



HIDDEN MOVES AND HIDDEN FACES

And Other Richmond Stories

By

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Preface

Perhaps this collection is only a miscellany of leftovers from writing *Frameshifts*, the two volumes of stories and poems published in 2011. Ultimately, readers will decide. To me, the stories are fairy tales for adults—small myths, sometimes cautionary, about secrets, hidden forces, fearful creatures, magical thinking, warnings through dreams and visions, and intuitive decisions.

The territory imaginatively explored in this work and in *Frameshifts*, is not a gothic setting or dark German forest but the modern terrain of monstrous patterns in the lives of individuals, families, and society. In this territory, amazing transformations are routine:

*This fact imbeds in fable:
all's given; all's unstable.
The frog becomes a lord,
the knotty branch a sword.*

(Frameshifts, v.2, p.274)

Unlike *Frameshifts* and my operas, however, these stories do not re-tell familiar myths or unfold in multiple genres. Only *Jack and the Beings Talk* is a re-telling, but as it encompasses Google, the magic beans, and a short sailing trip with Thales of Miletus, the narrative follows a different path. In the stories about Carl, the lonely leather-worker, and David, the elderly uncle, the “hidden moves and hidden faces” are less fantastic than stubborn—like the parts of our nature that resist all denial. In the title story, a priest refers to our natures as prime numbers—unique and indivisible. In our era of analysis, subdivided specialties, and customization, perhaps it is funny and unsettling to find that neither zooming in nor zooming out reveals who we are better than letting our imaginations speak in words, images, and music. I hope so.

* * *

Finally, while the longest story, *Hidden Moves and Hidden Faces*, takes place in Richmond, the subtitle refers to the stories being completed since we came to Richmond last year. References made in the last story, *The Queen and the Crocodile*, deserve a few comments:

Boadicea was the English warrior queen who defeated 70,000 Romans in 100 A.D..
Judith was the Jewish widow who decapitated Holofernes. Hypatia was the female

mathematician and philosopher who taught in the great library of Alexandria (400 B.C.).
”**within my eyes, the tears of two**” comes from Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s sixth sonnet in the *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. “**As hearts by double motion live**” comes from a poem in the novel, *Frameshifts*. (See below.) Saying “**Love’s worth’s unknown although its height,**” the Crocodile misquotes Shakespeare’s Sonnet 116, “Let me not to the marriage of true minds.”
Gilgamesh & Enkidu are the partners in the ancient *Gilgamesh Epic* that includes the first story of the Flood, as told by the Babylonian version of Noah, an old fellow named Uta-napishtim. This story is retold in the story and opera, *The Profit of Doom*, in *Frameshifts*. The left ear is called the “**advantaged ear**” because there are more nerve fibers on that side; thus, better wiring.

About *Frameshifts*

The stories in *Frameshifts*, a self-published novel in two volumes of mixed genres and poetry about Fairall, Holburn, and other places in an imaginary region of Northern Virginia in both the present and next centuries, are drawn from my brief experiences as a soldier and oyster-researcher, as well as longer experiences as a Virginian, traveler, teacher, environmental advocate, AIDS-research advocate, and composer. The *Report on A42163* is a spin-off from the science fiction stories in *Frameshifts*, written by one of the characters, Professor Wayne Neely. The story *Hidden Moves and Hidden Faces* is a spin-off of the Harry Pettiford mystery stories in *Frameshifts*. More information is on the book blog, <http://www.frameshifts.com>. It is available from Amazon.com, Baker and Taylor, Ingram, and Kindle. An inexpensive version of the first story, *Death Wears a Tricorn*, is also available as an *e-book* on multiple platforms. I welcome comments to my blog site. Good reading.

Richard L. Rose

May 1, 2012

Carl's New Workbench

Carl had never bought a whole tooling side. He left the office early to be home in time for the delivery. Let some other agent like Larry Sweet go for the Millionaire's Club. Carl was happy to leave the plaques and bonuses to sweet-ass Larry. One sale a month was all he had ever really wanted anyway. He even left his pager in the company car and took a bus home. If anyone called, he was so sorry, but he couldn't show any listings tonight. He would take his tools into the dining room and lay them out on the mahogany side board. With Carl Junior at the videoden, he'd have the house to himself.

He saw the box on the porch before he got off the bus. Partially wedged behind the storm door, it stuck out a couple of feet. It was lighter than he had expected. He didn't open it. The

mail had been scooped up from behind the door and stacked on the stool where Wanda used to sit. He wanted to take his time.

The phone rang. He waited. After five rings, his message told them he was so sorry but he wasn't taking any damned client out tonight.

He threw his yellow company jacket on the divan. His picture popped out of the pocket clip. A frail wisp of a man stared up at him from the floor. Wanda had sat beside the photographer when that picture was taken. She had watched him as if he were finally being pinned onto a card she could display to prove that he worked like everybody else, like the best people she was always telling him about.

He sat on the edge of her grandmother's sofa, the one nobody was supposed to use, a black leather and horsehair monstrosity preserved from five generations of small children for no other purpose than to take up a wall and poke one of its clawed feet into the doorway just enough to trip him every morning. He pulled off his shoes and rolled the white support hose down to his ankles. Wanda was big on support hose. "You got to keep the pressure up, Carl." She said this every morning. She even threw away his other socks.

He wadded his socks between the black leather cushions and walked barefoot into the kitchen. Nothing to drink but Wanda's sherry. He made a half and half concoction with Hawaiian punch in a quart jar and took it with him downstairs to the closet wedged under the basement stairs. Here he kept his leather-working tools.

He unwrapped the five pound maul he'd never needed for small projects and laid it in the tool box beside the bevels, stamps and new rotary cutter he'd bought for the tooling side. He kicked a little stool and marble-top table into the back of the closet and took a swig of punch. No more working on that wobbly table under a forty watt bulb. He set the jar down to pick up the

box with both hands and carry it upstairs to the dining room. His heart pounded as he laid the tools directly on the side board. He'd put a piece of plywood on the table, but he had no intention of protecting the surface of Wanda's damned side board, containing her grandmother's silver and her Uncle Reed's knives. It was probably from her uncle that she got her ways. He was always a joker. One time, when a couple was visiting to show off their newborn, he gave the kid a lit fire-cracker. It turned out to be a toilet roll, but the couple never came back. Behind all of those jokes was something harder. Carl figured that was what Uncle Reed had passed on to Wanda—some pleasure in seeing others squirm.

Carl hadn't understood at first. Shortly after Carl Junior's birth, Carl had come home early to see how Wanda was getting on. He found her rolling the baby back and forth on the side board. She claimed she had just changed him, but Carl noticed that the knife drawer was not closed.

He opened the drawer. The knives were odd-shaped bronze implements that Uncle Reed had bought in Thailand. To Carl, they always seemed like they would be more at home in an armory than on a dinner table. He noticed that one of them was missing. It was the one Wanda had taken out the last time he had called the police. They had pried it from her fingers as she screamed at him. He hadn't seen it since.

It was time to open the package. He slit the taped end with his new rotary tool and let the hide roll onto the table. He reversed the roll to flatten it out and examined the finished side. It was perfectly smooth and unmarked and smelled of tack rooms and saddle soap. He hadn't decided what he would make. He had never done anything bigger than a wallet. And the last wallet had to be tossed after Wanda took the shears to it. She always said she was looking out for him. She said she looked out for him better than he did for himself. He had to apply himself,

she said. “You can do your little projects, but don’t bring them upstairs and don’t work on them until you’ve made your cold calls.” She said this every night before dinner.

He had to make the calls at dinner time to catch people at home. How else was he going to catch up to the sales of Larry Sweet, she asked. Of all the things she required, he most hated the cold calls. People who might have been prospects if they had wandered into the realty office on their own would instead call in the day after the dinner-time call and demand to have their names crossed off the list. Wanda never understood. She even held up dinner until Carl had made all the calls on her list. Carl Junior even joined Wanda in pestering Carl to make the calls early so that they could eat dinner before eight o’clock.

With the five pound maul, Carl tapped a gouge into Uncle Reed’s side board. As he looked at the hole, he realized that he hoped Wanda would not recover. Whatever treatment she was receiving at the Sanitarium, she still screamed that he was a slacker and that no one but she would pay attention to the details.

She was right about that. No one paid attention to the details like Wanda. Nothing Carl did was good enough for her. It was no wonder that Carl Junior had no standards with such a father, she said. He had no drive, no ambition—even when she laid it all out for him. She had so many plans. She talked about them to people who weren’t there. She argued with her dead mother about them. She screamed when Carl Junior came in wearing a hoody. That night, she had yanked Carl out of bed. With his feet twisted in the sheets, he had dislocated his shoulder again.

All in all, Carl was relieved, so much so that he even said aloud, “She’s gone at last.” He looked around cautiously. Even now, he couldn’t believe he was alone. He looked for his drink and remembered leaving it in the basement. Wanda would never have had that. “Food stays in

the kitchen and dining room,” she said. Everything in its place for Wanda, he thought. Even the mail.

Carl had just found the jar of punch when he thought about the mail on the stool by the front door. Just where Wanda always put it. Carl Junior had gone straight to the videoden from school. Carl put down the jar and listened. The basement was dark beyond the dim light over the steps. He backed against the wall and slowly climbed the steps. On the third step from the top, he felt a metal object under his toes. He didn’t want to look down. He bent his knees and sat slowly on his heels with his back still against the wall and his head upright to watch and listen. Keeping his eyes on the doorway at the top of the stairs, he reached between his feet and picked up the metal object—Uncle Reed’s bronze knife. He had found it only because he was walking up the ends of the steps next to the wall. Maybe it had been there all along. Then he remembered the phone call.

Maybe it wasn’t from the office at all. Maybe it was from the Sanitarium. He waited at the top of the stairs and listened. Wanda could be very quiet. She had certainly sneaked up on him before. The more embarrassing she could make it, the better. The more he thought about it, the more he realized that after years of being discovered and made to squirm, he was now doing what he had always done. But she was finally gone, and he was determined to forget his old habits.

He was going to lay the hide on the dining room table, mark out a huge project, and cut it with his new rotary tool. He stood up at the top of the stairs, took a swig of punch, and stepped into the kitchen.

No one was there, of course. “Old habits die hard,” he said. He walked into the dining room. The tooling side lay on the table. His tools were spread out on the side board. The china

cabinet in the corner was undisturbed. The chairs were pushed away from the table, as he had left them. He glanced at the hole he had made in the side board, picked up his rotary tool, and turned around to look at the tooling side. As he stared at it, he realized that something had been missing from the side board. The five pound maul.

A voice behind him said, "You got to keep up the pressure, Carl."

THE END

Jack and the Beings Talk

It's not what you think. The beans were more like avocado pits and the climb up more like googling. What made me dizzy were the interruptions to take calls and then having to look back to find my place. I nearly lost hold more than once but I knew Ma was calling to see if I'd gotten value for the dollar this time. Was she surprised when I came down with a nest egg-a-day policy. No strings. All from a little seed money. Anyway, I went on, as the voices said. Nobody cared about me talking to myself because no one was listening. People had buds in their ears. Everyone talked to themselves. Nobody noticed me talking to the beings. Somehow going up there had cleared out my ears the way when you blow your nose for a moment your ears are like part of a big pipe open at both ends that was always there but somehow you never noticed until

something went to zero in your head. You were *re-set* the way the guy who sold me the beans re-set his balance on zero to show me he was giving me a full 100 ounces. I asked him what the little sliding weight was. He called it a tare and said everybody uses them. I guess they do.

Anyway, it's like my ears were re-balanced, set to zero, you know, without the tare. And I could hear the beings talking. Sometimes they were talking to me but mostly to each other. I never see them, maybe because my eyes are not zeroed. Probably that was good, because hearing the beings distracts me, and seeing them would really tie me up. You've got to know that I didn't ask for this.

Or maybe I did—by buying the beans. But I don't mind it. In fact, hearing what they have to say has given me some ideas, like when I went to see my friend Troy to tell him how well my start-up turned out. Troy was being someone else when I got to his walk-up. You don't like to interrupt, so I just sat in the kitchen and looked at the apartment across the street. A guy was coming out the front door. He carried a black briefcase. Probably it was a lap-top he would open up on the subway on the way to work.

One of the beings said that's what he was going to do but the lap-top was stolen. He was planning to visit some of the people in the data-base. This was how he spent his days. He picked a neighborhood, claimed to be an independent auditor checking files. He smiled broadly and asked the customer to take a moment validating the information on file, if she didn't mind. He usually picked forgetful women in their eighties. It wouldn't take long, he said very politely. This got him inside. I could see why he was happy with himself at the bus stop.

Then Troy took off his goggles and stopped being someone else. We had grilled cheese sandwiches and took a walk down by the river. I didn't tell him about the beings talking. I had told Ma, but she was too excited about her dividends rolling out of my turn-around profits.

That's when I decided that it's probably better not to mention the beings. Every now and then, however, they would remind me that the deal was a joint venture. That worried me because my part in it right from the beginning had seemed pretty vague.

It wasn't just their talking that I heard. It was something like one time when Troy and I were under the bleachers when the crowd began the wave. You know, sixty thousand people standing and sitting down together made the eye beams flex and whine. We got out of there. I mean, we knew nothing was going to happen, but the idea of being under something that big when it wheeled around and flexed its muscles—well, that's the sound in the background when the beings talk. It's worried me sometimes.

So, anyway, one day I was going down to the dock where Troy and I hang out sometimes to watch the cranes swing booms over the water. I unwrapped a sub and sat on a pylon. This guy with a blue vest comes up and says I can't eat there.

One of the beings says he's not who he seems. He wants me out of the way because his buddies are robbing a warehouse. I looked around and, sure enough, there were some guys loading crates onto a flatbed. I strolled away as casually as possible, but then one of the beings said, "This is a joint venture. You must hold up your end."

I didn't have to tell them that I was not going to commit any crimes, deal or no deal. They knew. By listening through that pipeline, I guess. They said that all I had to do was say something to one of the guys loading the flatbed. He was big and sandy-headed, with forearms like two by fours, and orange nose-hair. I didn't want to talk to him. The beings flexed their giant, shrieking muscles, so I tapped the guy on the shoulder.

Before he had a chance to slit my throat, I said, "Jeff, they need you back in Brisbane. Now, Jeff."

He looked like he'd choked on a lug nut. Didn't ask me anything. He just ran off. I didn't hang around. When I got down to the fish market, I looked back. The Harbor police had stopped the truck. The beings said something like "Good save." It got me thinking where I had found them.

See, it wasn't exactly like googling. It was more like trying to hold onto a thought while you're spinning around it. I don't mean spinning out like Troy does all the time. I mean, I had this thought, and it took off. I stayed on it no matter where it went. Ma was always telling me to get full value on the dollar. I couldn't go back to her with another wad of nothing. So I held on to this scaly thing, finny and spiked, flying through the air, or a brown stickiness that passed for air. It didn't dive the usual way. Leaping down was dropping in size, like cream swirling into coffee. Leaping up was sudden growth. You swelled until you were inside-out and branched in a thousand directions. But as I held on, I got its shape, searched it, and found how to climb in and out of it.

