**GRAY= reedited and sent to Susan**

**YELLOW means reedited and NOT YET sent to Susan.**

**Clayton Redfield's**

**MiddlerZ**

**( Murder & Mayhem in the Rooms of Recovery )**

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**"If you think dope is for kicks and for thrills, you're out of your mind.**

**There are more kicks to be had in a good case of paralytic polio or by living in an iron lung."— Billie Holiday**

**Chapter One—The Prologue**

**The Grisly Crime**

***It was the worst of days, it was the worst of days.* There appeared to be happening, a never-ending-thought-river of sensations associated with her present predicament. Kajon Kilgore had a sense she just might be, simply, finally, going plum crazy, her brain not able to be operating at its full potential, thinking things like, *Can there be humor in horror… healing without dogma…is there a difference between dope and alcohol…duh…yeah unless you're an idiot...do drug and alcohol addicts have to have separate self-help meetings in order to attain sobriety…duh…no, unless they're idiots.***

**She giggled some tears as her very intelligent and very young yet semi-mashed brain appeared to try to manipulate her vocal chords into mumbling something that was meant to say, *"Yeah, even seemingly very intricate things really aren't always, uhm, as they seem… I mean, my gawd, some people thought O.J. did a number and actually got away with it….Daddy never believed he did it...got away with it I mean… I remember he once said, "Nobody gets away with nuthin"…. The luckiest killers—if there really are any—are the ones who get caught and have to pay for their crime in prison…at least they have a feeling they are paying, atoning for their sins…there is a sort of salvation in that…the unlucky ones are the ones that never get caught and have to just live with knowing what they've done, what they have become, the lives they have made for themselves, what they took away from others."***

***It makes sense when you really think about it…some people really gotta' think… and think and think about it though and if this was a movie, right here, right now, man…,* Kajon thought she said, but hadn't. It was some strange process that had begun jittering around somewhere in the pain-filled, life-oozing recesses of her brain, *…well, it would start with a completely black screen…I mean black—black—pitch—black—*she felt her bottom lip wrinkle up and get stiff*—like looking into the dead center of shark's eyes, or straight up into deep space with no stars or planets, just black covering the whole screen, man….there would be nothing, totally, like deep mystery, man, and underneath it a sound; a low grinding, growling, base-line, lower and deeper and more powerful than the Jaws music, you know…Imagine it…way down and underneath the lowest imaginable bottom, but real loud, rumbling the dust on the streets, like a fucking 52 bored out Harley Hog, blauw—blauw—blauw—blauw; kind of power makes cars in the hood loaded with woofers designed to boom da hoods into submission, sound like the scaredy-cat-cowardly signs of insecurity they really are.***

***Gawd, language young lady.***

**Kajon felt she might be on a roll now and thought,*Hmmm, maybe, in the studio, this could come from several base cellos, electronically lowered way down low...below low…it'd be like multiple low—down guttural Yo—Yo Ma, over, but at the same time, scarily under—whelming, man…way, way, way down under, man…creepy…its gotta' say, revulsion, dread and terror, like Brando in Apocalypse Now…” The horror…The horror”…you know, I mean if this was a movie.***

**Her young, bloody nostrils flared and filled with a dank, warm, wet saltiness as she became part of a subtropical muck, literally.**

**Kajon was losing blood…fast.**

**(prologue to be continued…)**

**Chapter Two**

**A little over five years after a wonderful, sweet morsel of young lady—my daughter—Kajon, became among the missing, I woke up to find myself in a treatment center for what they called chemical dependency, back in the day. The counselor I had been assigned to was Connie, a small, twelve-year Navy veteran who had been brought up in the rough 'n' tumble Cabrini Green projects of Chicago during the rough and tumble fervor of the civil rights-yearning sixties. She too stereotypically loved greasy fried chicken to the degree that in her late middle-age she had become misshapen like a well-worn, dark, leathery-brown hassock. This window dressing surrounded the most loving and caring heart ever developed in a human who spent a couple of hours with me in my exit session earlier in the afternoon. In it she leaned back in her worn and torn, Cosco-bought, simulated leather chair covered in duct tape and told me I should concentrate primarily on the *sobriety thing* and take getting back into the *searching for Kajon thing* kind of slowly. She explained how the frustration and untreated grief issues are liable to trigger my need to use. My brain read this as her misunderstanding of a father’s necessity for resolution.**

**Connie was able to risk sounding cold as tons of icicles falling in wintery, almost deadly silent thuds in order to make a point of common sense. In this case, if my daughter-who would now be over twenty-was no longer among us living folk, then taking my time getting a handle on sobriety first and foremost was not going to make any difference to my baby being found any quicker. And if she was alive, Connie then asked me, "How has she been doing in *her* search for you, Daddy… Hmmm?"**

**Now that hurt.**

**Though I too had the same thoughts over the last half-decade way too many times and felt guilty about it and she was right. Us addicts know exactly how to make pain—like guilt—instantly disappear…with the right mixture of—for me—cocaine and alcohol, of course.**

**It had been painful thinking about it month after month, year after year and I smothered it with, in the end, whatever was handy.**

**Smothering begets disorders through medicating in place of process.**

**Self-medicating exacerbates serious psychiatric disorder. A disorder or disease, —I have come to understand—is something that does not promote life.**

**Here’s a crazy thought I remember having about that time. *I didn't have the tiniest clue as to what started happening after that moment, but after some time, after acquiring at least some lucidity in my life—some months into recovery—I slowly realized there had been a battle brewing among forces I wouldn't ordinarily have seen coming, nor would I have been able to fully comprehend it if I had—still don't, not fully—but I knew in a way that knowing is hunch-like, there was an imposing puzzle to be solved, maybe more than one, and a sixth-sense that I was not too far from where it would all play out and eventually unravel, sort of, not necessarily get solved; as if anything valuable in this life really ever is, I mean, in a neat and tidy manner.***

**Thought processes don’t always translate neatly into words.**

**I was loaded with an unexplainable anxiety’ which I felt would give me a simile of one of my favorite puke—words of the era; *closure*. Hasn't everyone had s feeling they are sliding around this huge rim of some kind, ready to make a slow entry into the slippery funnel that would drop them in the center of all of the main players, a new, extraordinary world; a feeling of anticipation, of new adventures, of impending doom and excitement all rolled into one?**

**Or is it just me?**

**At other times, it felt as if I had been aimed out of a large slow-motion gun, by fate. I would have to deal with it or escape; pretend it wasn’t there. I had already perfected the latter. Dealing with it on its own terms would be my new life… if I chose to live.**

**#**

**So, like I said, this was a lot of years ago. I lived in Pinellas County, Florida. Still do. The area is known for its powdery white sparkling sand and sun—drenched beaches, dotted with hundreds of just as alluring tiki bars and lounges strewn along the edges of some of the bluest, constantly lapping, life jammed salty waters.**

**The sands are dotted with hotels and large Florida-born chain restaurants, many of which were founded in the eighties and nineties for the express purpose of laundering billions of dollars gleaned from Florida's just as white and sparkling cocaine trade. Those dollars also spawned the plethora of banks and credit card companies whose primary purpose is not to serve but to first launder, then rape and pillage, mostly using the very hidden of beasts, corporate-not trial-law firms, whose primary purpose seems to be to help the rich, rob from the poor and to protect the rich from any just retaliation from the poor, get the public to think of good justice as being just *frivolous* *lawsuits*.**

**There are treatment centers and methadone clinics striddled around the county, which cope the best they can—as good as any other recovery program has ever been able to, which means almost not at all—although at a much higher profit than most long—term programs. With much of the pharmaceutical addictions created by profit—oriented folks in the medical profession and legal pedaling/ maintenance such as methadone maintenance and treatment being also, quite profitable… in addictions there is money to be made going in, maintaining and coming out, even in the occasional resulting death.**

**Some doctor's offices are like nice smelling, air—conditioned crack houses filled to the brim with white and blue—haired addicts in flowery dresses, walkers and glassy—eyed and very, very polite. Most would be appalled to find out they were, in fact, addicts.**

**The present ratio of Heroin and other addicts addicted by illegal pushers compared to licensed physicians is, Heroin, approximately twenty percent and Pharmaceuticals, eighty. Ironically, over eighty percent of all people in prison in America are there for drug related crimes while virtually none of them are doctors. Reminds me of the old saying, "Twenty—four bottles in a case, twenty—four hours in a day, a mere, coincidence? We think not."**

**As a small Godsend in the center of all of this chaos is S.R.C., The Substance Recovery Center. It survives mostly on federal funds, various insurances and donated pittances. It exists primarily as an alternative to jail for the legions of Florida's drug and booze addicts; people like me. In Florida we make up an inordinate percentage of the population. I have heard Jacksonville alone has more consumption of the drug, alcohol, per capita, than any other city in America. Maybe.**

**It's hot down here and damn humid too. Some of us seem to be of the chemical/genetic makeup where we not only have a larger than normal need to wet our whistles but also to whet, then dry out our brain cells in a never ending hot/cold cycle. There is the illusion of romance in this, a false impression this up and down process actually sharpens the edges in this muggy paradise. Booze and/or drugs, a marriage actually works… for a while is the central lie in the disease/disorder. The whetting and dulling, whetting then dulling, then dulling, dulling, then…**

**Anyone looking closely enough without making prejudgment prior to sufficient investigation, easily sees a major truth is addiction is an involuntary disease, as involuntary as any disease comes from any other diet, pleasurable or pastime behavior, presumably also with—believed by some—genetic predisposition, which includes many different cancers, diabetes, Alzheimer's, loss of sight, hearing and other senses. Under the guise of some escape and solution, at first, for a very short time, it brings about comfort and solace from fears and then loss on such a grand, long term, ruinous, unstoppable scale, ending usually in death or insanity, it is impossible to conceive of a human so deranged he or she would bring it all down on themselves voluntarily through lack of something as simply conceived and conjured up as will—power, want—power, lack of faith or any of the other many myths like… *they just do because they want to…* as if it were something actually did, outside of the fantasies of usually agenda—driven wishful thinkers, a choice.**

**So the S.R.C. treatment center is the only alternative to jail. Jails, since the majority of people are their for drug—related offenses, represents the archaic yet escalating concept of incarceration for people afflicted with a disease where society seems to have decided punishment will change the structure of one's genetic makeup or organisms get addicted to addictive substances or one can make a human mind forget what made it feel great. Makes about as much sense as diagnosing someone with cancer and then locking him or her in a box as the solution… the way we used to not too many years ago.**

**We seem to like doing this to our afflicted, so far back here, in the dark ages; a very uncomfortable and crippling comfort zone.**

**After being involved in a misjudgment as a direct result of the disease also results in a criminal infraction, marking one for life, S.R.C., as one and only alternative to jail, is a concept not usually lost on the jail's inhabitants before sentencing. The judge says something like, "Six months in the Gray—Bar Hotel on 49th St, along with its tandem life—long criminal record or twenty—eight days in S.R.C. and maybe we can do something about little addictions problem, which is really why you're here, anyway, hmmm?"**

**A wink is usually as unnecessary as a nod at this point and in most cases, the rare, caring, yet assuming judge has already placed, in a humdrum manner, the case—brief in the outgoing S.R.C. pile on the edge of his bench before the defendant has even made a verbal response. It is unfeasible to think someone would be so mentally afflicted with this disease or so defiant as some call it, or so stupid, as it may look to the uninitiated—or in my case, what might have looked like all three—as to refuse the offer of a paid—for—in—advance month with three—hots—and—a—cot, including treatment and maybe a small serving of hope, and take instead cold, hard punishing jail time. So when I, King Kilgore did just in front of God and everybody, saying—or more than likely slurring—"No, Mr. Judging Man, I won't, Buddy ol' pal. I just won't," to the kind man on the bench, whatever meant in my soaking—wet brain. There was an understandable hush in the courtroom. History was being made. It was as if either God himself, or the greatest fool on the planet had just spoken, neither of which was really true.**

**Something rare indeed had just occurred. There were a few confusing titters but no one out—and—out laughed at the weighted sadness of the event. It must have been just a pitiful scene. I have to try very hard these days to imagine it because I can't say what shred of evidence there is it ever really happened other than what I am told, tidbits here and there and hearsay, which makes my heart just bleed for me and people like me. It all seems to be so very, very unnecessary.**

**So, I was told the judge gaveled after saying, "I believe I just heard Mr. Kilgore say the S.R.C. Treatment Center. Any objections?" There was a silence. "From anybody?" The gavel dropped.**

**I have seen this judge since, in my newfound lay—vocation, and I imagine his eyes probably widened, pushing his brush—like eyebrows way up and out as if to challenge anybody in courtroom to claim they did not hear exactly the same thing. There was, understandably, complete silence. Even I, the person chosen by forces unknown to play the blithering idiot, was mute, so they tell me.**

**As this wise old and very caring judge violated my rights, with love, I am told I just cried and threw him a wet, slobbering kiss as I was escorted out of his courtroom. Must have been from my subconscious. Love, on the surface, is so hard to recognize when you spend a good part of your days inhaling the fumes from Florida—sun—simmered asphalt, but apparently, I did.**

**I was carted back to detox.**

**I spent the next couple of days trying to figure out what was going on and sometimes I felt as if I knew and yet, I didn't know, and there didn't seem to be anything I could do about it. Anyone who has been there knows exactly what I am referring to. It was a very dank and confusing dream and no matter how I manipulated the incoming information, I couldn't make it into a positive experience. I couldn't just wake myself up, find my bootstraps, pull myself up by them and march off and proudly make a good life for myself. Almost all diseases work way with humans.**

**I remember Connie—my loving hassock—said, "Remember when we all used to sit around getting high, partying, and finding humor in sayings like, 'Why do you think they call it dope… getting ripped…getting hammered?' Takes on a menacing ring on this side of the fence, doesn't it?" It seemed to make sense to some in the group. Not to me. She usually said brilliant things to me but at this I openly sobbed because this wasn't a joke and it never had been for me. I watched and heard other people *partying* but I had to try very hard to create and keep up façade. Apparently I had missed out completely on the cool part of becoming addicted. I just had a few drinks one night, something I had never done before. I liked the fact it obliterated my deep sorrows and fears regarding my great loss. It made time fly. I tried it again—the next day, in fact—and very soon, I was addicted. My choice was to drink like I always saw everyone else doing, like the advertisements showed, but the truth is I found yes, it removed fear and pain and made the time go faster and faster, but I was hooked and then when I searched, I found there was no road back.**

**I wonder sometimes when I sit in recovery meetings and hear about partying and being out there having fun, whether the people I am sitting in these meetings with really *do* understand the disease at all, because it sure doesn't sound as though a lot of them lived it… not like I did.**

**I was told I sustained well my role as blithering idiot through detox, court and then for a couple of days into treatment. If I had been any more a mess in detox though, I would have been dead. I wished many, many times in the beginning of month I was. But it got better. When you're on level, just a little bit better seems like winning the lottery. Chemical balances take a while to return. When it happens, any semblance of normality feels like a miracle.**

**Before long, the night came when I sat all cleaned up and fairly clear—eyed, healthier than I had been in a long time, in the S.R.C. lunch room along with fellow clients, on one of thirty or so, very worn metal folding—chairs arranged in a ridiculous looking, symbolic triangle pattern. We were holding hands and finishing a recited prayer I now knew by heart ended with the phrase *…wisdom to know the difference.***

**The triangular placement of the chairs represented a constant reminder when we were released, the only way to continue in our sobriety was through rooms of recovery, many of which use variations on triangles as symbols of unity and recovery.**

**I read only recently the gay world received the triangle symbol the same year one of the most famous recovery organizations, Alcoholics Anonymous, was formed. The difference was the gays were given their symbol by Mr. Macho Man himself, Adolph Hitler. It was forced upon them. Like Jews who were to be marked for segregation and humiliation with yellow stars, gay men were to be marked for the same treatment with green triangles. There are many reports some lesbians were marked with black triangles but mostly, these innocent women were tossed in with the prostitutes and the asocial, not really considered sexual beings at all; *if not heterosexual, than asexual;* kind of thinking or lack of thinking. It wasn't until twenty years later, in 1955, recovery groups all over the world adopted pretty much the same symbol. Odd, but true.**

**Among many recovering folk, the use of the three—sided symbol represents *unity, service and recovery* although there are variations on this, and the triangle is sometimes set inside a circle, which to some represents the whole world of recovering alcoholics. The circle helps in the making of jewelry renditions of the insignia on necklaces since this keeps the three sharp corners of the triangle from stabbing the wearer in the neck…I guess.**

**Rules, symbols and mottos… I once stood in a recovery meeting, which was held inside a very old Boy Scout hall on the south side. While everyone recited particular recovery group's rules, I silently read the ones for the scouts, which were mounted on a very old, cracked and shellacked piece of plywood, high above a huge board with samples of rope—knots. I thought to myself—because reciting rules and mottos didn't seem to work for me back then—*I wonder if I will get something out of chanting rules this time around*, as the group recited away.**

**#**

**The leader of our group, my last night in treatment, a counselor, said, "Good evening everybody. My name is Linc. I'm an addict."**

**The group responded in unison, "Hi Linc."**

**Linc had no ponytail, did not look anything like a run—of—the—mill bleeding—heart—liberal drug and alcohol—rehab—counselor stereotype. Linc was hard as nails with a heart of, well, not gold, but some kind of hardened—tempered steel alloy which he wielded like a sword of love. night he wore high—gloss, very slim, very expensive cowboy boots, starch—pressed blue gabardine—like slacks and a starched and pressed pink—denim shirt, his only left—ish, pseudo—yuppie—Peter Coyote—looking garment. This was topped off by a smile so wide it pushed his deep—tawny cheeks up into broad yellow—tipped almonds. There was whispering, hissing around the ranks, but Linc always triumphed.**

**"Tonight ladies and gentlemen…" as things murmured down, "Tonight we have a coining out party. This is not a coming—out party, for you souls with misplaced sexual identities of many persuasions," he joked. "You know who you are." And here he did one of his famous blurt—guffaws. "And so does everybody else."**

**There were smirks and giggles all around, then he pulled from his pocket an aluminum coin about the size of a half—dollar and placed it on his open palm.**

**"This, my brethren and sisteren, is a *coining out* party. For you very, very newbee—babies, this is a party after which is served a complimentary warm orange; some room—temperature chocolate milk and two—count 'em now—two graham crackers. Mmmmmmm, grown—up sober people food."**

**Some rubbed their stomachs in a sarcastic manner they all had learned from day one and said, almost in unison, "Mmmmm, graham crackers, grown—up sober people food."**

**I had seen him go through this probably twenty—five times in month. Someone, or two, was admitted or released almost every day. Tonight I was scared shitless as Linc continued the next part, as if he was one of those auctioneer wannabees who somehow ends up selling little plastic widgets meant for slicing and dicing vegetables, by gathering people around his table at the flea market. I always found these little guys very entertaining.**

**Linc's old saw began, "Coining—outs occur every few nights or so when someone is completing their little hiatus with us, a break from their research and development careers out there in the fine streets of Pinellas County, from their illustrious lives out there rubbing noses and chins on the asphalt. What we do is…" he held up the aluminum coin, "…we hold this flattened out, recycled beer—can here in our sweaty little addicted paws and simply pour our love, our strength, our hoping and our dreams and whatever good 's left in our coal—black little hearts and souls—and there is a lot of it here…I know—right into the center of it."**

**Some smiled at Linc's affectionate disrespect. He reminded me of a TV preacher doing this bit, but I knew he meant every stretched out syllable of it and never asked for us to plant even one little seed of faith.**

**"We pray into it, this little slice—o—metal here, and share out loud with our departing brother or sister exactly what we feel about 'em and their particular situation, sharing, hopefully, large, large packages of love. We sort of just jam it into this little piece of al—u—min—eeum… sort of spiritual—like. I like to call it," and most, having heard it before, chimed in with him, "…osmosis at its best. It's a good thing." And then there were giggles, lots and lots of giggles and then they slowly trailed off, as I remembered my last twenty—eight days there. Then my first night.**

**It was my first night in circle. I felt sad to be there. Broken. It was the lowest I had sunken since I took a job—about a year before this—believe it or not, hosting one of those all—night shopping—at—home shows on cable in front of all the gods and the whole world. Talk about hitting bottom. Bam! What could be worse? Child molester? Presidential candidate?**

**All the faces were present at first meeting were now gone, except for mine. I had started a few days earlier counting the days I had left before heading home and on to my new life but ironically, on this last night, I felt sad to be leaving, or maybe I was just scared.**

**Clients spoke lovingly of Linc, he liked to beat a dead drunk—as in beating a dead horse—'till he sobered up, with his diatribes. And so, Linc continued, going on and on and on and on.**

**I heard some folks somewhere were talking about forming a new twelve—step group for people like Linc. It will be called, instead of something like A.A. or N.A., O.O. It will be for people who can't help when they share, going on and on and on and on.**

**"The reason we do this? When you leave here and go to the local bar, liquor store, 7—11 or you might find yourself suddenly standing at the door of another jackpot at Cracker Jack's friendly, neighborhood crack house. You just might reach into your pocket for money to pay for your little feckless trek and along with money, you might pull out this coin here, by shear accident. An accident is, if you don't count the fact at least we in recovery have planned it this way.**

**You might at this point remember the one thing someone—maybe one of you—said here tonight while holding this coin. Crazier things have happened, but what you insert into this coin tonight, might keep someone from picking up a substance just once… and it might be the flip of this coin saves a life. Think about 'dat one! Hmmm?"**

**"So…" Linc said, as he flipped the coin in the air and then snatched it mid—fall to get our attention. "...make it from as deep as you can dig into those Dahk lil' hahts."**

**In use and at the same time can't stand the corny little aphorisms you hear in recovery. To this day, I feel it. Not as strongly maybe as when I first came in, but it's there. It is there. At the same time they have sometimes, a ring of truth, maybe just for the moment nor the circumstance, but something in my humanness still rankles at a lot of them. It sometimes feels, when I hear them, like I'm in some old relative's 1940s mobile home, like the ones I visited when I was a kid, and the place is filled with goofy little mementos from assorted county fairs, like drinking ducks seem to move up and down perpetually, for no apparent reason, seeming to drink out of a small pie—plate, Or shellacked wooden plaques read Easy Does It, Think, Think, Think, and First Things First. I don't trust these things people say. Again, when I was a little kid and people told me if I crossed my eyes they would stay way, or if I slouched I'd end up with rounded shoulders or the thing about hair on your palms? Then I get all grown up and my eyes are straight, my shoulders aren't rounded no matter how much I slouched—all happened is I became a better sloucher. And as for my palms, well, what's a little hair?**

**Linc said, "Now just to make sure the horse is absolutely, positively dead and pulverized into kibbles and little bits it needs to be for most of us to get with the program, listen up. Again, there are times out there when we are alone and, in the beginning it's good to have a memento along for the ride, twenty—four—seven. We are creating here a memento is the palms if our hands... blah, blah, blah."**

**One of a kind.**

**Eyes were beginning to glaze over and go dry but on Don Quixote went slaying the windmills until his wind finally waned.**

**"Tonight's coining out is for none other than Mr. King K. who will be leaving us first thing in the morning."**

**He laughed, slapped me on the back, tossed the coin in the air again and clapped his hands together rapidly, capturing it in between them as he shut his eyes and silently—I could almost see it being inserted—said a heartfelt prayer into penny—piece of aluminum. It moved me. A lot. Not I thought for a minute there was any real connection with the super—natural, but, who would have ever thought it possible to take, what Linc liked to say was no more than a recycled beer can and imbue it with such precious sentiment and meaning?**

**I don't know. Maybe you can only buy into something so silly if you have asphalt burns on your nose from scraping along the bottom for so long you have no other choice.**

**There was a smattering of applause, whistles and a few good—natured jeers, as I blushed a little and teared up like I had seen several before me do, in my four week stay there. I was a quick study. Most of it was from a sort of manufactured innocence I had acquired since getting into treatment. It is something I got by osmosis. There is the feeling of jail for a first—timer. You want to join a choir, or the Boy Scouts again, give your heart to just about any of the many assorted and very available messiahs, anything you think might help you turn things around from the degrading decline had become your freaking life. I was looking for a strength greater than just me but more importantly, greater than booze and other drugs, which is really what it is.**

**The tears rose, the ones fueled by my wanting to share gratitude and therefore recover, were real. Of course it should be noted—and I will never forget it— I had wept sincere tears of helplessness muddled with pleas for help from God, any of the Gods, for many years and when nothing happened for so very, very long, I truly believed, *if this guy or anything like him truly existed, he held no interest in me or my dilemma.* So, I was trying to let feelings flow, but it was difficult, very difficult. I had not yet allowed myself to become human and therefore, I choked on anything less.**

**I had acquired however, a modicum of simple hope which had evolved from the good things I had experienced and been taught over the preceding four weeks, and I was determined to win—I really was—and , I think, is what was squeezing out of me through swollen eye—rims, plump with salty tears. Past this point, I pretty much machined it, as I had been pre—programmed to do for so many years and held the rest of it in, which caused a burning sensation in my nostrils, behind my eyes and underneath my soul. It seared down the back of my heart; an intense, very private pain and the only way deal it was to numb it. I wanted so much to just trust, but there was going to be no way was ever going to happen again.**

**Many lines like, "I hope you remember what got you here," and, "You remind me of my dad, man, 'cept he's still using," things like , would be difficult to remember. A more memorable sharing for me was, "I hope you find her, man, 'cuz I sure would hate it if my kid got up and left for no reason, hearing nothing at all, for these years. must really hurt. Must really suck, man."**

**Man, did it ever.**

**Then there was, "Stay sober, don't drink, go to meetings, blah—blah—blah, cuz, even if you find her, or she comes back, man, what difference is it going to make if you're just drunk all the time? Blah. They echoed what Connie said.**

**All good bits and pieces of compassion, but I still felt strong emotion I had so utterly anesthetized, deep, deep guilt, guilt from me having the sole knowledge only I held, the knowledge , prior to spending years using, I had given up on my search. I had to numb myself to keep going on and then my purpose became simply to stay numb. I gave up. *I* gave up.**

**I had tried my best, determined to find what had happened to Kajon but there was such intense loss, combined with the confusion of what to do, where to turn, why is this happening, was she okay, even alive? Then even the cops didn't care after awhile, not they ever did. They said from the beginning most kids over fourteen who disappear simply have run away. They said , especially after a kid age or older has a drug/alcohol problem, in this county, the disappearing problem soars. They run away to Las Vegas or Hollywood. I'll never trust the cops either. Never.**

**So, finally there was just me, alone, having not the slightest idea of what to do. I was alone and totally powerless and it hurt so very, very deeply and I drank and used so it wouldn't hurt so much. I would stop drinking for a bit, feel great for a while, and start the search or rather, the planning of a search, over and over again. I always hit the same brick walls...the same hurt, the same pain and back into the same self—medicating and the river running rapidly under measuring—stick—of—a—bridge got longer and longer. I created all of those miles of river completely alone and had it in my head I would only be able to get out of it alone. I mean, who would be able to understand my life?**

**The legendary syndrome settled in and eventually took over my life. I was no longer drinking to quell the same pains. I had stopped looking. My purpose became staying drunk, past numb, maybe to slowly destroy myself. Punishment was in there. The times became farther in between and shorter in duration when I would sober up long enough to feel an even more severe pain, guilt again, guilt I no longer knew why I had, and then into the sauce and powder, again.**

**Alcohol is a chemical creates the illusion of warmth, security and painlessness...for a while, and then it becomes cold, insecure and even more painful than before; an even bigger problem for most.**

**I became what felt like a self—medicating, empty, robotic hamster on a wheel, running hard and going nowhere. I resigned into such an un—unique rut of inevitability. The thought process was, the more I try, the more nowhere I get. Something like , followed by self—loathing and gradually—as it is for everyone in this mess—the house of cards falls and it does so, usually in almost imperceptible, long, slow motion waves, but it sounds to the soul like an interminable crash.**

**The coining—out meeting ended with a stand up, circular—or rather triangular—Lord's Prayer. Everyone holding hands, hugs and good wishes. It was warm and a little snugly. It even felt a little real. About as real as twenty—eight—day healing gets.**

**One thing I remembered from the close of meeting was when Linc told me, "We will always be here for you, ' and 'Get a good night's sleep.' I knew he didn't mean the treatment center. He meant we—if I chose them; people like me… us.**

**I went to bed night all giddy, like a kid on Christmas Eve. I was sure the next day was never going to come. The morning held such promise, a promise of a strange fantasy of a new life, one I barely remembered, to live, day—to—day, sober. Normal. But it was exciting to think come sunup, I would be able to experience all again. It was exciting and, like anything and everything is while recuperating, starting recover, scary.**

**I fell asleep and the much—anticipated next morning was suddenly there. I got up like I had for the last month, made my small, single bed as tightly as possible with new sheets and a blanket with the tight hospital corners like they had re—taught me. As I straightened the crisp pillow case, I wondered in what repugnant state I would find my own bed when I returned home, having spent pretty much the last month prior to being admitted to treatment, swaddled deep inside it, except to go out, but only at night, for more, mostly liquid confusion. I thought of pillows infested with Palmetto bugs. Why? Those little curly Q's in my brain, still a little too tight.**

**I collected the many pamphlets, keys, and a well worn and tattered big blue book they had given me along with a small cache of keepsakes; mostly nonsensical knick—knacks and boondoggle doodads I had constructed in the stupid craft class there. Altogether, they were probably worth only a few cents, but I was told they too would be worth their weight in diamonds as keepsakes, if I were successful in my new life of sobriety. They would be a bleak, hideous reminder if I relapsed. So, I had a plaster—cast of the liberty bell, a boondoggle key chain and a coin made out of a recycled beer—can… and with this I would start a new life.**

**When I got down to the lobby, I expected to see my housemates and Linc, for what I had fantasized would be the big send off. He did say he would be there for me. The receptionist, whom I never saw during my stay because the lobby—unless you are leaving—was off limits, said Linc was with a new client in detox. He was there with me a month ago day.**

**I felt a sudden pang resembled doom and gloom, or betrayal. I felt like a small boy, ready to whimper. Vulnerable. I had no idea why I thought, really, anyone would be there for me. Then I wondered if everyone departed this way, thinking they are getting a send off and then no one showing up.**

**Linc was not into tough—insidious—love per se, but he was not always mushy and gushy in his support either. It was not unlike him, for some strange, therapeutic reason, to pull something like this. It was not unlike him to know exactly how I was going to feel walking out the door, expecting him to be there and then be standing there all—alone. He probably even knew I was trying to figure this dilemma out at this very moment. I don't mean to make him into a Yoda or anything but the guy was crafty in his caring.**

**Then I laughed. I had been there for twenty—eight whole days and never once was I part of a group saw anyone off, and someone arrived and someone left almost every day. I felt like the proverbial wide—mouthed bass had just jumped up and onto the oh—so—obvious hook. What else could I do but laugh at myself. Linc. What a joking wizard. Me, not a wizard, now on the other side of the door dealing with the knowledge I would now be on my own with only this head to guide me, the same head was not able to figure out this little scenario of solution in the first place. It was sort of a lesson the world really doesn't revolve around me. Although, mine does.**

**I remembered my first morning in detox, Linc spent hours, alone, with me. He sat forever on the cot next to me and using a lot of one and two syllable words, told me what it was like for him when he was out there using. Then he told me what happened to bring about a change in his life and then he related to me the ups and downs of his life in the many years he had been clean and sober. Maybe 's what he wanted me to remember, the first day, last moment before I walked out the door. Hmmm, duh. Crafty.**

**I bid good day to the receptionist and scooted out the door leaning forward into my new luggage—a large, green garbage bag—as if it were some divining rod leading me into an extraordinary new world. Which it was. Not having held down a full time job in several years and all income being reduced to little more than a trickle and because I hadn't been anywhere in a long, long time, there was no where to be now except home, alone, without any booze, and no dope, but hopefully, a little more hope. I felt as though I was just going to be stuck there, inside myself, without the usual party favors. I was petrified, an emotion can be reduced to mere capable fear with the right chemical solutions. Better living through chemistry, some cynically say.**

**For the first time in a month I saw my sand/dust covered 1965 Bug—eyed Triumph Spitfire parked a tad diagonally, right where I had left it after driving there, drunk, four and a half weeks ago last night. There were small clusters of leaves encircling four tires, which had very obvious, contrasting amounts of air in them. One tire was half flat and the other three were graduations up from all the way to a little low. They were all bald.**

**Actually, I did not drive there, to the treatment center, intentionally anyway. I was pulled over, drunk, on my way back from one of those Wing & Breasts restaurants. I knew from the coupons were still laying on the seat. I would find coupons for restaurants, get drunk, take the coupons to the car, drive to the restaurant, eat and drink then drive home and always, the next day, find the coupons unused still in the car. It wasn't a very sensible or organized lifestyle—this drunkenness—but it did have its consistencies. I had never been attracted to those kinds of restaurants before my using years, or since. I wonder if there's a connection.**

**Apparently, I was followed right out of the parking lot of a restaurant subtlety named, Wings & Jugs, then fairly soon pulled over to the inside of another parking lot of the county detoxification center, which just happened to be attached to a state—run treatment center. Go figger. I remember none of this.**

**They had let me come outside and put up the top up after they brought me back from court three days later. The detox was attached to the S.R.C. They kept my keys until after the coining out party.**

**I hopped in, turned the ignition and flipped on the radio as the community—run FM station—the one I lovingly have nicknamed *commie—radio*—blasted out the Saturday morning, sun—shining sounds of Bob Marley. The chonkitty—chonkitty—chonk—chonk—chonk—chonk ala Caribbean` lilts boosted my spirits immediately into a *Don't Worry Be Happy* sort of carefree optimism, which was only enhanced by the grind—grind—brrrrrrooooooom—sput—sput starting up of my *Bug—Eye's* powerful little four cylinder engine sucking fuel and oxygen through ill—tweaked English SU Carbs.**

**Tucked under the gearshift, between the seats, amidst a pile 'o' coupons was a yellow, with red and black printing, traffic ticket they had apparently issued to me before hauling me off to court. Again, not too coincidentally the court date on it was set for tomorrow, the day after the drunk gets out of treatment.**

**I looked around and noticed at least ten other cars looked as if they had been parked by skewed souls. Made me stupidly think,*Hmmm, must be some kind of system here.* I don't know how to do it delicately but whole bunches of *duhs* need to be somehow inserted here, on this first day out of treatment.**

**I wasn't fixed yet, but at least, now I knew it and although I felt just as scared—because I knew it—there seemed to be some hope.**

**Smirking at myself, I got out, slung back the rickety rag—top, plunked my thirty—something body down into the rolled and pleated, old, cracked, English naugahyde, curve—backed barrel seats, cranked Marley even further up, looked back at the front door. Nobody to say goodbye. Ever the dreamer.**

**My foot mashed the pedal enough to spit some gravel—a small spurt of resentment—then as quickly, eased up—which was an expression of my need to show, I suppose, the therapy was successful—in case anyone was watching from secret cameras or helicopters or anything—and after stopping at the K—Store to get air in my baldies—another small sign of returning sanity, maybe—I cruised out onto U.S. 19, hung a left and headed north, goin' home.**

