” He palmed about twenty dollars.

I took the money from him. “I can exchange it at the bank later. Why don’t you try some Chinese food?”

“No. I want fries and a beer.”

“You can eat fries any day back in the States—”

“Fuck! I won’t get anything.’ Conversation stopped in the café. The two mahjong players stared at us. Or me.

“Keep your fucking voice down,” I hissed. “Get your fries and coke.”

“Can I have fries and a beer?”

I waved the waitress over. When she came back, she brought a mug of hot water and a sachet of instant coffee. I added cream and sugar and stirred it with a heavy spoon.

The beer came in 750ml bottles, which Alex guzzled after scanning the bottle for alcohol content. Once, as kids, we found a bottle of whiskey in a ditch while walking to school.

The bottle had a half-inch left, and we dared each other to take a sip. I only pretended to drink. It burned my lips and sent a shudder through my body. Alex swallowed. He doubled over as from a blow and threw up over his shoes. His reaction had been so immediate that for years I thought drinking whiskey a feat similar to sword swallowing.

I realized Alex was talking.

“...after I made bail, I got home and found someone had broken into my apartment. Snatched all my shit. I had to get out of that apartment complex. Too many people knew where I lived. Knew what I stashed in my place.” He pinched his cigarette between his finger and thumb for emphasis. “That’s why I didn’t tell anyone I was moving,” Alex went on. “I just picked up whatever wasn’t stolen and left. But I’m smarter than those shitheads. I keep necessities stashed in places no one can find.” He relaxed his shoulders, momentarily lost in his own thoughts. Then he launched into a ten-minute monologue about all the dumbasses he works with back at the plastic factory, how he could run production better if office politics didn’t keep him from being shift supervisor. The waitress drifted near, and he ordered more beer without a break in speech.

Sometimes, Alex's stories leaned up against incredulity. Other times, his tales were completely fabricated. If you called him out on it, he only became angry and defended himself more, hence I learned to sift through his stories to separate truth from bullshit. He was good because he sold every sentence. Years ago, Alex fell out of a tree and broke his forearm, putting him in a cast for six weeks. Shortly after, we went to the barbershop, and, as Alex sat in the chair, he held up his cast and told the barber he had broken his arm in a gang fight (he was eight). He said it so smoothly, adding just the right detail in his play-by-play account that I even thought it had actually happened. Seven minutes later, another man walked in and asked Alex about his cast—Alex offhandedly remarked that he broke it in a dirt bike race. The barber froze with open scissors above Alex's head, squinting at him in the mirror. All Alex said was, "A little off the top, sir." In my memory I see Alex talking to the barber, but I know it never happened.

"I told my supervisor that I was going to take some time off and see the world." Alex looked up to the tin ceiling to find a word. "Sabbatical? Is that it? Either that or I was going to walk out and take half the shift with me. He was powerless." He said this and readjusted his cap. "I would try to unionize the place, but none of those morons ever think past payday. And what the fuck did you do to your face?"

My beard had taken three years to grow. My mother's Choctaw blood fenced the hair out of my cheeks, but what I had was black and scraggly. "I can't bother to carry a razor."

"You look like Jesus."

"You sound like Mom."

"Fuck you. She's fallen off the deep end."

My mother had always been crazy. *I'll put the fear of God in you!* she would scream when she took the belt to Alex and me, chasing us around the house before we barricaded the bathroom door with our bodies. She would scream and punch the door for twenty minutes. Then the television exploded at full volume. Alex and I were raised Pentecostal, meaning that my mother fully believed in the Rapture, faith healing, omens, and glossolalia.

“She says that soon, ATM cards will be small enough to stick under your skin and you will starve and die without one.” He tagged on, “But I see where she’s coming from.”

I love my mother, but her slipping grip on reality made her a difficult person to love. She saw miracles and omens in everything. Her superstitions dominated family life. If I complained of an earache and wanted to go to the doctor, she’d lay hands on the side of my face and say, “Doesn’t that feel better? That’s the power of Jesus.” My conversations with her always wormed their way into my lack of faith. She wasn’t worried about Alex’s faith, just his drinking, his questionable friends, and his run-ins with the law.

My mother and brother shared a relationship that bordered on the occult. Alex believed in God, ghosts, and demons—all these mystical explanations for phenomenon that he didn’t understand. If a window fell shut, then it must be paranormal. Raised in the buckle of the Bible Belt where everyone has been visited by a dead relative or has dreamt of things yet to come only encouraged this fantasy. My mother and brother were co-conspirators intent on driving me crazy.

The conversation lulled. Alex stated the obvious.

“Dad’s dead.” He said it with only a touch of sadness, as of one who hears that the childhood turtle given away years ago had finally died. “Mom hasn’t mentioned it at all since she found out, but I caught her looking through the photo albums.”

“Did he really do it? Do you think he really killed himself?” When someone commits suicide, fingers start pointing.

“Who knows? If he did, he was crazy too.”

I tried to imagine my father—I pictured him as he looked fifteen years ago—racing along the Pacific Coast Highway before breaking through the guardrail and surfing the Corvette into infinity. I had to fantasize most of the scene because I didn’t know anything about him. I had never met his second wife; I saw her once from a distance. She was sitting in a car waiting to pick my father up the day he left my mom. I knew she had three kids (two boys and a girl), though I never met them (they lived in another state). I did, quite naturally, wonder what this new family had that ours didn’t—then I walked inside my house and found my mother walking around the kitchen talking to herself and it was all clear, even to a twelve-year-old.

I didn’t escape until six years later. My mother had been playing the lotto for as long as I could remember using the same numbers every time. She put much faith in these numbers: They were significant to her because they were our birthdays and her anniversary, and other significant dates. She never won despite how many prayers she laid on the television those Friday nights. The lotto was her unanswered prayer, her hopes of striking it big and making all of life’s problems seem trivial. When I turned sixteen, I dropped out of school and seldom left our house except to go the gas station to buy food at midnight when I knew I wouldn’t see anybody. But one day was different:

The gas station I usually went to was closed (I never learned why) and so I walked the five miles across the state line to another gas station at one o'clock in the morning. At the end of those five miles, I had decided I had had enough. I was ashamed that I had been living like a hermit in my parents' house. I had no driver's license, no car, and no plans to ever leave. I had saved a few dollars and in a moment of desperation, bought a lotto ticket, choosing numbers with absolutely no meaning. For the first time in my young life, I prayed. I prayed all that week up until the day of the lottery. When the white little balls started to come in with our numbers, my mother fell off the couch and onto her knees, groveling in front of the television muttering "Why Jesus?"—and screamed out obscenities when the final number rolled in front of the camera. They were *my* numbers. I hadn't told my mother I had bought the ticket—never mentioned a word about it—but as soon as I saw that last ball I ran to my room (leaving my mother crying on the living room floor) and lifted up my mattress and double checked the numbers: as perfect a match as any fingerprint. I held the ticket in my hands, turning it over, reciting the numbers while amazed that such a small piece of paper could have such a dramatic change in one's life. How minor choices in life, once entered into the machine of fate, steer out lives in completely unexpected directions. At age eighteen years, two months, and four days, I became the youngest lotto winner in the Texas State Lottery history. The rest is anti-climatic. I had to split the winnings with about thirty-two other people: I opted for a lump sum, and after taxes, opened my first bank account with a deposit of \$107, 564 and thirty-four cents. A month later, I had a passport. Two days after that, I had a one-way bus ticket to Mexico. I left a note for my mother and hadn't seen her since.

Alex interrupted my thoughts. “Mom wants to know why you’ve been hiding from her all these years.”

My brother’s honesty had always cut like a rusty saw, squeaky and forceful. A wind blew across the rooftop and snatched a newspaper, scattering its leaves over the edge. I watched them fly off into the haze. I spoke, but it sounded like a stranger’s voice. “I didn’t want to go crazy, too.”

The waitress brought over our food. I had sweet and sour chicken with rice, Alex a big plate of fries. He leaned in close to his plate and poked a few fries with his thumb. Then he layered them in salt and without looking up said, “I promised Mom I would bring you home.”



The night I first heard someone speak in Tongues was when my mother took me to church for Sunday night worship. I was only four-years-old, but my memory is clear. There was lots of singing and lots of standing. Although I'd seen books at church with pictures of people screaming and repenting in a subterranean ocean of fire, to me a more imaginable hell was an eternity of standing and rejoicing.

After what seemed like hours, the preacher looked up from his hymn book and stared out at the congregation. His head, I remember, carried about fifteen pounds of greased hair, half of it in sideburns. He sweated through his short sleeve shirt and tie. His forehead was also very shiny.

“People have lost their fear of God.”

His voice echoed off the walls and the old people nodded their heads as if they already knew.

“People have lost their fear of God!”

A few people flinched, and several *Amen*'s and *Praise Jesus*' popped off in the crowd like belated fireworks.

“Jesus!” the preacher shouted. “I pray to thee to be with us tonight. Jesus! I pray that you send the Holy Ghost to be with us tonight, for we all have sinned....”

Then the piano started up with “As the Deer Panteth for the Water.” The preacher knelt in front of his podium and began to pray deeply, sweat beading up over his cheeks, as he called all sinners to repent. His slacks had risen up and revealed a waxy leg. One hand gripped a microphone and the other reached up to the ceiling. He squeezed his eyelids and shook his head violently. “Oh, Jesus. Thank you Jesus.”

I had to cover my mouth to bite back a laugh. My mother and I sat in a pew near the back. I whispered to myself, “Thank you, Jesus. Thank you, Jesus,” with my hands on an invisible microphone. The old lady sitting in the pew in front of us threw a glance over her shoulder and muttered something to the woman next to her. My mother held her head straight but pinched my knee. I dropped my hands in defense and tried to squirm free of her grip.

A howl shot through the church that sounded only half-human. My insides locked up and I cowered into the pew. But my curiosity overpowered my fear, and I peeked over the pew to see a small, wiry man stagger from the front pew to the altar and fall to his knees praying. He opened his arms heavenward, his body shaking from spasms of weeping, and a wailing fell upon the congregation that rattled my chest. His bald head gleamed as he emptied his lungs. I thought his soul had broken open and spilled out over the floor. But my mother, and many others, kept their eyes fixed forward on nothing in particular. The man found his voice and confessed before the whole church to lusting after his teenage daughter’s friends, some of whom were praying in the pews behind him.

People began leaving their seats and knelt next to him. They laid their hands on his back and bawled out Jesus’ name. Latecomers to the altar laid hands on the backs of the people in front of them. Their voices gave me goose bumps, and it felt like lightning was about to strike. More and more left seats to walk down the aisle and kneel with the growing crowd surrounding the altar. Nearly everyone had their hands in the air or on another’s body. I latched to my mother’s side. I watched the adults cry and pray and scream—things I’d never seen adults do before. The few children who were in the tabernacle only crouched further down into their pews.

I was the youngest person in church that night, and probably the most terrified. I expected this kind of behavior from my mother inside our house; I did not expect to be dragged into a room full of adults crying and yelling at the ceiling.

My mother rose from the pew with her head down and her hands on her abdomen. I called after her, but she didn't hear me. Her long black hair hung over her eyes as she walked down into the spectacle at the altar. Then the crowd swallowed her, pressing their hands around her. People cried and begged for her soul.

The preacher, fueled by the mass of moaning, writhing bodies before him, yelled over the congregation, "Jesus! We pray for the Holy Ghost. Jesus," his voice rose to reach the handful of us still in the pews, "give us the Holy Ghost so that we may repent our sins!" A man in the back got up and shuffled toward the altar. A few seconds later, a hesitant young couple joined him. Then I was the only one left in the pews.

The crowd of fifty moved about like a brood of snakes: in and out of one another, arms and legs intertwined, their bodies all one in the same. Their voices became hisses sliding over each other in a mass of entangled bodies. Out of the slithering flesh, I saw my mother's arms raise toward the ceiling. She stood on her tip toes, her back to me. Incomprehensible words tumbled out of her mouth and brought the wailing to a whisper. It was not her voice that came from her mouth, but something else, and today many years later when I think of that sound I think of ghosts crying. I didn't understand what she said, but the people crouched around her seem to. They filled the pauses in her speech with whispered praises for Jesus. My mother reached higher to the ceiling, stretching more than a normal person is able to do, and that unfamiliar voice poured out of her and

filled the church. The preacher flushed purple, his lips flared out, and he pointed down at me from the altar.

“Those who deny God, he will deny them on Judgment Day.”

I leapt from the pew and ran out of the church. My mother may have had the gift of Tongues, but I had the fear of God.

After two weeks of studying Beijing from the rooftop of the Cool Donkey, Alex convinced me it was high time to finally step outside and see a city of thirteen million at street level. A river slid past the front of the hostel, foaming and roiling yellow, and dragging with it air that stank of sulphur. Sewage and other pollutants flowed openly through the city in concrete washes toward the sea. Alex and I pulled our shirts over our noses to keep out the fumes. At the river's edge three boys in their underwear dipped their ankles into the soupy water. What creatures hardy enough to live in that water I didn't know, but I half-expected a hand to reach out and pull a boy under. Even through my shirt collar I could taste the river. I flashed on how convenient a bio-suit would be for exploring the city so I wouldn't have to touch anything. In these nine years, I have not stayed in one hotel longer than three weeks. I've learned this much about myself: After a honeymoon of ten days to two weeks, the insomnia and paranoia start to overtake my nights. I won't try to convince you that if I stay in one place too long, the natives all transform to ghouls at midnight to come and eat my organs warm, but it feels that way nonetheless, and I'm mindful to never unpack my bag completely just to be on the safe side. So aft I took that bus bus ride to Mexico City, I kept going south, all the way down to Tierra del Fuego where I eventually ran out of land. Then I flew to Europe.

I've traveled to over 120 countries across five continents; I've filled four passports—an endless study in geography for any custom official who flips through my passports grafittied with colorful stamps and visas. Dividends from my lotto fund and the favorable dollar exchange rates of developing nations have carried me through nine years of unemployment with no career plans, if any, for the next nine. Nothing pulls me out of bed in the morning other than to reset my circadian clock. I'm not even sure what today

is—holidays and Mondays lose their meaning when you don't even need a clock, much less a calendar. Until that day I boarded the bus, I had never been more than 125 miles from Texoma; I spent my first eighteen years in one house in one town with only my mother and brother. I opt for dorm rooms not just because they're cheap, but it calms me to listen to a roomful of people sleeping: the soft snores, the half-muttered words of dreams, the occasional breakage of wind—the sounds of humans being humans. But then the daylight comes and I wake up in a roomful of strangers where I am the strangest of them all. They have a comforting normalcy waiting for them back home that beckons them to grudgingly pay taxes and show their friends hundreds of photos of the same monument in some exotic locale. I contemplate how many photographs I am in right now in homes and offices all over the world. I am the man in the background staring at the camera. I am that hostel rat who never speaks, only hangs out day after day in the hostel bar watching pirated movies. I've made pathetic efforts to meet people in the bar by introducing myself while checking off a mental questionnaire (*Where are you from? What do you do? What do you want to talk about?*) that I spill out all at once that makes my audience squirm as if under interrogation. The first thing to go in the life of a recluse is the ability to hold small talk.

Alex yelled at me, bringing me back to reality. I quickly shook away a lifetime of memories that had bottlenecked into a few seconds.

“Where are we going?” I asked Alex. There was still a tinge of sulfur in the air.

“I found an Internet café while you were sleeping this morning. You sleep a lot, by the way. The café is across the river.”

“You've got an e-mail account?”

“Of course. Everybody has e-mail.”

“Who the hell writes to you?” One of the benefits of having imaginary brothers is that you don’t have to share them with others.

Alex answered with a coy smile and three quick raises of his eyebrows. Our stroll ended at a café buried inconspicuously under the sidewalk. We descended the stairs into electronic gunfire and screaming kids. Computers stood on-line like slot machines. Boys and some girls yelled and slapped keyboards as SWAT teams battled terrorists with uneasy realism. The bodies twisted and howled at full volume, the noise ricocheting off the concrete walls with no place to go.

There was a time when I tried to keep an e-mail account. It was full of mostly ignored letters that I never answered. Most of those letters were from near-strangers, like the woman I met six years ago while backpacking in Seville. I had written her a single letter and was ensnared in her *en masse* e-mails for the next two years. The letters were indistinguishable; a chain letter, or worse, a humorless joke someone sent her. No one tells jokes anymore. They forward them. These letters were from people I had met while traveling and my pathetic attempt to have peopled called friends. (Backpackers, I’ve noticed, throw out their e-mail addresses like condoms, and so I had gathered several emails in a short time.) The interim between my replies stretched longer until I forgot I had ever known the person, replaced by a memory of someone I couldn’t place in a place I couldn’t remember. Eventually, I lost my e-mail account. These last years I’d learn to cut the fat off potential friendships with false addresses. I’d meet people, thought about exchanging names, but just wasn’t up for the commitment.

‘You have to e-mail Mom.’ Alex was already sitting in front of a computer, his voice raised to be heard over the screams.

“You dragged me outside for this? You e-mail her.”

“I did that this morning. She knows everything, Josh.”

“What does that mean?”

“She knows that I found you. But I think you should be the one to tell her why you cut her off the first chance you got and spent all these years running from one smelly hotel to the next....”

I didn’t hear all of Alex’s retort on account of all the mayhem around us, but I left him down there yelling something at me as I climbed toward the daylight. The air suddenly thinned and I broke in a run to get back above ground. Alex talking to Mom was an impossible suspension of disbelief. He was only serving lies with an extra helping of guilt. I never told my mother about the lottery. Back into daylight, Beijing rose a hundred feet above me and stretched out miles around me. I thought there too many characters in this dream; I could feel the presence of thirteen million people pressing all around me. I bent over and leaned on my knees, sucking in great lungfuls of air. I decided right then to go back to the hostel, pack my backpack, and catch the first train out of town before Alex could find me.

“Excuse me, do you speak English?”

Two pink tourists sweating like pack mules under enormous backpacks looked down at me. Their bags, stuffed to capacity and adorned with rolled towels and dangling Nalgene bottles, towered a foot over their heads. The boy and girl leaned over an open map, rotated it several times and still looked unsure.



The boy spoke to me. “We’re trying to find the Cool Donkey Guesthouse. Do you know where it is?”

“I think it’s already full,” I answered after catching my breath.

His girlfriend started to cry. She was blonde, like the boy, and very pretty though she braided her hair like a farm girl.

The boy turned to comfort her and swung his gargantuan backpack into me. It was solid—I had to step back to stay on my feet. Their backpacks matched, each with a Canadian flag stitched to it. His backpack curtain their moment. Only their bare legs were exposed.

I hesitated before I spoke. “Actually, the hostel is booked up, but they might let you throw a sleeping bag in the hall.” They faced me. The girl was pinker than before. Her blue eyes seem to plead with me. “I can take you there,” I added.

They spilled thanks and followed me down the street, their backpacks occasionally clipping passersby.

“How long have you been traveling?” the boy asked.

This wasn’t the kind of small talk I wanted. It was not that I didn’t appreciate good conversation; it was that I didn’t want the conversation to be about me. Besides, just being outside the guesthouse took all my energy from me.

The boy repeated his question and I ignored it again. We walked on in an awkward silence for about forty feet.

“My name is Eli,” he continued. “And this is my fiancé, Rebecca.” It felt foreign to shake hands.

“We’re on our honeymoon. Well, we will be as soon as we’re married. We wanted something romantic, so we decided to go backpacking for a year in Asia—”

“I wanted to go to Europe,” the girl interjected.

“We’ll find a quaint Buddhist temple in some village to hold the ceremony. Hey, if you’re around, you could be my best man....” I had stopped outside the hostel but didn’t interrupt his story. I had been backpacking for a long time and have seen couples start together only to break up two months later in Bangkok or Amsterdam. People just aren’t made to spend that much time together. Alex was digging under my skin after only a few hours. I told them I was in a hurry and wished them luck. They thanked me again, and as I was leaving the boy asked, “Hey, what’s your e-mail address?”

My encounter with the Canadian couple delayed my escape. After I left them I high-tailed it to the dorm room, grabbed my pack, and made it to the front door. I hailed the first cab to the southern train station. I figured I could head down to the southeast Asia, maybe lose myself in Laos for awhile. Nobody would find me there, not even Alex.

But I never got that far. At the train station I realized that I did not have my passport. I always keep my passport and cash in a money belt tucked down the front of my pants. I even sleep with the belt on. I quickly dumped the entire contents of my backpack onto the train station floor, kicking and pulling apart everything I had looking for my passport. A crowd of Chinese bystanders had surrounded me by the time I learned that someone had taken it—probably while I was asleep. I knew it had been Alex.

Having been beaten, I spent the next few hours bumming around Beijing with no particular place to go before I ended up at the Forbidden City. I paid the exuberant ticket price, stored my pack in a locker, and entered through a giant gate crowned with a smiling portrait of Chairman Mao. The city, according to my guidebook, was home to a long line of Chinese emperors by the time Chairman Mao took power shortly after World War II. Ironic that the last emperor of China spent most of the royal life trapped inside a palace believing he was the ruler of China. My mind drifted to the young Canadian couple I met that morning, how they might be globetrotting across China trapped inside their own forbidden cities with nothing to dine on but hopeless romanticism. Fantasies and daydreams seldom accommodate two. These were, coincidentally, my exact words to Oma. She accused me of being a cynic. I suspect now that she is somewhere in the big world with her husband and kids. I left her in India because I didn't want to take anything more than I could carry. I'd left her a note too. I promised I'd write, as I always did. A

week before leaving India, Oma and I were walking through Varanasi, a holy city where bodies are burned along the banks of the River Ganges in the hundreds. It had been the dry season and the river was low, so we walked along the ghats at dusk watching people play in the same river in which corpses were dumped. We had spent two weeks at each other's side—but it felt more like two years: trauma often makes time seem longer than it actually is. We walked along the river Ganges and occasionally stopped to watch the funeral pyres. The air was thick with smoke and the smell of sandalwood—not the smell of burning bodies, for the Hindus have perfected the art of cremation through thousand of years of practice—but the smell clung to the humidity, and it always felt like we were walking through soup. We watched an old man burn into a black mass of remains, the heat peeling the skin off his skull and throwing ash into the night. Male relatives stood off to the side as the eldest son (who had recently shaved his head and face in accordance with local customs) poked at the body with a long bamboo shaft. When the bones had become fragile from the heat, the man took his bamboo shaft and cracked open the skull, spilling black, steaming brains onto the coals. Oma told me that this signifies the moment when the soul is freed from the body and awaits rebirth. There was something so public, so matter-of-fact about the burning the dead that none of it seemed gruesome (Oma thought it was romantic, but she was queer). We walked into the night, the outline of the river discerned for miles by the light of a hundred funeral pyres. I stopped her and took her hand and said we should get married. I could smell her hair and would forever associate incense with burning bodies. When she didn't answer, I quickly said, "It was just a joke." We walked all the way back to the hostel without a word. I imagine now

that she already has a family—the one thing I know she wanted more than anything else  
and I wouldn't give her.

After hours exploring Beijing, I returned to the Cool Donkey smelling like burning tires. I blew my nose and what came out was black. The hostel, quiet during daylight hours, was now waking up as people returned from sightseeing and filled the showers. Some headed straight to the bar.

Over the years I've learned to survive with less, things I thought I needed but learned to live without. I carried three sets of clothes, three pairs of socks, and three pair of boxers. They are made of cotton (they dry easier than denim), second hand and stylish outdated, even in the third world. Once every four or five days I would wear my clothes in the shower and scrub a bar of soap over myself, then hang my clothes overnight. Sometimes they might be a little damp, but a minimalist has to accept a certain amount of discomfort.

I dried with my sarong and slipped back into my clothes, careful not to touch the woman next to me or the other five people standing around in towels for a shower. The bathroom was too small to accommodate modesty. Particle board shielded showers and toilets with as much privacy as a saloon door. Someone hid in a toilet stall, too shy to come out with so many people in the bathroom. A sign taped above the sit-down toilets stated in five languages: Sit like a princess not a frog.

I brushed my teeth over a sink. Cracks were scattered across the basin like a city map. I ran my fingers through my wet hair and picked at my beard in the mirror, trying to straighten out the curls and spread the hair evenly over my face. Fresh out of the shower, I might pass as a respectable human being.

I climbed the steps to the dorm. The musky smell of a human den was palatable here where the air circulated less. The door was propped open. A lamp at the far end of the

room shone, a night light for any returning, stumbling guests. A dark man, silhouetted against the light, sat by the door picking at a guitar. He held his guitar in a way that made me think that he did not know how to play. Between his feet was a half empty bottle of gin and a wastebasket full of empty beer bottles.

I asked the man, "Have you seen a guy this tall with long black hair?" I leveled off my hand about four inches above my head.

The man shot out a guffaw through the dorm room like a gun barrel. He wore no shirt, his bulbous belly hung between slender thighs. He peered up at me, his eyes mostly white. I slid past his beer sweat. The dorm was empty.

"You mean Alex?" he asked. He strummed a few chords on his guitar and sung something I think was in English. "We had a long talk about Jesus."

It was the way the man accented "Jesus" that scared me. "Where did he go?"

He started strumming his guitar again. "To get more to drink," the man called out to me. Walking through the Cool Donkey was like exploring an M.C. Escher print. Stairs were not in their proper places. They hid behind closet doors or led up one storey before dropping back down to other rooms on the same floor. Staircases bent at acute angles with some steps higher than others. I descended through the hostel to the basement where the sounds of concordant cheer seeped through the large, timbered door of the hostel bar. I pulled the door open and let the noise of the crowd spill around me.

There were no less than fifty people in the bar, all sitting at tables or on barstools, or just standing in clusters. The crowd—younger than thirty—gripped over-sized beer bottles by the neck. The crowd had encircled a pool table in the center of the bar. Inside

this circle two people stood: a heavy Chinese woman, and Alex. The bar sank a few steps here, and with the watching crowd, had a coliseum-like effect.

Alex, cap turned backwards, reached across the faded green felt. He had tucked his long hair behind his ears and a lit cigarette hung from his lip. He slowly slid the cue a few inches toward the ball, then shied away, and again nearly touched it. No one spoke. A sharp crack sent the ball to the far end of the table. The cue smashed the three smartly into a corner pocket. The only other balls on the table were the eight and fifteen. A cheer erupted. Alex eyed the table as he coolly chalked his stick.

I tapped a man sitting nearby. The man, about forty-five years old, sat amongst a passel of empty beer bottles. He looked easy to talk to. I asked him what was going on.

“That skinny guy there,” he said as he pointed to Alex, “has a bet with the bar owner. If he loses, he has to buy the bar a round of drinks!”

To myself, but quite loud, I cursed—Alex didn’t have any money.

“If he wins,” the man paused to belch, “the bar owner has to buy the drinks!” He pointed at the woman. She watched Alex lean over the table and aim his stick at the cue ball. Narrowing his eyes, Alex muzzled the crowd.

The eight ball and the cue ball sat in front of the side pocket, an effortless shot had not the fifteen stymied the eight. Alex, laying flat on the table, drew his stick and the three pool balls into one line—he intended to jump the cue ball over the fifteen and tap the eight, a skilled shot I doubted he could do. Alex’s abilities always had fallen shorter than he imagined.