I could hear Ma shouting somewhere below. All the time it was twisting and wiggling and turning its heads around to snap at me, riding on its back. And, my cell was ringing. I finally turned it off. Sometimes we were in water, sometimes in an icy stillness and unbearable brightness. Closing your eyes didn't keep out the brightness. But there was a shape to the thing, and a path that it followed. When they knew I understood this, the beings started talking about our joint venture.

Later, I remembered the vague word they had used: a venture of *reclamation*. I hoped that my good save of the hairy bozo would satisfy them. They answered right away that there was more. Ma didn't know how much value I was giving for her dollar. It made me wonder if the beings had hidden a tare on the balance before saying what I owed.

You figure you can go into another realm, take off what you can carry, and then be out of there. It doesn't work that way. The other realm has rules. Sure, you can make a raid. You can even escape. But the rules remain. You made a transaction. Things have to be zeroed up. It turns out that what matters in one realm is of no value in another. But the rules matter, even if you don't understand them.

So the beings would let me know when they were good and ready to be finished with our joint venture. Things were going great, of course. Ma was happy and I was fixed up. Everything perfect, you know. But it got me thinking about Eden. I mean, suppose someone were to find the way back. Then you'd have the rules to deal with. And, in a way, Eden was a tyrant's idea of heaven. Everything set up just right, you know, as long as you follow the leader and a few rules—another joint venture. I guess you can tell that I was feeling trapped. I couldn't turn them off. They were there, somewhere in the pipeline, always talking to each other and making those metallic shrieks that reminded me of the Bay Bridge rearing up from the water like a giant centipede. I suppose most people would say that they were in my head. That's true. The problem was that part of my head was not where it should be. You know, I thought of getting medication, but I felt less afraid of hearing the beings talk than of being too bombed out to understand them. So I asked them what to do next. They said, "Look for Milo Mihalakis." Then they made sure I would find him.

"Milo," I said to him. "It's not as if you can't go anytime you want. You hear what I'm saying?" He just gives me the big dumb stare the way he does. Find a way to get through that, I'm telling you, I'll give you a prize. You just can't penetrate. And there was no use telling him I was not who he thought I was, because, of course, I was exactly who he thought. The beings had

seen to that.

Find a way to get through that dumb stare if you're good at passing through walls.

So he's stretched out with one leg over the side of the bed and I'm lying against the wall with my head cracked. I didn't touch it to see if I was bleeding because I figured, I move again, it sets him off. You know? And Milo, well, it wouldn't take much. Like the guy must be three hundred pounds. He threw me into the wall like tossing a hat onto a hook at the barber's. So I didn't move. Maybe I couldn't move. It took some thinking.

I asked him, "If it was just you and me, how much would it matter?"

"What?" he says, with that same stare, like I was something he'd pulled from the grease trap.

"Yeah, just me and you. Sharing doesn't have to come into it. Forget this place. Forget what was said. Just you and me," I said. Truth was, I was dizzy, but passing out was not going to help me, you know, if I wanted to wake up.

He said, "You mean you take it back?"

That far I didn't want to go, so I said to him, "You remember when we were on the islands?" Now, I didn't know where I was going with this, but I had his attention, and sometimes you've got to just tell the story and hope you live to see the credits. "Yeah," I said. "You had some of your best thoughts on the islands." Then I said this, without saying that most of his thoughts were ankle deep, "Sure, just me and you on the islands."

He frowns a little, you know. Like, do I squash her now or later? I'm pretty sure something was leaking down my back. How I am Milo's girlfriend or where his real girlfriend went, if she went anywhere, or whether the beings had simply arranged for Milo to imagine I was his girlfriend, I don't know. Anyway, I didn't move.

“You remember how you liked the water?” I said. I like the water too. It was better than cracking heads—particularly my head. “You said the sand coming and going was like an equation.”

Milo said, “Like an answer, if only I knew the question.”

“Sure,” I say. “That’s it. You liked the water. We traveled a lot.” I didn’t mention that he’d put on weight since then and taken to cracking me against walls. Don’t set him off again, you know. Probably mentioning the sand was a bad idea. He didn’t need to be thinking about the chance that a breaker smashing a dune would carry off a grain from the middle—or some other bet which would cost me another body part. Those kinds of bets that had rattled me until I felt like a very loose string of beads. We got back onto the water.

“Yeah, the blue, the cobalt-blue sea,” he said.

“And the salty air, and the fire on shore near Ephesus where we ate calamari and watched the sky bleed into a bruise. You said the sun was still there, like a coin in a bowl you don’t see from the rim until someone pours water into the bowl You remember that?”

“Yeah,” he says. For once, his eyes were not on me. I felt the back of my head. It wasn’t just the sun bleeding into a bruise.

“Just the two of us. We had it all. We traveled far since then, but you were right about the water, huh?”

He went back to staring. I tell you, a stare like that you don’t forget after being smashed up a few hundred times.

“Think about that water,” I said. “What did you call it? Cobalt blue?” I heard somewhere that an octopus will take up residence in anything from a precious amphora to a coffee can. We all have to protect our hides. All I had was a story without an ending. “I mean, the stuff boils and

freezes. Squeeze and cool it some more, it's a liquid again. Stop the North Atlantic current, and you cloak the Earth in ice. Each realm has its own rules. Just like when we were traveling.

Different states, different rules. Remember them looking at your Greek passport in Montana?"

Milo stared at his big feet, his black hair in his eyes. He held his hairy, right fist in his left hand and ground his teeth. He sat on the side of the bed. How much more time I had was anybody's guess. I stuck with the water idea.

"Just you and me on the water. OK? Who knows what's under the surface? Who cares? No white tops. Not even a riffle. Just like a film of polyurethane on a bar counter in Key West. Like you could step out of the boat and walk from Samos to Lesbos—or from Samoa to Los Angeles. It's that firm. Yet you can also dip up a drink. Your rules. Water was your idea. It's still good."

Milo did not look up. He hung his head and slowly twisted his right fist like a pestle in the mortar of his left palm. Not good. Milo always had trust issues. Greeks and Turks or anybody else, for sure, should stay on their own sides of any island, if you ask me.

"OK, what about this?" I said. "There are no re-entries—not at the Cape, not anywhere. Not anytime. I know that. I respect that we can't go back. Maybe you don't see the point of imagining it's just you, me and the bright, blue sea."

He looked up. The rhyme helped, but it wouldn't break his depression, and even Milo having a head cold would leave me with a week-long migraine. So his depression would put me in ICU if I soon didn't get to the point. Or points. Or chunks, maybe.

"So, Milo. Imagine this." I figured giving him a different picture would give me a chance to grow a new head. "We're out on the water in our skiff. Becalmed. Maybe in the Tyrrhenian off Palermo, or maybe over a milky reef near Yucatan. It doesn't matter. Just the two

of us, the boat, blue sky and glittering sea. To your pals in the space station, we look like another chunk of light in a vast mosaic. Over the bow, you look at the water and see the same thing—the tessellation so far away only the glitter reminds you that it’s chunky and not smooth. I can’t take it back. It’s the way it is—just as you said. You were right about the water. If one of those tiny chunks you imagine seeing from the bow is another skiff on another becalmed sea, you could look over the side of that skiff and see some other apparition. Different states, different rules. That’s all I’m saying. We don’t have to hang around here banging our heads into the wall. You could even stand to lose some weight. Let’s move on. I’ll stick with you.”

It wasn’t good to put the idea of banging a head back into Milo’s mind, but I could tell he had spent his urge to slap me around. He reclined on the bed and studied the crummy ceiling. He had the picture. I could relax. Of course, the attraction of abuse is the surprises.

Two hours later, we were looking back at the motel as we pulled offshore. Going off on a freighter was Milo’s idea. I hoped that throwing me overboard was not part of it.

“Good save,” said one of the beings.

I was watching a freighter pull off as I sat on a pylon finishing my sub. I walked down to the beach to get a closer look. A big, bearded guy was staring back at the shoreline. He was alone with his thoughts, but his thoughts were taking another beating. I wondered if he heard voices. The tide swept in to make its additions and deductions. I wondered whether to tell Troy you didn’t need goggles to be someone else.

Another of the beings said, “We’ll let it stand.”

Then all I heard was the hissing tide and high shrieks of the black-capped gulls.

THE END

Your Uncle David.

David

Dear Wanda,

Today is Monday, September 13, 2010. It is 55 degrees this morning. I just came back from QuikMart, where I bought a Times. Saw Will Chambers. You remember how he teased you when we would come back from work at Mackie's Hardware in his old Cutlass. Says he had bypass surgery three months ago. Last time I saw him was June 8, 2008 at church. He was there with his wife because she needed a driver that last year. Twelve stitches she said she had on her hip after the last fall. I cut out her obituary two weeks later. Then after church I walked to the Coop for oranges. You should eat more oranges. I weighed 156 pounds today. They protect against cancer like Will has now even though he and I are almost the same age, him coming to seventy in a month and me in two days. My forty-fourth birthday was on Saturday, September 15, 1984. Clare took me to Stromboli's. Bow-tie pasta she bought me because of my bow-tie. I

never had any before. It isn't good for you, so I haven't had any since then. Clare gave me a new journal and a gold pen. I use the pen to write my journals. Clare would have been eighty-three today. We went to see a movie at the Odeon. I had to leave before it was over. The shooting made me sick on the seat. Clare drove me back home. After I bought the Times, I walked to Willow Green and pulled up the dandelions around her stone. Some of the headstones had been tipped over. I told Myron Turner at the gatehouse. He said, Mr. Wells, I know about it and the property crew will get to it. You don't have to do anything. He was playing cards on a computer. I'm having an egg sandwich for lunch. I put the dandelion greens into the salad, the way Mama did. Then I will go to the Community Center. Today we pack boxes for the rehab center. Your uncle David.

Wanda

As I see how we live, this comes to me repeatedly: *We take on more than we can handle*. Humorous, pathetic, noble, frustrating, infuriating. *We take on more than we can handle*. Too many lawn ornaments—lined up outside along the picture window; in the yard three spools of garden hose, toppled gnomes, rocks of all sizes piled around an empty waterfall and nonexistent rock garden, trellis lying on a bag of lime, pots of dead flowers, ladders, rakes, a collection of Colonial lanterns—why I don't know—two pails of hardened asphalt. Yager calls about it every week. Her car with a pumpkin in the back window, Kirsten is running behind yoked malamutes, leaving the yard and car behind. And everywhere, chipped shutters, flakes of bondo, piles of leaves, milk jugs, catfood cans, brown and green beer bottles, wads of paper, plastic cups, and swirls of little bits of Styrofoam. *We take on more than we can handle*. Kirsten talks on her phone while being yanked down the street by the dogs. She's dog-sitting for Joni, who's giving herself the break she needs after pushing out the next release of ZymoStar on time. Joni and her low life need to work things out she said. So Kirsten won't clean up our yard for another weekend. Kirsten wants someone to know about all of this, even if it's only Maya, who pretends to work the phones while she's listening to Joni. I'm sure that's what's going on because I know Maya. So you see what I mean. *Everyone takes on more than she can handle*. Kirsten's walking

dogs to have enough to live on after paying rent and tuition. We're both taking Health and Nutrition. She wants to qualify as a counselor at a compounding pharmacy. To me, it's a waste. But the real waste is that meditation course.

Hickam

“Ignatius’s method was to bring imagination to scripture. Add color. Make the scene and characters familiar to you. Enter the story. Take a role—a main character or a minor character. Live in the story. Wait for Christ to ask you a question. For example, take the story of the calling of the disciples. The Zebedee brothers are working in their father’s fishing business. Jesus appears and says, “Follow me and I will make you become fishers of men.” They drop everything and go with him. Not many of us are fishermen. Suppose we set the scene in a mall. Maybe you and your brother are working in your father’s bakery. You’re rolling dough, your arms dusted white, a yeasty smell in your nostrils. Bright lights behind the glass counter display all sorts of truffles, cakes, quiches. Customers are milling around in front of the case trying to decide what to buy. A dark-eyed man who seems familiar shows no interest in the pastries, but stares straight at you. What does he say?”

Wanda

How am I supposed to know what he says? Professor Hickam was the one making up the story and the crazy assignments. I don’t appreciate being put on the spot. What a waste of time. Anyway, Kirsten finally unloaded the dogs. All weekend they scratched the wall and howled and I turned on the bathroom fan to block it out. When she will tend to the front yard is a guess, but I’m not going to clean up this time. Sharing the rent doesn’t mean she skips everything else. Jamie came by. Same old same old. Like I don’t know what he’s been doing with Maya. We both laugh about him. Features himself a mean dude—with his dirty black shirt and skinny ponytail. *Deep breaths!* As if inhaling through my nose is going to make sense of being fat or losing my job because ZymoStar is changing its image. Why didn’t they just say they didn’t want a swollen receptionist greeting their yeast-sucking groupies? I haven’t stopped eating since Sharon moved in with me and Junior after we lost Mom. Only me to blame. Anything she’d

whip us for we had to do. Dad just sat it out. *He had more than he could handle.* Dad might give me something if Sharon let him but she has her eye on another cruise. So here I am sitting in this pew looking at the bumpy glass of jigsaw people, waiting for a needle of blue light from one of those windows to strike my third eye. Maybe I should cross my other two.

David

Dear Wanda,

Today is Monday, October 4, 2010. It was 42 degrees this morning. I went to Mass and then to QuikMart, where I bought a Times and some oranges. Mrs. Murphy read the lesson. Her mother taught third grade to Clare and then to me at Brooks. Her daughter has leukemia. I saw the collection can with her picture on it in the QuikMart on Thursday, March 12, 2009. When I left the store Jimmy Duncan who still lives in the neighborhood came up to ask me to move his mother's bed and dresser downstairs. She has no feet. Jimmy moved out when she died on Wednesday, May 6, 2009. Two oranges were bad. Mackie's Hardware is closing. I walked there for forty years and two months. On my last day on Thursday, April 7, 2005, I finished shelving the fasteners in the new display cabinet. Mr. Mackie said it looked super. On Tuesday, April 7, 2009 I asked Richard why Susan Murphy's collection can was no longer on the counter beside his cash register. He had never seen it. The Community Center is having a canned food drive. After I finished packing the cans I went to the Coop for collard greens, Romaine lettuce, goat butter, and some better oranges. I saw a man talking to his ear trip over the triplets in a stroller across the detergent aisle. When I got home, there was a letter from your father. He sends me twenty dollars a month. Clare sent me two hundred dollars twice a month. She always wrote long letters. I didn't hear from anyone last week. The Coop only had Iceberg, so I bought kale to put in my soup. I weighed 154 pounds today. It's time to hear the six o'clock news. Your uncle
David

Hickam

Before we stop, let me share what some of you noticed.

One student writes: *"I just feel so restless sitting here without anything to do. Nothing to*

eat, my phone in the car—”

You see how this is like the sensory deprivation protocol we talked about yesterday?

