

# The Otherside

by  
Michael R Guerin

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- ❖ world thru a window
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- ❖ between black & white
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## Part 2

“Freedom and love go together. Love is not a reaction. If I love you because you love me, that is mere trade, a thing to be bought in the market; it is not love. To love is not to ask anything in return, not even to feel that you are giving something- and it is only such love that can know freedom.”

– J Krishnamurti

## Part 1

“Centuries are what it meant to me  
A cemetery where I marry the sea  
Stranger things could never change my mind  
I gotta take it on the other side...”



# Chapter 1 – Gloria

“And I try to sing this song, I  
I try to stand up  
But I can’t find my feet  
I try, I try to speak up  
But only in you I’m complete...”  
~ U2

*February, 2061*

"Are you sure you'll be alright, dad?"

Gloria, my fifty-year-old daughter, looks me squarely in the eyes. I think she's searching for some sign that I'm lucid, in my right mind as it were. All around us the Logan Airport terminal bustles with activity, with people hugging loved ones goodbye while others hurry off to their departure gates. I want to laugh at the absurdity of this conversation taking place here and now, but her expression is deadly serious.

"Yes honey, I'll be fine. I double-checked the bungalow reservation this morning, and the shuttle is reserved to pick me up at the airport. I'll text you when I land."

She frowns. "Call me."

"Okay, okay, I'll call you. Promise."

She looks me up and down once more, as if some small

detail might have escaped her attention. Satisfied, she leans in and gives me a hug. "Be well, dad." She holds me tightly, reluctant to let go.

I pull away and kiss her forehead. "For you and the girls. And pass along my goodbyes to them as well." With that, I sling a quilted travel bag over my shoulder and wade through a sea of people toward a rapidly growing line at the security checkpoint.



A few hours later and we're finally airborne.

Truth be told, I don't care much for flying. Never did, not even when I served in the Air Force and flew on C-130s from Holland to Sardinia and back again two times a year for combat exercises. Back then we sat on web seating strung up along the hull of the aircraft, face to face with palettes of gear and equipment. At least on this trip I have a window seat.

"Are you traveling all the way to India, sir?"

I turn from the view and face a middle-aged Indian woman in the next seat. She looks at me with deep, dark eyes. My late wife had eyes like hers. "It's Michael."

Embarrassed, she smiles sweetly. Like a little girl. "Excuse me, Michael-ji. I'm Madhubala but everyone calls me Bala."

I touch the palms of my hands together, fingers pointed upwards. "Namaste, Bala. And yes."



She beams, "Really? Oh wonderful. You know, it's nice to sit next to someone pleasant on these long flights. Helps to pass the time. I'm on my way to attend a wedding in Sivakasi." She pauses to catch her breath. "Is this your first trip to India?"

"Yes. Though I visited Bangladesh once, a long time ago. Most likely before you born."

"Really? How interesting. So what brings you all the way to India at..." She looks me over, unsure of which words would be appropriate or respectful to say next.

I decide to help her out. "At this age?"

She laughs, relieved. "Yes. You're traveling alone, right?"

I nod. "It's a long story."

"Well, we have a long flight." She reaches out and touches my arm. "But only if you feel like sharing, of course."

*August, 1984*

Ancient oaks lined both sides of a paved, narrow lane.

Michael, a wiry sixteen-year-old with dark brown hair, stood in the shade as a welcome breeze rustled the leaves. The stillness of a late afternoon August day was punctuated by the telltale beep of a construction truck in reverse as a backhoe slowly neared a black, wrought-iron

gate. On either side of the gate, granite columns were topped by white marble angels.

Steve, the forty-something-year-old Director of St Joseph's Cemetery, guided the backhoe closer to one of the columns. "A little more. A little more. Perfect."

The backhoe stopped, causing the extended arm to rock back and forth.

Reaching the bucket, he pulled out a large, thick chain. He secured one end to the bucket's hook, then dropped the remaining links to the pavement. "Mikey, bring the strap." Michael walked to the Cushman utility vehicle and retrieved a thick nylon strap, handing it to him. Steve dropped it in the bucket. "And get the ladder. Place it here."

Michael went back to the utility vehicle and removed the twenty foot aluminum ladder with some difficulty. He carried it to Steve, who grabbed it from him and leaned it up against the granite column nearer the backhoe's arm.

Steve checked the ladder's stability, then climbed up. Using hand signals, he motioned the operator to raise the bucket until it reached his level. He pulled the nylon strap out of the bucket and gently secured it around the angel's waist, careful to avoid her wings. Satisfied, he pulled the dangling chain up and passed it through a loop in the strap, then secured it to the bucket's hook. With a thumb's up, the backhoe's arm climbed higher and higher until chain and strap became taut. "Easy does it. We don't want to damage her."

The backhoe's arm stretched to its maximum height.

For a moment or two it strained against the weight and inertia of the angel. "A little more. Almost there." With a jolt the angel broke free from her perch atop the granite column. She swung in a wide arc and bumped into Steve, nearly sending him flying from ladder.

Joe, the thirty-year-old backhoe operator, chuckled to himself.

After he steadied himself, Steve grabbed the angel's wing and held her steady. "Okay Joe, pull forward. Slowly."

The backhoe inched forward until it was ten feet away from the gate. "Okay Joe, that's good." The backhoe stopped, causing the angel to swing back and forth from the outstretched arm like an oversized Christmas ornament.

Steve got down from the ladder and dumped it in the back of the Cushman. "Okay Joe, lower the bucket. Easy does it."

Joe swiveled his chair to face the angel. Slowly the backhoe's arm retracted, causing the angel to inch closer and closer to the ground. When she was about a foot off the pavement, Steve motioned for him to stop. "Mikey, your job is to hold her steady until we get to the new section. Okay?"

Michael nodded and approached the angel, noticing small black spots which pockmarked her surface. He reached out and held her wing.

Steve fired up the Cushman and sped off. The backhoe crept forward with Michael walking alongside.



About an hour later the angel stood at the back edge of a triangular shaped lawn.

Behind her a row of Rose of Sharon were in full bloom, their purple petals providing the perfect backdrop to her white marble. The angel gazed toward the triangle's apex and beyond to a small, field-stone chapel across the lane. A nearby bell tower soared above a cluster of bone-white birch trees.

On their hands and knees, Steve and Michael pounded the last aluminum marker into green grass. About fifty numbered markers ran in neat, evenly spaced rows in three parallel lines.

Steve stood and dusted off his pants. He gathered the tape measure and rubber mallet and dumped them into the back of the Cushman. "Mike, go ahead and get the body from the chapel. For plot number eleven." He pointed in the marker's direction. "And make sure you dig down to three feet." He surveyed their work, then strolled toward the maintenance office with hands stuffed deep into pockets.

Michael stood and watched him go, stunned. He thought about calling out to his boss, to ask what seemed like an obvious question... "How the hell am I supposed to bring a body here all by myself?" He glanced over to the chapel. The hearse wasn't parked out front and nobody was waiting outside for him.

Still dazed, he shuffled to the chapel.

Reaching the heavy oak doors, he stood for a moment unsure of what to expect. Just six years earlier he had walked into that empty space with his family when it was time to say goodbye to his grandmother. He remembered the cream-colored carpet, and how they all stood around her casket as the priest droned on and on about her being "called home."

Michael shook his head, opened the doors and stepped inside.

It took a few seconds for his eyes to adjust to the dimly lit interior.

The only furnishing in the open space was a small granite altar near the back wall. Stained-glass windows filtered sunlight into a myriad of colored shapes which cascaded across the familiar carpet. But this time there was no person-sized casket sitting on its dolly. Instead, on a wooden table placed in front of the altar a tiny white casket, no bigger than a shoe box, waited for him.

He froze. His mind reeled.

And suddenly he understood why no one else was needed to help move the body.

For a full minute or two Michael stood there, held by the gravity of the moment. There was no one to help him do what needed to be done. Mustering up his courage, he took a deep breath and approached hallowed ground.

Standing close to the pristine, white casket he became painfully aware of his soiled hands. He wiped them on his pants, then reached out and gently lifted up the box.

It weighed no more than a sigh.



Twenty-one-year-old Samina Singh, Bollywood's number one actress, tossed and turned in her hotel bed. On the other side of the room her middle-aged mother, Rajani, snored like an auto rickshaw.

Samina was deep in a dream...

Dressed in a long white gown, she walked through a dark forest. The path strewn with dried leaves crunched under her bare feet. Suddenly, an apparition appeared directly in front of her. She screamed, spun on her heels and bolted in the other direction.

A voice calmly spoke to her as she ran. "When you accept yourself for who you really are, you will find peace."

Samina kept running until she emerged from the woods into an open expanse of tall grass. The sky was a deep lavender hung with two crescent moons, one slightly larger than the next. Up above stars twinkled brightly.

A man stood about one hundred feet in front of her. He had a close-cropped beard and was dressed in white. Their eyes met, and she thought he was the most handsome man she had ever seen. Slowly he approached her, finally stopping within arms reach. He smiled, then kissed her gently.

Instantly they were both transformed.

They faced each other, now dressed in traditional Hindu wedding clothes. Between them a bronze fire pit two feet

by two feet square glowed with hot embers. A braided cord of red silk wound around her wrist and dangled over the embers, with the other end of the braid wound around the man's wrist.

The voice spoke once more, barely above a whisper. "What Love has joined together, let no one separate."

Samina woke. Tears flowed from her big, beautiful, hazel eyes.



Michael emerged from the chapel into the hot August sunshine carrying the white casket.

Even though the new section was little more than three hundred feet away, it felt more like three miles as he walked with the tiny box in his hands. After what seemed like eternity he found the correct marker, number eleven. He gently set the box down on the grass, then walked to the utility vehicle and grabbed a spade and yardstick from the back.

It only took a few minutes of easy digging through black soil to reach the right depth.

Once the bottom of the hole was made level he got on his knees, gently picked up the white box and set it down inside.

No words came to mind.

And what words would be fitting or appropriate, given these circumstances? Michael didn't know the child, of course, but in that singular moment they were both held and connected by the tenuous threads of space-time. Still on his knees, all he could think about was how the parents must be feeling, imagining the depth of their pain at such a sudden and heartbreaking loss.

He bowed his head and closed his eyes.

When it felt right, he opened them and began scooping dirt with his bare hands, filling the hole handful by handful. Once the hole was filled in he patted it down and smoothed the dirt to make it level with the surrounding grass. Finished, he returned the shovel and yardstick to the Cushman. Grabbing a bag of grass seed, he stood over the grave and generously scattered seeds until the black earth was covered.

Just as he finished, he spotted a young couple from the corner of his eye. They held hands, and held by their collective grief walked toward him.