The stick in Alex’s hands torpedoed forward in one oiled motion and popped the cue ball into the air like a cork. The cue landed on the pocket-side of the fifteen and rolled



across the felt, too fast or too slow I couldn't tell, until it bumped the eight, gently dropping the eight ball into the pocket. A nearly inaudible clink echoed before applause exploded and smothered all conversation. Alex held the cue stick two-handed high above his head and exhaled a cloud of smoke as bystanders slapped his back and cheered his name. Cameras flashed. It was Alex in all his glory.

“What the fuck would you have done if you had lost?” I yelled at him. The music had forced me to speak louder than I wanted to.

“I wasn’t going to lose, Josh,” Alex answered flatly. His cap was now forward and his hands played with the lighter in front on him. A blue line chalked the flesh between his right index and thumb. We sat at a thick wood table, smooth yet scratched with names and dates and senseless epitaphs. The bar was spacious but with a low ceiling supported by four pillars. There was a lot of wood, and a lot of posts, and chain linked the posts to make a fence around the pool table. In the soft light the bar felt like the belly of something. The pillars were tiled over with photos of red-eyed foreigners hugging the heavy Chinese woman—the bar owner.

The music stopped. “Hey, everybody listen.” The bar owner stood on the pool table. “You know Alex won a bet against me in my own bar tonight. But here in China we have a tradition. It says that any man who wins a bet against a woman,” here she paused for effect, “must marry her!” Cheers and bottles rose toward the ceiling. “So—shhh! Everybody listen—tonight we will have a wedding!” Some drunkard yelled “And a honeymoon!” and cackled hysterically. The bar owner threw a hand in the air like a matador and yelled, “Free drinks for everyone!”

Applause again thundered off the walls. The bar owner, standing above the crowd, beckoned Alex with her palm down. He strutted to the center of the bar through a gauntlet of backslaps and climbed on the table. He stood, straight and thin, with his hands in his back pockets; she was almost eye-level to him, but outweighed Alex by one hundred pounds. A barmaid came through the crowd carrying over her head a tray and two full shot glasses. The bar owner pinched the glasses and handed one to Alex. She

said something in his ear and the two interlocked their drinking arms, the tiny glasses ready at their chins. With their free hands each wetted the other's lips with a lemon, then salt, and tipped their glasses back. The crowd rallied louder when they pressed lips. My brother hugged her shoulders and silenced the bar.

“I just want to thank Xue for having the courage to be my fourth wife,” Alex said while smiling at the chuckles. His Oklahoma drawl thickened as it came out above a silent crowd. “And I'd like to thank my brother, Joshua, for being awesome.” Alex pointed and all fifty heads rested on me. I suddenly felt two feet tall. Then my brother yelled, “I got the next round!”

True to her Xue's word, the crowd lined up by the cooler and were handed a bottle of Tsing Tao, soup-kitchen style, as liters of tequila and vodka circulated the bar. Nobody paced. I sat at a table watching Alex dance with Xue on the pool table, his right hand swigging a bottle of tequila. Other couples danced or made out around the room. A woman crawled into the beer cooler while her friends took pictures. A teenager slept with his head on a table but still clutched a beer. Some were just starting their vacation and tonight was their first taste of promised adventure: a montage of binge-drinking, exotic food, and holiday romance. For others this was their last hurrah before returning to the 40 watt glow of former lives—until they saved enough money to do it again.

A middle-aged man dropped into Alex's empty chair. He had a thick, bushy goatee and a thick braid of red hair that ran halfway down his back. “Your brother's a good bloke,” he told me in a thick Cockney accent. He was the man I spoke to earlier tonight when I first entered the bar. “He's got a heart of gold.” It was evident that he had been

swigging from the passing vodka bottles. He didn't look me in the face, only played with the beer bottle in his chubby hands. After a pause he said, "He told me everything."

"What? What did he tell you?"

"That you flew him over here. About how you're paying for this trip. You guys planned this when you were just kids, right?" The man stopped, perhaps waiting for me to say something, but I let the lie live. "I wish my brother would have done something like that for me. Fucking tosser. Now he drives a Porsche and dates my ex-girlfriend...."

Alex let out a cry and handed Xue an empty shot glass, and then popped a lemon wedge into his mouth. His whole face puckered. We were in high school when Alex found a *National Geographic*—the cover was a man in a fur cap staring out a frosted train window—we wanted to leave Texoma and take on some great adventure. We made plans then to work the summers and save so we could leave the day after Alex graduated. I think about that often, my memories of us as children growing a little here and there, adding a color I couldn't remember before or a line of dialogue I had forgotten. I suddenly wanted to talk—any audience would do—but the chubby man and his bottle were gone, vanished during my reverie. On the pool table he shuffled his weight from foot to foot, foaming his beer over the felt. He slung his arm around Alex's shoulders and the two sang.

I left Alex with his friends and went back to the dorm to sleep. I would ask for my passport another time. The night light only illuminated a few beds at the far end of the dormitory, casting the rest of the room into silhouettes. In a bed on the left side a woman moaned on top of a man, but leaned down onto him when I entered the room. I walked past them counting the beds on the right, annoyed but also hotly envious. Alex would

probably have his honeymoon in Xue's room tonight. My brother had been in China not even eleven hours and knew more people than I had met in two weeks. Years and miles had separated us, but now only a bar full of smoke. I felt those absent years suddenly compress to a point, a singularity of longing for my brother's companionship.

In my bed lay a man. He slept face down as if he had fallen from some great height. His arms hung over the edge of the bed, his black hair hid his face. He was shirtless and wrapped in my sheet. I grabbed his shoulder—I'd kicked over an unseen bottle next to the bed—and shook him till he grunted.

"Wake up. You're in the wrong bed." I tugged his ankle, but he slid only a few inches. He raised his head; he was the man I'd seen earlier trying to play the guitar.

"Jesus Christ, are you ever sober?" I said.

He stared at me in the dark for a long while. "It's you."

"Get the fuck out of my bed."

"Forgive me." With effort he stood upright and the sheet fell from him. A flat, hairless ass jiggled in my face.

The man staggered naked, tripping over backpacks, toward a dark corner. I spread the sheet and flopped on top of it, wearing everything but boots. Suddenly, I pressed my hand under my back and sat up. My hand was wet and stank of urine.

Then the woman's moans started again.

Alex was not in his bed when I woke up the next morning, but I didn't have to look passed the bar. The barmaids collected bottles off tables and swept glass into piles. Xue sat next to Alex, her eyes half open. She would lean to one side before suddenly sitting up. The chubby man I spoke to last night (I would learn that his name was Harold) sat listening to Alex, who had full throttled into a conversation but didn't bother to look into his review mirror to see if anyone was following.

"...and he paid for my plane ticket and everything. He doesn't look it but he's got lots of money. He's been everywhere. Josh!" Alex waved at me. Alex called the barmaid to bring another beer, pulling a chair next to him. "Drink up, Josh, you're behind." The shorthand on the clock wall barely had past eight.

I sat at the table but dismissed the beer. "You said last night you wanted do some sightseeing today."

"Sure," Alex said while he balanced his head on his neck. I told him about Tiananmen Square and Mao's mausoleum, but his eyes had closed twice while I spoke.

I paid the bar tab and led Alex to the dorm. He stomped up the stair case, bumping off walls, before he leaned on my shoulders. Together we squeezed up the stairwell. Twice Alex stepped on his untied shoelaces. I steadied him against the wall and crouched over the shoes; they were wet and smelled like beer. "Alex," I said while looping the laces, "why did you say that stuff about me? I didn't buy you a plane ticket."

Alex kept his feet together like an obedient child. I heard him say, "You didn't? Then tell me how I got here." His laces were too long, so I doubled the loops and cinched the not.

I laid Alex down on his bed and undid the laces I had tied and pulled his shoes off. He didn't look sick, only tired, but I moved the wastebasket to the edge of the bed anyway.

Alex keenly pointed out that, despite its name, Tiananmen Square was more rectangle than square. Only a few structures broke the flat, brick landscape: At the far south end stood Qianman, the original front gate to the old city. The gate was a huge, layered building with a tiled roof and upturned eaves—traditionally believed to deflect evil spirits. On that half of the square, the mausoleum squatted next to the Monument of the People's Heroes. The granite and marble mausoleum swallowed 5,000 spectators in a thick line bending at right angles around the tomb. On other acres a vender held a string of sixty kites that wiggled like fish on hooks. Other kites performed acrobatics against a blue sky, their lines tethered to children riding high on the shoulders of fathers. Behind us, an immense portrait of Chairman Mao Zedong hung from the Gate of Heavenly Peace overlooking it all.

A breeze blew through the open square and cooled my arms and back. We sat on a curb to an underground walkway that linked the square with the Forbidden City. Alex had complained of sore legs, but I had persuaded him to stand in line with me to Mao's mausoleum. The line had moved swiftly through the tomb; the guards prohibited anyone to loiter or photograph the body protected behind ballistic glass. One solemn light shone on the man, illuminating his white head like a jack-o-lantern. Alex was convinced the body was a wax dummy. "I swear to God I saw the flange behind his ears," Alex told me as we sat on the curb and passed a bottle of water between us. I wanted to believe him. It was too morbid to carry on with coffin-viewing like this. The man should be buried, under the ground with the rest of the dead—better yet, cremate him and let the breeze carry his ashes up there with those kites. China is so old with so many people that under



every brick is an unmarked grave. The dead don't go anywhere in China; they're just lying under our feet.

"Let's go back to the Cool Donkey," Alex said. "I'm getting tired." He stared at the ground and occasionally squinted back at the square. Alex's hangover had been trailing us all morning and finally caught him on the curb. I saw it coming: Like the pool table, Alex became a regular fixture in Xue's bar. He knew nearly every backpacker by name, where they came from and where they were going. He even had picked up a handful of Mandarin while flirting with the barmaids.

"But we haven't seen the Natural History Museum yet" I whined.

"It ain't going anywhere."

"Alex," I tried to calm down, "you were the one who wanted to get out and see the city. If you want a photo album full of drunks you shouldn't have left home." The truth was I was jealous of my brother's popularity.

"Excuse the fuck out of me for finding this sightseeing shit boring. I'm having more fun at the hotel."

"Is this the life you've settled for? Getting drunk and passing out wherever the hell you're at? I've been listening to your shit all day. Half the stories you tell end with 'and I woke up in a ditch with puke on my shirt.' What the fuck, Alex?"

"Mother fucker, you don't know shit about my life." Alex stood up and pointed a finger at me. "You don't know half as much as you think you do. You've been gone for ten fucking years. You don't understand that Mom's going fucking crazy. I saw her, Josh. I saw her hiding behind the bedroom door holding a kitchen knife, talking to herself. But you don't know this because you're never home, are you?"

My best answer was silence. I didn't want anymore of this conversation. Talking with Alex was like digging into the earth. Sooner or later, I'm going to dig up something I wished had stayed buried.

Alex walked off. I watched him crossing Tiananmen Square, then I got up and followed him south down Qianmen Daiji toward the National History Museum—it was the same direction Alex headed to the Cool Donkey. Soon I caught up with him, but we walked on opposite sides of the street and pointedly did not notice each other. Our lives had moved parallel to one another, never getting any closer to where we tried to go. He would lie, I would call him a liar; he would fuck up, and I would parent him. I was tired of fighting with him.

Alex strutted down the street, weaving between people like he was in a hurry. He held his lighter and checked his pockets, all of them, then grimaced. He changed direction and jogged across the street, holding his hand up to swerving traffic, and stopped in front of my face.

“I need money for cigarettes.”

“Where's my passport?”

“You promise you won't take off again?”

“No.”

He looked pissed. I lifted my shirt and pulled my money belt out of my trousers. I handed him a ten RMB note anyway. “Now come to the museum with me”

The Beijing Museum of Natural History had the care of a roadside attraction. Neglected, stuffed animals decorated rooms. A tiger lacked a glass eye (Alex stuck his finger in the empty socket and solemnly shook his head); a bear missing fur looked more like an old toy than the majestic beast it once was. Dinosaur bones crowded so close together that the skeletons were almost indiscernible. I didn't know if the museum was under renovation or simply had been abandoned. Had we not seen the small building next door Alex and I would have left the museum and never had given dead, displayed animals another thought.

A bored guard posted at the entrance kept children out. The one-room building, a little larger than a three car garage, fumigated a nauseous smell of formaldehyde. Alex only got two steps inside the door, ran out and puked.

I watched him dry heave over a thin puddle of vomit. "You going inside?" I asked. "Fuck no!" he said between heaves. "Are you?"

Just inside the door a skinned man bolted to an aluminum stand greeted me. Enclosed in a glass sarcophagus, the cadaver hung like cured meat. Taunt, purple muscles strapped around a yellow skeleton; his shriveled, rubbery organs seemed to be in their proper places. He hadn't trimmed his fingernails before he had died. Layers of cellophane shrouded the corpse's face, perhaps to protect the dead man's identity. It wasn't necessary. The face was skinned as well. Two round eyeballs stared at me through the plastic, and his mouth hung open as if he had died while screaming.

The Hall of Humans was a study of anatomy and oddity. Conjoined fetuses floated in glass jars. Large plastic tanks held parts of people: a single lung, half a face. The soft light behind the exhibits illuminated morsels floating in a yellow fluid like dust in a

sunbeam. I contemplated how long can chemicals preserve an organ before the flesh completely liquefies.

The centerpiece of the gallery was the horizontal glass coffin in the middle of the room. A hanging fluorescent light gave the woman's skin a plastic sheen. She lay with her hands on her side and her feet shoulder-width apart, completely naked except for the black gloves and black socks and the black bag over his face. Her breast plate had been sawed off to expose her deep red and mustard yellow organs, all neatly stacked just like an anatomical model. She looked like a wax doll. She, face hidden but chest and vagina open, was the anti-Mao. This woman was not even given a blanket. I wondered if she had donated her body for money or if she was an executed criminal. Except for the guard outside the door—he and Alex were smoking—I was the only living person in this room of people. I wanted to shatter the glass and rescue her. To have your body mutilated and displayed nude convinced me that I wanted to be cremated.

I left. I had seen enough dead things today.

“I was backpacking through Europe and had missed my connecting train in Hamburg. I had to wander around the city from one late-night café to the next until the next train left at five a.m. By the time I sat down on the train, I was so exhausted I knew I couldn’t stay awake long enough to get off at Copenhagen. Across from me sat a nun nose-deep in a Bible. I asked her to please wake me when the train arrived, but she didn’t speak English, so I showed her my ticket and said *schlafen, schlafen* and laid my head on my hands. She smiled—that was the only answer I could get out of her.

“Of course, I fell asleep. When I woke up I realized that not only had the train stopped, but it was completely empty. My first thought was that I had slept through my fucking stop again and would have to catch another train to take me back to the right station. But here’s where it gets weird. Though the passengers were gone, there were jackets, open magazines, half-drunk sodas all lying around the seats and tables. Luggage was still stowed in overhead compartments. Only the people were missing.”

Alex’s brow creased. I went on.

“I looked out the windows. It’s dark ‘cause the train was in a tunnel, and next to it was about four or five lanes of traffic, bumper to bumper as far as I could see. However, when I looked closer, I could see that all the cars were empty too.”

Alex straightened his back. “You didn’t see anybody?”

“Not a soul. I didn’t know what the hell was going on, but my instinct was to look for people. I can’t explain this, but I felt that if I could find other people, I’d be safe.

“Anyway, I start looking for people on the train, but after a few carriages didn’t find anyone, so got off. The exit door was between the train and the tunnel wall, so I head off in the only direction I could go. Usually, when we are disorientated or confuse, we figure

things out in just a few seconds—but about sixty seconds had elapsed since I woke up, and that is a hell of a long time not to know what the fuck is going on. My mind went into overdrive trying to rationalize what was happening, and the longer I was confused, the more extraordinary my explanations became. First, I thought there had been some kind of accident and everyone had evacuated their vehicles, but then why had no one woke me up? Do you remember that painting Mom had in her living room? The one of a city in mass chaos as cars slam into each other and a 747 crashes into a skyscraper?”

“Yeah, Jesus is standing on a cloud and all the souls are flying up out of the ground to him.”

“I thought that the Rapture had come while I was asleep. No shit. Jesus came and took all the righteous and I had slept through it. Hell, I was sitting across from a *nun*. She would have been the first to go.

“So I keep walking. I’m guessing two minutes had gone by since I woke up in this nightmare—and I *knew* I wasn’t dreaming. Then another explanation slides into my mind.”

Alex flicked his chin at me to continue. His hands were full with a beer and a cigarette, and he’d sunk too deep into the couch to move much else. We had about six large bottles of beer between us, most of which was in Alex’s stomach.

“Hell is not a big lake of fire that angels chuck souls into. I don’t believe in fire and brimstone and all that shit, but I could imagine years of roaming an earth with a population of one. Solitary confinement on a global scale. I thought that perhaps *I* had died—not the rest of the world—and was condemned to a planet of solitude where my only company was my own thoughts. My friends were my sins, my family my vices.

Once my mind found that explanation, it pushed all the others out. I walked along that tunnel and the more I thought, the more it made sense.

“Eventually, I came to a door in a wall. I pushed it opened and found a staircase that only went up. I climbed three floors, maybe four, taking steps three at a time. At the top of the stairs I found another door. I walked through it and into a shopping center. There were people everywhere. They’re carrying bags and walking from one store to the next doing their Sunday shopping. I watched a teenage boy sit down on a bench and put on a new pair of shoes straight from the box. I still didn’t know what the hell was going on, but I found some semblance of normalcy. I walked around this mall wide-eyed until I saw something that captured me completely. It was another door, this one with a window in it. Of all the things I expected to find on the other side, the ocean wasn’t one of them, spread out all around me.”

“You were on a ship?”

“When I had fallen asleep, the first four train cars had docked in the holding of a ferry. Everybody had left the train and went topside until the boat landed in Copenhagen.”

“Whoa...” Alex whispered. “The whole time you were on a ship and didn’t know it.”

I nodded. I didn’t tell my brother that I was waiting to find another door, the one marked “How the Fuck Alex Found His Way Out of My Imagination” so I could walk through it and chuckle at the apparent absurdity of what I had awoken up to. I watched Alex finish his drink and follow me outside to a bright day in Beijing. He moved just as I had pictured he would. His voice sounded as I had imagined all those years growing up as an only child. He had become popular at the Cool Donkey and I had met a lot of

people through him. He was real, and I was not dreaming. I had raked over every piece of logic my mind found to explain how my thoughts had taken corporal form. I reached for an undiscovered science, that maybe our minds exert some force on our environments. The only reason I did find was how I had managed to keep my shit under control; there was a comfort in talking to Alex that I shared with only one other human being on the planet, and I hadn't seen her in years. I didn't have to explain myself to Alex. I didn't have to rehearse the scripted small talk that burdens encounters with strangers. I trusted that sooner or later an explanation would come.

The café was idyllic, next to a lake on the edge of a *hutong* neighborhood. Traditional Chinese homes were now being bulldozed to make room for high rises. I was curious about the lives of multiple generations of families living in rooms built around a shared walled courtyard only to be dissipated to apartments scattered around the city. Across the street two old men fished out of Qiahia Lake. I unchained the bicycle from a post.

The bicycle I rented was not the Huffy I had growing up, but a bulky contraption with baskets and fenders. It took a lot of energy to pedal, wasn't fast, and riding it made me feel my age. But, it was huge and Alex had no problem riding on the handlebars with his feet in the basket. We raced down narrow streets with high walls deeper into the *hutong*. The streets veered off at all angles. Some streets were wide enough for one calash at a time and on other streets we had to duck under passing clotheslines. A person would have had to grown up here not to get lost. The neighborhood seemed to have been built as convenience dictated—no street signs, only walls and people. People of indiscernible ages sat on small stools in the street doing nothing but thinking. We waved at the stares



we got. Ahead, a mass of steel and tires and book bags came at us, two dozen uniformed school children riding bikes clogged the street from one side to the other. I steered toward a side, my front wheel turning spastically as I struggled for balance at such a slow speed. They passed through like a school of fish, parting around us, never slowing. A teenage boy rode his bike without hands, too busy texting on a cell phone to even look up. A girl rolled by standing on her pedals with her little brother on the seat. The boy looked at my face as he passed and flashed two fingers in a V.

“You want to race them?” I asked Alex.

“Let’s not get ourselves killed.”

We rode on farther and soon a gaggle of school children on bicycles rode abreast of us screaming “Hello! Hello!”

“You know,” Alex said as I swerved from a charging dog, “I’ve been in this city nearly two weeks and have yet seen one fortune cookie.”

“Let’s race them. If they try to pass us, you could leap aboard their bike and set it adrift.”

“That story you told me,” he said. “About the train. Did it really happen?”

“Yes. Most of it. I added small details about the mall to give it verisimilitude.”

Alex laughed. “I don’t know what that word means, but it sounds to me that you add a little spice to your stories.” He stretched his arms wide apart to measure an invisible fish. We lost some balance but recovered it before crashing into a five-year-old boy on a bike twice his size.

We rode the bike across Beijing as the afternoon drifted into evening. This was how we had spent most of the hours since Alex arrived: We divided the days between

exploring the city and our past, swapping stories about childhood and arguing over the details. We talked about Buck McKenzie and how much of a big, puckering asshole he was and how he had tormented me through most of junior high. Buck had worshipped ninjas and always carried throwing stars. He was also missing a front tooth from a mishap with his nunchuks. When I started to come home regularly with bruises and scrapes, my father gave me a bat. My mother read obscure Bible passages that I didn't understand. As I got older, I left my house less, and spent most of my time in my room. I never had many friends anyway.

I pedaled faster, the fifty pound bike gaining momentum as Alex and I raced along traffic.

"Where are we going?" Alex yelled over his shoulder.

"For a bite to eat." I stopped the bike at the lighted street stalls of the night market on Dang' an men Dajie. The street had the air of a carnival, full of tourists snapping pictures. They posed in groups, one person rotating out to hold the cameras like penguins keeping warm in a colony. Headless chicks, scorpions, and squid decorated the stalls in brightly color spreads that, from afar, could pass as candy.

Alex leapt off the handlebars.

"You dragged me here to eat bugs?"

"Look," I said, "consider it a dare. It won't kill you."

Alex grimaced as I handed him a kebab of four beetles skewered from ass to head. I held my own stick of impaled grasshoppers. The vendor had dipped and scorched them in oil and fire before handing them over. The grasshoppers were charred and brittle, not as appetizing as they had been displayed.

“All right,” I said and poised the stick near my mouth, “on three.”

“Why do I get the fuckin’ roaches?”

“One. Two. Three!”

I bit the grasshopper in half and pulled it off with my teeth. The inside was mush, but the legs were stiff and stuck between my incisors. As kids Alex and I entertained ourselves by throwing bugs into the bug light that hung on our back porch. The bug light was a phantom lighthouse. Its ghostly blue light beckoned across the backyard, and when plugged in over night, left a two-inch high pile of bug corpses. We had broken off every other slat on the guard so grasshoppers and cicadas could be thrown inside. I fantasized that my captured grasshoppers were Buck McKenzie. We watched them haplessly touch the wire meshes; sparks arced, popping two thousand volts into a creature weighing a penny. It takes a lot to kill a bug. You either have to crush it flat or drown it in insecticide. Gnats exploded like popcorn, but grasshoppers writhed as white-blue bolts crackled around them until they started to smoke. It was an acrid blue smell that never left my nose. My grasshopper tasted like that.

“Oh, man,” Alex said as he tried to chew the beetle without using his tongue.

The plan was to swap sticks, but Alex had eaten enough. I ate the rest of his beetle. The inside was a dirty yellow, but otherwise it tasted salty and charred like the grasshopper. We washed our mouths out but we were still spitting for the next ten minutes. Alex complained of something stuck in his teeth.

We strolled along the street stalls debating why we had paid for the privilege of eating bugs. Alex and I talked of this and other things as we wandered through the crowd. I knew that the city was beginning to get to me. I had been here for nearly two

weeks—ten days with Alex—and was getting restless. I wanted to move on. We were coming up on the low season: The Cool Donkey was slowing down. For the last two nights Alex and I had shared the dorm room with only a few other people. Alex saw me thinking and asked me, “Are you ready to come home yet?”

“I still want to see the Wall.”

“Hey,” Alex said smiling, “when we get back home we should get an apartment together. I told you I had to find a new place when I get back. Too many people were coming to my door askin’ to buy. I tell them I’m done with that shit but they don’t listen. I want to move to the Villa with all the Mexicans. Nobody speaks English there, so nobody can ask me for shit.” He had lit a cigarette and gave a long cough punctuated with smoke. “Anyway, I already got a couch, a table—the basics. I even got a regular Nintendo and fifty-four games. We could team up on *Contra* again. Do you still remember the thirty-man code?” He held up his hand and his thumbs rapidly pressed imaginary buttons, as if by reflex. “Up-up-down-down-left-right-left-right-bee-aye-bee-aye-select-start. That’s for two players.” He smiled again.

I shook my head. “I’m not going back to the States.”

Alex looked at me as if I spoke a foreign language.

I hesitated before I spoke. “I’m looking for something....” Alex insisted, so I told him. I had never told anyone about it before, not even Oma, though I didn’t having anyone to tell anyway. It was a legend—mostly bullshit—but it might have been partially true at one time. “I first heard of it in Romania. It’s a little different each time someone tells it. Back in the Seventies some hippies got together and drove from Marrakech to Katmandu, stopping at everyplace in between. One long, single file of cars

and buses rolling down the back roads of the world. They picked up others, adding more vagabonds and vans on the way. When they got to Katmandu, they kept going. When they came to an ocean, they crossed it on ferries. *Allegedly*, they're still driving around out there, somewhere, elusive like the yeti. I've never met anyone who knew anyone who had seen it for themselves, but once in a while I catch stories about a heard of buses popping up on Christopher Street Day in Berlin or the Chinese New Year in Hong Kong. That's how these legends originate. But don't ask me how they pay for gas."

"Is this what you've been looking for all these years?"

"To be honest, I don't think its even true. There's nothing logistical to keep it from happening, but it sounds too fantastic. They may cross borders in Europe hassle-free, but what about entering Russia or China? They don't just let foreigners drive anywhere they want."

"Maybe they sold everything they own to pay for it. If you only need money for food and gas, it can't cost too much."

"But eventually people wouldn't get along. It's hard enough to find someone compatible for a cross-country road trip, let alone living in a van for years with a whole bunch of fuckers. Only in legends and wars do people live in close quarters like that for any significant length of time."

"What would you do if found it?" Alex said.

"I'd first make sure I wasn't dreaming. Then I'd ask for a ride."

"Now you're going to tell me you don't believe in Santa Clause," Alex said.

"I'm telling you everybody loves a ghost story. It's just a legend like Big Foot or UFO's. Something you don't believe but would love to be proven wrong."

Alex was quiet for a rare moment. I could see he was digesting what I had just told him. Then he spoke unusually slow, as if he were choosing his words with great care.