Another says, *“I did okay until I realized that for maybe five minutes I had been thinking about my desk at ZymoStar.”*

Fidgets of the monkey mind were well known to Gautama and Meister Eckhart. Try for more than two minutes to attend to the quiet background of everyday life and the screaming monkey drapes all the trees in toilet paper.

Here’s a last one for today: *“So I wait for the blue light to mean something, but it can’t mean anything. So I let my eyes lift the spaces between those jigsaw saints and the bumpy glass rises around them and it’s like looking down from the bridge on my uncle rowing Mama through the red dirt channel left in the river bed, dry-cracked and stuck full of rocks like teeth. Then I look up at the bumpy sky, like bruises after a whipping.”*

What I like is the use of a visual ground or anchor. But how hard it is to escort those associations off the premises! I have the same problem with using a mantra for an anchor. I begin to think about the pitch of the tone. In no time, the monkey mind has me humming a tune! Keep on with your logs. Have a good weekend.

David

Dear Wanda,

Today is Monday, November 8, 2010. It was 25 degrees this morning. Most of the ice has melted. This afternoon I went to Mackie’s and saw two forklifts inside. Clare showed me the notice in the *Times* on Monday, February 8, 1965, and drove me to the main store on Burkitt Avenue. Mr. Waterman did the hiring until he died shoveling snow outside the store on Thursday, December 6, 1984. It was two days before the accident took Mama and Clare at Burkitt and Ninth. “No problem, Mr. Wells,” he said. Both stores needed stock-men so I got to stay in the neighborhood. Richard isn’t working at the QuikMart now. I don’t know where he went. I bought a *Times* and some unsalted raw almonds. The lady in front of me didn’t buy a

candy bar when I told her how bad it was. Oranges are good. Today I weighed 157 pounds. I didn't have time to go to the Coop because I was signed up for the food pantry at the community center. I didn't get home to write this letter until 6:30. I missed hearing the news. Your uncle David.

Wanda

Giving Jamie the money was how I got rid of him. *One less thing to handle.* Well worth it. Classes cancelled because of the snow. *It covers everything without handling anything.* Sharon says it would be easier for everyone because it takes the worry out of it for all of us. As if she worried about Uncle David. Clare's trust fund for him—*that* she worries about. Kirsten picked a fine time to leave. Nobody looks for a rental in December. Without overtime at the checkout I would be on the street. So much for either of us finishing next semester. Kirsten let everything pile until all she could do was go back to mommy. Dad sits it out as usual—waiting to see what others will do. Sharon doesn't even use the palace he built for her. Their dining room table is hidden under all the bobble-heads, parrots, leis, and crockery from cruises. Tonight they leave for St. Croix. "*We just have to get some relief from the winter,*" she says.

Hickam

Now we come to the point of these practices. Some of the mystics would say that coming to the point is our problem, but I accept the fact that some of you—maybe many of you—took this course for easy credits. Here's a *koan* for you: *How many credits are required for the new life?*

No answer, of course. Whatever the new life may be, it will be *your* life and it will require practice. You now have a smorgasbord of meditative practices. Select one which suits you. What comes of it depends on you—maybe revelations or visions. More likely, it will be greater attentiveness. Maybe you will walk to work because you want to feel your body moving, look for the common spirit in the eyes of others, and fully occupy the place you live. Maybe you

learn to escort distractions from the quiet center of your life—whether they come from outside or inside.

Or maybe you sell my book to the next sucker, plug in your ear buds, and welcome back the monkey mind. Your choice. *Namaste.*

Wanda

Hickam is so full of it. I pay attention all right. Where has it gotten me? Jamie calls me at midnight saying I need to send him more money because the band broke up. And now I'm the one to pick up Kirsten's gnomes and flower pots or pay Yager to hire someone else—as if I don't pay him enough already. But at least I'll have the money since ZymoStar figures that even the fat lady is better than two flakes who can't fit regular work into their social calendars. I couldn't believe they even offered me a raise. Anyway, it was time for Dad to hear it from someone. They spend all their time at the smorgasbord or looking over the rail at dolphin acts and some guy forced to take off his Bluetooth so he'll look authentic in a feathered headdress. Dad needed to see a picture of himself in his own habitat. I don't care what Sharon thinks.

Dear Wanda,

Today is Monday, April 4, 2011. It was 65 degrees this morning. Raymond the new cashier at QuikMart told me his parents in Michigan were still snowbound. I bought the Times and some almonds and walked to Mackie's. It's a shoe store now. When your dad came he said I should buy new shoes. The shoe store still has the same crown molding around the ceilings. Your dad sent more than I need for shoes. I couldn't find any good greens at the Coop so I bought some carrots and a soup bone to make some broth like Mama's. Clare showed me how to soak the beans when Mama had to leave us at home one weekend for Eastern Star meetings downtown. Soup is always good. I weigh 158 pounds today. Your uncle David.

THE END

Hidden Moves and Hidden Faces

A Richmond Story

Crawley told me about such messages and how anything that grows is like part of a signal rippling through the generations—a signal compounded of multiple messages like these frameshifts, with each individual a different reading. The readings occur at all levels—what he called “scale invariance”—and one can pick up the reading at any point, which is why I say, “Begin anywhere.”

—Tom Farley, *Frameshifts, Part Three*

It should not be hard for you to stop sometimes and look into the stains of walls or ashes of a fire, or clouds, or mud or like places in which, if you consider them well, you may find really marvelous ideas. The mind of the painter is stimulated to new discoveries, the compositions of landscapes and various monstrous things, such as devils and similar things, which may bring you honor, because by indistinct things the mind is stimulated to new inventions

—Leonardo Da Vinci, *The Notebooks*

I knew about Giacomo L. Fiori all along. Knew him in school. We were in Father Berman's classes with Harry Pettiford, Lester Stihl, and that bully, Mingo—like Than, whom I'll tell you about later. Some called Jack a prig. He was better than that. He genuinely wanted to be a priest like Father Berman. Nothing was faked. I once asked him how he knew God existed. He said God spoke in his mind. An undeniable assertion, it seems to me. Thirty years he tried to be a priest. I say "tried" because the collar never fit. As Lenten ashes followed angels and shepherds and the years became decades, the collar grew tighter, the explanations less adequate. Why do the wicked prosper? Why do the innocent perish? That sort of thing. Surd evils are always going to be a problem if you keep asking *why*? They can't be rationalized.

Jack never changed from minister to administrator. Explanations of human actions always come up short, just as a quark seems incompatible with Jack's old aunt, Brenda Lockhart, who always said he would some day need to be rescued. Using Jack's old aunt to explain quarks or the god in Jack's mind to explain the one in Than's mind—or using spiritual agencies to explain human actions can occupy as much of your life as collecting Meissen gravy boats, making dolls from buttons, or playing contract bridge, as Aunt Brenda did.

But then you step away from your preoccupation and see what you've been up to for more than half your life—always making one thing into another to keep your heart from giving up on you. As I said, Jack never became an administrator. He wore his heart on his sleeve—and never had anything *up* his sleeve as far as I could tell. Forget sleeves. The man never had a clue. He was so open to the pain of others that he simply vanished like the Snark's Baker. He vanished for good after the diocese sent him to Ybor City.

Supposedly it was to be a sabbatical, but Monsignor meant for Jack to recover—not to return half-dry like some of his alcoholic priests. Jack wasn't an alcoholic, but he might as well have been. Monsignor directed the priest at Our Lady of Perpetual Help that Jack should have no responsibilities. All of the signs were evident—distraction and physical exhaustion; coming late to appointments, reconciliations, and Masses; parents concerned about Jack's statements on alumni chapter day at the parish school, retirees angry about getting less attention than the homeless mothers whom Jack had allowed to overstay their welcome in the senior center, and long, weekly conversations with the self-important deacon at St. Margaret's.

Jack was losing his vocation.

Monsignor could have sent him for psych evaluation; so Jack was relieved to be sent to

Ybor City. In his own way, maybe Jack believed that release time would work a wonder. But Ybor City did a different kind of work on Jack.

* * *

A week after arriving at Tampa International Airport, Jack sat alone after evening Mass in the front of the sanctuary, his rosary beads across his knees. A young woman genuflected and sat on the same bench. When he nodded, she moved closer. He fingered the beads to seem busy. She had not lowered the kneeler. She stared at him until he looked up.

“Father, may we talk?” Her eyes told him everything. Always the same searching look, wondering why a priest should know but hoping he would. And of course, he did know. He had known when she genuflected. The script was to be one of the many sad, insufficient dialogues—making one thing into another—dialogues he was trying to forget. But her story began differently.

“I can’t take care of him any more,” she said, glancing behind her.

Jack turned around. A young couple stood in the lobby reading parish announcements.

“My brother, I mean—my brother Nathan. I can’t take care of him now that I’m pregnant. And he mustn’t know. My younger sister and her friend want me to come back with them to Richmond. Father said tonight that you are visiting from Richmond?”

Jack nodded. Father Silva could have kept that to himself.

“They don’t know I’m pregnant—or what I want to do about it—what I need to do because of Mama.”

No use for Jack to tell her that he wasn’t on duty or that it was because of playing this role so unsatisfactorily so many times that he *needed* to be off duty; that he had no authority to explain away whatever she had done.

Instead, he asked, “What do you think you should do?”

“Father, I always stayed a Catholic in my heart—even when Than became a Mover and got us involved. It was what he wanted. Mama always knew he was special and took care of him so that he could be all he was meant to be, even if others didn’t understand. When she passed, I did the same. But I don’t want my sister to take care of him. She should go back to Richmond and do her art. I can take care of him if I don’t have a baby. And he mustn’t know about the

baby.”

Sweat streamed down her neck. Her breaths were rapid and shallow.

Jack laid the beads between them. He wanted to find the shortest phrase—like a small tab to flick over and end this, to file it away with more than thirty years of other failed encounters. Don’t say too much. Too many words, probing for a rational account from this woman, would quickly become like pushing the inflamed gut back into some writhing animal.

“Do you want to give the baby for adoption?”

“No!” She shouted. “I can’t. I mustn’t! Than must not know. He has to stay on with the Movers. He’s set up now. He’s in a good place. He can’t go back to how he was. I have to take care of him. And the Movers need him.”

As she spoke, she wiped her hands on her knees and pushed her hair back. She couldn’t keep the baby or let it be adopted or let anyone know about it.

Jack tried a dodge.

“Do you want to talk to a sister about it?”

She shook her head. “I talked to the priest and sisters at the other church. They said over and over that abortion was murder. I tried to explain but it didn’t matter, Father!”

So much for the dodge. Jack’s role was unavoidable, but instead of playing it, he asked, “What do you need to explain? Is it that you must take care of your brother because he’s doing well now and you don’t want him to fall back?”

She nodded slightly.

Perhaps her brother’s delicate condition was alcoholism. The family orbited his condition, daily decisions slaved to his perturbations in an erratic path. The mother had transferred his care to his hapless sister.

She whispered inaudibly, burying her head in her lap, sobbing and coughing.

Jack laid his hand on her head.

She slowly sat up.

He gave her a handkerchief.

“Thank you, Father.”

Jack paused and then, reluctantly, asked, “What did you whisper?”

She stretched the handkerchief like a cord. Staring at the floor, she said, “It’s Than’s baby.”

Her eyes widened as she saw Jack's face and how he gnawed his knuckle.

Another of the Simple People, he thought. Give them a button, a pill, a label, a fix, a law, a penance. Make one thing into another. Send them on their way. Call it a cure, an absolution, a new life, a slogan, a judgment. All according to the script—the procedures that claim to know so much about the unknowable.

Give the same fix to everyone.

Except everyone is different. *Legion* is the name of every one of us. Most of what we are is hidden even from ourselves. Everyone is a different case, a different set of variables, a different criss-cross of forces, genii, and demons. Each must be addressed in his own way, not smoothed down into some nominal, normal, numb standard being—some statistical soul requiring the right medicine, ritual, implanted idea, or wants reengineered to make one more acceptable, malleable and obedient. Each has his own erratic, monstrous path.

Jack put the beads into his pocket.

“Young lady, you already know about the Church's rules, but I'm only another human being, not the Church. You must do right by yourself. Your brother's problems and your mother's promises—sordid as they are—do not belong to you. You must protect yourself.”

As she walked backed down the nave, Jack seemed to see her helplessly hurtling around a turn, a desperate little turn she'd tried to make, before sinking back into the path of the monstrous pattern so familiar to her. She shook her head as she rejoined the couple in the lobby. The three of them stared back at Jack, standing in the middle of the church: a tiny man in a black suit.

Four weeks later, Jack was watching television in the rectory as he ate dinner. A screaming crowd milled around the storefronts on Seventh Street. Smoke poured from a doorway crossed by yellow tapes. A twenty-year-old man with a wiry pony tail and the letters “MM” on his tee-shirt waved his fist at the camera.

Jack was already accustomed to the way Ybor City dozed in the sun from Sunday to Wednesday, chickens strolling the streets and tourists watching the cigar roller in his shop window. Thursday to Saturday nights, however, the city came alive in screams, laughter, crowds of young drinkers staggering from club to club, and the sweet smell of hash. Jack would

sometimes sit in Centennial Park after dinner until sunset—but not on Thursday through Saturday.

The picture of a young woman appeared on-screen above the snail-scroll of market gains and losses. Her name was Angela Spadini. She had been found dead of smoke inhalation in the storefront clinic after the firebombing. It was the same woman who had talked with him a month earlier.

Within the hour, Jack stood at the blackened doorway of the tiny clinic on Seventh Street. Yellow crime-scene tape marked off the entire corner. Slips of red and purple paper were scattered on the sidewalk. He put down his suitcase to pick one up.

MOVE OUT OF YOUR MIND.
THERE ARE ALWAYS OTHER OPTIONS.
A message from The Movers.

Ybor City had done its work. Thanks to Monsignor and, later in the year, to an inheritance from his aunt, who said he was at least as much worth rescuing as the feral cats with which he shared her estate, Father Fiori simply dissolved.

Several years later, however, he had to reassemble himself after unexpectedly meeting June Pettiford at Ellwood's grocery in Richmond.

* * *

But first you have to know about Leonard.

Worship, prayer and service, Leonard says, are the only devotions, while serving another slice of stuffed crust pizza double cheese everything on it. Some sing psalms. Others, like Leonard, palm off the mystical in various forms of confusion. Leonard interrupts my lunch to invite me to another meeting. He always comes around the corner when he sees me. It's like a pizza comes with a side order of Leonard Plotz. Thank you, I say, to make him go away. He sits down. He says he knows that spiritual life matters to me. My Shiva song and dance man stepping on the head of ignorance caught his eye once on a delivery to my apartment. What matters to me is *understanding*, I say. I don't want to hear another sermon by Brother Bledsoe. Leonard

shakes his head vigorously, calling me “Brendan,” for some wandering saint. “Brent,” I remind him.