**My foot too heavy on the pedal, the radio cranked and the wind through my hair lied to me telling I was re—entering my ordinary life. instantly changed to feeling again I was taking the very small introductory steps toward an exceptionally extraordinary world. Before the day was out, I would embark on a journey would change my life forever, but for one moment, what I smelled was freedom in the air; Florida Gulf brine mixed with truck diesel. Hmmm, mmmm good!**

**As I turned left under the viaduct, swinging onto Gandy Blvd, which connected via a long causeway and bridge, Pinellas County with Tampa, I kicked in both carbs and blared through the torching sun—stung morning. Tweaked or not, the carbs just sounded like some blare of royal trumpets were ushering in a strange and powerful era of healing, but I feared, it was going to be a bumpy ride. I squinted into the sun and screamed "Yessss," meaning I'm freeeeeeeee, all the while, inside, hoping through fear this freedom would be from every kind of dependence and also hoping somehow, my screaming, would alleviate—just a tad—the droning of almost six—year old feeling of impending doom was always there, lying on the bottom, ready to do damage.**

**I didn't see it at the time but now I know it was a subconscious nudge, one said the sustenance of this sensation of freedom I was experiencing, from here on out would be tied securely to my ability to stick to my mission—or missions—which must be sustained in order to remain sane, or at least, more sane.**

**I wanted to live.**

**Chapter Three (The prologue continues…)**

***The Grisly Crime***

**Kajon was losing blood… fast.**

***The reason is, right up front it's got to feel like you know you're going to get the shit scared outta' you, right away, or real soon anyway, like never before. You do not know when. If it doesn't seize you around this corner, then the next. Nope, it's not there. Then it has got to be around the next one. Nope, it's not there. You think, I guess there's nothing. Whew, was scary but everything is all right now. Then out of nowhere BLAM, there it is. It slams like a baseball bat to the back of the head. Yeah, like . Only, I guess wouldn't fit here. Right? 'Cuz it's not a movie, right?***

**No one answered. Kajon was alone.**

***No, better yet, it doesn't deliver like at all. It just starts out real slow and sucks you into the terror a little, teeny bit at a time all along the way. It has to be something really special, man...really special. Yeah I like .***

**Kajon was getting very excited now, about the film, or what she thought was a film while her blood was oozing in weakening pulses through her hair and down the side of her way—too—young face. She mumbled and thought she was talking for what seemed, to her, like hours. The whole process took only a few seconds.**

**"This flick's gotta' feel, right from the start, like your going to brown your Fruit—of—the—Looms. I dunno'. Gotta' draw out the suspense, way out, way out. Have to make good notes I guess. Sumpin', hmmmm? Rewrite, rewrite, rewrite."**

**Her brain would be lucidly chugging along, then just deaden right down, as if she had just been electrocuted, and after the juice was turned off, not dead, but semi—fried from the deathblow. Some physical parts of her brain were actually gone, lopped off the side of her head, while what was left, was trying desperately to take up the duties of the severed regions.**

**The exposed section of her brain was nothing but raw burger, but she didn't know it, couldn't see it, nor would anyone see it until it had become a five and a half—year—old mud—ball, along with the rest of them. Though the time was short, Kajon took as long as she could to die. It was her manner to wring the last drop of enjoyment, or experience out of everything so her final moments on the planet would be no different.**

**Some of her talking actually had been out loud but now the silence was deafening, to her one still—functioning ear. She had a quick thought she might just be high and talking out—loud off in the corner of a party somewhere, by herself perhaps, because of a strange echo—thing she had been experiencing and maybe she should curb her tongue. Being loose and loud and vulgar used to happen to her a lot when she was drinking and using but she was doing neither this time, yet here she was thinking *fuck, fuck, fuck, what the fuck, man*all over the place. *The horror!***

**Kajon was merely thinking she might be high, thinking, with what little gray matter—now mangled bubbling crimson— remained, for her to do any thinking with, slowly dying.**

**The blood trickled down her neck, making a new trail over one breast, she thought kind of sensuously, and into her blouse. A few lobes of her still wonderfully satirical brain were thinking, *ooh Baby, kind of tingles*. She giggled, painfully and devilishly through the sneered opening in the corner of her pain—frowned mouth. It was usually a fun—sneer, her trademark, which quickly relaxed into an almost death—doomed frown. It helped her brace for another searing pain and it came.**

**BAM!**

**Her teeth mashed together into a powdery paste to absorb the shock of inescapable seizure; a ruthless jolt. It stopped as fast as it had started. Its purpose, merely to shock her into a painless coma, but instead she peacefully slackened and waxed still into a dark, dead calm designed to conserve and regroup, true to her natural refusal to succumb. She never gave up.**

**Her hands were wedged to her sides. She couldn't reach her breasts—the tickling. She had had them for only a short while, being fifteen and a bit of what she thought was a late bloomer. She called them her little puppies, as in, *you like my little puppies?* A phrase she had uttered through drunken but adorable lips, only a few times in her short life, during as few very intimate moments, seeking assurance and to please, but mostly assurance. She liked them and hoped to grow them a little more, *perhaps improve on their shape somehow*, she thought.**

**The little puppy on the right pressed hard against the slivery wood as she took a deep breath causing it to buoy a small trickling of blood up, over and down into her crunched cleavage, the same blood had only minutes before pumped through the veins it now glazed. It pooled, dripped between them and continued puddling, surrounding them, like scarlet, custom—fitted coasters, slowly drowning the gold medallion had been placed around her neck only moments before. What was visible was only half of an insignia of some kind…**

***(prologue to be continued…)***

**Chapter Four**

**The last days prior to arrest, detox and then treatment—which I romantically refer to now as my first three steps—I hoped would have been the last memories, what there were of them; of a bleary—eyed existence, one had hovered around long enough on several low qualitative levels, the two most memorable of which were pain and oblivion. The pain was from the loss and turmoil over the disappearance of my Kajon and pain was quadrupled when no one could, or would, try to find her any longer. Like I said before, they saw her, as a young drug—addict and repeat drunk, like her dad had eventually become.**

**No one seemed to care about her, about me, and oddly, I think its fair to say I, in my drunkenness, eventually joined them; Not in thinking but certainly in my actions. Oblivion came about after a while. Addiction and irretrievable loss eventually wears the soul down to a nub.**

**The third low level was fear and then it was compounded by a different sort of fright, more of an anxiety seemed a little healthier, in comparison, the trepidation this not—so—healthy—terror might return and once again take over control of my life.**

**I had gone through most of the symptoms of loss. I lost my daughter and knew not where or why. I lost help from the authorities and did not understand how or why. I lost my career, my home, my money, my self—respect and finally, the very last strand of my dignity. While quelling the pain I became addicted to the solution and eventually lost everything but my little, patched up Triumph. I lost my three—story townhouse perched up on the white sands overlooking the Gulf and moved into a somewhat patched up, rickety old mobile home which, oddly, matched the car quite well now.**

**I roared into the Mobile Home Park. Okay, it was an old trailer park. Time, I guess, I practiced at least a little honesty after so many years of perfecting a lower—than—snake's—belly—Jerry Springer—guest image of myself. I roared in raising dust from the sandy drive; an old behavior. Maybe for the first time, I noticed neighbors—mostly older residents—looking on, through the dust… in disgust. Like, Oh great. Look who's back. I could almost see the words form in the wrinkles on their old foreheads.**

**I slowed too dramatically, smiled, waved apologetically and pulled snail—like down to my trailer and into the wrenched and bent carport. I got out, looked at them all, smiled, bowed and announced, "I am so sorry. I will never do again." They were absolutely stymied, as was I. They froze and a few of them managed to squeeze out a squeak of a smile before turning, shaking their heads and walking inside.**

**The trailer was so dilapidated it leaned like a stepped on tuna can. I thought there was a distinct possibility it smelled like one inside too. I reached in the car, got the bag 'o' belongings in hand, headed toward the door, head down, but then stopped, noticed the dead plants, mostly Coleuses—surrounding my big old tuna container—grabbed the garden hose, turned on the tap and watched as molasses brown water pooped out onto the already dead plants. I was aware I was still performing for the stymied audience whom I knew was looking through their curtains at me, the park—drunk, now watering his plants with Coca—Cola. I hoped it was, at the very least, a better presentation than they were used to seeing over the last few years from me. I didn't want to think about it.**

**After the water ran clear, redeeming myself to my neighbors, I soaked the thirsty plants almost to death. When I finally did dare to go into the trailer the heat hit me so hard I said in my best ancient Steve Martin impression, "Exuuuuuse me." The intensity of the heat was not to be outdone, but actually enhanced by the ripe stench of my former—hopefully—petri—dish existence. The odor was left—out—in—the—sun—sardine—can strong.**

**I rushed to open windows, turning on fans, AC, everything. I even fanned with my hands, gagged, trying not to breathe in too deeply. Ah, home.**

**The sink was filled with scummy, moldy dishes. The trash was overflowing with Gin bottles, some beer cans, and cigarette butts, small plastic Baggies, etc. and ashtrays were way too full. It had only been a month since I had been in there, yet it seemed like a lifetime ago.**

**The message window on the answering machine was blinking frantically which instantly brought back agoraphobic feelings, the reason for the machine in the first place. There had been dire fear involved in opening the door to unexpected knocks or answering the chirping of the unexpected phone call once alcohol and coke had gotten its grip on me. Now, I guess a little health invaded my psyche because I started to feel a bit excited, thinking of the adventure lay in a whole a month of collected phone messages.**

**I spoke to the little robot as I made my curious, slightly titillating approach, gagging a little as I acclimated to the environment I had so long ago created. I said, rubbing imaginary palms in my brain together, secretly hoping for all the wrong kinds of escapades, "Been twenty—eight days."**

**I pressed the button and it spoke back to me with perfect comic timing, "The time is nine—forty—five A.M. You have three new messages."**

**Now, three messages in twenty—eight days has a tendency to force ones out—of—whack little ego to take a tad more than small right—sizing sips from the humility trough. Because there were no close friends there to berate me. Friends were a memory from my past. I said to myself, "You are one popular guy." Groping for a modicum of purpose or at least something to do as I actually played, as I grimaced, the first message.**

**A woman's voice said, or rather slurred, "Hey man, where the fuck are you baby?" She sounded drunk with a smoke—graveled voice, not unlike the actress, Bea Arthur, but I had no idea who it was. Must be blackout drinking they talked about in treatment like what happened on the night I was arrested. Something to be thankful for. Maybe.**

**"I think you have my number. Don't tell me you stood me up again." She did not sound very secure. "You Mother..." it beeped. Thank goodness for cheap machines with thirty—second messages and apparently built—in censoring mechanism.**

**It beeped on to the second message. It was the same voice.**

**"Its in the fucking phone book, my number. Fred? You there, Fred?"**

**Not King, thank God. "Answer the fucking telephone Fred, you chicken—shit," beep.**

**Not exactly a welcome home message, but nevertheless, funny. There I was, incarcerated for a month. I come out and there are only three messages on my machine and the first two aren't even for me. It felt like an old Woody Allen joke.**

**I then remembered all the footsteps stuff I read and heard about while in S.R.C. Things got pretty religious and mushy in there at times. There are poems, calendars and posters depicting one set of footsteps left in the sand and the implication is they belong to God and he was there all along while we were going through our addiction(s), carrying us. led me to wonder, if he was carrying me all along the way, how did I get so freaking lost? It does get a semi—well mind to thinking.**

**So now with this person on the answering machine, the thought crossed my mind, what if this is God doing this? Like when your drunk and you can't dial the right number, maybe God has it arranged so although you don't know it at the time, you are really calling newly recovering alcoholics, like me, to remind them of what they probably sounded like.**

**Either , or maybe my name really is Fred.**

**I laughed at my silly little scenario and it felt good to laugh, at myself, at this insidious disease. Disease. I didn't even know whether it was a disease or not. I just knew I got hooked. 's all I knew and it made me sad and lonely and helpless. I was slowly, probably subconsciously committing suicide. Long time since I stood alone, thinking, laughing with myself, sober.**

**Message number three, "Fred, God damn it..."**

**I fell on the floor laughing.**

**The smell in the place was either sailing out the windows or I was getting used to it. I lit a cigarette and leaned back against the wall. The wall gave a little. I realized in all the time I had lived there, I had never stood and just leaned on one of the walls, or if I did, I didn't remember it. Same thing.**

**Over the last couple of years I guess I laid on the floor a lot, staggered around, bumped off the walls, crawled back and forth to the porcelain goddess, and passed out on, in front of, wrapped around or half inside it. When you are newly sober, you notice odd little differences occurring in your life.**

**You notice birds in the trees, is, after you start noticing trees of course. You notice their songs, and the fact the birds and their songs are two different things, things ordinary, normal earth people take for granted——which is some strange thinking of course——but I would soon find there are those who understand.**

**I knew, watched and calculated over the last five—plus years all of my thinking capabilities were slowly deteriorating like a fine tapestry degrading from exposure to all the wrong elements. I will never understand this but there wasn't a damn thing I could do about it. The thing non—addicted people understand the least about addictions is this; one of the things we still have in common. The strongest part of the disease is it refuses to allow you to not feed it, even though it is destroying you. Weird, huh?**

**I took a deep drag on the butt, a satisfying coating of nicotine waxed comfortably inside my chest. Still leaning on the elastic wall, contemplating the ceiling, and I noticed another thing. There were water stains and sags. I reached up and touched my finger to one spot and it went right through the material allowing a small amount of rusty water to emerge in a plop and then just drip. Maybe it was time to start making a few changes.**

**"Nothing changes if nothing changes," is what they told me in there, and of course, nothing does.**

**I looked over at the phone list of friends—who never called—next to the telephone and for the first time realized this action, automatically looking over at the phone list, was being done purely out of habit. It felt for the first time, robotic… again. Apparently, every time in the past I had told myself there was work to be done, changes to be made, I went into a programmed escape mode, looked at the phone, then the list, called someone and dodged my resolve. was my process. Old behavior I hoped. The problem was, they said in treatment, old behavior isn't old behavior at all if you are still doing it. Hmmm.**

**There was only one thing left to do at this point. I unhooked the list from its stiff, yellowing and crackled cellophane tape attachment, wadded it up and tossed it on the trash heap. This caused a chain reaction because it was, for the grand steeple of trash, the straw broke the camel's back and the trash heap toppled, butts, bottles, cans and all.**

**My house had developed a sense of humor in my absence and was now nudging, no, ganging up on me screaming for change. I said aloud, "Okay, I get it. I guess it's time to clean up." I swear it gave me a look said *ya'* think? This was the day I nicknamed my trailer/can, Amityville.**

**Just as I swung around, I caught in my peripheral vision something made me hear an almost audible, Hey there, Daddy. It was a shelved, framed picture of Kajon posing along side me at a fundraising carnival—day a few miles north, up in sparkling, downtown Clearwater. She had just successfully drenched her old man in the dunk—tank and was all beaming with victory. Yuk, Yuk, I drowned my daddy.**

**The sight of it made me feel pain, emptiness, and loss. I noticed my hand draped around her bare shoulder giving a little squeeze, my fingers slightly depressed into the flesh. I tried to remember what felt like. What did it feel like to have my little girl right there, live and in person? I looked at my eyes in the picture, Kajon's eyes, the way we all do when one leaves or has passed on, looking for a sign, a twinkle of what was to come but seeing only the human helplessness. None of us have any idea how short our time here and with each other is. There is no way we can calculate, use the time well, have any idea what is or is not to come. Sometimes I wonder how we all keep from being scared shitless every waking moment. She used to look at the back of my head when I would get mad and walk away, "No huggies?" I am happy to say, this always made me buckle.**

**I stood there a moment and remembered her clean smell, her giggles, her foul little mouth—God she loved to swear—and I remembered her coming home one night, probably from one of her meetings and she said, "Dad. A man got on my ass tonight about my language. He said one's language is in direct proportion to the level of one's sobriety. He asked me what I thought about so I told him. 'I think is the dumbest fucking thing I ever heard.'**

**I am afraid this sent Daddy into hysterics because I thought she was funny and this was a very bright observation. As a matter of fact, there are probably more ways to use the word FUCK than any other word in the English language.**

**I giggled, eyes filled to the brim as I realized all I have now are these framed pieces of paper covered with chemical images showing what she used to look like along with bushels of lush memories.**

**God! How was I going to do this? How was I going to find her? Its one thing to make all of these plans about how you are going to take the world by storm once you are out of treatment but then you're out and you suddenly know what all the fear was about. It's well founded when you're finally out and alone. The time has come… to do something**

**I wanted, at second, a drink or just about anything numbing, but this time instead of tripping out the door and down the street to the nearest liquor store, I reached into my unpacked satchel and pulled out a recovery—meeting schedule. I checked the nearest meetings and times and glanced up at the clock, which now was much closer to ten. There was a meeting a few blocks east of the park, at noon. Suddenly, I hated the thought , like they told me in the jitter—joint, I might have to hang with these people, go to these meeting the rest of my life. Like I had anything better to do.**

**I surveyed again the mess was my abode, snickered and thought; well probably the best way to start 'cleaning house' in my messed up life would be...to, um, clean my house. So I grabbed a bucket. Of course, I didn't have any cleaning fluids. Mr. Cocaine and Mr. Alcohol had been around for a few years but Mr. Clean had never seen the inside of this house, at least not since I'd lived here. So it was a bucket, a handful of caked old laundry detergent, some old rags, and a brush.**

**The first thing I had to do was to draw some water and clean the bucket. It was kind of funny. I had to clean the bucket I was going to use to clean the rest of the house with before I could clean the rest of the house. It jogged in my memory an old Lily Tomlin line went something like; I went to the store today and bought a wastebasket. They put it in a bag for me. When I got home, I took the wastebasket out of the bag and put it in the wastebasket. Life holds such deep irony.**

**I switched on the radio looking for Rush Limbaugh because listening to his show always makes me angry, almost as angry as listening to a completely narrow, one—sided liberal point of view radio host. Extreme right wing, extreme left, both so very, very stupid. Nowadays, even extremely moderate is starting to irk me, everybody bailing away from his or her ideals in order to capture the middle, where the money is. Always, the money.**

**So, I guess it's just me. Any stance or belief system eventually becomes so unthinking, robotic and goose—step—like, it just makes me want to, I don't know what. Puke or clean the world maybe. Look Mom, I'm cleaning the world.**

**I just use these poor little talk show hosts. I'm a user. If they only knew their real purpose. To clean floors in run—down trailers, faster. Yeah. could be their new slogan. At least they'd have a purpose. But it was too early in the day for Rush. And Ralph Nader and his Green Party didn't have a talk show, yet, so I just got angry about having to spruce up ye old sardino can, angry because I had been reduced, or rather, had reduced myself (chosen to) somehow, live in this debris for several years and finally I just got angry the looks, as well as the smell of the place was such a blatant metaphor for what my life had become. It's embarrassing when you look at something like this and realize this is your life, your dream, you made it all happen. Or was it the disease?**

**I had no idea where to start, in my life or in the cleaning of the can. They told us in treatment not to worry about anything. Just don't drink and go to meetings. Okay, I'm not drinking and there isn't a meeting 'till noon. So I started at the tops of the walls and cleaned down to the bottom. Then I started on each end of the kitchen counter and I cleaned over to the sink and down into the drain and thought about the disgusting life I had created and I wanted to crawl down the pipe and, man, talk about wanting to pull the river back under the bridge. Cleansing, starting over, getting things straight, were words just bounced all around in my scrambled brain but even though the more I thought about it, the more impossible getting it all right seemed, until I noticed as my hands got rawer, my place got cleaner.**

**It was going to take a lot of hard work.**

**I finished a thorough cleaning of the top of the range and around and inside and underneath the burners. Next, I opened the oven and very quickly let it spring shut. I opened it again, very slowly this time, watched the light go on, aware of the soft stretching of the spring in the door and almost went into shock. I guess I had expected to see something like Dante's Inferno, all crud and guts, worms and such, but I was shocked because it was the most pristine several cubic feet in my entire trailer. It was a sort of bonus. I guess the many people who had lived there before I came along may also have been people just like me; not really big on swilling booze, snorting coke and baking blueberry muffins simultaneously.**

**I opened the refrigerator, wishing for the same kind of miracle but instead was met with four or five somewhat living things, as I remember, which may or may not have been in a former life, a half—empty open jar of Dijon mustard—sans the Rolls Royce—and three green and fuzzy oval modules wrapped in cellophane and a, what I thought might be a petrified carrot. The fuzzy oval things, I think were, in a former life, Kaiser rolls.**

**I was caught between a laugh and a gag so I gagged and then when I got accustomed to the sight, I laughed and as I looked up, my eyes came to rest on the clock. I had an eerie feeling the move of my head, neck and eyes upward, was subconsciously programmed. system thing again, from treatment. Gotta' make first meeting. Maybe something was working.**

**For the moment, everything in front of my eyes was still disgusting, and it really did seem, as I spruced up, difficult to believe I might return to my former living standards, but who knows? Truth is, I've heard it said people change slowly… if at all.**

**Time was slipping by quickly, me having all this fun, and according to meeting schedule they gave me, approximately a six—minute walk from my humble mobile abode, sat a two—story house nestled in a section east of what was known as Snug Harbor. The place had been turned into a halfway house and was open for meetings at noon and at eight o'clock at night. I finished up, not bothering to dry things too thoroughly knowing if I just let it set for a couple hours with the breeze going through the windows, it would dry on its own and when I came back, there might only be the detergent smell. Of course, once the cleaning smell was gone, who knew what odorament would be left?**

**Whatever, I could make a meeting—which would make Linc happy—but it would also give me a feeling of accomplishing a preliminary step, then I could spend the rest of the afternoon whizzing through the rest of the house. Also, when I returned, Rush guy would be on, piss me off and fuel me on to the finish line. What a concept. A right—wing extremist helping people, a liberal concept to be sure, to help one get through the oh—so touchy—feely abyss to recovery. Strange how the mind works when it has not been working well for so long.**

**My final scrubbing made me fantasize like a child, a subconscious assurance if I cleaned the house, my whole life would then be A.O.K. I knew this was not true of course, as an adult, but there is child—like thinking goes on in our psyches when we work at it no matter what our age, and it helps our dreaming for the future.**

**I was getting nervous.**

**Chapter Five: (The prologue continues…)**

***The Grisly Crime***

**What was visible was only half of an insignia of some kind.**

**Kajon could not raise her hands to relieve the tickling because her elbows were jammed against the solid wood. She was pinned in with slivery planks above her and more below her, everywhere.**

**Claustrophobia blew panic from her diaphragm outward but it quickly settled. There just was not enough oxygen left to fuel the rage, the horror.**

**Kajon did not know where she was or what had happened to her, just hints of flicks; strips of film lying around the floor of her psyche. She resigned and relaxed, then in the same moment braced for the next, dreaded whatever it might be, not knowing when it would hit. It seemed to wait, let her think, find the needed strips of film, screen them, set her up for a little hope and then hit hard again.**

**She followed her pastime — as she did with many stressful situations in life — of treating the experience as if it were film, a movie, or rather, a script. Life, real life, had the makings of a movie for Kajon, but she didn't think most of it could be a good one without a lot of rewriting; every morning — or reality — being a similar scene to yesterday's offering. She thought from a very young age she could change the scenes ran daily in front of her eyes and she finally did manage to do , for a while. Then it just became, constantly, rewrite, rewrite, rewrite.**

**She had been doing this intra—cranial cinematic improvement on life since she was about eight when she woke up to find her dad sitting at the kitchen table with a short note laying in front of him, his head in his hands, his fingers probing into his eyes searching for something; comfort, relief, maybe just some reason. Her mother had vanished. The years followed brought not one word from Mom, other then one note.**

**It said she had taken off with a man from New York City, a heroin addict and playwright who had written a much hailed play was a hit to all the pseudo—hip people in the off—off—Broadway world. The play called Lil' Angels, was an in—depth and very understanding, even sympathetic look at child molestation, from the molesters point of view.**

**It always confused Kajon, how this man, somehow looked so good to her Mom she abandoned her own little angel to be with someone like him.**

**Kajon's first rewrite on reality was it must have been the heroin. It couldn't be her mother was a horrible person and therefore attracted to horrible people who write horrible entertainment about other horrible people who do horrible things to innocent little children for the pure enjoyment of audiences made up of even more horrible people who pay to see a home—wrecking heroin—addict—playwright flip his artistic boogies on the wall just to make people in a theater go 'Eeeew,' so they could then all retire for the evening to the buots of Manhattan and converse with each other — quite academically of course — in order to form the proper artistic understanding of this misunderstood playwrights 'milestone—of—the—theater—presentation.'**

**Rewriting changes things… for a while…**

***(prologue to be continued…)***

**Chapter Six**

**I scrubbed myself up in the shower, patted on a little Cologne—I have since stopped using stuff too—was unusually aware I smelled the alcohol in it, stumbled out the door and down the white, rusty wrought—iron—grated steps. I noticed the step—way had separated from the trailer. It probably happened some years ago but I just then noticed it. It was as if all the time I had been there over the past few years, I hadn't really been there and little things like the condition of those steps—the entire place——were proof.**

**I walked down the sandy drive through the park, the one I used to have trouble navigating late at night because there just wasn't a smooth square yard on it anywhere. Not it was bumpy or rut—worn necessarily, it had these wide, smooth ravines , if you were in a car going five miles an hour, it took you softly up in the air than down into the deep dip of a hard sand bowl, where there was often—times a puddle, then smoothly up in the air again and down into another one. Walking home from drunk, late at night, with no streetlights to guide me, was a memorable trip. I learned where the hills and valleys were but there was always water, somewhere would surprise me. I wondered how it would be negotiating it in the dark, sober.**

**'s the way the mind thinks when you are new to not drinking. It wonders soon how different every little seemingly insignificant thing is going to be. Will I listen to the same radio stations, like the same sitcoms? What will sex be like sober? You know, the important things. I mean, will the sex be with another person or what? Things like . I was starting to find myself entertaining again.**

**I made it out to the main road, the boulevard, and walked toward the bridge. I wasn't sure exactly where this big house was but I knew from the number it had to be about halfway down the block on the left hand side just across from the back lot of the local TV and radio station.**

**Several minutes later, almost there, I saw a large hedge coming up, too high to see over. Just as I passed it I looked to my left and saw probably forty people all standing on a huge wrap—around porch. I swear it looked like every one of them was smoking a cigarette. It was instantly weird site for some reason. I expected at any moment to have Rod Serling step in from the wings to tell me the introduction to a story about these forty huddlers on a veranda, there, for apparently no reason whatsoever. Appropriately, it was set in its own surreal, porch—surrounding fog, the smoke. feeling in the air should have been a clue to me , although it is true most of the people there were trying to get better, or stay better, as I have long since learned, this was not a center of wellness. It was called the House of Assisi. I still don't know why.**

**What the hell did I know? I had passed three very open bars on the walk down and although, to be honest, place did not look any better than any of those dives but no one there had a drink in their hand so I just turned on up the driveway. Just as I planted my foot down on the first munch of gravel, before even the first sound of foot—in—gravel—crunching began, a young man about half my age stepped from behind the hedge dressed in a long, black trench coat. He thrust out his super—splayed hand and said, "I'm Scott I'm an alcoholic. And you?"**

**At a loss and trying to bring my heart—rate down, I wanted to say something stupid like, nope, my name's not Scott, but I knew from experience my deep appreciation for absolutely stupid, bone—dry pun—wit, in times of stress and sometimes sorrow, is lost on most people. On newly sober people, as my friends from Brooklyn say, Fuggetabowdit. It just sends them away rolling their eyes and clucking their cheeks. Then again, it does send them away. I mean, is something.**

**I choked, not intimidated but yeah, frightened, I guess would be the word, off my guard. I needed guard. I needed, I thought, to be on my guard.**

**"I may ... a ... my a ... what... heytherehihowyadoin?" is pretty much how my blistering wit expressed itself this time, answering young Scott.**

**"I said my name is Scott and I'm an alcoholic. Who are you?"**

**I detected, for the first time, an elevated voice, 's how young he was. He saw me, made a judgment, older guy, and his eyes betrayed him by telling me he was thinking something like, Omigod, you are a lot older than me and are probably deaf, losing your liquids on a regular basis or both and now what am I going to do? Probably the way I looked at people my age when I was his age.**

**For some reason, I didn't answer. I froze and his timber, as it rose, was of an ugly overseas American trying to make himself understood in English in the back roads of Tanganyika as he yelled at me, "Scott, sir. My name." It's hilarious to think back on but I couldn't laugh at him...aloud.**

**"Sir. I'm Scott."**

**I wished I had a large brass hearing—horn at moment I could pull out and shove in my ear and say, Eh? Like characters do in cartoons. They can pull props from thin air. Ah, if life were only a cartoon.**

**I took his outstretched hand because it was, after all, the neurotic thing to do. My heart started beating fast, fear of the unknown, like I was going to be asked to join a cult, give my heart to Jesus or sign up for Scientology or worse, Amway. Even though I had just been dragged out of a rut and retrained for living—for a month—I thought for the first time I did not want to be sucked into this whole recovery program thang, but the dilemma I faced was this. I knew these crazies knew how to stay sober, or at least was the buzz, and the truth was if this was true, I needed them. I was pretty sure I did not know how to stay sober all by myself.**

**Of course on top of truth is another one, less endearing, I had screwed my life up so much, there really wasn't anywhere else to be; no one else would have me. I knew this but wasn't accepting it fully, so while letting go of Scott's hand, I just pretended I was a deaf, pants—wetting old guy, all the way up into my thirties now and turned my head away Max—Headroom—fast, for my own entertainment, and commenced escaping toward the recovery house thinking, man, this guy Scott is really creepy, which he wasn't, I mean, not much. He was just a young lost kid who was willing to go to any lengths to get/stay sober, even if it meant coming off a little creepy to some older fart.**

**I thought about it for a second more and decided, yes, I did want to get sober. But I also wanted to get away from this little creep. So, I did.**

**On the way up to the house I felt as if my escape was going along just fine but then I lifted my head and saw forty more people, not a hell of a lot unlike Scott to my eyes except, no trench coats.**

**I didn't know what I was escaping into. Everything looked different than in the treatment center. I knew no one was going to tell us when bedtime was anymore, no three hots on the table at the same time every day and meetings would available to me from only my own initiative, not because it was posted on the wall with counselors roll—calling to make sure you were in attendance and if you weren't and it if this happened repeatedly, it was said, it was back to the county jail for you. I just hadn't planned on the first meeting place I attended being the exact opposite of what I had imagined even though I had been well trained as to how unpredictable life could be.**

**I turned my head slightly to check behind me, probably for another escape route. The Blues Brothers on a rescue mission from God would have been perfect right then and there since, sincere but still a little bit creepy, little Scott was still on my tail like a good little codependent/addict, trying to show whoever it was directed him to do this, no doubt was thinking it good for his sobriety, told him he should prop himself out at the edge of the lawn like a sober but trench—coated lawn jockey, sans silver ball, he would be doing his best to welcome (capture) people; he was going to any lengths for his sobriety. And he was. He really, really was, no matter what I thought.**

**Recovery meetings and groups have this sponsor system. Some say it is sort of a buddy system except one buddy is the leader and the other buddy follows. Not much of a buddy system I guess. So, actually, it isn't anything like a buddy system at all. The buddies never change places. The system is designed for guidance, free guidance, unprofessional guidance, but because we are working with human beings here, it takes as many forms as do other ideal relationships such as husbands and wives, partners, doctors and patients, priests and alter—boys, politicians and, well, whoever's handy.**

**I have often thought it must be so embarrassing to have a politician for a mother or a father. It's a very difficult thing to hide. I mean, everybody must know. Right?**

**Anyway, at this particular halfway house and in their meetings, there was an unusual practice. New members were expected to sponsor someone within three days of putting down their last drink or drug. The belief was the new person could not and would not stay sober unless they were helping someone else achieve sobriety, almost immediately.**

**I have thought someone just coming in would have to be so very insanely deep into this disease in order to buy into concept. On the other hand, if you are a person who is ill, finding a person who is able to stay sober for three days—something you may have been incapable of accomplishing for many, many years—just might seem like a God—sent miracle, who's to say?**

**I used to call this system the old blind—leading—the—blind system. I was (was?) a tad cynical about it, snickering at an image conjured up by the concept, similar to of a person walking into a wall being followed by another person who walking into a wall and they are all part of this worldwide club of people who, hand—in—hand, have spent year after year, sometimes decades, walking into walls, but together. They could be called Wall—Walkers Anonymous, or W.W.A.**

**By sharing their walking—into—walls experiences at meetings they may somehow, somewhere along the line, learn how to walk around the wall—at least some of them do—and then they spend the rest of their lives talking about experience to new people who come in who are still walking into walls who may also be in desperate need of a different route.**

**Funny, I am sitting here thinking this and remembering how I think I used to feel about it and while I am describing it, it actually sounds like a pretty good analogy. Either I am getting ready to relapse or getting very well. Fine line. I had better get to a meeting. Poor us.**

**Truth is, you have two bent, sometimes completely broken brains trying to help each other out and although it may seem futile to the normal everyday, what they call in the rooms, Earth—person, normality plays a very small part in any assessment. Two broken winged birds may never get completely off the ground together but they could at least, by joining forces, theoretically, stop flying around in circles, which is a start. Not normal, no longer helpless, still crippled, then, sometime down the line, the hope of maybe even being a little useful.**

**When one's nose has been scraping and inhaling the asphalt for a long enough period, a slight tilt up of the head can sometimes be a grand improvement. Some might even call this a miracle.**

**I ignored Scott whom I had already, secretly, though darkly, nicknamed Columbine because of his mid—summer—black—trench—coated attire. I kept my stern and frightened mask aimed straight ahead. Marking out the last few steps toward the house, I imagined he stopped at some point and just stared at my back as I made my way up to the steps. Poor kid might have been wondering how on earth he had blown it, especially if he himself had been corralled in the driveway in the same manner when he first arrived? Probably thought, Sheeit! Old people! Damn!**

**I was now actually mounting the steps and I remember thinking halfway up, just three more steps, King. Then I remember the thought immediately followed, what do I do when I get to the top? Always projecting.**

**Now this may seem like weird thinking to normal people, but to the newly sober, thought processes take strange little routes of their own through a Swiss—holed brain hasn't been exactly up and running for many years.**

**I noticed everyone had a cup of coffee and cigarettes so half the quandary of my need to acclimate was quelled so I took out a cigarette and lit it. I looked to the nearest person who looked to be the least scary and said, Tonto—like, "Where's, um, coffee?" Almost a complete sentence. I guess it was fear of the unknown I was feeling but it was fear, nonetheless. I felt insecure and of course one has to take into consideration I did still have one of my hands empty. There are props one needs to feign well—being. 's okay. They told me when I left treatment I was merely a month old (a measly baby in sobriety years) and there would be times I wouldn't act much older. Wah!**

**He nodded the route to the coffee was through the door, of course. I felt like I was acting like Detective Colombo, at the beginning of an episode, stupid and slumped in the corner, except of course, for my tongue, which was well wedged into my cheek.**