“Man,” he said, “I know there’s a lot of stuff I haven’t experienced in this world and probably won’t live long enough to do anyway. I work at a plastic factory and I drink too much. But, if I can fall asleep with a full belly, next to someone who cares for me, then the rest is cake. Gypsy caravan or no gypsy caravan.” He tossed his spent cigarette butt to the ground and stepped on it with finality.

I gave a long look at my brother, deeply impressed by this unexpected insight. I had too often discredited him for whittling down complex ideas to absolutes, a device used to win over emotion rather than intellect. Yet there was something beautiful about its simplicity. I had thought my brother’s world small enough to measure in hand spans, or that he suffered from a narrow-mindedness forged from living in one place too long. Yet he knew what he wanted. I didn’t see any plan unfolding behind my experiences.

“Alex, we got to go.”

“Five more minutes.”

“I’ve already given you twenty more minutes. We’re going to miss the bus.”

Alex sat up and dropped his feet over the bed. He sat there with his hands resting on the bed’s hard edge, his mouth hanging open. The crust that cemented his eyes broke apart when he rubbed them.

I stood dressed and watched him. His head turned side to side, searching the shadows between the beds until he found a shoe. He slipped it on and stared absently into space.

“Alex.”

In the dim light he could be six again. In those dark mornings before school, Alex and I dressed in front of the propane heater (we wouldn’t get out of bed unless we knew it was on). I would have my pants and shirt on and look over to see Alex staring off into space still in his underwear with one sock on. At night, Alex rocked his head to fall asleep, so the next morning I had to comb the tangles out of his knotted hair. His eyes held a vacancy and even when his head pulled back on a stubborn tangle, he would only half close his eyes. Alex sleepwalked a lot as a child, and I often wondered if he was sleepwalking his way through the mornings and waking up at lunch thinking it had all been a dream.

All of last night’s cigarettes came out in one long coughing fit. He dredged something up from his throat and swallowed it.

We arrived at the outskirts of the village an hour past noon, after taking a bus and then haggling a driver with a van. Alex slept the whole ride.

The van dropped us off at a roadside eatery. The driver agreed on a time to pick us up the next day (this was the closest the highway came to the village). Here an elderly woman sold noodles and charged one Yuan to use the restroom behind her kitchen. A thick gray cloud buzzed around the outhouse, and suddenly the wind changed directions, bringing with it the smell of liquid shit. I took as much air as my lungs could hold, and we walked inside.

It was a cement building with one long, three-foot trough that stretched lengthwise in the middle of the room. At one end a man squatted with his ass over the edge and watched us while smoking a cigarette. Three feet from the edge was as close as I dared, forcing an arc of piss into the ditch. Shit clung all along the edge, and flies—thousands of them—crawled all over my face and hands and penis. It was dark, but I imagined flies leaving tiny shitprints all over me. My chest burned and I strained, my arc aimed higher and splattered into the abyss below, my chest burning. The old man held his stare at us, smoking, flies crawling across his bald head. I finished first and waited for Alex, then we ran outside and around to the front of the eatery before sucking in great lungfuls of air.

“That was the fucking, foulest bathroom I’d ever seen,” Alex said.

“I dare you to go ask that man for a cigarette.”

We sat at a table outside under a tarpaulin and ate noodles. The woman also rented backpacks and sleeping bags. I wasn’t expecting this; I thought we were heading off the beaten path by going hours outside the city rather than taking the hostel sightseeing tour like most tourists. That wall was infested with trashy Great Wall t-shirts, beggars, and



handicap ramps. I wanted to take Alex to a section of wall far from that—and spend the night on it. When I waved the sleeping bags away and told Alex we would rough it on the ground he gave me such a look that I had to ask the old woman how much she rented her equipment for. We rented two sleeping bags.

“What is that? A diary?” Alex said as he finished his noodles. He meant my notebook I was writing in.

“Their just notes. Things I have trouble remembering.”

“Like what?”

“Like stuff about what I told you earlier.” Alex saw the map I drawn in my notebook and asked about it. “A man I met in Vietnam gave it to me. He said his friend had gone looking for...that caravan, too. That was three years ago. The day I met him he got a postcard in the mail. All that was written on it was that map—no instructions, nothing.”

“What else did he tell you?”

“Nothing else really. I had overheard him talking and I approached him later that night when he was alone and asked him to see the postcard. He said he would show it for me for two hundred dollars. I borrowed it long enough to copy it, and gave it back.”

“Where does the map go to?”

“Here,” I said. “It comes to the Great Wall.”

“You paid \$200 for a map? How do you know he didn’t show you something he made up himself?”

“I don’t. But I wanted the map very much.”

The village lay a few kilometers down a dirt road that flared dust with every breeze. On our right, a mountain took all our view, but on the left trees rolled out to the horizon. It was cooler here, and cleaner than the city, and I felt very awake.

We rounded the edge of the mountain and found that the road side-winded into a cluster of small homes a kilometer away.

And behind the village, crowning the top of the mountain ridge, was the Great Wall.

Alex and I stopped. The Wall ran along the top of the ridge, snaking over the mountains and over the edge of the earth. Every couple of mountains or so a watchtower crowned a mountain top. It was too far away to put it to scale, like trying to measure the size of a cloud.

There was a flash next to me. Alex was squinting through a small disposable camera. "Damn, Josh, that's really it." He snapped another picture.

We walked in silence until we crossed a small bridge and entered the village. There were no cars on the street, only children and lean, skittish dogs. The children had stopped playing and stared at us. Two little girls whispered to each other. The braver one yelled "Hello."

"Hello, ladies!" I said and smiled.

The children returned smiles and drew a little closer. I extended my hand to the two girls and wondered if they would know what to do with it. The bigger one slapped it. I reached down and grabbed her hand and made an exaggerated handshake. She giggled and began practicing it with her friend. Soon all the kids were shaking hands with each other chanting "Hello, hello."

"How are you?" Alex threw in. "Say, *How are you.*"

The two Chinese girls smiled at each other and made a gesture that they hadn't understood Alex.

"How. Are. You?" he said. "Repeat."

The girls smiled again at each other, then in unison spread their eyelids wide with their fingers so that their eyes might fall out and roll away if they leaned over, and mockingly said, "Dow dah do? Dow dah do?" They cackled manically.

Soon all the children had their hands to their faces chanting "Dow dah do? Dow dah do?" I was laughing so hard I wiped my eyes on my shirt.

In the center of the village the road divided, one trail bent right and up toward the mountains. It was the only road we saw aimed at the Wall. The road was narrow, wide enough for one ox and cart to pass at a time. We sidestepped fresh mounds of animal dung. Hovels hugged the street with doors that opened right into the dirt road. Old, weathered faces stared at us from open doors and windows.

We followed the road up until it faded into a loose collection of rocks. Then there was no road at all.

"All we have to do is go up," I told Alex.

We navigated through trees, a few of which had bloomed. The trees stood like soldiers in formation. Then we passed two dirt piles with rough headstones on them.

"Josh," Alex called after me. He was breathing heavily. "Are we going to run into that guy who sold you the map?"

"No," I said. "He thinks it's all bullshit."

We pushed for a saddle on the ridge. My legs burned as the ground became steeper.

We came to a cluster of cherry trees, each tree bursting into shades of pink and white and amethystine. Their colors were so bright, explosive. As we walked silently through the grove a wind blew, showering petals on top of us. The petals fell slowly, flipping end over end. I lifted my face and felt them brush my cheeks. Petals flowed over us and painted the ground. It was so beautiful I almost thought God had something to do with it.

“Give me some water,” Alex said. We took off our packs (Alex was wearing his duffle bag like a backpack) and lay on the ground, watching the petals cascade upon us when the wind blew. I could see the sun peeking through it all.

Alex was sitting up with the water in his lap. He held a hand out and watched it slowly fill with petals. He had changed so little over the years. Memories spilt into the present like a broken floodgate: Alex and I spending afternoons searching clover patches for charms (we never found one), Alex and I burying one another in piles of dried leaves. We grabbed our packs and headed for the wall. There was no trail to the top, just a general suggestion provided by the landscape. We crawled over Volkswagen-size boulders, mindful of the weight on our backs as we second checked footholds. We weren't talking, just listening to sounds of small rocks bouncing down the mountain. I kept my head down but occasionally stole a peek at the summit: twenty minutes of climbing and the Wall looked no closer. I climbed over one rock then another, first impressed at my own agility, then aware of my fatigue as I moved slower and slower. All other thoughts slipped from my mind as I pushed myself up the mountain. I became all arms and legs.

I looked back to see Alex twenty yards below. He had abandoned his pack and kept only the water.

“Fuck that bag,” he panted when I reached him. His black t-shirt was wet with petals stuck to it. I could see his bag lying only a few yards down the mountain and I told him to rest and then keep climbing. After a rest, he got up. I watched him stumble over and between boulders with one hand clutching the water bottle and the other guarding against falls. He slipped than mumbled “fuck.”

I fetched Alex’s pack and climbed up the mountain. On the way I shouldered my pack that I had left when I scrambled down to Alex. Alex and I reached the Wall at the same time, both of us panting and dripping, unable to communicate with anything more than nods. The Wall was humongous, at least twelve meters to the top. Bricks upon bricks followed the contour of the ridge. We stood in a saddle, the Wall in front of us climbed up and over the tops of mountains. There were no doors and I thought that somehow we might be on the wrong side.

Alex held his head up staring at the Wall. Then he bent over, hands on knees, and splattered noodles all over the ground.

“Fuck, I feel better.” Alex sat with his back against the Wall, his bag at his feet. I stood and ran my hand along the Wall. It is hard to grasp the antiquity of such a thing. It was older than anybody I knew, older than anybody they had known, older than anybody anybody had ever known.

“How do we get to the top?” Alex asked.

“I could stand on your shoulders....”

“Stop it.”

We marched along the wall looking for something to let us up. We walked with our hands brushing bricks, coating our fingers in dust. Over the centuries bricks had fallen

off the Wall, scattered about the ground and had rolled down the mountain. All these years of being a part of something, now they lay all over the ground. I picked up a piece. I liked the weight of it in my hand.

I put the brick in my bag for a keepsake.

“Don’t do that,” Alex told me.

“Why? It’s just a souvenir. Hell, everybody in that village down there has them in their houses and gardens.”

“It’s sacrilegious. Leave it where it lays. If everybody wanted to take a piece home there wouldn’t be any left.”

“Alex, it’d take a billion people....”

“China’s got a billion people, Josh.”

Alex had snubbed me like a cigarette. I dropped the brick to the ground and walked on until we found a small door and steps to the top.

The Great Wall of China lay east and west across the top of the mountain range, zigzagging over the shape of the earth, dropping between mountain tops but stretching further than I could see, all the way to the Gobi Desert thousands of miles away. All the pictures, all the movies I had ever seen fell so short. I stood on that wall and dropped all my burdens and watched them roll off the sides like pennies, hardly worth chasing after.

“Josh,” Alex said while standing next to me. “This is *awesome*.” I had never heard him put such weight on a single word. “It’s...majestic.”

In front of us a giant shovelful of landscape had been scooped out and filled with a reservoir. The wind blew strong and cold across the lake, smashed into the precipice below, and shot straight up into our faces. The Wall was more than a rampart. Its

architects had designed it as an elevated road to make communication and the delivery of supplies more efficient; but years of neglect left small trees and shrubs sprouting through every crack, hastening the wall's degradation. Several crenels had eroded away and fallen into the cold lake far below, making the Wall a dangerous place to trek at night.

"Okay." I took out my map. "We're here—see the lake?—and if we follow the Wall this way we should come out at this paved road that will lead us back to the canteen."

Alex studied the map. "All these lines look the same to me. Is this a road a river?"

"Don't worry about that. It's not important. Look, the Wall intersects the road...."

"Where are we sleeping tonight?"

"Look." I held the map closer to his eyes. "See these squares? They're watchtowers. We're looking for that one." I pointed at the mountains in front of us. Miles away a small building perched atop the Wall. It reminded me of a snake that swallowed a giant block. "Trust me."

Alex took the map from my hands. "What's all this shit written on the back?" He had flipped the paper over and saw my neat handwriting: block letters with little space between words. What is this, a story?"

I had reached for the paper but Alex had held it away as he read. "It's just a piece of scrap paper I tore from my journal." I snatched the notebook back from Alex's hand.

"If you're writing something about me," Alex said, "I have the right to read it."

I picked up my pack. "We got to hurry if we're going to find a place to camp before dark."

We marched on the Wall, watching shadows grow longer as the sun dropped from yellow to orange and on its way to red. The Wall inclined thirty degrees, forcing us to

clasp saplings while we caught our breath. The landscape grew dark and flat as shadows flooded the cracks and holes. We reached the top of the hill and found the remains of a watchtower: two freestanding arches over a mound of broken bricks. The wind blew stronger, as if on cue, kicking dust in our faces.

“Josh, please don’t tell me this is camp.”

“No, no. There are complete watchtowers.” I held my map in the air to catch a few faint rays, “...a few more hundred meters. Look, you can see them from here.”

“I don’t see anything.”

“We got to hurry. We don’t want to be scrambling on this thing after dark.”

But the sun had rolled behind the mountains sooner than I had planned.

“What do you mean make a torch?” Alex said. I hadn’t brought a flashlight.

“Find a stick. I’ll put a sock on it and we’ll have a torch.”

Alex stared at me for a few long seconds, and then dropped his bag and crouched to the ground.

“Don’t go near the edge,” I cautioned.

We found a stick. The lighter burned only a small flame, not hot enough to catch the wood.

“Wait,” Alex said. I could hear bottles clink as he dug through his pack. “Let me see that.” My eyes were adjusting to the starlight and I saw Alex open a bottle and pour something over the stick. It had a sharp, flammable smell that I almost recognized.

The lighter flame pounced on the wet sock and flared like a struck match. “Fire!” Alex yelled and held the torch about his head. The flames flapped like flags in a storm.

“What the hell are you carrying a bottle of vodka for?”



“You mean other than saving our asses? It helps me sleep at night.” He waved the torch in circle eights. It was the only light for miles.

“You were suppose to buy food. Do you have any water?”

“Shit, this has all the substance I need.” He stuffed the vodka back into his duffle bag.

“What the hell are you going to eat?” I asked.

He held out a can. It had a pull top lid and a picture of corn on it. “I didn’t recognize any of that other shit in the store. I figure they can’t fuck up corn too much.” He tossed the can in his bag and tried to wipe something sticky off his hand with his pant leg.

I felt more in control after Alex’s arm tired and he gave me the torch. Shadows ran away as the light slid and slipped along the Wall.

We came upon the remains of another watchtower. Only two walls and a corner stood. From the main wall a small subsidiary wall forked out like a tributary. This small wall had crumbled lengthwise, the surviving half overgrown with trees and brush. Their roots had burrowed deep into the Wall and slowly had splintered the bricks into dust. In the starlight we could see the silhouette of a sturdy watchtower, the roof topped with leafless trees that clawed at the starry night above.

“That’s it,” I told Alex. I could only see his face, the rest of him disappearing into the dark. “This is where the map tells us to go.” I went first, holding back branches that scratched us and snagged our shirts so Alex could pass. We stomped small trees and muscled through foliage while holding the torch away from anything it might want to jump on.

The Wall had deteriorated away several yards in front of the tower door, leaving the entrance a full person higher than our outstretched arms. But a portion of the Wall remained under one of the tower windows. We hastily stacked stones under it.

I pulled myself up the window's ledge and sat on the wide sill. The tower was dark—I couldn't see the floor, only a black pillar in front of me.

Alex handed me the torch. Over the years dirt had blown into the tower and filled it up like an hourglass.

I pulled Alex up and we left our packs by the window. We moved as a pair, me holding the torch and Alex at my heels.

The watchtower was laid out like all the other towers. Broad pillars supported archways, three on one side and three on the other separated by a corridor. Above the corridor a large hole opened to a second storey that had rotted away long ago to make room for the advancing vegetation. Every wall had two windows, each near a corner.

I searched the tower twice and found nothing. I was sure this was the place.

Alex piled sticks under the open ceiling. Soon the pile burned orange. He slowly fed it twigs until the fire grew large and warmed the tower with flickering light.

"You know what this reminds me of?" Alex said. "Dungeons & Dragons."

"How so?" I was still searching the walls with the torch convinced I had overlooked something.

"You know, hiking ruins by torchlight. Living out of a backpack." Then he tagged on, "Only if we had some monsters to slay." Alex brushed sand off his empty sleeping bag and slipped into it, a red bulky bag that took up half his pack. "Fuck it's cold." Alex squirmed in his red sleeping bag, making his bed of dirt.

Much of our childhood was spent playing games deep in imagination. Our parents didn't care that we rearranged the furniture in our room and tacked sheets to the walls to make castles and caves for days at a time. When we got older, Alex and I got into role-playing games. We spent our summers in my bedroom slaying monsters and saving beautiful damsels. My mom had become concerned when someone at church told her those games were devil-worship. When we were at school she had dug out all our books and character sheets and burned them in the backyard.

"I don't think there are any more monsters out there," I said.

"Did you think you were going to find something here?" Alex asked.

"Yeah. I was kind of hoping to."

"Don't give up," Alex chirped. He rolled away from the fire and soon was snoring.

I woke to the wind rushing through the tower like water through storm drains. I drew my legs up to my chest to keep warm. The fire had died to a few lambent embers on gray and black ash. It was too cold to leave my bag and find firewood. Besides, dawn was only a few hours away. The howl against the old stones sounded louder now that I was awake and cold. The wind blew and rubbed my face. Every night abrasive dirt wears a little of the tower away, but at the same time fills it up with sand. One day the walls will erode and collapse, releasing a houseful of dirt over the Wall's sides. Drifts of dirt fell into the folds of my sleeping bag and caked my untucked hair, coursing the wisps to straw. Rumors of bodies buried in the bricks of the Great Wall might be true, and as I slept they crawled out from the dirt and whispered in my ear, trying to tell me something that I didn't understand.

I pillowed a lump of dirt. The acrid smell of the ground reminded me of a cellar. A deep cellar with the door left open but too high to reach. Agoraphobia lurked about the spacious tower, pushing me deeper into my sleeping bag. I shivered uncontrollably.

There was an echo of a rock falling. Twilight poured through the tower's windows and open roof, but it wasn't enough to rid the shadows that hung in the archways. Another rock fell. I peered into the dark from my bag suddenly wondering if it was too late to feign sleep. I opened my throat to muffle my raspy breathing.

Peeping through the archway, I saw a figure pass behind a pillar. I suddenly felt like I had been pushed out a window. The figure crossed the corridor into the archway beside me.

“Who goes there?!” My voice exploded into the dark.

“Josh!” Alex hissed. “It's me. Stop hollering.”

“What the hell are you doing?” I hadn’t noticed the flat sleeping bag next to me.

“Josh!” Alex hissed again. “There’s somebody outside!”

Alex and I crawled to the watchtower window that we had climbed through only hours before. We peeked over the sill. The sky was bright with stars over a black landscape. I couldn’t see what Alex was pointing at.

“There,” he whispered, “next to the tall tree.” The tree stood where the auxiliary wall lead to our watchtower and the main wall diverged, about two hundred yards away. Its thin, bare branches reached up to the sky.

“I don’t see anything. Your eyes are bad anyway, so you probably saw—” I saw something move behind the tree. It was tall like a man and seemed to be peeking around the trunk.

“It moved! It moved!” Alex whispered.

“I saw it.” A villager had probably followed us up here. Alex and I watched for a full minute without a word. We didn’t see anyone else, so concluded that he was alone.

“Should we sneak up on him and force him to answer a few questions?” Alex proposed.

“That would never work. He’d see us leave the tower—this is the only way out unless you got some rope. And he probably doesn’t speak English anyway.”

“Why is he just waiting there?”

“Curious I guess. He can’t wait there too long. He doesn’t have a fire and he’ll freeze his ass off soon.”

“He’s just standing there by that tree....”

I admit that I was getting freaked out. Alex and I discussed the matter in whispers, even though the man could not possibly have heard us.

“What if he tries to come in?” Alex asked.

“If he’s cold he needs to go elsewhere.” There were plenty of stones and sticks lying around the tower. He wouldn’t get in unless he really wanted to.

Alex and I sat shivering by the window a little while longer, and Alex finally returned to his bag. I threw mine around my shoulders as I kept watching. I understood why two foreigners camping on the Wall would attract attention. He was probably just keeping an eye on us. Yet, he seldom moved, standing motionless for great lengths of time like a sentry that fades into the background. At times my eyes lost him, and I frantically surveyed the trees and shrubs to find him again. Though I was cold, I found it hard to watch a motionless landscape without my mind drifting to faraway places and faraway times. The smell of the tower reminded me of the cellar in our backyard. Our storm cellar was a dark and dead place I’d go only on a dare. It had sat in the corner of the backyard as long as I could remember. My father had been ambitious before I was born and dug a hole in the backyard large enough to drop a car into, poured concrete walls around it, but didn’t know what he was doing and with the first heavy rains of spring the cellar filled with water. It smelled like a drained pond. Stagnant water covered the floor and bottom steps, but it was black and dark and Alex and I thought it might be ten feet deep. Anything we never wanted to be found again we tossed into the storm cellar: the wooden spoon Mom used to beat us with, something we stole and later regretted. Once I was brave enough to venture down the first few steps with a stick to see how deep the water really was, but something had moved in the water and sent me running. I told Alex

what I saw and mustered up enough courage to prowl up to the cellar door armed with two-pound rocks. I pressed my finger to my lips and pulled the door open. The storm cellar was still as usual, the water perfectly flat like black glass. We shielded our eyes with our free hand and peered into the dark corners and saw nothing. I took the steps down to the water. The daylight behind me cast my reflection on the dark surface. I could see Alex's face over my shoulder; a few water bugs skipped across our reflections and sent small ripples through our faces. Alex's gaze suddenly fixed on something in the water.

It shot out of the reflection and struck the step below my feet. Water splashed into my face and open mouth as I screamed. I threw my rock at the water and scrambled outside. Alex slammed the door shut behind me and we ran back inside the house. My shirt was wet and reeked. Years later I would explain this event as a frightened snake, but for the rest of our childhood Alex swore he had seen a hand reach up at me from the water. We stayed clear of the storm cellar after that. On summer nights when we slept with the windows opened, sometimes we could hear the wind blow through the air vent on the storm cellar. It made a moan that sounded like our names.

I had lost sight of the figure by the tree again, and even after fifteen minutes of straining my eyes, I couldn't find him. I waited another hour, but fell asleep next to the window.

The cold sucked the heat from my sleeping bag as soon as I unzipped it. Sunlight seeped between the eastern peaks, but the cold would haunt the tower a few more hours. I stacked logs too big to have fallen from any tree growing on the tower roof—proof that others had been here before us. My hands shook as I held the lighter under a pile of leaves. The leaves burned slow like a forgotten cigarette.

“You should try that map of yours,” Alex said from his bag. I didn’t know he was awake. “Put it to better use.”

Smoke drifted into my face. I wiped my eyes with my upper arm, never taking my thawing hands from the heat. Flames clinched around the logs and sent ants running amok with nowhere to go. The long unzipping of a sleeping bag precluded Alex’s appearance: a denim jacket hiding a man, its upturned collar protecting a face. He was a stick figure with a jacket drawn on. He’d gotten the jacket in the ninth grade assuming he would fill it in over the coming years. It had been a deep stiff blue new but had faded and frayed like everything else he ever had.

I raked a few coals with a stick and boiled water in the blue steel mug I carried. After the first few bubbles I wrapped a handkerchief around the handle and stirred in instant coffee. It tasted a little like smoke. Alex didn’t want coffee, choosing vodka instead to warm himself. He huddled at the fire’s edge now with a sleeping bag over his shoulders. In the fire, ants ran back and forth on a burning log carrying possessions above their heads. They bumped into each other and gave instructions as the fire followed them. They were doomed. I left the fire for the icy sill of a tower window, carrying the hot mug close to me like something precious, and gazed over the saw-tooth landscape. The wall followed the mountains like the bony spine of a sleeping dragon.



A camera flashed.

“That’s the next cover of *National Geographic*, man.” Alex dropped the camera into his front pocket. Alex turned his back to the fire like he was on a spit. “You were talking again in your sleep.”

“What did I say?”

“You were mumbling. I couldn’t hear you.”

I took a sip of instant coffee. The coffee came premixed with cream and sugar. All I had to do was provide a mug and hot water. The coffee tasted more artificial flavor than anything else, a chemical metaphor of its real-life counterpart.

I unwrapped my handkerchief from my mug and tied it to my head. It was warm—a little heat can go a long way. Alex looked into the fire like there was something in it he wanted to pick up. He got as close to the fire as he could without burning himself.

Together we shook the dirt from our sleeping bags and packed everything. I stomped the fire out and kicked dirt over the cinders. Then we left the tower and traveled back to the main wall. I decided to march along the rest of the wall until it came to the road again—hopefully, by the noodle shop, if the map could be trusted.

We had hiked only a short way when Alex began complaining of something poking him in his back. He still humped the duffle bag on his back with the carry straps wrapped in socks to pad his shoulders. He dropped the bag and rummaged through it until he pulled the vodka bottle out like a cork. For a moment, he seemed vexed as to what to do with it. He took a swig and offered me the bottle. I declined. Alex shrugged and repacked his bag, then slid it on again and gave me a thumb up. Twice this morning he had slipped and fell on his ass. His landings had left powdery butt prints on his jeans.

The wall dipped then steeply ascended into narrow steps. We took deep knee lunges from one step to the next, climbing more of a ladder than a flight of stairs. I hugged the wall close enough that my exhalations puffed clouds of dirt. Over my shoulders I watched Alex climb. The duffle bag had shifted his center of gravity, and his moves were now slow and thoughtful. I had a horrific vision of him falling backwards and bouncing down the wall. The steps were at least half a millennium old; no telling how many people had mortally slipped off them. When I reached the top, my mouth tasted like chalk from all the dust I had breathed in.

“Shit,” Alex gasped. “Wait.” He let the duffle bag fall and rubbed his shoulders. The peak supported a dismal tower: a third of the structure had rolled off and lay in rubble at the bottom of the mountain. Looking back over the wall we had just clambered up, I felt a little proud. It was a steepness only appreciated from a mountain top.

But the wall before us was more precarious. It skirted a cliff, and the wall between peaks had been severed as if a giant wrecking ball had swung through it. For us to continue we would have to climb down the amputated end of the wall and the forty-foot cliff. Mistakes made in inches had consequences of fathoms.

“Look,” Alex said. He only had air for monosyllables. Footprints of various sizes, of various boots, tracked across the tower floor. We hadn’t seen anyone all morning.

“Hikers,” I answered. “Or ghosts.” I looked again down the cliff but saw no bodies. “Either way, they’re gone.” The tracks were protected from wind by low walls. The people who made them could have passed through here days ago. If both of us got hurt, it could be a wait before help hiked by.

I went first, Alex a noon shadow's length behind me as we shuffled the wall with our arms out from our sides. Footholds had eroded away to lumps and hollows filled with gravel. Our feet slid like old parking breaks, and rocks that had rested on the wall for centuries rolled off with each step.