He wasn't sure how long they had been standing there watching, and Michael wasn't about to find out. With a quick about-face he headed to the utility vehicle, threw the bag of seed in the back, fired up the engine and sped off while wiping away tears with the back of his hand.





Varnum Cemetery was only a twenty minute walk from Michael's house.

It was a fairly typical example of an old New England roadside cemetery, with just a square patch of land edged by a mortar-less rock wall of stacked stone. Most of the heavily weathered white limestone headstones were askew, the names and dates etched into their surface barely legible from erosion. A number of tall pines grew scattered among the graves in the center of the cemetery. And along the plot's northern edge the hill sloped gently down to a grove of tall maples and oaks on the other side of the wall.

No one ever stopped to visit this cemetery anymore. No doubt anyone who knew anyone buried there had passed away a long time ago. This made it a quiet and peaceful place to lay down on cool grass during warm summer nights to gaze up at the starry sky. It was also Michael's favorite place to "hang out" with his best friend, Gary.

This night they were side by side about halfway down the northern slope. Gary's hands were behind his head while Michael's were crossed over his chest. Between the swaying leaves and branches in the breeze, a sea of stars twinkled high above them.

"You know, in that pose you fit in perfectly," Gary said.

Michael didn't bother replying.

"You're awfully quiet tonight."

Michael finally answered. "Just thinking about work. About life. And death." Gary sat up and looked over at his friend, who kept staring straight up into the night sky. "I

buried a baby today. We set up a new section at the cemetery just for them. Imagine that. An entire section set aside for innocent babies who never did anything to anybody. How fucked up is that?"

Gary laid back down on the grass. The two of them stayed like that for a few minutes until Gary felt ready to break the silence...

"if they  
should take me and take you into their balloon,  
why then  
we'd go up higher with all the pretty people  
than houses and steeples and clouds:  
go sailing  
away and away sailing into a keen  
city which nobody's ever visited."

This time Michael sat up and faced his friend. "What the fuck does that mean?"

"That life is nothing more than what we see, and any thoughts about an afterlife are just a pipe dream."

"And that's what you believe?" Michael was defiant.

Gary hesitated. With hands behind his head, he continued. "My grandfather landed on Normandy Beach. He always said that before D-Day he believed in a God, but after his faith died along with all of his buddies who never made it off the beach."

"Damn. I mean, I don't know what to say." After a pause Michael offered, "But you know, it could have been God who saved his life."

"Or luck."

"I don't believe in luck. Never did." Michael laid back down, his arms behind his head now. "Hey, did I ever tell you about that recurring dream I used to have?" He turned his head and looked over at his friend. "No? Well, I'm a little kid, like three or four years old. And I'm sitting in front of this white headstone. It's raining and I'm just sitting there, tracing a name carved into the stone. There's a date, too, but I don't remember it anymore."

Gary sat up and faced him, "What's the name?"

"Vincent."

"Who the hell is Vincent?"

Michael howled, his body curled up and shaking with each fit of laughter. "Shit, I have no idea." And with that they both laughed out loud for a full minute. "Oh well, what the hell. Hey, you going to Rick's tomorrow?"



Rick's house was the perfect place to hang, a perennial safe haven for high school teens during long summer days. And nights. Nobody's parents knew the address, and since this was before smart phones and caller ID there was no way for any adult to find it, save for hiring a private detective.

Being the youngest of six much older brothers and sisters, every summer Rick's parents would load up their RV and crisscross the country visiting all of their children and grandchildren. Which meant, once they were well on

their way Rick would move everything valuable (and breakable) into his parent's bedroom for safe keeping. Stripped of all personal items the home resembled a flophouse. Upstairs a few mattresses sat on the floor of each bedroom while downstairs his stereo and four-foot-tall speakers were the main attraction. And since Rick's was isolated on a quiet country lane with no nearby (or nosy) neighbors, it meant the music and beer could flow all night long. And every weekend it did.

Such was the quintessential summer hangout.

Around seven at night Gary's blue Renault sedan pulled up in front of Rick's, the passenger side facing the lawn. Michael looked out the open window and counted about ten cars parked bumper to bumper in the driveway. From the street you could hear rock music pouring out of the small, yellow cape.

"Sure you don't want to come in, Gary?"

He stared straight ahead through the windshield. By now Michael knew that when his best friend didn't want to talk he would shut down, or ignore what you said. And that it was futile to try to get him to budge or change his mind. Hell, it had taken six months of saying "hi" to him everyday in the school cafeteria his freshman year before Gary ever bothered to say "hello" in return.

"I'd rather stick red hot pins in my eyes than hang with them." He pointed his thumb toward the house, then turned up the car stereo's volume.

On cue, Michael stepped onto the lawn and closed the car door behind him. He leaned in through the open window, "See you tomorrow?"

Gary glanced over and smiled. "Sure, I'll pick you up in the afternoon." And with that he sped off.

Michael hiked the fifty feet or so up the long driveway and found the porch door open. He stepped into the kitchen which swarmed with teens standing around talking and drinking beer. Most were strangers to him, though he recognized a few faces from other nights at Rick's.

Standing by the refrigerator Michael's brother Ken was grabbing a cold one. Ken glanced over at the doorway and saw him standing there, looking a bit lost. "Bro, you made it." He snaked through the crowd and handed Michael a beer. "Hey, make sure you call Ma before it's too late, and let her know we'll be spending the night."

Michael nodded and took a healthy sip.



A few hours later the crowd had thinned out. It was pitch black outside.

Those who came as a couple or hooked up their 'other half' at Rick's were now upstairs making good use of the bedrooms. And mattresses. Thankfully, the stereo was so loud you could barely think.

There were a handful of teens sitting on the floor in the living room, along with Michael. Ken got up and put U2's October in the cassette player and pressed play. "Gloria," the first song on the album, flooded the room with drums

as Bono began to sign, transforming the space into a shrine. "Two-three-four, oh. Gloria, oh, oh..."

"You know what I'm saying, Mike?"

Rick liked to talk when he got drunk, but most of the time no one could make out what he was saying through his heavily slurred speech. But he was a friendly enough guy so Michael just nodded along while his monologue continued.

"Right, Mike?" Rick slapped his thigh and convulsed in a fit of laughter.

Michael took a sip of beer, focused on the song's lyrics as they filled the room. "And I try to sing this song, I, I try to stand up but I can't find my feet..."

Rick punched Michael's bicep to force the issue. It was more playful than serious, but it was hard enough to send the beer bottle flying from his hand. "Come on, Mike? What's up? What are you thinking about?"

Michael finally faced him. Rick's dopey grin met his hard expression. And seeing that empty look on his face caused something to erupt from deep within Michael, a passionate fury which he unleashed on him. "Why the fuck am I here?"

Rick burst out laughing, like a maniac. Or a fool.

Everyone else in the room got quiet and stared at Michael, unsure of what might be coming next. "Do you know what I mean, Rick? Why the fuck am I here?!" He scanned the room, staring everybody down with an odd mixture of defiance and, for lack of a better word, exhilaration. "Why the fuck are any of us here?"

Spent, Michael jumped to his feet and stormed out.



Halfway around the world Samina leaned against a tree, bathed in sunlight. Dressed in a black sari embroidered with silver, she gazed absently toward the faraway hills lost in thought.

All around her the film set bustled with activity as crew members readied for the next scene.

On her right, the film's leading man sat on his heels facing a pond with his back to her. He gathered up small stones in his left hand, waiting for his cue. Sitting directly in front of her the distinguished director, Mr. Rao, checked on his crew to see if all was ready. Satisfied, he yelled, "Action."

In a flash Samina's face was transformed. Her blank expression melted into one of grief and loss perfectly suited to the scene about to unfold.

Still facing away from her, the actor stood on the edge of the water and threw a stone into the pond. "The children told me you will not be coming to school." Another stone splashed in the water, its ripples fanning outwards in all directions. "The oath we had taken to accomplish our mission, have you forgotten that oath?"

Samina turned away from him. "I could not. That's why the moment you called me I came to meet you. I am not sad for myself, but for you."

"For me?"

She bowed her head. "Yes. You. I accept that marrying me would have created hurdles in your path. I also accept my grief for having lost you." Looking up, tears filled her eyes. Her voice trembled, "But why did you invite trouble for yourself by marrying a woman like Bijlee? If you had to marry you could have chosen anyone else, so why choose that defiled woman?"

Calmly, he turned from the pond and walked away from her to face the camera. "She's not defiled. The truth is that disgusting, vile men made her their prey."

Samina looked up at him, "I understand. But you could have sympathized with Bijlee. Why did you have to ruin your life by marrying her?"

The actor stopped. With folded arms across his chest he turned toward Samina. "In this world anyone can feel sympathy, but very few actually do anything about it."

Mr. Rao beamed. "Cut." He looked around, very pleased. "Just perfect everyone, well done."



The August air was cooler than Michael expected. Overhead, the cold brilliant light of a thousand stars sparkled. "Why did I do that? Why say anything at all?"

He walked through Rick's backyard, headed for a path which cut through a forest of tall pines. Reaching the edge



of the woods, he found the rope swing which hung from a large branch jutting over the path about thirty feet in the air. Two thick braids of rope ended as knots beneath a wooden platform seat worn smooth from years of use.

This was Michael's favorite spot at Rick's. Nobody used it anymore, and at night no one could see him (or judge him) if he chose to swing like a child high into the air.

"It wasn't the beer talking," he whispered to himself.

He sat motionless for a few minutes, his hands gripping the old rope while replaying his recent outburst over and over in his mind. "Oh well, fuck it." And with a kick start he began to swing, slowly at first and then gaining speed with each pass. Higher and higher he climbed, really getting into it, coming face to face with the stars above. And on each back-swing he faced the cool ground covered with pine needles.

Sky and earth, then earth and sky.

Speeding through the air was liberating. He felt like he could fly. All it would take was a simple jump at the highest point and off he'd go, to God knows where. And in that moment he thought to himself, "Why are we here?"

He could put up with the bullying at home, endure the seeming senselessness of suffering and death, could deal with rampant stupidity and the chronic thoughtlessness of people... but only on one condition — that there was some meaning, some purpose to it all. Otherwise, why bother? Why live at all?

His mind began to wander, the questions coming fast.

Was there someone out there to love him? Could anyone love him for who he truly was, flaws and all? And would that same person allow him to love her unconditionally, deeply, passionately in return?

He wasn't thinking about sex. Or marriage. Or what typically passed for "love," that plaything which only seemed to be an escape from loneliness, a distraction, or the simple need to be needed.

No, he yearned for something richer, deeper, truer and more profound than any tame or domesticated version of "love."

The questions kept coming. Was there such a thing as fate? Or destiny? And if there really was some soulmate out there, where was she? How would they meet? More importantly, when would their paths cross in this big, beautiful, empty, cruel world?