**I went inside and saw a young woman with huge, round and beautiful 1965 Mustang—blue eyes. She wore a bright—pink silk top, bright—pink stretch pants and gold plastic slippers. The colors of everything she wore were not normal colors. They were K—Mart colors. The kind they saturate their clothing with, the clothing is manufactured to sell, not to last.**

**She stared across the coffee urn looking nowhere in particular trying to hook a very large black cup of coffee into the same hand held a very long, pink—papered, gold—filtered cigarette. It was the kind of outfit made me wonder what her goals and dreams were. I smiled and gave her my pleasant, "Hello. She recoiled almost instinctively when her eyes met mine as a snake might recoil from a flame.**

**This triggered something one of my counselors had shared during a group meeting. The discussion was about myths associated with alcoholism and drug addiction. I happened to say one of the things I noticed as the years went by, along with my addiction, part of the baggage I had acquired along the way, was a loss of some important emotions; mainly empathy; something still missing in my humor.**

**When Kajon disappeared it almost killed me. Alcohol helped alleviate pain. When people around me or people I loved were hurting, it didn't bother me as much as it used to before I drank. I easily rationalized this whole, changing situation as something happens to people as they get older, and moved on. I was even starting to get used to the loss of Kajon, my own kid.**

**Finally I was no longer drinking to quell the pain. I drank to feed the addiction to drink and was . What was once my solution had now become my affliction and a pain could not be quelled.**

**This counselor said this syndrome was called, something like, alcoholically induced psychosis. She said it was very common for people to lose, after years of using, the ability to emote normally, especially in the empathy department. She told us not to worry about it however, because it all but comes totally back. She also added there were several therapists around the country who were convinced this area of recovery was only available to men. They believed women could not retrieve much of their emoting—abilities. The counselor said it was unfortunate if these therapists passed any of these lies onto their sincere, recovering female patients because, she said, "This is a load of hogwash and who knows the damage could be done if some well—meaning, very ill woman really believed she would never have empathy for another human being and there wasn't a damn thing she could do about it".**

**Indeed.**

**There wasn't any reason for me thinking anything about this except this woman, the pink lady, being the first one I ran into in the rooms, seemed to have more than a drinking problem—like I didn't. I thought my fear factor and paranoia were high.**

**I helloed her again and she slammed her eyes away and down very quickly, her coffee jilting, spilling a couple drops on the floor. She did not return the hello, but finished filling her cup, and walked past me as if I was some dangerous old man. Maybe she knew something I was yet to learn about myself.**

**There would be more signs this was not the wellness center I once thought it might be and it was odd I would have such an expectation unless you consider was exactly why I was there; I was not well, so why I expected everyone else to be? But I wanted to be and I knew no matter what, if I was going to make this thing work and be sober—long enough to find my kid anyway—I was going to have to find some way to make a commitment to this loony bin.**

**I had been beaten to a pulp by this disease and I wasn't at all sure I could take another round with the champ. I also wasn't sure it wasn't the addiction talking, thinking, making me find fault with everything, maybe making me see there was no solution here or anywhere for me and then I would be doomed to a life of drinking and drinking only; a commitment I had already managed to keep for too many years.**

**Now I was a man with two completely different and new missions and I had to stay with them. I had to go through whatever was going to become my path, to stay sober and find my kid.**

**I got my coffee, exited out onto the porch, and became, in my squeaking mind, one of the cult. I noticed every single person out there was now smoking. I stubbed the first then lit another cigarette, so I would fit in, and I remember the first words I eavesdropped on. A man over my shoulder said, "Our primary purpose is to stay sober, man, no matter fucking what." I thought this probably some sort of motto and thought it odd it was stated so loudly and clearly over my shoulder in the first few moments of my first day. I turned to look and a tall man was saying it to another small, very tattered man. The recipient of the motto looked as if he had been dragged reluctantly from the bushes and I assumed from his blank and cloudy—eyed response to the statement, he had probably heard it several times in a row from this man prior to my joining the porch—cult because he just kept saying, "Uh—huh… uh—huh."**

**While looking at this poor soul I had one of my first grateful moments. It was twofold actually, when I realized I was not only grateful for not falling low but the best surprise, I realized I had just experienced a soulful empathy for a fellow human being. I was at least a smidgeon back. This made me feel it might really be possible I would heal. Little did I know what was in store. I looked back into my coffee letting the steam dance around my nose. It had cheap coffee smell, like in jails. Coffee/not coffee. Some kind of chemically treated, slightly caffeinated cereal product, maybe. I rolled my eyes up into the other direction looking for something to fix upon and caught the pink lady on the other end of the porch, now staring intensely at me out of the corner of her mascara—laden eye. Me catching her stare jilted her and her coffee slopped again. Poor thing was going to leave there spotted as a leopard if this kept up. I giggled a little.**

**Regaining her composure she reached into her little pink cigarette—purse—thing, pulled out another one of those ridiculous cigarettes with one hand and then she swiped her tongue down the side of the it as if her name was Elsie and the cigarette was a old salt—lick. It was a behavior Jack Palance might exhibit, hunched over, out on the range, rolling his own with one hand, pulling the string tight with his teeth, giving the cig one last swipe of dusty spit—sealant down the side before settling back into his well—worn saddle for a relaxing smokeroo.**

**Okay so she's nuts, I was thinking. They told me some were sicker than others but I thought they were referring primarily to me.**

**A man about the size of a large refrigerator but with the consistency of what looked beneath his clothes to be Jell—O leaned out the door and said loudly, firmly, authoritatively, "Lets have a meeting." Then he kind of just bowl—full—of—jellied himself back inside.**

**"Who's he?" I said to no one in particular, and someone replied, "'s Bicycle Fred," with an accent made it sound more like Moe—pay—ed Fray—ed. I'm thinking of similar nicknames; Tricycle Mike, Big Wheel Neil or Skatey Katie, Punky Drunky, Ducky the... well, point made.**

**"Interesting name." I said, "How does someone,"—I was thinking a three hundred pound jiggling someone—"get named for a miniature motorbike? Just as quickly I thought of how common the name Scooter use to be in America. I say In America because I have never met anyone from, say, the Middle East or even China, named Scooter.**

**The answering voice came around in front of me housed in a nicotine—thin, dressed all in black, topped off by an also black cowboy hat, cragged faced Johnny Cash look—alike form, only shorter, who was mid—drag on a long white cigarette had just been lit but looked like it was still a little wet down along one side. I thought of the pink lady licking hers and wondered what her favorite drink used to be, or was. This is another manner in which the newly sober mind wanders? It's as if its entertaining itself with silly thought meant to keep it from ever going anywhere interesting. Habits.**

**"When he first got sober here, some sixteen years ago, he rode a small bicycle. One of them little motor=scooter—mini—bike type 'o' things, you know. 's how he got around, you know," said the face hanging underneath the black Stetson as it proudly dangled Pall Mall.**

**Well, of course it was all I could do to keep from laughing. I had the image of this four hundred—pound mountain of mush tooling down the street on a small bicycle...maybe even drunk. I see people like and I wonder how they keep the machine from just swooping right up their asses. It made me feel sorry for the bicycles of the world. Talk about stress. Poor little thing.**

**As people filed inside, a guy next to me lit up his cigarette. I didn't think anything of it but my neck nearly snapped back when my eye caught him dragging his tongue, yup, right up the side of sucker before lighting it.**

**"What's with all the cigarette licking here?" I asked Johnny Cash Jr.**

**Johnny grinned knowingly and said, "Never been here before I guess."**

**Now he was the Colombo. I shook my head.**

**"Well, it's not real complicated." This relieved me.**

**"Its a kind of spiritual thing here. Don't know how it got started but its kinda' neat, I guess. Y'see, whenever you take a smoke, you remember to lick each cigarette before lighting it."**

**I thought, before is probably a good tactic, but my eyes, I hoped, were asking why?**

**As we took our seats Johnny continued, "When you lick your cigarette it's supposed to remind you to remember the still—suffering—alcoholic out there. way you might remember him thirty, forty times a day. Sometimes more"**

**I was already pretty much weirded out at this point. Scott, the pink lady, her immense shyness then her not so secret, seemingly intense fear of me. Yikes! Then Bicycle Dick, Jack, Fred, whatever his name was, Bicycle Fred, hah! I was not sober long, but even then something just did not gel. I mean, we are all here recovering from some kind of drug and someone comes along and creates a ritual of licking another drug delivery device in order to remind us of the people out there who are still suffering from drinking or using drugs? Was it? Did I have it right? Does mean it is reasonable to assume right now, this very minute, somewhere out there in the world there is a group of recovering nicotine addicts who are gathered around a bar, licking up the sides of their martini glasses in order to remind themselves of the still—suffering smokers out there? Well, not too fucked up!**

**The meeting started off with old Bicycle—Jelly—Roll dropping a wooden gavel making everyone hush in unison, as if they had rehearsed it, and they had. Several people around the table took turns reading tenets of the program.**

**At certain phrases, the members knew what was coming and joined, again in unison, for a sentence or two. This I read as just so much genuflecting, something has never really interested me, didn't in those first few meetings and still doesn't; might someday though, who knows? My eyes glazed over as everyone did everything but cross themselves, I guess in order o feel part of the flock. I guess I just never have been much of a flocker...flockee...whatever.**

**I was real uncomfortable but I had to stay. I had to make this thing work. I thought of Kajon and then how ordinarily, you tell people your kid's been missing for long they give you an askance look all but says, why doesn't he get off his ass and go look for her or 's how my oh—so—secure ego read it.**

**My excuse, if truthful, would be, I've been too fucking drunk to get off my ass and look for her. An excuse? No. A reason? For anyone who's been there, it's the truest, yet still the most shameful and least understood explanation. She just didn't come home. It had happened a few times through her teen years, since she had gotten to the age when she wanted to get out and try out her wings, thinking about getting her first car and such. Along with wing—testing comes trying out the breaking of Dad's rules and see what happens when you don't call when you are going to be late, the weekday curfew, disagreeing with Dad when all you've ever known how to do is roll your eyes and say—or sometimes yell—"All right Dad," things like .**

**I was more lenient with her, not because I was lazy but I believed she should start having control over her life, eventually, as a young lady and she would be there very soon and I wanted her to be a little more experienced than most, the one with the most moxie, to be in charge of her own space.**

**I knew she partied a bit and assumed there were at these parties, the druggies and assorted other groups have been at every teen party since the beginning of time. I always thought she had a rather square head about things like this but what I hadn't counted on was a heredity factor they say, children of alcoholics/addicts have.**

**Before her mother left I noticed she had taken on a nightly habit of drinking and eventually I discovered Mom had really developed a nightly habit of drinking until she passed out. What I hadn't counted on was any heredity factor in myself because my mom and dad never even imbibed. would have been a bit tacky for the image of a pair of Pentecostal Ministers. Even though I had always known my father was adopted, I found out, only recently both of his blood—parents were alcoholics, early twentieth century drunks. Kajon may not have even had a chance in hell.**

**Some time before morning, wherever she was going to make it an all—nighter, she had always managed to find a phone. Always. I dreamed the night before, she was kind of late getting home, she had a little smell of booze about her, we had a little talk about it and she went to bed. When I awoke the next morning, the first thing I did was go to her room. The door was open and her bed had not been slept in. Some dream.**

**first day was tenuous for me. I had to go into one of the studios over in Tampa, where I ply my trade doing voiceovers for radio and TV commercials, documentaries, public service announcements and now I was just starting to take off doing books on tape and CDs. I had to do several jobs would eat up the majority of my day and then head back home.**

**At the studio, while on a break, in the kitchen there, I said in passing to Susan, the absolutely hottest studio manager in the industry with legs went all the way up to her face, it seemed, and the best talent and tech coordinator in the biz, "You've met Kajon, my daughter?"**

**"Yeah, Kingman how is kooky kid?"**

**"Well, she didn't come home last night. She didn't even call." I don't know why I said anything really. I was just jilted a bit, numbed out by it, wanting to talk about it with someone during every break in the workday.**

**She expressed a tepid concern and then asked how old Kajon was, probably because she had seen me with her before and knew I wasn't talking about an adolescent, of course she was to me.**

**I told her she was only fifteen. Susan's concern lowered a little as did her eyes and her eyebrows rose slowly, reached there full potential. "She's a teeny—bit young to be doing this I think," Susan said, "but I did it when I was her age. I pulled a weekend stunt had my parents frantic. They called the police and everything.**

**I did one of those things where my girlfriend, Deb, called her mom and told her she was staying at my place and then I called my parents and told them I was staying at Deb's house but we were really calling from our friend Elaine's house. Elaine's parents were gone to the Tortugas for the weekend and we three thought it would be neat to have a house all to ourselves for two days. Why? Wing stretching, I think. Tedious for parents but probably normal. You're a single dad, right?"**

**"Yeah, but, she didn't call?"**

**"I'm sure it'll be alright. She's probably home right now scared half to death at how you're going to react."**

**I smiled at the thought but was the last time I smiled at what the possibilities might be. Susan kind of cutely smirked her way out of the room and was . I was sure all the way home I would find Kajon waiting back at the house. was when I actually had a house. We lived in Madeira Beach right up on the beach overlooking the Gulf of Mexico in one of the last remaining bungalows amidst the newer high—rises all of which were just bulging with senior—packed condos. Every other one of those high, waterfront warehouses had those stupidly designed fountains in front, the ones with the blue water. They were stupid because they were so artificial looking against a backdrop—not a hundred feet away—of the vast, green—blue, all natural colorings of the Gulf of Mexico.**

**They had to be designed by someone who had lots of polyester leisure suits left over from the early seventies, and lots and lots of Lawrence Welk records…maybe one or two by Englebertle Humperdinkle or whatever the hell his name was.**

**Several times a year, the kids were left in the depleting family—beach—hood would get a ninety—nine cent bottle of dishwashing liquid from the Pick—Quik and empty it into one of the fountains. Within minutes it would be frothing in big bulges like a giant ice cream cone, or cloud—making machine. I always smiled when I saw because it seemed like such an appropriate way to display the fountain's complete lack of purpose. It is heartening since kids now have computers, cable TV and refrigerators in their bedrooms nowadays, some still know how to go out and have good old—fashioned clean fun.**

**Nothing obstructed the view of the western sunsets from my upper balcony all the way to Mexico other than the weather, the curve of the earth and the entire Gulf of Mexico. I used to spend at least a couple of hundred hours a year whiling away the afternoons doing nothing but falling asleep on top of the salt—laden water of the Gulf. I got real good at it.**

**Once, I was awakened with my head bumping into a large woman who was vacationing from Germany. It was scary then, but funny now. I awoke and my head was just bumping into her fat abdomen. She stood there like some matronly Arian from 1940's Nazi films with her arms folded. I just smiled, said, "Hello," and slowly stood and walked away, looked back, weakly waved and said something stupid like, "Have a nice day." Mr. Originality.**

**Several times I awoke to the delicate flutter of tens of beautiful stingrays winging their way in a school down the coastline. I just happened to be in their way while floundering my life away so I slowly submerged and saw they surrounded me. One time I had snorkel gear on so had a clear view of them through the mask. The ones nearest to me were just as curious about me as I was about them. They came up to my face, some slowed and a couple were curious enough to stop. They gazed for a moment, inspected me, then slowly fluttered a little hello and passed by. Kajon was standing on the beach time afraid for me. I told her the one's who stopped said something to me. They said, "Hey, who's the chick on the beach," which only succeeded in making her giggle, roll her eyes and pucker. "'s not funny. I was scared for you."**

**'s what my life, our life used to be like. Flittering, fluttering, silly and boring like most lives are most of the time but containing enough fun moments here and there to make it all bearable, almost normal and as with everyone, eventually, just memories.**

**So, I was still in the meeting, the gavel had dropped, the genuflecting now quelled, Bicycle Fred stated this was a closed meeting for alcoholics only—as if anyone else would give a shit about attending—and asked if there were any newcomers in the room. I didn't consider myself one—having piled up a grand total of twenty—nine days by time, an expert at this—but a couple of people raised their hands and awkwardly introduced themselves. When I noticed their hands rise, I had one of those uh—oh feelings.**

**Bicycle gruffed, "You're alcoholics, right? Not addicts…"—he made it sound like addits—"…I mean you're not here for prescription drugs, monkey weed or gorilla biscuits, right."**

**A few people tittered, but it was very controlled tittering with matching eye movements as though they were making sure their sniggering was Bicycle—Fred—approved. It should have been forever confirmed for me at moment, I had an addictive mind. It got stuck on wondering what the hell gorilla biscuits were and how had I missed out on them?**

**'s the way some of our minds work. Always thinking we are missing out on some strange, new and cool kind of guaranteed self—destruction. I once met a man who had nineteen years of sobriety. He lost it all when they came out with colorless, clear beer which has since been sold under several brand names. He simply felt like he had missed out on something and just had to try it. He became obsessed. It wouldn't have mattered if you sat him down, told him someone had made a beer tasted like piss and they couldn't figure out how to sell it, so someone else came up with the marketing idea; hey lets remove the yellow dye, the artificial coloring. And 's what makes it beer without color.**

**Addicts are compulsive.**

**He romanced his missing out on shitty beer with the coloring removed. Once the addiction kicks in, normal thought processes cease until the feeding frenzy is over... if it ever is.**

**There are adult children of addicts and other would—be loved ones striddled around the globe who can't understand how their fathers or mothers could have just left them in poverty, neglected them for years, and totally abandoned them, or worse. They will never fully understand it and the diseased person can't help them because they never understood it themselves.**

**Trying to figure it out, let alone explain it is just a merry—go—round. You spend all your energy going round and round and no matter how hard you try; you end up in exactly the same place.**

**The two newcomers at the meeting were nervous, snickering along with maybe one or two others, nodding their heads around like two spring loaded Chihuahuas in the back of a fifty—seven Chevy in East L.A. Circa 1975. They obviously had no idea what the hell old Bicycle was talking about any more than I did, really. They were giggling but nervous and fear—filled and definitely had antsy look says through their not—too—well—masked fear, I need to get high; escape. They said and shrugged their answers almost simultaneously, "Um…alcoholics, I guess," then giggled again.**

**What I know now, after being around for a while is not all the rooms of recovery are the same. There are some very stiff rooms and there are even fairly rough, what I call asphalt—sniffin' rooms. I call them because the people there, some still living in the streets, but sober, have had a little more of a gritty taste of reality than most in there downward spiral toward the hitting of the proverbial bottom. The have smelled and probably tasted the asphalt—where the rubber meets the road—more than most, but for them, apparently, necessary.**

**They start out with what some are still calling tough—love sponsors who say things like, "Unless you're willing to push a peanut down the middle of Central Avenue with your nose in order to stay sober, get the fuck outta' here." Tough love; an oxymoron.**

**There are also the beach meetings, from the middle of the county all the way south to Pass—a—grille, a small, recovery—incestuous community, which has always held quite a bit of romance for me. Meetings are held up and down the shoreline in small storefronts, some under picnic pavilions on the beach and in parks, and others in churches. These meetings have a tendency to have no smell of asphalt at all but it's not difficult to find sand abrasions.**

**It's where I now hang out more than anywhere else, but first I had to go through the gamut, which for me, started with trying to figure what this meeting was all about, only to have my mind wander back to my humble abode, wondering whether the cleaning fluid smell was airing out fast enough.**

**Bicycle had a scowl on his face reminded me—because I think he should have been more loving to newcomers, kinder, make them want to come back—of a priest I once saw in the Pelourinho Historical district in Salvador da Bahia, Brazil. There is a church in the five and a half century old neighborhood by the name of St. Anthony's. I was down their working helping actors with their Southern American, Portuguese dialects, on a movie set was so disorganized, I couldn't help but take as much advantage of the situation as I could and get out and swallow up the culture.**

**In this particular church, named St. Anthony's, you can go inside and see sites like, the healing room. On the ceiling is hanging a hundred or so, crowded together, what looks like paraffin models of body parts. I asked someone what they were there for and a man told me they represent all of the parts of the human body had been healed in room" I thought, all I see is arms, legs, heads and heads… apparently there had been no healings of impotence and such.**

**The other site there was the slave quarters. According to the history, the royalty who once ran the town in the fifteenth century, when they came to Sunday morning meeting, brought their slaves with them. The slaves were not allowed in the church to hear the message of loving Jesus Christ but they were allowed to listen from stable—like, cold and damp, stalls adjacent to the phenomenally gold—adorned church altars, out of sight.**

**Ironically, I was there on St. Anthony's Day and there is a point in the day when the priest comes out and blesses all of the beggars in the street, who, also ironically, hundreds of years later, were no longer allowed anywhere inside the church at all. I asked why they weren't allowed inside the church and a woman told me it was because they scrape the gold leaf off the walls with their fingernails.**

**These beggars were descendants of those slaves from long ago. They crawled ceremoniously up the steps of the church and the priest came out with small alter boys assisting. The boys held an old, iron, enameled basin filled with—presumably—holy water, and the priest thrust a wand of some sort with an absorbent ball on the end, into the holy water and then slashed angrily through the air with water as it rained down on the grateful—for—this—blessing—from—God faces of the beggars. The look on this priest's face however was one of such deep disgust said; here you are, you disgusting legions of peasantry. Don't say we never gave you anything.**

**Father Asshole had the same look on his face I now noticed on Bicycle's; Disgust. Along with the tough—love mentality, comes an air of pseudo—knowledge. As if anyone knew how someone else should go about getting clean and sober. My feelings about this may be colored by the fact I had already had just about enough tough love in my life. I had a dad loved me so much while he whipped my little legs with a leather belt, he used to tell me how much he loved me, he was doing it for my own good and he included in his diatribe of affectionate lacerations, a few, very loving, justifying bible verses; Spare the rod and blah, blah, blah.**

**I always thought it was wondrous I didn't turn out to be one of those freaks who needed to have sex while giving and getting pain, maybe while wearing a priest's outfit—worse yet, a habit or white robe—with the background music provided by the singing Nuns singing, "Domi—nika—nika nika…" or maybe the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. I mean, other than the little spanking fetish squeaks out every now and then… and oh yeah, the big lesbian combat boot thing… but other than .**

**Subconsciously, I think it may have worked its way into the milieu 'because although I have dearly loved all the women in my life I ended up hurting them, not physically, but hurting them nonetheless, their hearts. Mayhem in some way I haven't yet made touch with yet, even Kajon's mom, and I wondered if I had ever unwittingly hurt Kajon in a way would make her want to go away and never contact me again.**

**A voice thundered from heaven, "And who are you?" It was Bicycle Fred, right there, right off cue to bring me back to, whoops, I almost said reality.**

**"Huh."**

**"You a newcomer? I never saw you here before. Just visiting, from out of town, what?" He flung his hands, questioning, palms in front of him moving around out of sync with his words. Odd. He had a stern, stony, but sickly, kind of Jaba the Hut look of helpless gluttony to his face but something glimmered behind his eyes. I suddenly felt as rough hewn as it felt at first, he may have been doing the absolutely best he could.**

**"I just got out of treatment, this morning, and I was told to come to a meeting as soon as I got out so, I live just down the street and here I am," I said, stumbling along feeling very much like the new kid on the block. I fumbled quickly for a cigarette I could lick, found it, lit it, didn't lick it; my first act of defiance.**

**There was a dead silence. Moses... I mean Bicycle looked down at the table and everyone waited in silence. Then he said, in a feigned Texahoma Chill Wills snarl, "Well now, not everyone here had the luxury of going to treatment."**

**Being sober a month now, brain cells starting to function again, I caught the slice.**

**Bicycle, ranting a bit, "The only thing most of us know about Betty Ford and high—falootin' places like is she was once a first lady who had kids smoked monkey wahzoo, if we even know much."**

**He was a knowledgeable fellow. I could tell. He had always thought he needed to be hard and I think he felt I saw through it. I remember feeling guilty about because he was there not to hurt people but to help them stay sober… by yelling at them. But he was there.**

**I felt same kind of dichotomy with my dad when I was little. Man, a guy named Bicycle reminding you of your dad. Doesn't make ya' feel too screwed up. I have to admit though, ol' Bicycle did get my addictive curiosity started… again… because my mind started to sail away and all I could think of was what the hell Monkey Wahzoo was and how did I never hear about gorilla biscuits? The things I missed out on.**

**My attention turned away at this point from the meeting and went straight into the wings of my attention as my eyes rolled up a bit to an open window had no screens. Bees and flies buzzed merrily in from the sun, hit the ton of cigarette smoke and immediately—as if saving their short little lives—buzzed out again… fast.**

**There was another opening in the wall where a large windowsill air conditioner had once been installed. There was a very old, very small air conditioner resting there now. It looked worn out from the challenge of the Florida heat and corroding humidity and didn't even look attached, sort of just precariously balanced, a four inch gap all around it where nothing but air sailed through. I wondered how many years old machine had just sort of balanced up there, through how many windstorms.**

**A long unplugged cord dangled from it, attached to the wall only by a few cobwebs. In another window someone had ingeniously patched in a very old, adjustable window—fan had one blade left on it. The blade teeter—sawed back and forth like a pendulum, driven by the breeze or maybe just the shifting heat. It never got the momentum up to make a compete revolution. It was like a thin, bent and rusted pendulum swung back and forth, lightly scraping itself on the puke—green tin housing causing it to make a monotonous sound no one seemed to notice but me. I knew just how the machines felt, stuck in a hole they weren't made for, looking year after year for a new purpose.**

**I looked around the table and all of the women seemed to be looking at there hands. Not once during meeting did they look at a man, except for two women sitting over in the corner. They both looked a little younger than me but didn't seem like they belonged there because, well, I guess because they were looking at me. Both of them. They seemed like the free women in this place. Backsliders maybe, heathens, hussies, one would hope. Who knows?**

**One of them was trim, Irish—looking with natural roses in her cheeks, looked like she regularly might have berry and barley juice for lunch, fresh—squeezed. The other, a little younger, looked like she had a stiff upbringing with posture like an army brat, a bit of a rough veneer, a handsome woman but sensual with a wise and fairly careless, carefree slouch. She was smoking long brown cigarettes. It's the kind smells... like they're pre—dampened, maybe soaked in nicotine; twice the amount of nicotine anyone should be allowed to take in one sitting. Her fingers had brown indentations on them showing she wasn't just trying on the habit for size. This is usually a turn—off for me but with this woman, it just made her a little more attractive, in a naughty, sinful manner.**

**Irish stared intently, even wide—eyed at me before finally looking away after our eyes kind of glued. I actually found myself suspicious of this complete stranger. Nicotine? She didn't flinch. She held the stare until it was a second too long for comfort and then let her rather large, attractive mouth spread into a comfortable, almost handsome and very sexy grin. It didn't move but said welcome. I got a tingle.**

**Other than one tic in time, I realized I hated being there. I took a big sigh and really don't remember a damn other thing about meeting. I just sat kind of nicotine—buzzed, like I was smoking fifty cigarettes at once, mentally plodded through the smoke, the sweltering heat and the diatribes, wondering—a little—how I had made this big dream come true for myself. I had long put out my cigarette, but choked. Cash was sitting next to me, nudged me, I guess as a reaction from my cough, and offered me one. I laughed out loud. I just couldn't see the point.**

**I do remember being home afternoon, hauling all of my bedding and pounds and pounds of laundry over to the trailer park washroom which consisted of four, salt—air—rust—hazed washers and one big old gas dryer had long had the paint singed away, rusted through in one place, patched by a screw—held, foot—square piece of sheet metal which was well on its way to rusting through too. These crippled robots looked like there was no way they would ever work; I didn't remember ever using them before but I chucked the clothing in, dumped in the brick—hard el cheapo detergent I found under my sink, slipped in a few quarters on pure faith and they kicked in and chugged along just fine.**

**It was actually fun sorting my laundry, hanging some of it, folding the rest all wrong and tucking it into the built—in, completely unorganized, broken—veneered drawers had long ago lost their runners, spreading the fresh sheets on the bed and then flopping down for an afternoon nap in my very own, bent up but clean tin can.**

**I thought of Linc. Thought I should give him a buzz and let him know I made my first meeting. Right, like his world ran on whether happened or not. I dozed a little, thought of calling him again, then not, then thought of my agenda. So far it was still on the rail: Get sober and find Kajon.**

**All right, so I went to a meeting. Now what could I do? I was suddenly empty. I had been to a meeting and was pretty much the only thing they told me to do my first day. But now, I was lost. I felt old familiar feeling of impending doom. Empty. Afraid. Without knowledge.**

**My brain went directly to, where the hell could she be? Where the hell do I start? I felt the pain again and then feeling came reminded me I know damn well how to make pain go away. I felt overwhelmed, impending doom. I cried, confused, sobbed, then fell asleep.**

**I woke up at around seven o'clock. The place was dark and I could smell the sweet southern smell of salty—laden, late spring, evening air intermingled with the bouquet of fat broiling about a block away at the Crab House; a small, rustic seafood place had been there since the early forties. The Crab House has the coldest brew on tap in the county and I thought it probably wasn't such a good idea to go there for dinner but I had no food in the house so instead, I got up, showered and tumbled out the door and started walking down the road back toward the meeting house to catch my first evening meeting.**

**It was the strangest feeling came over me and has a hundred times since. It reminded me of the thousand times or so before when I had sworn off the firewater, woke up in the morning after drinking the rent money, prayed to God I would never to it again, poured what was left down the drain and because was the only thing happening in my life, within hours, I was right back in the squirrel cage again, drinking to quell the pain, knowing damn well I would be on my knees again the next morning begging for mercy. Mercy never came. However, I did pass by the Crab House this time, left its ice—cold brew intact and continued down the road.**

**The night was swirling with briny and balmy dervishes, full of spirits. It felt like hope and trouble; like anticipation and butterflies.**

**A few more blocks and I was walking up the same driveway had scared the hell out of me a few hours earlier. There were many cars parked around the house, some new, some pretty old and dented up and no Scott. Life is sometimes so good.**

**When I walked inside the tables were gone and there was a podium set up in the front of the room. It reminded me of a small, poor country church, except for the deep, pungent smell of ashtrays. Immediately I thought old Bicycle Fred was going to give some kind of lessons. I guess, sort of subconsciously I thought the guy probably owned the place, maybe he was their leader.**

**I got a hot cup of java, found myself a seat and like a kid on a trip in the back seat of a car counting out—of—state license plates, I found myself counting the number of times I saw people licking cigarettes… again, then I let it go.**

**I looked around at each person, wondering if any of them would soon be my friends. I tried to sync up my mind with my mission, at least half of which was recovery. I looked over the faces again and remember Linc once said, "When you get out and you start going to meetings, stick with the winners and you'll win too." This was during a conversation on choosing a sponsor.**

**The winners, for now, were invisible to me. I thought, how was someone with a brain as broken as mine supposed to tell what the hell a winner looked like anyway? I laughed to myself and chose to at least consider, just for today, those who didn't lick their cigs. I took out a cigarette just boldly, defiant lit the little sucker.**

**There was pretty much the same genuflecting went on earlier. A group serenity prayer and a few short readings from some well—worn photocopies encased in well—worn plastic sleeves and come meeting time, a guy introduced a small man with snow—white hair, the guest speaker for the evening. I have never seen him since so I have always thought of him as something akin to my angel.**

**He had thick glasses and a big smile on his face hovered over a red, plaid bow tie on a starched white collar framed by an ageing, dark blue suit; out of his element I thought but he probably dressed like , to come to this run—down place, solely out of a sweet, cultured respect.**

**He talked about his teen years, how he had dropped out of school and took a job as a flyboy in a print shop. 's what I did when I was a teenager so right away I found it a little interesting.**

**He said after a couple of years or so, he was taken aside by a kind older man from the art department and was taught, after hours, some drafting. He got pretty good at it and after awhile this old man got the company to make him an apprentice draftsman for a machining end of the company.**

**After a couple of years he was a journeyman and finally a full—fledged draftsman and several years after this high school dropout became head of his department.**

**Years later, the company was taken over by a larger company was heavily contracted to NASA and he found himself working in the American space program. One day, he was approached by his superiors and offered a position of substantial responsibility working directly with NASA and he freaked.**

**Ordinarily, one would think this was the greatest opportunity a young man in his position could hope for but he carried his high—school dropout secret around with him even more diligently, as if it were a contagious disease. Each day, week and month went by found him more and more introverted, thinking he was going to spill the beans at any point. He knew his self—concern had grown to the place he lived in constant fear and it was all pent up inside.**

**He pushed through it, but thought his position now held such grand responsibility sooner or later, because of his supposed lack of knowledge; he was going to screw up and cause a catastrophe or blurt out the truth to the wrong person at the wrong time.**

**There was a Christmas party and he found himself celebrating right along with all the big wigs, the college boys with multiple degrees from NASA and all he could think of was he just didn't belong there. He felt like a fraud.**

**A waiter came by and simply handed him a highball. He had always been a teetotaler up until time but everyone else was quite jovial and he just downed the drink, just for something to do.**

**In a matter of minutes he felt it's effect and he described it as a magic bullet seemed to instantly literally obliterate and liberate him from all of his fears. He had another and knew a few moments later he really had finally laid his hands on the miracle drug he had always needed. It was such a power relief for him he was instantly hooked.**

**This little man's story was the first awakening I had I might—might mind you—be in the right place. He had described in a few short moments exactly the effect my first escapist drinking had on me. I drank because I was at the end of my ropes and filled with fear and shazaam, fear exploded and dissipated into a million particles, into thin air at almost lightening speed as if it was an asteroid destroyed by a very powerful missile… just... gone. It really felt like a miracle.**

**Previously, I had a beer once in a while, and once in a great while, a couple too many on special occasions but when Kajon left, I went crazy. I sifted through every schoolmate she had, friends, potential boyfriends—the ones I knew about—and I worked with the police the best I knew how.**

**When the cops found out she had been in a little trouble, had piled up a couple of DUI's—of which I wasn't aware—and had been sentenced by the last judge to recovery, they were no longer interested in her missing status. She was seen by them as just another troubled teen, was probably—like many—escaping her troubles and most likely was just running. They said many of them just hop on a plane or a bus to Vegas, L.A., and after a few years, they return... maybe. They said , for some reason, this happened here in Florida at a slightly higher rate than in most states per capita but they had no idea why, especially in this county.**

**After the meeting, I started the replaying over again while picking my steps through the dark down the roadway toward home. Ordinarily, I would have driven but it was only a few blocks and I really was trying to do everything different. A walk home at nine o'clock was a good thing. Somehow, deep inside me, I knew the scenario of Kajon just up and scramming and not making contact for over five years was impossible. Of course, apparently I didn't know my kid well enough to know she had been drunk, several times, been sentenced to meetings by a court until the police informed me, so what did I know or more to the point, what else did I not know?**

**I did know she had nothing at home to run from, or so I thought. I wasn't rich but we lived well and there was just the two of us. And then there was just me.**

**When your only child, just vanishes there is an inertia gives off a psychic sensation of being sucked along through life automatically underneath the inevitable shadow of other doomful falling shoe. You feel it is a real possibility the Earth can open up at any moment and swallow up everyone you love, even you.**