The fall on my right was only fifteen feet, and on my left the cliff. "If we start to slide, we should steer to the right." I pointed to the shallow drop. My moves were slow as if I balanced on a stack of chairs.

"Steer to the right?" Alex was sitting on his ass for traction. "Fuck this. I'm going back." He turned back up the wall, crawled up three feet, and fell flat on his belly, slipping four feet down the wall. Little rocks rolled down the sides of the wall.

"Fuck!" he yelled.

I squatted. The wall was about five feet wide here, and three times that to the end. "It's not a far drop," I said. "We can make it to the end."

"I can't fucking move." Alex was on all fours like he'd been doing pushups.

Both sides of the wall were lined with busted bricks and rocks. Nothing flat to dissipate impact, but jagged edges that would hit like a dozen sledgehammers. From the tower the wall had appeared navigable. I thought of the tracks crossing back and forth. Had everyone else turned back? When I lifted a foot the other shifted and sent a landslide of sand down. I grabbed at air and fell on my ass.

"Josh!"

"I'm okay." Alex couldn't turn to see me. "I have a plan. Put your left foot on that brick right there...." Alex stretched his leg out and touched the tip of his sneaker to the brick. "Now reach up—"

The brick came out of the wall like a loose tooth. Alex scraped down the wall on his stomach spread-eagle, his hands raking for holds. I grabbed the duffle bag as he slid by. A strap broke and the two came apart. The bag split open and flung out folded underwear and the vodka bottle. Alex kept sliding, breaking fingernails against stone. His knee whacked an outcropped brick and flipped him on his back. He smashed into stacked bricks at the bottom of the slope—coming to a stop—but knocking debris down the cliff. An avalanche of dust and pebbles settled on top of him. The bottle tumbled down, clinking but not breaking, and flitted past Alex’s open hand. He feebly reached for it, but the bottle nosedived forty feet over the cliff to a crash.

Alex was still on his back when I finally got to him. Dust had covered him white, his ashy hair trailed away from him. His pants were ripped and exposed a bright, bleeding knee. Alex lay there, breathing hard, as he lifted his upper body and looked over the ledge. He seemed to stare into something deeper than the cliff. Slowly he climbed off the wall—he didn’t want any help—while I collected his belongings.

He was staring over the ledge again when I wetted my handkerchief.

“My pants,” he said as I wiped his face. Blood and dust came off revealing the man underneath.

“I can fix that.” I peered over the ledge at the shattered bottle. It resembled spit in a sandbox.

“My bottle,” he said.

“Gone.”

Alex sat down on his knees, and then leaned on his hands. For a few seconds I thought he was going to climb down after the bottle, but instead he threw up over the bricks. Then he lay on his side and closed his eyes.

Alex thought that the face on the bathroom door was Jesus Christ, but it could have easily been Santa Clause. The eyes, nose, and mouth, and the pointed beard was obvious. “He looks just like Jesus,” Alex would say, as if you had to be blind not to agree. I once traced horns, running my finger along the wood grains for Alex. The wavy lines bent out from the face, small but sharp. Alex told me they were just ears.

Alex saw faces in everything. Not so much cars or dinosaurs, unless they had human faces. We’d walk by a completely blank wall and he’d point at it and ask me if I knew who *that* was. “He’s looking right at us!” he’d say and draw a face with his finger. “It’s the Holy Ghost. There’s his eyes, nose...” then he ran his finger in a long straight line, “and this is his gun. You don’t see it?” Once he spilled a glass of milk on the linoleum and stomped on it saying that he’d seen our dead grandfather.

I can’t remember when we first noticed the face. We’d sit under the sink and stare at the face as our mom kicked at the bathroom door. The face was almost head level, so her voice came through the mouth. The mouth was closed, pensive, but spoke with my mother’s voice. “Open the Goddamn door!” She’d only beat for a few minutes, but we knew she was waiting. I would creep up to the door and peek under it and see her bloodshot eye staring back at me. “Open the fucking door, Josh!”

Not long after Alex had been locked in the storm cellar, he came to Soldier’s Creek to find me. “Josh, I need to show you something.” He was unusually serious. When we got home he led me to the bathroom. “Look.”

I studied it. Two knots stared at you like eyes. They had always drooped down. Wood grain swirled around the knots to make cheeks. “What about it?”

Alex seemed disappointed. “Josh, today it’s grinning.”

At the time, I thought Alex could be right.

Alex was quiet on the bus ride back to the Cool Donkey. He limped straight downstairs to the bar with his duffle bag on his back. I went upstairs. I walked down the hall to the dorm and my thoughts were interrupted by an untuned guitar. I smelled gin before I turned the corner. The man was strumming his guitar as he sat on the steps near the door to the dorm. He wore only shorts. Thick, ashy calluses gnarled his elbows, knees, and feet. He had one leg stretched out: his toenails were yellow and thick and did not grow uniformly. The bottom of his foot was black from dirt. I could not comprehend how a human being could be so filthy.

“Hello-my-friend,” he said.

I nodded and made to step by him.

“Hey, I have a message for you.”

I stopped and looked down at him. His eyes were red and half open and had trouble fixing on me. “Your friend left a letter for you.” He stood and I heard half a dozen joints pop.

He walked across the hall and fiddled with a padlock nailed to a narrow plywood door. It opened to a narrow hallway: so narrow he had to turn sideways to shuffle in. I took a step inside. The hall was narrower than my shoulder span but had a ceiling a yard higher than my stretched arm. The man, dark and dirty sliding between two scuffed plaster walls, turned his head around and beckoned with his hand. A thick, syrupy smell, like smoke, drifted pass my face. I followed.

The hall was about twenty feet. My buckle scraped along the wall showering the floor with white dust. The hall emptied into a room only twice as wide as the hall. A frayed straw mat laid on the floor, the ends curled up and unable to lay flat. Newspapers



and soiled, stained clothes bedded the ground like a nest. The dark red light of the paper lantern hanging above us made the hundreds of cigarette butts scattered on the floor look like confetti. The man dropped on his mat and leaned against the corner. Every square inch of wall that surrounded us was covered in graffiti, stickers, tacks, and staples.

Thousands of tiny, careful block letters from dozens of languages decorate the walls with such intensity that they intercepted one another into a giant international alphabet. There were hieroglyphs and crude drawings of genital and poems full of confessions. I could see that the work was of many hands over many years.

The man dug through a pile of clothes and unearthed a long opium pipe. He tried three lighters on the floor before he found one that worked. He turned the pipe upside down and held the lighter under the bowl. The cloud that came from his mouth covered his face and never left the room. He offered me the pipe. I shook my head, but squatted just inside the room.

He sifted through newspapers and empty bottles until he found a folded piece of paper. He gave it to me. It was stained with black thumb prints. I opened it and read it. It was only a few lines long, and I scanned it for useful information. Something caught my eye, and I read it a second time with more care.

It read: "Sorry we didn't get a chance to say good-bye. We are leaving today. We're heading north with that peculiar man you introduced us to. He told us the most unbelievable story." It had yesterday's date on it. I looked at the closing.

"Maybe we'll see you. Eli and Rebecca."

It was the Canadians I had met outside the Cool Donkey.

"What the hell is this?" I asked.

“It’s for your brother.”

I deduced that Alex must have met the Canadians on one of his long nights at the bar. “Who is this man they are talking about?” On the other side of the wall came the sound of a door opening. The man snapped a finger to his lips. I heard a lamp switch on; five little holes lit up in the wall. The man scooted closer to the wall and put one wide eye to a hole. He stared a long while, and I thought he had forgotten I was here. I cleared my throat and he pointed to a peephole near me.

I crawled over to the hole. It was the size of a bead and I couldn’t see much but the corner of the bed. Two bodies stopped in front of the hole: They were naked and less than two feet from my eyeball. The couple bent over a bed, one thrusting behind the other. I couldn’t tell if it was a man and a woman or only two men. I folded the letter and stuck it in my pocket. I stood up; I was lightheaded and leaned against a wall. My mouth tasted like wet cigarettes. I left the man with his face pressed against the wall and squeezed down the hallway and ran down the stairs.

The Cool Donkey had officially lulled into the low season. There were only a few other patrons scattered around the bar. Xue was making her rounds, stopping by tables and chatting with her customers. Alex was reading a book, his eyes only a few inches from the pages.

“Alex!” I yelled as I ran into the bar. He looked up at me. The smoke swirled off his cigarette, divided, then twisted like a pair of ram’s horns. I gave him the letter.

Alex frowned. “Oh, I didn’t even remember their names.”

“Who did you introduce them to?”

“I don’t know. Some weird guy hanging around here at the bar. I actually handed him off to those two so I could politely get away from him. He kind of gave me the creeps.” Alex went back to reading. I sat quietly next to him. After a few minutes, Alex said, “I remember why that guy was so weird. He kept talking about something called the *Flying Dutchman*. Was obsessed about it.”

“The *Flying Dutchman* is an old mariner’s legend,” I said. “He was probably trying to scare you, There are weirdoes all over the world, man.”

“*Mariner’s*? No, this guy didn’t mention any water. He said it was like that but on land.’ Alex’s head fell toward his book again. “Oh, and with cars.”

My insides seized, much like they did nine years ago when I read that lottery ticket. “What?! Jesus Christ, Alex, why didn’t you tell me this before?”

“Hey, asshole, what the fuck is the *Flying Dutchman*?”

“It’s a ship that forever sails the seas. It’s always going from one place to the next. He found it, Alex! He found it!”

“I already told you. That guy never mentioned any water—”

“He was talking about the fucking Caravan!”

“You said it was only a legend.”

“I said the way I had heard it, it had to be a legend.”

“Who gave you this?”

“That drunk guy in the dorm!” Alex stared at me flatly. “Okay, I now how this sounds, but the letter says they went north. I bet they’re headed to Mongolia. And there’s only one place in Mongolia where they can stop and get supplies.”

Alex was still staring at me.

“We can catch a train to Ulan Baatar tomorrow morning. It will take a day and a half to get there. They left yesterday afternoon. We might beat them there.” I was so excited I was nearly yelling.

“I was thinking we could talk about going home,” Alex said. “I’ve been here two weeks now. It’s been fun, but we should think about getting home. Mom is anxious to see you—”

“Fuck that. I’m going north. Don’t you see? This might be it. We have to see for ourselves!”

“I’ve been thinking of the Wall all day.” Alex moved his hands around something unseen. “I thought I was going to slide right off that cliff. I was grabbing at everything on the way down. I should have slid off that cliff. But something grabbed me. I felt it. I don’t know the words, if there are any. I think it was a miracle, Josh. That’s the only explanation I can come up with.”

“Jesus Christ, Alex.” He gave me a stern look but I dismissed it. “That was no miracle. You got lucky. If you had fallen off that cliff and got up to dust yourself off, I’d say I witnessed a miracle. You’re taking random events and trying to give them purpose. It wasn’t God who brought you to Beijing. It was Buck McKenzie and his fat mouth. You fell because it was slippery. That’s it.”

“Josh,” Alex said, “you’re not going to win this one. What I felt on up there....” He held out a cigarette lighter in his palm. “It had weight.” He closed his hand around the lighter. He lowered his head back to the book.

To Alex, there was meaning in the most trivial of incidents. He didn’t fall, he didn’t die, so why did he insist on a history of what-if’s? I still wasn’t entirely certain if Alex

was real. He had a body, and it bled, but how had he been born? Could Alex even die? It occurred to me for the first time that Alex may not be aware of just how lonely my childhood was. How could he not know he wasn't real?

"Did you hear any of the shit I said about Mom?" Alex asked.

"This is the closest I've been in years. No fucking way I'm going to let this go."

"Mom is going crazy! It scares me to death thinking of her alone in that house at a time like this. I could use some fucking help." He snubbed his cigarette on the table and shook a replacement out of a pack.

"Don't pull that guilt shit on me! I never asked you to leave her. I didn't ask any of you for anything."

"Now that you know Dad is dead," he stood up from the table and aimed a long stiff finger at my chest, "your own fucking father, you still won't go home."

"Dad was an asshole! He obsessed over that fucking car more than his children, and then killed himself in it. He lived his whole life doing whatever the fuck he wanted without giving two shits to whoever got caught in his aftermath. I can't bring myself to giving him anymore respect now than I did when he was alive."

"Don't you see!" Alex screamed. "You're just like him!"

In the silence that followed Alex's words I realized that the conversation in the bar had stopped like a twelve-car pileup. I didn't want a family quarrel in front of strangers. "Let's take this outside," I hissed.

"You want to go outside?" Alex pulled his shirt off and threw it on the bar floor. His thin, long body was a collection of homemade tattoos made from disposable pens and lighters. Cigarette-size burns dotted his frail arms. I could see the outline of hard little

organs. For such a thin man he was a lot to take in. “Fuck it, let’s go right here.” His lips trembled like tires spinning on an overturned vehicle. The whole bar became an audience.

“Put your shirt back on!” I whispered.

“Fuck you, you self-righteous fucker!”

“You’re just as crazy as Mom. And everything that comes out of your mouth is a goddamn lie.” I heard only my voice echo in the bar, my last words cracking. I turned away feeling so many eyes pricking my back.

As the door swung shut behind me I heard Alex yell, “Love you too, Josh.” I was humiliated. I took steps two at a time. I heard myself yelling through clenched teeth. On a landing between the second and third floor I punted an abandoned beer bottle. I swore. Someone opened a door as I stomped from one staircase to another. I spun on her with clenched fists. The door slammed and locked.

I threw open the door to the dorm room. The lamp at the end of the room threw shadows and only a few people were lying in their beds. They jumped when I barged in. In my bed sat the drunk man playing his guitar. He was still high and in his underwear. “You’re still here, my-friend?” he said to me.

I snatched his guitar from his hands and hurled it down the room. It spun like a lopsided boomerang and crashed into the lamp. In the dark the guitar moaned a D flat in its death throes. Someone screamed.

“Get the fuck out of my bed!”

The man scrambled like a mouse.

Somebody said: “Dude, you need to chill out—”

“You need to shut the fuck up!” I screamed at the voice in the dark.

I fell on my bed. My face was hot. I wanted to burn this whole building to the ground.

There was whispering in the corner.

“I said shut up!”

I didn't sleep much that night.

The doors opened to a single track behind the station. I carried my bag over a shoulder, and Alex huffed his duffle bag. He refused to look at me.

My head hurt and my guts felt rotted. I still tasted whiskey. My brain was a coffee filter that had been used too many times.

I was too ashamed to see Xue, choosing to slip outside and hail a taxi while she and Alex hugged their good-byes. I couldn't get out of Beijing fast enough. I wanted to forget about my stay here and start over: a new country, a new start. I could move to another place where nobody knew me, where I had another chance at first impressions.

Even after the train pulled out for the station for its thirty-six hour ride north, Alex still hadn't spoken to me.



I lay on my back and listened to the rhythmic sloshings of my belly. A mechanized tapping reverberated through out the train as it pulled itself along the tracks at sixty miles per hour. The tapping was hypnotic. I closed my eyes and listened to Alex's wheezing on the bunk above me. All through childhood we had shared a room: I on the bottom bunk and Alex on top. Late at night I'd press my feet under Alex's bunk, lifting the box spring from the frame and then letting it drop. He'd curse at me. I'd wait in the dark for the wheezing to stop and then I'd do it again until our mom yelled at us.

We were the only two in the four-berth cabin. The bottom bunk was a padded bench; the top bunk folded down from the wall suspended on chains. Identical bunks hung on the opposite wall. The wood veneer glued to the walls made the cabin feel smaller than it actually was. I watched the sunlight and shadows bend across the floor as the train took turns, the light coming through the single window with thin curtains partially drawn over it.

The cabin door began to shake violently. A loud, monotonous knock banged the door until I got up and unlocked it. A young, handsome Asian man in a wrinkled blouse looked at me and simply said "tickets" and I handed them over for the third time that morning. He gave them back and left, leaving the cabin door open.

I closed the door and fell back on the bunk. Alex still hadn't spoken to me. I gently placed my feet under his bunk and pushed up. I let the bunk fall and whip the chains taunt.

"Quit it, fucker!"

"Talk to me."

Alex hung his head over the edge of the bunk. Half of his long hair draped straight down the side of his face. “You want to talk? Let’s talk about your little conniption fit back at the Cool Donkey. I had to sweet talk Xue to keep her from throwing your ass on the street.”

I pushed under his bunk again, this time lifting it higher and dropping it harder. Alex squeezed his eyes shut through the impact.

“You’re a fucking kid,” he said and rolled away from the edge.

None of that shit back at the Cool Donkey even mattered. Ulan Baatar was a welcomed start—and the home of a the only Mongolian I had ever met, and last I had heard from her she was moving back to Ulan Baatar to get married. I didn’t know if she were still there, but her father was a successful businessman, so she would not be hard to find.

We had met in India. I was bedridden in a cast from a bus accident that had killed two people (I can still vividly see their lifeless bodies trapped under the crushed metal) and shared a hospital room for three days with her brother. He was unconscious and only twenty-six when they brought him in. Oma and I befriended during those three days she waited by her brother’s bedside plea-bargaining with God for his life. She spoke English fluently but in an unidentifiable accent, the result of her father sending her and her brother abroad for their education and most of their childhood. Their mother had succumb to an illness long ago—I don’t remember what it was exactly—and both Oma and her brother despised their father. They had come to India to do drugs and defy their father because he had committed Oma to an arranged marriage. Oma’s brother had

publicly denounced the arrangement, shaming Oma's father into never speaking to his son again.

Oma and her brother had been smoking hash in Goa when he collapsed into a coma right at the table. He had never complained of headaches, never spat blood, and seemed perfectly healthy before the tumor he had been carrying around for months, maybe years, decided to swell too big for his skull and kill him. Whether it was Oma's grief, the readily available drugs, or an amalgam of both, we had sidestepped the customary manner to acquaintance and exchanged vulnerabilities without regard to consequence: She confessed she loathed her father but was afraid to disobey him without her brother. I told her I had invented a childhood playmate to keep from going crazy. She didn't immediately return to Mongolia after her brother's death, choosing to stay with me in India and burn her dead brother's body in Varanasi—an act that further infuriated her father. Though I had fantasized about her a thousand times, we had never shared our bodies, and I came to intensely know this human being in a short time. Oma had become a living diary for which I gave all my anxieties. I had invested so much of myself so quickly that when she rejected my proposal to forget about Mongolia and travel the world with me, I had become rash and left Laos without telling her. I never thought I would find myself in Mongolia looking for her help.

As a plan to thwart invading armies, Russia and its former puppet states ran their trains on tracks of a narrower gauge than the West. At the Chinese-Mongolian border, each car was lifted off its wheels and placed on another set to accommodate the smaller gauge. This would take a few hours. Everyone disembarked the train and shuffled into the cold station. Merchants laid out their goods, mostly foodstuffs, for the passengers to shop through. I was hungry for something warm so Alex and I strolled outside in search of an open canteen.

Only a few buildings surrounded the station, but the street choked with bundled pedestrians and vendors. The first canteen we came to had a line of people that spilled out to the street. Alex and I shouldered our way down the gravel road and farther out from the cluster of buildings. The moon hung above the station and buildings around, graying the walls and rocks under our feet. In the moonlight I saw miles of isolation, and pulled myself deep into my parka. On the outskirts we found a tiny house that doubled as an eatery. Inside we found a small, cozy room with linoleum tacked to the walls, furnished by four tables and their chairs. Two surprised elderly women ate at one table, and a woman with big hips smiled and handed us a menu of Chinese and Cyrillic characters.

“What the hell am I suppose to do with this?” Alex whispered and flapped the menu like a broken wing.

I eyed the bowls of clear soup on the women’s table. “We’ll have that,” I told the waitress. I pointed at the bowls and pantomimed drinking soup. The waitress clapped her hands and exclaimed something in Mandarin. I nodded my head.

In less than three minutes we had soup and tea steaming in front of us. The soup was watery but spicy and I watched Alex cup his tea with bare hands and lean his face down to sip. "This would taste better with beer," he said. He leveled a stare at me that I took as a request. I dug out my guidebook and pointed to the Mongolian word for beer.

"Chinggis?" Alex said as he read the beer bottle.

Eager for the conversation, I said, "As in Genghis Khan. The man who ruled the world's largest continuous empire. You know, like Caesar, Napoleon, and Cobra Commander."

We finished our meal over conversation about our favorite childhood toys. Alex could remember so much more than me. Our conversation entertained us all the way back to the train station, even until we were finally permitted to return to our cabin. We sat on the bottom bunks across from each other. Alex lay across the bunk with his shoulders against the wall. His long legs bent over the bunk, each sneaker planted firmly on the floor.

"Remember that big GI Joe aircraft carrier?" Alex asked. "The USS Flag?"

"Oh, yes, I remember. It was like seven feet long. That weird kid who lived down the street from us had it. He was always laughing. Fuck, what did we call him?"

"The Giggler," Alex said. "His real name was Andy Dawson. He was always the first to get the cool toy but had no brothers or sisters to play with. He wouldn't let anyone touch his toys. Remember? He was always giggling with a hand over his mouth."

"I hadn't thought of him in years. Whatever became of him?"

“His mother locked him inside the house after he dropped out of school. I think he still lives there, but he stopped talking. He doesn’t even laugh anymore. I called over there some years ago but his mom picked up pretending to be an answering machine. Fuckin’ weird.”

“When did this happen?”

“After you left.”

I did some silent math. “So these last nine years you’ve held a job, an apartment...paid taxes?” I searched for another question. “Do you have friends?”

“I run with a few guys from work. You wouldn’t know any of them. We hang out sometimes but I don’t call them friends.”

“What do you mean?”

“Some of them give me rides to work, but some don’t always have a job and so hang out at my apartment. They eat all my food, smoke all my weed. They know when payday is. That’s why I left without saying a word to anybody. I’m hoping they’ll start looking for handouts elsewhere.”

Alex closed his eyes as a way of saying he was tired of talking about this, and soon he was snoring lightly. I placed my hand on his sore knee: An oversized patch covered the tore he got from falling on the Great Wall. I hadn’t flatten the pant leg out properly before sewing the patch; the denim puckered around the triple stitching like an old burn. I rubbed a finger over the tiny blood stains that didn’t wash out. Real blood from a real person. I had been so preoccupied with how Alex found me in China that it never occurred to me before that he might have been walking and talking far longer than the few weeks we had traveled together. Perhaps long enough that my mother had seen him.

As Americans we were issued Mongolian visas on the train. With still a full day's ride to Ulaan Baatar, Alex and I decided to explore the rest of the train. I calculated that it stretched eighteen carriages long, engine included. The *provodnitsa*, whose duties consisted of handing out linen and locking the restroom doors at stations, resided in the front cabin of each car. They let the two of us pass unmolested. Unlike our second-class accommodations, the first-class carriages were only two passengers per compartment. The extra money also bought you a private toilet, real beds, and strained smiles from the *provodnitsa*.

Each carriage contained two restrooms located near the ends. The toilet near the *provodnitsa's* cabin was usually locked, so everyone shared the restroom near the back. Because there was no shower, I filled the sink and dunked my mug to wash myself. Pressing the foot pedal flushed the toilet bowl—I could stare straight down into the toilet and see the tracks passing underneath.

Smoking was permitted only at the end of the carriage in small, uninsulated compartments. Here I had to yell over the din of wind and steel wheels slamming along the rails. We walked to the next carriage via a flexible passage—a steel frame wrapped in tarpaulin—that twisted at each turn. I was careful to step over the two metal plates covering the coupling; the plates overlapped and scraped against one another and could squeeze an unprotected toe. On either side of the plates I could see hydraulic lines and the speeding railroad ties below.

An overpriced dining car segregated the third-class from the rest of the train. Although there was minimal difference between first- and second-class, third-class was a train apart: There were no compartments, but one open carriage crowded with bunks

bolted to the floor and ceiling, possibly three times as many occupants per car than second-class. Toilet water sloshed across the floor with the tilt of the train. Cigarette smoke drifted through the bunks and past NO SMOKING signs. Mongolian and Chinese families, with their possessions tied in trash bags, watched us trespass through their camp to the back of the train.

Alex and I stood at the end of the train watching the tracks fade away. Kilometers of bottles and torn plastic bags littered the sides of the rails, with a bag or two kicked up in the air by the train's wake. The Gobi was capacious. A flat landscape of rock and sand broken with gentle hills and a little green. Above, a faraway sun hung in an empty sky. Other than the tracks and trash, the only other human evidence I saw was when the train dusted by a shanty built of brick and scavenged debris. A naked child ran out to wave at us rolling by.

My attention turned to Alex. His black hair flailed about like a black plastic bag caught in a tree. Small black whiskers had sprouted below his nose but scarcely anywhere else. Cigarette smoke leaked from his nostrils as Alex tilted the vodka bottle he carried up to his lips. When a Mongolian custom agent stamped our passports with visas (I had reacquired my passport from Alex without incident), she had handed both passports over to me. I had inspected Alex's passport: It was fresh and clean, and Alex looked the same in his picture, although in the photo he was holding up what resembled another passport in his hand. I looked closer and could see that the passport he held bore another photo of him holding a passport, and I suspect, so on and so on like a reflection caught between two mirrors. I didn't think they let people take passport pictures like that. His birth date itself—September 31—had no special meaning to me other than he



was four years younger than me. He even had a Chinese visa stamped the day I first met him Beijing. Every detail I could imagine about Alex's life was provided for. I couldn't even prove to anyone that Alex wasn't a real human being. I often forgot myself; my time with my brother was like a dream that I kept forgetting I was having. If Alex had really met my mother, I am convinced that she would believe he was real. She had long ago accepted Alex as flesh and blood, evident in the fact that she was the one who gave me a bunk bed despite my father's protest to indulge my fantasies. Mom laid a few presents under the tree each year with Alex's name on them. It was an unspoken pact my mother and I had made; so much so that even when I turned eighteen she was still telling people she had two sons. My father had simply stopped fighting us. I understand why he had left, but I wondered that had happened in my father's new family to make him drive past work that day and straight off a cliff. I also wonder if he had met Alex.

“What the hell is that?” Alex yelled. I followed his gaze out into the desert. An immeasurable cloud of sand filled the northwest, rolling over the desert, its face a slow shifting mass. “Josh!” Alex grabbed my arm. The train turned slightly and collided into the storm. It took only a few seconds: First the engine disappeared, and car by car, the rest of the train was swallowed. Then it was dark.

There was enough emergency lighting to guide us back through the carriages. The air suddenly had weight: I could grab a handful of it if only it stopped moving. We pulled our shirts over our noses to fight the sand from our lungs while running back through the carriages. The third-class passengers, in their third-world ingenuity, ducked into tents erected from bed sheets. The sand beat against the train windows loudly; I couldn't even see the sun. The sand was fine like talcum powder and was everywhere. People ran by

us, calling out names with handkerchiefs over their mouths. Alex still gripped my arm tightly. I thought he was overreacting. The train was unlikely to derail from a sandstorm—unless the desert covered the tracks, which I doubted but couldn't say why. I pulled Alex along to our cabin and left footprints in the sand piling in the corridors. I locked the door behind us.