As he reached the highest point on his upward ascent for the briefest of moments he was weightless. And as he hung there, not of earth and not quite of sky, he shouted up to the heavens so that God, or Spirit, or whoever else might be listening could hear him. "Do you know what I mean?"

His voice echoed into night.

Then he swung back down to earth.

And just as the swing reached its lowest point a mere sixteen inches above the path, one of the ropes snapped. Frayed from years of use and neglect, at that precise instant it gave out slamming Michael back-first onto the hard ground.

The air was knocked out of his lungs. Tears filled his eyes. And for more than a few moments he wondered if he would ever breathe again. Lying flat on his back, he gasped for air until a few short puffs finally filled his lungs again. With both arms spread out wide and gazing upwards into a cloudless sky, he stared intently into the heavens feeling a strange feeling that someone or something up there was looking down on him.

And for no particular reason, he began to laugh.

## Chapter 2 - Kissing Families

“Well someone said I made a mistake  
Kept looking forward on paths sideways  
It's everything that is connected and beautiful  
And now I know just where I stand...”

~ Silversun Pickups

*February, 2061*

The flight attendant rolls the beverage cart up the aisle. This seems like a good time to take a break since she's inching closer to our row. I look over at Bala who's staring at me, eyes wide with wonder and disbelief. It's clear she has a lot of questions and can't wait any longer. "Yes?"

"Excuse me Michael-ji, but how does Samina Singh fit into your story?"

I smile. "Oh, you know who she is?"

Bala laughs. "Of course. True, her movies were well before my time. But when she died I was five years old and it was all over the news. Even today many people in India still remember her and visit her home in Chennai. Like a shrine."

"That's nice to hear."

"But, and please excuse me sir, how do you know

Samina?"

It's my turn to chuckle. "Ah, yes. Well, my late wife was Bengali. We met in New York at St John's University in the late 90s and got married in 99. Anyway, back then you could rent VHS tapes of Bollywood movies at Indian grocery stores. And since my wife's favorite actress was Samina I watched many of her classics, like Padmini and Sir Hindustani."

"Oh, I see."

From her expression I can tell she's letting my words sink in, but something isn't adding up. She looks me over, as if searching for a missing puzzle piece. "Excuse me Michael-ji for being a bit pushy, but how exactly does she fit into your story?"

"Patience, Bala. All in good time. Like I told you, it's a long story."

*Early January, 1888*

Just outside of Arles in the south of France, a two-story farmhouse sat on a low rise bathed in noon sunshine.

In the backyard a long wooden table was covered by a red and white checkerboard tablecloth. Dinnerware was laid out on the table, with about a dozen family members gathered around in groups of three or four. Everyone was absorbed in conversation.

Out past the expanse of lawn the fields lay fallow and stretched for acres on end. And at the edge of lawn and

fields a mangy black dog prowled back and forth, unnoticed.

Seventeen-year-old Gabrielle Berlatier exited the farmhouse carrying a large platter of food to the table. With long chestnut hair, she well represented the famed beauty of the region. An eleven-year-old boy, Gabrielle's younger brother Marcel, sprinted from the backdoor and ran past her, laughing.

Paulette, Gabrielle's stern looking mother, followed close behind with another large platter. On reaching the table she spotted the dog and shouted to her husband trailing behind. "Henri, there's a stray you'll have to chase off!"

Henri was a short, well built man. He never complained and always had a ready smile. Seeing the mutt at the edge of the lawn, he bolted toward the dog waving his arms and shouting, "Shoo. Go on now."

The dog stood its ground and snarled back in return. Henri ran inside the house and returned soon after with a broom in hand. Wielding it like a battle axe, he took a few steps toward the stray once again. "Go on, get!" The dog only crouched lower and snarled back more menacingly than before. Muttering under his breath, Henri charged full speed ahead. The dog barked and pawed the ground, ready to strike. But as Henri got within striking distance the mutt turned and scampered off into the field.

Turning triumphantly to his family, Henri held the broom high above his head and yelled, "Now that's the end of that."

Seated at the table a delighted Marcel clapped his hands.



Thirty-four-year-old Vincent van Gogh stood in a small studio working on a self portrait. The room was cluttered, with soiled brushes and empty paint tubes scattered about. Leaning against the walls a number of canvases lined the room, slowly drying.

Vincent paused and gazed out his fourth floor window, affording him a nice view over the rooftops in Montmartre. He absently scratched his cheek through a ginger beard.

The front door slamming shut shook him from his reverie.

"Theo?"

Indistinguishable grumbling reached him in the back. With paintbrush still in hand, Vincent entered the front living room. His thirty-year-old brother Theo, looking sharp in his suit with hair cut short and a neatly trimmed mustache, stood in stark contrast with the filthy surroundings. The living room reeked of oil paint and turpentine, with soiled rags, dirty dishes and empty paint tubes littered everywhere. Vincent's works hung on the walls in every conceivable space, with more paintings leaning against the walls.

"Look at this place, Vincent! Little wonder no one visits anymore. Where would they sit, let alone stand?"

Vincent scanned the room, then shrugged. "Well brother, I've been busy with a number of studies —"

An exasperated Theo cut him off. "Enough, Vincent. I live here too, after all. You could tidy up a bit from time to time."

His brother's words were like a slap to the face. His enthusiasm gone, Vincent turned on his heels and walked back to his studio.

Theo began gathering up dirty dishes.

A moment later Vincent walked past his brother with coat in hand. "I need to get some air." He stormed out, slamming the door shut behind him.



With the holiday meal over, it was time to celebrate Marcel's birthday. Paulette stood and began stacking up dirty dishes. "Gaby, get the cake."

Gaby rose and walked to the farmhouse.

At the edge of the lawn the black dog was back, drawn by the smell of food. He crouched out of sight, and no one at the table had noticed his return.

A few minutes later Gaby left the farmhouse carrying the gateau des rois in both hands. When she was about halfway to the table the stray dog charged.

Henri was the first one to spot the mutt. "Gaby!" He



leapt to his feet and ran toward his daughter.

A startled Gabrielle caught sight of the charging dog and froze. With eyes on the cake, the stray lunged toward her trembling, outstretched arms. As it sailed through the air she flinched, causing the mutt to miss. Instead, sharp fangs bit deeply into her right arm tearing the flesh badly. Falling hard to the ground, the dog yelped and scampered off towards the fields.

Gaby fell to her knees and shrieked in pain. Somehow she managed to hold unto the cake. Blood gushed from torn flesh.

In a flash Henri was by her side.

Paulette called after her husband. "Dear, did Gabrielle drop the cake?"

Henri took the platter from Gaby's trembling hands and set it on the ground. He scooped his daughter up and ran toward the farmhouse. "You'll be just fine, pumpkin."

She wrapped her good arm around her father's neck and wept.

Lisette, Henri's thirty-year-old sister, leapt up from the table and ran after them.

Paulette calmly crossed the yard and picked the cake platter off the ground. She inspected it carefully, then brought it to the table setting it down in front of her son. Acting as if nothing had happened, she cut a large slice of cake and gave it to Marcel as shocked relatives looked on.

Moments later Henri emerged from the farmhouse carrying his hunting rifle. As he hurried past the table he

called out to his older brother. "Victor, please go fetch the doctor."



Sunlight streamed into a brightly colored bedroom hung with satin and lace.

Though it was past noon, Samira Santiago was only now waking up. Sprawled across her brass bed, she yawned and stretched out her arms skyward. She opened her eyes, rolled on her side and clambered out of bed.

Dressed in a sheer white gown which left little to the imagination, she walked to a vanity against the far wall. At twenty six, she was a stunning beauty with long black hair and piercing hazel eyes.

Standing by the vanity, Samira poured a pitcher of lavender-scented water into a bowl and washed her face. She sat and began brushing her long hair, finally pulling it back into a ponytail. Satisfied, she got up and walked to her armoire. Inside, a number of dresses hung in evenly-spaced rows. She chose her favorite, a long yellow dress with a plunging neckline, and put it on.

At the bottom of the armoire there was a bottle of wine and small cake.

She smiled and clapped her hands together like a little girl, then removed both items and set them up on her bedside table. "Perfect."

She turned and crossed to her bedroom door. Samira

paused and looked over the room one final time. Satisfied, she opened her door and walked out into a narrow hallway.

Directly across from her there was another door.

She noiselessly crossed the hall and gently knocked. "Sis?" After a pause she knocked again, a bit louder this time.

Finally the door cracked open.

Samira grinned from ear to ear, "Good, you're up. Happy birthday, sis."

Tiena Santiago, Samira's twenty-three-year-old sister, opened the door wider. She was slightly shorter and thinner than her sister, but no less beautiful. Her auburn hair was pulled back in a braid and she wore an orange dress edged in white lace. "You remembered?"

"Of course, silly. I know it was last week, but with everyone celebrating the holy day today even the regulars will be spending time with their family. So we can finally catch a break." Samira clapped her hands. "Now come." She took Tiena's hand and led her across the hall to her bedroom. Once inside, Samira closed the door and pointed out the small cake and bottle of wine to her sister. "Ta da!"

Tiena giggled, then frowned. "But Ms. Chabaud doesn't want us to eat in our rooms."

"Then we won't tell her, silly."



Gabrielle sat at the kitchen table, a blood-soaked towel wrapped around her arm. Her aunt stood behind her with both hands on Gaby's shoulders.

A middle aged Dr. Michel with salt and pepper hair entered the kitchen, followed closely by Uncle Victor. He set his well-worn, black leather bag on the table and looked at Gaby. "How are we doing, my dear?"

Gaby just stared at him.

"Now let's take a look." He gently unwound the towel to reveal a nasty, deep bite.

In the distance a single gunshot rang out.

Gaby jumped.

The doctor turned to Uncle Victor. "I'll need to examine that dog."

Victor left the kitchen.

Turning to Gaby's aunt, he added. "I can treat the wound now as best I can, but you'll want to get her to Paris immediately. There's a good chance of rabies and The Pasteur Institute has a vaccine they can administer once she gets there."

Soon Henri trudged into the kitchen with his hunting rifle. "The mutt's just outside the door." He moved over to his daughter. "How are you doing, pumpkin?"

A pale Gaby gave him a weak smile.

The doctor leaned over and whispered something in

Henri's ear, who in turn whispered in his sister's ear. Gaby's aunt left the room as Victor entered again. Henri looked at his brother, then crossed over to the wrought iron stove. He took a nearby poker and raked the hot coal embers inside. Victor walked over to Gaby and stood behind her, with both hands on her shoulders.

Once the poker glowed red-hot, Henri removed it from the stove.

Gabrielle's eyes widened. Sobbing, she struggled to break free from her uncle's grasp. Victor looked away as he held Gaby firmly in place.