**I had this wonderful young woman of a daughter who was full of life, maybe too full sometimes and now she was gone. And the questions: Was she snatched? Was it something I said? Should I have encouraged her to confide more in me so she wouldn't feel she had to hide the DUIs? How did they come about? How come she couldn't come to me and tell me about them?**

**And then there was her mom. Ah yes, our past. How much did she remember? The whole attempt at a family was such a ruse, such a failure. I was instantly in pain. Someone told me once my mind was a dangerous place to be alone.**

**Kajon's mom was 6 years older than me. I was fifteen when I lost my virginity to her. I didn't even know her. Some old friends of mine got her to do it and oddly, few minutes is the nicest memory I have of her. I didn't see her again until I had gotten back home from my stint out in Hollywood. I was around twenty—six and she was still—surprise—six years older than I was. She looked only a little older than how I remembered her, a very striking, handsome woman, but she had added to her life, a young daughter, Kajon, and I would soon learn she was a result of little soirée we had when I was…(ahem) underage.**

**Kajon was named after a combination of her mother's name and what her mother thought she remembered my name might be. She thought for many years my name was John. Hers was Kay. Good thing. The kid could have been named Kayking, Kingkay. It yuks either way. Heroin addicts.**

**The short of it was , for some reason, we ended up getting married even though there was no love there but there was the kid and I guess we read as love. Then I was offered a summer long gig in Florida on what was supposed to be several cruise ships. We came down here and I sailed. Came back every couple of months and tried to be Daddy to an adolescent daughter who still didn't know me and husband to a woman I didn't know and who—it would soon become obvious—had plans included neither Kajon nor me.**

**I didn't like comedy anymore. It held no kick. I felt like a robot up on stage. I would be introduced and in my first five minutes assess the audience and then when I had them pegged and knew how they were going to respond, I would do my forty—five minutes, all the while thinking about anything but the fact I was entertaining a crowd. They thought I was standing right there having a good time along with them but I was on automatic, barely there at all.**

**I had spent too many years in Hollywood, basing myself out of there when I went on the road. I had tried acting, gotten a few small parts on sitcoms and such but I just became jaded and worn out on it all. I no longer had a desire to become rich if it meant I was just going to be another jaded and world—weary Hollywood player. I learned fairly quickly to hate what I wanted to become.**

**One day, I came home and Kay was all packed and said she had to go back to her home, which had been New York, because her mom was sick. I could tell by the look in her eyes she was lying, but I said nothing. I felt there had always been an unspoken yet understood inevitability this would happen. I guess she thought it was the best way to have Kajon bond with her father and she could assess the situation until it was the fated time for her to leave.**

**A couple of years went by and I heard she was living in the Village, in NYC, with some playwright. Several years later, I saw a spread in some scandal sheet showed pictures of the two, lounging around a scummy apartment, in a tell—all story about how her husband—she never did divorce me——gets his ideas for plays. He wrote a disgusting play about child molestation. I started to read about it, felt a vile stomach twinge, tore it up and tossed it away.**

**I recently heard, Kajon never knew, somewhere along the line, they died together from drug overdoses.**

**I couldn't help wonder how long it would take before some bent film studio head gets the idea their lives would make a great film, an insidious remake perhaps, of Romeo and Juliet, the middle—aged artists who dared to challenge sexual norms, some shit like .**

**So here I am, a few years later, former, almost—famous—guy from the northeast, former husband, former daddy, former sober person and now, hopefully, former drunk, stumbling, but soberly, toward my formerly half—way decent mobile h…I mean my trailer… wondering if I will ever find a purpose in life and I remember suddenly I haven't eaten today.**

**They taught us in treatment four of the main triggering mechanisms can get us to drink are if we are lonely, angry, hungry or tired. I was lonely for the good times in the past and of course for the home—sweet—home—hug of my daughter. I was a little tired but happy the day was coming to an end. I was angry with myself, or maybe just frightened because I knew I had to get up tomorrow and decide what to do to stay on goal and I had no idea, nor made any plans where to start. Nevertheless, I was famished and needed something to eat right then.**

**Like an oasis appearing to a thirsty man crossing the desert, I rounded the corner smack dab into the eyes of the three—story swashbuckler hoisting his sword over the Crab House. Accompanying this sight, a warm wind wafting the smell of blackened and fried seafood right into my face. I was eating seafood tonight.**

**Chapter Seven (The prologue continues…)**

***The Grisly Crime***

**Rewriting changes things… for awhile. Sooner or later, the writer runs out of tales and is forced to choose between insanity and common sense or choose them both; reality. At least some get to live to do . It's all part of the normal process of the loss of innocence, or any loss. First comes the actual loss, then denial, then, probably choice, Kajon, at fifteen, thought about what comes next and so far came up with only, whatever!**

**Right now, the denial was running out and Kajon was just trying to make sense of the story. With her script rushing rapidly to its end she knew she was nearing the resolution, the end of the third act, and she was not excited, but desperate. No happy ending here. It's too soon. Rewrite.**

**She thought, Okay now, and then in the middle of this huge, dead shark—eye black screen, I mean it's like a dense, blackness and slowly, a teeny, tiny, blue, almost transparent box dissolves into view, in the center. It is a dark, midnight blue slowly lightens as it grows, so it sneaks up on you out of the yawning, raven blind. Ooh, raven blind. I like .**

**Easy... easy... at a slow, snail's pace it comes to fill the screen, sucking you right into the experience.**

**It's got to, right?**

**Ooh, am I a fuckin' poet or what? She ragged aloud on herself, but only for the giggle. It wasn't a heartfelt excitement comes from accomplishment. She needed the giggles and got them, most of the time, with self—satire.**

**She called them the me—dozens. Like in much of her life, behind it all was the agony of confusion. She felt another jolt. She stiffened, and then relaxed back into the numbness but with a more ghostly and even more sagging, profoundly stroked face.**

**When it passed — or she got past it — she brightened and continued her directing through mumbles. "This dissolves man, man, ma... maybe into, through browns, blues and grays, like memories, you know? Tintypes. Sepia tones. On the other hand, um, umm..."**

**Ums, long *ummmms* had always occupied a creative pondering point in her thinking process.**

**"Like you are underground or..." Her blood flow and consequently the needed, life—supporting nutrients to the brain rapidly draining, she had her first trouble holding onto and expressing continuous thought.**

**"Like, what's the word, what's a word, word, wor... oh Daddy?" Kajon cried out for her father with a bellow, having no idea one day he would hope this was the or at least a last thought for her. Him. This and he really did have a fathomless love for her. She really was so very, very loved…**

***(…prologue to be continued…)***

**Chapter Eight**

**As I grabbed the shellacked—rope handle on the Crab House door, I could feel the vibrations of the night inside. There was a jukebox chugging, but not very loud. There were people, but it was not unusually packed. The place had the feel triggers what I now recognize as subconscious creature inside me gets excited about having some fun, doing something naughty, escaping and not respecting and finally hating myself in the morning. So what did I do? I opened the door and marched right in, of course.**

**Uhuh, smell of beer—battered deep—fried fish, fries, cigarettes, perfume and decades of pungent neighborhood bar smell, good times. There are lots of wonder smells like . The kind of smells, I hope, on my deathbed, I can remember vividly while giving thanks for the short ride on this planet.**

**"Hey King Man." A voice along with a small hand reached up, took my elbow and smiled into my face like an old friend. I smiled and thought, I've never seen you in my life.**

**Her name was Mouse, the food and cocktail waitress. She showed me to a booth, shoved a menu in my hand and said, "I'll be right back sweetie for your drinks."**

**Drinks? meant alcohol most likely and it also meant or sounded like it meant plural. Drinks; more than one. I guess what she really said though was "I'll be right back with your drinks because in a flash, it seemed she wiggled up to the table with a big frosty mug and a just—as—frosty pitcher of beer, poured it and said, "The pause refreshes." Not a brilliant line or original but …cute, tumbling out through her tight, crimson lips and even the most critical of us is kind and forgiving once the pheromones star swirling around in the air doing their evils.**

**I picked it up and drank about half the glass down and damn if she wasn't right. It tasted soooo good. Quenching, saturating gulp after gulp. And then I remembered a little something. Then I remembered it, not before. Why was ?**

**I remembered this was my first night, my very first night out of treatment and I had just slugged down alcohol and absolutely loved it. Up until very satisfying gulp, I had been twenty—eight days sober, almost twenty—nine. The creepy thing was I didn't even give it a thought…or could it be I had just blocked out the fact I wasn't supposed to be drinking anymore. Weird, but I know to this day it was not a conscious process.**

**I'm quite sure I kept drinking until the pitcher was gone. My memory does a slow, gray fade after . The mind can be a terrible thing.**

**I met a man recently who had been smoking for over forty years. He heard of a new treatment where a doctor charges you five—hundred dollars, gives you series of detoxifying shots and this is guaranteed to take away the craving. I saw him several weeks later and asked him how it had worked for him. He said, "It's like a miracle. It instantly took every bit of my craving away. The only thing is, I can't stop smoking." And he was serious. This kind of thinking, of course, is insane, but I, an addict, understood completely.**

**The next morning as I woke, I didn't feel bad at all, at first. I had no headache but I did remember drinking, at least the first few beers. As I turned my head, snippets of the memories followed were triggered when my eyes fell on the way—too—large cud of bubble gum was stuck to the top of the radio. I groaned, as I am sure she did when she woke up earlier. Mouse was up and I was still down. Mouse was gone and I had really fucked up.**

**I rolled, ever so slowly out of bed, expecting familiar lead bowling ball which many times I would find wedged between the two halves of my brain after a night of imbibing, to go thudding around in my head and all there was a bit of haze. I stumbled into the bathroom, looked in the mirror, felt guilty, yes, but I had been, for the last half—a—decade, doing exactly the same thing. It was something I was, very sadly used to. Sometimes, I would look into my bloodshot eyes and give myself a stern little talking—to, sometimes a yelling—at and sometimes I would just curse God again because I had prayed so hard the day before, and for hundreds of days before I would have the strength to not let, or make this happen again.**

**I had known for a very long time this stuff was way more powerful than I was, but like people who keep going back to their abusive lovers, it had become my uncomfortable and insane, comfort zone.**

**I was following the pattern of pulling my eyes down with my fingers and looking at them in the mirror. I never did figure out why I almost always did . Like the people who have car trouble, pull over the side of the road, stop, open the hood and stand there looking in, having no idea what the hell they are looking at. Another thing we saw in the movies, I guess.**

**I drew a hot tub of water, grabbed the cordless and climbed in. I dialed the S.R.C. and got through, miraculously, to Linc. I told him what happened. He told me to get out of the tub, get aluminum, coin everyone put there strength and hope into, get back into the tub, put the hot washcloth over my face, snug down into the water with the coin between my hands and try to remember ever single thing was said in the meeting night and then try and remember every single day I spent in treatment, especially the ones in detox before treatment even began and then simply start over again. He said, "You can't fail if you keep trying. The only way you can fail is if you give up."**

**Off the cuff, while I was running round the place naked and dripping, finding the coin and then scooting back into the tub, I said, "Linc, man. You should see this place I went to the meetings yesterday. These people are crazy, I think. It's like an asylum, I mean, really nuts."**

**"Oh really?" He said. "You think they're insane? You should see those people when they're drinking and using. You should have seen yourself when you came in here. And King, one more thing. How many of those nuts do you think woke up this morning the same way you did?" He paused for a rather poignant moment and then added, "You know, there are literally hundreds of meeting around here. If you don't want to go there, try the Bores. It's in your meeting list. Keep in touch."**

**With , he hung up, I slid into the tub, drenched a washcloth in the steamy brine, draped it over my face, held the coin tightly between my palms and thought of those cigarette lickers and what they would be like drinking. I felt like such a shit when Linc's words about how many of them woke up hung over this morning, rang in my ears. I shivered and snuggered down a little bit further, trying to hide from it all, I guess.**

**I thought about what happened in the less than twenty—four hours since I had been out on my own and it all seemed to magnify certain helplessness in me. Aside from the fact I had only been drunk once in the last month, I felt at first there was no way I was going to make it. I had only two things on my agenda, not a lot for a thirty—something single guy so my feeling of failure was mixed with embarrassment, something I had learned well, the self—medication for.**

**I also felt anger, justified or not. I guess I may have had an image of the rooms, as they are commonly called, as being a place of recovery, hence, there may possibly be some recovered people there. But at the noon meeting the day before, it just seemed like a bunch of whacks. Was I really one of them? Did other people see me like ? There's enough for a couple of shooters, I thought.**

**I always have had, still have and probably always will have a more than ample helping of cynicism in my composition. I always thought this had helped me, protected me from charlatan ideals and such. I wondered, as I lifted the wash cloth from my face, dunked it under the hot bath water one more time and draped it over my face, allowing a small opening for air, whether cynicism wouldn't be my undoing. Then I thought again, nah.**

**Right, Linc wanted me to think about everything I had heard in treatment. I guess everything I did hear for entire month had do with what happened to me in the, still less than 24 hours since I've been home. What came to mind most powerfully is something Connie had said to me in one of the sessions I had alone with her.**

**She said, " King, think of your addiction as if it was a dragon. This dragon for the last five—plus years has taken over your life and you have not been able to find the power within yourself to overcome it. I am sure there were times along the way you had at least some lucidity, and during those times you must have known, whether you remember it now or not, whenever you feed this dragon its favorite fuel, alcohol, the dragon grew, the fire it breathed became more destructive, and it became even more impossible to manage, let alone stop.**

**The truth you must learn from this scenario is if you do not feed the dragon its drug of choice, it will, slowly but surely reduce itself into something no larger or any more dangerous than an ordinary Garter snake. Mind you, it will not disappear." She repeated this last sentence, clearly, three times." You can just imagine it sort of wavering around innocuously, back and forth, back and forth, biding its time, sort of behind your mind, in the deep dark recesses of your alcoholism." The dragon, now a snake, is your disease. Always, always remember ." I secretly nicknamed her Yoda.**

**I have thought so many times since this day, to anybody else this would have sounded like some kind of cartoon scenario, but I can tell you emphatically, every addict I have met since whom I have shared this with, instantly identifies with the point she was trying to make.**

**Connie repeated it because she is an expert and experts know we need these things sing—songed into our DNA somehow. "You see King, as long as you do not under any circumstances feed the fuel to garter snake—although your life will not seem totally manageable 24/7, it will never again, one day the time, become totally unmanageable like it has been for the last five years or so, as a direct result of you feeding the fuel to the dragon. It is you, King Kilgore who causes little Garter to snake once again become the dragon you already know, from riveting experience, has, as its primary purpose, your total and absolute destruction."**

**Her point was, of course, don't feed the freakin' dragon. To any normal mind, even one who slipped off the rail a little along the way, this solution can be realized, adopted and then put into practice. No sweat. Alcoholic minds are not considered to be, even by the most liberal among us, what is usually meant by the term, normal. They don't slip off rails. They seek out the third rail, the one will execute you.**

**I would one day hear a sweet old women in a candlelit pseudo—spiritual, midnight recovery meeting, maybe six months later say, "Addicts like me don't realize we have programmed ourselves to believe there is no hope. We do it by telling ourselves just . there is no hope. We program ourselves, in other words, by talking to ourselves.**

**Some of us think, for instance, because our drug of choice was different than what other addicts used, then there is no way other addicts or alkies could understand us, and this of course is one of those big silly, destructive lies. The truth is we have been saying these things to ourselves minute—by—minute, day—by—day, and year—by—year—these lies—until, to us and to us only, they become the truth. We then, somehow, surround ourselves with people of like minds—or mindlessness—who robotically repeat the same lies and then we think the whole world thinks like and therefore we think is what reality is."**

**She continued," What I had to learn was all I had to do was simply start telling myself something completely different while I was talking to myself. I was an alcoholic, an addict, of course I was going to talk to myself, 's one of the things we crazy rattle—asses do, but the question was, as long as it was inevitable I was going to talk to myself, why don't I plan out what it is I am going to say…to me?" Good question. Then she said, "Oddly, simply, really is all it takes, I think for complete healing."**

**I remember feeling, WOAH!**

**Alcoholics, addicts of every kind just need to be reminded of these things a little more than others. I don't know if it is because our egos get so out of whack the message we get from them is we are special and cool and therefore eccentric and eclectic and we have to prove it by, instead of doing the next right thing, oh, say, mutilating ourselves, but if gets us the attention we need to have someone share with us, and remind us of our mission, then so be it. 's just the way it is sometimes in the great world of humans.**

**session with Connie finally ended with her stating the obvious. "However, if you do feed the fuel to the dragon, not all only will you experience again, the misery as a direct result of its destructive forces—which is its mission—but your situation, your life, will continue to get worse and worse, beyond your wildest nightmares, and there will, definitely, as sure as we are sitting on this planet talking to each other right now, come a point in time when you will not ever again be able to stop feeding the dragon. Past point your purpose in life will consist of nothing more than barely surviving, and of course feeding the dragon, from which you will never again derive a moment of pleasure."**

**I now believe this is what is meant by the concept someone once dreamed up known as hell. If hell can be something as real as this in the here and now, who needs the biblical location.**

**Nonetheless, insidious irony enters from the wings here because although she certainly spelled it out clearly enough—even for me—and I thought at the time as well as every single day up until the night before, she had given me a gift I could finally hold onto forevermore, a formula would help me see clearly I had no choice other than to choose once and for all, never again to feed this dragon, the truth is the night before this I had jumped into the dragon's lair, grabbed it by the scruff of its neck, shook it just to make sure it wouldn't sleep through this and shoved its snout deep into it's fuel source.**

**This meditation, post—slip, and it's resulting realization, some people in the rooms of recovery call, a completion—sometimes once again—of the first step toward sobriety.**

**I spent probably more than an hour reaching up every few minutes, turning on the hot water to re—warm the tub, re—soaking the wash cloth, re—draping it over my face, slouching down again, engulfing myself in warm water, and just trying to focus my mind on the fact I have to focus my mind, on focusing my mind… and, on the fact I have to be constantly focusing my mind. I know sounds like ridiculous, redundant thinking, but my mind had become so open—man—and so anesthetized, it was finally not much more than shallow—lite. My perception became so out of focus I had to literally talk to myself minute after minute, hour after hour until I sort of reprogrammed my thinking. Like woman said. It's not you talk to yourself, it's what you say while you're having little conversation with…well…you.**

**There are times, even in the dregs, when I feel I am the luckiest creature to ever have lived, if only because, at very moment, no one else on earth is experiencing the very unique, out of six—billion people buzzing around, situation I call, being me. No one in the world, at any moment is feeling exactly what I am feeling and after I dragged my shriveled self out of the tub, determined to commit myself back onto the proverbial wagon, I dressed, shaved and bounced out and into my trusty old Spitfire.**

**I was roaring back down Gandy, mid—county, to the place Linc suggested, The Bores club. At first one thinks it is named after the animal called a Bore, some kid it is named after the meetings, which to some, sometimes seem boring, but the truth is the name Bores is simply an acronym for the word Sober.**

**It wasn't far, it was about three miles or so west, then Gandy becomes Park Blvd. You go to 66th St, turn right and it's along in there.**

**I pulled into the parking lot and although there weren't many, there were enough fairly well—marked cars for me to know, even without noticing the tell—tale sign on the roof of the place, which had only one word; BORES, this must be the place.**

**The cars were well—marked not only with dents, crumpled fenders and such, one assumes from nights out driving under the influence, otherwise known as the good times—unless of course it was your property or body actually came in contact with and left one of the many impressions on these cars—but there were giveaway bumper stickers had sayings with the word sober in them, most of them chrome colored, with black printing and rainbow flickers.**

**I didn't have any idea when I arrived this was going to be the starting point of a very long process, one would start slowly, almost boringly, collecting all of the flavors and dynamics of this new world I was entering, but one would pick up momentum so insidiously, I realized—once it was way too late to pull out— it would ultimately take every fiber of my being to be able to stay on top of it all without going insane, but first, the slower part, where it all started coming together.**

**After swinging into the Bores' parking lot, what first caught my eye was a bright red 'Vette sandwiched into protective parking spaces, guarding it imperially, on both sides and as I pulled in to one of them, a less than average—sized man, about my age, kind of tumbled up and jitteringly out of the fiberglass eyesore. I don't ordinarily think of 'Vettes as being eyesores; this one was. I remember it's driver had on a red Polo shirt matched the 'Vette, several loose gold bracelets, fairly heavy, on each rather frail wrist and three as—heavy gold necklaces around his Izod—collared neck. He leaned uncomfortably, like he was posing, against his red 'Vette and although his head was not turned toward me, I could see through a space behind his sunglasses, a strained eyeball peering peripherally at me, Eagle—like, most likely to see if my opening door made contact with his… red 'Vette. I realized there was nothing about this man he could hide any better than one could hide...a red 'Vette.**

**I nodded toward him, closed my door and started toward the club.**

**"New?"**

**I stopped, thought of Scott, maybe this was his dad or some relation. Who knew? I decided—not with a lot of forethought—to actually act as if I was Scott for a second, walked toward the guy, hand out, flashed my biggest smile, wished I had a big, flowing scary, black trench—coat to go with it and said, "Scott, my name is Scott," not knowing why I said it then added, "…and I'm an alcoholic…and you are?"**

**I couldn't believe what I was doing. The poor guy seemed to almost lose his balance as he stuck his limp hand out while steadying himself with the other annealed to his red 'Vette. I noticed he was teetering a bit but not like he was drunk. This caused my eyes to flash downward in search of the problem which embarrassingly turned out to be external—probably internal too—cosmetic lifts on both shoes, not—very—well—covered with overtly camouflaging semi—bell—bottomed dress slacks. The poor man was standing perfectly still, as much as he could anyway, and although much effort had made to accomplish the opposite, nothing was hidden.**

**With folded arms he yipped, "Chip."**

**His name was Chip. Well sure, I thought. Chip. What else? Where had I heard seemingly all American sounding name before? Oh yeah, only one place, TV, My Three sons, if I remember correctly. Little Chip who looked like a little buck—toothed beaver with glasses, unlike the real Beaver (The Bead) on another sitcom, who really looked more like this guy, this Chip, but now he was all grown up. Of course, it all made sense now. How else did we think Chip, or the Bead, would or even could end up? Red 'Vette, too much gold, internal and external lifts which looked like matching club—feet, coming from a family where your dad, played by Fred Mc Murray and Mrs. Cleaver, Marjory Lord, had been allowed, even encouraged by society to get together and reproduce; Yikes. The picture was completed when I noticed the not—too—faint scent of Armies.**

**I was suddenly aware of how bizarre my life had become and there is a part of what is left of my brain takes over and razzes its host as a sort of necessary leveler which then reminds me life is pretty much going nowhere and this usually means I am just plain scared. This time however, it said to me something like, the pieces of the puzzle are all falling into place now; Columbo feeling. I simply did not know what this meant since I didn't know what pieces to what puzzle but now I know, in a strange way, they really were, coming together, is.**

**"You know what you do man?" Chip said, out of context, still finding solace and stability in his grip on the 'Vette. The question sounded as if it was one of those solution—oriented questions people insert after a conversation has been going on for a while and a problem has been stated. The thing is, all he had said prior to this question were the words new and Chip and I had said squat other than my phony Scott mimic—intro and I realized I was even more scared now because this freak was still holding my hand. It felt clammy and crawly, causing my own hand to shrivel up and surreptitiously slide away as I said, "Um, no Chip, what do I do?" Tell me oh master of wacko—vile. Tell me now.**

**Not having any weapons, I was fully prepared to run.**

**"It's easy, man. You just act like you've been around for a long time and then you console them."**

**Them? I looked at his gold, then his 'Vette, took another whiff and got the Aramis and I was pretty sure he was talking about women, them, and it was not going to be a lesson on how to help them deal with their sobriety.**

**I had seen and heard much more than I ever had wanted at this point and had no desire to hear any more so I looked him squarely in the eyes and answered him.**

**"I see," I said, digging the balls of my feet around searching for instant traction and possibly a fulfilled wish for... oh, maybe a rocket on my back.**

**"Yea…" he continued as he bravely let go of the grip on the red 'Vette, along with reality, demonstrating with his hands as if he were describing something about a foot long, "…and then you take them out for coffee a couple of times, see, and then you become sort of their mentor."**

**I waited for a second kind of hoping he would fall off his shoes or something stupid, but fitting like .**

**Oh yea Chip, 's definitely going to happen.**

**He continued, "You know what a mentor is, man. You become their teacher and they look up to you and then...well, their so lost when they come in here, they're really vulnerable, you know? You know how chicks are anyway, right?"**

**I figured fate was playing fair for the moment and Chip's voice faded away because, as I was pleased to discover, my self—preserving instincts had taken over and I had my back to him, walking away.**

**See, I knew at moment, even though I had been sober only a few hours, I was getting better because his last sentence wasn't quite finished before I, although I had not been on the property for more than 30 seconds, became fully aware, albeit subconsciously, I had already made bodily contact with the club—stalker, who was very willing to share his theories of conquering the most vulnerable, weak creatures on the planet for what purpose? Don't wanna' to go there.**

**Is it defeatist to think at this point, Why does this only happen to me?**

**I continued my walk and although physically free, I felt all clammy, trembley and creepy, as if I had just pooed in my pants.**

**I guess I didn't run away from the place at point because, I just knew—because I had also already met Connie and Linc and the nice people brought meetings into treatment from the outside— there were good people in recovery. I did have to wonder though, what I would have thought if I had been one of those sad new—comers who just rolled out of or been removed from a dumpster, ready to get sober and in my first two days of this journey toward health, had met Bicycle, the Pink Lady, Johnnie Cash and the Red—'Vetted Jeffrey Dahmer, I mean Chip, all on my first day. Recovery; could be it's a subjective term.**

**I noticed what would become for me, a trademark of sorts for places, clubs like this. There were flattened cigarette filters in various stages of fading decay the closer I got to the main doors of the club. They seemed strewn in graduating layers in a manner said most likely a geologist might be able to tell, by delving down through the layers, how many years the club had actually been there, what the weather patterns had been like since then, etc., until I finally got right up to the club and there were none at all, at least on the sidewalks. They had been swept clean. On both sides however, was a butt—carpet two inches thick and the aroma rose from them in the hot and wet Florida humidity was just, well, let's just say it was some kind 'o' sensation didn't necessarily herald a welcome. I am thinking the aroma of old armchairs in the lobbies of practically any low—end hotels/flophouses anywhere in the world. Ironically and unfortunately, for many of us in this stage of recovery, the odor did lend a homey atmosphere.**

**I latched onto the door, very much like I had so confidently latched onto shellacked rope—handled door the night before at the Crab House. This door was made of heavy metal and had a flimsy screen—door handle screwed off—kilter into it. You had to work at it a little to get inside, like most interesting places.**

**Chapter Nine (The prologue continues…)**

***The Grisly Crime***

**…he really did have a fathomless love for her. She really was so very, very loved.**

**Kajon heard a last thump... felt a quick fading. She didn't know what it was at first but she heard her own heart stop, dead, thump. No warning, just a thump, an almost matter—of—fact, rather uneventful halting of energy. Like someone flipped the switch and it, not like an engine but a light bulb, just went dark...stopped...thump. And was it.**

**She gasped in shock, then screamed and her heart jump—started, trying to stay alive. Her brain shot a laser/lightening flash along with riveting thunder crackling through her ricocheted around inside her cranium. Her heart started thumping, adrenaline—fast at first, skipping a beat here and there, and there, and she could taste the resulting ooze of more blood her rushing heart caused to finally envelop her porcelain face.**

**Amidst this horror was more shattering pain, coming on now like contractions, closer and closer together, warning her loudly of her demise; so cruel. Slipping into a coma here would have been a blessing. Her brain made her face handle it all with an insidious giggle backed by a fear—fueled surge of bravado which made her whisper unintelligible, "Whoa, now was one non—fucking—gracious rush."**

**Her body had started its process of dopamine, morphine—like manufacturing; easing her into life's final denial — or is it acceptance — of the coma/death comforting delirium, but she kept on writing. Who knows why the mind goes where it goes, even in less desperate times? It just goes, through truths, half—truths, and lies. No one knows why. It all helps us cope, survive, procreate, figure it all out, whatever. But do we ever?**

***(The prologue to be continued)***

**Chapter Ten**

**When I entered The Bores club, even though there were very few cars outside, I expected more people to be inside. There were only fifteen or so there, at first. Most were owners of the bicycles I had seen hanging from their cable locks and handlebars on the split rail fence lined the driveway coming in, I presumed. I would soon learn there were many people in recovery who rode bicycles, not necessarily because they couldn't afford cars—although often was also the case—but because they had too many DUIs and their licenses had been suspended, sometimes for many years. Then I remembered back before I lost my job as a host on TV selling more cubic zirconias then anyone ever thought existed in the word to unsuspecting overweight mommas dressed in Muumuus, feet hoisted, comfy in their matching double—wides, bonbons in one hand, and the phone in the other.**

**One night, an old friend from out of town flew in on business and wanted to get together for old time's sake. We met for dinner down on Indian Rocks Beach. We ate dinner at La Cave, a little French—ish restaurant used to be there. Had the best steak béarnaise and mustard duck in Florida. From there we went to the first Hooters restaurant America ever saw, up on Gulf to bay. During dinner we had had a couple of bottles of a nice Cote du` Rhone, then at Hooters, a pitcher of beer and then we drove—in two separate cars—across the street for cognac and some bleary—eyed games of backgammon.**

**When I absolutely couldn't see anymore, somehow, knew it was time to drive home. We said our farewells and I got into my car and squealed out the driveway, right in front of a cop, made an illegal left turn—through a red light, no less—and went roaring well over the speed limit up to countryside, where I was living at the time. I was really wasn't drinking regularly yet, in those years, it was just one those things you did with one of the boys, every now and then... I thought.**

**The cop had not been sleeping back there and soon roared up behind me, his lights blinking and twirling, going nuts. The short of it was he checked my license and it was clean but he asked me to breath on his hand then smelled it. He asked me to walk a line and after . There was no need to touch my nose because I am sure I wouldn't have been able to find it. He told me to sit in the car while he called for help. I sat down and fell immediately to sleep. When he woke me up he said.**

**"I been wantin' to ask you somthin' ever since I pulled you over," which could have been three days or so for all I knew. Then he continued, "Are you on TV?"**

**I told him I was and he smiled and told me since he worked nights, his wife stayed up all night as well, and watched me on the tube. Apparently, when he went back to his car, he did not call for help but called his wife. She verified it must be me because I was on all night long six nights a week but tonight was Sunday Night, my night off.**

**"My wife really likes you. She watched you all week while she stays up and does needlepoint shit. I think she even bought shit from your show."**

**Well, Officer Goober let me go. I told him I lived only a few miles up the road and he followed me, probably to tell his wife he knew where the guy on TV who sold her needlepoint—kit shit to her, lived. There are so many lives well lived.**

**I have cloudy memories of kind of thing happening several times and so, the real reason I don't have a bicycle hanging up outside on the fence is merely because I used to be on the lowest form of television in American history. This position, in some officer's eyes, gave me permission to hurl two tons of metal down the city streets in the middle of the night endangering any life in sight. What an interesting planet we live on. And here I was now a few years later, not on TV, no job, house gone, living in the dregs… but with a license. Go figger.**

**I also wondered how I would have handled it if I had gotten a bunch of citations, and my license had been suspended; If I even would have hung up my car keys and ridden a bike like these folks were doing or would I have just driven without a license, in defiance? I'm pretty sure I would have been one of those who would just keep on driving, license or not.**

**What I learned from this was there were at least a few people in those rooms of recovery who were more honest than I was; maybe a lot more, which planted some sort of seed—of—hope something wholesome might be possible there, at least some people may be dealing properly with change in their lives, yet I pretty much thought there was a limit to the degree I would be able to join them.**

**This particular room was in the very front of the building, a very large room, probably three thousand square feet or so. The walls had yellowed; browned in the corners and even blackened in some areas, especially around the vents from many years, thousands of meetings filled with cigarette smoke. There were large laminated folding tables arranged in traditional, giant triangle, like the chairs in group, in treatment. This triangle had openings on the corners as well as along each side, about halfway down the lengths. Symbolically—because some say it is important, even essential and imperative to stay right in the center of the program instead of playing around the edges and people who do this to an insane degree, I have nicknamed, *middlerz*—arranged inside of the triangle were about thirty assorted tables, some sat four people or more and several two—tops. All of them had ashtrays on them except for one—only one— had well worn and half pealed away decals in the center, which read, "Non—Smoking." At most, this non—smoking section sat four people. I thought of the cigarette lickers over at other place. other place. I couldn't remember the name of it so I nicknamed it The Monastery.**

**Along one side of the room sat a bar—a coffee—bar—which was adorned with a huge mirror had hand painted, "You're Looking At The Problem," sprawled across it—not something you might find in the local Optimist Clubhouse—which was framed on both sides by bags of chips, pretzels, nitrite—soaked spicy sausage—sticks and the biggest army colored coffee urn I ever saw. It must have had a twenty gallon capacity and was army green with a well—worn red Cross insignia on a white circular background—probably from WWII—and down near the brass spigot, which looked as if it had been patch—repaired several hundred times over the years, the paint was worn away from thousands of hand swipes, maybe millions of knuckle rub from those drawing their mugs full. The worn spot was a highly polished copper patch edged in a bronze—green crud, or what some call a patina. Well—worn brass, like on a very old brass bed, when I look at it, I can almost taste its tartness on my tongue.**

**A small barrel—shaped woman tended the bar, and I mean barrel shaped, with measurements something like 44—44—44, set atop two spindly legs. She was well into her forties with long, dense hair, the kind gets a thorough washing once a month whether needed or not and the rest of the time almost certainly houses some kind of nesting, microscopic villages. Below a quadrupled chin, which was moist with sweat—the kind you see on women her age who endure non—estrogen—quelled menopause for months on end—there were five gold necklaces supporting as many medallions. All of them were different versions of dream catcher shapes. In the middle of this milieu was an onyx cameo with an embossed circle with the triangle inside it. A handmade bow rode aside her head matched the faux—silk muumuu exploded colors so bright your eyes squinted as if you were viewing a painting by Peter Max while your brain was bathing in Owsley Acid. It was the polyester kind you knew had no lining which meant the ribs of thread inside held the garment together were exposed to the skin and this thought, polyester in general, always made me itch.**

**Her very long nails were painted a mauve—brown and they curled dangerously in on themselves at the end, which always made my mind go into a graphic imagery, for some reason, of how these people take care of simple restroom—duties. I imagine her nails were useful mostly for scraping tips—coins—across the counter.**

**Generally, she gave off a feeling of something gooey, maybe a little stinky too, until she smiled one of the most loving of human smiles, which seemed to kick into gear a coquettish tilt of her head. She said, "Coffee sweetie?" with the only thing she had left to flirt with; her pert smile framed by dueling dimples.**

**There was something in her voice; a smooth, non—sexual love had few conditions attached other than possibly an expectation of a little of the same in return. There was, in her eyes, what I read at the time as an abiding sadness.**