“Brother Bledsoe has moved on, just like your patron saint. Just like you, Brendan.” Leonard pulls on his long nose to make the point. “One Sunday he was telling the congregation how to live through the dry periods of the spiritual life and the following Sunday a deacon came out of the sacristy to tell us that all he knew was the brother had driven south. Even Tina Bledsoe didn’t know where.”

Leonard lifts a black bag onto his lap and pulls out a small leather band about nine centimeters in diameter. What’s that? I ask. He says it’s an amulet. Leonard has moved from Brother Bledsoe to selling amulets. The amulets also come from the Movers, he says. Who are they, I say, although I already know. The Mental Load Movers, he says. They show you how to do the heavy lifting in your life—to get clear of the problems that afflict us. I’m not afflicted by problems, I remind him. He knew I’d heard this before, but Leonard reaches into the bag again.

He pulls out a certificate with a gold sticker at the top, like the awards piano teachers put on the music of their five year-old students. This is my *Triptik*, he says. It shows that he’s in training to become a qualified Mover. That’s a good job for you, Leonard, I say, but you should protect your back. He says it’s not that kind of lifting, that they lift mental loads. Then he shows me his personal manifest, which is written on the back of a free pizza coupon.

- 1. Help Sandra deal with her brother while he’s here to check on the Richmond MM chapter.**
- 2. Do something about Sandra’s two labs, which gnawed off the landlord’s chair rails around the dining room and then gouged the back of the basement door when they were confined.**
- 3. Convince Sandra to sell some of her paintings to pay off her debts.**

Unlike his pierced and hirsute co-workers, Leonard was clean shaven and remarkably bland, with curly hair and a smile like Donny Osmond’s. If all his energy had gone into a list to find a better job than pizza sales he might have run a restaurant chain within a couple years, but any suggestion of self advancement seemed to make him suddenly listless. Only matters of the psyche and religion excited him; therefore, I asked him why Sandra wouldn’t sell her paintings if she had so many debts.

“She doesn’t want to lose their Qi,” he said. “You know—the vital energy caught in her

paintings from her twin sister. She says she can't release them until she understands them."

Leonard says that he made Sandra wear an amulet on her wrist and showed her how to use it to move out of her mind, but she took it off and went back to her rosary, lighting candles for her sister, and waking up in a sweat with images stuck in her mind that she had to paint at once. She even took her dream to a fortune-teller—always the same dream.

Wherever Sandra looked there were bodies. She didn't know any of the people. They wouldn't have cared about her. A few of them saw her come into the stadium before they also passed out, one on the field and two in the stands, where a yellow haze hung over the lowest rows of seats. Some of the fans had painted their faces, the blobs of red and purple scattered like petals over the bleachers, aisles, and infield.

Whatever Sandra was or had become in the dream, she knew she didn't care about the piles of bodies—the deep piles in the exits, the shapes splayed on the chain link fence like newspaper pages snapped up by the wind. Like the few others awake among the twenty-five hundred fans at the Diamond, Sandra found her way around the piles, stepped on heads and shoulders to scale the gate, and climbed down to the street. By the time Leonard and the rest of the crowd began to wake up, she was back in her apartment over Jewel's.

The MM rally and concert she'd attended with Leonard at the Diamond had been too crowded, but nothing like the dream. Whenever Madame Almah encouraged her to think about the concert dream, Sandra would have a sharp pain in her right nostril, as if the fine needle of a cactus had been delicately inserted into her frontal sinus. Coming out of the stadium restroom, she had immediately noticed the smell—a fuzzy, acrid odor, like being too close to the deacon's thurible in the cathedral, but sharper. She had returned to the restroom and waited for the odor to go away.

She blamed Leonard. He had convinced her to go. He told her that she must get out of her apartment to forget Ybor City and get on with her life. She must move out of her old mind. But now she was caught in the stadium without his help or anyone's help. She had to get out on her own.

When she awoke, she always had to paint. Sometimes she would take her paintings to Madame Almah for a reading.

Leonard told me about another reading, when Sandra told how the dream ended.

She ran from the stadium to the train station to pick up her brother. She saw her art

professor taking props from a truck and offered to help her. As she handed Sandra an easel, the professor became an angry bald man giving orders to put gold-knobbed walking sticks into a line. All of the knobs bore her brother's face. The bald man ran out of canes and commanded her to find more. Sandra paused to make sure that Almah was still listening.

“Go on,” Almah said.

“At that moment, I hear the train. My labs are barking. But my brother has become a bar-coded ticket, like tags in a dress shop.”

She stopped again, Leonard says, and Madame Almah tells her that the substitution of a ticket for her brother is a kind of thing that often happens in dreams and she should reflect not so much on what it means as on how she feels about it. She asks to see her latest paintings so that she can sense the aura and choose the right crystal to give Sandra another reading.

One afternoon, several weeks after hearing this story from Leonard, I walked to the Fan near the campus of VCU to see Madame Jewel's establishment, a rundown storefront with apartments in back and above the sign, CRYSTAL READINGS. I almost crossed the street for a closer look until I saw Harry Pettiford walking a black terrier along the curb. He'd lost weight, but he was still wide and tall enough to block the shop doorway. He stared into the window for three or four minutes before walking on, staring at his feet. Only after Fiori had spent the weekend at Sandbridge for the last time with Harry and the others did I understand why Harry had rocked on his heels as he looked in the window and disregarded the leash, taut at a sixty degree angle.

After the death at Sandbridge that weekend, Jack again tried to dissolve. If he had paid attention to omens, Jack would never have gone. Omens were like annoying phone calls from telemarketers or pop-ups blocking an email message. Omens had to be ignored. He had to correct his thoughts. Therefore, before that weekend, he purposely disregarded inner voices, signs, intuitions and the divine messages secreted continually along the rutted tracts of a mind routinely attentive to such ephemera. Afterwards, he dissolved.

A driver next to Jack in the station's parking lot waited while he opened the trunk and began to redistribute its contents, still undisturbed after his last trip to the shore. Jack didn't ask her to wait. He didn't expect her to notice him and resented it. Sometimes we just want others to

go about their business, pass us by, and keep us in their backgrounds. This is particularly so when we are unsure of what to do next. Just as we are taking our own counsel, trying to rediscover something about ourselves, they intrude—however kind their intentions—by adding to the variables in a calculation already perplexing enough to bring us to a stop. We don't know what to do with our time. And being observed makes us pretend to act as if we do—or else, insulted like young Achilles, to sulk or burn ourselves up for glory.

She finally drove off.

Jack couldn't find the club to lock the steering wheel. In fact, the train station parking lot was patrolled, so he didn't need it anyway. A pack of cards fell from his bag—cribbage. Probably June and Harry wouldn't want to play this time.

Ready or not, he couldn't think of anything else to do, so he went to the station and dutifully waited an hour early for the train because he hadn't been able to grant himself a better way to waste time.

Later that afternoon, Harry and June picked up Jack at the McDonald's near the inlet in Fintail on their way to the timeshare. Another couple was in the van.

Lowering a small Boston terrier to the ground as if it were a crystal bowl, Harry got out on the passenger side to help Jack with his bag.

"Peace, Jack. Hope you don't mind the crowd," Harry said. "June invited my daughter, Nina, and her friend, George. You know Scrunch."

June popped the trunk so that Harry could squeeze Jack's bag between two sacks of dry dog food.

Crookedly tipping on three legs, Scrunch tugged the leash as Harry closed the trunk and took Jack's elbow. "Hang on," he said. They followed Scrunch across the lot to a collapsed dock on the reedy inlet of a marsh, where he sniffed the layers of dead barnacles clinging to a post like the gray shreds of old posters on the telephone poles Jack saw on his walks around the VCU campus in Richmond.

"Jack, I know that as a priest you've seen everything, but I want to tell you about my daughter and me. June believes she can mend fences by inviting Nina on this trip. It's not going to happen. I'm sorry you're involved. It's too late to fix things with Nina. I'm at the time of life when more hairs sprout from my nose and ears than from my head. And Nina—well, you'll see her. And then there's George. We didn't know about him until the two of them came down from

her apartment. She says he's a musician. Anyway, you've got your own rooms at Sandbridge to get away from our craziness, so don't feel that you should visit with us as usual. It's likely to be awkward and unpleasant at best."

Harry studied the spots on the back of his hand and then stared down the track where Jack's train had disappeared behind a water tower.

Jack had almost to stand on his toes to put his arm around Harry's shoulder. "It's all right, chum. You've got June and me on your side."

Harry shook his head, pulled on the leash and turned back to the van. "Well, Scrunch, let's get this over with." Harry climbed into the back, squeezing himself and Scrunch around the middle seat, where a young man with wooly red hair sat beside a woman with a half-purple neck. Jack sat in the front, nodded at the couple, and quickly turned around.

June squeezed his arm. Her broad smile and dimples hadn't changed, but her gray-blond hair was cut short in a Louise Brooks style. Her hands and neck were thinner than he remembered, the bones of her hands like thin stalks fanning out under a nut-brown fabric.

"Here is the man who married us," she said.

"I only did the right thing, June."

"A rite you didn't have to perform. And then we lost track of you until we ran into each other at the grocery." She glanced back at George and Nina. "Father Fiori married us in a civil ceremony. After Harry's Aunt Celeste died, we wanted to marry before leaving Holburn. My ex couldn't accept the idea of an annulment. It took the church hierarchy another three years to make the decree."

The girl with the purple neck twisted in her seat. "Why couldn't *he* accept the idea, June?"

June's face tightened. "Because Jim Brightman could deny anything that didn't fit *his* picture. Some people get hung up on the pictures they think they see in everything."

No one spoke after that.

Several hours after he had unpacked, had dinner, and watched the sky go from pink to amber over the marsh flats, Jack came down from his apartment for the usual toast to sunset. He brought the cards and cribbage board, even though it seemed unlikely that they would follow the pattern.

Already wearing his beach clothes and sandals, Harry sat on the deck nursing Chianti while George showed June a CD in the living room. Nina let Jack in. She wore striped shorts and a tank top, her midriff half-wrapped in a reproduction of Renoir's *Girl With A Watering Can* and edged by foliage rising and falling from it in a purplish green mat of tangles that seemed to float above her skin. Not only was the right side of her neck purple in tattoos, but the entire right side of her body was cloaked in a purplish green mat with glowing stones and almond eyes in the leafy darkness. Her face and left side were unmarked, an emblem to Jack of humans' two-fold nature—background and foreground.

Nina didn't speak to him. She sank next to George on the couch as June loaded the CD.

A piano hesitantly lifted a tendril of sound to the right and left, groping or carefully finding its way through some resistant medium, a low, insistent turbulence becoming louder and more demanding, forcing the hesitating steps above it, against their will, to become more resolute. Such a force—Jack thought, as he listened to the unremitting static of the churning bass voices growling under the treble footsteps—such a force would compel fear itself to step out.

Jack stepped onto the deck, slid the patio door shut behind him and laid the cribbage board on the table next to a dish of corn chips.

Harry's eyebrows rose. "Thanks, Jack. I've heard enough of that."

"Sounds like Liszt."

"Peg two! George's specialty, it seems."

Harry tipped his glass for the last drop, set it down, and examined the cribbage board. "Unfortunately, he brought half a dozen recordings of his concerts." Harry shook his head and handed Jack a glass. "I should be glad he's not a rock singer."

Something bumped the glass door.

Jack slid the door open for Scrunch to hop over the threshold, dragging one foot.

"Another escapee," Harry said. "Scrunch and I are both limping to the finish line. He's almost lost control of his hind legs and I'm losing control of a galloping heart." Harry glanced at Jack, who showed concern as he did in school, by widening his eyes and bringing the knuckle of his right thumb to his lips as if steadying his hand to shoot a cats-eye out of the circle.

"Don't worry, Jack. I'm on meds." Harry's beefy frame was gaunt, his eyes cloudy, and his legs densely spotted with reddish-tan blotches. He picked up Scrunch. "We keep our appointment every day with old Maury on Monument Avenue. That's where I walk Scrunch. We

take a turn around the monument three or four times a day. Bea gave me Scrunch after my angioplasty. She looked at his black and white suit and said he was my curate to see that I did my daily office. But we leave out prime and compline. Old Maury has to sit alone with his stingray, the cow looking over his left shoulder, and the Amazon basin over his head. Like most of us, he should have stuck to what he was good at—making maps, in his case—rather than claiming the Amazon as a new slave dominion for the defeated South. You remember Father Berman telling us about Rome’s chattel economy? Old Maury has a lot to think about these days.”

Harry held a corn curl above Scrunch. The dog cocked his head. His protuberant eyes fixed on the falling chip. On hind legs, stretching his neck and jingling the collar tags, he snapped it midair.

“Tell about your travels, Jack.”

Jack poured the pegs from the hole in the end of the cribbage board and began to put them in place. “Since I retired and left Holburn when Aunt Brenda passed away, I haven’t done as much traveling as I once did. At our age, you realize that travel is only a way to spin yourself into feeling that time is still insistent. Better to come home and make a daily pilgrimage in a familiar place, as you do in your walks.”

He inserted the last peg, making a line down the board.

Harry frowned at the board. “But you’ve taken those other pilgrimages—the ones Father Berman told us about—to Delphi, Sinai, the foothills of Ararat, Izmir, and Carnac in Brittany.”

“Yes, yes,” Jack said, leaning forward in his chair as the marsh took on a beige-purple hue. “The Shrines in Summer Tour. I’m sorry that you and Bea could never come.”

In the fading light, as Jack smiled, his small dark teeth and the bright whites of his eyes with tiny black pupils completed Harry’s impression of a leprechaun perched to leap into the reeds and saltgrass.

Jack raised his right hand to his chin, his tongue in the corner of his mouth and his right thumb again cocked as if he were aiming a marble. “I confess,” he said, “that not all the sites I visited were holy shrines. You mention Carnac. The giant stones stood in lines like these cribbage pegs. Not tilted onto a leader-stone like other megaliths or buried in circles as in Urfa, the stones at Carnac reminded me of a cribbage board—like any life-journey with long stretches, sudden turns, and the slow job of pegging in every day to account for everything. Yet so much is daily buried away that we can never uncover.”

They could not see the sunset from Harry's deck—only a smeared streak of orange-gold like a bit of shine rubbed into the bottom of an old copper pot, the scattered marsh ponds burnished by it.

A light came on in the living room. Harry turned around part way, letting Scrunch jump down.

"Looks like they're still listening to that piano music," he said. "Nina has graduate degrees in art and psychology. You know what she's done with them?"

Jack shook his head.

"She reads crystal balls. Calls herself 'Madame Almah Jewell' because 'Almah' means 'wise' in some language and the crystal ball is a jewel."

Harry stuck his index finger in the neck of the Chianti bottle to lift it to his lap. "Want more?"

"None for me. Thanks," Jack inhaled sharply.

June was frowning at Harry as she walked to the deck. She opened the patio door as Harry emptied the bottle into his glass.

"Thanks, Harry," she said, taking the glass. "Nina and George want to play cribbage." She finished the wine. "While you four play, I will go the store before it closes."