In a calm voice Dr. Michel did his best to reassure her. "Steady, Gaby. It's best not to look. I'll be as quick as I can."

Henri quickly handed the poker to the doctor.

Gabrielle trembled and turned to face her father. "No Daddy, no!"

Henri implored the doctor, "Hurry, please!"

In one swift motion Dr. Michel deftly placed the tip of the red-hot poker into Gabrielle's open wound, cauterizing it immediately. She screamed in pain, then passed out into her father's waiting arms.

*Late January, 1888*

It was an unseasonably warm day in Paris.

Vincent sat on a park bench in Luxembourg Gardens with a sketchbook in his lap. A steady stream of well-dressed Parisian ladies strolled the tree-lined paths eager to be seen.

Rather than sketching, he absentmindedly doodled. A bored Vincent finally glanced up and noticed two women clad in distinctly provincial attire. Intrigued, he found himself staring at a young lady who was accompanied by her mother.

Gabrielle spotted Vincent but pretended not to notice.

As they neared his bench, Gaby took a step in his direction and stopped. With both hands on her hips and in a tone more playful than harsh, she asked him. "May I help you, Monsieur?"

Paulette was appalled. "Gabrielle! Manners, please!"

Still seated, Vincent laughed. "You already have, Mademoiselle." He extended his hand to her. "I'm Vincent."

Gabrielle noticed his charcoal-stained fingers and considered for a moment whether or not she should talk with this odd fellow. Finally, she shook his hand. "Gabrielle, though friends call me Gaby."

Vincent turned to face Paulette, "A pleasure meeting you both." As he shifted in his seat the open sketchbook fell from his lap, landing shut on the ground.

Bending down quickly, Gaby picked it up just as Vincent leaned forward to retrieve it. She impulsively cracked open

the cover and started thumbing through the pages. "Ah, you're an artist! Of course."

A flustered Vincent blushed, though how much was visible through his ginger beard was hard to say. In any event, Gabrielle plopped down next to him on the bench and handed over his sketchbook, instantly curious. "Would you mind showing me some more of your work, Monsieur Vincent?"

Vincent smiled, green eyes sparkling.

Paulette, still standing like a statue the entire time, was aghast. To make matters worse, she was embarrassed by the disapproving stares from passing Parisian ladies. "Gabrielle, we must be going!"

Clearly in their own world, her daughter and Vincent continued flipping through the dogeared pages. After reviewing his work, she asked. "Monsieur Vincent, would you mind sketching me?"

Paulette, standing ram-rod straight with arms folded across her chest, protested. "Gabrielle! We —"

Vincent cut in quickly, relieved. "Of course, it would be my pleasure! For too long I've been stuck inside reduced to nothing but self portraits." He motioned Gaby to sit at the far end of the bench. Suddenly self-conscious, Gaby tugged at her sleeve in an attempt to cover her wound. Vincent, missing nothing, turned to Paulette. "And what brings you ladies to Paris this time of year?"

Paulette shot Vincent a stern look and remained silent, then turned away.

Gaby, however, pointed in the direction of the Pasteur Institute. "Treatment. For rabies." Then she pulled up her sleeve, revealing a nasty scar. "And you, monsieur? How has fate brought you here today?"

*July, 1879*

Vincent slept on the ground, a meager pile of straw for his mattress.

Sunlight streamed through small holes in the roof and cracks in the rough-hewn wooden siding. Tacked here and there to the plank walls a few of his pencil sketches hung. The drawings were stark, dark and severe. And an honest reflection on the kind of life most often lived in the Borinage.

A fist pounding on the rickety door woke him. "Vincent, open up." The voice of Pastor Stemple thundered into the room. "Vincent?!"

Vincent sat up and rubbed sleep from his eyes. "Yes, yes. Come in."

The door swung open and in strode Pastor Stemple, self-righteousness personified. He was short and stocky with the rounded features of a man used to easy living. He surveyed the miserable surroundings with disdain, then glared at Vincent still seated on his pile of straw.

Seeing his boss's expression, Vincent stood and brushed away any straw still clinging to his clothes. He wiped his hands on his pants and offered the Pastor a handshake,



smiling broadly. "It's good of you to come, Pastor."  
Vincent gestured to the lone chair in the room, "Please have a seat."

The Pastor stood with arms folded across his chest.  
"There have been complaints, Vincent."

"Complaints? I'm sorry, I don't understand."

He made a sweeping gesture with his hand, indicating the condition of Vincent's shack.

"Regarding your lifestyle."

An instantly defensive Vincent became defiant. "You mean, for following in the humble footsteps of Christ?"

The Pastor matched Vincent in terms of volume and defiance. "For making a mockery of this ministry! For reducing your station here as preacher of the gospel to that of a common beggar. You were sent here —"

Vincent cut him off, raising his voice enough to shake the room. "I was sent here to minister to these poor miners and their families. To be one with them, not preach down to them. To live like them. To embody —"

"Enough! Don't lecture me about your mission!" Pastor Stemple was adamant.

Vincent took a step closer to his boss, his tone much softer. "These people need bread, not words! Kindness, hope, love! I preach the living Gospel of Christ by embodying his words each day. I'm not better than —"

Raising both hands as a signal for Vincent to stop, the Pastor shouted over him. "Enough, Vincent!"

Vincent froze, dead in his tracks.

"Your contract will not be renewed at the end of the month." After a pause, the Pastor continued. "The Board unanimously agreed."

A crestfallen Vincent knew it was over. He bowed his head, a defeated man. A failure, again. What would his family think, especially his father? How would he face them this time?

Pastor Stemple turned and strode to the door. Just as he marched out into warm summer sunlight Vincent offered him one final epithet, spoken more like a prayer than a promise. "One day you'll see. I'll show the whole world what love can do."

*Late January, 1888*

Gabrielle sat like a statue, bathed in sunlight.

Vincent was bent over the sketch taking shape on the page. "At the end of the day I tried to follow in my father's footsteps, but it was an impossible path to follow. No matter what I did or how hard I tried, nothing was ever good enough for him."

"Is that when you decided to become an artist, Monsieur Vincent?"

He looked up at her and smiled. "As a child I was always drawing or sketching what I saw around me. But it was my brother Theo who encouraged me to take this

seriously and fully commit myself to this path. Thank God for him, the one person who always understood me."

He returned to his drawing and penciled in the final few lines. Satisfied, he motioned her closer and turned the sketchbook in her direction.

An excited Gaby slid down the bench until she was almost on top of him. She looked it over carefully, taking her time before saying anything. "Oh, Monsieur Vincent! It's beautiful. Is this how you see me?"

He beamed. "If you truly love nature you will see beauty everywhere." He then laid the book in his lap and carefully tore out the page, handing it to Gabrielle.

She got up and kissed his cheek. "I will treasure it, always."

Gaby ran to her mother and showed her the drawing. An unimpressed Paulette frowned. Then she looked down at the still seated Vincent and offered a polite, "Thank you." Turning to her daughter she motioned that it was time to go. "Gabrielle?"

Vincent closed his sketchbook and stood. "Are you ladies returning home soon?"

"Yes, Monsieur Vincent. We return south to Arles in about a week or so once my treatments are finished."

"Ah, that sounds wonderful. You know, I've long dreamed of traveling to Marseilles. To watch the ships come in with their exotic treasures from far off Japan. And to escape this terrible weather, of course. Paris in winter is no place for an artist."

"Oh Monsieur Vincent, you would love Arles. The sun, the light!" Gaby turned to her mother, looking for support. Paulette's thin smile was ice-cold. "You must come! Right mother? Monsieur Vincent can stay at the Hotel Carrel!" She turned to Vincent, "I know the proprietors, they're a very nice couple. I'm sure you will find it more than suitable!"

Vincent was energized by her enthusiasm. "It seems the time has come for me to wander off once again!"

Gaby reached out and laid a hand on his arm. "Ah! You see? Our meeting here today was no accident, Monsieur Vincent. You mark my words."

An inspired Vincent bubbled with energy. "Ladies." And with that he ran off through the park.



Vincent burst into the tiny apartment. The front room was noticeably tidier than a couple of weeks earlier, with all painting supplies removed from the room. Even more of Vincent's works hung on the walls or lined the perimeter of the cramped space.

Seated at a small desk with shirt sleeves rolled up, Theo poured over his ledger-book.

A breathless Vincent ran to his brother, stopping short behind him. When he was able to speak his words came spilling out. "Theo, I've got great news! I'm off to the south!"

Without looking up, Theo replied. "Really?"

"Yes brother. Look, I've got it all figured out. Down there I can work twice as hard since the weather will be more agreeable for working outdoors." Vincent gestured toward one of the windows. "And no doubt living expenses will be cheaper than in this wretched city."

Theo finally turned and looked up to face his brother. "Really?"

Without pausing, Vincent continued, "Just imagine it. The vibrant colors of the south splashed on canvas, not to mention the open space where one can finally breathe. And let's face it, we're driving each other mad cooped up in here together."

Theo cocked an eyebrow, then glanced toward Vincent's studio in the back.

"Okay, okay, I'm driving you mad." Vincent laughed. "Wouldn't it be wonderful to set up a studio in the south, a place where artists from Paris can winter and work together? So what do you think?"

It was Theo's turn to smile. "I think a change would do us both a world of good."

An excited Vincent hopped up and down for joy, then grabbed Theo's shoulders and shook him playfully.

A relieved Theo pushed him away and stood. "And I've got some good news for you as well. Yesterday I sold one of Paul's paintings from the four I took on commission."

Vincent hugged his brother, picking him up off the floor in a bear hug. "That's great news." Vincent set Theo back down on the floor. "You know, Paul's been suffering terribly of late. By the way, where has he gone off to?"



Located in Brittany, the Pension Gloanec was a three-story, white-washed stone building stationed at the entrance to the Pont-Aven village square.

The ground floor of the famous boarding house held a large dining room with a kitchen at the back. And covering just about every conceivable inch of space, numerous works of art hung on the walls depicting various scenes of local life. Each and every piece had been given over the years by guests in lieu of cash payment. By Gauguin's time, it was considered quite an honor to have one's work displayed on those illustrious walls.

In the center of the dining hall a long wooden table ran the entire length of the room. Diners sat on both sides and served themselves from large platters, family style.

This night was no different, as a boisterous crowd ate, drank and talked. Among them sat thirty-nine-year-old Paul Gauguin, sporting a thick, black mustache. He was a man in his element, a proverbial king holding court. He pounded the table with the palm of his hand to get everyone's attention. "I'm telling you all, my fortunes are finally turning."

Marie Jeanne Gloanec, the proprietress, entered the room from the back kitchen. "Ah, now there's a familiar voice."