“Josh!” Alex hadn't released my arm yet.

“What the hell are you yelling for?”

“I saw him!”

“Saw who?”

Through the thick, dim air I could still see Alex's eyes behind his covered face. They were wide with fear. “Dad!” Alex hissed. “He's here on the train!”

The storm sanded us for three hours. The sand had found its way into everything. Alex sat on my bunk drunk and quiet. He had insisted on sneaking sips from his bottle during the storm, mixing sand into his vodka. Sand dusted him from head to toe. I wiped my ears as best I could, tugged at my tangled hair, but there's only so much you can clean in a sandbox. As the train approached Ulan Baatar, I packed everything and left behind shadows of cups and books as if they had been undisturbed for centuries. When the train stopped, packs of sand-crusted people fell out, dragging luggage and staggering about. The wind blew hard and sand trailed away from them like long shadows as they crossed the platform into the station.

Alex was convinced he had seen our dead father during the storm. My brother said we had brushed right pass him on our way to the cabin. I told Alex that was impossible, but he insisted otherwise. "He had a rag tied around his mouth and a cap on, but I saw his eyes. I know it was him." I offered rational explanations: you couldn't be sure of the man's identity, sand was blinding our eyes, you're crazy like mom. "I saw him, Josh. Alive. He looked you right in the face." I would have felt easier had Alex spun out some elaborate conspiracy theory, one including insurance fraud or a long lost twin, but he believed our dead father was following us. He scared me. I had agreed to search the train after the storm. Alex would not leave my side, and so we walked the train together again end to end and found nothing but sand. I hadn't seen a single white guy on the whole train.

It was a tall Mongolian woman, the wife of the hostel owner, who had solicited Alex and me as we left the station. She had a jeep with a driver and offered to take us if we were inclined to do business with her. Alex was constantly looking over his shoulders

and I decided it was best to get him indoors as soon as possible. Mr. Ching's Little Hotel was nothing more than a renovated second floor of a drab apartment building. Each of the four bedrooms was crammed with wide bunks and could sleep about six people. A kitchen, two bathrooms, and a common room filled the rest of the floor. Mrs. Ching introduced us to her husband, a Taiwanese named Ni Yun Ching—"Mr. Ching for short." He only came to his wife's chin, but compensated with grand smiles and handshakes. He also laughed loudly at his own jokes, often before I could hear the entire punch line. He gave the whole hostel spiel: the curfew, the alcohol policy, how to check e-mail. He tugged at my dusty sleeve. "We also have laundry service!" He ended his speech with a high five.

Alex had left halfway through Mr. Ching's pitch to inspect the hostel. He opened every closet, looked under every bed, and checked the latches on all the windows. Looking for dead people was not new to me. Our mother had been seeing them for as long as I could remember, telling Alex and me that they followed us home from church. Alex and I would search every inch of our bedroom for the paranormal, which is easy to find if you are determined. Alex thought the hostel checked out but would peer out the curtains while he told me this.

I watched the sand swirl down the shower drain in small muddy rivers. I scrubbed everywhere, surprised at where I found sand. I had surrendered all our clothes to Mrs. Ching except for a shirt and a pair of pants that I kept in a plastic bag at the bottom of my pack and gave Alex my sarong, which he wrapped around his waste while wearing a t-shirt. I wanted to start looking for Oma immediately. I had no intention of telling Alex anything about Oma for fear that he might insist on meeting her—and then I didn't know

how I could explain to Oma that everything I told her about Alex, my parents, and me was not some sick fantasy. But Alex didn't want to leave the hostel. He didn't want me to leave either, but I told him I had to exchange money and attend other errands. "It's only a matter of time before he finds us," Alex told me. I promised to bring him a bottle when I came back.

Ulan Baatar was by no means a metropolis. Only a million people lived in the entire country, and one in three of them resided here. No prominent buildings scraped the sky. No crowds to contend with and no grass to picnic on. It was as if a colossal dinosaur had collapsed in the cold desert long ago, its bones bleached and cracked and populated by tiny humans. Ulan Baatar felt hallow, dead, and isolated—it was as close to the middle of nowhere as one could get. If Oma were still here, she shouldn't be hard to find. Her father was an entrepreneur, a man who intuitively understood the free market economy and was eager to take advantage of abandoned Soviet states. I had never met him; I'm only reporting what Oma had told me. I had his name and so went to the most obvious place to start my search: the bank. I exchanged money with a young clerk who spoke some English, than invented a story that I was a foreign investor from America and was interested in meeting the prominent business man—I also gave the man a hundred dollars. He didn't disappoint; the clerk was so excited to practice English with a native speaker that he told me everything I needed to know: Oma's father was out of the country on business, but his daughter managed his affairs at an office not far from the bank. I slipped the man a few more notes and a postcard I had written on the train with instructions to meet Oma at the Gandan Monastery the next day at noon. The clerk

smiled and bolted out of the bank. It had all been much easier than I had expected—I only hoped that he still wasn't angry at me.

The monastery shined in white on a bright concrete plaza dotted with children, adults, and a flock of pigeons that landed in unison. Quiet vendors were kept at bay with a polite “no thank you.” A solitary monk wrapped in saffron sat at the monastery door and whenever I looked at him he smiled and pointed to the entrance fee for foreigners on the admission sign. I turned my attention back to the plaza and waited for Oma.

I wasn't sure she would come. As far as I knew she was married and may want to avoid a scandal by meeting a foreign man unescorted. I hadn't anything else to do, so I passed two hours watching the people on the plaza waiting for her.

I saw Oma before she saw me. She wore a knee-length black coat and stepped across the plaza on heels at least six-inches high. In our parting she had aged more than just four years—she was only twenty-six but looked thirty-five. She was still beautiful, and graceful, and a part of me cranked over that I had thought had frozen up long ago. She saw me, here eyes widened, and she trotted up to me.

“Joshua! Oh my God, what have you done to your beautiful face?” She threw her arms around me. Her body had filled out more in the right places, but even in her heels I could almost rest my chin on her head. I didn't know what to do with my arms so I left them at my side. She yanked my beard. “It's horrendous! Are you wearing a disguise?”

“I heard you finally got married.”

She gave me a smile but I saw that my words had stung her. I started an apology but she cut me off. She wanted to take me to lunch. I followed her through the city, her arm locked around mine.

“I’ve been back here for almost four years. I have no story to tell. But you’ve been crawling all over the world. You must tell me about your adventures. Did you ever make it to Bhutan?”

“No, I never did. I got side tracked.”

I rattled off some places I had been until Oma stopped in front of an unmarked building. There were neither signs nor advertisements, but inside a few tables snuggled around a billiard table in a likewise plain interior. The tables were bare of table clothes and customers. Our entrance woke a waiter draped across a table. He rushed over to a far corner and kicked something unseen on the floor. A second waiter popped up, rubbing an eye and straitening his shirt. The first waiter showed us a table while the second fetched menus. The restaurant catered to foreigners’ taste, Oma said, which meant more flavor and care were added to the dishes.

The one dish I expected to find—Mongolian barbeque—wasn’t on the menu. Oma did the ordering: A plate of mutton and potatoes simmered in yoghurt and two glasses of Chinggis Kan. I finished my beer before the food came and ordered another.

“You used to tell me you were going to quit drinking,” Oma said.

“And I still might.”

“Except for your beard, you’re exactly the same as when I last saw you. Four years living in one flophouse to the next doesn’t seem to have given you wrinkles. I still don’t understand why you stay at those wretched places. I won’t step inside any place without room service.” Even after all the years, her accent was still mystical.

The food came and I attacked it. Having eaten only instant Ramen the last few days, this meal was a feast. I remembered Alex. I thought about wrapping a potato in a



handkerchief, but didn't want Oma catching me putting food in my pockets. Oma had ordered me a drink that came in a suspicious small carton with the silhouette of a mare and a colt. The waiter poured a white, creamy liquid in a glass and set it before me.

"Try it," Oma teased. "I promise it won't kill you."

I drank it and gagged.

"It's horse milk," Oma said between her laughs. "The country people ferment horse milk to make it alcoholic. I know how much you love 'going local,' so I want to see you finish a glass."

"It's sour!" My loud voice carried through the empty restaurant.

She handed me a napkin. "Half of it is on your beard. It's charming how you have floated about like this for so long. No job, no obligations. Such freedom. Promise me you'll never settle down."

"Why didn't you come with me?"

A piece of mutton stopped two inches from Oma's open mouth. "Marriage is slavery, Joshua, especially if you're a woman. The only good thing that comes out of it are children. Maybe I'll adopt when I can afford a nanny."

"I know that I didn't say good-bye...."

"Marriage robs people of individuality. People say 'I do' and merge into single entities and make little clones of themselves." Oma took a drag off her cigarette. I could see she was just getting started. "Did you bring any drugs with you?"

Oma had always thought sobriety boring. Living in Mongolia, and her inaccessibility to good drugs, was driving Oma mad. She told me she got high by swallowing spoonfuls of nutmeg and washing them down with vodka. She swore by it. She said she was a

slobbering idiot for a day and a half. She said she need two pounds just to survive a week of housewifery. “In desperate times obstacles become stepping stones.”

I sawed a chunk of mutton with my knife. The underside was burnt but it was still delicious. I swallowed it along with my guilt for not telling Oma about Alex.

“I know you and me haven’t spoken in years,” Oma said. “But I’m going to ask you a direct question, and I want a direct answer. I don’t trust most people, including my father. Don’t you dare become one more.”

I knew what she was going to ask me. “Do you want me to swear on a stack of Bibles?”

“If you tell me, I will believe you. But if I find out you lied to me, I’ll never speak to you again.”

“Okay.”

“No, Joshua, not ‘okay.’ Swear to God you will tell me the truth.”

“I don’t believe in God.”

“But I do, and any promise you break is between you and Him. Swear you will tell me the truth or this conversation ends now.”

I believed her. I don’t know what living in Mongolia had done to her, but her single-mindedness was unshakeable. I promised.

“Thank you.” She reached her hand across the table and grabbed my forearm. She had a strength that I had underestimated. “Why did you disappear? You ran away without a word. Do you understand what that did to me?” I could feel her shaking. Her eyes were wet and so black I felt I could fall into them. I had been careless. “Why did you come here?” I couldn’t escape her stare. “Answer me.”

“I’m sorry, Oma. I know that’s not much, but I don’t know what else to say.”

“Try harder. Seeing you reminds me so much of my brother. You’re here in Mongolia like someone pulled you out of a hat.”

“I thought that taking off without saying goodbye was easier than promising we would stay in touch.” I wiped my hands on my legs. “I never expected to see you again.”

“But you did. Why are you here?”

“I’m looking for something and I followed it here.” I told Oma everything I knew about it, including the postcard. She listened attentively. I couldn’t read here; I didn’t know if she believed me or not. “I’m not saying I believe everything I heard, but I got to see for myself. Nothing short of my own eyes will do.”

She nodded but didn’t say anything.

“I heard that they left Beijing last week heading north. They’d have to come through here for gas, food, and whatever.”

“What do you want me to do?” she asked.

“Ask around. Let me know immediately if anyone or anything matches that description. Anything suspicious.” I told her I would check back with her tomorrow. I didn’t tell her where I was staying for fear that she might see Alex. And I had no idea how I would explain that. When she didn’t say anything for another thirty seconds, I asked her, “Do you believe me?”

She shook her cigarette pack but only tobacco crumbs fell onto the table. She sighed. “You believe that somewhere out there is a troupe of globetrotting hippies that have been driving around in vans for the last few decades?”

“You make it sound ridiculous.”

“It is ridiculous! How could so many people travel unnoticed like this all over the world?”

“I’m only telling you what I heard. There’s some rational explanation behind it—I have faith that there is. I *have* to find it.”

“Why are you so obsessed about this? I’ve never known you to be passionate about anything.” She gave me a small smile.

I know it had been Alex who had changed me. I had no answer as to how he came to be. He’s not make-believe; he talks to people, he has a passport, and he is alive in every sense of the word. My rationality tells me that I can’t prove he *isn’t* real, which leaves me with one obvious question left: Is it my memory that is in question? I know I’m not crazy; I just don’t have all the answers yet. Of course the idea sounds ridiculous—I felt self-conscious telling Oma about it—but there must be a truth in it somewhere. Something inside me had awoken, and I found myself being pulled toward this because I believe there are answers there, even if I don’t have all the questions yet.

Oma promised to help me. I thanked her many times and told her I would be grateful for any information she could find. The rest of our conversation steered cleared of the past and instead skipped across the surface of current affairs, American politics, and colonialism. Her voice and mannerisms brought me memories I had long forgotten I had. When we parted, she gave me a hug and said we could talk tomorrow. On my way back to the hostel, I pushed away the guilt rising in my stomach. I couldn’t tell Oma about Alex. The story I told her was crazy enough. I thought of all that had happen these last few weeks: the coincidence of meeting Buck McKenzie at the Cool Donkey; Alex

finding me; my father's death; and now being led to the one place on Earth where I still had a friend. There was so much coincidence in these chance encounters that I started to think they were somehow related, as if I were trapped in fiction: contradictions, uncanny coincidences, deus ex machine seem to be molding reality in front of me. This had all seemed absurd a month ago now haunted my mind and refused to be ignored.

But I know I am not crazy.

“You shouldn’t go out there. What if he sees you and follows you back here?”

“There’s nothing out there, Alex!” I didn’t mean to yell, but Alex had been harping about seeing our dead father on the train for four days.

“He’s been following us ever since the Wall.” Alex was chasing me around the common room. “Why are you pretending you didn’t see him?”

“I bought you another pack of cigarettes. They’re with the noodles.” I straightened my beard in the hall mirror. “I’m not sure when I’ll be back, so I’ll take the key. Don’t go anywhere or else you can’t get back in.” I checked myself again in the mirror. “Any other questions?”

“Are you going out with that girl again? Why won’t you tell me who she is?”

“I told you she was a friend.” I threw my parka on. “I also got you a bottle of vodka.”

Alex jumped in between me and the door, his hands up and barring my way. “Josh, please listen to me. He’s out there! He followed us here.”

I stepped into my boots. “If you want to go somewhere, go. The honeymoon is over. Just get back before me or you’ll sleep outside.”

Alex grabbed my arm again, but I shook him off and shut the door behind me.

Evening was descending upon Ulan Baatar as I crunched gravel under my feet. Whatever my brother believed about omens and ghost, I certainly didn’t. I looked over my shoulder and saw Alex watching out the second floor window. I could only see his face: We came to Ulan Baatar and Alex had refused to leave the hostel, not even when I took our passports to the Russian embassy. Yesterday I had met Oma for a drink. She had news for me. Through her father’s business she had many contacts throughout the city. She knew just about everything that was going on in Ulan Baatar.

“You’re not going to believe this darling,” she told me over her beer. “Someone I know owns a gas station outside the city, on Road No. 5 going north. He said five days ago two foreigners—a white man and woman—came to the gas station and bought over 500 gallons of gas. They were driving some kind of fuel truck, paid cash, and left.”

I got excited and asked her a hundred questions at once.

“My friend didn’t see them himself. His attendant did. But they came from the north, bought the gas, and went back in that direction.

“That’s a lot of gas for two people. Do you know where they went?”

Oma unfolded a map as if on cue. “You see, here is the gas station. This is Road No. 5.” She traced a finger on a long, lone line with a town every few hundred miles. I followed her finger as it crossed the Mongolian border and into Russia.

“What is that?”

“This, darling, is Irkutsk. That’s Lake Baikal. You can see that this road only goes north. If what you are looking for was at that gas station, this is the only way they could have gone.”

“Can we talk to the gas attendant? The one who met the foreigners?”

“We can’t,” Oma said. “He’s gone.”

“What do you mean?”

“He’s been missing since the day after the foreigners came. He’s a widower. He’s got no family. He lived at the gas station and after he told my friend what he saw, he just disappeared.”

I had been thinking about this every minute since Oma told me. I’m convinced that the man had them. Even Oma admitted the whole thing strange. As soon as I got the

news I grabbed Alex's and my passport and applied for Russian visas. I was eager to get them as soon as possible, but had no choice but to wait. Oma had even called a friend at the embassy to expedite our visas faster, but with no luck. When she asked her friend if there had been an increase in visa applications lately, she was told there wasn't. I didn't know what to think of that.

My plan was to go to Irkutsk as soon as Alex and I got our Russian visas. I was close and knew it. At the time, I couldn't explain my growing obsession for finding the Caravan. I had heard tales about it for years, but refused to believe most of them. Finding these people became a justification for my last nine years.

Oma took me to a disco for a drink, which was an exercise in cultural understanding. After being interrogated by the doorman—Oma never did tell me why he had asked so many questions—he let us pass. The disco was large, but nearly empty, as if there were not enough people in Ulan Baatar to support a night life. Most of the patrons were men. They sat at tables and nursed beers, but on the dance floor a circle of eight men danced in an alcoholic stupor, taking turns entering the ring to dance. Half of them had brought their drinks with them. One man, his shirt saturated with sweat, jumped into the center of the ring. He did nothing more than shuffle from one foot to the other while holding a beer and waving a free hand in the air. He did a series of turns and stumbled over his own feet. He stepped out, and another man took his place.

An unfamiliar pop song blared so loudly that conversation strained my vocal chords. Oma pointed to an empty booth and we sat. The waiter came by and Oma held up two fingers. "So now you are going to Russia?" She sat close. Her breath tickled my ear. Oma drew a slender cigarette from her case and offered me one. I declined, and the case



snapped shut. “Oh my God, Joshua, what I would do to get the hell out of here. I envy you. You can go anywhere you want, as long as you like, and leave as soon as you find it irritating.”

That’s what I think she said. I couldn’t hear every word because of the ear-splitting music. I could feel the hair of her bare arm. After the waiter brought our beers, Oma and I touched bottles before taking a swig. “You have such freedom! No obligations. You can do anything you want.” She paused to take another drink, and I waited for more compliments. “You’re not pinned under your father’s thumb or have a husband who’s turned you into a servile housewife.” She raised her bottle in another toast.

“Where is your husband anyway?” I had spoken too softly the first time, so I had to lean close to her ear. I could smell perfume and body order. It turned me on.

“He’s in the Middle East on business,” she said without looking at me.

“How long has he been there?”

“Three years. It’s a boring conversation. Let’s talk about something else.”

“Do you believe that these bohemians could really be out there somewhere?”

“I believe that you have been looking for something for a very long time, and now that you are close I see you with a purpose. I hope you find what you’re looking for.”

Oma rested her hand on mine. I felt my insides somersault. She tilted her head toward the dance floor.

The men cheered when we joined them. Suddenly the boogie ring engulfed Oma and me. Another song I didn’t recognize—bubbly, with a voice of a pre-pubescent—blasted through the disco and the men cheered again. They took turns stepping into the circle to

dance. I saw my turn coming, and I slid into the center with the Running Man, pumping all that alcohol in my brain.

I felt a sweaty man grind me from behind. I looked over my shoulder: He was all smiles and no teeth. The man sloshed beer on the floor with every violent pelvic thrust. I backed away, but he followed. Even when I returned to my place he jumped in front of me and gyrated his body. I took Oma's wrist and pulled her back to the table, leaving the man thrusting by himself.

More people—more women—had entered the disco. I watched the sweaty man attack any woman brave enough to step on the dance floor until a bouncer grabbed him by the neck. The man continued thrusting his pelvis as the bouncer dragged him away.

“Sorry about that,” Oma said into my ear. She liked to apologize for her countrymen. She sat close, her body pressed against mine.

The music faded and the spotlight shone on the empty dance floor. Six women wearing gold dresses came out from behind an inconspicuous door. They wore blue glitter mascara and cherry lipstick. I leaned forward in my seat when I saw that their dresses were thin enough to see nipples. A flash burned in my belly and raced to my fingertips. The women danced to traditional music for about ten minutes, then they disappeared behind the door and pop music exploded again through the disco.

Under the table, Oma put her hand on my thigh. She wetted her lips and pressed them to my neck. I didn't know what to do; none of it, I swear, came naturally to me. My attempts to be intimate with her before had been failures, and I saw myself as a freak, like someone pathological about shaking hands. Suddenly, I felt a sweaty hand on my elbow.

“Where you from?” It was the drunk man from the dance floor.

“America.” I pulled my arm free.

“You no look American.” He meant my Choctaw features. The man babbled more, but I looked for the bouncer. Oma had moved a few inches away from me, her hand slipping off my leg.

“Dance?” The man tugged my arm.

“No thanks.” The waiter came to collect the empty bottles. The drunk man said something to the waiter. The waiter left and shortly returned with three bottles of beer.

“Now we dance.”

“Fuck no, I don’t care how many beers you buy me.” The man sat quietly at the table, nodding his head to music. I tapped Oma’s shoulder and moved away to the dance floor.

Not surprisingly, the man followed. He came up to both of us and slung his slippery arms around our necks. He smelled like he hadn’t left the disco in five days. I slid his arm off, but he threw it up around my neck in a poor headlock. I grappled free and brought my fist back to strike him, but Oma caught my arm. She said, “I’ve got something I want to show you.”

I could hear the disco thumping for blocks behind us. Oma held my hand and led me down the street, her heels scraping on loose gravel. There were lights on in some houses, and somewhere in the city a six-year-old was caterwauling karaoke. The night had cooled and so Oma had slipped back into her long coat—black like everything else she wore. Above us a voluminous starry sky split the city into twilight and shadows. Her hand tightened around mine. She was a tiny person, yet I could feel her strength through my arm. I found my sexual fantasies to be so much better than my reality, and honestly, I wasn't sure if I could give them up.

Oma was silent, leading me through streets that slowly elevated as we approached the edge of the city. We took deep steps as we ascended a barren hill and left the lights behind us. I watched Oma step carefully on loose rocks as to not twist her ankle in her heels. She occasionally turned to me and smiled. It was too dim to see her eyes, but I knew she was looking deep inside me. She never slacked her grip on my hand.

We reached the top of the hill. On its summit, over looking the sleepy city below, stood a pile of rocks six feet high and adorned with fur-covered horse skulls and yellow and blue ribbons that whipped violently in the wind. I had seen the ribbons flapping in the daylight but didn't know their purpose. The hill held an air of sacredness, thus I hadn't ventured near.

We squatted near the rocks and took in all of Ulan Baatar. Shadows filled depressions. I tried to find the hostel among the black buildings, wondering if Alex was still up watching movies—or staring out his window and watching us. The wind kept us close together, partly for warmth, partly to be heard.

“What is this?” I nodded toward the pile of stones.

“That’s an *ovoo*, and it is only half of what I want to show you. Travelers walk clockwise around it three times and add stones, sticks, bones, whatever to the pile before going on a long trip. Then they say a prayer for their journey. Over the years the pile grows, so what you are really looking at is a pile of prayers.”

“When a prayer is answered, does its owner come back for the rock?”

“It’s impossible to take a prayer back once it’s been made. The ribbons are *khadags*—I don’t know what you call them in English—and they’re for prayers too.” She reached into her pocket and pulled out something swathed in cellophane. She unwrapped it, guarding it tenderly from the wind. “This *ovoo* has been here my whole life. Do you see that black rock right there?” She had to point twice before my eyes found it. “I placed it there after my brother died.” In the twilight Oma held up a hand-rolled cigarette. “This is the other half of what I wanted to show you. Your prayers have been answered, darling. I’ve been saving this for a long time.”

Oma threw her heavy coat over our huddled heads and the wind and sky disappeared around us. In the darkness a flame erupted between our faces. Her face was inches from mine, her big eyes focused on the joint in her tight lips. When the flame vanished I still saw a face hanging in the blackness. Oma pressed her mouth to mine and filled me with smoke. I felt myself split apart into a million pieces: There was nothing outside the blackness, pieces of me as ethereal as the smoke. I took each breath as deeply as I could.

Oma tossed the coat off and brought us back to Mongolia.

“I’m sorry for disappearing on you,” I said. The words sounded like a foreign language spilling from my mouth. I cannot recall the last time I apologized.

“Don’t do it again.” She picked up a rock with her fist. “Do you have any more prayers that need to be answered?”

She placed the stone in my hand and closed my fingers around it. The stone was nondescript, no different from the thousands of other stones around us. I stood and began walking around the pile, taking small steps and inventorying everything. What I wanted was an answer. It was the first prayer I had given since I my numbers rolled onto the TV screen nine years ago. On the end of the third circle, I placed my rock on the pile.

I walked Oma back home. She spoke of her brother the whole way, telling me stories about him when they were children. I envied her faith; there was no doubt that one day they would again play as they had as children. Whether that day would really come mattered not to Oma—she believed, and it gave her hope. At her door I hugged her. I watched her unlock the door and step inside, imagining her brother and her as kids running on these very streets. She stood in the doorway waiting for me, but I zipped up my coat and turned toward the hostel.

I came back to the hostel and found the door broken open: The door jam was splintered both at the doorknob and the dead bolt. On the other side of the door, I found the apartment turned inside out: An inch of water covered the entire hostel and the bed bunks from the dorm rooms had collapsed, their pieces scattered all over the small hostel. Fist-holes perforated the ceiling. The couch in the common room was broke in half, tethered together by a few inches of upholstery. The television's electronic and glass innards lay sprawled on the wet floor. Mr. Ching's movie collection—all 400 video tapes—were torn open, their insides draped from the ceiling and rooms and twisting from the wind that blew in through the door behind me. Doors hung from a single hinge or floated on the floor. The carpet had been torn from the floor in long pieces. The apartment had the pungent smell of stagnant water. I called out for Alex.

I stepped through the hostel tapping debris with my foot. In the dorm, my bag had been torn apart; my clothing and other affects were thrown around the room. I hastily overturned and upended anything that might hide a body, calling out for my brother the whole time. I saw no blood.

I found Alex behind a curtain, crouched on the wide window sill that sat in the thick walls. He was breathing heavily, his eyes clenched, and his lips moved softly. I recognized the Lord's Prayer. When I touched his shoulder he screamed. His eyes open and found me. I could feel his fear.

“Josh, Dad was here....”

The Russian jeep bounced down the two-track trail. The jeep seated three of us but could accommodate another nine. Alex and I sat in the back; Alex was quiet, and I caught him more than once turning in his seat toward Ulan Baatar. The Mongolian driver said nothing as he steered the vehicle over the jarring path. The jeep had no lap belts, and every bump sent us from our seats.

Last night I had hastily picked up our belongings out of the hostel debris. I had to pry Alex from the windowsill. I wanted to get out before Mr. Ching came back and demanded explanations—I had none to give him. I don't know how so much damage could have been done in only a few hours without waking the whole building. I didn't have a plan this time; Alex and I didn't have our passports (they were still at the Russian embassy) and so could not leave the country. All this happened at exactly the most inopportune time. We left the hostel during the night and hid under a bridge until the sun rose—Alex had refused to shut his eyes—and in the morning found a travel agency. We were to hide a few days at Terelj National Park. Mr. Ching would undoubtedly notify the police—he knew our names, what we looked like, and would reasonably assume we were going to either Russia or China. All Alex and I could do was lay low long enough to get our passports back and take the first train to Irkutsk.