**"I'd love one...with and with. Thanks," is how I replied, trying to match her smile, feeling very uncomfortable with the fact all of the weirdness I had met up with so far, here, was somehow, strangely, making me feel at home.**

**Home.**

**There were stools at the bar. I swung my leg over one and didn't notice how rote my existence had become until I took a big gulp, expecting, subconsciously, from years of programming, probably a cool one. My lips and tongue got burned. Ah, yes. This is the world of hot coffee. Hot bad coffee, but still... hot.**

**"They call me Mother Mary." She delivered the line like Sydney Poitier in "In The Heat Of The Night," when he said famous line, "They call me Mr. Tibbs." Mother Mary smiled and held out her hand. I took it, a little cautious, but not very.**

**"I'm King."**

**Mary smiled a strange I've got a secret smile and left the bar hefting a brown—scarred, heavy looking gray plastic bus—pan filled with clean but stained and cracked ashtrays. Human beings going through the process of cleaning black, Melmac ashtrays, is a concept I never understood. I mean, what is the worse scenario if this toil is left undone? People have to put dirty cigarette ashes into dirty Melmac ashtrays? Dread the thought. The illusions of cleanliness. I mean, how next to Godliness can something like this really be?**

**"If you really want to, help me put these out on the tables and pick up the dirty ones, I will let you. King is it?" she said—although she was only five feet tall—slightly down to me, shoving her tongue hard into her cheek making sure she was seen not as bossy but maybe a little challenging, in a yuckish, cutie—pie manner. Of course it may also have been her way of letting me know my shallow mind had just been well read; she knew I was already judging, classifying, qualifying everything in sight. She knew I did with every thing; everyone, especially myself. No, I am not too paranoid.**

**It was humbling in a way. Not because of being requested to help schlep ashtrays necessarily, but I was on the cusp of thinking something like, here I am in yet another room of recovery while effort is being made to clean receptacles and make them available to the members, judging them for enabling yet another addiction, like the 'lickers,' and then I remembered, Oh yeah, I smoke. Of course, I giggled at my hypocrisy—because it was my hypocrisy—and lit up.**

**'s how self—centered I was; maybe still am, just a little less masked... maybe**

**While slinging out the ashtrays, people started filing in. First, there was a woman in her middle thirties who had long, heavily dyed, blue/black hair, a black jacket cloaking a black silk blouse, black jeans and flat—soled leather boots; guess what color. I would later learn she too drove a low, sleek, ten—year old 'Vette, umm… a black one. I wondered really hard what her favorite color was and what an average shrink might have made of it.**

**After a troupe of bikers strolled in. They were kind of cartoon characters. They were members of, believe it or not, a sober bike club called the Dry Camels and on their vests they had patches with Joe Camel look—alike insignias along with collections of enameled pins had recovery sayings on them. It was weird. It was like running into a Bikers for Christ club all of the sudden. There was nothing wrong with this of course, as the world seems to be going, but I did have a private little giggle.**

**I could not fathom how this could have come about. Everything I had read about the real, grungy type of biker—clubs—and these guys were no prettier—was not unlike the Hell's Angels stereotype of the last forty—odd years, mostly fat, overindulgent, overly tattooed men with matching women—mommas—usually with either bad teeth or beautiful dentures, with fewer tattoos then the old man and usually way—over—exposed/abused sagging or stringy bodies; sometimes both. I don't think there were too many vegans among them.**

**They usually smelled, or rather reeked, of the odorament created by the situations we all read about occur at biker parties; the drinking, debauchery, swapping and very strange sport of urinating on each other, en masse, fully clothed; a sort of initiation. What some people think up to pass the time. Who knows what the rest of us would have ended up doing with our spare time if we hadn't all gotten cable or online?**

**These people were different. The first one in the door had a deeply pocked face and a very nicely planned, very sinuous tattoo ran around his entire neck spelled out in Edwardian script, Winter Garden. It was so wide the top edges came up over his jaw—line on the sides and over his chin in front. I knew instantly—call it intuition—this man would never work for IBM.**

**His head was too small for his body frame and he had a chain attached to his belt draped around his back and was looped into a grommet in the top of an elongated leather wallet stuck in his hip pocket. The guy behind him looked like a fat version of Mortimer Schnerd, except, instead of having one tooth missing, he had one tooth...period. His chain, attached to the same side loop as the small—headed biker's, was longer. So long in fact it actually dragged and jangled along the floor. He had tattoos on both arms and up onto his neck, so I assumed he had them all over, but they weren't scary tattoos. They were cartoon characters. Characters like Tweedy—Bird, Porky Pig, even Winnie the Pooh. I wondered what it must be like to be his mate, looking up at and trying to achieve an orgasm maybe, I mean, could this be even humanly possible and at the same time be and remain sober? Of course, if his old lady had matching tattoos… maybe Yosemite Sam…?**

**Behind One—Tooth came a long, tall Gary Cooper/Peter Fonda combination. He had a painter's cap on backward over long, braided hair and his leathers seemed to fit in a manner said he was the coolest one of the bunch. This was corroborated for me when three just as stereotypical biker—mama—types, better looking than most but worse looking than him, followed behind and stuck more closely to him then the others. They were giddy for him but he looked at them, panned their faces and bodies and then glanced jadedly away—a sort of ritual, which they all seemed to enjoy displaying—and walked toward the coffee bar. The other three bikers offered to buy him coffee while the faces on his women—friends went into steely waiting.**

**Their were several others and then the last sober—biker to come in looked like what I can only describe as a haystack with glasses and I noticed they all had brought in an invisible cloud of Patchouli fragrance; something I had always thought smelled like concentrated mashed earth. He looked as if he was made of solid leather, all three hundred pounds of him. There was no doubt as to what they were riding because they all had matching Harley Davidson T—shirts on which read, IF YOU HAVE TO ASK YOU WOULDN'T UNDERSTAND. I couldn't resist it. I asked Haystack, but they all heard it, in the dumbest voice I could muster, "Hey, what do those t—shirts mean anyway?" He just looked at me with his lower lip hanging limp and weighted, glanced at the others, they sneered and walked away from me probably thinking, the idiot, or something much worse. And then—I couldn't believe this—Haystack actually said to me, "What does it say?" He didn't actually say the word idiot.**

**I bit. I said dumbly, "It says, if you have to ask you wouldn't understand. But don't you see? 's exactly what I'm talking about. I don't know what means." I was sort of having fun.**

**Sometimes I just love being the asshole.**

**I looked off to the side and saw Mother Mary, her eyebrows crunching her forehead up a bit in amusement. She knew I was having fun but her pursed lips said I had better be careful.**

**Haystack stared and then finally shook his head at me, gave me the idiot look again and went over and joined the others, all mumbling unintelligible sounded something like, "Never mind man. You wouldn't understand," which I thought was rather clever.**

**I really don't know why I do these things. I just do. It's a weird little pastime.**

**When I was young…germ, I was afraid of bikers. I then read somewhere they adopted way of life because they are scared of most people, didn't fit in anywhere and what appealed to them most was the camaraderie, yes, but also the uniform and the machine, which together blurred the picture and were read by many as they were intended to be; A big sign read: BE AFRAID OF ME. And it works.**

**For years now, since I learned this, they have looked rather clownish to me. I look rather clownish to them, I suppose.**

**I eventually got to know some of these sober—bikers and they're pretty nice guys. As soon as you get the world all wrapped up into a useful paradigm, along comes another wind full of learning. Hohum. I don't think I'll ever figure the whole thing out. I'm not sure we're supposed to.**

**Mary had finished her ashtrays, taken the last three from my hand and snickered at my adjusting to this new, extraordinary world.**

**The meeting had begun. The room had filled to about seventy—five percent and all were in the middle of the initial genuflecting, where they read, sometimes in unison, say prayers and recite goals and edicts of the program. When they finished, the chairperson asked if there were any newcomers or if anyone had been out there—like me the night before—doing a little more of what the chairperson termed research and development.**

**A woman raised her hand and said she was coming back, had almost a year in and went out. Scary. Yet another person more honest than me.**

**I guess it was only my ego would not let me raise my hand and join her. I know this sounds a little like the devil made me do it but there you have it; is where my head was at, at the time. I have since found there are many like me.**

**The chairperson was a woman named Fiah and she decided since there was a newcomer in the room, the sharing would go around the room and one by one, we would impart a sort of three points message. What it was like in the beginning for us, then what our concept of realizing a lack of power over our drug—of—choice was and finally how the act of accepting lack of power turned out to be our first step toward, or in some cases, back toward recovery. This made sense to me.**

**We were to do this for the benefit of the woman who was coming back to the program and any newcomers might be present and too shy still to identify themselves.**

**Sounded good to me. There was even a weird side of me was ready to step up to the plate and help the poor soul who was coming back until I realized Fiah was pointing at me when she said almost gruffly, "Let's start right over there with you, sir, whoever you are." felt a tad cosmic but 's the way coincidences feel.**

**I knew enough to say, "My name is King and I am an alcoholic." Being honest past this point took some doing.**

**This was one of two very powerful moments for me day. I was no longer in treatment, here on my own volition—as if I had anywhere else to go—and I felt as if I was, right away, caught in a big fat lie. I lowered my head trying to squish the lump in my chest and said, "I too am coming back. Sorry it took someone choosing me to be the first to share, to bring it out of me, but," my chin rose, "I left treatment yesterday, after twenty—eight days and drank last night." I looked at Fiah and said, "Weird you should start with me."**

**"What? You think there are coincidences in this world? No wonder you drank" Fiah said.**

**The room tittered then went silent as my mind searched for signs of agreement, some in accord with her implication, which I think was moments like these are spiritually or otherwise conceived or guided through mystical means. Well, I don't know about .**

**The meeting went on with many people sharing, some stumbling, some angry and some possessing the kindness of a loving mother or comforting spiritual guide while others communicated through something akin to hell—fire—and—brimstone. At the end of the meeting they offered a white chip as a sign of surrender to anyone new or coming back.**

**The idea is something like the coining—out chip—which we all know worked just freaking great for me—which you carry around as a reminder to a commitment to stay sober one day at a time. The only thing missing was Linc's accompanying twenty—minute speech to the captured.**

**The woman who upstaged me and admitted first her relapse—the honest one—got up and took a chip and every one applauded, gave her hugs and such, but when they offered me one… I don't know. I just couldn't take it. I didn't feel ashamed or anything. I guess I just didn't really want one. I understood the concept and all but if the recycled beer—can didn't work for me, what good would a white plastic poker chip do?**

**Someone announced they needed a volunteer to make coffee night and I thought, this I can do and raised my hand. I believed I was doing the right thing but the goddess of hell—Fiah intercepted. She chose the woman who had taken the chip even though she hadn't volunteered and then appointed me to be the little mother's little helper. God, I resented someone for being more honest than I.**

**"Maybe… King is it? Maybe you could learn a few things from her about honesty. Maybe you could learn the value of being honest enough to admit when something has licked you and then maybe you could see the value of at least showing up to make the coffee and then earn the right to be trusted to do it."**

**Wow.**

**I was a little taken back because it wasn't from ignorance of my defeat or arrogance I chose not to take a white chip, but I suppose now I can see how some might have chosen to take it way. I don't know why exactly but there was a part of me felt I just didn't think I deserved a chip. I thought if I was to receive a symbol of something, I should at least earn it. It was my first exercise in humility and I was punished for it. Oh well. Humans will be human.**

**The most important thing happened at meeting occurred at the end when everyone stood readying to leave, and closed with the Lord's Prayer, as many recovery groups do. I was overwhelmed as my eye caught the last handclasp, forming circle. There was sort of an electrical connection, a linking, having nothing to do with the prayer, but with human unity of purpose and at the same time, I thought, Wow, what a bunch of rattle—asses I've ended up with here. I belonged. My name is King and I am a rattle—ass. It was all internal and hidden from most, but my heart, sincerely wept.**

**As it was, I was the only one who showed up night to make coffee. The new gal petered out but Fiah wasn't there either so I got to be of service all right but I didn't get to gloat. Damn.**

**I got a lot of compliments on the coffee; most recovering alcoholics like their java—and everything else in life—strong. I don't trust recovering alcoholics who don't. I guess it goes to the root of the understanding I have for my addiction. It is similar to my lack of understanding of how anyone can be a mere beer drinker and still be an alcoholic unless of course he or she lived by the beer—drinking alcoholic's creed I heard somewhere, Twenty—four bottles in a case, twenty fours hours in a day…a mere coincidence? We think not. These people you have to hand it to. The rough equivalent of twenty—four shots of grain alcohol a day not to mention the accompanying several hundred ounces of liquid bread comes with it. Whew!**

**It was gin for me. Beer drinking, for me, back then was analogous to being on the wagon.**

**My expertise and newfound fame as a good coffeemaker was short lived. The old guy had showed me where everything was when I got there said the coffee was too strong. He liked the way I made it but he told me if I used half as much coffee to make it, there would be twice as much coffee available for the folks who would be attending the meetings for the rest of the month. This was the day I conformed and became just another dishwater coffeemaker. But, it doesn't mean I'm not right about my theories.**

**This, in its minimal manner was a first realization of having a power greater than myself help restore me to sanity. Ordinarily I would have argued 'till there was an honest Republican or Democrat in this world, a good, strong cup of coffee would keep someone coming back to the meetings, but the sane reasoning, there, I understood was not about the one, still suffering alcoholic. It was about a lot of them. And it wasn't about me, but them.**

**The meeting ended at about nine o'clock and most people scurried out faster than they came in and scooted off home or wherever, in their cars, on their bikes, on foot. Some stayed behind to play cards in the game room, which was behind a partition, behind huge mirror hung over the coffee bar.**

**The old guy who trimmed my sails on the coffee making introduced himself to me as Papillon, not after the man who escaped from the infamous former prison in French Guiana known as "Devil's Island.**

**He sort of nicknamed himself Pap because members of the club started calling him Pappy somewhere along the way once his beard started turning Colonel Sanders white and he didn't like it so he introduced himself as Papillon but says, "You can call me Pap. Everyone does."**

**Pap was the president of the club. He didn't look well heeled at all but I soon learned he had one hell of a spread down near Pass—a—Grille, at the south end of the county. Ironically Pass—a—Grille is an isle; one was once a pirate's cove and Pap's place was an actual estate had once belonged to an old beer baron who made his haul from a now defunct Upstate New York Brewery made what was known back then as dry ale, whatever the hell was.**

**I was told the estate had over thirty rooms in it and half of it was used throughout the year as a very avant—garde treatment center for well—to—do addicts who sounded to me, to be so wealthy, it would take them several lifetimes to hit finally bottom, a level believed by some to be necessary to attain before sobriety could be achieved. It was sort of a hitting—bottom—experience for the rich. A bottom only money could buy.**

**Pap didn't run it though. He leased it out to a couple of really hard—nosed women who gave the place a certain mystery. He lived in the old guesthouse.**

**There were always a few scandals surrounding the place... the treatment center. Several people were said to have died there, as luck would have it, from overdoses. One of the women who ran it was accused, several times of seducing other women; her clients, but got away with it, claiming the conception on the client's part was because they didn't understand the depth of the treatment needed. Ah, the rich. They are so cartoonish. I love to watch us humans who are fortunate to have been born with so much, run after all even more wants. The grand disease called more. It is a sick form of entertainment on my part though—the voyeurism—getting my kicks from the poor afflicted wealthy. They always have to have more… and when they get it… guess what they want next—I was this way with booze and drugs—more.**

**So many times I have marveled at how long it takes for them to run down; like Ever—Ready Rabbits. Who said I'm well?**

**The two treatment—center women came to Florida from an ashram in the northwest where I have since found out, they were cooks. The ashram was once flourishing with young initiates all bright—eyed, giggling and copulating insatiably to sitar music. Then they got older, and their guru ran away with the dough in a fleet of Rolls—Royces had been badly painted with psychedelic designs; something like .**

**These two came to Pass—a—Grille because a soothsayer out in Malibu told them the latitude and longitude intersections through the isle were demarcations of the path of, what they called a mauve band of healing surrounded the earth. As it was, it passed right over Pap's estate, where the treatment center was, almost. The guru had actually charted it passed over a building two blocks from the estate but the women soon found out the guru had just inherited land from a deceased aunt and wanted to dump it. After they found this out, he had a change of heart, confessed and then told them where the mauve band was really located. When they found out the owner of the half—empty estate, Pap, was an old—timer in the program, the sign—to them—was as strong as if it were a gift chipped in on and delivered by the three wise men themselves.**

**Even though I know this to be a true story, even after having spent years living among people like this in California when I was younger, it is still difficult for me to comprehend the fact business decisions are made daily on such harebrained scheming. And yet… some people have gotten clean and sober in place. Go figger.**

**I have found in life a heavy belief most lords work in mysterious ways.**

**Pap pulled up a stool along with several other old—timers and surrounded me. I didn't know if this was a buddy—up thing or I was going to get initiated, soundly thrashed or what.**

**Mother Mary set a cup of dishwater—coffee in front of me and shoved it across the white Formica along the deep—brown, coffee—stained scratches as she had undoubtedly done a thousand times before—a ritual—and shoved with the other hand the cream and sugar and they landed just right, in unison with two simultaneous clucks to the inside of her cheeks.**

**"No thanks," I said. I can take my water straight."**

**She smirked. I looked up and in walked a woman, long, tall, and handsome with full lips and oh—so—long legs. Just before I looked away, she noticed me too, did a second take, I looked away and she did too. Her eyes had burned a hole in mine and I saw a negative of her while staring down again into the Formica.**

**"So, let me get this straight. You got out of treatment just yesterday?" It was Pap who was talking to me.**

**"Yes, sir. I did," I said.**

**"And you went right out and drank." It was a statement was tainted with distain but with an intonation also said typical. The others offered very subtle sneers hidden within fine lines of a different sort of understanding seemed to curl up around their eyes and tightened the corners of their mouths.**

**"'s right. I spent a month sober, got drunk last night and am at a meeting today." I said with a tone said this is the truth and don't get down too hard on me and… would it be better if I had just spent another day in a bar... motherfuckers? They caught my drift. They also didn't give a shit. These were old salts, toughened yet softened with age and experience with guys like me.**

**Pap folded his arms, leaned back in his chair and said, "I know I didn't hear it first hand, but I heard you had said in the meeting you were looking for your daughter or you said something to the effect your main reason for getting sober was to look for your daughter who has been missing for a bunch of years. Is true?"**

**"Yeah, 's true ... partly." I couldn't even begin to think of how he might have known this. Maybe, Linc?**

**I just talked. "What happened was she had some drinking problems, maybe some drugs too, got sober, started going to meetings, had a few problems adjusting to them, from what she said and from what she told her friends, but I don't know if she'd started drinking or using again or not. Then all the sudden she comes up missing. Over five years ago. Haven't seen her since"**

**Pap's eyes seemed to go dead black as he said, "Yeah, there seems to be a lot of goin' around, especially with young gals"**

**I said, "I think I know what you're getting at though. Finding my daughter isn't my only reason for getting sober. I know, or it least I learned in treatment I have to stay sober in order to plan on doing anything else, staying sober has to be my number one priority."**

**One of the other old—timers said, "'s true, your number one purpose is to stay sober but also to help other alcoholics get sober but buddy, I can tell you right now if you can't even stay sober one day outta' treatment, you better not have any other number one purposes. Not yet anyway."**

**It sounded a little confusing, I felt a little defiance in me, like who the hell do you think you're talking to but it was mixed with I couldn't get off the shit alone and now here I am with a few old salts willing to help me. Shut up King. I was in a quandary, a place I had come to feel uncomfortably comfortable being in. I had a problem as soon as I came out of treatment, deciding how I was going to bounce around two things—stay sober and search for my daughter—but thought I could handle it.**

**Here I was less than forty—eight hours into this journey and I had blown it, yet here I was also, already trying to put it back together. I thought maybe I did need to listen to these old guys. Maybe I just needed to stay sober. I said this to myself, meant it but also knew as soon as got to be routine, in a day, week or month, I would be looking for any opening to start my sleuthing. Yup, 's what I would be doing.**

**No one else seemed to disagree with him. I know I certainly didn't. We all just sort of stared into the well—worn Formica, waiting for the muse to arrive with our next thoughts. I was still a bit buzzed by the deadness I thought I saw in Pap's eyes when I mentioned Kajon's disappearance and his dead, flippant response. I replayed it, …there seems to be a lot of goin' around." As if a missing human was a case of the sniffles.**

**I felt my neck turn as if involuntarily pivoting on an Ouija Board sending my sight dancing across the room, right into those full lips again. There was fateful feeling. meant—to—be thing I haven't felt in so long. Not love, not romance… something sexual, yeah but… maybe something new and stronger. My head smoothly pivoted back again, my eyes landing on Pap's then above the pool table on a sign announcing an upcoming billiard tournament, there at the Bores club. Images started triggering in my brain; the kind feel like they're bubbling up in a rush from one's subconscious then they strobe together; the kind feel a little scary because we don't know what it all means; it's a language unto itself but we all use it.**

**Flash: The full lips.**

**Flash: Pap's eyes.**

**Flash: The billiard tournament sign.**

**Then I was able to put together, on the spot, the full lips on the woman I had just seen a coming in the door; the same lips were on a woman who sat on the edge of the nooner meeting of the day before at the House of Assisi. She had been sitting with another woman. What did she look like? I glanced over at her. Sure enough. Long brown cigarettes. It was her.**

**Pap's eyes didn't give me anything whatsoever other than an underlying dead and creepy feeling, or was me giving me feeling?**

**The sign announcing the billiard tournament meant nothing to me and I don't know why I didn't realize this when Linc made his suggestion I come here, nor when I saw the name of the club in the meeting schedule listings, nor even when I saw it emblazoned on the front gables of the building when I drove up but right then the little signs came together and subconsciously nudged me into the realization I remember Kajon mentioning this place or maybe it came up in the preliminary investigation after she was missing; still only a fog for me. I didn't remember whether she had attended here regularly for her recovery meetings but I do remember her saying she came here for something, some sort of social gatherings maybe; perhaps some Friday night sober dances or something similar.**

**Put it all together and I really don't have anything more than I came in with, however I remember wondering whether she had sat in very chair I was sitting in at moment, if anyone there would remember her. Oh, if she came there, they would certainly remember her. She wasn't any little mouse in the corner, not my Kajon. It was then something solidified in me. I knew I had not only entered the world where I would find out how to stay sober, but I had also entered the world where I would find what happened to my Kajon. I know sounds awfully assumptive, maybe even with a little bit of ESP thrown in but although my description of those feelings and what they culminated for me sound very specific, generally speaking, what I got from those little tidbits of information sort of directed me like a doweling rod. I felt like I was headed in the right direction, for the first time in over five years. Trouble was, I didn't know toward what or where nor how many hurdles there would be for me while trudging the roads to these two goals. Still, it was an enchanted feeling. It was magic—time.**

**My head swiveled again but before it had completed its pan over and back again, the old guys disappeared and I was across the room sitting down with Mommy—Long—Legs. She got up, went over to the counter. I didn't know what to think. I don't know where Mother Mary was but Mommy leaned over, drew two more cups'o'brew, mixed some powders in it and in seconds it was in my hand blending steam with my view of… lips.**

**"You know and I know a couple of months ago you wouldn't have given those old geezers the time, let alone your time and now, here you are listening to them and they make you think. No matter how corny it sounds, right?"**

**Yeah, you're right. Why is ?"**

**She stiffened her neck and pulled in her chin, looking down at me "You got no choice. Who does at this point? Having a choice is what kills most of us." Some of us can't be trusted with a loaded gun like choice.**

**"I was under the impression you, maybe, were going to lighten up the subject a little."**

**The lips softened even more and then flattened and spread like a butterfly; so full of something like caring, understanding; it was a strange kind of tenderness.**

**"I'm sorry. I'm Nance." She didn't shake my hand. She lightly held it.**

**"I'm not sorry. King"**

**She was one of those people who don't make a point of it, but while talking to you, can't take their eyes off you. They seem to be locked into a genuine interest. Most of us protect our egos by never risking being seen to be as interested as we really are. Ordinarily this kind of attention feels intrusive but here, with this Nance woman, it felt good.**

**"I sat down here because I wanted to rescue you but then I didn't know how and hoped you would feel the vibes, and Voila! You did. Here you are"**

**"Yeah, the vibes. 's what it was. I felt them. What happened to the guys?"**

**"I think they got up and left when you came over here, or maybe astral projected. You miss them already?"**

**"But…"**

**"But?"**

**We both laughed. Didn't know why. Two buts. I don't know.**

**" was weird," I said. I think I lost a couple of seconds I there. It felt as if I was sitting there with them, in silence and then all of a sudden, I'm over here. What happened?"**

**"I don't know. I know what you mean though. 's happened to me before. Most juicers—in—recovery don't understand it but some of us have these lapses, these blackouts, even after we're dry. You'd think they could throw in a little high along the way too, huh?"**

**I smirked, "'s funny."**

**"Humor is the only way I can take any... all of this... life, seriously anymore. My new substance."**

**"What do you do Nance?"**

**"I sing."**

**"In a club, a choir…?"**

**"I like choirs, yeah. Just about anywhere really, is all right with me anymore. These days in clubs though. I sing Jazz. Nothing too much off the edge or anything. Classic stuff. The Blue Note. Downtown."**

**I thought for a bit, felt a little romantic and said, "Wow. Really? I wanna' say cool or maybe even cool daddy, but what I really mean is, is about the most interesting thing I have heard anyone say in a long time. I just wanna' see and hear you do it."**

**"When you say…"**

**"I just wanna' hear you sing, watch you sing. I find you very intriguing."**

**"Yeah… uh huh." She sniggered a heavy and handsome giggle. "I guess me saying down boy wouldn't be too inappropriate at this point in time, huh."**

**I was taken back. "Not really. Nuh—uh." What a dork.**

**"I wanted to talk to you about you, King. About what you are doing here." She emphasized you and here. "About what is going around and about you," she said, which made me think, and why does she wonder this about only me?**

**My head didn't but my mind did rattle back and forth a little looking for a little clarity.**

**"I think I need a little more vagueness."**

**She gave me a gist—catching smile.**

**"As I understand it—eavesdropping being more than a hobby for me—you got out of treatment and drank. Do you wonder why you didn't, in all those twenty—eight days, just walk out of treatment and drink? I mean, why wait the entire four weeks?"**

**I thought about it for a bit and she waited so patiently. "This is a little embarrassing to admit but I think it was because someone else was in charge."**

**Nance smiled, "Me too. I think it was something like too, for you. It was for me anyway and 's the way it will be here too, for a while anyway. You'll see. You gotta' let everyone else be in charge because you fucked it up for so long and when you come out—although there are things to think about and your not clear but maybe a little clearer—well, let someone else do it for awhile and then take back the reigns after awhile and if it works, great, if not, give it back."**

**It sounded scary but I said, "Okay, but who wants it… them… the reigns?"**

**She said, "Some give them to God, to others, to the group I really don't think it matters either way. If you were anything like I was when I came in—and so far, it sounds pretty close—you could hand it over to a tree stump and come out on top. I laughed. "True." A couple of seconds ago when you said 'Eavesdropping being more than a hobby for me,' I know it was an aside, but there was an intonation sounded almost serious. Not I mind here but, do you do a lot?" "I think what you heard was a tone I use, I think, to remind myself I used to have to do a lot of it for a living. I was a local cop. You develop extra sensitive hearing skills and I guess it becomes so entertaining; it's tough to let go of it. I still sit in restaurants sometimes and do this exercise I read about and it still surprises me. We just assume all the chatter around us keeps us from selective eavesdropping but if you actively listen and systematically remove or start ignoring the voices nearest you and then the ones a little farther away, you can actually hear a conversation going on across the room. " You're kidding. It works? You can do this? "Sometimes, well, most of the time, yeah." I was amazed but all I could do was smirk and then she did too. "I mean, I can't do it all the time but when it works, it's like those paintings, those computer paintings are three dimensional but you have to focus your eyes just right somewhere a little in front of the painting and then all of a sudden it springs to life. Just like , it doesn't happen all the time but when it does, it really is astounding." I found myself wishing the place were full so I could try it out right away. "You're a cop?" Nance finished a gulp of coffee, lit another long brown one, "Was. Six years ago I was on vice and one night I was in a group made a bust. Cocaine. We were always pretty careful about accounting for the stuff but there was an altercation while gathering the contraband one time and I shoved a couple of grams of coke in my pocket. After it was over, we went back to gathering evidence and the next morning at home, while getting laundry together I discovered the two little brown bottles and knowing this would mean big trouble for me, I thought I better get rid of them. The thing is, I didn't flush it. Instead, I put it in the freezer. I have always wondered why. Not too long after, I had a few days off and I had been out drinking with friends and ended up at a party. I was pulled into a side room and offered a line. Here I was faced with what I busted people for all the time and I simply picked up the straw, bent down and snorted… for my first time. It didn't really do anything for me but I had been drinking so maybe, I don't know. They say the first few times, sometimes, for some people, it really doesn't have much of an effect. When I got home, I sat down, had another beer and realized I was really smashed. I thought of the stash in the freezer and went for it. I had three days off but I was up drinking and snorting spacing the coke out over a two—night period. I slept on the third and for days afterward all I could think of was not how I have violated the law and much of what I stood for at the time but how I could get more. I really had a jones for it, soooo quickly.**

**I never found myself drinking more and then I started driving over into Tampa and getting grams from someone I knew on the force over there. After a bit it got more expensive for me, on my cop's salary, so I started getting sticky fingers at a few busts and this went on for about a year and then one day the Captain called me in and showed me a video where I was caught actually pocketing an eight—ball while turning in evidence. Pretty bold, huh?" "And 's how you became a jazz singer," I joked. Nance laughed. "'s how I became a jazz singer, a coke addict, an alcoholic, a broke ex—cop contemplating only how I could get a hold of a gun and shoot… me."**

**"When I was in treatment there was this guy who was really turned off with the program—I am too, sometimes—because some meetings are for alcoholics, some for addicted and such and some are really particular about which one you are.**

**Yeah, there are a few of them around but for me; I really don't see much difference. I even tried quitting smoking these damn things once and did too, for three months and after I started again, don't know why, but I took those first few drags and I got so dizzy I almost fell on my ass. I know these too are mind—altering drugs. I saw people before they got hooked on heroine, after they started and then later and later was just like cigarettes. They just didn't get high anymore but the first thing they had to do when they got up every morning was shoot up… same thing with cigarettes. You think nicotine isn't a mind—altering drug? Try quitting."**

**Of course, I grabbed for my pack and lit up. I asked her, "So, you lost your job? Even though you went through treatment?**

**"If it was just the addiction, I probably wouldn't have, not then. But I committed crimes getting it. I made the department into an unwilling supplier. Police departments try to stay away from dealing drugs, you know, contrary to popular opinion?**

**"So, I was on probation for… almost this whole time, just got off a few months ago and part of the agreement kept me out of jail was I seek counseling, which I did for a while and attend recovery meetings and now. I'm sort of addicted to this now.**

**"Yeah, what about ? People talk about . You know, the trading off of addictions.**

**"Well, it's true but you have to see it in context. I am also addicted to food, air, and water… to these people. The truth is, I really don't care what you call it. Booze and drugs would have killed me. These new addictions I think I need to survive. It's like people who say there is a cult side to this whole recovery thing too, and I thought about it for a long time and I can see what they are talking about, except for one thing. There are no cults out there you have to have an otherwise incurable disease in order to be a member of. This cult has at its center, many of us do anyway, as our primary purpose to stay sober and get together and help other people get sober and straight too. Not exactly offering black cats up as sacrifices, but there you have it.**

**I felt depressed and yet exhilarated with hope, both at the same time. This was the longest conversation I had had with anyone in years and so became the closest to the heart. Nance didn't seem like she would be a thumper of the rules but rather a hard—nosed common—sensor and I wanted to ask her out or to lunch or to just get away from the club and was just about to suggest something when she said, "So, tell me about your daughter."**

**I started palpitating and it made me shove my chair back, take a deep breath. I felt cold sweat forming in unusual places.**

**"I'm sorry. You okay?"**

**"I'm okay, " I lied.**

**hearing thing really does work for you. Did I say something to those old guys about it?"**

**"A little. But it seemed to be a big deal. To you and to them. You don't have to say anything if you…"**

**"No, 's fine. It is my number one or number two priority right now. Can't figure out which"**

**"Oh, 's the problem."**

**"Nope. The problem is she disappeared without a trace over five years ago and the fine folks you used to work with started looking, for a short time, but when they learned about DUI's, getting into recovery, they just shined it on and this devastated me. I tried on my own but just brick walls.**

**Kajon—'s her name—was missing and then her dad was completely lost and five years spin by and… here I am." "You're daughter's name was Kajon?"**

**There seemed to be a dead space.**

**The club closed at ten and I spent most of the remaining minutes running down my story with Nance, the first time I had done with another person in recovery, outside of treatment. She seemed genuinely interested. We exchanged phone numbers but made no future plans other than see ya' around.**

**It was great making the connection and I drove home, top down, heavy Florida night—wind blowing through my hair. I passed the bars, the liquor stores, and probably twenty or thirty crack houses and pulled into my humble carport.**

**night was the first night in over five years I would go to bed, all on my own, sober. While falling asleep a feeling of impending doom enveloped me and all I could see was the deadness in Pap's eyes.**

**The next day was uneventful. I woke in the morning, dumped out of my home—I call it the can, now—and went down the road to a breakfast place. I picked up a newspaper and saw a story on a woman who was making beaucoup bucks helping people get themselves organized. She did this mostly for businesspeople but it got me thinking about something I heard in a meeting. One way to get rid of the newcomer—confusion is just pick one thing to do each day for a month or so and then work your way up to two and then three and try not to go to far past . It sounded, well, sound. At least worth trying.**

**I went back to the can and found a fairly dried up old Bic, a frayed yellow pad and listed ten things or so I had thought of doing and then prioritized until I got one; stay sober.**

**I went to a meeting down the road at the House of Assisi and raised my hand as a newcomer. This was a mistake. I was almost attacked by other newcomers trying to sponsor me. Weird place.**

**When I got home, I laughed out loud, rolling all over the bed at my stupidity for even going back there. I did start thinking about this sponsorship thing and thought of talking to Nance about it. Actually, truth be told, I thought of Nance as a sponsor then thought, Nah, I'm a little too interested in those lips and legs to try and make a sponsorship relationship work too. I snickered it would probably make me drink.**

**I snickered at thought.**

**night, I went to the Bores, not to the eight—o'clock meeting but to a smaller meeting in a different room there, only fifteen people or so, more intimate but because one couldn't hide in the crowd, more intimidating too. I did, however fulfill my priority for the day; I stayed sober. Yea!**

**I spent the evening at home thinking about tomorrow's agenda and I tossed between staying sober and starting my search. I knew I had to keep it simple, as simple as possible, yet there would come a time I would have to, absolutely have to get back on horse. Luckily I didn't have to go back to work for a few more months since I had the residual checks still trickling in and some had built up over my month in S.R.C. So I was freer than most, probably, to take on a little more than just use my free time to attend meetings.**

**Someone did tell me after 5:30 meeting a good rule is to make ninety meetings in ninety days, at first, at least, but then said he was so bad he actually made three meetings a day for the first few months.**