Gauguin stood and bowed to the older woman. "Madame."

She smiled at Paul. "Have you come back to finally settle your bill, Monsieur Gauguin?"

The crowd howled with laughter.

Paul, still standing, was enjoying himself. "Why Madame, I'll have you know that I recently sold two paintings during my last trip to Paris." He bowed low. Standing tall again, he showed everyone the number two with his left hand while mouthing the word 'two' for emphasis. "And I'll have you know that I am currently represented by a rather well known and well respected art dealer, one Theo van Gogh of Goupil & Cie." Finished, he again bowed in her direction.

Everyone cheered.

Madame Gloanec was pleased. She waited for the applause to die down. "Well done, Monsieur Gauguin, well done. So glad to hear it." She paused, then surveyed the room. "Tomorrow morning please stop by my office so you can settle your bill." On that note, she curtsied.

The crowd roared and pounded their fists on the table, enjoying the show.

When the ruckus settled down, she continued. "In cash or in kind, of course."

A calm Paul held up his right hand, as if surrendering. "Madame, if my fortunes continue to improve you'll be quite a wealthy woman from all of my paintings you've accepted over the years."

She spun on her heels and returned to the kitchen, laughing.

Paul waved goodbye, then sat and regaled the gathered crowd about his many exploits abroad all of which featured one common theme — his as-yet-unrecognized genius.



## Chapter 3 - No One Knows

“We get some rules to follow  
That and this  
These and those  
No one knows...”

~ Queens of the Stone Age

*March, 1945*

In the predawn light, three Sherman tanks rumbled slowly down a muddy track cutting through a forest of tall pines. They clanked to a stop.

On the lead tank, the commander's hatch opened. Sergeant Fergus Quinn ("Gus") emerged, his stocky frame sticking up through the turret. He scanned the terrain in front of his column. Up ahead the lane forked to the northeast and southeast.

From inside the tank the muffled voice of his driver cut through the morning stillness. "Which way, Sarge?"

Gus leaned inside. "Right."

The tanks moved out with Gus still exposed through the hatch. Reaching the fork, all three tanks took the southeastern path. A light rain began to fall. "Dammit to hell," Gus muttered to himself.

About ten minutes later the column reached the outskirts

of a small hamlet. The tanks stopped once more. From behind Gus, Sergeant Price popped up through his hatch. "Hey Gus, any idea where the hell we are?"

Gus turned and shouted back, "Fuck if I know. The map is —"

Just then the telltale whoosh of a Panzerfaust being fired cut the morning stillness, quickly followed by another whoosh. One projectile sailed just over Gus' head. The other warhead struck Sergeant Price's Sherman squarely in the left hull plate, just below the turret. The tank quickly burst into flames. A wounded Sergeant Price tried climbing out of his stricken vehicle as flames shot out through the turret's opening. Eyes wide with fear, he screamed to his friend. "Gus! God-dammit Gus, help me!"

Gus looked on, helpless.

Unable to pull himself to safety, Sergeant Price slid back inside the burning hulk.

From the corner of his eye, Gus caught sight of three shadows disappearing into the woods. He cocked the fifty caliber machine gun and fired a short burst into the treeline. Ducking quickly inside he shouted at the driver, "Advance fifty feet, then wait for me."

As his tank rolled forward he hopped out of the turret, scrambled to the rear of his tank and jumped to the ground. The other remaining Sherman carefully maneuvered around the flaming hulk blocking its path.

Gus sprinted into the dark forest with his Colt .45 in hand.



Inside the brightly lit factory, the noise of metal punches beating aluminum into shape was deafening. Women clad in denim overalls worked the machines, stamping out canteens for the US Army.

Colleen loaded a sheet of aluminum into one of the machines. An attractive blonde in her mid twenties with curves in all the right places, she glanced up at the large wall clock and saw that her eight hour shift was nearly done. Wiping sweat and grime from her forehead with the back of her hand, she spotted Nick, the factory foreman, heading her way.

As he got closer to her he flashed his typical shit-eating grin.

Sadly, guys like Nick are a dime a dozen. Smug, cock-sure and full of himself Nick figured he was God's gift to women. A 4F rating and a defense contract job kept him out of the military, which was just fine with him. After all, somebody had to remain behind to hold down the home front.

Reaching her work station, he leaned in close with his right hand lightly brushing up against her behind and whispered in her ear. "Hey doll-face, wanna head to Muldoon's when you're done?"

Colleen glanced nervously around the room, checking to see if anyone was looking their way. "Nicky, you know I can't. The bartender knows my husband."

His greasy smile widened. "Don't sweat it, doll. I'll swing round your place later with a couple of brewskis." And without bothering to wait for a reply, he sauntered off whistling a tune.



Gus crouched in muddy soil.

He peeked around a tall pine, listening intently as light rain continued to fall.

To his right he heard the unmistakable sound of a twig snapping underfoot. He charged toward the sound, angling down a shallow ravine. Up ahead, he spotted a shadow running away from him along the path of the ravine. He quickly squeezed off four rounds. The metallic click of the slide remaining open told him the clip was empty. "Dammit."

The retreating soldier fell.

Gus sprinted forward and reached the body. It was face down in puddle of mud and pine needles.

In the predawn light he could just make out a bullet wound to the back. He got down on his knees and rolled the body over. Staring up at him with dead eyes was the angelic face of an eleven-year-old boy, blonde hair plastered to his forehead. The child soldier had a gaping wound in his chest.

Gus rummaged through the boy's uniform and found a Hitler Youth knife still in its sheath.

He pocketed it.

Catching sight of a flash of movement up ahead along the sound of footsteps running through the underbrush, Gus jumped to his feet. He sprinted toward the distant figure, taking an angle to intercept the soldier. He clambered up the ravine and reached the edge of a clearing.

Crouching low, he waited.

To his left he spotted the soldier. The German paused and looked around. Satisfied that the way was clear, the soldier ran across the clearing and cut across his field of vision, roughly fifty feet away. Staying low, he sprinted toward his unsuspecting target. At the last minute the German caught sight of him, but it was too late. Gus dove, knocking them both to the ground. He rolled, pulled out his combat knife and sprung on top of the prone figure ready to deliver the killing blow.

And then he froze.

You see, had the German been a man, or even a boy, he would have made quick work of that defenseless soldier. Instead, he came face to face with the Burgermeister's wife. She wore an SS overcoat and fumbled for her Luger. Gus punched her in the cheek, hard, knocking her senseless. He easily pulled the pistol from her limp hand and stuck it in his coat pocket.

Checking for more weapons, he rummaged through her overcoat.

And then he tore at her clothes. Blind with rage and combat fatigue, he vented his vengeance on a forty-

something-year-old mother of two boys already buried on the eastern front. During the assault she came to her senses. And as tears filled her eyes and streamed down her cheeks, Gus tried not to notice as he finished what he started. When he was done, he executed his mission just like every soldier in history has been trained to do since the dawn of time. In one, quick stroke he used his combat knife to deadly affect.

And like a man waking from a nightmare, he finally got up and shuffled back to his unit while falling rain was powerless to wash him clean.



Light filtered into the room through a pair of windows from a row of streetlights below. Over the rooftops a sliver of moon hung in the late night sky.

On a wooden coffee table a candle flickered, adding to the romantic mood.

Colleen and Nick sat side by side on her sofa facing the windows, his left arm casually draped over her shoulder. His right hand clutched a warm beer bottle.

On the radio Tommy Dorsey's "I'll Never Smile Again" started to play. Hearing the familiar tune Nick took a final sip, got up and headed to the radio. Cranking up the volume, he spun to Colleen and extended his hand to her. "C'mon baby, let's cut a rug."

She folded her arms across her chest.

"Shoot girl, you're no fun tonight." He plopped back down on the sofa, defeated. "C'mon, what gives?"

She turned to him. "Just thinking about my husband."

"Is that all? Look baby, half the dames at the plant married some poor, dumb slob before he got shipped overseas. So what?" He paused, gauging her mood. "Whether they married for sympathy, or simply the chance to get laid and maybe land a survivor's check, what difference does it make? Either way, it just doesn't matter. No big deal."

She stared at him long and hard for a moment, letting his words sink in.

He continued. "You wanna know why? Because all we ever have is right now." He gazed deeply into her eyes. And something in her expression softened. Seizing the opportunity, he took her hand in his. "Look baby, I'm here. You're here. So why waste this moment?" He stood, and still holding her hand took a step toward the bedroom. "Right, baby?"

Slowly, her shoulders relaxed and a slight smile appeared. And finally getting his hoped for response, that greasy, shit-eating grin of his spread like a disease across his smug face.

She stood.

And step by step he led her to the bedroom.



Two Sherman tanks approached the edge of a town. Gus sat on the lead tank's turret manning the machine gun, his legs dangling through the open hatch. Up ahead the main street was lined with small shops and low, two-story buildings on both sides.

The town seemed deserted.

They rolled single file down the narrow street, finally coming to a central square. Around the perimeter about a dozen old men and young boys were strung up, hung like rag dolls from wrought-iron lampposts. Dangling from their necks crude wooden signs were painted in red letters. "FEIGLING."

Both tanks stopped.

Gus leaned into the hatch and shouted to his loader. "Hey Vic, you read Kraut, right?"

"Yeah Sarge."

"Pop up here a sec." The loader's hatch to the left of Gus swung open. Up through the narrow, oval opening Vic squeezed into view. "What's up, Sarge?"

Gus pointed to a ten-year-old boy hanging from a nearby lamppost in front of their tank. "What does the sign say?"

Vic looked at the young boy, horrified. He then surveyed the scene taking it all in, slowly viewing one corpse and then the next as the hanging bodies gently swayed in the wind and light rain. "Sarge, what the..." His thoughts trailed off into nothingness.



An impatient Gus' turned to him and barked out his words like a burst of machine gun fire. "What - do - the - damn - signs - say?"

"Coward, Sarge. It means coward."

Gus hopped off the tank and strode toward the largest building in the square. Without looking back he shouted his orders. "Tell the men to cut the poor bastards down."

*May, 1945*

In Europe the war was finally over.

The town of Regensburg, or what was left of it, was bisected by the Danube river. Most of the buildings left standing were pockmarked with bullet holes, both large and small.

Warm spring sunshine bathed the town square in a golden glow. Soldiers in clean and pressed uniforms strolled the streets and waved at local girls lined up on the sidewalks. The girls smiled back at the GIs, eager for extra rations or cigarettes. Everybody's spirits seemed lifted, as if the world had finally woken up from one long, catastrophic nightmare.

Everyone, save Sergeant Quinn.

Gus sat propped against a brick wall, the two front legs of his wooden chair more than a few inches off the cobble-stoned sidewalk. He still wore the same unwashed combat uniform, and clearly hadn't shaven for a week. Even though it was nearing noon he was drunk again,

clutching a half-empty bottle of beer and taking the occasional swig.