I listened to Alex mutter after each back-breaking buck. I rolled the window down for air—I get car sick easily. The countryside was green tacked over rolling hills, with a few hills worn to exposed bedrock. The green was as green as green could get. The jeep passed a solitary shepherd on horseback herding his flock. He, the horse, and the sheep watched us pass.



The jeep stopped a few miles later at a camp of four gers and a corral. The driver got out and exchanged Mongolian with an approaching rancher. Alex and I hefted our packs as the driver—in broken English so broken I asked him to repeat it three times—told us he would come back in four days. Then he saluted us, and he and the jeep bounced away over the horizon leaving Alex and I standing with the rancher. Alex spoke to the man first, spewing a mouthful of Mongolian as I watched, dumb founded. Alex told me afterwards that he had been reading an English-Mongolian dictionary during his long days at the Mr. Ching's Little Hostel. The rancher, whose dark face and hands had tanned from years in sun and cold, smile and pointed at a ger, a fifteen-foot round tent with a squat conical top. The stitched yak skins stretched over a wooden frame protected families from central Asia's remorseless winters, our home for the next four days. Inside three small but high beds hugged the walls and were dressed with thick wool blankets. A tiny cast iron stove sat in the center, its black smokestack reached up and through the skin ceiling. Because wood is scarce in Mongolia, animal dung is often used for fuel. I pictured the rancher hauling a bucket of shit to his tent every night.

The rancher left to prepare lunch. Alex flopped onto a bed, his feet hanging over the end, and said, "He'll find us, Josh, no matter where we hide." He stared up at the sagging ceiling adding, "And we're in a fucking tent." I stepped outside. Except for the camp and the trail, there was no evidence of people anywhere. To my right a corral fenced four horses. An outhouse with no door frothed with flies sat at the edge of camp. Two of the gers had smoking chimneys. Only the rancher, his wife, a few strong children, and an old woman folded at the sternum lived here. Their neighbors were stoic boulders and reclusive hills. The boulders seemed to have simply fallen from the sky and landed on

this big lawn, narrowly missing grazing sheep. The boulders were so large that it was hard to accurately judge their size from camp. About a quarter mile behind us an enormous crag fifty yards tall shadowed over the gers—its face a sheer cliff. This full-scale emptiness was powerfully lonely, yet in such vastness I let my thoughts roam as far as they wanted. Explanations were shortcoming to my mind. However Alex found his way into this flesh-and-blood world, something else might have followed him, and that something may not be human.

Alex came out of the ger. I watched him search the ground for something before he bent over and picked up a rock, then went over to a pile of sticks by the corral without a word. Alex examine the stick, held it high up to his eye to measure its straightness, and gave it a good swing before making his choice. Then he walked to the ger door, hunched to the ground, and began sharpening the stick with his rock.

“What are you doing” I asked.

“Making weapons,” he answered. “One of us needs a fucking plan.”

The next two days were spent watching sheep graze and horses fuck and Alex methodically making a collection of spears. I had grown restless. The great crag loomed down on us. I suggested to Alex that we climb it: I didn’t want to sit in the ger, I didn’t want to stand around and stare at horses anymore. We needed to do something. To my surprise, Alex agreed to come.

Although the ground to the crag appeared flat from camp, it slowly steepened, and our strides were shortened. We had our parkas open and our conversation became grunts and gestures. We marched on burning legs, zigzagging our way up the pitching slope with heads bowed. I threw my parka over my shoulder and gradually left Alex behind. I

had come to this conclusion: Whatever was following us would find us here. It would never stop following no matter where we went.

I reached the jettied bedrock and climbed up its fractured backside. The rock pushed up through millions of years and pierced the earth like a compound fracture. Panting, I urinated and regretted not bringing any water. Alex dragged himself up and collapsed on the ground, his eyes on the mountain looming above us. Piles of rocks were stacked upon each other all the way to the summit. Stray boulders lay at the bottom. The strata jettied at odd angles and the edges were sanded by rough winds and cracks and crevices intertwined through the whole rock. Some of the boulders balanced like a precarious tower of blocks: a gale, I imagined, would send boulders bowling down the slope and toward the camp. We dropped our jackets and made our way over the broken stones, stepping over some and climbing over others, until we reached the lee of the mountain and found a crack that nearly split the mountain from bottom to top. I could see enough cracks and precipices with flat tops that would make the cliff accessible and searched for hand holds. The rock was cold and we pushed ourselves up on sore legs.

Ever since Alex's arrival at the Cool Donkey I had faith that a rational explanation would surface: I cannot surmise how he came to be; he simply is. I racked my brain these last weeks for these answers and have gotten nowhere, not an inch closer to a truth—I doubt now that there are answers to questions like these—only the questions for restless minds to chew on.

We climbed the crevice spread-eagle as if we were climbing two facing ladders; our movement was slow, and I instructed Alex were to put his hands, even though I had never climbed this before and was no more of an expert than my brother, but it gave me some

control. I reached a ledge—but still dozen of yards from the top of the mountain—and pulled Alex up to safety. His hand was rough from years of use, his grip strong in mine. Around us, boulders rested upon boulders, their great weight supported by even smaller rocks. Two massive boulders pressed against each other with just enough space for me to wiggle under them on my belly. Alex inhaled a cigarette between heavy breaths and gestured for me to go first. I moused my way into the crack thinking of the boulders and their great weight above me.

I crawled out to the other side and under a blue sky. I neared the peak as Alex squirmed out the hole, cursing with one hand on top his head and a smoking cigarette in his mouth. I climbed onto the top and was slapped by a gust of wind. The summit domed smooth and broad and I sat there filling myself on air. Alex soon joined me, his breath heavy. The camp lay conspicuously far below. We were high enough to see across three degrees of latitude and to the curvy ends of the earth itself. It is true: Mongolia is best viewed from a mountain top. We huddled next to each other with our knees to our chests, as Alex's hair whipped wildly like ribbons on the *ovoo* Oma had shown me. He squinted into the wind, mouth half open as if there weren't enough skin on his face to close both his mouth and his eyes at the same time. We listened to the wind for awhile.

I felt like I was tripping over something unseen under a rug. Away from the comfortable familiar, I found reason running away from me, and raised my walls of rationality as high as I could until they began to crumble around me in what psychiatrists commonly call a nervous breakdown. I believed I was going crazy.

“Why is he following us?” I asked Alex. “What does he want?”

Alex shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know. But he’ll never stop. Where ever we go, he will hunt us down. We can’t stay anywhere for very long. If we go home now, we will lead him straight to Mom.”

I peered across the landscape half looking for people. Out there someone was looking for us. He might ask around where we went. He knew our names—I’m sure of it—and so it would only be a matter of time before he found something—or somebody—that would tell him what he needed to know....

I thought of Oma. She knew nothing about Alex or what was following us. If this man knew where we were staying, he would know about Oma. He would find her, and maybe he would do worse to her than he did to Mr. Ching’s hostel.

I said to Alex, “We have to go back to the city.” I told him everything about Oma and waited for him to protest.

“Let’s not go empty handed,” he said. “We need better weapons.”

I was reluctant to call whatever was following us across Asia a man—the same reluctance I have in calling Alex a “human being.” My mind recoiled at the words “our father” for what Alex determinately called that which patiently watched us from shadows and followed our tracks wherever we went. What Alex believed was a ghost, I believed could be something more sinister: something from my imagination made into flesh, just like Alex. I had asked Alex—in the gentlest ways I know—what his earliest memories were in attempts to learn the extent of his existence but learned nothing. We shared the same memories. I recalled particular memories with my mother and Alex knew them, albeit his versions were not the exactly as mine. In fact, he told them with such intensity that at first I believed his lies—I only had my own memory as evidence.

Alex and I had to go back to Ulan Baatar. Not only were our passports there, I could not abandon Oma.

Despite his fear, Alex’s sense of duty was stronger than I had ever imagined. He was afraid—maybe even more than me—but his resolution was unshakeable. “We have to save her,” Alex told me whenever he saw fear creep its long finger up my back. He did not hide his tears—he woke up screaming half the nights since we left Ulan Baatar. He slept with sharp sticks and tied a rope around the door of the ger every night. On our last night, he woke me with a hand over my mouth: I was half asleep when he pointed his stick to the wall of the ger. At first I saw only the dancing shadows from the stove, but then my eyes caught something moving outside, something stretching the walls of the tent as if it wanted to punch its way inside. Without a word, Alex hurled a stone at the shape, and the wall stilled. Nothing else happened that night.

When our driver—the same man who brought us to the park four days ago—dropped Alex and I off at the travel agency, we quickly made our way across Ulan Baatar to Oma’s house. Alex, with his bag on his shoulders, aimed his stick at every alley, shadow, and corner. I kept my eye out for the police, but it was early, and we didn’t turn any heads.

I had no plan about explaining Alex to Oma, but I knew I would have to do it alone. This agitated Alex greatly—he was adamant about not splitting up—and I convinced him not to say a word to Oma until I had the chance to speak to her first. I knew disappearing for four days without even a note would be hard to explain, but it was even more awkward when Oma refused to open the door for us.

I went through the rigmarole of knocking and pleading to her to let us in. She made me wait forty minutes before she opened the door. She wore her customary black with her usual clove and held her stare on me for a while before moving on to Alex. I never did ask her if she saw any resemblance between us.

After the awkward silence, Alex pushed passed her and dropped his bag on the floor. He peeked out the front window. It was a big stone house: Alex would later refer to it as a castle. “We can’t nail any boards across these windows,” he said to the room. His attention rested on a wooden bench in the foyer. He seized one end but was unable to budge it. “Josh,” he grunted, “help me move this against the door.”

“What is going on?” Oma said.

“Alex,” I said when I laid my hand on his back, “take a look around the house. Tell me how many windows and exit doors there are, both upstairs and down.” He gave me a curt nod and ran off through the house, his foot steps echoing off the hard walls.

“Joshua,” Oma began, “I went to the hostel when you never showed up for breakfast. The owner was furious. He said you destroyed his place. He told the police. Tell me everything—and I when I give you a question I expect a straight answer.” There was a loud crash upstairs. “Who is that man?”

I asked Oma to make some tea. Over our cups, I said that I couldn’t explain everything. “I never told you about my brother before because there wasn’t anything to tell. I hadn’t seen him in almost ten years. Then one day I woke up and he’s staring over me. He found me in *China* and has been with me ever since.”

Oma was about to ask a question, but I cut her off.

“We’re being followed. Somebody—I’m not sure who exactly—found us here in Ulan Baatar and chased us out of that hostel. It was he who trashed the place when he didn’t find us. I’m sorry, Oma, but Alex and I thought you might be in danger. I didn’t know what to do. Alex’s...” I pointed up to the ceiling, “...and my passports are still at the Russian embassy. The police are probably staking the embassy out for people with our descriptions. We need to get our passports back and get on the first train to Irkutsk.”

When I had the nerve to lift my head from my tea cup, Oma’s deep brown eyes revealed nothing of her thoughts. She remained silent until I asked if she had heard me.

Alex came into the kitchen. “This place is fucking huge. There’s a million windows. Hell, he could already be inside the house for all I know.”

“You’re Joshua’s brother?” Oma said.

“Who else would I be? Josh, we should lock ourselves in one room with one door. Don’t think the windows on the second floor are any safer...maybe he can fly.” Alex



started digging through kitchen drawers until he found a knife. He stabbed the air with a few quick lunges, and satisfied, said to Oma, “Do you mind if I keep this?”

“Do you mind if I have a few minutes with your brother alone, Alex?”

“Sure, no problem. Can I keep this? Josh will pay you for it.”

Oma nodded and watched Alex dash out of the kitchen. “I don’t know what kind of trouble you are in, nor do I want to know. It’s your business. You can stay the night here, but I’m not. I don’t know anything about you, or even who you are. And I don’t want to hear anymore. I can have a friend give me your passports if you give me your receipts. I’ll have someone drop them off here in the morning before the train leaves. You can get tickets at the station.” She stood from the table. “I’ll leave a key to the door by the table. When you leave tomorrow, you can slide the key under the door. I would not like to find you here when I come back.” Then she walked out of the kitchen.

I thought that perhaps this was the best ending to it all. She wasn’t safe here, and the less I had to explain, the less crazy she would think I am. Best to let her disappear back into my past. This thing chasing me would never stop no matter where I went; he would never let any real people into my life. These things I had never thought much of before, now no longer a possibility, tugged at my insides. I thought I might be running forever.

When my mind came back to the kitchen, I heard talking from the living room. I found Alex speaking to Oma in a low voice; her back was to me, and he was speaking just low enough not to be discernable. He stood nearly a foot taller than Oma. He had one hand on her shoulder—his other hand waved the air, dropping when he stretched his words. I heard my name and watched two people from my past intersect in this far corner of the Earth—it all seemed incomprehensible. I watched them until Alex noticed me

standing at the door. He stopped talking; Oma turned her head over her shoulder: She was now seeing something unfamiliar in me.

“What are you two talking about?”

“Josh,” Alex said, “we don’t have time to chit chat. Help me lock all these doors and windows downstairs.” He still gripped his stick. “She’s going to take care of upstairs.” I saw Oma nod her head and then leave the room.

“What did you tell her?”

“Can we talk about this later?” He moved toward a curtained window. “He will come tonight. I know it.”

“Oma shouldn’t be here.”

“We shouldn’t be *here*, but here we are.”

After securing downstairs, I watched the dark fall across Ulan Baatar from an upstairs window. Blue, white, and red lights flickered across the cityscape. The lights inside were off; I felt safer at the windows this way. I wasn’t sure what I was waiting for. Oma sat in the chair beside me. She had a blanket pulled up to her shoulders, her head rested on the arm of the chair. Her hair draped over the side, straight and long.

Alex lay asleep behind us. He slept on his side, his newly-made weapon cradled in his arms: a broom handle with kitchen knives taped at each end. I had told him I would wake him for his watch, but he had had too little sleep these last few days and I didn’t want to steal anymore from him.

Twice my chin drifted to my chest and woke me to a start. My grip on the knife tightened.

“You look like him in the dark,” Oma said. Her voice also startled me, and I hated that I was so jumpy.

“Who?” I thought she meant Alex.

“My brother.” Her eyes were open and aimed at me. “He had that same distant look to him.”

We listened to Alex’s soft snore for awhile. Then I said, “Why did you stay tonight? What did he tell you?”

“Your brother believes there’s a ghost looking for you.”

“I never saw him. I came to the apartment after he had left. I have never seen Alex like this. Maybe he’s crazier than I thought. Maybe he did it himself and doesn’t know it.”

“He told me it was your dead father.” Oma dragged her chair closer to mine to whisper softer. She looked over her shoulder. “So which of you is the crazy one?”

“Maybe we both are.” I let the words hang in the air expecting them to explain everything. “I’m going to make some tea. Do you want some?”

Oma nodded. I left the room carrying the knife—I felt self-conscious holding it and questioned if I had the strength to use it. I made my way through the dark house: There were no photographs anywhere, no clue that it was truly Oma and not someone else who lived here. But, at the same time, someone did obviously live here, and that made me feel safer. There were vases and rugs and plants and things people cared for. Oma lived here all alone—her husband a ghost himself. I filled the tea kettle in the kitchen sink.

There was a noise behind me. I spun around and held the knife against the dark. In the doorway Oma stood. She still clasped the blanket around her. She made small steps into the kitchen and noticed the knife in my hand. I apologized.

“Your brother is awake. He’s calling for you.” She took a tray out of a cupboard and placed three small cups on it. “He was having a nightmare.”

“I want you to leave with us tomorrow.”

Oma lifted the bags out of a jar as if she hadn’t heard. I stood next to her. “Come with us tomorrow. Leave all this and come with Alex and me.”

She tilted her head. The dim light that entered through the windows fell only on half her face. “God, you sound like my brother. Even your voice.”

I took the tray from her hands. “Come with us. We’re close to finding it. I know it.”

“Then what? What will you do then?”

“We’ll see the world together. It will all be ours to come and go as we please. We can go to places no one has ever heard of and where nobody can find us, not your father or that thing out there. Don’t you understand? The world is *ours*. Anywhere at anytime. We can live the rest of our lives seeing all of it.” She took the water from the stove and filled the cups. “There’s nothing to keep you here,” I continued. “Your husband is gone. You never speak to your father. The rest of your family is dead. Why would you want to stay?”

“Because I’m connected to this place, Joshua. Everyplace I find a memory—most of them with my brother or mother. I can’t leave all this to follow you around the world. I reached for Oma but knocked the tray over to the floor: The shattered glass echoed all around me in the dark. I moved my head to kiss her and she shoved me away.

“I told you my decision four years ago. If you want me so badly than you must stay here. This is my *home*. Do you know what that word means?”

“Jesus, Oma, I can’t understand why you chose to stay here even though it makes you so unhappy. There’s nothing here but ghosts.”

The crash upstairs shook the entire house. Oma and I instinctively ducked from the noise above our heads. I bolted out of the kitchen and took the stairs in three long steps. Something like screaming, something like singing, bellowed out of the bedroom—it was distinct and didn’t sound like English, but it was familiar. At the top of the stairs I ran toward the bedroom door—and slipped on a floor flooded with three inches of water. It flowed out from under the bedroom door, down the hall, and cascaded down the stairs into the living room. The water stank like a deep drain. I had landed on my elbows. I got up and pulled the door open.

Gallons of water poured out around my calves, the force of it made me grab the door jam for balance. The only light in the room came through the shattered bedroom window and glimmered off the sloshing water. The air was fouled with swamp fumes—I had to turn my head for fresh air. The bed Alex had been laying on was crushed, its wooden frame splintered apart and floating across the water. The mattress had sunk from wetness.

Oma screamed. I saw Alex lying in a far corner, his legs straight in a V before him, his face resting on the wall. He was conscious, but he said or did nothing except breathe heavily and stare his eyes at the window. At his feet, floating in two pieces, was his stick.

I dreamt I was back at the park, sitting on a rock, and spotted a long line of vans, buses, and campers crossing the ridge on the horizon. I ran down after them, yelling and throwing rocks, but they kept driving. Alex was running behind me, but I could hear him screaming for help. I was too afraid to turn around.

I woke from that dream and found myself still on a train bound for Russia. Alex slept on the bunk next to me. I was happy he had finally found some sleep and I dare not disturb him. He had a black eye and a few cuts, but I knew that what had been bruised the most was his sanity.

The second-class cabin looked the same as the cabin we had ridden to Ulan Baatar: four bunks, a small table, and a tiny speaker that squealed something like music. Alex and I shared our cabin with two Mongolian women who, upon entering, locked the cabin door and began removing heater panels with a special made key. The women carried an enormous pile of colored sweaters that they stuffed behind the panels, ignoring Alex and me until they asked us to move so that they may stuff more sweaters under our bunk. They were probably permitted only so many sweaters into Russia and had hidden the rest to sell. The women looked more like moms than smugglers.

Last night, when Oma and I had found Alex wet and broken, I decided that it was too dangerous for Oma to be around us. She was more distraught than Alex or I: She thought that the Devil himself had come into the house. When Alex was able to speak—he had vomited about a liter of water—he told us he had been sleeping and woke up when the window broke. Something had flung him against the wall before he could scream and then tried to crawl into his mouth. He said there was too much water to see

it. Whatever was following us wasn't our father—and waited until Alex had fallen asleep or was alone before attacking. I hadn't let my brother out of my sight since.

Oma, to put it simply, could not handle all this. She asked me a thousand questions that I could not answer. It took me an hour to calm her down. Even then, the water was still dripping down the stairs when she asked us to leave. I don't blame her at all. I didn't know what the thing was capable of doing. I promised to call her as soon as we got to Irkutsk, but I had decided on the train that it was better to leave it alone. The less she had to do with us the better off she was.

The train was parked at the edge of No Man's Land, the thirty-minute stretch of land between Mongolia and Russia. In Suhbaatar, a Mongolian border town a few miles behind us, we had to wait for the Russian diesel engines to come down from the north (still draped with snow and ice) to couple with the rest of the train before dragging us to Siberia. When the train finally left the station, it traveled a short way before stopping again at the border. A uniformed official entered the cabin and asked for passports. The Mongolian women coolly answered the custom official's questions, and he returned everyone's passports and moved on to another cabin. Through a window, I eyed another officer walking along the train with a flashlight and a dog. I hoped that he wouldn't find any stowaways clinging to the underside of the carriage. The train crept northward at a brisk walking pace for several miles until it halted again. Two Caucasians, a man and a woman, wearing uniforms entered the cabin. They simply said "passports." The man had a sharp, slanted nose and hair cut to the scalp. The woman had similar features but her hair was pulled back into a tight bun. Their expressions might have been carved with a jack hammer. Despite all my travels, I had never met a Russian. I grew up in the

shadow of the Cold War and so was only familiar with the Hollywood version of Russia: a dreary, cold place where toilet paper was at the end of a four-hour line. But the Cold War had thawed, and I pondered, as the expressionless Russian handed my passport back, what it must have been like to wake one morning and find yourself in a different country.

The Russians left and the train sped to Irkutsk. I had to go to the bathroom, but didn't dare leave Alex unattended, even if the Mongolian women were in the cabin. Instead, I threw a blanket over my lap and pissed in an empty beer bottle. The women watched me but didn't say anything. Outside the window stone kilometer posts passed in the darkness. 5895 kilometers to Moscow.



Numbering 200,000, Irkutsk was the largest city within a thousand miles. The Irkutsk River bisected the town east and west. The train station lay west of the river; all other points of interests, including the cheap hotels, dotted the east side.

I didn't know what the hell I was going to do. My enthusiasm for finding the Caravan had fizzled away overnight: Now my thoughts were on the monster that chased us. It would never stop until it got us. The best we could do was stay a few days ahead of it.

I woke Alex with a gentle hand on his shoulder. He woke to a fit and I had to yell his name over and over before he heard me. In front of the train station men with private cars offered to take Alex and I to the hotel I had circled on my map. They all, as always, claimed to know exactly where I wanted to go even before they saw the map. One man, when I asked in shitty Russian how much he charged for a ride, wrote *100* on his hand. I offered him three US dollar bills instead. While driving us to our hotel, he stopped four times to ask pedestrians for directions, and then dropped us off at a hotel that was already full. On my map, the hotel manager pointed to streets with Russian names longer than the streets they christened. I didn't like being outdoors and so took the first available accomodation we found: a three-story hotel that had been dipped in puce. Through two sets of doors and up a few steps brought us to a white-tiled room with an unreachably high ceiling. A 250lb. woman and a young man holstering a pistol were leaning on the counter and silently watching Alex and I enter the lobby. In butchered Russian, I asked if there were any vacancies. The fat woman scribbled a price and pointed to the calendar. I held up two fingers and US dollars. She nodded and gave us registration slips as long as federal job applications.

Our room hid in the corner of the hotel, directly above the hotel bar. A high ceiling and pinstripe wallpaper hung above us, and two beds framing a radiator took all the floor space. There were two tall windows. I opened one (as with the doors, there was an inner and outer window to guard against the winters) and sat on the thick ledge. The town was a collection of small wooden buildings, including a church with a sharp steeple spiking the cold blue sky. It was a blue May afternoon. White puffy sailboats raced overhead, their shadows trailed over a sunken town. Alex dropped his bag and fell on a bed. He hadn't spoken more than a few words to me since Ulan Baatar. I had to cash some traveler's checks—I was low on cash—and find something to eat. Alex hadn't eaten in over twenty-four hours, and his detachment from me was making me uneasy. He was afraid to leave the hotel, but I needed to get money. In the end, I had no choice but to drag him with me. I moved quickly through the city without my backpack, desperately searching for a bank to cash my checks and return to the hotel as soon as possible. What I was going to do after that, I had no clue. We only had a few days before it caught up with us, if that. I had all but given up on the Caravan. I had no leads, and time was running out.

The first indication that things were going to be worse was when I found a sign posted to the bank door. It was in Russian, but I knew what it meant: The bank was closed over the next few days for some holiday. In a panic I located another bank on my map; it too was closed for the next four days. I desperately counted the cash I had in my money belt. I had enough money to pay for two nights at the hotel, plus a little for food. It wasn't even enough to buy train tickets to the next city.

In a futile effort to budget carefully, I bought only bread and water for dinner. I even picked up a bottle of vodka (it was cheaper than water) in hopes I could raise Alex's spirits after I told him the bad news. I doubted the hotel would let two foreigners stay on good faith, and the idea of sleeping under the stars with that thing pursuing us terrified me. We returned to the hotel and Alex fell on the bed again. I woke him and ordered him to eat something. The bread was unbelievably hard, and when I broke through the crust, the brittle insides poured out like sand. The water was worse: it fizzled like soda. I let the seltzer go flat hoping it would taste like tap water, but it only tasted like flat seltzer. That night at the hotel was a long one. With dry bread and flat seltzer in my stomach, I began to feel queasy. I opened a window and vomited onto the sidewalk fifteen feet below.

For the first time since I won that lottery ticket nine years ago, I prayed. I needed help. I felt like a marooned sailor tossing a bottle into the ocean in hopes that providence will guide it to a good Samaritan. I could not account for my brother's existence, nor could I explain what was following us. But if there things were real, than maybe the universe was populated by things that I could not understand, and maybe out there somewhere was something that could save my brother.

The next morning Alex and I spoke little—we were too busy listening to our stomachs. I only had enough for one more night in the hotel, and perhaps enough for a meal between the two of us. Not that it mattered much, for Alex hadn't eaten anything in over forty-eight hours; he was sleeping longer, and when he was awake, he laid on his back and stared at the ceiling. He was slipping further and further away from me, and nothing I did seem to make a difference.

My mind had spent the last few days trying to dissect what I had seen. I had to accept that I was confronted by things I probably would never understand: the phantom that was closing in on us, the existence of Alex, the seemingly chance encounters that were now revealing a purpose. It is on that last matter on that day that had overwhelmed me the most. Was it chance that I ran into someone who knew me from a town 12,000 miles away? Did Fate have a hand in guiding me to Oma? These things began to outline a pattern, as if something very real was steering me. But it was on that day, in that hotel room where I sat on the windowsill gazing over a far corner of the world, that I witnessed a phenomenon which convince me I had been led to Irkutsk. I was watching the townscape thinking these very thoughts when at first I had a trick of the brain: on the far end of town—on the other side of the river—I saw a building lean to one side and then spring back into place like an oak sapling. Immediately a neighboring building was pushed to the side, followed by two adjacent apartment buildings that slid apart to make way for something I could not see from where I sat. I watched this with the same awe one reserves for watching tornados at a safe distance. An unseen juggernaut bulldozed a way through the west side of the town, pushing space itself out of the way. I cannot say

with any accuracy how long this lasted; maybe only a minute or two. But while I watched it, hypnotized, I knew what it must be.