Harry rolled his eyes and stood. "Come on, Jack. There's no appeal. You too, Scrunch. Harry went out to the parking lot with June, leaving Jack, Nina, and George waiting at the card table. Nina fingered a round glass pendant which hung from her neck on a gold chain. Her right hand was purple and green to the finger tips, covered in tiny curling figures. On the back of her hand was a small, black and white matrix bar code.

George opened the deck and began laying cards face up. Nina frowned and touched his arm.

"Don't do that, George. It brings bad energy."

George smiled and held up a five of spades. "I suppose this means something."

She crossed her arms. "Yes. It could mean something about a sad, depressed person—someone we don't want to meet. Put it away, George. Please!"

George put down the deck. "We don't want to summon evil, do we, Father?"

"Just call me 'Jack.' I'm sure your music drove off any evil influences tonight. Wasn't it *St. Francis Walking on Water*?"

George smiled broadly, his sandy freckles crowding around his nose. “Saint Francis de Paule. You know the work?”

“I once looked across the Strait of Messina to Sicily, where he walked over the whirlpool of Charybdis, and visited some of the shrines of the Minim Friars in Calabria.”

“Most people don’t know about the piece,” George said.

“George has just recorded two CDs called *The Abbé*, Nina said.

“Liszt’s meditative works,” George said, raising his large, bony hands from the table. “Like *St. Francis Preaching to the Birds*.”

“You can hear the birds—” Nina said.

“So many people think of Liszt only as a showman—the inventor of the one-man act, and so on.” George threw his arms up.

Jack pushed back, scooting the card table toward Nina, who dropped her pendant.

George seemed to hold an invisible object over the table, squeezing it between his hands and staring into it. “So many of us need access to mysteries, the deeper parts of life—where religion once reached. Now we our separated from ourselves, from . . .”

“From our souls?” Jack said.

George nodded. Slowly, he brought his hands back to the table as if releasing the invisible object. “Yes, our souls. But priests don’t see it that way, do they? Aquinas said the soul and body make a composite.”

Jack nodded. “One gives life, the other supplies the material for action in the world. But maybe we’re closer to primes than composites. The wonder is not in mystery; it is that we know anything at all.”

“Least of all about our shadows,” Nina said.

“Dr. Jung’s ideas,” Jack nodded, pointing to a Jack of Hearts. “Like trees with roots in reality and heads in the clouds, or like this card with two images, one upside-down, we cannot live in the world without wondering about the accidents and evil in it, especially when evil comes from some upside-down part of ourselves which we can’t see properly.”

“As if it were submerged!” George nodded vigorously, his hair falling into his eyes. As he raised his hands again, Jack tucked in his chin. “Religious rituals once connected us to that submerged energy. Accepted myths like the stories about Samaritan, Krishna, Noah, Jonah—or even our national myths—once engaged and directed us, but now—“

Nina laughed. “Look at the two of you! It’s like a psych seminar. Jack is perfect for you, Sacky! He’ll actually listen to your ideas about restoring myths and saving the world through music.”

Nina’s pet name turned George’s ears crimson. “You make it sound like Wagner,” he muttered.

The door quietly opened behind Nina. Harry entered, followed by Scrunch, who shook himself and pawed at the rug.

“Why didn’t you start playing?”

“Maybe because two of us don’t know how, Dad!” Nina handed the deck to Harry.

He pulled up a chair. “You could have asked Jack. He always wins.”

Nina shook her head. “We were too deep in archetypes.”

Harry looked from face to face. “What?”

Nina laughed, taking a handful of corn curls.

“I’ll shuffle, Harry.” Jack laid the deck in the center of the table. “Cribbage is all about combinations.” He cut a two of clubs.

“Low cut deals.” Harry said. “No reason for me to cut. Go ahead, Jack.”

“We’ll have a practice game.” Jack dealt.

Harry passed him a card and pointed to Nina’s hand. “Everybody gives the dealer a card for the crib. It’s the first of many advantages to the dealer if he knows how to play. And Jack is usually the dealer.”

Jack set the crib aside and put the deck of undealt cards back on the table. “Pone cuts the stock.”

“And I’m the Pone,” Harry cut the deck. “A Jack of hearts. Go on and peg it now, Jack. You love to race around the board.”

As he inserted his pegs in the first line of holes, Jack pointed to the starter card. “Harry blames me, but he’s the one who cut a Jack. Hearts lead. Because it’s a Jack, dealer receives two points. By the way, if I hadn’t explained how I made two points, you could call “Muggins” and claim the points for yourself.”

“But don’t expect Jack to make mistakes,” Harry said, studying his hand. “He starts as His Heels and will probably peg in forty-five points while the rest of us lurch.”

Nina frowned. “His Heels?”

Jack nodded. “It’s when the dealer gets a Jack from the starting cut.”

“The Jack of Hearts seems to favor you,” she said. “It stands for a Caring Friend.”

Harry shook his head. “Tarot?”

“Playing cards *began* as Tarot cards, Dad.” Nina said. “You don’t need all seventy-eight archetypes to ask the deck for guidance. I often use them for a tune-up to start the day.”

“What can cards tell you that you don’t know already?” Harry said, putting down his hand.

“Well, for one thing, there’s that word, *fiori*.” Nina emphasized the word by cupping her hands as if handing Jack a cluster of grapes.

Jack smiled. “Good accent! With a name like Fiori, I should be the Jack of clubs, shouldn’t I?”

Nina shook her head. “I don’t know about lurches and Muggins, but I *do* know the cards reveal things we haven’t fully realized. The Jack of clubs is an unreliable, jealous young man—not exactly like Father Fiori, but maybe linked to him in some way. A single card only tells part of the story. With people, as with cards, it’s the combinations—”

George held up his hand. “One game at a time please?”

Nina puffed her cheeks and exhaled slowly.

“In cribbage you also count the combinations—and terms for them, George, like pairs, runs, and proils. But you’ll learn as we play.” Jack pointed to George’s hand.

“Your turn.. Put a card face down and say the value.”

“Nine.” George laid the card down.

“Now I add a six. Fifteen.” Jack pointed to Harry.

A wispy flute melody rose from the sofa.

Nina stood up.

“My phone.”

She took her jacket to the deck.

The three men put down their cards.

“But I’m in Sandbridge for the week, Sandra. Well, yes. I could see you here.”

She shut the patio door.

Harry went into the kitchen and looked out the window. “June is back.”

Nina returned.

“One of my clients. She’s coming here tomorrow for a reading. Around eleven o’clock.”

She looked at her watch.

Jack stood and started for the door.

“Maybe we should postpone our game.”

June entered with a bag of groceries. “Finished your game?”

“Nina’s client is coming here tomorrow,” Harry said, his lips hardly moving.

“That’s okay. We were going shopping in Virginia Beach tomorrow morning, so the apartment is yours.”

Both Harry and Nina raised their eyebrows—surprise revealing their likeness. Jack thought that a portrait painter or photographer would have waited for that moment.

Nina put on her jacket.

“Sacky, if we’re to walk on the beach before you go back, this is it.”

“George is leaving?” Harry said.

“I have to return to Holburn to prepare for classes and a concert the day after tomorrow.”

“But how?” With a suppressed smile, Harry was plainly embarrassed for being relieved.

They shook hands.

“Oh, I rented a car after we arrived, Mr. Pettiford. It’s been a pleasure meeting you. I’ll leave the CDs for you.”

Scrunch suddenly sat up under the card table and howled.

* * *

After Nina and George had left, Harry spoke.

“Jack, you may not recall when we planned to go to Virginia Beach. In fact, neither do I.”

Standing between them, June hugged them both.

“You boys don’t want to be scried tomorrow.”

“Scried?” Jack said.

Harry took his drink to the sofa. “Sit down, Jack. You need another drink to hear this.”

June sat between them. “Scrying is crystal-ball reading—“

“Not only crystal balls.” Harry said.

“No. Nina also scries faces, cards, and paintings.” June said.

“She can find patterns in dry mud, or in that knotty pine panel, or on a parged wall. You know why she has that painting tattooed to her waist? Maybe you didn’t notice it, Jack. I guess priests learn to ignore uncomfortable truths.”

“*The Girl with the Watering Can*, you mean?” Jack put down his drink. “I always find ignorance more uncomfortable than truth.”

“Her mother’s favorite painting,” Harry said. “It’s from the National Gallery. Bea had a large print in the dining room in Roanoke. We have it in Richmond. Nina never visited while Bea was sick. She didn’t come to the funeral. When she finally finished the graduate work and stormy romances, and treks to ashrams in India, communes in Italy, and migrant camps in California, she wrote me a letter saying that she was returning to Virginia. She wanted to live near us in Richmond. When she came through the airport gate, we were on her left side. Then she turned around. I thought she’d been horribly burned. That’s why we hadn’t heard from her.”

June squeezed Harry’s hand. “He turned white and slumped against me in a faint. We had to sit on the floor.”

“Later, after I realized she’d done this to herself. I asked her why. Nina told me it was to make her body a reminder that we are not what we seem. The picture was part of it—a reminder of her mother. She tried to make me see—turning down the lights, making me take off my glasses, telling me to spy through a cardboard tube.”

“*Scry*,” June said.

Jack chewed his knuckle and rubbed his forehead as if trying to smooth the furrow between his eyes.

“What Harry means is that Nina wanted him to scry the painting. She seemed to think that doing this would explain everything. She stood him before Bea’s print in our bedroom, drew the curtains and told him to . . . to—“

“*De-focus*.” Harry said.

“Perhaps she wants you to give the background its due.” Jack said.

Harry frowned, but June leaned forward, suddenly animated.

“That’s it. Nina said to let his eyes go out of focus and see the painting as a pattern of light and dark patches. After a few minutes, she asked him if he saw the face.”

“*Bea’s* face.” Harry said. “All I saw was a blur and all I could think about was the damned tattoos and never hearing from her for months at a time.”

June's eyes widened. "Oh, look at Jack. Such a face! We've upset him."

"I'm sorry for you both—and a little tired." Jack stood quickly, his heart pounding. "We'll all do better on a good night's sleep. I'll join you in the morning for the trip to Virginia Beach."

* * *

Jack did not return to his room in the guest wing. It would have been no good trying to sleep. Better to pace the boardwalk through keening mosquitoes, to stare at the dark pools in the mud flats on one side and, on the other side, at the white, crenulated crests of cycloid waves remorselessly paring away the continent like a hungry Minotaur carving up all who lose their way.

Who needs special reminders in such a place—special marks, stigmata, and signs? You do everything to keep your head free of the chaos within and then it pours over you from the torments of others. There would be no sleep until the almond eyes under purple leafy lips, the tenuous sounds of steps escaping the roaring static of annihilation beneath them, the thousand whispers of *forgive me father* flying low along the ground like swifts through swarms of mosquitoes, and the eyeless face of the girl dying in smoke—no sleep until all of them could be overcome by dead, heavy, welcome fatigue.

* * *

A bump at the door woke Jack from a deep, stuporous entanglement with his sheets, a sharp cramp in his right calf as if he had been running.

Another bump at the door—followed by Harry's voice.

"Jack, we're going to the boardwalk. Everything okay?"

"Yes, yes. Just woke up. Join you outside."

He sat on the edge of the bed rubbing his leg and looking out the window at the uninterrupted gray moiré fabric of sky and sea. The strip mall was already busy. A few coots and mergansers clung to the marsh as it crumbled into shopping carts and vaporized in microwave ovens. He wanted to dissolve again, to return to the dull, corrective thoughts that had come to shield him from cross-winds and entanglements. But like Jonah boarding a ship to Tarshish, he was on course to a typhoon.

Once dressed, he glanced out the window again. In a misty drizzle, Harry and June returned with Scrunch from the dog park ahead of another couple with two black dogs. Scrunch danced around Harry's legs barking at the larger dogs.

Jack quickly went downstairs and crossed the parking lot to meet them. Scrunch continued to bark and do his three-legged dance as the couple behind them closed the distance.

When the woman and Jack saw each other, she must have released the leash, letting the huge, black Labrador bound ahead, snap up Scrunch by the hind leg and toss him backwards into the path of the other Lab. Both big dogs nuzzled the tiny limp body as it eerily slid away along the pavement to the reel automatically rewinding the leash to Harry's hand.

* * *

In the vet's office an hour later, as the remains were being boxed, Harry asked June what had happened to Jack. She thought she recalled seeing him by the car.

But Jack had dissolved.

* * *

It wasn't like Leonard to come to my apartment, even though he lived nearby. We met over the pizza counter. I don't appreciate being disturbed. There is so little time to study and truly understand what I need to know. And no relief comes from knowing that each of us is a provisional wave on the sea of mind—each a narrow, prehensile tendril of perception that slightly swells the trunk of mind, our fingers sensory shapers like branches, root-tips, and lips under leaves drawing spirit into the tree of mind. All study is a brief search, a narrowing, a pruning and shaping of mind—which is no-one's and everyone's—all of us imperceptibly widening its trunk. *Understand it!*

This corrective thought prevents despair, pride, self-indulgence, and spite: *Make much of detail. Embrace fine distinctions. Puzzle out patterns.*

Interruptions should be finished after long train trips, finding your way through crowded stations, waiting in traffic on Broad Street, and attending to the vexations of closing e-mail

accounts and dropping phone numbers. Interruptions should be done, but here is Leonard Plotkin, looking like Ichabod Crane in jeans and a VCU sweatshirt.

I ask him in, but he studies me as if skeptically appraising a vase with a six figure price tag. He backs away, apparently reconsidering what he came to say. Again, I ask him in so that the breeze from door to window will not blow my notes onto the floor.

He pushes books and laptop aside to sit on the sofa. He says he knows that I would want to hear what happened to Sandra and him last weekend.

“Her brother came to Richmond and called for her address, but Sandra didn’t give it. Instead, she took her two labs to meet him at a Starbucks many blocks from the house. He insisted on knowing where she lived. The manager told him to leave. Sandra didn’t come out until I picked her up. Then she had headaches, stomach pain, and diarrhea. Then she had to see Madame Almah for a reading. But Madame Almah was at the beach,

“Early next morning, I drove down with Sandra and the dogs.”

Leonard drinks the entire cup of tea.

“Almost as soon as they get out of the car, the two labs kill a little mutt just as if he were a rabbit. I didn’t think they really did it. The mutt seemed weak and high-strung. When the big lab raced after him, he probably had a heart-attack. No blood at all. But because the owner of the mutt got so bent out of shape, the dog warden impounded Sandra’s labs.”

Leonard says he could be happy not having the dogs around if only Sandra would calm down, but even after Madame Almah had given her a reading and a healing massage, Sandra was edgy.

“Just as she started to mellow out a little, the door opens and the big, crazy dog-owner comes in carrying a little coffin. Sandra froze. I grabbed her paintings and pushed her out. Back in her apartment, she locked all the doors and windows and hunched down in a far corner of the room on the other side of the bed, with the remaining space filled in by her paintings leaning against the wall. She wouldn’t leave her room after that. Not even for meals. Four days later, I’m still sleeping on her couch.”