Cheerful civilians walking past made sure to steer a wide path around his position.

In stark contrast, Vic was the spitting image of the model soldier. Marching down the street and waving at all the pretty girls, he spotted Gus and approached him like a man about to feed raw meat to a hungry lion. "Ah, there you are Sarge. The Captain wants to see you."

Gus looked up at him, and stared right through him.

Vic fidgeted, unsure of what to say. Or do. "Said it's urgent."

Gus leaned forward, setting the two front chair legs back on the ground. "What could be urgent now? We did our job. We beat the fuckin' Krauts, didn't we Vic?" He finished his beer. "Tell the Captain I'll be right here," he pointed a thumb to his chest, "so if he needs to see me he knows where to find me."

Vic stared down at his polished boots for a moment or two. With no other options left to him, a defeated Vic returned to deliver the message.



The brightly lit factory was packed with workers from all three shifts. For the first time in years all the machines were idle. At the far end of the room a wooden stage had

been set up, draped with red, white and blue bunting. A lone microphone stood center stage.

Colleen, clad in work clothes, nervously awaited the news along with all the other women. The only sound was the murmuring of the crowd standing shoulder to shoulder as they wondered about their fate.

Nick exited the upstairs office and descended the exposed stairwell. Aware that all eyes were on him, for once his cock-sure arrogance was replaced with something like concern. Or fear. He passed through the assembled crowd and climbed the wooden steps of the makeshift stage until he was face to face with the crowd.

He tapped the microphone three times. Then took a deep breath and cleared his throat. Nick scanned the crowd, looking for Colleen. He gave up, then took a folded sheet of paper from his pocket. "Good afternoon, Ladies. With the war in Europe won the boss wanted to thank you for all your hard work. And for your invaluable contributions to the war effort."

The women cheered and applauded.

Nick waited a moment, then continued. "Soon our boys will be returning home, and it will be time for them to settle into their jobs and their hard-won and rightful place in society."

Some of the women applauded, but most looked around at their fellow coworkers aware of what might be coming next.

Nick droned on, gaining momentum. "With the final few orders from the Army left to be completed in a couple of

weeks, we'll need to let most of you go by next Friday. At the latest."

Stunned silence hushed over the factory floor.

"You'll find a clipboard hanging by the punch cards with a list of all the girls who are invited to stay on as we retool and transition back to pre-war production. If your name is not on the list make sure you surrender your name badge before you go."

Those women closest to the time-clock started edging their way to the clipboard. What started as a trickle turned into a flood as all the girls rushed to see the list.

Nick had to shout in order to be heard over the anxious crowd. "Again, thank you all for your service. And for those girls on the list we'll see you bright and early on Monday morning."

All the women around Colleen joined the mob rushing to the clipboard, but she stood her ground. As Nick got off the stage they finally made eye-contact. He made a bee-line to her as the crowd around her evaporated.

Nick finally reached her and flashed that greasy smile. "What's up doll-face?"

"Is my name on the list, Nicky?"

He cackled. Over by the clipboard women who didn't find their name on the list were sobbing while others filed out of the factory with heads hung low.

"Maybe it is. Maybe it isn't."

Colleen stood her ground, all business. "Nick, don't mess with me. I need this job."

In an instant whatever charm he possessed fell to the factory floor. "Every dame in here needs this job."

Doing her best to hold it all together, Colleen clasped her trembling hands together. "You don't understand Nicky, I really need this job right now."

Nick paused, eyed her up and down like he was sizing up his prey. "Don't sweat it, baby. Of course you're on the list."

Relieved, she clutched his arm with both hands.

He winked at her. "See you tonight, doll-face?"



Gus sat propped against the wall, his eyes closed. Warm spring sunshine lit his haggard face.

"Hello, Sergeant Quinn."

Gus cracked open his eyes. He recognized Father Doyle standing before him, the unit Chaplain. Gus wasn't exactly a church-going man but he didn't have any beef with the forty-year-old Chaplain.

"Can I help you, Padre?"

Father Doyle squatted before Gus like a baseball catcher preparing himself for a fastball. Now at the same eye level, he smiled. "Well Gus, the question is... can I help you?"

A thin smile crossed Gus' face. "You mean, like

confession?"

"More like a conversation. If you're fit to stand how about you and I take a short walk. And if you feel up to it we can chat. What do you say?"

"Do I have a choice, Padre?"

The chaplain smiled. Sweetly. Genuinely. "Well, that depends on who you ask. If you're asking God the answer is always yes. Even if it doesn't always feel that way. But you'd get a very different answer if you asked Captain Sparks right now."

Gus laughed. For the first time in a long, long time. "Good one, Padre."

The Chaplain stood as Gus sat forward, setting his chair on solid ground. Father Doyle extended a hand to help him up, but Gus waved him off. He stood, and nearly toppled over. Finally finding his balance, the two men walked off down the street.



Inside her apartment Colleen paced nervously.

She stopped for a moment and glanced at her watch, then began pacing again. Lost in thought, a knock on the door startled her. As she headed to the door a second knock, louder this time. She called out, "Coming." Standing at the door she composed herself, then opened it on Nick.

Without waiting to be invited in he marched past her and plopped himself down on the couch. "Can you get me a beer, doll-face?"

Colleen slowly closed the door. She went to the tiny kitchen and got his beer. A moment later she found herself standing in front of him like a statue. Not sure what to say or how to say it, she handed over his beer.

Without looking up he grabbed it and took a long sip.

She remained glued to the same spot, speechless. He finally noticed her odd behavior and looked up with that same shit-eating grin. "What gives, baby?"

She blurted out, "I'm late."

Nick slapped his knee with his free hand and laughed. "Is that all? Shit baby, you had me worried there for a second."

"Nicky, I'm late." Her words hung in the air between them. It took a full minute for the import of what she said to finally dawn on Nicky.

"Late?"

She nodded yes.

His smile was long gone. He was all business now. "How late?"

"A month. Maybe two."

Nick nodded, letting her words sink in for a moment. Then he smiled and mustered up all the charm at his disposal. "No sweat, doll-face. There's nothing to worry

your pretty little head about. I know a guy who can take care of your problem."

The color drained from her face. This was not how she expected this conversation to go. "Problem?"

"Yeah. If you want I can reach out —"

Colleen put both of her hands over her stomach. "Problem? This isn't a problem, Nicky. It's a baby."

Nick was getting angry. This wasn't the reaction he expected. "Hey doll-face, take it easy. All I'm sayin' is that —"

Colleen couldn't take it any longer. Something inside of her broke. Or rather, something inside of her was beginning to wake up. She was sickened by the greasy smile and dull face looking up at her. She finally found her voice and shouted at him. "Get out!"

"Hey, baby, take it easy —"

"I said get out! Get out!! Get out!!!"

Nick slowly got to his feet. He took one last, long pull from the beer bottle and set it down, hard, on the coffee table.

Colleen stood her ground, defiant.

Nick looked her up and down one last time, taking it all in. Then he shook his head, partly in disbelief and partly as a man slowly hatching a plan. "Careful what you wish for doll-face. Know what I'm sayin'?"

And with that he strolled out of her life, slamming the



door shut behind him.



Father Doyle led Gus down a narrow, dirt lane just off the main road.

They followed it in silence for about two hundred feet until they reached a long, low, one-story brick building. Out front several barefoot boys and girls were playing in a small dirt yard. All the children were between three and six years old.

When the children spotted the Chaplain they ran to him. And one little blonde girl smiled and threw her arms around his legs, screaming "Vater, vater!" She had a one inch scar above her left eye.

Father Doyle patted the little girl's head affectionately. "Hallo, meine kleine Liesel."

Gus looked over at the Chaplain with a mixture of dread and wonder. What was the Padre up to?

Just then a nun in full habit exited the main entrance and shooed the children back indoors. Gus just stood there, completely out of his element, as the sister and Chaplain spoke briefly. Then Father Doyle motioned for Gus to follow, and the two men walked through the main entrance.

Inside, the foyer was tiled like a checkerboard with black and white squares. Across from the main entrance an

open doorway led to a small courtyard. To the left and right a narrow hallway ran in both directions.

The two men walked across the foyer and entered the courtyard. A wooden table and two chairs were waiting for them, along with two empty coffee cups. Gus was beginning to think that this walk had all been one big set up.

Still standing Gus asked, "What gives, Padre?"

Father Doyle smiled and took a seat. He pointed to the other chair. "Please Sergeant, join me."

Gus took a seat. He surveyed his surroundings, noting how the building was shaped like a large square which encircled the small courtyard. A number of windows, their shutters open, lined all four walls of the open space. Gus could also make out curious little faces staring at them both, filled with awe and wonder. And as he took it all in, the scene was playing out like some sort of inquisition. He shifted in his seat, understandably nervous.

Father Doyle finally offered an explanation, or sorts.

"I thought this space would be a little more... conducive for our chat."

"Chat, Padre?"

"Look Gus, the Captain asked me to talk with you to check in on how you're doing. I know combat —"

Gus cut him off, instantly upset. "You don't know the half of it, Padre."

Father Doyle remained calm. He was no stranger to combat, or the toll it takes on the human spirit. "And

that's why we're here, Gus. I thought a place like this might give you a little perspective, and maybe help you begin the healing process. Come to terms with your demons, as it were?"

Just then one of the nuns approached silently, pot of freshly brewed coffee in hand. She poured, then exited as quietly as she had entered. Once she was gone Gus checked the windows, half expecting to see curious little faces pressed up against the glass. But his audience had gone.

He picked up the cup and took a sip.

Looking over the cup's rim he noticed something warm, something peaceful in the Chaplain's expression. And before he knew it Gus opened up and spilled his guts, sharing with the Padre everything that he'd seen, and done, since landing in Europe.



Sunlight streamed in through an open window, waking Colleen.

Slowly she sat up, dreading her first day back to work after the fight with Nick. But since she needed the money, now more than ever, she forced herself out of bed.

It didn't take her long to get ready. And once outside, the sunlight on her face nearly washed away her fears. After all, how bad could it be? Her name was on the list,

she was good at what she did and what could Nicky do to her, anyway?

She walked along the sidewalk and turned the corner. Up ahead the factory gate beckoned. But as she neared the checkpoint something seemed out of place.

The elderly security guard, a friendly face she'd seen each weekday for months on end, normally greeted her with a smile. But as she got closer his expression was different, like that of a man forced to do something he didn't approve of or found distasteful.

She fished her name badge from one of her pockets and showed it to guard. Instead of waving her through he put up his hands instead. "Excuse me, ma'am, I'll need to take that from you. Orders from the boss."