I had collected enough of myself to call for Alex to come to the window. He didn't answer until my third call, and, after raising his head to get a better look at me, I dragged him out of bed and over to the window. But all that we could see was a flock of black, squawking birds in the sky, disturbed by the commotions of buildings moving across the earth. I pulled Alex down the stairs, him limping but not protesting, and out onto the street. I didn't have any money for a cab (even if I had seen one), but we had gone only a few blocks before taking a corner and catching a fortuitous tram parked at a stop. My heart was bursting from my chest; I struggled to master my breathing. There were a thousand stops before we crossed the river and I pushed Alex out when we got close. He was very compliant. I had the map with me and tried to navigate by way of land marks. After a few blocks Alex and I stood before the train station that I knew for certain was out of place. There were no gashes in the street, no uprooted trees, no split foundations. Yet when I studied the streets on my map, the train station was not supposed be on this street. With Alex in tow I took a closer look at my surroundings. Buildings that were adjacent on my map and in my memory now were separated by a parking lot. Some streets now had bends and kinks in them where they didn't before. The signs, though in Russian, were scrambled, as if these letters had been shuffled by wind. A tree grew out of a gutter. As eyes grow keener in darkness with time, so my eyes revealed to me things that blinded me before. Something had cut a swath through the city and nobody seemed to notice.

Almost nobody. Across the street an old woman stared at the gnarled train tracks next to the station. She yelled in Russian, but the young couple accompanying her could not find where she pointed. She must have felt my glance, and turned to me, and I knew that she saw what I saw. Alex could see it too and seized my arm while muttering prayers. We followed this absurdity across town: the distortions and permutations were now plain to us, and others. A group of boys surrounded a stop sign with a knot in it, and a woman held a cross up at the sky. Yet most people did not see these things. They walked over crooked streets and ducked overhanging lampposts without a second glance, and some were even annoyed at those who tried to bring those things to attention.

The trajectory aimed east, toward Lake Baikal. It had at most an hour head start. At that precise second I became convinced that this was not the work of chance.

Within an hour we had our backpacks packed and were hitchhiking to the lake. Most people wanted money, even if they were going that way, but in the end a man eager to practice English gave us a ride all the way to a ferry dock that stretched out onto Lake Baikal. The lake was big enough to be an ocean. Around the lake's edge was a white ring, a remnant of winter. We got out, thanked him, and zipped up our jackets from the cold. A wind trampled across the lake and kicked up small waves. The yards of ice rocked against the stone shore; each wave carried a grinding and cracking sound as ice rubbed and broke. Listuyanka was still a few more kilometers down the road. The sun was near the horizon, hanging between the lake and the clouds. The weather had turned for the worse in just a few hours. The road followed the edge of the lake, side-winding behind hills: I saw no village, only a few scattered home across the lakeside.

Alex insisted we stop to rest. A thigh high curb ran along the lakeside of the road. Alex and I dropped our packs and straddled the wall and laid a handkerchief down to cut the bread on. The wind rushed between us, scooping out the bread and leaving behind the crust. Alex chewed and gave shrugs as answers to my conversation. I emptied the seltzer out and refilled the bottle with lake water. It wasn't bad, but it did taste like a lake.

We marched along the road silently watching our shadows stretch to giants before us and listening to the lake slosh. Our shadows grew larger and fainter and then they were gone with the sun. At the same time I became aware of the snow that was falling, lightly at first, but growing more menacing with each second. The shortcomings of my hasty plan began to reveal themselves, and I realized that we were going to spend the night outside in the snow without so much as a tent.

“Josh!” Alex said grabbing my arm. With his other hand he pointed to the first few buildings that constituted Listuyanka. Cozy wooden cottages with warm, glowing windows sprawled the outskirts of the village. Up on one hill a gray sky silhouetted a wooden cross. How my brother’s weak eyes saw it I didn’t know.

The snow was falling harder and I was getting very cold. With nowhere to go, we made our way to the cross.

There was still some light, even more snow, when Alex and I plodded up the dirt road toward the cross. We aimed for the cross, guessing which streets might take us to it. Snow whipped through me, blowing up my pants and stinging my legs, until at last we found what supported the cross: not a church, but a freshly built house. The three-storey house had a fresh coat of varnish and there were wood shavings in the yard. Except for the cross, the house looked like a Canadian hunting lodge. As soon as Alex and I set foot on the lawn, something lurched out from under the house. The animal was bigger than a man, covered in mud, straw, and gravel. The it charged across the yard at us—it made no sound; but Alex and I screamed—and came to a jerking halt a few feet in front of us, its breath steaming out of a massive head. The dog stood silently at the end of a long, rusty logging chain that led under the house. Its eyes followed me—not Alex—and did not soften even when I called to it.

The front door opened and a man wearing a flannel sweater, jeans, and galoshes stepped out. He clutched a claw hammer. He spoke to us in Russian.

“Hello,” I said, hoping he understood English, “we’re looking for a place out of the snow. You see, the banks are closed and we couldn’t pay you until they open....”

“I’m sorry, but we don’t even have heat yet,” he said in perfect English.



Alex let out a very audible sigh.

The man eyed Alex's bruised face. Then we went from the dog, to me, then back to Alex. I could see he was thinking. "Let me make a room for you." He called the dog in Russian and it immediately retreated back under the house.

We followed him inside. "Your English is excellent," I said.

"It should be," he replied. "I'm from Maine."

The house was a church, and the man was a visiting priest. Fr. Ramirez had spent most of his Jesuit years working in impoverished communities in Central America. He was in Listuyanka to install the heating in the church, which also doubled as a sanctuary for troubled kids in Irkutsk. Fr. Ramirez told us that he was only here for two months, and then he would be on to a permanent assignment in the Kuril Islands. The bishop was actually in Rome on Church business, and as the Jesuit said, "What the bishop doesn't know won't hurt him." By the time darkness had completely overtaken Listuyanka, Alex and I were sipping cups of hot coco on the snow-swept balcony of the top floor. We warmed ourselves over our mugs while watching the snow. It was falling thick. I shuddered when I thought where Alex and I would be had we not met Fr. Ramirez at the moment we did.

The snow didn't let up that night, or the next morning. Fr. Ramirez heard on the radio that a storm had rolled across the lake and was unlikely to ease up for a day or two. The buses weren't running due to road conditions. Although the locals had endured sterner flurries, the unusually late blizzard had come upon Listuyanka after the village had coiled its tire chains and wrapped its snow plows.

Something wanted us to come here and meet this man. I believed it was connected to what we were looking for.

Fr. Ramirez never asked us any questions, seldom spoke unless I initiated conversation. I did get this out of him: He was a master electrician and plumber, and had PhD's in theology and family counseling. He despised working under the eyes of the church, and preferred to live in remote areas of the world helping the poor by building latrines and teaching AIDS awareness. He never once brought up God. I did ask him if he had heard or seen anything peculiar, but he said he hadn't.

Though I had no leads, I was grateful for a few days of security. I felt safe here, and so did Alex. Even one night here improved his health dramatically. He was talking more, and one of our first conversations addressed the tracks that led us here:

“Why did it come *here*?” Alex asked.

“I don't know. I thought about the places it has been before. China, Mongolia, and now here. I don't know if it is drifting in an unseen current or if it had a reason to come here.”

There was a knock at the door. Fr. Ramirez had left for a house call (he had an abundance of trust) and I thought he may had forgotten something. Alex and I went downstairs to the front door. The church was big, and besides a chapel it had eight bedrooms, a soon-to-be-recreational room, and a kitchen to feed thirty. We descended an unsanded staircase and to the unfinished welcome room, which was part of the basement. Copper tubing and power tools were strewn across the concrete floor and the smell of pine hung everywhere.

The knock at the door was monotonous, almost mechanical. Alex and I stood confused—then we panicked. Knives in hands, we trampled down to the front door and peeked out the eyehole. A young, dark man eyed me back.

“Who are you?” I asked in English through the door.

“Where is Michael Ramirez?” the man said. His accent was Latin, but I couldn’t say where exactly.

Alex pressed his back flat against the wall, ready with his knife above his head. I opened the door but kept a foot planted behind it. The man was younger than I thought, no more than twenty-one.

“He’s not here,” I said. “We don’t expect him back till dark. Do you want to come back later?”

The young man looked over his shoulder to the lake a quarter mile below. The lake still had a white rim, and everything in between us and the shore was blanketed in white. Snow was still falling lightly.

He faced us again. The man had a detached quality about him. His words were slow and stressed strangely. “No, I cannot come back. Tell Michael Ramirez I will be in Moscow in ten days.” Then he turned around and walked away. I called out for the young man’s name. He said it was Raul, then added, “Tell Michael Ramirez I miss him very much.” I thought the visitor peculiar. I wouldn’t say he looked drugged, but there was something somnambolic about him. He shuffled off the porch and down the street—the dog under the house never made a sound—and slightly tilted his head up at the sky. I also noticed that he didn’t have a jacket.

Alex and I returned to the balcony. The crisp air tickled my chest. From the hillside we could see three boys sneaking behind a fence cradling something in their hands. They ambushed two girls walking down the street with so many snowballs that they didn’t know where to run. Alex scooped two handfuls of snow off the balcony rail, and a

moment later, nailed the biggest of the boys in the face at twenty-yards. All the kids on the street—now united against one common enemy—hurled a barrage of snowballs at the balcony. One hit me in the shoulder. Alex took two to the head. I sent a snowball at heads peeking from around a parked car; it flew harmlessly above them.

We exchanged a few volleys before things suddenly stopped. A few seconds passed before the kids all sprinted from out of their cover in different directions, all of them screaming. They ran down the muddy road, one fell but was up running again before I could say anything. They had all ran from something behind the fence.

We didn't see anything. But the giant dog charged from out under the house toward the fence. It jerked the chain tight, and the church gave a tiny jolt. The dog growled deeply: I felt my insides tremble. It jumped at the end of the chain; each lunge snapping the chain in the cold air. The animal saw something Alex and I didn't.

But I knew. I grabbed Alex by the wrist and dragged him inside, locking the door behind me. Alex and I double-checked the windows and doors—we had made sure they were all locked on our first night here. Next we went to the top floor and spied out a bedroom window.

“We got to get out of here,” I whispered to Alex.

“And go where?” Alex said. He pointed the kitchen knife he'd been carrying since Ulan Baatar. “He's got us trapped.”

He was right. I thought that we would have a few more days' head start on it. We were stuck here for another day or two until the banks and roads open to Irkutsk.

“We'll tell Fr. Ramirez when he gets home. We'll tell him everything.”

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Fr. Ramirez did not return home until after nine. We waited for him to shake the snow off himself and settle into his chair before telling him what happened. As with Oma, I did not tell him *everything*, only this: that there was a creature lurking around outside, something we believe meant us harm. The priest listened calmly, even when I told him providence had led us here. When I finished, he asked me a few expected questions. No, we hadn't seen it up close, but it was responsible for Alex's injuries. The only evidence we had was the dog's peculiar behavior: It remained always between the house and the edge of the yard.

I shouldn't have told him. He was polite, but not convinced, though he never said so. His eyes gave him away. What he really was thinking I'll never know, but I couldn't blame him for his lack of faith: It took a first hand encounter to convince me. Fr. Ramirez gently asked us when we might be on our way, and I told him the day after tomorrow.

Alex and I got up and excused ourselves to the bedroom. On the way out, Alex added, "Somebody came by earlier for you. He said his name was Raul."

"Sorry, I don't know any Raul."

"Well, anyway, he said he would be in Moscow in ten days. He was upset he missed you."

Fr. Ramirez smiled at us. But then his smile faded and he drifted away with thoughts I don't think he had had in a long time. Alex could see it too. He gave a few details about the man that I couldn't remember, details that made a world of difference to Fr. Ramirez. The priest asked Alex about a scar above the man's eye—I hadn't remembered seeing one, but Alex did, and he described it accurately enough that Fr. Ramirez fell deep

inside of himself. He got up and left the room—Alex and I exchanged silent words—but came back after only a minute. In his hands he held a tattered photograph: in it were the man named Raul with an arm around a much younger Fr. Ramirez. The photo had to be twenty years old, yet Raul hadn't aged a day.

"That was him," Alex said.

"I know what you two were after the moment I saw you," Fr. Ramirez said. "I saw something peculiar the day you two showed up. No money, no where to go. All you knew was that you had to come here." He tapped the man in the photograph. "He was the same way. He tried to convince me to go with him, but I wouldn't." The photo in his hand trembled slightly. "You looking for those people, the ones who can cut through...space."

"But I asked you before...about *it*."

"For awhile after Raul left, my memories started to feel like dreams. I started to forget about him. I would wake up from some daydream and have to dig out this picture to convince myself that it all had really happened. This picture is the only proof I have against my own mind." Fr. Ramirez's voice fell to a whisper. "Raul was hunting it in the Americas when I met him. We were good friends." In those four words Fr. Ramirez started crying. "We left on bad terms...I never saw him again."

"Why didn't you go with him?" I asked.

The man stopped crying—everyone felt better: until he said, "Because when you join them, you can never leave."

"He looks the same age as in that picture" Alex said.

“Those people are trapped in purgatory. Those souls roam the earth, going nowhere, do nothing but watching the world grow older.”

“Come to Moscow with us,” I said.

“Never.” He cut me off when I protested. “If you think God or whatever led you to me, then heed my words. Do not look for them. Leave them be and go on with what life God intended you to have. Those souls are damned.”



The next two days were spent watching the snow slide off the roof in bright sheets. Icicles fell as the sun melted everything away. Fr. Ramirez refused to talk any more about his friend, or the people he was with, and said he would give us money to take a bus back to Irkutsk as soon as the banks opened. But, I did get him alone once: Alex was in the shower, and I was standing outside the bathroom door. I caught the priest as he was passing through the hall. In one breath, I told him the rest: I told him that Alex was not a real person and asked him if it had anything to do with the others. He only replied, "I don't know," and left me in the hall. I didn't know what to expect, but I knew that in eight more days we could find the answers in Moscow.

On that final morning we left the church for the first time in four days. Fr. Ramirez waved to us from the church porch. There were no goodbyes, no words for anything that had happened. We tramped across the yard, the dog watching us from under the house. When we had walked a short ways down the road, I looked back at the church. The priest was gone. I never saw him again.

We had left Baikal unmolested. Alex and I had crept through the mud and slush, scrutinizing every shadow we saw; my brother kept his knife ready to pull out of his jacket. But we didn't see anything. Even when we got to Irkutsk, cashed money, and bought a train ticket to Moscow, I found the train station to be back in its proper place. There were no indications that anything had happened at all.

Our train cabin to Moscow looked like all the other second-class cabins we had stayed in. At the moment, Alex and I shared a cabin with an old man and a woman tending to a one-year-old child. They didn't speak English, so I felt comfortable talking about our circumstances aloud.

I dealt another hand to Alex. He picked the cards off the bunk and held them close to his eyes before placing them in some order in his hand.

"We should get to Moscow with two days to spare," I said to Alex.

"Moscow sounds like a big place." He kept his eyes on his cards. "Where are you going to look?"

"I'm just going to follow the trail. I think it will be too big to hide from us."

The baby had finally fallen asleep after an hour of crying. The old man slept on the bunk above the mother and child. He was snoring lightly.

"Josh...Fr. Ramirez was pretty serious about those people. I think he's afraid of them."

I agreed. "I think he fears things he doesn't understand." Fr. Ramirez made the caravan sound like the *Flying Dutchman*. "But the fact remains that this thing is after us, and it's never going to stop. We can't go back home and lead this thing to Mom."

“I know...” Alex said. “But I’ve been thinking about another way. I got the idea watching that dog at the church. Maybe there’s a way we can trap it. Something that we can lock it in so that it never escapes.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. But I’m inclined to side with Fr. Ramirez on this one. That man who came to see him didn’t look right. You said it yourself there was something strange about him. It was like he was sleepwalking.”

“He hadn’t aged a day in two decades. Of course he’s going to seem weird to us. Listen, sooner or later this thing is going to catch us unless we can always stay ahead of it.”

“But you won’t even give my plan a chance!” The baby stirred and the mother gave Alex a stern look. “We could lure him into something—I don’t know...maybe throw a net on him.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. That thing would probably break out of anything we could trap it in. And how the hell would you lure it into anything? It probably already knows we’re going to Moscow. It’s too dangerous to try and trick it.”

“You don’t know that, Josh!” Alex raised his voice again, and I tried to calm him before he woke the baby. “Who the hell made you in charge? I’ve been following you across three countries and it’s clear to me that you don’t know what the hell you’re doing.”

“I’ve got the money. I’ll say where we go. And remember, this thing didn’t show up until you did.”

Alex threw his cards in my face. I flinched and the little cardboard corners stung my cheeks. The cards tumbled end over end to the floor. "Fuck you," Alex yelled, then slammed the cabin door open. The baby began crying and the old man leaned up from the top bunk to see what was the matter. Alex pointed a finger at me before leaving. "I wouldn't have had to come looking for you if you weren't so much like Dad." He left the door open and me picking up the cards from the cabin floor. The baby didn't get back to sleep until a few hours later.

Whether it was their intended stop or not, the old man and the woman with the baby left wordlessly before the train came to a complete stop. For a time Alex and I had the cabin to ourselves. I thought it was dangerous for the two of us to be apart, even if it was just to go to the bathroom, and I told him so. He didn't reply. He did, however, quickly come out of his sullen mood when two young Russian women in military uniforms dropped their dark green sea bags on the bunks across from us. They were cute, on their way back from leave, and watched us while speaking Russian and smiling to each other. A few miles after the train had left the station, Alex had their names (Yelena giggled a lot, and Agnessa had better English) and pouring waterfalls of vodka in plastic cups. I thought Russians had a peculiar sense of hospitality: They are distant to strangers, but warm up quickly to people they've just met. I had trouble seeing how my hick brother from Oklahoma was so charming to people all around the world. It certainly wasn't his looks. I thought it irresponsible for him to get drunk with all that was going on. He tried to cajole me with vodka—even Agnessa joined in on the teasing—but I kept to myself on my bunk. The next morning I awoke to the reeking smell of spilt vodka. An empty bottle rattled on the table next to an overturned plastic cup that rolled back and forth through a puddle of vodka. All three of the others slept on their bunks. Soft wheezes seeped from each of them. After I touched my money belt—a gesture now so routine as urinating in the morning—I threw away the bottle and wiped the table clean. I then heated my mug of noodles (each carriage had a hot water thermos at one end) and watched the little Russian towns pass by. We were now officially in Siberia. Most the cities were gray and industrial, built at a time in the Soviet Union when a whole town produced only car door handles. The apartment buildings resembled factories more than

residential dwellings. But one thing was for sure. Russia is enormous. The train ride would span eight time zones: a third of the world. This and other thoughts occupied my mind until Alex woke up. I beckoned him out of the cabin with a cigarette.

“Look,” Alex said and sucked a long drag from his cigarette, “I’m afraid of that thing too, but you and I both checked the train after it left Irkutsk. Relax and enjoy the company we have.” We were standing at the rear smoking chamber in our carriage. The wind from the open window whipped his hair. The cold wind howled over the din of several tons of train sliding on two steel rails held in place by a quarter-inch of flange. The air smelled slightly of cigarette smoke and burning grease.

“I know we did. But it could get on at any of these stops. Why are you being so careless? Did you get amnesia when that thing attacked you at Oma’s house?”

“If it comes for me this time, I’ll be ready.” Alex daftly pulled his knife out from his jacket and stabbed an unseen enemy. “Next time I’m going to bury this in his face.”

“Is this before or after you catch it in a giant mousetrap? This thing is waiting to pounce on us the moment we drop our guard. All I’m asking is that you be more careful. How are you going to fight back if you’re drunk?”

“You let me worry about that. I don’t need you hanging on me like a Siamese twin ready to tell me every time I fuck up.” He threw his cigarette out the window. “You’re so much like Dad you don’t even know.”

He left me alone with my mug of noodles. The train chugged west. We were still days away from Moscow. I knew I couldn’t keep an eye on Alex the whole time, even on a train. Outside the frosted window the Trans-Siberian Railway crawled over a vast

landscape. On both sides of the train patches of taiga faded into one another, stealing the terrain of any identifiable landmarks.

A uniformed attendant opened the door to the chamber toting a trash bin. I greeted him in Russian. The man nodded. Then he opened the door and stood between the cars, inside the tarpaulin throat that connected the carriages to each other. He lifted one of the steep plates covering the coupling like a dumpster lid and emptied the trash container onto the passing tracks. White plastic bags fluttered around like confused doves, then captured and released under the locomotive. I covered my noodles to keep stray bits of toilet paper from landing in the mug. The attendant gave the bin a good shake, kicked the lid closed, and left. I watched the plastic bags blow across Siberia.

Sometimes when my parents fought, my father would disappear for days at a time. He would rather be away than argue. His absence was not really noticed because I rarely saw him when he was home, for he would take over the television and tell everyone else in the house to shut up. But there were times that when they fought, it was my mother who packed her bags and left for her sister's for a weekend. The difference was that our father let us do more or less whatever we wanted as long as we were quiet. We always got too loud and my father would yell at us from the living room, I'd cry back "sorry" and we'd continue with whatever trouble we were doing. It was rare for him ever to punish us, or even speak to us with words other than "shut up." The one clear memory I have of my father's wrath was when my mother had left after fighting with him on the account of his drinking. My mother hated his drinking, and he seem to crack every beer open as a testament to his defiance. She had left Alex and me alone with him.

Our mother would not allow us to play in the carport for fear we may damage my father's '67 Chevrolet—the same one he would drive off a cliff two decades later. With our mother gone, no one stopped Alex and me from crawling under the tarp and playing in the front seat. We left the tarp over the car and underneath it was much darker. We had done this thing before: we pretended we were driving a car that could drive over land and water, over any mountain or through any ravine. We imagined driving to those faraway places we had read in *National Geographic*.

This time our fantasy was interrupted by our father pulling the tarp off the car. He stared at us through the windshield in disbelief before screaming. He pulled the driver door open and jerked me out by my arm. We had broken nothing. Our only crime had been trespassing. His grip was like a dog's jaw on my wrist. He pulled me into the



backyard without even speaking—Alex was punching him in the leg—as he dragged me toward the storm cellar. Alex and I both began screaming for help and I dropped to the ground to dig my heels into the grass.

Dad had to let one hand go to open the door, and he loosened his hand on my wrist. I broke free and ran. I ran through our neighbor's yard and rolled under the barb wired fence. I ran across his back pasture and headed for the woods. Only when I stopped did I realize Alex was not with me.

I don't know how long I hid there, but I got cold and snuck back to the house. I crawled under fences and peeked around sheds until I came back to the backyard. I thought of my brother trapped in the cellar with the monster.

I crept up to the storm cellar door. A bent nail stuck through the latch. I was reaching for it when I heard Alex talking to someone. I put my ear to the door and heard whispers, but I couldn't hear what was being said.

“Alex?”

“Josh, open the door,” he said calmly. “I want to tell you something.”

I lifted the door open. Alex was crouching at the bottom of the steps near the water's edge. He was shaking with his arms folded across his knees. There was no one else in the cellar.

“Who were you talking to?”

His eyes were red.

“Alex, get out of there.”

Alex climbed up the steps using both hands and feet. His crotch was wet and one pant leg stuck to him. He stood next to me and leaned in close. The cellar smell clung to him like a soggy jacket.

“He told me he was going to kill Dad.”

Alex somehow found more vodka—I wouldn't give him any money—and he seemed determined to finish the bottle in one setting. Yelena and Agnessa joined him, and soon the three were laughing but didn't know why. Alex drank shot after shot with no regard for our predicament or to the bruises still fresh on his face. But I said nothing in front of Yelena or Agnessa and was forced instead to give him dirty looks. He would get up to fetch something out of the cabin and leave without waiting for me. When he came out of the bathroom I yelled at him but he rolled his eyes and went back to the cabin. I sat on my bunk pretending to read while the three of them talked about their homes and families. The young women explained the photos they carried. They were good friends, and Yelena had spent her leave at Agnessa's hometown in Siberia. The women talked about how much their family writes them, always telling them to be careful, especially of boys. I thought of my own mother. On the day I took that bus to Mexico, the note I left was short, and told her I was only leaving for the summer. I think she knew I was never coming back. Alex hadn't known about the lottery ticket, but he knew I was leaving.

"You can have whatever I don't take," I told him. I had packed an old gym bag of my father. "When you turn eighteen, I'll send for you." But I never sent a letter or postcard to either Alex or my mother. After nine years, Alex's company had churned the deep waters of my memory and brought to the surface things long forgotten. These memories were so old to me, so distant, that I couldn't separate them from old dreams.

I had endured Alex and the Russian's merriment for three hours before I told Alex I had to go to the bathroom. He acted indifferent until I reminded him that we shouldn't be separated—then he made it more of a point to ignore me. In the end I had no choice: I

went to the toilet alone. I ran out the door and down the corridor to the bathroom. It was occupied; I sprinted to the next carriage and jumped in the first available toilet.

I did my business and peeked out the door before running back down two carriages and to the cabin. I opened the door and found the room empty. I jumped back into the hall. I walked toward the engine, into first-class, until I got to the end and was stopped by a *provodnitsa*. I turned around and jogged through a dozen carriages before getting to the dining car, and then on through third-class where the richest of the poor were stacked three people high in an open cage of bodies and bags. I studied every face I passed. I reached the very end of the train and found no one.

It was dark and there were no lights anywhere outside the train. The remoteness beleaguered me. This was the first time I had been alone since Alex's arrival, and I didn't have so much as a knife. I walked back through third-class, even waited there amidst the heavy stares until I figured out what to do: I went to every cabin on the train knocking on doors. Some people answered, angry that I ignored their questions while my eyes searched the cabin behind them. Some doors didn't answer, and I banged on them until I was certain no one was home, even when a neighbor stuck his head out to investigate the noise. I went back to the engine but was again stopped, this time by a man and a woman who made it clear in Russian that I would be expelled at the next stop if I didn't go back to my cabin.

I locked the door and closed the curtains. On the table, where the vodka had been resting, was Alex's knife. I picked it up and climbed onto my bunk, my back against the wall and knife aimed at the door.

I remember Alex crying on the day I left him. He was only fourteen. I had to tell him that I just couldn't take that house anymore, nor did I think that I had to. Anywhere was better, and nine years later, I still think so. But now there was something hunting me, maybe something even clinging under the train patiently enduring the cold, waiting for me to be alone. Every so often something turned the handle on the cabin door—these incidents were not precluded or followed by knocks.

After two hours there did come a knock. Alex called on the other side. I did not underestimate that my ears could be tricked, and so I unlocked the door and stood ready with the knife. Alex, Yelena, and Agnessa all recoiled back when they saw me.

“Where the fuck have you been?” Alex said. “I’ve been looking all over for you.”

“Where the fuck was *I*?” I screamed. They were still outside the cabin, and the Russians gave each other secret looks. “I’ve checked the whole Goddamn train for you. I thought something happened! Where the hell have you been?”

“Calm down, man.” Alex said. He came in the cabin but the Russians stayed out. “Give me my knife!” Alex’s eyes were bloodshot and he swayed to keep his balance. “We went to a friend’s cabin to get more vodka and had a few drinks. I came looking for you, but you weren’t here.”