**I thought this was probably an important issue to take on if I was going to have so much free time. But again, I knew I had to start the search soon. I had no idea where to start, how or even when.**

**The phone rang. My phone rang. I was a little surprised it still worked. My heart beat fast because I sincerely couldn't remember the last time it did ring except for a wrong number and way too many marketing calls. As I walked to it my mind raced through the possibilities of who it might be. 's the way it was when I was drinking every night. The phone, a knock on the door. They were so few and far between and the alcohol, the coke, well, they eventually took their toll and made me so paranoid.**

**As I said, I worked all night long on the shopping channel, except for Sundays. When they first started out, they wanted to pretend they were family oriented, even religious because their customers throughout America were pretty fundamental in their beliefs. The owners of the network used to tell us this and then quote P.T. Barnum, "…sucker born every minute," which made me grind my teeth a little but I went on, the way all hardworking Americans must when working for upstanding corporations.**

**Anyway, the good thing about not working Sundays was I did not have my mug exposed worldwide hawking K—Mart refund items to the unsuspecting salt of the earth, at least one day a week. I instead, got very, very drunk and this meant I had to sleep a little later than usual on Mondays and one morning there was a loud rapping at my door. Having barely shut the TV off a couple of hours before and crawled all the way into the bedroom, I woke with a start. It was the exterminator.**

**Well, I put on this old bulky terrycloth robe I had for years, the shoulder had a seven inch rip in it, the couch had eight or ten crumpled beer cans on it, a couple on the floor, and in the middle of it all was a huge, soapstone ashtray with at least forty cigarette butts and a couple crumpled packs of Marlboros. I let the exterminator into this mess.**

**I sat down on the couch, still very drunk and flicked on the TV. Within sixty seconds I completely forgot the exterminator was in the house and was zoning out on Regis and whoever his co—host year was.**

**The exterminator came out of the hallway on the way to the door and yelled, "'s do it sir." He scared the living shit out of me. I got up and walked him to the door, reeking I am sure of alcohol, unshaved, beat red from the ensuing heart attack with a cigarette butt hanging out of my mouth and he turned before exiting and said. "(I gotta' ask you. Are you on TV?"**

**Very embarrassing. Cops and exterminators.**

**I let the phone ring one more time. "Hey, how ya' doing?" It was Nance… lips and legs… my new friend. "You called?" I was so subtle.**

**"Oh yeah. works. Sound desperate. Every woman just loves ."**

**I laughed as she continued, "Had to call. Just had to. You all right?"**

**"Why? Because this is the first night I have been alone and sober in years? Why shouldn't I be all right?" "Oh yeah. And too."**

**" too? You mean there's something else happening on the planet at this time?"**

**Nance laughed and then sounded a tad serious.**

**"Hey, I'm here at the Note, just starting my last set. Early night. Kinda' sparse. Why don't you, without thinking about it, just hop down here and then we can go over to the Niche' and have a chat. I have something I want to tell you."**

**I paused wondering where and what this Niche thing was she wanted to take me to but she must have thought I was pondering whether to go or not.**

**"Just do it. Okay?"**

**I loved the idea I was meeting a recovering alcoholic who was working in friggin' a bar, so taboo. The first friend I made in the program ends up being a former cop, coke addict, alcoholic who is sober and sings jazz in a booze—joint. They say water seeks its own level.**

**When I walked in, I veered over to the bar, almost took a stool—instinct—and as the bartender reached for a drink—coaster a cocktail waitress took me by the arm and led me over to the tables.**

**"You're King, right? Nance said I should sit you down."**

**I wondered how I had been described.**

**When I walked in I had heard a smattering of applause and as she led through a nearby doorway I saw where it was coming from. The combo was just starting out with the thumbing of the Bass. The scene was classic. There were several blue lights on various areas of the band but on Nance there was a blended blue and red. It cast her in a violet/indigo haze seemed to shift along with the floating clouds of cigarette smoke.**

**Nance was right about the classic stuff. She was just closing her set with the Gershwin's Embraceable You. For a smoker, her voice was heavenly, like Cleo Lane but with a little more lady in it, as she formed each word, flavored it with her own music and let it fall through those lips… like five—dollar truffles. It was not a traditional rendition. There was Nance's voice almost, but not quite out of tempo with the base which was fingered riffing underneath her lyrics and then popped up to take center stage for the short spirits in between Nance's control of things. The bassist was good. He would hit the note right on and then bend it so far out and off to the edge you expected a full augmentation but then he would bring it right back on track but only so he could fuck with you a little more. It was great fun.**

**When she finished her set she came over, leaned down and gave me what mere acquaintances do out in the nightlife but nowhere else, a nightclub kiss off the cheek.**

**"Let's get out of here."**

**I found out what the Niche` was. It was actually called the Beat Niche`, a very old fashioned coffeehouse, circa 1962—ish located in a red—brick building on Central Avenue in one of those buildings looks like it is right out of New Orleans' French Quarter, complete with second story wrought iron balconies, called the Garden District.**

**It reminded me of a spot up in New York I caught the tail end of, back in the seventies. It was much on its wane at the time but in the early sixties, the beatnik ban—the—bomb days, it hosted all the great folk—singers of the day from Baez to Robert Zimmerman, the man who would travel the countryside putting us all in touch with our hypocrisies, is, after he changed his name from Zimmerman to Dylan.**

**The Niche` was complete with a very large espresso machine and steamed milk and honey. The added features would not have been around back then were several Internet stations and a wide assortment, from blue, green, shocking—pink and purple haired people. There was even a woman there with hair not more than a quarter inch long and it was dappled with perfectly replicated leopard skin design.**

**They also had a wide assortment of previously unheard of coffees and we ordered the coffee du` jour, which was called Spank Me Silly Satan Naughty Brew... I don't know… something like .**

**I thanked Nance for the invite telling her I was doing all right on my first night alone sobriety project but I thought on my first night out too and then found myself drinking.**

**She asked me, "Isn't it strange? We hear in recovery all the time how this is a disease. It is backed up by different sayings, one: I'm not a bad person trying to get good. I'm a sick person trying to get better, stuff like and then when we do go out; so many people in the fellowship treat it as a moral problem. They want to know what we did wrong. Weird."**

**I hadn't been around long enough to give it much thought, but she was right… again.**

**There was no entertainment night but there was a lonely, very old fender amplifier sitting in an otherwise empty bay window facing inward and I assumed this was where the entertainers performed when they were here.**

**"I called you down here, not only to keep you company on this night… but to help you with your reasons for staying sober. I don't think I can help you decide which is more important—staying sober or looking for Kajon—but I bet I can make you forget about confusion, maybe, if we're lucky, never think of it again. I think it bothers you even more than you have let on. For some reason 's the way our minds work at times. We obsess over things normal people see as rather simple choices and the obsession becomes painful and we want to be free of the pain and then we… well, you know"**

**"Okay," I said. She had me more intrigued, at point, than the twenty—one year old woman who seduced me when I was fifteen who had said, just before she lay down in the new—mown hay and threw her petticoat and skirt up over her face, "I think I have something you might be interested in." Gee, I wonder why me head went back there.**

**"I'm all ears."**

**Nance looked at me and her eyes welled up on the edges with tears. I could actually feel the stinging she must have been feeling in her nostrils. I didn't know why but it was happening to me too.**

**"I have a confession and I hope you won't hate me for this." She took both of my hands and held them in a manner people do says both I care about you, and this is important, but there is also a possibility they are going to tell you something just terrible and they want to hold of your hands to keep you from hitting them.**

**"I know your daughter, Kajon."**

**I lost my breath. There was thunder in my ears. Not from fear but a sort of shock.**

**"I didn't know her well and I didn't know you were her dad until I heard her name but it was very strange. When you said her name last night, I wasn't surprised. I don't know if it was because you are both alike in your eclectic defiance…" she smiled, "…or what it was but…" "What do you mean you know her? You know her? As in, right now, you know her? Here? You know where she is, where she is living? Is she here? In town? Tell me. I have to know." "No, no, no, no, no. I knew I would screw this up. was a poor choice of words. I do not know her. I knew her. Using the word knew sounds too past tense, as in, she isn't with us anymore, if you know what I mean. I'm sorry King. I really am."**

**"What are you say…say…?"**

**With , she lifted my hands to her forehead and melted them together, stopping my stuttering. Oh man, there were no sparks but something creamy and oozing like the life—force, a caring, a friendship thing I had never experienced before was moving around and it felt as if our fates were sealed or…I don't know, it was feeling makes people think we knew each other in a former life, something like but not the hots, or infatuation, falling—in—love kind of love.**

**I didn't know what all this meant. Had Nance done something very wrong with Kajon? What? I pulled back on my hands, just a little.**

**"Tell me. I gotta' to know."**

**"Oh God. Now you're going to expect a lot of information but I really don't have much to give you. I have to… I have to…"**

**She grabbed for cigs and lit one aware of the tension this caused and trimming her actions to a minimum, she began to speak while lighting up.**

**"Back around the time you say she came up missing, a little before maybe, she came here. I don't remember if I ever saw her at any of the other meetings around the county. Christ there are hundreds here every week. I did meet her here though, and people pegged her the same way they pegged you, as a defiant one."**

**"I've been pegged? I just got here."**

**"Not so much because of you, although… you know… it's the old apple doesn't fall to far from the tree bullshit—thing. The weird thing is, she wasn't really defiant. She was just curious. She questioned everything. I mean every single goddamn thing. Drove people nuts. I think most other alkies might see as her disease keeping her from staying sober and they want to stay away from her, one of the culty things.**

**There are others too who have bought the program hook—line—sinker and refuse to ever think for themselves and to people like , your kind is a threat."**

**"My kind…"**

**"Especially if you end up staying sober anyway." Nance sniggered.**

**"I don't get…"**

**She waved me off, "Don't worry about it. You'll see. Not important right now. Actually, I found Kajon quite intriguing but I knew whoever reached their hand out to her was going to have to use both hands and then some. Handfuls, you invented there. As far as I can tell, so far, she was sooooo much like you King.**

**You probably never got to see her off alone without you and in a way, you most likely would have been proud of her. The sad thing, although I have never read of this phenomenon anywhere, I have seen several girls just like her come and go… right here. They always just seem to come in and then poof, they're gone, and just like Kajon, they seem to be settling in a bit and then…" Nance snapped her fingers. "…gone."**

**I talked into the wee hours with Nance because this is the first glimmer of—I almost said hope—the first glimmer of… something… the first time in all these years I even ran into anyone who knew her, who saw her, live and in person, even though Nance was not sure she saw her beyond the last day I saw her. For all she knew, Kajon could have even started coming around the Bores after she left home.**

**There was much ground to cover but at least there was a thread to start weaving it all back together with. This thought reminded me of a book I would later be given by this tottering old guy in the program. As it turned out, it is a very famous book by a man named Victor Fankl, Man's Search for Meaning.**

**He said, "Ultimately, man should not ask what the meaning of his life is, but rather must recognize it is he who is asked. In a word, each man is questioned by life; and he can only answer to life by answering for his own life; to life he can only respond by being responsible."**

**I had, for a few years lost the sense of meaning, thinking meaning had to be out there for me but it was mine to make. I heard in a meeting, if it is to be, it is up to me, which has an odd meaning if one is successful because if one is indeed successful he or she is not seen kindly if they announce, well, if it was to be, it was up to me so I made it happen.**

**Frankl, while a prisoner in the concentration camps of WWII conceived what he called logotherapy. What I understand this to be, in a nutshell, is, not the belief, but the knowledge no matter how far down the ladder one has gone in life, no matter how much has been lost or thrown away, if there is one thread left, thread must be discovered and then must be used as a means to find the next thread and then repeat this process until a life is once again woven into a useful fabric.**

**In this case, Nance gave me a thread and it was now my responsibility to use it to find the next one and I believed wholeheartedly, at this point I would solve the mystery. What I didn't feel confident of was the notion, given my most recent history, I could do it alone.**

**We hadn't come to what ordinarily is the end of a conversation. Everyone knows when happens. This time, I knew it was happening but the content of our conversation was so melding for us. She told me of the guilt she felt when Kajon asked her to be her sponsor and how she finally sloughed it off and then how the guilt returned ten—fold after she met me a couple of days ago and found I was Kajon's dad.**

**I shared with her the guilt I too felt when Kajon came up missing and how I felt like I was in the Grand Canyon and there was no way out and no help. How I numbed myself for half—a decade and now I am sober, the guilt is returning and I don't have anyway of dealing with it. "Some stuff to have in common, huh?" Nance said, "Never saw this in the movies." We sneered at realization together.**

**I took her hands as she had mine earlier in the evening and said, "I can't do any of this alone."**

**"None of us can, baby."**

**"No, I'm not talking about just this sobriety thing. I can't do either, I know it. What I am talking about is the whole package. I am not going to be a guy who says sobriety is everything and let the rest of life go to hell. I have to find out what happened to her. She is all I have remains of my family. And… I can't do it... this alone." I thought why did I drink? Why didn't I just have continued looking fro her? I could have found her by now. Maybe little Garter snake wanted to make me feel bad, get fed.**

**The last thing I remember about evening has nothing to do with words. It was the firm, very slow squeeze Nance gave back to me in her hands. It was like when we all prayed in a circle. Words sometimes are shit. Connecting with or without them, for the right reasons was for now, everything.**

**Chapter Eleven (The prologue continues…)**

***The Grisly Crime***

***It just goes, through truths, half—truths, and lies. No one knows why. It all helps us cope, survive, procreate, figure it all out, whatever. But do we ever?***

**Nature's sedatives were now being blocked by more adrenaline, which brought her a few more seconds of something similar to a confused normality.**

**The swansong continued, "Lets see, where was I? Oh yeah, so like there's a sort of semi—dissolved screen and we see a medium—sized, but pretty heavy—looking shovel bangs, no, chops against the back of her head. Is what happened to me? And I um, I mean she falls down, out of the shot. The camera comes to rest on a shovel, clumped with dribbling red blood, flesh, black and gray sand/dirt and hair, I mean real gooey and I slump and there's a loud fellop—lump—plop sound when I fall into this thing here.**

**"What is this, a box, a fucking box? I'm in a fucking box?" she screamed.**

**A squirt of adrenaline blasted her heart to compensate for the lack of oxygen. She gasped, and then laughed.**

**"Okay, all—righty—then,' doing her finest Jim Carey. "Just for a little macabre comic relief I could break into song after falling into the box and sing, *whoops, there goes another rubber tree...*Nah would probably be just a wee bit inappropriate. No room to dance."**

**She blubbered a little tsk, tsk, tsk to herself and laughed. "Gotta hold the audience. Scare the shit out of them, yes, but don't fuck with them too much, you know, not too much... I mean fuck with them, yeah, but you know?**

***Jesus, one minute someone gives me a necklace; a present, and the next minute I am in a black box somewhere.* She snorted, "Mmmm, black—box maybe a big plane crash and I'm the only one."**

**She giggled then stopped quickly as she felt her heart fail, causing another massive adrenaline jump—start.**

**"Whoa, what the fuck's wrong with me, man. I must have fuckin', just fuckin' leaped, fuckin' leaped off the fuckin', the fucking, mother—fucking, fucking wagon of fucking recovery, man, again, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, FUCK. I mean, am I like drunk, high, amyl—fucking—nitrated, generally fucked up, ripped and torn and shredded to bits like the old days or fucking—what? Hmmm," she feigned comfort, "the old days. I mean, what was it, a few months ago—or what? What else could it be? Must be drugs, man. I don't know."**

**She thought she had gotten a hold of a bad, or very good, batch of, whatever, and was on some bummer, or ultra—cinematic, fantastic chemical trek, like she heard all those old, decrepit hippies from the meetings talking about. They were sober for ions but they really did love romancing their long—gone substances and Day—Glo days of mind—expansion. All fun they used to have using shit.**

**They sang songs about it, marched for the right to do it, called it, yeah, mind—expansion, man and now they look back at it and have renamed it abuse. One more good high would probably fucking kill them. They're like people who miss the person who constantly beat them half to death.**

**They long for uncomfortable—comfort—zones.**

**Kajon remembered then forgot, momentarily, then remembered again about the shovel and the blow to the back of her head. All of the evidence of what had just occurred just couldn't quite fully register with her, not yet. She screamed but no sound came out. She slumped again, and then surged right back up, maybe in a final effort at denying the horrible inevitability of it all, like we all do when we get terrified. We go to the movies, we drink, we overeat, drug ourselves, run forty miles a week and fall in love repeatedly and we buy, buy, buy everything in site, rather than deal with the reality of it all.**

***(…prologue to be continued)***

**Chapter Twelve**

**I could hear the break of day burbling coos of mourning doves, which nestle themselves up into the aluminum mini—gables of my carport, ushering in the new day. I had had a dream. Felt more like a premonition, but I never remember these things fully, until around mid—morning.**

**I ground up some coffee, boiled it up in an old Turkish mud—maker I acquired years ago, someplace, and lit a cigarette, which I, in the middle of the first drag, stubbed. Another feeling of premonition.**

**I walked around in the can, sipping and chewing my muck, looking at the clock as if I had to be somewhere—purpose—seeking—and within the hour I was hauling out an old beach cruiser bike, Kajon's, from the back storage room. It was rusted with two flat tires. I found the old hand—pump, which was just as rusty—but it worked—and I pumped away. The tires swelled and surprisingly stayed. Change was in the sir.**

**I wrestled the contraption out of the can disturbing the quite of the little park with squeaks and scrapes, metal against metal, getting it our the door. When I did, the normal, cool, fairly wet Florida air wasn't there to settle on my skin and enshroud me. It usually feels comfortable, like I am cloaked comfortably in familiarity. Instead, the humidity was low which made me feel not enshrouded but unblanketed, uncloaked, uninhibited, free. Within minutes I was tooling down Gandy Blvd., toward the bay for some reason, having no idea in hell where I was going. I got there pretty quickly but before I did, I remembered this guy who stopped by during treatment so he could celebrate in the same room he spent his first day sober, a whole year of sobriety. Strange, the things we romance.**

**Linc said to him after the guy gave us his little speech, "Have you heard the sounds of balloons yet?**

**Baffled the guy said, "Balloons?**

**Linc looked askance at him, raised an eyebrow and smirked, "You sure you got a year?"**

**Linc turned toward the rest of us and said something like, "Y'all, if you are lucky, are going to walk out door over there with twenty eight days under your belt and all you're going to be able to think about is either how to use right away or how not to use right away. Some are going to feel like you made a big accomplishment, twenty—eight whole days but remember, everything is relevant. If you are successful and you get closer and closer, month—by—month to getting year, you should—not everybody does now—you should hear a sound in your ears is similar to the sound of rubbing overfilled dry balloons together. You know sound? Lottsa' electricity, He turned toward the yearling and said, "You sure you ain't heard sound?"**

**The guy was cracking up and said, "I remember this now. Go ahead." So we all knew there was a joke in here somewhere but Linc never told a joke without a point.**

**He continued, "You hear this sound, like all these balloons rubbing together and the closer you get to year, the louder it gets until it all comes together on the day you celebrate first year and then it explodes. What do you think sound is?"**

**No one would talk. We wanted the punch line.**

**" rubbin' sound my little addits is the sound of your head getting ready to pop out of your ass."**

**I'm riding down the road, remembering this and I broke into laughter. I missed Linc. He loved us and wanted us to have the confidence comes from twenty—eight days sober, but also he wanted us to know we weren't free and clear by a long shot and we had to find people like us and stick together… somehow.**

**At the end of the boulevard, just before it turns into the bridge crosses a long span of Tampa bay, there is a Park & Ride, a large parking lot where people who are willing to bus it over to Tampa to their various workplaces, can leave their cars and return to them at the end of the workday.**

**I had found a new friend in Nance and was riding fairly high on along with a feeling of accomplishment I was still sober but I knew I was still lost. It was this dual—purpose thing. I knew what had to be done but still had no idea where to start. There has to be a time when the thinking and talking kick start the doing. I needed something, a sign from the Gods, a direction to move in.**

**I remembered someone they had hauled in to give us meetings in treatment said they were helped by self—help books. They did whatever it took to get back to where they needed to live at least a semi—normal life. One of them shared with us they discovered we all had to admit to certain human traits and to use them. One of those traits was we all, everyone on the planet, talks to themselves. Maybe not as out—loud as others, but, mentally or otherwise…. we have a conversation with ourselves almost every waking moment.**

**The book said since we are doing all of this jabbering with our own brains, we might want to look at what it is we have actually been saying all of these years. Apparently, the guy or gal who wrote this particular book found an awful lot of what is being said is affirmation of what we were taught to say to ourselves, by others and not all of these affirmations were positive. The conclusion was it just might be time to change the tapes and if we tried real hard, we just might be able to change enough of them to make our lives more livable… more meaningful.**

**Now I usually can't stand religious stuff and renaming it spirituality, which is so popular these days, doesn't knock the fish—smell down enough pegs to make it more tolerable, more palatable but I must say, I find the fat little Buddha… fascinating.**

**He had these noble truths, which have been reinterpreted by millions; the first two I have condensed into this thinking. One, bad stuff happens and two, the suffering I experience from bad stuff happening is in direct proportion to the clinging of my mind this bad stuff should not be happening to me.**

**Now, I did not have this philosophy all sorted out while wobbling along on my long lost daughter's quickly deteriorating bike out on the edge of crystal blue waters day but I had heard in the rooms and in treatment a prayer had been around long before the rooms of recovery said essentially the same thing. My dilemma was I needed desperately to change the things I could, accept the things I had no control over and probably most important, I had to figure out some way—maybe just stay sober and live long enough—to know the difference between the two.**

**So, I started talking mantra to myself over and over again while tooling around parking lot in small figure eights. It seemed to calm me, help me focus and all I could think of was how important it was to my survival I, one, surrender to the fact substances do not enhance my life, two, I could not handle licking it alone any more than I could find Kajon by myself and third, committing forever, if need be, to turning my life over to this realization and practicing it as many living moments in every single day as I can. I felt as if I was cultivating new soil, planting seeds, which may finally grow into me talking my own thoughts to myself. A powerful irony came over me when I realized my self—centered thinking seemed to be all about finding healing through exchanging my thoughts with many others.**

**Over a period of a couple of hours my figure eights got wider and wider until I finally went straight up one side of the highway and then down the other, mantra—mumbling all the way home.**

**As I coasted into the trailer park, sailing over those extreme ups and downs of the sandy roads inside it, stirring up mini—dervishes in the wake of worn and cracked tires, feeling excited and new, the premonition hit me. I couldn't remember the dream but the feeling was one told me from here on out life would be okay, manageable. Behind feeling was a huge, murky, shoe formed from sinister clouds, which could drop, enshroud, encase me, and bury me at any moment. Scary, yet, while burying the bike back into the bin I made a conscious decision to say something different to my mind and instead of feeling free this controlled, opposite—thinking upset me, because it jeopardized uncomfortable comfort zone I had created for half a decade. I realized my very existence, my survival was at stake here and I came to believe there was no way out of addiction, I had to spend every waking moment fighting for the solution to my dilemmas. What would happen if I couldn't retain sobriety, never found my daughter. Everything had to change. But how? Where do I start?**

**I pulled the bike back out of the shed and forced the kickstand out of its rust—frozen position, set the bike up in the middle of the driveway and stood back and just gazed at its possibilities. It was not an adjustment. It was a statement.**

**I looked up into the sky, smiled, took a deep breath and noticed there was once again, a change in the air. The phone rang.**

**It was Mother Mary over at The Bores. Seems Pap had been missing for a couple of days and his coffeemakers had fallen apart in keeping their commitments so they needed someone to handle it for the noon mtg. At first I thought why me? Why did I have to do this? How did this place survive before I came along and my old thinking was off and running again? I had a nanosecond talk with myself, recommitted to my figure—eight thinking and told Mary I would be there in half an hour. The air was rare and the sun stung in tiny prickles in way made me feel alive and sizzling and at the same time like tiny, cancerous seeds were being implanted into my skin would have to be dealt with in thirty or forty years. I felt great.**

**I thought suddenly, Pap missing? What the hell is ? I didn't know if it meant he hadn't shown up today, really was missing, as in a missing person, was this unusual or what? I thought, calm down, son, it'll all be cleared up in a few moments. Someone merely called you in to make dishwater. No one asked you to do a Lt. Colombo. I was only blocks away. Back to reality. Once I arrived, it wasn't cleared up. No one had heard or seen him for a couple of days and apparently hadn't happened since 1979 so...not normal.**

**As soon as the red light illuminated on the coffee urn, indicating the dishwater was ready to serve, in walked Fiah, the woman who wouldn't let me serve coffee until I found a modicum of honesty. She pretended not to recognize me so I pretended right along with her, not to recognize her, nor she was pretending to not recognize me. We pretended quite well together. Not much satisfaction in of course but I thought if she thought enough of me to deny me, I guess I ought to have the human decency return an unsolicited favor. I thought, if we could only keep this going indefinitely. was kind of fun.**

**I thought of Pap, then of the night I met Nance in the game room, sensation, dead look in Pap's eyes when he spoke of Kajon. Was there really something to those feelings or was me giving me feeling?**

**I remembered the sign announcing the billiard tournament prior to moment meant nothing to me, the name of the club all of the sudden sounding old and familiar where it hadn't registered at all prior to moment and then I thought I had remembered Kajon mentioning this place or maybe it came up in the minuscule police investigation after she was missing; still only a fog for me. Why did I just think of again, because of Pap?**

**I walked into the coffee bar where Mother Mary greeted me with tear—filled eyes tilted up at through little girl's pout. I stepped naturally into her hug.**

**Her been—around—the—block—ness I had seen on my first day there had vanished and she bled into my chest, "Where is he?" It was a strange feeling. I hardly knew her. I hardly knew anyone there, yet I was expected to comfort, maybe even to know something. Very special people in and around these rooms have learned to expect comforting.**

**I mumbled into maze of matted hair encased her grieving head, "I don't know Darlin'. Why don't you come into the meeting room and talk with me while I get the coffee stuff set up."**

**No one knew anything. Pap left, apparently closed up the club by himself a couple of nights before. I thought of my premonition, creepiness I felt from Pap night. I scooped the newly washed ashtrays into the bus pan and got Mary to look into my eyes. I felt like a piece of sucker—punching litmus paper.**

**"Hey Mary. You remember my daughter? I had not mentioned my daughter to her and I guess all of the creepiness made me want to find out just who knew things about me, how far the tentacles of knowledge of me went. "You have a daughter? Is she here?"**

**She had no idea what I was talking about.**

**Fiah made her presence known again, interrupted, "Coffee ready yet?"**

**I know now, in her own way, Fiah was trying to do right, chastising me the way she did at my first meeting of the Bores. There are those feel if they were tough—loved into sobriety, then is the way it should be for all people on the planet. Some leap, but oh so common… but, I remember at the time, thinking I just couldn't wait until I got to chair a meeting and she raised her hand to share. I wondered how I would handle her.**

**"I haven't got this coffee thing down yet, ma'am," I said. "It takes me, for some reason, more then two or three seconds to make sixty cups but I guess 'll all change if I keep coming back."**

**She never broke stride with my stupid comeback. Her eyes rested like pig—iron and she said," The light's on stupid. Give me a cup of coffee and then she turned her sensitivity to Mother Mary. "And where the hell has Pap been. Seems like weeks since I seen him."**

**This sent Mary wailing off to the ladies room. Fiah, untouched simply turned to me and said, "My we are a sensitive lot, aren't we?" And she took a lone seat at one of the tables. I looked at her and felt a stinging in my sinuses, a burning in my eyes and I realized, there is something in rusty old soul I dearly loved.**

**"Coffee ready yet?" Another wanting voice from the other side of the counter. A small, trim, Irish—looking woman with natural roses in her cheeks; looked like she regularly might have berry and barley juice for lunch, fresh—squeezed stuff. There was a déjà vu—ness in thought.**

**Her hair was wet looking, curly, fire—red and shimmering. Her eyes, light green crystals with little emerald and brown flecks accenting the irises, surrounded by whites, lightly bloodshot with THC or some other additive smearing around in a little more moistness than normal. So sexy. She held out her hand for me to taste, I mean shake. What I have since learned is this is a common—sense sign of ongoing insanity; mine.**

**" I haven't seen you here before, have I?"**

**I had no idea whether she had or not but I took her word for it. I wiped my hands on a towelette, "Um, I dunno. If you say so."**

**"My name is Cid. Didn't like it over at the Assisi house?"**

**Huh? Then it came back to me. She was there noon hour when I met the cig—lickers. was the déjà vu—ness. Was she one of them? One of the cigarette lickers? Images were coming in. All of this happened in a speck of time. She was sitting next to someone else, another woman. Was … was it Nance?**

**She went on talking but I was weirded out, a bit fried, like I had just had an electrical surge singed my brain cells but I didn't know why. For some unknown reason, I remembered the essence again of my dream then I settled into the figure eights and noticed she was still talking.**

**"… so I thought I would find out for myself. The coffee?"**

**Find out what for herself? I wanted to watch her walk away. To assess. To make her come back to me. "Um, a couple more minutes."**

**Instead of walking away, she squared both elbows into her hands, leaned down on the counter and took a deep breath pumping a healthy cleavage through the "V" in a lovely red—silk blouse which, like me, was just trying oh so hard to do it's job and merely survive.**

**"So, have you decided? You going to hang here, make this your recovery home?"**

**She was asking a question while her eyes scraped me clean head to toe. I wasn't exactly sure what she was measuring me for.**

**"I hadn't really thought about it. I sort of, don't have anywhere else to be right now and I'm just kind of feeling my way around."**

**"Got a sponsor yet?"**

**"Sponsor? I really don't know much about yet. They told us about it in treatment and I thought I would get one but things changed when I got out. I'm feeling my way around." I wondered what she felt like.**

**Her smile stayed set but her eyes betrayed her. Her brain was spinning like crazy.**

**"How are you working the program without a sponsor?"**

**question felt like someone was wedging my wallet from my back pocket with a crowbar. Her smile was painted on but still hungry. Her breasts pushed out a little more pulling my eyes down. Whatever fragrance she was wearing made my nostrils flare a bit and while hoping it wasn't obvious, her eyes told me it was. I knew she was out to hurt me and she knew I wanted her and I knew it had nothing to do with my heart and she knew exactly what she was doing. Together, we knew a few things.**

**I feigned a punch. "You know something… uh…"**

**"Cid."**

**"Cid?" I felt my lip and nostril lilt into a little mock. "You know something Cid, I don't like the word program. I know it isn't meant way but it feels cultish, you know? When I hear it. I cringe when I hear it."**

**I could tell she did not like the word cringe, so I added, "Honestly, it feels like my heart wrinkles up in dread when I think of attaching myself to something people can think of as no more meaningful to them than, a program. Like we are these weird creatures have to line up and get programmed or re—programmed."**

**I was feeling my oats a bit. Caught up in my own diatribe, in reverie. I wanted to smell her more… much, much closer.**

**I had trouble reading her responding expression. My ego told me it was mutual lust but it kept morphing, slower than the creeping moon, from lust, to pity, to hate, to a repulsion so guttural it said, I am nothing right now but a spirit of craving yearns to fuck you until you are absolutely dead. Wasn't sure whether this was another sign of my insanity or hers… or both.**

**They have this thing in recovery called thirteen— stepping. It is usually when men take advantage of newcomer—women for dating/sexual purposes. It is frowned upon, of course. I felt like I was being very strongly, even meanly thirteen—stepped… and my perverted needs were ready to spread for it.**

**I have found since then, no matter how many people get haughty about it, no matter how many prudish, priggish, starched, strait—laced, long black—dressed spirits of temperance run around trying to keep human attributes from flourishing, the truth will always be the mere promise, the sheer possibility a single person a newcomer may pine for, perhaps may show up at a meeting, has kept throngs coming back until they hear what they needed to find healing. This is true with or without consummation of the desire.**

**Funny, I was molested pretty regularly as a child between the age of five and seven and as I remember, I looked forward to it happening over and over again.**

**My mother and father were both ministers. I was brought up in churches and so, have had for a long time, what I call the Wizard Of Oz syndrome when it comes to spirituality. I have seen behind the curtain so there is a part of me is very much like Toto, Dorothy's little dog, who's desperate purpose at one point in the story seemed to be to keep on pulling back the curtain obscured the reality of the wizard so Dorothy and her friends could see there really was no wizard at all. they already had inside of them everything they were searching for, and there was no need to line up in submission and jump through hoops for what one already has.**

**Now, many years later, I feel like I am back in one of those churches. I may need what they have or need to rediscover what I always had and help other people to do the same and I had become committed to finding out what was, but I have damned curtain securely enmeshed into my teeth.**

**Here, in a place where what Cid was now doing to me, is a touted to be a major no—no, she was doing to me blatantly. A large part of me couldn't wait to get started on it. It would be a wonder escape. It would make me feel different and is really what I want, wasn't it?**

**My younger brother was introduced to the wonders of sexuality long before puberty by a deacon in my dad's church. A young woman, the daughter of the minister down the road used to baby—sit me and molest me into nirvana regularly. She educated me at a young age how to help her leave the planet for a few moments as well.**

**It seemed as if a very destructive, menacing spirit of mutual molestation was slithering around between Cid and I.**

**The meeting had started and someone had brought up a topic of something like, how it for them was when they had no control whatsoever over their addiction. Oddly, most people responded with moral solutions. I noticed it was so important for many folks to dwell on how they were to blame for their dilemma. I noticed in myself something didn't seem to fit. I noticed I had been blaming myself too, for a long time, for everything going awry. The meeting made me think—which is really what they can do best—and I realized this devastation in my life was not the result of some perverted dream I set out to create and make happen. This was the result of something happened not from me but to me. I had to concentrate on the problem of living with or getting healing from… a disease.**

**This thinking would be the source of conflict with many fellows in recovery… it also would become my sustenance.**

**So, no more listening for hour. My mind either drifted off or was drawn away by thoughts about how the hell I had gotten to this place in life, why this Cid gal had come on so strongly to me, what it would be like… hair, those eyes, red silk… those… and, oh yeah… what the hell was she doing with Nance at meeting over at the house of whackos. Were they really together? Were they friends? And where the hell was Nance? I hadn't seen or heard from her. I felt a little antsy in my thinking, then thought no more about Cid but about Nance, why it was my brain was jumping for conclusions. Why I was looking for some diabolical connection between Nance and Cid; was just stupid. And finally, why would I be upset about Nance not contacting me. We did not have a relations ship or a contract, or even plans. I was in such desperate need of a life. Here I was, a volunteer coffeemaker for a free, walk—in jitter—joint. Then I thought, maybe singing tonight. I didn't know.**

**About halfway through the meeting, Cid got up, came over to the counter, puffed those breasts at me again and slid a business card my way, upside—down, tossed her coffee cup in the trash, smiled and absolute inviting smile and just walked right out the door.**

**On the way home, I lifted the card out of my shirt pocket. It was her phone number. I wadded it up and tossed it out onto the road and gave myself a whimper said, what the hell am I doing, turning this down? It was a small action but it did suggest some change might be occurring.**