Colleen was shaken. She could barely muster the strength to speak. "I don't understand. My name —"

"Sorry ma'am. You're no longer employed here."

She dropped her badge into his waiting hand. Not sure what to do next, she stood there. It felt like the entire world had collapsed all around her. Tears filled her eyes. Blushing, she covered her face in her hands and wept.

The security guard whispered to her, "I'm sorry ma'am. Will you be okay?"

Colleen's body shook as she sobbed. And without answering she finally wiped the tears from her eyes and headed home, wondering to herself about that very same question.

## Chapter 4: Stand or Fall

“Is this the value of our existence  
Should we proclaim with such persistence  
Our destiny relies on conscience  
Red or blue, what's the difference...”  
~ The Fixx

*September, 1926*

Gray skies hung low over the capital of the Weimar Republic.

Rows of four-story apartment buildings flanked both sides of Schwartzkopffstrasse, a narrow side street which ran east - west for about eight hundred feet in Berlin's Mitte District. An open-air moving truck was parked in front of one of the buildings. In a number of windows overlooking the street curious neighbors watched.

Gertrud Engel, a stern thirty-six-year old woman, stood in the rain with arms folded across her chest. She supervised two men as they lugged boxes to the back edge of the truck's flatbed. Dripping wet, she was in no mood for nonsense.

Mr. Schechter stood by the main door and held it open. At forty-two years old, he was tall and thin and leaned on a wooden cane for support. Gertrud's sixteen-year-old daughter, Anna, ran past him and bounded down the

steps. Moments later Kurt, her eleven-year-old brother, shuffled out of the building. Shy and reserved, it seemed like a sudden gust of wind might blow him away.

Surveying the scene, Mr. Schechter beamed. "Welcome to your new home."

Anna grabbed another box and was up the stairs in a flash. Kurt picked up a heavy box and struggled along trying his best to keep up with his older sister. He disappeared inside.

From the far end of the street a tall, well-built older teen clad in his Hitler Youth uniform dashed over to Gertrud. He was soaked through to the skin. "Excuse me, ma'am. Can I help?"

She sized him up. Satisfied, she pointed at several boxes and crates lined along the back edge of the truck. "These need to go upstairs. Fourth floor."

"Yes ma'am." The teen stacked one box on top of the other, easily handling the heavy load. He strode up the steps and glided past a wary Mr. Schechter.



The apartment opened into a long, narrow living room. Along the left wall there were two closed doors. At the back an archway opened to a small kitchen, with a lone window providing the only natural light. Wooden boxes and crates were lined up along the right wall.

Anna stood in the center of the room, waiting on her brother. Kurt set his box down near the others.

She ran toward the open apartment door, eyes still on her brother. "Race you downstairs." Just as Anna reached the doorway she ran smack into the older teen, who was hurrying along with two boxes piled high in his hands. One of the boxes tumbled to the floor while Anna was knocked backwards, landing on her behind.

Oskar quickly set the other box down. Seeing Anna sitting in the center of the room, he stammered out, "Are you okay?"

Anna smiled up at him.

He extended his hand to help her up. She took it, and once she was back up on her feet asked, "And who is our clumsy helper?"

His cheeks flushed. "Oskar."

Witnessing his embarrassment, Kurt fell to his knees and laughed.

Anna curtsied in an exaggerated manner. "Nice running into you, Oskar."

Playing along he bowed low, then smiled at her and her brother. "The pleasure was all mine. And welcome to the neighborhood."

Kurt finally got to his feet and ran past them through the open door, shouting over his shoulder, "C'mon you two, there are more boxes to carry."



Opened boxes of dishware sat on the kitchen counter. A brass hurricane lamp flickered on a square, wooden table in the corner. Bathed in the dim glow, Mr. Schechter and Gertrud sat at the table. He faced the darkened window. High up in the night sky a pale crescent moon peeked from behind wisps of passing clouds.

Gertrud wrung her hands together. "Moshe, how can I thank you for..."

He smiled and reached out, placing his hand on top of hers. "It's the least I could do. Really."

Gertrud shook her head 'no' but he continued on. "If it wasn't for Karl I would have lost my life in the Great War, instead of only losing my leg." To hammer the point home he knocked on his prosthetic leg with his right fist. "In the morning I'll reach out to some friends in the community who might need some help with laundry. If that's okay with you?"

Gertrud smiled, relieved. "It's more than okay."

"Good. And I've already spoken with the Headmaster of Französisches Gymnasium regarding Kurt and Anna. They're --"

She cut him off. "Moshe, I can't afford to send them to that school."

He waved her off. "You know Ruthie and I never had children. Not for lack of trying." He smiled. "Before she



passed she made me promise to look after your children." Moshe got choked up. "So you see, my hands are tied."

Gertrud looked like the weight of the world had been lifted from her shoulders. "What would I do without you?"

"Nonsense. I'm happy to help out."



A ten-year-old girl with dark, wavy hair was clearing away the dinner dishes from a table big enough for six. Her Grandmother Adele, a gentle woman in her sixties who always had a kind word to offer, got up from the table.

"Thank you, my dear Lizzie." She stood for a moment behind Elisabeth and kissed the top of her head. With a pat on the girl's shoulders she left the room.

Elisabeth carried the dirty dishes to the sink and turned on the tap. Methodically she washed each dish, taking her time to do the job right.

Her grandmother called out from the living room, "Dear, are you ready for school tomorrow?"

"Yes, Oma."

"That's good." A moment later the radio clicked on, filling the apartment with Gabriel Formiggini's Orchestra playing "Static Strut." Elisabeth smiled. Standing by the sink she danced in place, finishing up the last dirty dish. She dried her hands and danced into the living room

where her grandmother was waiting for her, ready with a hug and big smile.

"Dance with me, my dear."

Elisabeth curtsied. "Yes, ma'am."

And together the two of them danced the night away.



In the darkened room two beds were positioned against opposite walls. A lone window bisected the room in two, overlooking the street. A sliver of crescent moon hung in the night sky covered now and again by passing clouds.

Kurt was wide awake, his hands positioned behind his head. He looked toward his sister. "Anna?" he whispered, "Are you awake?"

She slept soundly.

This new apartment felt like a million miles away from his old home. Kurt missed their manor house which sat on the grassy shores of a lake. He missed the wide mahogany staircase which always creaked underfoot, and the large upstairs bedrooms where he could slip away unnoticed to read one of his books or get lost in a daydream.

It had been a peaceful, beautiful, idyllic place for a boy like him.

He knew Anna would settle in just fine and easily adjust to their new circumstances. She had a way of making new

friends, and Kurt was sure that before long she'd be one of the popular girls in school.

As for himself, he always found it difficult to talk with new people. What do you say once you get past hello? And what do you talk about, anyway? On a few occasions he tried to share with classmates the stories he read in his book, but all the schoolboys only seemed interested in sports. Or taking turns beating the crap out of each other up on the playground.

So more and more he retreated into books. And swaddled in their comfortable pages he found himself a home, of sorts.

"Anna?"

Still no luck. Kurt got up from the bed and knelt in front of the window. Across the street most of the apartment windows were dark. And high overhead some stars were visible between passing clouds, even in the middle of this bustling city.

Suddenly, a light was switched on in one of the rooms directly across from him. The window's curtains were open, giving him a view of a young girl roughly his age also in front of her window looking up at the night sky.

Behind her a gray haired woman entered through a doorway. Kurt could make out that the woman was saying something to the girl, who turned from the window. The woman left the room and the girl stood up. Just as she pulled the curtains closed she caught sight of Kurt staring at her.

She made a face, then disappeared behind the curtain's

fabric. A moment later the light was turned off and she was gone.

To Kurt, she seemed like an angel.



In the faint glow of predawn light, Gertrud sat at the kitchen table sipping tea. She gazed out the window which overlooked the apartment building next door. Above the rooftops she watched as two doves flew past in the morning sky.

Finishing her cup of tea, she got up from the table.

In the living room she rummaged through one of the wooden crates still lined up against the wall. She pulled out a large coil of rope and a handful of metal hooks. Sizing up the space, she set the rope on the floor and began screwing the hooks into the wall, with five on one side of the room and five on the other.

Satisfied, she picked up the coil of rope.

Starting with the hook closest to the front door, she tied a loop on one end and hung it on the hook. She then ran the length of rope across the room to the opposite hook, crisscrossing the room from hook to hook until the room was zigzagged by the entire length.

Once her makeshift clothesline was complete she opened the bedroom door.

"Kurt, Anna! Time to get ready for school."

Kurt pulled the sheets over his head. Anna stretched and quickly got out of bed. She raced out of the room and dodged past her mother who stood in the open doorway. A second later Anna fell on her back with a loud crash, having run headfirst into one of the clotheslines.

Kurt bolted upright in bed. "Sis, you okay?"

Gertrud turned toward her daughter who was splayed out on the living room floor. "Dear, do watch yourself."

Anna burst out in a fit of laughter. "Really, mom?" She got up and peeked into the bedroom, a red line across her forehead. "Watch out baby brother. It's an obstacle course in here."

Kurt fell out of bed and rolled across the floor with a fit of hysterical laughter.



Early morning sunshine slanted down the street.

A flood of children in differently colored school uniforms poured onto the sidewalk from each apartment building. They all flowed west to the end of Schwartzkopffstrasse where it ended at the intersection of Chausseestrasse, one of the main thoroughfares in the Mitte District.

Anna and Kurt ran down the steps and joined the tide of noisy children. Kurt walked slower than his sister as he

looked all around, vainly trying to find the girl he had seen the night before.

Anna finally stopped and turned back to him, shouting, "C'mon, let's go."

He picked up the pace and joined his sister. One last look over his shoulder and there she was, walking down the steps and waving to her Grandmother who stood by the front door. He noticed that her uniform was a different color than his and wondered what school she attended and if he would ever get a chance to say "hello."

Just then Anna tugged his arm, pulling him forward. Once they reached the corner they turned south while most of the other children headed north.

On the wide, busy street a steady stream of trucks and double-decker buses rumbled past belching black smoke. And running on tracks in the middle of the street a trolley rolled along, powered by a thick electric cable hung overhead.

Anna drank it all in, reveling in the hustle and bustle of Berlin.

To Kurt, the sheer wall of noise was almost more than he could handle. Gone was the lake where swans, geese and ducks swam in lazy circles on the mirrored-sky's surface. Gone were songbirds singing sweetly in the branches of ancient oaks. Instead, he was face to face with a city which seemed ready to burst at the seams.

After about a ten minute walk the traffic became more dense and the sidewalks even more crowded. They crossed Invalidenstrasse and turned right, heading west along the

busy sidewalk. After a few minutes they turned south and followed Luisenstrasse. They walked the half-mile or so in silence through a steady stream of pedestrians, with Anna holding her brother's hand tightly.