“I’ve been here for two fucking hours! Do you even comprehend how dangerous this was? I’ve been *alone* this whole time. That thing could have broken through the door and killed me!”

“Did you see it?”

“That’s not the Goddamn point! We shouldn’t under any circumstance be apart until we find *them*.”

The ladies were obviously confused. Alex coaxed them inside and shut the door.  
“I’ve told Yelena and Agnessa everything. They’re going to help us.”

“You told them a fucking ghost is chasing us?” I looked at the women. They were arguing in whispered Russian. “They don’t even know what the hell we’re talking about.”

“Listen, asshole,” Alex yelled, “I’m not going to be afraid. I’m not going to back down. When we get to Russia, I’m going to figure out a way to kill that thing, even if I do it by myself.”

The Russians didn’t speak to us for the rest of the trip. I decided then that Alex and I had different destinies. I would find them with or without him.

After an awkward day of sharing a cabin with two Russians who obviously evaded Alex's every attempt at attention, Alex and I arrived at Moscow. The city was far more cosmopolitan than I had expected. Stalin architecture aside, it has all the feelings of an old European city. And the capital seemed relatively prosperous compared to what I had seen in the east. We found cheap accommodation: a near-derelect building with dodgy customers who avoided each other. The receptionist gave me a key nailed to a foot-long piece of broom handle with a painted number. Alex and I rode up eight flights in a doorless elevator noting that some floors operated as a hotel and other floors were offices for independent businesses. We stepped onto our floor, took two lefts, and found the room that matched the key. The room was disproportionate—the floor had a smaller surface area than any of the tall walls surrounding it. Two beds pressed the sides of the narrow room and a sturdy wardrobe leaned behind the door. The toilet and showers were down the hall.

“We can move that wardrobe in front of the door.” I checked the single window. There was no fire escape, just the sidewalk eight stories below. There were a few parked cars, and I calculated if I could survive an impact on them should I be forced to flee out the window. “Maybe we can make a rope with the sheets if we have to.”

“We need to find a church,” Alex said. “Do you know where one is?”

“What? No, Alex, we got to stay here for the next two days. We'll buy some food so we don't have to leave. Maybe I'll find some nails to help secure the door and window.”

“I'm going to find a church. I'm going to get God in on the matter. Whatever this thing is that has chased us all the way here isn't going to stop if we find those people. If it can't find us, it will look for Mom.”

“You don’t know that—”

“I know this thing didn’t show up until after our father died. Maybe this thing had something to do with his death. Maybe it even killed him.

“You do what you need to do,” Alex continued. “I’m going to ask for help because I’m afraid. I can’t leave Mom alone with this thing out there.” I spoke but Alex cut me off. “If you don’t help me with this, I will think you’re a coward, and will never want to see you again.”

There was finality in his words. I did not believe that my brother could stop that phantom. It could not be killed; it could not be deceived. Alex had filled his head with false hopes and prayers and would surely kill himself if he stayed. I could not change his mind and so went with him.

Alex and I shuttled through the subway until we emerged at the heart of Moscow. Red Square was a huge brick yard surrounded by an imposing collection of buildings and stretched at least a thousand feet to the Moscow River. At the north end loomed the Russian Historical Museum, a massive red brick castle of towers and golden spires. A latticework of scaffolding hid under swaying canvass that curtained one side of the museum from remodeling. The Kremlin flanked the west side of the square, a sprawling compound shielded by a high parapet and occasional tower. A mustard yellow building with white stripes peeked over the wall with a Russian flag perched atop its dome. In front of this wall rested a tomb of deep red granite and black labradorite—Lenin’s mausoleum. Opposite there was a long building with a thousand windows. The nineteenth-century palace had become a symbol of a lost Cold War: It was now the largest shopping mall in Russia.



Farther down Red Square was St. Basil's cathedral. Eight marionettes encircled a large spire, each tower crowned with stripes and swirls in blue and green. The church upstaged everything on the square. Like Tiananmen Square, many people clustered to all points on the square. Kids ran amok across the field of stone. I felt safer with the crowds.

"Do you want to go in?" I asked Alex while pointing at St. Basil's.

"Give me a second." Alex squinted about the square. His eyes searched over the people, the buildings—he took it all in. I followed him as he strolled the perimeter of the square. He was quiet most of the time, but he occasionally asked me for some fact about a building or the Russian government. I answered when I could, but could see no relevance to our situation.

"Are you looking for answers on these stones?" I said. "You're wasting our time. Let's go back to the hotel."

Alex ignored me. We walked around the square three times. He stopped by the line stemming out of Lenin's mausoleum. "Is this like the one in Beijing?" I said it was so. "Let's go in."

I made him promise me we would go back to the hotel after the mausoleum. This line was not nearly as large as Chairman Mao's, and in less than fifteen minutes we passed the body. It was behind thick ballistic glass and encased in a glass sarcophagus. I thought of Chairman Mao and the dead woman in the Hall of Humans. Lenin was dressed in a clean suit, his hair and nails perfect, and yet he looked as if he had never been alive. Alex stared at body; Alex's eyes studied every detail of the cadaver—so much so that we were told by the guards to keep moving. Outside Alex lit a cigarette, but

didn't say much, and even when we returned to the hotel with groceries he hadn't said more than a few words.

"I told you," I said between bites of a sandwich, "there was nothing to see. Help me move the wardrobe in front of the door. Do you need to go to the bathroom first?"

"I think I know how to stop it," Alex said. "You're right. I don't think I can kill it, but I think I can stop it."

"I don't know what you thought you saw, but let me tell you this: If that thing catches you, it will kill you. Your knife will not help you. You can do nothing but run from it."

Alex took the knife out from his jacket and tossed it on a bed. "I think you're right about all those things. But I can't stand by and do nothing. I've got to try."

"I'm not going to let you kill yourself. In two days we will have answers. We're both getting on that ride."

"You can't stop me."

"The hell I can't. You have no right to leave me alone with this thing. At least wait until the Caravan gets here—"

"No! I've got to find it now. I think the thing likes to attack when you're sleeping. That's when you're the most vulnerable."

"Alex! Listen to yourself. What if comes here while you're gone?"

"That's why I've got to find it before that." He walked toward the door, but I moved in front of him. "Get out of the way, Josh."

“You’re not real. I don’t know where you came from or how you found me, but I know I invented you so I could keep a handhold on my sanity in a house with a drunk father and a mother who talked to Jesus everywhere. What are you?”

“I’m your brother.”

“How do you know what I know?” I grabbed his arm. “How did you get this scar?”

“I cut it on a fence. Buck McKenzie was chasing us. You know, you were there.”

“Bullshit! It was me who was running from him. You were never there.”

“Then how do I know it happened?”

“That’s what I’m trying to find out! The only reason why this sick fantasy survived as long as it has is because our mom was always talking to you and ghosts.”

“You sound like Mom but act like Dad.” He went for the door and I pushed him back. Alex’s bloodshot eyes looked me over. All the skin on his thin face bunched above his eyebrows. “You only want me to stay because you’re too chickenshit to be alone.”

“You’re not leaving.”

“Stop me.”

I stepped forward and slapped Alex across his face. Never in all my life, despite all our scuffles, had I ever hit my brother. I dropped my arm—Alex immediately lunged at me. We fell back onto a bed, tumbling bread and canned meat to the floor. I grabbed Alex’s hair and yanked his head back. Alex found my forearm and clamped his teeth on the soft flesh.

I screamed. Alex lay on top of me. We wrestled before I got my arm back. I brought my feet up between myself and Alex and stomped them into his chest sending him backwards across the floor.

I leapt off the bed, but Alex was quicker. His fist smashed into my mouth. My lip was pinched hard between knuckle and teeth.

I collapsed back on the bed but fell dragging a backpack with me. Clothes and toiletries spilled across the floor. Alex sprinted out of the room.

I was slow to get up, and by the time I reached the elevator it was already descending. I ran down all eight flights but got to the lobby too late. Alex was gone and I was alone.

I went back to the hotel room. I pushed the wardrobe in front of the door and picked up the kitchen knife Alex had left. My window overlooked the city. I didn't know what Alex had planned, but I prayed for him all the same.

For the rest of the day I stayed in the hotel room and searched for Alex from the window. I had no idea what his plan was, or even where he got this plan, but he was crazy to go out there alone. I paced the small room, clutching the kitchen knife in my right hand, and startled at every noise I heard in the building. I didn't even leave the room to use the toilet; instead I peed in a water bottle. Other things I did with my time include packing Alex's bag to be read if he came back. I tried to occupy my mind with a book, but my thoughts always wandered to my brother. I could imagine every detail about him—but when I opened my eyes, the room was still empty. The solitude wore on my mind and soon I was interrogating myself. I had given Alex a face, a mind, and a character. He had found me before that other thing—and now his absence was my vulnerability. I spent the rest of daylight with these thoughts, and when Alex hadn't returned by nightfall, I upended one of the beds and barricaded the window with it.

I tried sleeping, but the buzzing of mosquitoes woke me up. It had started in my sleep and crept into my consciousness. My feet itched, and so did my arms. The room was trapped with hot, heavy air. I was sweating and almost naked. In the dark I could hear the mosquitoes swarming to feast on my body. I threw the heavy blanket over my head, but my breath became hot and forced, so I dragged my backpack onto the bed, propped it up near one end, and with the blanket, made a tent. But again, under the blanket the air became stale, and I kicked the tent off in anger. The room too had become airtight and I pushed the upended bed a few feet to open the window and discovered that it didn't open. The buzzing didn't cease, and my hands soon were covered in the bleeding, crushed bodies of mosquitoes too slow for my slaps.

I couldn't stay in the room. I pushed the wardrobe aside and pressed my ear against the door. For a long while I listened, and after hearing nothing, I picked up the knife and stepped outside.

The hall was cold and empty. I slipped on some pants and grabbed a few things for the bathroom. I tip toed bare foot down the hall on a thin carpet over a cold cement floor and was shivering when I reached the bathroom door. I locked it behind me.

The bathroom had one sink, one toilet with no seat, and a bathtub large enough to hide a family in an air raid. There were no mosquitoes yet, but they were here, slowly stirring in the cold and sensing my body heat. I stepped naked into the tub and waited for it to slowly fill. Covering my face with a wet handkerchief, I lay on my back and kept my feet clear of the scolding waterfall. The small stream from the faucet reminded me of filling my tin mug from the thermos on the train.

Under the handkerchief my tongue slid along the cut Alex had given me on my swollen lip. My mustache was getting in my teeth, and my hair was the longest it had ever been. With the knife I sawed off handfuls of hair till my neck and shoulders were bare. Black hair floated in the water and stuck to the sides of the tub. The mosquitoes were now awake but kept away from the steam of the bathtub. Their number and determination drew my mind to when I freed Alex from the storm cellar. If this creature had killed my father, it would surely kill Alex, and then go after my mother. I don't know what they had done to enact its vengeance but it would eventually get them. And when it had killed them all would it next seek others who had intersected with my life? I thought of Oma. I hadn't called her like I had promised. I hadn't heard anything from her in weeks.

I waited in the bathtub until the sun came up. Then I got dressed and left the hotel to find a phone.

I kept one hand on the knife inside my jacket. I had gotten directions to a kiosk that sold phone cards and then found the closest payphone. I still had Oma's number and hearing her voice at the other end instantly calmed me. I told her where I was and all that had happened since we left Mongolia. "I couldn't change his mind. He's crazy. He has slipped over the edge forever. I'd been seeing the warning signs for years but I didn't think he'd crack now." Oma was quiet. "Did you hear me?"

"Joshua," Oma whispered, "it's still here! I've seen the devil. So have others. They think my house is cursed!"

I felt hallow inside. "You've seen it?"

"Yes! What does it want? Why doesn't it leave?"

"I don't know." I listened to Oma's heavy breathing on the phone. I told her that I thought this thing might have killed people before. This thing would haunt everyone who had ever had the misfortune to have crossed my path. Oma would not be next if it wasn't stopped.

"I'm going to find Alex," I said.

"And then what?" Oma said. "What will you do?"

"I don't know."

We were both quiet for a little while.

"I broke another promise. I'm sorry I didn't call you sooner."

"You brought the Devil himself into my home and all you can say is your *sorry*? You are the most selfish man I've ever met. You have chased this dream of yours so single mindedly that you have trampled over the people who care for you. Come tomorrow



you'll find what you've been looking for. Then you will never have to worry about anyone else again." She hung up the phone.

The city was waking up around me. The streets had filled with people and vehicles running from here to there. They all moved passed one another without so much as eye contact. People within arm's reach of each other but with minds elsewhere, either on a cell phone, an MP3 player, or somewhere deep within themselves. I was on a planet that was sleepwalking through space one day at a time. All this overcame me, and I fell to my knees in front of the payphone. My stomach turned inside out and landed on the sidewalk. The people on the sidewalk walked around me and my mess, not even bothering to look down at me. I had become invisible.

I found some strength and pulled myself up. I had to find Alex but didn't know where to go. I stumbled off down the street. Everyone I passed ignored my eyes. I spoke to a man but he quickly disengaged from me without saying more than two words. I found a subway entrance, bought a ticket, and boarded a train. All morning I rode the subway under the city, to each stop, but I never saw Alex, only crowds of faceless people.

By noon I had given up on the subway. I went back up to the surface and searched dozens of streets. I didn't find Alex. I went to churches, synagogues, and mosques, but he wasn't at any of these.

When dark came to Moscow I was on Red Square. There were still people wandering about and I was thankful not to be alone, even if ignored. I walked out to the middle of the square and sat on the cold stones. The skies were clear but the lights from the city hid most of the constellations in the night sky. I had become familiar with the constellations of both hemispheres over the years and places. I watched the constellations above inch

across the sky. If I had to retrace all the steps I had ever taken on this earth until they led me back to home or this monster, I would do it. I rested my head on my knees and closed my eyes: Let sleep draw the monster out of its cellar. I listened to my breath and heart beat for a long time while my thoughts flew everywhere in my mind. I had been running from the very danger that I had put everyone else who had ever loved me in, and now I was alone and far from anyone who cared. My father was dead, and probably my brother too. My mother was alone 10,000 miles away. Hours passed, and even in the cold, I fell asleep.

My mother and I rode home from church in a long silence. Before we pulled into the driveway, I asked her who the Holy Ghost was.

“After Jesus died on the cross, he left behind his ghost on earth to guide sinners like you to salvation.”

I thought about this for some time. I imagined something ethereal yet invisible in the back seat.

When we got home she told me to brush my teeth and go to bed. I obeyed, my mind preoccupied with the paranormal. I laid my head on my pillow listening to my mother move about the house apparently unaffected by what had happen tonight. My father was at work, but I knew he wouldn't want to know about what had happened at church tonight—he always refused to listen to anything my mother or I said regarding God. I heard my mother run the bathwater for a long time before the sound of the front door opening startled me from my thoughts. I knew my father wasn't due home yet, so I left my bedroom and wandered down the dark hall. There wasn't anyone else in the house.

Sasha, my three-year-old cocker spaniel, had long ago learned to climb onto the kitchen counter by way of a chair and a table, was now staring at something out the kitchen window. Her ears were cocked but she remained silent.

Outside, I watched a light inside our backyard shed flicker on. A few seconds later my mother came out of the shed holding a flashlight. I turned out the kitchen light to peek out the window less conspicuously. It was too dark outside to see what she was doing, but soon she went back to the shed and the front door opened. I ran back to my bedroom unseen.

I listened to footsteps make their way to the bathroom again. I crawled out of my bed, this time putting my ear against the bathroom door. Over the sounds of water I heard my mother crying.

The next morning I went out to the backyard as soon as I got up. There was a fresh mound of dirt by the plum tree. A large flat stone rested on the pile.

Fresh piles of dirt appearing overnight in the backyard was not so strange once you had lived with my mother. She periodically buried, burned, or sheared things around the house. Often there was no warning at all. My father had almost hit her when he discovered that she had burned out my uncle's face from all of my father's childhood photographs with no apparent motive. She had once doused my Star Wars figures in gasoline and made me set fire to them in the fireplace. (The black molten plastic had clung to the fireplace bricks for years afterwards.) My father and I—or at least until my father left for his other family—had learned to live with these mysterious acts.

What my mother had buried this time was anyone's guest. Sometimes she buried my grandmother's jewelry whenever my uncle came to visit for a few days. I lifted the flagstone off the mound. The soil was loose enough for me to dig with my hands. Sasha sat patiently next to me, her attention on the hole.

Only six inches under, my hands found a shoebox. I picked up the box and ran behind the shed.

I tossed the lid off—it wasn't even taped on—and picked up the rolled newspaper inside. It wasn't heavy, which disappointed me a little. I laid the paper on the ground and gently rolled it flat. In the center was one of my father's white tee shirts splotted

with dark brown. Sasha watched on without a sound. I gingerly picked up a shirt corner and shook it until something fell out.

It landed onto the center of the newspaper. I heard myself gasp. I waited for it to get up and do something. It was so tiny, so unmistakably human. Its arms and legs had folded like noodles under its body, and I could see that it was a boy. The thing was mostly head and smaller than my hand. It had two lidless black eyes.

I poked it with a stick. It slid across the paper like it weighed nothing. There was blood and tissue stuck to the shirt, and I examined my hands to see if I had any of it on me. I remember thinking it looked like it had fallen out of an egg. I didn't possess the language then, nor did I understand what death, let alone life, really was. I pushed him back into the tee shirt with the stick and buried him in the backyard as I had found him. My mother had spent the morning watching television, turning up the *700 Club* so loud you had to yell to get her attention. She sat on the couch, drinking tea, and occasionally nodded at something on the TV.

I went back to my bedroom after laboriously washing my hands and tried to forget what I had found in the backyard. But every unguarded moment brought me back to the dead fetus landing on a crumpled newspaper. It was obviously a secret though I didn't understand why. I didn't know where my mother had gotten the thing but had assumed it was given to her by the Holy Ghost.

I remembered I left Sasha outside. I went outside and found her lying in a clover patch chewing on a toy, wagging her tail when she saw me. Sasha was a small dog and easily excited. She ran to me, toy in mouth. When she stopped at my feet I saw she had caught an animal—an animal with a hairless head and a tiny arm.

“Sasha!” I grasped her collar and shook her until the half-eaten fetus fell from her mouth. I had forgotten to place the flagstone back over the grave. Shreds of the shoebox and newspaper were scattered around the backyard.

She had chewed off the part of the head, an arm, and everything below the waist. The head had collapsed as if it had been full of water, but it still had its black eyes. I pulled Sasha away, her ears tail wagging, and dragged her inside the house. Mom was still watching television when I grabbed a plastic bag from the kitchen.

I picked up the remains using the bag as a glove. I couldn't put the body back in the grave. If my mother ever dug up and found only half of him, she'd bury me next to the plum tree too. But if she found nothing, I reasoned, she my never say anything. I took a large rock near the property line and placed it in the bag. I had to hide it where nobody would find it.

I opened the storm cellar door and disturbed a swarm of mosquitoes. Hot, heavy air rose up through the door, thick air that smelled of drained ponds and decaying matter. The cellar had always been flooded with water that started six steps below the door. I swung my arm in an arc and threw the bag as far as I could toward the back of the cellar. It plopped and sunk into the black water. I didn't know how deep the water was, but I scooped up the remains of the shoebox, newspaper, and tee shirt and threw them in too. Then I covered the grave with the stone.

Despite my best efforts, I could not make myself forget what I had done, and for all that day I prepared myself for the long nightmares to come. That night I lay in my bed listening to a house that had fallen asleep hours ago trying to rid my head of the grave in the backyard. Even at four I knew my imagination was something to fear. I kept telling

myself that the soft muddle sounds of a baby crying drifting through my open window were only the residue of a bad dream. After an hour of hiding under my blanket, I gathered the nerve to look out my window. The cries were coming from the storm cellar. The cries, though not loud, were relentless; all through the night I listened to them. Even the next day, I could hear them while eating cereal in the kitchen. My parents, if they heard it, said nothing. By the third day, the crying had not lessened a bit, and I could take no more. I ventured near the cellar door.

“Hello?”

The cries were subdued to a whisper. The sounds were just on the other side of the door.

I opened the door with a stick. When the daylight spilled in, I found a small creature huddled on the top step. It only had a head and one arm, but what had been chewed off before now seemed to be growing back in tiny pink buds. Its tiny arm feebly reached toward me. It was breathing shallow and shaking from the cold. My fear, my confusion, slipped away from my four-year-old body and was replaced with an intense compassion that I had never equaled since. Without thinking, I picked him up in my hands. He was so cold, so light, and I worried that a strong wind would blow him apart like a dandelion. I carried him this way back inside the house.

My father was still asleep in his bedroom—he had a strict rule not to be disturbed after working second shift. My mother was watching television.

I didn't say a word. I just thrust my hands in front of her face. She stared at my hands as if she saw nothing, but then, slowly, recognition came over her face. She gently

took the creature from my hands and brought it to the kitchen table and wrapped it in a dishtowel. For the first and only time I can remember, my mother smiled.

I said nothing. I only stood by my mother's side watching her and the tiny creature on the table. She took a salad bowl and made it into a crib, then placed the creature in it. For a long while she only watched it, smiling.

"What is it?" I finally asked.

"He's your baby brother," she answered without looking at me.

I had always wanted a brother, partly for a playmate, partly for an ally against my mother's insanity, and so immediately took to this. My mother and I spent that morning welcoming him into the family. Eventually, my father woke and came into the kitchen. He stood next to us and peered down into the salad bowl before asking my mom where the hell his breakfast was. From that day on, he never paid much attention to Alex again, but that never detoured my mother or I.



When I awoke it was still dark, but there was light in the east. I was so cold—my arms and legs ached and I couldn't stop shaking. I pushed myself off the stones and slowly noticed that the square was empty. I didn't even see any police. My money belt was safe and I still had the knife, so I took a few steps to warm my slow, cold body.

At the edge of the square, down by the river, I saw a man walking my way. My hand rested on the knife under my jacket. He came my direction purposefully: for two minutes I watched the man cross the square until he came close enough for me to tell him to stop.

“Josh,” I heard the man say, “it's me, Alex.”

His voice sounded strange. I edged closer. My brother stood motionless and when I saw his face, I grabbed him tight in my arms. Apologies tumbled out of me until all I could say was my brother's name.

“Let's leave this place,” I said. “We can go back home to Mom. We'll leave today. I promise.”

Alex smiled at me, but his face didn't cover a pain. His hands rested on his stomach. I looked him over but saw no blood. “What's wrong? What happened to you?”

“I can't go back with you, Josh.”

“What do you mean?”

“My ride is going to be here soon.”

Comprehension slowly came to me. “No, no, it doesn't matter anymore. We'll leave before it even—”

“You don't understand,” Alex said. “I trapped it.” He opened his jacket and lifted his sweater above his stomach. His belly was swollen. Something was twisting about

inside his gut, its hands and face stretched across his tattooed abdomen looking for a place to break through the skin. "I swallowed it," he said.

I didn't know what to say. He covered his stomach and zipped his jacket. "It's the only way to keep everyone safe."

I couldn't look him in the eye. We stood in silence watching the light spread across the early sky. I didn't have any more words for my brother. I had a gratitude I couldn't express and guilt that seemed insurmountable.

"Do you remember that day Dad got you that new bike?" Alex said.

"Yes." I thought back to a faraway summer. "He surprised me with it."

"You rode it two miles out of town to Soldier's Creek. We made the swing there."

I had tied a rope to a tree that leaned out over the creek. Alex tied a set of old bicycle handlebars to the rope, and we spent the whole day swinging over the creek. We both swore we'd never tell anyone about it. It was where Alex and I hung out at after our father left.

"I think that day was the happiest day of my life," Alex said. "I went back to Soldier's Creek. It was the day I heard that Dad died, when Mom made me promise I would find you and bring you home. I found the tree we used to swing on. The rope is long gone, but a branch has grown through the handlebars. It's stuck in the tree now."

The sun was now beginning to crest over the buildings in the east. The sunlight slowly moved down the Kremlin and across the square. More people were awake now. They crisscrossed the square and clustered around St. Basil's and Lenin's tomb.

Then the buildings in the Kremlin began to move. In complete silence, without so much as the air being disturbed, the buildings parted to make room for something. St.

Basil's cathedral opened like a flower, its spires now bent backwards and drooped to the ground. Ripples moved across the square; Alex and I grabbed one another when a wave passed under our feet. But people still walked about unaffected by the silent madness that rolled across the square. The Kremlin then split right down the middle and peeled back like a creature shedding its skin—through the middle of this emerged a massive shape composed of hundreds of cars, vans, trucks, buses, and campers of every year and model from everywhere in the world: all the vehicles moved together as one animal, like a flock of birds or a school of fish, and it skipped across the square like the placid surface of a pond. I seized Alex's arm to dodge an incoming van, but it slid to a stop in front of us. All the vehicles stopped and filled Red Square into a giant parking lot. All the vehicles looked extremely weathered: They were rusted, broken, some even dragged parts or had flat tires. Yet every window on every bus and car and van were taped over or painted black so it was impossible to see what was inside them. I became aware how quiet everything was—not a single vehicle had an engine running. I recalled Oma's story about someone sighting a fuel truck, but I didn't see a purpose for one.

Alex and I waited for something to happen, a door or window to open, but nothing did.

"I don't think it's going to stay long," Alex said. "I'd better get going." He pried his arm from me. "Hey, maybe some day I'll pass through Oklahoma and see you and Mom."

I nodded. I was sick to my stomach. "Alex, I'll go with you. You don't have to go alone—"

“And who will take care of Mom?” He looked at a nearby van. The red paint was flaking off, exposing patches of primer. “Besides,” Alex continued, “it’s your turn.”

He walked up to the van and tried the cargo door. It was unlocked. He slid the door open and took a step back surprised at something he had found inside. His eyes moved about the van, trying to take it all in. I couldn’t see anything from where I stood. “Josh, it’s empty....” Then the most peculiar expression overcame his face, like he had finally learned the answer to an old riddle—he even gave a small smile. “Josh,” Alex said to me, “remember the tree I told you about Soldier’s Creek.”

I nodded.

“I carved a message for you on it.”

I waited for him to say something more. “What...what did you write?”

“You’re going to have to go read it for yourself.” Then Alex stepped inside the van and the door closed behind him.

A moment later the vehicles took off across the square: a migration who knows it has a long way to go before it can rest. I watched the undercarriages of cars sail over me until the last one had disappeared across the river and left a trail of folded buildings.

I kept my eyes on the horizon for a long time thinking about my brother. Then I left for home.

VITA

Graduate College  
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Jason Coley

Local Address:

4336 Spencer St. Apt. 9  
Las Vegas, NV 89119

Home Address:

701 N. 13th St.  
Durant, OK 74701

Degrees:

Bachelor of Arts, 1999  
Thomas Edison State College

Thesis Title: Wraith Walking

Thesis Examination Committee

Chairperson, Mr. Pablo Medina, MFA  
Committee Member, Dr. Vincent Pérez, Ph. D.  
Committee Member, Mr. Richard Wiley, MFA  
Graduate Faculty Representative, Dr. Michelle Tusan, Ph. D.