**It was mid—afternoon and I hadn't had breakfast but noticed I was hungry as soon as I got nearer to home… as soon as I got near the Crab House, is. I observed I became aware of, what Connie had said… dragon—thing; little garter snake wanting to become a dragon again and devour me. She never said ton avoid it, but to try to always be aware of it. So there I was, hungry, but aware the last time I went in this place I got laid, yes, but I also got drunk. I knew I had to be very, very careful but did not hesitate a second in zipping into the Crab House parking lot.**

**Just before I latched onto big, familiar, shellacked rope handle on the door my mind flashed on the ice—cold beer… on the carefree, fun, wiry and gymnastic… Mouse.**

**"Hey baby. How's it hangin'." She had no class at all and I loved her for it. And of course she said, "Beer?"**

**"Nah, not this time." foreign and, for the first time, like it fit me… like I want it to fit me.**

**"Too early?"**

**"Nope, too late. I hope I have finally just been there and done … you know?"**

**She was already pouring my coffee and smiling. She understood but she also understood in a very streety way humans are frail and beer?… coffee?… it didn't matter to her a tinker's damn. She loved me like she loved them everyone, any ol' way.**

**I had a cup of coffee and one of the best Grouper sandwiches I ever ate, smeared with homemade tasting tartar sauce. It was a sort of a celebration.**

**When I left, Mouse asked me to call her sometime and my sillyly cautious brain said, I wonder if she wants sex or to get sober… maybe both. And I smiled, pleased with such a harmless dilemma and the awkward new manner in which my brain seemed to be stumbling into thinking.**

**I woke to my phone as all future amateur detectives do. I remember thinking; I am getting popular, man. Then, what a Dork I am.**

**"Where were you?"**

**It was Cid but for all I knew it could be hag of a voice I found on my machine when I first got home from the jitter—joint.**

**I thought I knew but said, "This is…?"**

**"This is Cid." She said in a tone said she was put out with me not knowing instantly it was she. Confirmed, I felt my blood pressure zoom.**

**"I never heard you on the phone before. I just woke up."**

**"Uh—huh… listen, I was thinking. I stopped by the Bores to see if you might be there. Of course you weren't. Worried about you. But… have a feeling you don't like people prying. I hear you like to do things on your own. You didn't take another white chip showing your willingness to surrender to the program when you went out and drank the night before, I heard. Right?"**

**"You heard?"**

**"King, rumor—mills are not exclusive to the program. They happen everywhere. People talk. I heard."**

**"Okay. Well… I overslept is all. I am not drinking or using. I overslept."**

**There was silence so I added, "Look, I appreciate your concern. I really do but I see the value of not drinking and getting together with other people, of being honest about my sobriety and all. Don't worry. But, thank you. It does feel intrusive but I guess 's just something I am going to have to get used to.**

**Another lull, then, "Good. I got a proposition for you."**

**"A proposition."**

**"A proposition, yeah. I don't usually do this. As a matter of fact, I have never done this."**

**I could here her lips twist into a dirty little smirk on the other end. Probably licking them ready to devour me alive. I imagined little garter snake wavering around in seeming innocence, "You slept though meeting time. Thought I would see you there. She said, "Wanna' come play?"**

**Come play?**

**There is absolutely no reason I should come play with this woman. So I took a stand and then my mouth said, "I'd like to play. Maybe. What game?"**

**I thought, how coy. How clever. Then, Dork.**

**There was silence, then, "Did you look at the card I gave you?"**

**"You mean your phone number?"**

**"Yeah, did you check the other side? What I do for a living?"**

**"Uhm, no… it's out in the car, I guess."**

**"Okay…, don't make me feel too important now. I just wanted to know if you saw my business. I own a massage therapy business. I specialize in deep Rolfing. I use sticks. I leave deep bruises. Don't worry though. I was just thinking you looked so tense earlier today and maybe you could use a good massage… a simple, non—bruising one… at first… or, you know… something."**

**The something is what caught my… ear. She gave me the directions and after I showered off the sleep—sweat, I putted out to south—county knowingly fueled by lust, oh wondrous lust.**

**Cid lived in a tucked away enclave known as the pink streets. The sidewalks and the streets, throughout the neighborhood are made from pink cement. They were built in the booming nineteen—fifties. It was somebody's dream. They made it happen. Made al the digests and newspapers at the time, millions of them are to this day, trying so hard to decompose at the bottoms of thousands of landfills throughout the country.**

**Relaxation was just what I needed and even if it wasn't, it felt so good. Cid had hot passion—fruity apple—cinnamon juice, a whole aromatic therapy room going and gave me absolutely the best massage I have ever had. She was all oil and elbows.**

**Massages, good massages always open up so much which I think releases not only tension but toxins for the bloodstream to carry away. This process usually gets me very buzzed, especially if there is the promise of romance in the air and I soon fell into a deep, toxic sleep, as if I had been drugged.**

**When I awoke, it was the middle of the night and Cid's, pungent—oil drenched body was seemingly, involuntarily smearing mine in a hazy ballet from head to toe, as sort of some strange, ultra sensual finishing buff. She kissed me deeply and then her tongue slithered out of my mouth, up my cheeks, over my brow and pressed sizzling obsession into my ear. She continued down my neck as her knees passed by my face. She slowly spun, defying gravity, our skin, shimmering in the soft flickerings of candlelight coming from several spots in the room.**

**When she came around again, she smiled, stood, helped me up in the continuing dance, out of the room into the moonlight were we slipped into a warm, herbal—intense burbling hot tub, as the cooling Gulf Breezes passed through heavily vine latticework surrounded us. She relaxed me. We relaxed each other… all night long.**

**I don't remember getting up, dressing or how I slipped away, but the sky was mauve, for a moment in dreamy, eerie pallet it displays every morning, here, as the coast leans back arching gracefully the rising sun.**

**My top down, always, made the clammy, wet air swirl around the car mushing the smells of distant low tides together with the murmurings of the radio, the morning fisherman's report. There was a man talking about a recipe for Snook he had tried. He warned the listeners upon hearing the ingredients, it would be difficult to accept, but he urged his Tampa Bay angling listeners to just listen and then… just try it.**

**He said he took a bay—fresh Snook fillet and laid it on an oiled griddle, smothered the fillet with a pasty mixture of mayonnaise, chopped Vidalia onion, and an equal amount of chopped black olives all smushed together with a dollop of whole butter and fresh—squeezed lemon juice, but not enough to make it runny. He guaranteed after baking this filet with this odd—sounding mixture spread over the top of it, for about a half hour in a pre—heated oven at three—hundred degrees, the first bite will make your eyes roll back into your head and you'll never need a mate again. He laughed and said, "It only goes to show some of the weirdest things in life take you straight to where you never knew you wanted to go in the first place."**

**I thought, what a strange and attractive thought.**

**night with Cid was exquisite; everything I ever wanted from drugs and booze. It made me feel different, very different. It felt like escape, a velvety journey to another world, another reality, but I could feel inside of me a place where I would eventually want more and more. There would come a time when there would never be enough. Every one of my senses had either been liltingly seduced or pleasantly riddled with intense, piquing pleasure.**

**The voice of ol' Connie came whispering to me in little swirls from somewhere back in time, somewhere in the back of my mind, "So, how's the little snake working for or agin' you this morning Kingman? Hmmmmm?"**

**I could never again do this... with Cid.**

**Back at the can, the signal to my newfound popularity and purpose on the planet, my answering machine, was blinking. It was Cid—good God hadn't this woman had enough—sounding sleep, sultry then whimpering and finally scary.**

**"Mmmm, a night to remember." It sounded as though she were mushed against the pillow speaking through the laziest slit between her lips. She was wide—awake though and had an agenda. No one wakes up, thinks, finds a number, dials it and then can hardly open their mouth to speak. "I do hope you had an enjoyable time. I think I remember you having several enjoyable times." Then the whimpering sounded like it was going through cutsey—puckered pouty lips turned to giggling, then to a more serious again, "I couldn't believe it when I woke and you were gone." Gone was stretched out. "I felt all alone. All by myself." Alone and …self were elongated too. Then the scary, "I don't understand but then I am not a man." All righty then. I could have sworn I could hear a hammer being lifted by pulleys and cables in the background creating a very large shadow. "I can't just recover and get my emotions back and then manipulate them at will to get what I want, not follow the rules of the game and just change peoples lives willy—nilly." And then the hammer dropped to the tune of a loud hang—up in my ear.**

**My first response was to pick up the phone and dial her back but I didn't have her number, was frustrated then as quickly, suddenly happy I had wadded card up and tossed it the day before. I wondered if I subconsciously knew something would happen and had tossed it as an act of self—preservation and then I swear I saw little snake sneer defiantly and shrink down just a tad.**

**There was one more message.**

**"King. Listen up… pick up if you're there… okay then. I got together with a couple of old pals in the department today and brought up the investigation, Kajon's case, not specifically, but a general conversation about a few missing kids I had heard about over the years in recovery. I didn't want to let on I was working on a case or anything. I found out something very interesting. It's pretty late. Maybe I'll see you at the eight o'clock at Bores. Gimmee' a call. This is something we can definitely get to the bottom of, together; I can feel it in my bones, Babe. This is really weird."**

**Chapter Thirteen (The prologue continues…)**

***The Grisly Crime***

**We go to the movies, we drink, we overeat, drug ourselves, run forty miles a week and fall in love repeatedly and we buy, buy, buy everything in site, rather than deal with the reality of it all.**

**She had spent a lot of time doing the same damn things over and over and over again — to escape mostly — and each time, consciously, expected things to come out completely different than they had before. It never worked, of course. She knew it. It never would work. She knew too. However, she and they all did it anyway. Kajon had decided only recently, this was the consummate definition of wacko, and it was what the gist of the whole damn disease was about, if it was indeed a disease. It perked her spirit up a little to remember the time she said in a meeting — and was verbally beaten silly for it — she sometimes felt as if she was simply in a process of trading addictions; trading an addiction to booze/drugs for an addiction to meetings. She also knew she knew of no other way out. It had to be done way... at least for her.**

**She had said, "I think most of us wouldn't buy reality unless it went on sale or was illegal, which it almost is, I mean kind of, when you think about it, with addictions."**

**No one laughed, which made her giggle when she thought about it. She laughed at the fact she had once said and no one laughed. But she kept going back to those oh—so—uncomfortable meetings because she really did want to get sober, straight, but she just didn't want to have to swallow a whole bunch of, what felt to her like propaganda to achieve it. The defiant one, some of them had called her. Yes, she had been court—ordered there but after was fulfilled, she kept going back. So fucking what?**

**The flick continued.**

***(…prologue to be continued)***

**Chapter Fourteen**

**Before sailing off into a soft and sensual sleep the night before, I remember Cid telling me I was so lucky not to be her, to be merely born into this world as a man. I had no idea what she was talking about. I was lost, still dazed with softly humming post—sex high. I love after—glow comes when it has all been so wickedly wonderful and wrong. wonderful false sense of security seems so appropriate just before the other shoe really does drop away.**

**To me afterglow feels as though I have somehow been able to mentally absorbed a fine French feast, one smothered with the most luxurious of Champaigon' sauces, with a final finishing provided by a good, ten year old bottle of just about any Cote du Rhone. Mmmmmm, followed by a cardiac arrest.**

**The last I remember, she was talking about lost emotions, keeping things pure, keeping things from being watered down, it is just the way things had to be, twilight talk I supposed. But was then and it was the morning after and I was only reminiscing.**

**So, here's what I had so far regarding my two primary purposes. I have stayed sober for twenty eight days—under supervision—gotten released, drank… immediately—couldn't have been accomplished sooner—still went to meetings, met with old—timers—really saw nothing there for me, at the time—went to the monastery. I joke with myself, thinking is what made me drink; subconsciously dealing with the expectation of a life filled with cigarette—licking; black trench coats, a plethora of rattle—asses… whatever.**

**I met Cid—yum and yuck, which quickly turned into Oswald in Ghosts. Met Nance—yum, no yuck, so far anyway. Yuck is not usually so quick in coming as it was with Cid—and Nance had at least the potential of becoming at least a new, close friend, if nothing more but now her phone message which sounded like I would soon be face to face with my other primary purpose.**

**This is something I hadn't been able to do much at all about since I had been released other than wonder what I am going to do about it. I had just tried to stay sober, didn't, but since first tank, I have pretty much succeeded. I felt guilty but then realized I had only been out about a week. I had to just keep trying.**

**All around Florida there are places called Cozy Harbor. Some are officially called, on the map, Cozy Harbor or The Cozy Harbor or Cozy Harbors, however there are probably hundreds of snug little ports, docks, havens, wharfs, marinas and quays unofficially operating under the name. People seem to like the word cozy.**

**The cove my trailer park nuzzled truly was cozy and I had never even known it was there until morning, when I just sauntered, accidentally three lots inland. At least I don't remember ever noticing it.**

**The sun was pushing up clouds from the east coast while the moon still held its reign over the Gulf, not about to give it up too soon. Around these parts, most days it is difficult to notice anything in this sky unless it is very high off the horizon. The reason is there is so much humidity; we are almost constantly—especially through the summer and fall seasons—smothered by a thick blanket of wetness. When the tide is low you inhale and if you want to pretend for a moment you are in a Mississippi Bayou or any other Deep South bog, your imagination will never be taxed too severely. There is so much hidden when the air is thick but most people never even think about it. They just believe everything is okay, normal. Sometimes it is, but other times no matter how hard you believe everything is running along as usual, plain old reality is lurking around the next corner.**

**On the water's edge there is an old dock. On the way to it, I noticed there were freshly delivered morning newspapers on every third lawn or so—dew sweating down the sides of the plastic enveloped them. They were strewn with no system in mind but to get rid of them. The wood on the old dock looked as if it had seen every hurricane over the last half of the last century and then some; worn, sun, rain and heat—warped… pretty rickety. Of course I walked right out on it.**

**It took me on a little mosey out into the snug little cozy harbor maybe only thirty—five feet or so where I just sat for a while dangling my legs over the edge and thinking. I lit up a cigarette and flicked the ashes down onto the water, which attracted a school of minnow—looking fish. I thought of the lickers the other day over at the monastery, even thought of licking my cig to see what must be like, to be a cig—licker and then thought of the thing behind ; remember the still suffering alcoholic. Hmmph.**

**It all seemed ridiculous but then again, I knew human creatures from different tribes all over the world, throughout history, right up to the present, create and carry out rituals based around destructive substances for many different reasons, some ever so sacred. Couldn't think of a single example of course but I know it happens. So live and let live/lick. Go figger.**

**I took a deep drag on the cig. Something very satisfying about nicotine… then again. I almost want to puke because I know it's going to cripple me one day. I thought of all of the puking I had done over the last few years. I wondered why I hadn't just stopped and then I thought of what they taught us; this too was a disease. I wondered if it really was. I thought of the people I went through treatment with and knew most likely a few of them would be out soon, several had probably gotten out in the last week which meant they too are out here, wherever they are, dealing with things, trying to stay clean and sober. I thought of the coin in my pocket and wished them well.**

**Before my thought, my wish, my prayer was complete I realized I had just sucked on a deadly drug and remembered those who may be suffering. I felt a scary change creeping in on the edges, riding the moisture swirled around me in the harbor. I was breathing it in, had to, and knew I couldn't escape it, not if I wanted to survive.**

**Everything went silent. There, in the peaceful bog, buffeted by wetness, both warm and cool in the slow churning of the morning atmosphere under the power of the rising sun, in one waft, it came to me. There is no more dilemma. There is no dilemma to which one primary purpose takes priority over the other. There is no part of life with only one primary purpose. Life is all dichotomies. The air was warm yet cool, muggy yet breezy, peaceful yet mosquito—laden. You were calmed and at the same time something was biting the shit out of you. Reality is duality, even more complex then , but is about all the complexity I could handle at the time. There is no perfect place to stand doesn't include… everything, all of it.**

**My life is what my life is and whether it kills me or not, I will not be wholly human unless I just accept it as it is and run with it, change only what I can.**

**I have since learned, maybe relearned, in a human lifespan, there is no such thing as having it all unless having it all means owning whatever it is you get and loving it. We can only occupy a little over one square foot throughout our entire life. 's it. There are only so many hours in the day, which means no matter how hard we try almost everything available to us out there, we will never get to do, never have; almost all of it. So… decide King, what's it going to be and just move forward? Don't even think about turning back ever again. At the very least, try your darndest.**

**I had to get back to the can and call Nance but it was still a little early. She made it sound urgent and I really couldn't wait any longer. I remember thinking it would be great if we could do this together and then thought, while you were out screwing around Nance was working on this, on her own. I felt guilty and then thought and smiled—because sometimes my humor comes from my simply being such a shit—wouldn't it be great if we worked on this thing together?**

**I didn't know what to do so I was happy to have Nance along for the ride, or was I along for the ride?**

**I couldn't call the cops myself. Any brush with the justice system put a great fear in me. I didn't believe there was any justice for addicts, unless there was money and if you truly were an addict, you could always find enough money somewhere for your dragon but it wasn't you and your abilities found it; it was the dragon's. Once dragon was off the fuel and no longer fully directing your destruction—show, you could no longer figure out how to get the money, when you needed it the most. Weird.**

**Everyone knows in the justice system, money is king. I felt if I walked into the police station today to reopen the case, I'd be tossed but if I could afford to hire a high—priced attorney, it would be reopened. It's just the way it works. Yet another way God has blessed America.**

**I thought I could remember one cop telling me the best thing for the legal system in P—County—as far as recovering people are concerned was—if they just disappeared; who cares, problem solved.**

**Money.**

**I even noticed in and around the rooms the most spiritual people were people who were taken care of. Old—timers who were double dipping the government with Social Security checks and armed services pensions and younger people on disabilities. It is the people in recovery who still have to re—figure how to go out and beat a buck out of the system while practicing spiritual principles who have the hardest time of it. I had my residuals but they would only hold out for a few months. I needed to be assertive but realistic. If it was too be I had to realize it really was up to me.**

**In a more comprehendible world I would have my daughter back with me, unscarred and preferably in college making her/my dreams come true. But for the past five years, any hope for a happy life simply floated away and I wanted at least those hopes back, a chance, for her, for us, our little, seemingly extinction—bound family.**

**Everything I ended up doing turned out wrong. There was so much to straighten out. I wasn't even sure if I had paid taxes over the last few years. But low and behold, there I was, sober, and I had to join the rest of the planet and just do the best I could. I had to keep reminding myself I could no longer turn to substances for relief. Maybe there just wasn't any place to turn at all for relief of pain and normal people just—somehow—learned to live with .**

**So I thought whatever news Nance had, might bring a start to the solution. But it will also stir up a lot of old fears and I am going to have to deal with them, somehow. Some of them seemed like closed boxes should not be opened under any circumstances but I wouldn't dwell on them, would never be able to fully avoid them either. Another dichotomy.**

**As I walked over the hard dunes on the drive back to the house I thought more about Nance. What kind of cop she might have been. I thought she was probably very good when I remembered little talent she talked about at the Niche` a few nights before, thing about removing sounds systematically until you were able to listen to a conversation across a room. I wondered what other detective things she could do.**

**Although I had just gone through an awareness moment as I sat at the end of the pier I am rarely aware, consciously aware of what my senses are picking up at any one time. So I started with my toes, what they were feeling? The stepping, the squeezing of the bottoms of my feet trodding the hard sandy hills and valleys of the drive. I became aware for the first time ever I could actually feel the sand, the grit between my shoe and the drive surface with each step. I never noticed before. I felt the breeze created by me merely strolling through air, parting it and then feeling it move back into place, the subtle stinging around my eyelids cause by the morning getting brighter. I felt my stomach rumble for food. I felt change in my pockets with my fingers mixed with lint and a small wrapper of some kind, maybe a receipt and aluminum chip had inside it hopeful sharing and prayers.**

**I smelled low tide in the air again but it seemed to get fuller the more the sun rose. I tried to taste the air and found it had a sour, almost metallic tinge to it; like blood.**

**A motorcycle flitted down Gandy Blvd roughly a city block away and it sounded, against the thickness of the morning air, more like muffled sputtering then power. I stopped, closed my eyes, and listened intently to sounds very far away, tens of whirring fans from air conditioner compressors. I heard another whirring of what sounded like a helicopter, probably from Channel 10, which was just down the road a bit. I heard a phone start ringing and the faint sound of a radio or someone's TV and then the phone again. Before the second ring. I recognized is was my phone ringing which sent me into a trot.**

**I lost awareness of all senses in few seconds and focused solely on getting to the phone before the machine came on or she hung up. I grabbed the door as I hit the top step and on the fourth ring, "Hello."**

**"Hey Kingman." It was Nance. A trickle of sweat ran pleasurably down my temple. "And where were you yesterday?" I felt a pang of guilt. "I called you. You get my message?"**

**"Yeah. I just got it a few minutes ago. Didn't check my machine I guess, when I got in last night… from the meeting."**

**" Uh—huh. Just got in a few minutes ago, Uh—huh. So… you're all right then?"**

**"I'm just fine. Thanks Nance. You said…"**

**"Yeah. I got something I think, but have you eaten yet?"**

**"No. Huh—uh."**

**"Meet me at a breakfast place… where you located at?"**

**"Gandy. Near the bridge."**

**"Nance. Yeah. 's what I thought. First three digits of your number looked like area. Cozy Harbor, huh? breakfast place near you… has sign out front with the big egg on the plate. Scrambled … something."**

**"Scramble Eggplate it's called. Now?"**

**"Yeah."**

**"I'm on my way."**

**When I got to the Eggplate, I noticed after I settled in, got a coffee, my fingers were shaking like little leaves. I could stop them but when I relaxed again, they just jittered away voluntarily. Could be nervousness, withdrawal, anything really but it felt like impending—change or doom—thing around the corner again. The feeling dissolved when Nance walked in.**

**I had just spent the night rollicking in desire and satisfaction—satiation really—and Nance walked in and started the whole process flowing again. I wondered if I was normal, being able to have my sexual desire triggered by the slightest sensation from any of my senses. She walked toward me all form and expectations, so very much more the woman than all the Cids of this world.**

**I knew she had been around, knew the streets, hell, probably all the alleys, but she didn't seem to have cautious manipulation I found in so many places in my life, like what I found glaring back at me from Cid's eyes. I knew Nance could be manipulative, if necessary, but never for evil.**

**She touched my hand with more of a hello connection than a handshake. The sense; feeling touch triggered me again. She took a swig of the coffee I had taken the liberty of ordering for her when I ordered mine. It felt like we had been doing this little scenario for years; natural, meant to be.**

**Nance had no purse wit her. Her hair was red—auburn and it shined genuinely as it curled in an unaffected manner every which way. Everything seemed so real, even her small and sexy saddlebags I had noticed before she sat, pushed the hard and tight denim jeans out into four small fingers—full below her pockets. She pulled a long brown cigarette from the pack inside the breast pocket of her over—faded, denim shirt, sparked her lighter, inhaled, and blew smoke out over my head and said with a smile spread like a butterfly. "Hey Kingman."**

**It felt like my smile touched my ears and I knew almost as if it was a confirmation on my new commitment, no matter how drastically my life was about to change, I would not go through this alone.**

**"Hey yourself, Nance."**

**We ordered and then sat through a pregnant pause. My brain said she was wondering where I had been. I read in her eyes the knowing I had been a bad boy. She knew I gotten laid, hadn't had enough sleep, maybe thought I drank or used something.**

**"Made it through the night all right? Alone?" She smirked.**

**"Yeah. I… uh…"**

**"I don't want to hear it. As long as you made it through, clean, you're here and you got another day's reprieve, it looks like. Right?**

**God. I loved her.**

**She gulped her coffee. "Okay, here's the deal. I had lunch with this friend of mine, down at records. We got talking and she asked me how things were going. Had I met anybody? Girl—crap. I hadn't seen her in about a year. Seems like the times in between visits with old department friends gets longer and longer.**

**I thought, but didn't tell her about you because she wasn't talking about friend—friends when she wanted to know if I had met anybody. You know?"**

**I nodded, wondering if my disappointment showed but wanting her to get on with it because I knew it had to do with Kajon.**

**"But I mentioned about kids in recovery coming up missing, Hollywood syndrome thing. Kids get clean then can't stay clean and feel like total losers and go off to Hollywood or Vegas with dreams of either making it big or losing themselves in big toilet of a world of addiction. They usually turn up in morgues, sooner rather than later.**

**Anyway. I had always wondered what the stats were on and probably wouldn't have researched it, being out of the game this long, but I asked her because I was actually thinking of you. I thought if you saw how common it was you might not take the burden so much on yourself and although her leaving was devastating for you, it might help if, while still looking for her, you knew it was more common than you might have thought, you know? It most likely wasn't your fault. This is a disease, you know. You really need to know , I think"**

**"Thanks Nance. I appreciate but…"**

**The waitress refilled out coffees. I was a little disappointed this was the news but I knew her heart was in the right place and maybe this little effort on her part was enough to kick start me into action, to actually do something. I didn't know what I was going to say so I said, "So…?"**

**Nance looked down into the steam floating off from her coffee to wherever it goes, as if looking for a template to make sure all of the words followed were well—placed, in order and I knew there was more. She looked up and dug her eyes into mine.**

**"King. I'm hunching a bit here but I think this is fucking big. There are no stats specifically centered on missing kids who are in recovery. Chelsea, 's my records—friend… she said it is pretty unusual for missing teenagers not to have some kind of substance addiction issues, but the missing teen rate in this area is quite a bit higher than most areas, per capita, higher than in the rest of the U.S. Chelsea said, it was sort of an aside, wasn't unusual though, here. Something about the area. Listen to this. Almost double the rate of the rest of the country, King. 's what the unsolved missing rate is in this county for adults and teens."**

**My fingers stopped shaking. I think I thought she was going to tell me about Kajon, some very bad news. The worse. Then I thought it was nothing and then I wasn't sure of the point she was trying to make.**

**Nance butted the long brown she was smoking and lit another one. Everybody's got sumpin'.**

**The food came and she just laid it in the ashtray, arranged her plate, dug in and continued. "I know… what the hell does all this mean, right? Well, not much really." She swallowed her food, took another scoop and talked and chewed making me feel like a real pal. No flirtation or putting on airs here. "But I did a little googling on the net afterward and combined with the archives at the department, and yes I still have the password for access—you'd think them, of all people would have better security. Anyway, what I found was, Chelsea was right on the money but she had no idea what I could use the information for. Hell, I didn't either, not at first.**

**We don't have thousands of people missing every year here… fifty or so in teens and adults but again, is really high for an area this size, but here's the kicker. We are way below average on missing kids ages 1—12."**

**Now triggered me.**

**"So, twice the average for teens and adults and less than average for kids."**

**"Actually it's half the average for kids."**

**I added as if I were an attending stump, "I wonder why would be."**

**Nance's jaw dropped. "Duh, me too, and I haven't the foggiest. But I will tell you one thing I have learned. This crap about everything happening for a reason; things happen for no reason at all... all the time."**

**I was jolted. Had no idea what to think about this.**

**"So, what does this all mean?"**

**"You been up all night or somethin'? Never mind. What it means my dear man is there is something terribly wrong and it ain't in friggin' Denmark."**

**I numbly thought, not enough to build a case for anything except for further investigation and is exactly what we decided to do, on our own. The most wonderful thing about this is I now had a place to start. We may have found the beginning of little nub of a thread and if you pull it steadily and carefully, it will unravel the whole garment for you.**

**We ate and paid and grabbed a couple of javas to go. We went Nance's place, which was out on Mad Beach, not two blocks from where Kajon and I used to have our house.**

**When I told to Nance she cringed and said, "Okay... 's a little spooky. I remember looking at place. How much of a coincidence is , hat I met Kajon half a decade ago, later, I look at the house she used to live in, not knowing it and now here I am on a mission from God with her Dad, Hmmmm?"**

**I couldn't resist it. "Well, you know what they say." I said with satire in my voice. "There are no coinciden...,"**

**She laughed. "Aww just shut the fuck up."**

**We both looked at each other and knew in a short stare if nothing else, we were now, officially, buds.**

**Nance lived on the inter—coastal, in a high—rise down the street and across from my old house. It was a good size with sliding glass doors and the west and east sides so there was a constant cleansing breeze throughout the place.**

**She had interesting tastes; knack some people have for taking used stuff and making it into eclectia instead of junk. I couldn't wait to show her my trailer.**

**Nance mixed us a couple of ice teas and on a tray brought them, a fresh pack of smokes, a large ash tray, a yellow legal pad and three sharpened pencils out onto a broad balcony was heavily tiled in Aztec—looking terracotta and we plopped down on way too plush patio furniture whooshed on the sit.**

**She lit a More. "You hear about Pap?"**

**"Mother Mary called me yesterday and told me. I went in and made coffee. I met Cid." Why the hell I said , I do not know. Nance held the cigarette away from her mouth and just stared at me. Her eyes slowly slid away from me out across the inland view in deep thought or maybe pondering and as her thoughts settled, she slowly pulled her cigarette back into the comfort zone and sucked. She knew.**

**I said, again I don't know why, "What?"**

**"What, what?"**

**She looked like she wasn't even interested in helping at this point. She turned her eyes right into me.**

**"Look. I don't know whether I am doing this out of my guilt for not helping Kajon when she needed it, or my like for you, my sympathy for you or what it is, but a man in his thirties who has lost everything, his daughter, his marriage, his life, has got…" She looked down, then up and out, took three short puffs on the cig and inhaled them together, deeply and said, "I just don't know."**

**I told her what went down with Cid and the crazy phone call I got from her which pretty much guaranteed it would never happen again, knowing full well signs of absolute insanity never kept a horny mind from going back for more punishment anytime in human history.**

**Nance's eyes said she knew too. She just didn't know if I had good of a time. So, she picked up the pad and pencil and using smoke filled breath, said, "Yeah, yeah, yeah."**

**"You saw me at the St. Francis house one day. You were with Cid weren't you?"**

**Nance's eyebrows went up. "Yeah, I met her there. We are as dissimilar as Democrats and Republicans used to be, but I… the rooms, especially at place, we had something in common I guess, accept she takes it all a lot more seriously than I do. Everything has to be by the book with her, or at least as she sees it."**

**"I don't know about ." I blurted.**

**"Meaning?**

**I didn't want to say what happened the night before so I was tasting a little shoe leather and said, "My experience, so far on this planet tells me people who like to be seen living by one book or another, rarely are… unless they're just plain insane, which is a possibility here as well. I think most humans prefer loose—leaf bibles, if you know what I mean"**

**Nance snickered and said, "Whatever means but I am pretty sure I really don't want to know, not yet anyway, why or how you came upon this information as it pertains to Cid."**

**I looked down. "Don't worry. No way is it going to happen again."**

**"Uh—huh. Back to Pap. What I would like to do, after we leave here, if you have nothing more important planned, is to take a ride over to Pass—A—Grille, see what's shaking at his place over there. Maybe we can unravel things a little more, find a little more thread.**

**As soon as I agreed, I felt a rumbling inside me. When I am real nervous and intent on holding it inside, I get gas. could be what has happened to the ozone layer. Too damn many nervous people in the world today.**

**The estate was buried in the middle of a block. There were houses all around the outer edges of the streets surround block and two alley easements into the actual property. It was enormous and as manicured as any estate you might see in a Merchant & Ivory flick, Howard's End, Remains Of The Day, type.**

**There were people milling around—clients they were called—from the treatment center, which took up part of the main house. There was an old, hand—painted, green enameled Willy's Jeep which had no windows in the backs or sides which they used to cart clients around to meetings, do grocery shopping and such. On one side of the driveway was a volleyball court where mostly woman, some guys were botching the ball around, looking like they hadn't seen a court and net, ever.**

**On the other side of the drive, looking toward the court was a small pavilion with a couple of large wooden picnic tables underneath it. There were at least thirty people crowded underneath, keeping out of the sun, all sucking away on cigarettes while cheering the volleyball botchers on.**

**Frederique came down the coral steps from the entranceway with her arm straightened out from the shoulder, hand wide open and a masky smile. "Hey Nance, what brings you here? Who's your friend?"**

**Nance introduced me and we were rushed up the steps and inside to the nearest lounge area. Frederique said, "I'm sorry to seem so secretive but we have confidentiality agreements with these folks," she waved one Queen's wave toward the outside, "… our clients, and we like to keep uninvited visitors to a minimum." She didn't like us being there at all.**

**Frederique was tall, bony and strong. I guessed a runner, probably did forty miles a week but she was, for a Floridian, a little too light—skinned so probably protective of her skin from high UVs and probably was up running the wonderful Pass—A—Grille beaches well before dawn each day or way after sunset.**

**Her hair was chestnut and long, too healthy for her age. Her limbs were long; long legs, long arms, and long nose, thin when she was speaking to you, pointed like an Egret's beak.**

**Nance spoke, "Frederique. This is going to seem a little weird but I… well we, King and I are trying to find out some things. Trying to figure out what might have happened to his daughter. She is missing now five years."**

**Frederique turned to me, "Oh, King. How awful. How old was she?" She said it in professional, if you can't actually be sincere than act sincere, condescending manner was tainted with condescension. And there was word was again. Was.**

**"Was? You mean at the time she disappeared? Almost sixteen."**

**Frederique's neck swiveled back to Nance as if preprogrammed. "She wasn't here, was she?"**

**Nance said, "No. We came here because of Pap."**

**Yes, it has been a couple of days now. He has a lot of people worried." She didn't seem worried.**

**I asked her, "He has done this before."**

**"Never before. Not I know of.**

**She slowly fanned her hand back and forth in front of her face, as if wanting to remove dead air… or us. "So…?"**

**Nance said, "So, we are trying to find out a little more about people who have come up missing after getting into recovery, see if maybe we can put something together and then find some kind of common denominator, you know?"**

**"You shouldn't have a problem finding . We've been here only a few years but I think way too many people disappear. I mean, not covertly or anything. Holes aren't opening up and swallowing people in recovery but I think way too many people just don't get with the program. The sun is hot here. It has an effect on the brain. It's disheartening to say the least, especially when you're… well, me, someone who is in the business… the field. We've dedicated our lives to helping people "get it" and as soon as they are out there on there own again, bam, the majority use again and they usually do it until they're dead. I'm sorry King, but is the truth."**

**Nance said, "But why so many here?"**

**Frederique passed off with her first three words and then diverted. "I don't know. I think a lot of the younger ones, still at home, don't want to recover and then when they relapse and can't face their families they just scoot… leave town."**

**It sounded a lot like the cops scenario. The easy way out. It had to be something else. Either she had it all too neatly figured out, which made me seriously question what she really had her life devoted too, or she was empathetically challenged.**

**She turned to me. "The dirty little secret King is no matter what you do**

**to try to get clean and sober, the numbers are against you. The failure rate is way**

**high."**

**Wow. My eyes burned, my throat matched them and I choked. I knew**

**instinctively she spoke the absolute truth and I thanked her and I also felt as**

**though this truth didn't address the issue, maybe this was deliberate.**

**Frederique and Nance made small talk. There didn't seem to be anything there, yet anyway, and I sailed away in thought. It felt like the very beginning of the quest, or quests; a dead end right up front. I couldn't see where we would or could go from here and at the same time, I believed, had faith this is simply what we would somehow keep on doing. I mean, when you're at the bottom of the barrel in all areas of your life and you need something to believe in, in order to climb out… a big fat carrot, almost anything will do. But what if I spent the rest of my life looking for my daughter and was able to stay sober all along the way. There are worse ways to spend one's life. But, what if I never found her?**