While Sandra slept, Leonard had returned to his apartment for clean clothes. His manager had given him an ultimatum if he didn’t return to the pizza parlor by the next day. He wears three or four amulets to move thoughts of unemployment from his mind.

“Brendan,” he says. “When we came back to Richmond from Ybor City, all she wanted

to do was, like, paint pictures of her dead twin sister. Like Sandra was trying to keep her alive or something. The pictures don't look like human beings—more like yellow patches with scribbles in them, like a foreign language. They're abstract, I guess. She calls them *Qi Portraits*. More than fifty of them are leaning on her bedroom walls.

“But now she's stopped painting. She sits in the corner and hugs her knees. I can't blame her brother for being angry with her. After all, he's one of the founders of the Mental Movers. How does it look to have his own sister so loaded down? I thought maybe I should call him anyway and—”

“*No!*” I say. “Don't call him. That would make things worse.” I stopped myself, correcting my thoughts. *Avoid giving advice. Keep to yourself. This can only go badly. She's terrified of her brother for good reason.* What has to be understood is the pattern, the tree of mind.

Leonard stands up. He paces between my desk and coffee table.

“I can't even go to Movers meetings now. Than remembers me from Florida. After the accident, he didn't want us to return to Richmond. With his other sister gone less than a year after his old lady, he wasn't only, like, grieving. He seemed real tense. We didn't even tell him when we left. He called all the time until we changed her phone. After a couple years, he seemed all right with it. You know? And then we found the Movers were also here in Richmond. But with him around, I gotta stay away from meetings. And that makes me restless like. You know? Sometimes I want to find a joint or get a drink. With Sandra like this it's not going right. I need more than this. You know?”

A drop forms on the tip of his nose. I can't tell whether the clothes he is wearing are his new outfit or what he's worn for the last four days.

“*Joyful, Joyful we adore thee!*” A chorus sings from his pocket. He pulls out his cell, tells me it's Sandra, and walks to the window.

A card falls to the floor. I pick it up—a business card for Madame Almah. In one corner is a matrix code like the one on Nina's right hand. On the other corner is an appointment date.

After he ends the call, I hand him the card. “You dropped this.”

“I brought that for you,” he says. “Keep it. Maybe if you could talk to Sandra—maybe come to the reading. I told Madame Almah about you.”

“Told her what?” I say.

“How you gave us a loan.” He says this looking at his feet.

I tell him that the loan was between us and that I don’t want to meet Madame Almah. And then I tell him to find Sandra a doctor and to tell the police about her brother. He can’t do that, he says. Sandra trusts him but she wouldn’t forgive him for bringing in strangers.

“Anyway, maybe her brother can help her. Just come see her at the reading. I know you could do something.”

Why Leonard knows this he doesn’t fully understand, but he would understand soon enough if I went to Madame Almah’s. I tell him I’ll think about it. This gets him out of the apartment.

I spend the afternoon packing. What I own fits in the trunk. The monthly lease is easy to break.

Then I go to see Nina.

* * *

Sandra Spadini

The name plate over the mail slot to the apartment was taped beside a poster showing the acupuncture meridians of the body. Jack Fiori went into Madame Almah’s shop, passing through a curtain of tinkling cowry shells into the waiting room, where a middle-aged woman in sweat pants and a flowered blouse sat with a saddle-bag purse on her lap and Nina sat beside her with a laptop on her knees.

“Jack of Hearts, the Caring Friend!” Nina said. “So June sent you too!”

She closed the laptop and spoke to the customer. “Mrs. Coles, pardon me for a few minutes. Come on, Father Fiori. I have a reading, but you can both wait in the studio.”

She led Jack behind the counter into a small room with two chairs, a table and crystal ball. Through another cowry curtain, they passed into the studio. It smelled of turpentine. Someone was hammering upstairs.

“I think he’s finally hanging some of her pictures,” Nina said.

Paintings were stacked against the walls. Coffee mugs and bottles of brushes crowded the paint-smear table-top. And Harry Pettiford sat on a dilapidated couch in the corner.

“Give Jack a cup of coffee, Dad. I’ll be back in a few minutes.” Nina shut the door behind her.

Harry stood. “What happened to you? We tried to call, but your phone—”

“I’m sorry, Harry. I couldn’t stay. I can’t stay in Richmond. And I’m sorry about your dog.”

Harry poured a mug of coffee. “If that has paint in it, I’ll get you another cup. Nothing in here is clean. Did June send you?”

“Nina said the same thing. No, I came on my own. I needed to tell Nina about one of her clients and—”

Jack noticed one of the paintings. Two strong yellow horizontal lines, like arms or like a vise, closed on a scribbled figure, partly pictograph and partly calligraphy in an unknown language, of a curled human being, the script curling and coiling around the figure and projecting into the foreground.

Every painting wants your eyes. Here was a signal—this cursive spiral of a language that must not be spoken telling a story that must not be heard about a coiling, crushing pressure that one escapes only by changing into a stick figure or unintelligible script.

“Jack, are you all right?” Harry takes my arm and leads me to the couch.

I put the mug on the floor and cover my face with my hands. *Take a deep breath.* One only understands by breathing in all the harm and loss, by embracing what is; then one follows the painful detection of pattern. Accept the tree of mind, its roots in realities, its branches the paths to truth, its leaves breathing deeply to release painful ideas. Follow the paths of all those others who have no idea of how to spend their time and therefore fall into routines, enthusiasms, and monstrous conveniences

Bless me father. A mother comforts her only son. The son demands more. *Forgive me, father.* The pattern passes to the daughter. The promise of the special son—the gifted one who needs to be comforted and protected—must be guarded. A small price to meet his demands: *Forgive me, father. I have sinned by my own fault.*

“What is it Jack? What did you say?”

I sit up.

Harry has taken out his cell phone.

“Don’t call anyone, Harry. I’m all right.”

“I think June must be behind this.”

“No. I came here on my own.” I sipped the coffee. “I’m here because Nina has a client

whom I know—a young woman whose sister was killed in an abortion clinic in Tampa several years ago. I told her to go there.”

Harry’s eyes widen.

“Yes, I know.” I noticed another of Sandra’s paintings on an easel—larger and more insistent in its signals. “But I was already leaving the priesthood by that time. It wasn’t too long after your wedding in Holburn.”

Harry nodded. “You went out on a limb for us, too.”

“Rules and formulas seem sufficient when you’re twenty years old. Forty years later, you find the patterns impossible.”

“The patterns?”

“The stories people bring must be distorted—made into something else—to make them amenable to proper religious interpretation. See that?” I point to the painting “Here was a mother whose bipolar son has always been calmed—maybe since her husband left—by sleeping with her. His brilliant flashes seemed to be protected from the roaring in his head when she comforted him. It became her special role to protect his gifts, even as he became more aggressive and demanding, forcing himself on one of his sisters. Thereafter, the mother and daughter share in his protection. And this ingrown sore, this abscess of a family, appeared regularly at another priest’s Masses. The son then became a leader in a self-help cult—a sign to the daughter and dying mother that they had protected his gifts and promise.”

I closed my eyes and took another deep breath.

An outside door shut and someone walked up the back stairs.

The rough yellow streaks across the canvas had been built up so much that they cast a thin shadow along the edge.

“What’s the religious formula for this young woman, named Sandra?” I said. “We do not help by making one thing into another. We help by staying in the background. The distorted pattern of her life—most of which I have found easy to imagine after forty years of seeing such patterns in all their combinations—must be expressed and understood. To tell some religious story or to give her a formula would be to intrude. The religious restoration must unfold by connecting her story with a personal meaning. And she must tell it.

“Sandra’s sister told me the story. She knew that her twin sister must never be involved in the family pattern. I was at least able to keep up with her sister and provide help from a

distance. Nina has also helped her. I was the first and last to hear her story. Harry, that young woman was looking for religious restoration, but she was disconnected from herself and had only begun to puzzle out her distorted life before she was killed.”

Harry frowns and studies his big hands, folded on his lap.

I might as well tell him the rest, so I go on.

“The most difficult puzzles are the routines we take for granted. When the routine is taken away, we see through it—to what it meant. Even if it was a small thing we saw or did every day.”

“Like walking a dog,” Harry says.

“Yes.” I say. “Or walking away from a life to try to understand it.”

The cowries jingled in the doorway as Nina came in, immediately going to the counter to take her mug from the warmer. She looked at the ceiling, cocking her head.

“Mrs. Coles has gone. I don’t have any more readings unless my neighbor comes down. Did you hear anything?”

“Only someone going upstairs,” Harry said.

“Well, why are you two here? It’s got to be about last weekend. If I had known what happened to Scrunch, I wouldn’t have had the reading, Dad. You know that.”

“I know, Nina.” Harry said. “That’s not why I’m here. June *did* send me, but it’s because of what happened after we got home.” His voice quavered. “I was sitting in the dark on the bed, thinking about how Bea had given me that dog. And thinking about you—wondering why things turn out the way they do. I looked up at that print and saw Bea’s face.”

Nina sets down her cup. Harry holds out his arms and they embrace.

A heavy thump on the ceiling shakes the hanging lamp and is followed by a shriek.

I run outside and up the stairs to the deck on the second floor. The door is open. Leonard has a bloody spot on his shirt. He lies on the floor, leaning on his bloody elbow beside a toolbox and scattered nails.

Sandra cringes in the corner behind the bed and her paintings stacked along the wall, on her dresser and under the mirror.

“Father!” she screams.

Than stands on the bed, waving a long letter opener made to resemble a Toledo sword.

His hair is loose to his shoulders and his Movers tee-shirt spattered with Leonard's blood. He speaks in a low, breathy voice.

"I'll be your father now. Why should anything make sense, Sandy? You think you know anything? Your paintings aren't squat. You owe me. Mama would never have let you paint if I hadn't made her."

He slashes one of her paintings.

Harry and Nina come into the room.

Than screams. "Ha! I make a gash of gouache!"

He pokes a hole in it.

"An eye here—and there's a fleshy stub like a finger or a morel! I give it a title: *Vision Number Three in Black and Yellow*. Just like Dali and his sister—you know who *Number Three* is, don't you, Sandy? And I charge twelve hundred dollars. That's what I had to pay to get out of Ybor City. Do you think that's enough for your worthless crap? Does it *move* you? Do I care? Nobody's getting between us—not that wuss. You want me to stick him again?"

He waves the letter opener at Leonard and sees Nina in the mirror. "And not some fortune teller."

Harry gently pushes me aside.

Than sees Nina looking at her cell phone. He covers his ears and screams. "You think I don't know the pictures mean what we want them to mean. You know what I need to stop the voices and get the weight off."

He turns back to Sandra. "You know how it hangs on me and pulls me down to the scum of the rest of you who can't see and can't hear. Why did you leave me? Angela tried to keep secrets. I had to move her out of my mind—just like the others in that place. I need my balance back. You know that. I can move you out of my mind if I have to. If you don't come home—"

Suddenly he turns, staring at Nina with pale blue pupils set in whites like hard marbles set in a skull to resemble eyes. "And I can move *you* out right now!"

As he leaps off the bed, Harry grabs his neck.

Than turns and plunges the letter opener into Harry's chest, but Harry holds on.

I stumble backwards onto the tool box. A large Stillson wrench falls out.

I pick it up and bring it down on Than's head.

* * *

The last time I saw Leonard, he was back from the hospital. Sandra had finally come to live with him.

“She’s finally selling her paintings,” he said. “Nina helped her find a gallery.”

“What’s Nina doing?”

“Her boyfriend convinced her to come with him to some artists’ colony in the Northern Region. She closed her shop and her stepmother moved back to Roanoke. What about you, Father?”

“It’s *Brendan* now—all the time. Father Fiori has dissolved.”

* * *

I knew about Giacomo Lockhart Fiori before his Aunt Brenda Lockhart died and he became Brendan Lockhart. That was before his heart was locked up, in the days when death followed him, starting with the bully Mingo, who choked him in the cloak room until Harry slammed the bully into a coat hook.

More bullies and deaths, confessions and denials followed in a grim procession—more than thirty years of them. I watched Jack trying to understand it, to capture it somehow by caring for souls. But it was the care of souls that led him away from being a priest. It even led him away from himself. Every soul is a prime, indivisible, growing its own myth. To care for souls one has to let them speak or sing or calculate or paint their stories completely, to rise like bubbles from the bottom of a dark lake. To care for souls is to let them rise, unimpeded and unintimidated, to emerge whole and healed.

So Harry Pettiford , who stood up to bullies, also emerged. For him, I light this candle. So Father Berman emerged, who never let a day pass that he did not think about goodness. And so Jack emerged, dissolving into the background like a saint or a thought that has wandered off.

* * *

*Find wonder in slow talks with trees,
steadfast in facts, reaching for light,
each whispering in steamy breath,
shoving its skins away from death*

*and crowded above with blossoms white,
below with roots that grip realities.*

*Like nothing else, but yet like trees,
whose minds are branching up and down
between realities and thought—
both our doing—we are caught.*

—R.Rose, From "My Eye" in *The Complete Poems*

THE END

Report on A42163

**Translated by
Wayne Neely**

I now live in a sixty-three year-old male with a roll of fat around his middle, a lazy disposition, and the need for continual guidance. Needless to say, I don't identify with him too closely. When stranded, one does what one can. His systems do not respond readily to the usual inducements. In fact, it is quite impossible to move him unless he believes that he has an urge to pee or feed or copulate. I apologize for putting it so crudely, but after living in him for three cycles, I have myself become more crass and restless. Upon entry, I had higher expectations, but even now, I must tell you, after so many orbits, it is impossible to choose wisely among them. Often their most brilliant forms derive from unpromising stock in wretched conditions. And of

course their own means of choosing among themselves depends upon appearances—as if they understood appearances.

I will move him toward a mirror so that you can observe him more closely. You must understand that when they take us on it is not as controllers. We must contend with all the other whims, rages, and delusions they entertain. Do not expect to be all-powerful. That may have worked once, but not any more. You will be fortunate to have a vote. They have urges, rather than the steady urgency that we possess. With them, it is all back and forth, ebb and flow, dark and light. I attribute this to their loose lattice and the streams of hormones and neural currents continually pulsing and washing unevenly through them. One of them has spoken of their *crystal and fluid intelligence*, but I assure you, they are more fluid than crystal. Do not assume their constancy in anything.

Here you see him. He is not grossly flabby, like many of them, but his area to volume aspect is excessively low, impeding receptivity and movements. His interoceptive understanding is primitive compared to the exquisitely fluid, smooth, intercalated interactions between reflections and bodily functions I found in the giant cetacean where I once spent a very pleasant cycle.

They seize so easily on false distinctions like mind and body, natural and manmade, wild and civilized, and earthly and alien—an understandable liability of their bilateral bodies. The alien/earthly distinction is particularly amusing, given the immersion of their planet in the universal emergence and the awareness of this fact in all of the planet's life-forms except this last one that has so long required our special attention—this so-called *self-aware* form. Indeed, it is so aware of itself that it almost misses everything else, requiring several million orbits to understand even its relationship to its own base-star. They invariably mistake aliens as invaders from elsewhere instead of the ubiquitous forms that exist around them just beyond their purblind perception.