They finally reached the bridge crossing the River Spree. Just across the river their new school rose up, an impressive three-storied structure which stood adjacent to the Reichstag Building on the northeastern edge of the Tiergarten.

Anna stopped to admire the view while Kurt paused at the bridge's low railing, mesmerized by the ribbon of black-ink water as it roiled and swirled through this sea of noise, smoke and concrete. This was more to his liking. Anna indulged him for a minute or two, then gently tugged at his arm. "Come, my little angel. We don't want to be late on our first day."

"Sis, really? I'm not a baby anymore."

She just smiled and pulled him along. They reached the end of the bridge and turned right down a narrow lane which followed the contour of the river, Reichstagufer. A line of black Mercedes sedans, one indistinguishable from the next, pulled into the side street. Kurt and Anna walked alongside the slow moving traffic as the children of well-to-do parents were chauffeured to school.

The Französisches Gymnasium was impressive, built with large limestone blocks. Rows of windows on all three levels faced the street and river beyond, with the largest windows reserved for the top floor.

Out front the line of cars inched single file along the lane, delivering their delicate cargo to the front door. Still

holding hands, Anna and Kurt ran across the street between two cars and arrived at the entrance. Both siblings paused on the sidewalk, gave each other a reassuring look, and then they bravely joined their fellow students.

Kurt wondered what strange new world awaited him inside.



Set up in Gertrud's kitchen two large, tin wash tubs set up on sturdy metal legs filled the cramped space. One of the tubs had a manual clothes ringer bolted to the side. A small mountain of dirty laundry littered the wooden floor.

The tea kettle whistled.

Gertrud entered the kitchen and turned off the gas burner. She poured hot water into one of the tubs which was filled with soapy water. She gathered up a large handful of clothes and dumped them in.

Wiping her hands on her apron, she stood by the window propped open by a wooden stick. She fished a half-finished cigarette from a tea saucer on the table and lit it up. Taking a long drag she closed her eyes and held it a while before exhaling gray smoke out the window.

Finished, she stubbed the cigarette butt in the saucer and turned to face the remaining pile of clothes on the floor.



Gertrud returned to the tub filled with soapy water. With hands on her hips she looked up and stared long and hard at her husband's photo hanging on the opposite wall. The black and white image of her husband dressed in his Army Officer's uniform met her gaze indifferently. "So my life has come to this? Goddamn you, Karl Engel."

She stood that way for a full minute or so. With a long sigh, she rolled up her sleeves and plunged both hands, elbows deep, into hot water. And with an odd mixture of gratitude and disgust she began scrubbing other people's dirty clothes.



Mr. Schechter's apartment was a mirror-image of Gertrud's and was located one floor directly below her new home. It was well furnished and tidy, with an upright piano decorated with silver picture frames in the living room. Most photos were snapshots of Ruth smiling and posing in various locations from their many travels abroad.

Moshe sat at the piano staring at his favorite photo of his late wife. He smiled, then thumbed through a stack of sheet music until he found what he was looking for, Mahler's "Piano Quartet in A Minor."

An accomplished pianist, he played her favorite melody flawlessly. Finished, he picked up the silver frame and kissed her photo. "Well Ruthie, time to go to work."

He turned and grabbed his cane, then stood. Once he found his balance he walked to the door, stepped out into

the hall and shut the door behind him.

A few minutes later and he was walking down the sidewalk bathed in bright sunshine. With the children in school the street was deserted, save for a few older women sweeping their front steps. He smiled and nodded "hello" though a few scowled or ignored him as he passed.

Reaching Chausseestraße, he turned north.

After walking a few blocks his shop came into view. A sign painted with gold letters on a black background read, "Schechter's Watch and Jewelry Repair." Reaching the all-glass door, Moshe fished a key from his pocket and unlocked it.

Once inside he turned on the lights and flipped the cardboard sign hung from a chain from "Closed" to "Open."

His shop was long and narrow, hung with an assortment of clocks lining both walls. A glass counter ran parallel to the front door. Under the thick glass an assortment of valuable timepieces were on display. Behind the counter a door led to his darkened workshop.

Moshe walked to the counter and settled on a wooden stool next to the cash register.

He unlocked one of the cabinets beneath the counter and removed a red felt pad, along with a well-worn leather bag full of tools. Retrieving one of the wristwatches, he set it on the pad and carefully removed the back plate. Inside, tiny gears were frozen. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a loupe, carefully inspecting the watch's movement.

Finding the cause of the problem, he used a jeweler's screwdriver and freed a tiny piece of debris caught in one of the gears. A short puff of air cleared it from the watch's mechanism.

Immediately the tiny gears started meshing again, tooth into tiniest tooth.



Kurt ran up the stairs and reached the fourth floor landing ahead of Anna. He called down to her, "Beat you!"

"You're getting faster every day, baby brother."

Kurt put his hands on the railing and leaned over. "Sis!"

She laughed. Reaching the landing, she ruffled his hair. Together they walked down the hall to their door. Kurt opened it and they both stopped in their tracks. Facing them was a wall of clean laundry hung from the makeshift clothesline. There didn't seem to be anyway to get inside the apartment.

Anna called out, "Ma, we're home." Not hearing a reply she called out again, louder this time. "Ma?"

They could just make out their mother's face as she poked her head out from the back kitchen. "Be careful, that's a full day of work. Anna, I need your help folding. Kurt, why don't you go to the park?" With that she disappeared back into the kitchen.

Both kids looked at each other and shrugged. Kurt set his books down just inside the door while Anna crawled under the hanging clothes to reach her mother.

Taking a book with him he headed out the door, closing it shut behind him.



Kurt was back on the street, which swarmed with running and laughing children returning home from school. He headed east, toward the park.

After three hundred feet or so an alleyway opened on his right. To his left a side street veered off at a ninety degree angle, Pflugstraße, which was similarly lined with apartment buildings. Kurt joined in with the steady stream of children. They passed through a shadowy tunnel which passed under Nordbahnhof station. At the far end they spilled out unto Gartenstrasse.

Kurt followed along, unsure of where they were headed. Taking a left, the slowly growing army of children headed north for a thousand feet or so until they reached Scheringstrasse.

Reaching the intersection, Kurt could see the park's entrance off to his right.

Humboldthain park was a large square ringed by trees. In the central expanse of grass older boys played soccer. On this left children ran in circles playing tag while others swung in parallel rows of swings. Kurt followed a path

and found a towering oak tree. He sat in the shade with his back against the solid trunk. He cracked open the book's cover and dove headfirst into those pristine white pages awaiting him.

Kurt had been there for some time when an errant soccer ball rolled to a stop a few feet in front of him. Lost in the pages of his book he didn't see the group of older boys waving at him. And he didn't hear their shouts to kick the ball back so they could resume their game.

Finally the leader of the gang of older boys, Heinrich, strutted over to him. Five years older than Kurt, this boy was tall and wiry with jet black, greasy hair. He had the shifty-eyed look of someone unpredictable. And dangerous.

He reached Kurt. Standing directly in front of him with hands on his hips, Heinrich challenged him. "You stupid or something?"

Kurt didn't notice.

Heinrich kicked his outstretched foot. A startled Kurt flinched and looked up, shocked to find himself in the middle of a situation. "Yes?"

"Never mind, shit for brains." Heinrich bent over, picked up the ball and kicked it back to his waiting comrades. The black and white soccer ball sailed in a high, perfect arc and landed in the middle of the group. Proud of himself, he turned back to Kurt and pointed a finger in his direction. "I've got my eyes on you bookworm. So you better steer clear. Got it?"

Without bothering for a reply Heinrich jogged off and rejoined his gang.

A flustered Kurt fought back tears. He kept thinking to himself, "Don't let them see you cry, don't let anyone see you cry." The opened book remained in his lap as he sat there repeating this mantra, over and over again.

"Hey, what are you reading?" An unfamiliar voice called out to him from his left. Kurt looked over, not sure what to expect now. Instead of another bully he was greeted by a short, stocky boy with an easy smile wearing the same uniform as his.

Kurt lifted up the book and showed him the title as the boy ambled over to him.

The boy squinted. "H.G. Wells, The Door in the Wall." He looked up at Kurt and smiled broadly. "Is that on our reading list?"

"No. I found it in the library."

The boy stuck out his hand, "Hi, I'm Wilhelm. Saw you at school today." They shook hands. "You're in my class. I sit way in the back."

Wilhelm sat cross-legged on the grass next to him, then motioned over at the bullies playing soccer. "Don't worry about them. Bunch of Neanderthals. What do you expect, right? But I'd steer a clear path around Heinrich, the one who kicked you." Wilhelm twirled his finger near his temple. "That kid ain't right."



In Moshe's shop a heavy set woman walked through the

door. A brass bell secured to the lintel announced her arrival. Mr. Schechter looked up from his afternoon paper.

"Ah Edna, you're here for the watch."

The woman smiled. "Yes Moshe, but only if it's ready?"

He nodded and smiled. Reaching into his cabinet, he retrieved an eighteen-karat gold Patek Philippe pocket-watch. Moshe laid it down on the red velvet pad.

Reaching the counter, Edna picked it up and turned it over in her hands. She held it to her ear and listened for the telltale ticking of the watch's movement. Smiling, she placed it inside her purse. "Perfect. Just perfect. Jakob will be so happy."

Moshe smiled and rang the cash register.

She handed him a crisp Reichsmark note.

He carefully counted out her change. "Edna, I was wondering... an old friend of mine recently moved to Berlin with her two children. Her husband and I served together in the war. Anyway, she's available to do laundry, pick up and drop off service. Would you..."

Edna put her hand on his arm. "Moshe, of course. You're such a dear. Have her stop by, you can give her my address."

A relieved Moshe beamed. "Thank you Edna. I'll let her know."

She smiled, then left the shop.

Moshe checked one of the many clocks on the wall, then locked the cabinet and cash register. Satisfied that

everything was secure, he got up and walked to the front door. He switched off the lights and stepped outside.

The sidewalk was crammed with pedestrians as he locked the door.

Just as he turned to walk home, Heinrich and his gang of hoodlums ran pell-mell through the crowd weaving in and out of foot traffic. Heinrich shouldered past an older woman and bumped into Moshe, sending his cane flying.

Without pausing to see if he was alright Heinrich yelled over his shoulder, "Watch out, you dirty Jew bastard!"

Most of the people continued walking along acting as if nothing had happened. A handful of onlookers shook their heads in disgust at the boy's remarks. But only one person, a seven year old blonde girl, chose to help. She ran over, picked up his cane and handed it back to him with a big smile.

Her angelic face warmed Moshe's heart.

He took the cane from her outstretched hand and patted the top of her head. "Thank you, my little dear."