**I had had such a roller coaster of emotions after Nance's phone call morning, like, What if Nance was going to tell me there was an actual lead? What if they found Kajon? What if she is alive and well and wanted nothing to do with me. And why would be so? How could be so? What if she was… well?**

**I had an eerie feeling I both remembered and wondered if I had self—medicated myself for so long because I really didn't want to know the answers to any of these questions. I guess I had to decide and keep deciding to choose to milk the adventure for all it was worth without anesthetizing. Just wondering whether I could do successfully scared me enough to get the little dragon riled. Anesthetizing substances. The illusion of escape, of comfort. Eventually it would bring me death and ultimate escape. It never answered my questions. It took the questions away. Some call a broadening of awareness.**

**Somewhere, buried in the entire addictive swirl, I was aware of the lie I almost totally bought into. The lie somehow, if I got enough… substance then maybe I could have my own life back. No one ever told me but alcohol and drugs always promise it. How I thought making myself feel different then I ever did before, would, could do was so mysterious to me.**

**I stopped thinking and before I heard the women's voices again, I turned and looked out the window at the pain—scarred souls all sweaty and ball punching and was riveted with the knowledge most of them too, would soon be dead. They were not going to get out of this disease alive.**

**I didn't want to join them but I wasn't sure I knew how to avoid it. I believed in nothing. I had to just keep on keepin' on and like Shakespeare said, to my own self, be true.**

**Chapter Fifteen (The prologue continues…)**

***The Grisly Crime***

**The flick continued.**

**"Okay, now the camera looks like it's going to follow me down after the shovel—shot but instead, it tilts slightly, does a diagonal pan and stops at a taught, steady, hand — older than mine — holding a cocked gun which has not been fired. The thumb slowly, steadily releases the hammer back into its seat. I was no threat. Was I blindfolded? Bad job. I saw the fucking gun, moron."**

**Kajon screamed something very garbled but what she meant was, "Who did this to me? Why? Fucking pricks. I was being so good, so good. I was sober, man. What do they want?"**

**She started to weep and then calmed again, then with blood and tear—blurred eyes and through lipstick—smeared lips, "It, the gun, lowers out of view. I don't know. God, I'm hurt, man. I'm so fucking dead."**

**The pain reached excruciating levels before she blacked out but her moxie and her need to rewrite seemed never—ending. She came back.**

**The movie, lets see. Then a woman's or maybe it was a man's voice — it doesn't matter anymore — comes from off—screen. The voice says, as if pronouncing a benediction, like in church or at a funeral, 'Sometimes you gotta step over the dead bodies, man.' Sounds stupid under the circumstances but I think this really, really happened, and maybe a few voices afterward said, 'Amen.' So, um prophetic huh? Yeah, something like , you know?**

**'d be a pretty good opening scene, man. Bet a lot of popcorn goes uneaten here. Scary shit. Is what happened here, to me? Is it really a movie, an idea, um, or real?"**

**Kajon slumped and rumbled long and slow, her voice like the fully—possessed larynx of Linda Blair in The Exorcist, down, her lips mashed into the bloodied, piddled slats of rough—hewn wood, through red, bubbling spit, she gurgled and growled, "Motherfuckers."**

**Her sweat and blood married, slower now, in warm but cooling pools under her crippled, softening, and dying self. It spilled into the cracks, dribbled down and seeped into the muck, the damp and sandy sulfur—fouled, sandy earth below. Her breathing quickened, gasping at the same few cubic feet of dank air, acidic to the taste, mingled with both the clean copper smell of her own flesh and blood and her favorite, homemade sandalwood/musk/amber fragrance, laced with of the fresh—cut pinesap of the wood.**

**Of oxygen, the cupboard was now bare.**

**"Can't breathe," she gasped, and then laughed, but not aloud. Her thinking changed. The spark of a life—saving realization. Rewrite, rewrite, rewrite!**

**Then, a last ditch effort, "'s it man, this is just a dream, I forgot." Hey Dad... She thought she screamed don't worry Dad. It's just another one of those weird dreams.**

**The healing fog of denial wafted into the harbor of her dyeing mind more steadily now. How could this be happening to Kajon Kilgore? It just had to be a dream. Right?**

**The panic slipped in again. Kajon panted, "Daddy, oh Daddy, oh Daddy. Daddy. Daddy... why Daddy, why Daddy, why? Was I bad?" Kajon flat—out balled, but with oxygen only a memory now, she slipped quickly back into a whimper.**

**Inside the very few seconds remained, she remembered, maybe eight years before, she could not have been more than seven, maybe eight, she woke up in the middle of the night sobbing, sweating. Her dad had rushed into her room to comfort, to save her. It was a dream. A horrible nightmare—of—a—movie starring big bad entities without faces, chasing after her through smooth, floating, weightless black space. At first, she thought they would never catch her. It felt like an outdoor game like tag or hide—and—go—seek; the kind gets you all giddy and goose—bumpily with the anticipation of being caught, but she was way ahead of them. It was fun. Nevertheless, as it continued, she looked behind her and their blank—entity—faces grew larger, more ugly somehow as her imagination painted them in, scarier and much, much closer. The chase was stepping up now and her little legs worked harder and pumped faster. As she ran, a dangerously soft, spongy ground substance formed beneath her until it was a giant, almost insurmountable, old, deeply pocked and creepy, super—soft and musty—smelling, yellowed foam—rubber—filled landscape, replete with a deeper, more insidious odorament of danger and fear. There was no way out because this entire world was suspended out there somewhere, in jet—black space.**

**Her breathing tired and there was less and less air, her pursuers about to grab her by the nape of the neck and do to her whatever it is big bad entities with big blank—ugly faces do when they snare scared little children from their sugar—plum dreams. So Kajon screamed her night—searing, blood—souring screech, the bawl frees all children back to the shelter of reality. She tried to scream this time too, through her fear, not a sound emitting from her throat, and the harder she tried, the louder the silence seemed to become, for her.**

**She thought, dreams and nightmares, nightmares and dreams.**

**In old dream, the entities closed in on her as her fear rose higher, finally breaking the panic barrier. On the very last possible pregnant cusp of a moment, when those big bad monsters were about to make contact with her collar and snatch her into the world of horrors, at split second, she awoke, sat upright, steeled and shrieked, "Daaaaaaaddy."**

**She looked up and saw, as if he had been there all along, Daddy, hovering over her, in the darkness, ready to scuttle her up into his big—bear arms. Instantly, as if was the way some sweet God had planned it all along, everything was A—okay. Pure, secure, heaven.**

**was the night King, her daddy, told Kajon all about dreams and nightmares. He informed her dreams are usually fun—stuff for our brains and nightmares are — contrary to accepted belief — good. He had untwisted the pee and sweat—soaked bedding she thought she had — in her thrashing sleep — wrapped tightly in and around her little legs, almost mummifying herself. He carried her to his bed, which was all nice and fluffy, snuggly, warm and dry. Kajon felt — for now — out of harm's way.**

**In those days, to Kajon—and to most little kids, Daddy was synonymous with an almost nirvanic security; If life was baseball, Daddy was safe and until one understood what life was really all about — is, as much as one can — then snuggling up to one of these big warm daddy—things in times of fear was the utmost in tools for living and would just have to suffice until something better came along. Of course if nothing ever did, would be fine too.**

**'Yup, Dreams are fun and nightmares are good.' is what Kajon remembered her daddy saying when she was little.**

**This had helped her through many bad dreams and nightmares and would, she hoped, on this night as well.**

**After Kajon had acquired a few teen years, she questioned her dad about what she remembered him telling her night.**

**"Well, I don't know if I said dreams are fun necessarily, although I have had some rather fun ones, but yeah, I guess they are, or can be. But nightmares?" Here he laughed knowingly, "Nightmares are definitely a good, good thing. Nightmares can save your life. Did mine."**

**He told her of a single nightmare experience he had when he was a teenager from which he formed this, so far sustained and powerful theory.**

**"In the dream, I had been out all night with friends, didn't drink of course, but I was up with them 'till after dawn."**

**Kajon laughed when her daddy mimicked an old man with no teeth when talking about his past, wrapping his lips inward, pretending he was centuries old.**

**"Course, was a ways back a— fore the toin' of the century." She giggled a little at the memory. Silly Daddy. She pretended his antics were still funny to her.**

**"Didn't get in until after dawn. Rocky and Bullwinkle were already on the tube. I was, on a sweltering Saturday morning and on into the afternoon, very, very tired and I ended up swaddled in bed—sheets, fully clothed, in a closed—up bedroom as the beastly, Western New York summer sun beat in through the window into a room with no air—conditioning, no open windows or doors. While I slowly baked, I had a dream; a nightmare, really.**

**In it, my best friend and I were walking in slow motion into an old, small, rickety elevator," he said.**

**"Once inside, the door, slowly and way too smoothly, closed. A button was pressed and the elevator rose. We turned and spoke to each other, also in slow motion, but no sound came out of our mouths. Soon, intense confusion, mixed with a strong, knowing look of impending doom registered on our faces and the elevator came to a jolting, jostling halt, forcing us to flay our arms back, palms spread and stuck like tree frogs, against the walls, our faces literally smeared ear—to—ear with fear.**

**My friend, slowly smiled, then laughed aloud, still no sound track, and a bit insanely, pulled a screwdriver from his pocket (obviously prepared to fix any nightmare might come along) and climbed onto my hand—stirrups, pushing open a trap door at the top of the elevator. He quickly disappeared out to the blackness above.**

**I, my hands slowly unstitching themselves from each other, a fake, pasted—on smile begging to be pried from my face, looked up into the blackness, not so much expecting a miracle as anticipating the drop of the doom—shoe; this being a memory, turned into a story, hindsight, twenty—twenty and all , I guess."**

**Kajon, from the very first telling, saw this event as a movie. It was real, or at least felt real. Better than any scary movie, she used to tell her friends, the way Daddy told it.**

**She would often, when thinking about this story, try to imagine her dad as a young man, having a friend who climbs out of elevators like a cartoon monkey—man. He said his friend climbed out of the elevator like a chimpanzee, so she imagined him for years to look similar to one of her stuffed animals, Curious George. Her dad had said he had followed the sound of Curious George scrambling over the roof and down the side of the elevator.**

**Then, he told her, came the slapping sounds of some large, swinging cables underneath, his monkey—friend, obviously, having found the problem.**

**Apparently, a rather large electrical cable had simply disconnected. Dad's friend grasped it, touched it to the connection point, and was instantly electrocuted. Gruesome as it seems, what had happened was his body made and kept the connection, like solder, and the elevator started a slow descent.**

**King heard his friend's final scream, STOP! He bounced up and down rabbit—like, inside the box, which always seemed a little too silly to Kajon, for a death scene. However, he did act in panic looking for levers, tools, and probably some kind of reason. He finally splayed all ten of his fingers to cover every possible button on the selection panel and was absolutely helpless because the buttons seemed connected to nothing at all.**

**The elevator finally slowed of its own volition coming to a halt at the very bottom of the shaft. King told Kajon he looked up at the trap door. No George in sight. Then he slowly, expecting horror, looked down at his feet. Up through the wooden slats in the floor came bubbling, little bubbles at first, then gallons of thick, red gurgling blood, surrounding his shoes, then up, up, up filling the compartment, threatening to drown him.**

**Young King's face stretched up and out of the blood to the last centimeter, every strained neck—muscle sending him bellowing up through the cavernous elevator shaft, a screeching, Noooooooo.**

**His own voice is what woke him and he discovered quickly he was wedged, in the bedroom, tightly, between the hot wall and the hotter, humid bed. The steamy, wet, sweat—filled sheets had twisted around his neck, cutting off his air and had swaddled him tightly, claustrophobically. This caused him to screech and writhe, trying to free himself, only to gasp for oxygen in the airless, solar—heated, oven—like room on sunny, summery afternoon so many, many years ago, 'Afore the toin' of the century.'**

**This is when he said he first uttered his new awareness, because the nightmare had loaded him with so much fear he awoke and realized, Aha, nightmares are good! He swore forever after, this nightmare actually saved his life; must be what their purpose is. Otherwise, he would have strangled to death.**

**Apparently, he thinks during sleep, the mind shuts down the controls are in charge of simply waking you up if danger is present. Therefore, if it senses a slow, life—threatening situation, the subconscious is in conflict with the mechanism keeps you asleep while getting needed rest. So it takes a back—door—route and cunningly spins a scenario eventually grows into a situation one can no longer tolerate, even in the dream world, and it forces the other control mechanisms to become aware of the danger and nurtures and over—fuels the need to scream.**

**This manifests itself in the dream, as well as in reality and presto, another life is saved. Praise the lord and pass the clean undies.**

***(…prologue to be continued)***

**Chapter Sixteen**

**On the way back in Nance's 1962 Green Valiant, the kind with the buttons for a gearshift instead of an arm, we were pretty silent. Nance had reached up to her visor where she kept another of many cigarette packs in arsenal she had aimed at herself, lit one with the in cigarette lighter, reached over with the same hand and popped open the glove compartment where she had had installed a CD player, flicked it on and out came a most beautiful voice, Cleo Lane singing, appropriately, *What'll I do.***

**Nance looked at me and we both snickered.**

**"So, what'll we do?" I said. Nothing there.**

**"Nothing there? There's something everywhere," is all I could say thinking maybe if I just assumed clues, they would just have to appear. "You think it natural for a person supposedly dedicated to recovery, taking large amounts of mullah to get people on the right track, is so… so…"**

**"Pragmatic about it?" I said. Noticing she didn't know what I meant I added,**

**"Practical? Realistic?"**

**Nancy smoked. "What? You think I'm an idiot?"**

**I said, "Stop it. No, not at all. I just… I just thought maybe… uh… you looked like you didn't know what I was talking about."**

**Through more smoke she said, "I don't know what I looked like but I was wondering how long I would be able to endure someone who uses pragmatic where practical or realistic would do just fine." And then she smiled. I knew I would never have the upper hand in this relationship no matter where it went. Her smile told me she would give me shit every once in a while but she would probably endure mine just fine.**

**I said, "How should she have reacted."**

**Nance said, "I don't know. It just seems too pat. Maybe she's on those litter blue pills or something. Won't be the first counselor higher than all the other kites in her field. I saw you look out the window when she was gabbing with me at the end. You looked forlorn… fatalistic."**

**"Not for me… for them… for all of us I guess. It just doesn't seem like all the recovery beliefs are real to me. I mean… I heard one or two newcomers come into the Bores every week or so and they have been there since 1989. By my calculations, if it worked for most of them, at two a week, 's over a hundred a year, and they have been there almost a decade and a half, there should be about fifteen hundred people attending meeting alone and there are literally hundreds of meetings in P—County so… what gives?"**

**Nance said, "I don't know Kingman. I think everyone else isn't as good at math as you are."**

**I said, "So, where do we go from here."**

**Nance said, "We have to find Pap."**

**So we went to the Town's End Restaurant, had a quick bite and then planned on going over to the Bores but over eats, I asked Nance how well she knew Pap.**

**"Ahh, Pap. He is one of the dyed—in—the—wool, book—thumping old timers. The only reason he's running the club is because he is the only one out of the founding group they had back in '89 had a financial statement bigger than what most of them had invested in their banged up cars. Every year when the board has to hold an election of officers, they re—elect Pap every time because it they don't they're all afraid if something goes haywire, they might be left holding the financial bag. 'Course it doesn't work way but most of them, well, let's just say their driveways just don't seem to go all the way up to their houses, if you know what I mean.**

**I asked, "Does he have a wife? Kids? Anybody might know where he is?**

**"I really don't know," Nance said. "It seems to me someone said he was, or used to be married. Had a kid up in New York. The city I think. I think he's a doctor or something but they had a falling out years ago. I think he is pretty much alone now.**

**"There must be somebody."**

**It was then I realized two things simultaneously. One, it must be just terrible to be alone in this world with no family. Estranged from your kids, you parents probably already dead and gone… nobody… and then I realized Pap was not the only one who had a life like this. So did I.**

**My parents were long dead and gone. I had no brothers or sisters and made damn sure Kajon didn't either and now I was all alone, just like Pap. I wondered if Kajon was too.**

**When we arrived at the Bores, we both, I think, had a feeling of futility. You know how you plan what you are going to do and how you are going to do it and then you get there and think to yourself, *What was I thinking?* I mean… if anyone knew where Pap might be the main conversation over the last few days around would not have been what the heck happened to Pap? Right?**

**We went in, had a couple of cups of coffee, went through the motions asking if anyone had heard from Pap and when we started asking deeper questions, people just got irritated. It was late at night and it all felt so weird.**

**Nance took me back to the restaurant where I picked up my car and went home. My house was dark and when I entered I noticed the ol' blinking red light on the answering machine. I smirked and hoped it wasn't old drunk woman calling for someone named Fred again. I hoped she and Fred had finally made up and were getting sloshed together somewhere nearby and they were happy to be back together in their own little world. I also wished Fred had or would soon change his phone number to one was not so close to mine.**

**I pressed the play button and all of the messages were nothing but dial tones. Four people had called but none left any messages or else one person had called four times and left no message.**

**I thought about the day, what had transpired and realized nothing had been accomplished but I did get out and at least try to do something and I did it all with another alcoholic, not by myself and I did not drink or use day.**

**Then the phone rang. A young woman's voice said, "Mr. Kilgore?"**

**"Yes."**

**"I am only going to say this once. You need to stop what you are doing."**

**"What am I doing?"**

**"There is only one primary purpose for you from here on out. Stay away from Nancy. Your daughter is gone. She moved out west and then a few years ago she went to Europe. She doesn't want to see you or hear from you in any way. Do you understand? Stay sober and stop playing around the edges. Get in the middle of the bed or you will fall off. Be defiant and you will be knocked off. Get it?" And then she hung up.**

**I got it but I didn't get it. Wow, a threatening phone call. Just like in those detective novels. I started thinking like an old detective, like the few shreds I remembered from the Maltese Falcon with Bogart, things like and started analyzing.**

**Here I had spent the day trying to find out what happened to my daughter, maybe others and I thought we immediately hit a dead end. Obviously, someone else thought we had not hit a dead end and was now afraid. This, as Martha Stewart would have said, is a good thing.**

**They wanted me to stay sober or at least get the message is the only thing I should be concentrating on. They wanted me to lay off looking for Kajon, saying she was alive and didn't want me, which hurt but, even though Connie had told me was possible, I knew, or at least thought I knew it could never be so.**

**Stay away from Nance? Must be this woman thinks Nance holds a key. Hmmm. I think so too. She had said, "Get in the middle of the bed or you will fall off. Be defiant and you will be stepped over." Reminded me of room—saying: *Sometimes you just have to step over the dead bodies.***

**It was the voice of a young woman and it sounded vaguely familiar. Vaguely.**

**I had already come to know what term, middle of the bed, meant in the rooms. It meant you couldn't play around the edges of the program. You have to swallow it totally, line, sinker and hook, down, into the gizzard. I didn't trust the advice. I never trusted middle—of—the—bed thinking. They trust everything is handed to them and question nothing. This can only work with people who are convinced they have done some immoral wrong. It *can't*work with people who understand it is merely a disease. I question everything. Did before, did not during my illness—should have—and now would again. I decided to nickname these scary people *middlerZ*. I put the Z on the end because it made it comically horrifying. Something like what might have come out of A Clockwork Orange, here, in the new millennium.**

**I fell asleep night with my last thoughts being *who could it be and why did they call me*. Why am I so important to anybody and what had I done to get the feathers ruffled? I had hunch—like thing happening again told me there was a sense of urgency in the air. The stakes were rising in this game I was in the middle of but could not see. All the abnormality I had seen since I got back out onto the streets was becoming too normal; like my slide down into addiction itself. I felt as though if I did not find Kajon, solve this mystery very soon, terrible consequences would occur, but I had no idea what.**

**I was tired, very tired and I tried to think back to the time before Kajon disappeared. To add to my feeling drained, my memories were blurred. Lots of dead brain cells had been invented over the last half—a—decade and it felt as though it would be impossible to get them back.**

**I know I hadn't dated in so long and I know we had a little squabble when Kajon had been dating without my knowledge but I realized I just been jealous. It had been a long time since her mother left and almost as long since I had had a date myself. Didn't like the idea, I guess, Daddy wasn't getting' lovin' but the kid was.**

**There was the one time when she had been coming home from a party and was driving, after dark, on a learner's permit and was also just a little over the legal limit on her sobriety test. I lost it a little night but later apologized and chalked it all up to teen—indiscretion. It wasn't until after she came up missing I had learned about all of the other DUI's and the license suspension, her being sentenced to recovery meetings and counseling. I wondered if she had hidden all from me for some other reason I wasn't aware of.**

**was the only thing I could remember.**

**I went to a men's meeting the next night. Didn't really understand the concept. I asked *why men's meetings, gay meetings, women's. The answer has always been the same as it has for any separatist decisions throughout history. "There are just some things are better discussed between the same sex,* (Add to the same sexual orientation, the same race same language ad nausea. I have always thought the worse perpetuator of separatism is just ; separatism. If we keep having separatist meetings, how will we ever reach unification, a unified understanding? Maybe the reason we need to have women's meetings, adult meetings, teen—meetings, to be with our own kind because the others don't understand us, is because we keep forming them this way.**

**But, when in Rome… So, I went to a men's meeting and they talked pretty much about the same stuff. No one said anything about how being a man versus being a woman gave them a special circumstance in their sobriety but, whatever works I guess.**

**While sitting there, I realized I was really getting bored and remembered someone saying in another meeting if you find yourself getting bored at meetings it is because you are the one who is boring. Well, 'll help someone feel good about themselves and stay sober another day. I have gotten to the place where most meetings are fairly boring but they get to a place where they no longer grind on you. Most of them, if you try, can be useful for something inside you. This does not however, make the meetings less boring. I can't think of anything less interesting than the majority of them other than maybe watching a tree grow.**

**There was a new kid at this meeting though who said he had been out of treatment only a few days and his greatest fear was—because before going in, he drank himself into a passed out state every night—what he now going to do with his time.**

**There were several answers and then this old bull of a fellow said plainly, "What do you do with you time now? The answer is now, my young friend, you can do anything you want/**

**It was at this point my confusion over my conflicting primary purposes was resolved.**

**I knew by staying close to sober people on a daily basis, albeit behind closed doors, in treatment, I was able to stay sober longer than anytime within the last five years. Add to I have been able to stay sober over the last week or so by spending time with Nance and going to meetings everyday. What I decided to do was continue to go to these boring meetings and spend the rest of my waking time either figuring out what happened to Kajon or finding here. It had to be done. It had to be taken care of. I would be able to do nothing else until this dilemma was solved. This put a certain desperation into my need to find my sweet daughter.**

**What I had so far seemed like nada. Who are the main suspects, usually, in a missing kid case? The family members. The parents. I had all but completely ruled out the possibility Kajon had gone to live with her mother. There would be no way I could find out anyway because I had no idea where to even start looking. I had read her famous artist playwright mate had blown the top of his head off with a shotgun and now they someone was shooting a story of his life; the suffering artist. The gods they work in mysterious ways.**

**Of course it was not lost on me this was a severe, hereditary disease and Kajon had already shown signs of it and since her mother was obviously attracted to self destructive behavior, it may be Kajon had subconsciously sensed there would e more understanding, solace, enabling from camp.**

**Then there was the mysterious disappearance of Pap. I couldn't tie together with anything accept it had happened right after I arrived, right after I and then Nance started asking questions.**

**I also suspected Nance. She had, after all, approached me, not the other way around. She had been there with Cid at my first meeting and then also showed up across town before approaching me, but what could all this mean? She claimed she knew Kajon and then this stranger, although I now considered her a friend, wanted to help me in both of my quests. I knew why but realistically, I had only known her a short time.**

**Suddenly my mind seemed to warp and I went into a very strange state. I thought at first I was going crazy so I figured it must be humanistically—spiritual; something like .**

**My mind went back to conversation with Nance about her ability to remove chatter at a busy place in order she might center down a certain conversation and actually eavesdrop on conversation, even from across a crowded room. I had no idea what this meant but it made me dial her number.**

**"You're lucky I have caller—ID or else I would have been out of commission for you." She said, sounding a bit tired.**

**I told her about what just happened to me and she brightened up.**

**"What were you thinking about?"**

**I told her about my trying to figure things out but I didn't think we knew enough and then I thought of this but my mind went a little plooey.**

**"I feel like oarmeal."**

**"You know what just happened, Kingman?"**

**"What?" I heard her light a brown one.**

**"You're going to think I'm crazy too but, I think you're on to something. Listen. I think you, subconsciously just put yourself in a mode to remove all the bullshit going around in your head right now and, driven by the desire to find only one primary purpose and of course resolve your other issue, find Kajon…" My other *issue*? "…your head said, *hey, if system works for Nance and her ears, maybe it will work for me too and my deductive reasoning."***

**I said, "Really. 's what you think my brain is doing right now, huh?"**

**"You call me. You want me to listen to what you, yourself called craziness and then when I get a little conceptual about the whole thing, you treat me like I brought you a messiah to follow or something."**

**She was right. We put our heads together and deduced we had no idea who to suspect nor what to suspect them of, had a good laugh and then said we would call each other the next day. I deduced and deduced myself right into a deep sleep where all I thought about was Pap. I was drawn to him and hunched up deep inside I knew I would have to visit old estate at least one more time. I had no idea what I would do once there but, there you have it. Premonitions, or whatever you want to call those feelings, aren't always clear.**

**It would turn out to be a bright, wonderful morning for the rest of the folks in the sunshine state but not one I would just wake up naturally to. Before dawn, the phone rang and I had it in my hand before the machine went off. It was the police. They told me there might be a break in my missing daughter's case and they needed me there as soon as possible. I called Nance and she said she would meet me there.**

**Nance lived closer to downtown so by the time I got there, she was already there and talking with detectives. She approached me with the most solemn of faces. I knew instantly Kajon was dead and it felt as though my eyes and heart started bleeding.**

**They found her body in a grave alongside other graves, which contained tens of other bodies, all in separate graves right there on Pap's estate. Pap's body seemed to be one the last one had been buried there. Now they, we were looking for a murderer.**

**I need to tell what it felt like to be alone, to know my sweet little wizard hadn't a chance.**

**Later, back at my old tin can, Nance and I sobbed over coffee and cigarettes.**

**We put on our thinking caps and deduced. While deducing we fell asleep.**

**I woke in the middle of the night and Nance's lips were inches from mine, breathing air in and out. I wanted to kiss, hold but my mind would only deduce. It was dangerous in the middle of the bed.**

**I couldn't get past Pap—what was all about I will never know but suddenly Nance opened her eyes and we both said the same word simultaneously.**

**"Cid."**

**We got in the bug—eye and zoomed over to Cid's house. By then, the news was all over the place even going international with the cable network.**

**Cid's house was quiet and dark. We went to the back door, the one she used for the practice. Nance slid her shirtsleeve down over her hand and turned the knob. It was unlocked Inside there were candles burning, some burned out and puddled. A tape player was on but the tape had stopped. On the massage table was Cid's body, wrapped in aromatic steamed toweling, now giving off no steam. The room was cold. A red cloth napkin half filled with all colors of oils and capsules lay open with her pinched fingers resting inside it.**

**We slowly backed out, latched the door, got into the car and quietly left with our headlights off.**

**Chapter Seventeen (The prologue continues…)**

***The Grisly Crime***

**This was an early lesson for Kajon to realize the human mind is a myriad of conundrums within conundrums. It can make itself think anything it wants to. It can make itself think it is in danger in a completely different world only to finally wake up and preserve what is really holy, save it's own life source. It can make itself rationalize the obvious demons found in fellow—minds, like those found in loved ones, causing it to see only the good in them. It can realize words like rationalize can scarily be split in two, phonetically anyway, to sound like the words rational and lies and therefore take on new meaning.**

**Kajon's last fumbled words were, "I was just trying to get it right. Fuck, man!"**

**There was no air left in the box and at the end of Kajon's shortest sigh, after remembering all this with stunning clarity during her last few seconds, her now completely starved heart again halted. Several seconds passed. She gasped again and it started up, yet again, but sputtered. It beat a few solid but quick thumps. She caught some air — just old carbon dioxide — and then breathed no mass at all, nothing. She just breathed, going through the motions in a box full of waste, feeling the credits were getting ready to roll.**

**Soon, after she consioudly wished whoever did this was understood instead of punished and the movie would end with this understanding being put to the holiest of uses, something like what they say but practice so little; to stay clean and sober and to go to any lengths to help others who are afflicted through no fault of their own, to do the same..**

**She did not awaken from the nightmare and her sweet, sweet heart never beat again.**

**She might have wanted many bass cellos, at this point, in unison, to have their lower E—strings pick—scraped from neck to bridge causing the audience—heart to nearly sink and stop and drop below hell itself as Kajon's life simply…**

**…faded to black.**

**Chapter Eighteen**

**It had been like any other day for Cid, a couple of clients needing their muscles kneaded in a manner she did better than most; not expected to be an unusual day, Cyd's usual set—up. Greet a client, him or her at the door, show them to a changing area, which consisted of hangers and hooks and a stack of large, warmed, wrap—around over—tufted towels. Then Cid would get him or her situated on the massage—table, choose their favorite rfelaxing music, slip in the CD, dab some scented oil into the terracotta ring around the very soft, low watt light bulb and tell them to relax while she stepped out for a moment.. She would step out and immediately check the pockets and/or purses left in the changing area for pain pills or anything mind—altering to add to the collection she knew she would have to use sooner or later. Once a prescription was identified, Cyd would pocket just one. This had been going on for many years. She had quite a collection**

**The thing is, no matter how nuts people get or whatever demons they are controlled by, they many times plan their own ends. They know on some level sooner or later the reaper will come.**

**Prior to Glasnost there were filmmakers in the former U.S.S.R. who would somehow raise the money to write and produce subversive films. Then, after they were made, they would be confiscated and banned. After confiscation they were taken to a government vault and stored.**

**One wonders why a government thought it was in the philosophical right would store the subversive works worked so diligently to prove it wrong. It is as though they knew all along sooner or later the governments own reaper would come and the films could all be let out of the box and be shown. In effect, the government saved up for its own demise.**

**For Cid, the only thing happened different night was after everyone left, after she had a meeting with her sponsees and they prayed and repeated their affirmations and departed, Cid noticed the TV was left on in the back office without sound showed pictures of excavation going on Pap's estate.**

**Cid remembered way back when she first recovered, she told her sponsor—who also happened to be a substance addiction counselor— she felt she had hit bottom because she had no empathy for other people in her life. It was just all gone.**

**This counselor said this syndrome was called, something like, alcoholically induced psychosis. She said it was very common for people to lose, after years of abusing substances—especially alcohol—the ability to emote normally, especially in the empathy department. She said if Cid had been a man, there would be nothing to worry about but since she is a woman, she could recover just fine but would never retrieve ability to deeply empathize with the circumstances of other people. Cid thought this awfully unfair until she found a way to use it to her advantage and also to the advantage of the program.**

**She came across people in recovery who questioned this and . Some questioned literally everything. Oldtimers called these people *the debating society.* She learned these people were dangerous and with their questioning, threatened the very foundation of the program was becoming so precious to her.**

**She heard the phrase *sometimes you have to step over the dead bodies* in and around the rooms of recovery and had no idea what it meant but awoke one night as if to a voice and heard phrase. To her, it became a calling. Since she was promised she would not regain the ability to empathize, it became her calling to eliminate the questioners. Defeat the destructive defiant ones and preserve the integrity of the program. This had gone on for many years.**

**As Cid remembered, there was a slight rise in her heartbeat. She remembered she had bought a new tape day. It was entitled *The Real Karma.*The same woman who had written a new new—age type of bible a few years ago called *Lessons In Phenomenal Wonders* recorded it.**

**People were forming groups to study the book, like little bible studies, all over the world and the woman, Mary Eddy Winfrey had been making TV appearances on all of the daytime woman's shows for some time. She had become quite popular with a sort of spiritual version of the Martha Stewart crowd.**

**After showering then hot—tubbing for a while, Cid wrapped herself in warm towels, went to the closet where she kept the red cloth napkin which was now filled to look like a popcorn ball with assorted pills collected over the years for just such an occasion. She lit every candle she could find, spread her favorite rose and sandalwood bouguet, sprinkled a hint of jasmine and unwrapped the pristine CD.**

**With the tape of the woman's soft voice, as always, accompanied by generic new age, highly reverberated, electronic piano music playing in the background—someone playing slowly using only the black keys on the keyboard, Cid laid down softly, slowly situated herself on the table and one by one started taking—communion host—like—the many pills of differing shades and colors.**

**At one point, the voice said, "You have often heard and therefore thought karma was about old sixties slang, *what goes around, comes around.*Nothing could be further from the truth.**

**There is no retribution down the road for any good or bad we do. None. Karma is not stalled until a later date. Karma is always delivered instantly. This is the way it works. It is so simple. There is no such thing as planting seeds of faith.**

**If your reach out and help, this will not necessarily come back to you later. Your karma is you are instantly, simply, a helper. What greater reward could there be?**

**If you give of yourself or your possessions, your karma is you are now, a giver.**

**However, if you steal, you are a thief. If you lie, you are instantly a liar. What could be worse punishment than ? If you murder, you are simply… a murderer. You**

**will always know**

**#**

**As calmly as these words streamed out of the speakers, Cid's hand serenely, to the rhythm of the tranquil and soothing background music, chose at random, another pill here, a capsule there until finally she could no longer hear the woman's voice, though it droned on and on and…**

**At one point Cid's eyes opened awfully wide in a realization only she understood and was the last movement she ever made.**

**Nobody gets away with nuthin'.**

***I only wanted to help,*Cyd thought. *I hope, with all of my being, what I have accomnplished, for better or worse, does not go unnoticed. the resons I did it, the impetus, the motivation and what sustained me is understood so people who really want to get and stay clean and sober will be able to do so and more and more of us who really do want to get there nwill be able to do so and go to any lengths to help others to so as well. This is my most earnest, parting wish.***

**If this had been the end of Kajon's movie, she might have wanted many bass cellos, at this point, in unison, to have their lower E—strings pick—scraped from neck to bridge causing the audience—heart to nearly sink and stop and drop below hell itself as Cid's life simply…**

**…faded to black.**

**I heard or read someone ask once, "I wonder, are we here on this earth to merely believe what we are told is or is not the truth, or are we here to explore, wonder and use these wonderful minds and hearts to figure things out for ourselves and together?"**

**—Clayton Redfield**

**Beware the man of one book.**

**— St. Thomas Aquinas**

**You are now invited to contact Clayt Redfield, the author of The MIddlerZ, via email at the following email address:**

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**…keep coming back.**

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