But I get ahead of myself. Let me show the first breakthrough I have made with my subject. He thinks he's had a *vision*.

They are always mistaken. Even now as my subject transcribes his experience of emergence, he mistakes my message for my nature. He describes it as a business plan.

The Business Plan¹

Part 1: Location

Applicant: I'll come back to this when I know for sure.

City & State: as if it mattered any more

1. Why did you select your *present* or *proposed* location? Not selection. Coming to where/when is arriving at coordinates. It's *coming to*, not selection, that puts me here-now. I seem to have arrived in a world slightly offset from the world I left.

2. Is the neighborhood new, established, residential, or commercial? As I said, I just arrived. It's the same room in Kenton above the bakery on High Street that I rented after coming to Heathrow from New York three days ago to make contacts at the Book Fair so that I could get this business off the ground. The smell of fresh bread from the open window, the rattle of the greengrocer's awning, the hiss of traffic on the wet street—all of it seems the same as yesterday morning, but the insides of everything are luminous. The ground for everything is off.

3. Who will be your customers and why will they come to you at this location? With whom or what I now have to do has changed. No doubt. But it's too soon to say who they are.

4. What parking facilities are available to you? Will they be adequate? I seem to be a docking station for passing beings. Should I say angels or demons—is the question relevant? Or is it simply that some inner obstruction has been displaced and they were here all along?

5. What are the terms of your lease or terms of your mortgage? Enclose a copy of the lease, if applicable. I have as long a moment as I require with everything luminous and immobile, available for inspection.

6. What is the physical condition of the building? __good __fair __poor
I wouldn't have made the Book Fair trip if I'd felt better.

7. What competition do you have in this location? How close?

The subject has to pee. Perhaps it goes without saying that because they have not solved the problem of fading into crystal form, most of their existence is spent in metabolic processing, even in their most crystalline yogic states. As my subject ages, he spends even more

¹ SBA FORM 1107 (12-82) REF:SOP 50:10, an obsolete form of the Small Business Association. OMB Approval No. 3245-0019, Expiration Date: 11-30-84

energy tending to toxic eliminations. Intake and elimination compete with every flicker of an insight. How can I convey to you the tedium of waiting for these creatures to process and eliminate incomplete metabolites? Often the daily products of elimination from one of them would have sustained several of us for many orbits. The monotonous processes and ceremonies of elimination and preparation occupy more than a third of the lifetimes of these beings, who take great pains to modify the states and densities of ingredients as if this were of significance to their processing equipment. I might add that it is only recently that they have begun to consider their organs as equipment, a historical development you will recognize from our own precrystalline history as a precursor to genetic redesign.

He's gone back to his desk at the window.

8. Have you determined whether your building complies with local building codes and zoning ordinances? Occupational Health and Safety Regulations? Environmental Protection (air, water, and noise) regulations? Others? Since I am both my own competition and my own building, what safeguards can there be?

9. What licenses or permits are you required to have to start operations? And what permission can possibly be relevant to a process underway on its own power? Does a petrel swept inland by a hurricane need a visa?

10. Your merchandise will fall into what price range—high, medium or low? What I have to offer is an unpriced book of prints. Unpriced because I made them. Are they priceless or worthless? Both maybe.

11. Will you sell only for cash? Selling out was what Mike said I was doing by coming to London. Better to stay in the walk-up over the liquor store on Addison waiting for some State Street art dealer to notice us.

12. If you offer credit, will your prices have to be higher? Have I gone higher or deeper? The shimmering of objects, their waviness; the drifting in and out of shapes, like that pickle jar of brushes. They're like pseudopods or aloe leaves or fingers reaching through my misconceptions to grasp something higher or different.

Other mystics have housed me. Most of them had more original descriptions than aloe

leaves and pseudopods.

13. How do your prices compare with your competitors? If yours are higher, why will people buy from you? I don't know the cost yet, but I know this vision will cost me something. I can't paint any more, not with my eyes struggling to crimp all of the wavy splotches into shapes. Any vision costs something, I guess.

14. What type of advertising will you use? Why? How often? How much will it cost?

15. Attach completed forms for Projected Cash Flow and your Personal Financial Statement to this application.

Would you believe that he's gone to sleep? It's as close as they get to fading into crystal. Isn't there another assignment available? Maybe a bald cypress or a turkey vulture—something with substance.

THE END

Messaging the Paraclete

We do so well, but we don't stop. Crowds of us used to play in a sandlot. But how many can now play in a superdome? Nina says I rant. But where does she spend her time? Riding an escalator through a layer cake of fashionings and fastenings to become someone else, as on a Whip-and-Dip, Cosmic Spinner, Flaming Slide, or some other amusing ride. Before malls caked the earth, there were bazaars where even a few ideas could be swapped. We did well but we couldn't be stopped. "Amusing ourselves to death," Mr. Postman wrote in a ranter's love letter to the world. More power to him.

Speaking of power, we do well, but we don't stop. Our greatest strengths do us in. We extract copper so well that we die under tailings. We rhyme so incessantly that we sicken of it and become vigilant as duck hunters to flush out couplets. Whatever we are able to do, as the preacher in *Ecclesiastes* said, *we do*. We take it into our minds to erect the TALLEST CROSS IN THE WORLD, or a sky-scraping pyramidal headstone. Even half-way through these projects

we don't stop. We say we want to be proud of finishing. Even half-done, our foolishness evident, the project is too big to fail. We don't stop.

Mick Townsend, Nina's brother, the barber, came back from a Florida vacation wanting to build a NASA-sized gantry in the Dominion Oaks Dog Park and Fire Training Center. Hundreds of Shih-Tzu's, sheared to their naked black skins but left puffs at tail-tips, were herded up the fire-tower-gantry, their feathery red, white, and blue plumes floating like clouds over them while Mick operated the sound and light system for the annual Fourth celebration. We never knew what induced the dogs to leap from the gantry into a vat of hair clippings supplied by Malvern's barbers, salon operators, and pet groomers, whom Mick had persuaded to sponsor the event, their names festooning tower, vat, and bumpers in the crowded parking lot.

What induced the pet owners to allow it was easily understood. A network video crew was filming the event. Everyone saw the first dogs tumble into the vat, some of them breaking their legs on the rim while others ran off past the portapotties. Mick didn't get the kind of coverage he'd expected for his "LIFT OFF TO FREEDOM AND GOOD GROOMING."

Some time well before the angry owners with injured or missing dogs began to shout for him to come out of the sound booth, Mick should have stopped. As it was, he locked himself inside until the lot was empty. Next day, the barber shop was closed.

Nina says he's sensitive about it, that we should do something—maybe buy Mick and Helen a refrigerator. Why would this make him feel better about the dead Shih-Tzu's, I almost ask, but instead, I get my car keys. By the time we arrive at the showroom, Nina is already talking about a refrigerator with a program pad and wifi connections.

Once, chunks of ice cut from Lake Michigan, dressed and squared off by two men on the opposite ends of a saw, dragged to shore by horses, and loaded onto wagons were sold in the city for ice boxes. They went into restaurant cold-rooms, meat lockers, and ice cellars of forty-room gingerbread monstrosities, from which they were hand-cut to tinkle in cocktail glasses when cocktails were prohibited. *Ice*—sides of beef didn't have to gather flies. *Ice*—butter, milk, and ice cream all year around. Simple enough. It worked well enough. But we had to improve it. *We do so well, but we don't stop.*

I am looking at a computer pad on a refrigerator door. It wants my user ID, password, preferences for the meat drawer and crisper, my preference for crushed or flaked. It asks for dates, emergency contacts, favorite music, radio stations. It lists websites for suppliers of the

thousand antagonistic components which have been enslaved together in this device.

In the past, either the condenser worked or the refrigerator failed. Now the refrigerator can fail in a hundred puzzling ways. Subroutines, apps, subtle codes, and nuanced connections to various social networks in which I can communicate at length with other users of this QUALITY PRESERVATIVE EXPERIENCE—these are the advantages that Mick will have as a proud owner. It will take his mind off the Shih-Tzu's.

When Nina and I return home, Helen is waiting on the porch. Mick drove off this morning. Dwayne, you must find him, Nina says. I get the car keys.

So Herr Benz poured some vegetable oil in his engine—nothing like the steam engines from Stephenson's *Rocket* to Watt's freestanding engines turning craftsmen into bystanders, to locomotives with motives of their own, to Fulton's follies. No, this little engine would intake, compress, explode, and exhaust all in the comfort of a can. Puff, puff, presto! Behold the gridlock. Evidently Mick left the Taconic and headed toward D.C. Mick Junior was tracking him with his smartphone and Nina was ringing me every twenty minutes with suggestions.

Why D.C.? No one knew. Seat of power, maybe. Better than the seat of your pants. How could any of this help? He was embarrassed. Nina says it goes back to their father. True enough. The old bird had a gizzard for a heart. No news there. Passed the shop on to Mick and retired to Florida. Mick didn't even need a new sign. So now both of us are lost on the Capital Beltway at rush hour. I'm somewhere in Maryland when Nina calls. Mick Junior has tracked his father to Arlington cemetery. Four thirty in the afternoon I find him wandering around the white crosses .What are you doing, Mick, I say. He says, WHAT FOR?

He's still wearing the red, white, and blue sweatshirt printed with the slogan LIFT OFF TO FREEDOM AND GOOD GROOMING. He hasn't changed or shaved since standing on the dais the day before. WHAT FOR? He says again, sweeping his arm around the hills of crosses dress-right-dressed in multitudes, the old Lee mansion staring impassively from the butchery of its own uncivil time. Mick grabs my shirt and says, WHAT FOR?

Look, Mick, I say, I just came to bring you home, not to explain this. No one can explain this. That's why we make up stories about it. A good story is always diverting—a little drama, a little humor, a few tears. Many stories—histories to some, economics, law and politics to others—very many stories are needed for this. I can't tell you any story except that we do so well but we don't stop.

He stops waving his arms so I keep talking.

“Think of it. We’re packed off on crowded ships—some of us chained in the holds and some of us retching in steerage. We arrive early or late, unload ourselves and our belongings—if we have any—look for others like ourselves. Some of us are enslaved; others stumble across the continent, discovering that most of what we know is useless. We learn from native people, from the land itself, from the pain we inflict on each other. We begin to understand that these afflictions coil up like a heavy chain that will finally hobble all of us! So far, so good, but for much longer than necessary we continue to forge links in the chain and let it surround us even as we deny its existence. We go on long rides into the country to forget it, sometimes taking along a few thousand troops to exercise our imaginations by telling others how liberated we are and why they should be glad to let us liberate them. Back home, however, it’s so hard to walk around the chains that we finally begin to break them up into smaller chainlets that can be carried away, collected, admired, and traded. We become very discriminating chain-collectors. We convince ourselves that some chains are so profitable that they should be strengthened, while others can have a few decorative links made of rattan. In this way, we turn the chains into the most invisible things in the world—assumptions. Meanwhile, after hundreds of thousands of us have died in chains for several hundred years, the inconvenience becomes consequential enough to gin up for another war—not as lucrative a prospect as the new cotton gins, but easier than changing minds. So we continue to stumble in and out of sobriety. In fact—”

Mick is shifting from foot to foot.

What is it? I say. He says he has to pee. Well, you can’t do it here. Follow me out of here. We drive out of the cemetery, pass the Pentagon, and take one of the exits. Shirlington, I think. We go into a Greek restaurant. While Mick is in the restroom, I call Nina.

Yeah, he’s okay, Nina. Existential crisis. The usual thing. Why are we all here? What’s it all about? What are we coming to? He just needs to tone down the big ideas and get back to cutting hair. No, we’ll get something to eat before coming back. It’s a long drive, but we’ll be back before ten. Tell Helen. She’s there? Yeah, Helen. He’s okay. No, don’t tell him about the calls from the lawyers. There’s time for that later. We’ll be back before you know it. Gotta go. Mick’s coming back.

Shuffling across the room, Mick is staring at his smartphone. He bumps a server, who splashes her drinks.

Hey, watch where you're going, Mick, I say.

He mumbles.

What's that, I say.

I got a message, he says.

Let's order, I say.

No. I got a message—an answer. He waves the phone at me.

What are you talking about, Mick? Let's just order.

He hands me the phone. I look at it.

WHO'S ASKING?

What is this, Mick?

It's an answer, he says. While I was in the restroom, I typed in WHAT'S IT ALL FOR?

This is the answer I got.

Who did you message? I said.

No one, he says. He shows me the TO box. Empty.

You must have sent it to someone, I say.

The waiter brings us drinks.

No, I didn't, he says.

Come on, Mick. You can't send a message that doesn't have a receiver.

Oh yeah? Well look at this. He had typed his name, MICK TOWNSEND. No receiver indicated. He presses SEND. The message goes—somewhere.

We drink our beers.

The phone beeps. I don't know why Mick has a beep for messages. I don't want to know about messages until I'm ready to look at them.

Look at this, he says.

There's another message on his phone.

GRACE ABOUNDING.

With me watching, Mick types, WHAT MUST I DO?

In thirty seconds, another message appears: CENTER DOWN.

BUT WHY? WHAT'S IT ALL FOR? Mick says.

ONE QUESTION AT A TIME, says the unknown sender.

WHAT'S IT ALL FOR? Mick says again.

HOW MUCH DO YOU NEED TO KNOW? The unknown sender says.

ENOUGH TO LIVE ON, Mick types.

BREATHE DEEP, the unknown sender says.

WHAT DO THT MEAN? Mick types. His palms are sweating so much that his fingers slide off the keys. He types again, WHAT DOES THAT MEAN?

The waiter comes back. I order salads.

The next, and last, message is: PROCEED.

Mick doesn't speak for the next thirty minutes. I don't know whether the silence or the fact that he's actually eating an arugula salad without Helen giving him a sermon on greens is the reason for my apprehension. Can you drive, I finally ask.

Sure, Dwayne, he says. He's real calm.

Too calm.

On the way back, Helen calls to tell me that when she got home she found Mick Junior playing with the parakeet. He'd made a program of random phrases which the parakeet could choose by pecking single keys. I asked her if she could wait until later to tell me about this. I'm driving and also trying to watch Mick in the rearview mirror. She raises her voice. Okay, Helen, I say. Finish the story.

It seems that Mick Junior had programmed the smartphone of Mick Senior. Mick's unknown sender was a parakeet.

Wait a minute, Helen, I say. Mick got those messages.

That's what I'm afraid of, she says. We've got to do something.

No, Helen, I say. I mean that Mick *really got those messages*. Don't ever tell him where they came from—and tell Mick Junior he'll be grounded for a year if he ever tells.

And let the parakeet fly off before Mick comes home. Such a talented bird deserves to go free.

THE END

The Queen and the Crocodile

The morning after the Queen returned from defeating the Gaths of Wikdom, a crocodile appeared at the gate and asked to see her. The Queen directed that the bolt be drawn so that she could look across the grate at the Crocodile.

“O Queen, “he sang,

*“You have cracked the Gaths in two
And splintered all your foes
Into a thousand issues.
Here, from my marsh: a mallow rose!”*

The Crocodile produced a pink flower from his vest pocket.

The Queen did not take the flower, or move, but studied him, as a falcon studies a vole.

“If I kiss you on the snout,” she said, “Will you become something else or, perhaps, go away?”

“I am what I am, my Queen. Though I would love a kiss, I seek something more precious,” the Crocodile said.

The Queen backed off. “What’s that?”

“Your trust, Ma’am.”

“What do you mean?”

“Think of me as a personal assistant.”

“Oh,” the Queen said. “You must go through our Human Resources Department to apply for a position.”

The Queen beckoned to one of her attendants. As the attendant approached, the crocodile raised his tail. “No, Queen. I need no work. Like you, I am sufficient in my realm.”

“What then?” The Queen estimated the number of steps between them and readied her spear.

“In honor of your victory, my Queen.”

He tossed the rose across the grate.

She caught it on the tip of her spear—a simple, pink flower, with a downy stem. She looked up.

The crocodile had disappeared.

Late in the afternoon, as the Queen rushed from house to house, bringing consolation to widows, food to the hungry, and healing ointments to the wounded, the Bearer of the Royal Lists approached—one Lord Simper of Iffonly. She found him a peevish but necessary man—even more necessary after her king had split the realm and the Prince had left to quell a rebellion at the Western March.

“What is it, Simper?” she said.

He lowered his wheelbarrow, full of heavy clipboards holding all the Queen’s lists of things to do.

“Please, your majesty, a reminder.”

“More tedious details! As I told you this morning, I must first attend to the people, to my wounded soldiers and their families, to all of the imbalances this war has brought upon my kingdom. Wait until after dinner to bring me your dreary sums and committees and court intrigues.”

“But your majesty, you asked to be reminded that—“

“That I might be unhinged by your interruptions?” She waved her spear at him.

Lord Simper leaped back.

“What is it?” she said.

“About the Prince—”

“What news?” The Queen seized him by his velvet collar.

“Only this: that he asks again for an explanation.”

“Oh, *that!*” She turned away, remounted, and, seeing a tiny brown-eyed girl standing behind her father’s gurney, tossed away the pink flower that had hung from her pommel since morning. The girl immediately picked it up and gave it to her father, who raised himself on one elbow to admire it. They smiled and waved at the Queen as she slowly rode back to the Keep.

Long after the narrow trapezoids of sunlight on the Keep’s tiled floor gave way to thin strips of moonlight passing through arrow-slits in the walls, the Queen still worked on her lists. She sat on the floor, where she had dumped all of the clipboards, and talked to herself.

“Who can understand this? So many subjects! So much is misaligned! So much to sort out! So many claims, petitions, suits, and grievances! Even from my son, and my ancient parents in our homeland—who refuse my protection, despite their infirmities! But I must attend to all. I am beholden to no man.”

She took a long, deep breath as she stretched her arms behind her back, touching a log that had rolled away from the hearth. The log touched back.

“My Queen!” it said.

The Queen leaped up and drew her sword as she spun around.

The Crocodile cocked his head to the side to see more clearly the sword pointed at his nose.

“You again!” The Queen sheathed her sword. “You keep appearing unannounced. How do you do that, anyway? Surely you are one of those magical dragons one hears so much about, appearing like angels.”

“Little call for them anymore, your majesty. I’m a crocodile.”

“A crocodile?”

“At your service.” He bowed his head. “Of course, most people, looking at my barky hide, can only see a purse or pair of shoes.”

The Queen moved to stand in front of the shield she had fashioned from a crocodile she had killed with her own hands.

“These tiles are cool to my belly plates. But you know, O Queen, where—near my heart—I am soft and weak.” As he said this, he tilted his head to look at the shield behind her.

The Queen blushed.

“This floor reminds me of the tiles in Pliny’s atrium—the cool tiles filled with so many images of robin fish, eels, octopus and other delights.” The Crocodile licked his jagged lips. “That floor grew griddle-hot, I can tell you, and covered with ash and tufa, as the servants raced through acrid smoke to fling themselves into the Bay of Naples, a hot cauldron of fish soup.”

“You speak as if you were there,” the Queen said, sitting down again among her clipboards.

“One can be present in many ways,” said the Crocodile. “In service, for example. *You* are present to many by serving many.”

“I am.” The Queen frowned. “It is what I’m called to do. But I am beholden to—“

“To no man. Yes.” The Crocodile rolled slightly on his left side so that he could draw a pipe from his vest pocket. “Do you mind?”

“Ordinarily I would, but go ahead! I want to see how you will do that.”

Striking a match on his neck, the Crocodile quickly inserted the pipe stem in the corner of his jaw and was soon puffing a sweet, marshy smoke. The odor reminded the Queen of crushed cattails and salt-grass on a warm day after the first frost.

The Crocodile said, “Your self-reliance is admirable. It reminds me of Judith. However, such independence may sometimes banish trust, as Enkidu once told Lord Gilgamesh—who learned too late the value of his woolly friend. ‘Love’s worth’s unknown although its height be taken,’ as one of your poets said.” He sighed and pointed his pipe stem at the Queen. “And *you* need love and trust, my Queen. A dark passage awaits you.”

“So. You *are* a magical being? This is how you can appear behind closed doors.”

“It’s been done before, you know—coming into an upper room through locked doors to bring peace. But, on the whole, we’ve had mixed results with our appearances, really. Hypatia and Boadicea come to mind.” The Crocodile’s head drooped.

“Are you so old?”

“Not I, but what is in me.”

“What is that?” The Queen asked.

“Ah.” He paused. “It all began with us reptiles, you know. But that’s another story” The Crocodile tapped his pipe on the floor. A piece of tar fell out.

“What began?”

“Trust—as I said—O, my Queen.”

“I believe in God. That is trust enough.”

“A bit abstract, I fear, your majesty. First, trust in another fellow being; then you will understand belief in God. Don’t be embarrassed. Humans often get things like this in the wrong order. A mental disadvantage, we say. You know—just as your right ear is a bit disadvantaged because of its wiring, you humans are also disadvantaged by having concepts without experiences.” He puffed hard, sending sparks up, and finally getting a good draw again. “It’s as if you were satisfied with the smell of the marsh rather than knowing the marsh itself.”

“What do you mean? You *can’t* be a crocodile.” The Queen touched her sword. “Perhaps you are an assassin, retained by my enemies. Otherwise, how could you be here?”

“I’m not that, for sure.” The Crocodile pocketed his pipe and rolled back onto his stomach. “We just live in another realm—not so easy, I can tell you. You can see from my hide that I’ve had often had to live rough.” He raised his chin to point to light patches of scales on his side. “Looks like the bark of a swamp white oak, doesn’t it? I was talking with an oak about it last week. Oaks know all the ups and downs of things. It seems that everyone I have visited leaves me with a new scar or mark. This patch comes from a time long ago, when I made myself present for the Oaks of the Swamp. I made the usual offer. Being oaks, of course, they didn’t have your human mental disadvantage: No abstract thinkers in that crowd! They knew in their bodies what to do, and the fire that threatened them was soon smothered. It is one of my success stories.”

“And now you come to me?”

“Indeed, O Queen.”

“So what is the message for me?”

“Well, for now, let’s say it’s this: *Hearts by double motion live: receive and give.*”

A glowing log rolled out of the fire. With her sword, the Queen pushed it back over the hearth. When she turned around, the Crocodile was gone.

* * *

As the gray dawn lit the deserted battlefield of the Western March, a messenger drew up to the sentry line, dismounted, and was led into the royal tent. The Prince was surprised to see Lord Simper of Iffonly, dressed in battle fatigues, instead of his usual silks.

“Your majesty.”

“Lord Simper. My mother sent *you*? Why didn’t she send the usual courier?”

“Apparently, my Prince, the Queen desired the special emphasis of my presence.”

“Like a punctuation mark?”

Lord Simper, pretending not to hear this comment, busied himself with the vasculum containing the Queen’s letter.

“Been collecting flowers, Lord Simper?” The Prince grabbed the metal tube away from Simper and tossed it at one of his battle-weary captains, who was dozing by the door. “There’s a posy to wake you, Jack! Keep watch!”

As the captain staggered backwards, Lord Simper picked up the vasculum, pulled out the Queen’s letter, and began to read:

Dear Kered, my only son.

You ask why I have sent you to such a desolate place. What can it matter if a weak people rebel against us? A people so poor that they must daily form a line down the

mountainside to draw water from the river up to their stony perches. What you have said is true. They are no threat to us. But there is a greater threat—and a greater rebellion to put down.

I have placed you on the Western March—far from my arms that long to hold you, far from eyes that ache to see you. I have sent you into the company of men. Much as I wanted you to stay with me, I knew you would rebel. And rightly so. A prince must be a warrior. A prince who does not know hardship has nothing to give his people. One who only receives cannot value anything properly, or make wise decisions. A prince is, first of all, a giver. For this reason I give you up: that you may be properly aligned to the world, and not bent by a mother's love. When you return to me, we shall be equals, fellow warriors, strong in love and fellowship. First ruling yourself, you will then be ready to rule our people, as the heart rules the body by both giving and receiving.

* * *

Many weeks later, riding through a marshy place at twilight, slumped forward in her saddle as she returned on a long journey from the windmill farms in the mountains, the Queen was sleeping when her mount stepped into a muskrat hole. As she hit the ground in front of her horse, the Queen heard the crack of his cannon bone. He crumpled beside her, raising his head, and exhaling with a great whoosh. She rolled quickly out of his way, downhill into a bumpy hollow under a leafless tree. She felt around her and picked up one of the bumps. In the failing light, she could see just enough of it to recognize the green ball of an Osage tree—a wood good for tool handles. A wood, she thought, also good for splints. Gathering several of the straightest branches she could find, she returned to her horse, removed the tack, and used the bridle to bind the splints.

The swamp was noisy—cracklings, peeps and chirps, low whistles, and hoots. It was now completely dark. Even the stars were blotted out by ground-fog. Some of the hooting sounds she recognized. Gaths made such low, hooting sounds as they encircled villages. She took her spear and tried to stay downwind of the hoots, moving from tree to tree, and sometimes sinking up to her knees in a slurry of decaying leaves. After a time, the Gaths moved on. The Queen decided to wait until morning.

Something nudged her leg. Too heavy for a snake, she thought, wondering whether to touch it.

“You really shouldn’t wait here, you know,” the Crocodile said.

“How did you find me here?” the Queen said.

“You’re in my realm, now. Oh, you’re still the ruler, of course, my Queen. But just having something doesn’t necessarily mean that you can understand or control it. Take those Gaths, for example. You defeated them, but they simply regrouped in the swamps. You’ll find them in any direction you care to walk. It’s the same with feelings. They lie over the surface like all these leaves in my marsh, but they stay unexpressed unless someone makes them into a shape, or picture, a story or song. Once you’ve got your feelings into a story or shape, you begin to understand them.”

Tapping her spear on the ground and carefully moving her foot from side to side before stepping down, the Queen began to walk off.

“Ah, my Queen, you do the warrior-walk.”

“Better than standing there, listening to you rant,” she said. “It’s not how things feel or seem that matters, but how they *are*.”

“My dear Queen, you are knee-deep in muck, blinded by fog, and surrounded by enemies. Or so it seems to me.”

“What do you suggest? If I can only escape through conflict, then it must be so.”

“How do you come by that assumption, your majesty?”

The Queen turned sharply around and lifted the butt of her spear as if to jab the Crocodile in the eye. “You are the very one who said Gaths were all around me!”

“Oh no, my Queen. I said that they were anywhere you *walked*. What I suggest is that you ride me.”

“What? Not likely!”

“I assure you, it will be a smooth journey. Much quicker, too.”

The Crocodile peered down his snout, like a scholar looking over his glasses.

“Oh, I see. You’ve heard all those fables about going across the river on the back of a crocodile. Usually, it’s a hen or rabbit in the story. That won’t be our story.”

“No, it won’t. Because I do not intend to sit on your back.”

“Ah, me. I offered such a ride to Boadicea, as the legions curled around her camp. And to Hypatia, as the bishop screamed above the mob. Those ladies also were accustomed to control. Nothing wrong with that, of course—unless you sometimes step off into a swamp. Neither Boadicea’s winning ways nor Hypatia’s geometry were helpful in the situations they encountered. We do tend to repeat what we’ve learned, even when it doesn’t work. It’s your human—“

“Mental disadvantage?” The Queen said.

“Very good! You remembered! Now we are making progress.”

“And why should I trust you?”

“You finally asked!” The Crocodile grinned broadly, but then seemed to think better of it, and closed his mouth. “Because I love you!”

“What? I suppose you want to marry me? And then comes some long tedious story about waiting three years, or spooling flax for seven years, or going to live in a tower.”

“Any chance of marriage?” The Crocodile cocked his head to the side.

“Will you change into a prince?”

“Not guaranteed. Only the Crocodile part is guaranteed. Of course that comes with special tears—like those Mrs. Browning wrote about. You’ll see in my eyes ‘the tears of two.’”

“Suppose that we just go across the river? I’ll keep my spear, and you’ll stay a crocodile—because what I need right now is a crocodile.”

The Crocodile smiled serenely. “You can trust me to be that,” he said. And off they went.

The End

+*About the book*

Hidden Moves and Hidden Faces

And other Richmond stories

These stories are fairy tales for adults—small myths, sometimes cautionary, about secrets, hidden forces, fearful creatures, magical thinking, warnings through dreams and visions, and intuitive decisions.

The territory imaginatively explored in this work and in the author's previous book, *Frameshifts*, is not a gothic setting or dark German forest but the modern terrain of monstrous patterns in the lives of individuals, families, and society. In this territory, amazing transformations are routine.

Only *Jack and the Beings Talk* is a re-telling, but as it encompasses Google, the magic beans, and a short sailing trip with Thales of Miletus, the narrative follows a different path. In the stories about Carl, the lonely leather-worker, and David, the elderly uncle, the “hidden moves and hidden faces” are less fantastic than stubborn—like the parts of our nature that resist all denial. In the title story, about a crystal-reader in Richmond, a priest refers to our natures as prime numbers—unique and indivisible. In our era of analysis, subdivided specialties, and customization, perhaps it is funny and unsettling to find that neither zooming in nor zooming out reveals who we are better than letting our imaginations speak in words, images, and music. With humor, shifts of viewpoint, and nonstop invention, the stories will engage you and keep you guessing till the Crocodile's last message for the Queen.

About the Author

Richard Rose is a poet, musician, and writer in Richmond, who brings to his work his experiences as teacher, ecologist, composer and long time resident of Virginia. For other works, such as *Frameshifts*, his two volume novel about an imaginary region of Northern Virginia, see Amazon.com and his blog site, <http://www.frameshifts.com>.