

# **Michael Bettencourt**

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## **Works For Children**

Block & Tackle Productions Press



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**Co-Founders Elfin Frederick Vogel and Michael Bettencourt**

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**To María Beatriz - always in all ways**

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# **An Alphabet For Kara**

.....

**For Kara Jones**



## **The Aardvark**

The Aardvark loves to dig and dig --  
after all, its name means “earth pig”  
and like a pig it likes to put its nose  
(it’s long and round and rubbery like a hose)  
into dirt and leaves and homes of ants.  
It’ll eat almost everything -- an old pair of pants,  
library paste, brussel sprouts, crusts of bread,  
newspapers, stones, and an occasional bed.  
(Not really -- I just put that in to be silly.)  
There aren’t many animals like this dilly,  
with skin like cardboard and very hairy,  
this first animal named in the dictionary.



## Boys

Boys are weird -- and far too loud.  
And they like to hang around in a crowd.  
They're always trying to pick a fight  
or play war or throw things.  
They're not too bright.  
There are lots of them all over the place --  
my mother says that some day  
I might even like to look at their face  
and kiss them!! No way!!  
For right now I'll put up with them --  
sometimes they're fun to be around.  
They can throw mud pretty well  
and scream pretty good and roll around on the ground.  
I guess I'll let them sing their tune --  
but if they try to kiss me -- POW!! to the moon!!

## **Cleaning Up**

I love to get dirty --

it's my favorite love.

To pile on the dirt without getting hurt

is the best thing I can think of.

To get it down between my toes,

under my fingers, up my nose,

on my cheeks and in my ears --

it's the best fun I've had in years.

But then!! here comes the voice:

"Time to get cleaned up." I've got no choice

but to climb in the tub and take that soap

and hope and hope and hope and hope

that is doesn't all wash away.

But it does. And all my fun goes down the drain.

But wait!! I don't have to feel this way --

there's always tomorrow! And so I use my brain

to figure out how to get the dirt

in my hair and down my shirt,

on my hands and around my knees --

Mom, don't call me in too soon, please??!!

## **Dining**

My mother always makes a stink  
 about good manners when I eat.  
 “Fine dining,” she demands –  
 that means no fingers, no train wrecks.  
 But I don’t think it’s fair that she expects  
 that I should keep my hands  
 full of knives and forks, always neat.  
 It’s too much to ask, I think.  
 How much more fun it is to dig  
 through your food like a pig!  
 How great it feels to burp  
 and snort and gulp and slurp!  
 If only adults would let themselves go  
 and get that spaghetti sauce on their chins  
 and blow bubbles in their Coke  
 and get ketchup on their shirts –  
 then they’d leave us all alone  
 and quit this stuff about “Fine dining,”  
 rip that chicken apart, bone by bone,  
 and smile, their faces greasy and shining.

## Everything

There are days when I get up  
that I feel like a wet paper towel  
and when people say “Good morning” to me  
I just want to howl  
“Leave me alone!”. I don’t want anyone to erase  
the snarly gnarly in my face.  
But when they ask me what’s wrong  
I usually don’t give them the gong –  
I say “Nothing”.  
Why do I say “Nothing” when it’s really “Everything”?  
It’s just sometimes too much work  
to tell them that I’m tired of my sister  
and that my best friend yesterday is a jerk  
today, and that the school lunch was like glue  
and the teacher was like glue, too.  
Sometimes “Nothing” piles up so tall  
that “Everything” makes me feel real small.  
That’s when I’ll call you names  
and act like the whole world gives me pains.  
But I usually get over it and get my best face back.  
Then you can give me “Everything” for a snack!!

## **Friends**

Sometimes friends aren't easy to like.

They'll call you names, then borrow your bike  
and you'll wonder what you ever saw in such a loon --  
then you'll eat lunch together and play all afternoon,  
and be friends forever.

It's a lot of work to keep good friends  
and they don't always make it easy to do.

But without them everything good seems to end  
and the world can seem empty and blue.

A good friend comes back around  
even if you have a few bumps along the way.

So fight with 'em, yell at 'em, but keep 'em close  
and then play long and hard all day.

## Growing Up

Sometimes I think I'm popping out of my clothes

I'm growing up so fast.

One day I think my shoes are gonna last

and the next day they're scrunching my toes.

I'm not sure I like all this --

it was better being small.

Everyone paid attention to me

and put me on their backs to make me tall.

But I couldn't see over counters

and all the store clerks would ignore me

and in crowds I got jerked along

and banged against everybody's knee.

So I guess I'll keep on growing up

(I really can't fight it, I suppose) --

popping my buttons and stretching my pants --

what fun it'll be to buy new clothes!!

## Home

Home is waking up in the dark  
and having someone there to turn on the light;  
home is cutting your finger bad  
and having someone bandage it up tight.  
Home is being able to run in and tell  
about every little fight in the neighborhood,  
then run back out and have someone yell  
“Close the door!” and make you wear your hood.  
Home is where the laundry gets done  
and there’s popcorn on Friday night;  
where the toilet paper runs out  
and napkins will have to be all right.  
Home is all the little things  
that make you who you are:  
love and glue and irritation  
and pickles in the jar.

## **Inverploop**

Want to confuse someone and get them going?

Tell them that their inverploop is showing.

They'll look at you like you're absurd

for telling them such a stupid word.

But they'll check to see if their fly is zipped

or if the armpit of their shirt is ripped

or if their underwear hangs out

or if there are boogers in their snout.

They'll smile real nervous

because they don't know what the word means --

just shake your head and smile back

and say, "Your inverploop! What a scream!"

They'll straighten their ties, go messing

with their hair. Just laugh and keep 'em guessing.

You'll throw everyone you know into a loop

all because of their inverploop!



## “J”

I've got a family full of J's --  
everyone's name begins the same way.  
Jeffrey, my uncle, answers to "Jeff" --  
his name is full of breath.  
There's John and Jim, two uncles more --  
they like to wrestle me on the floor.  
My grandmother Joyce has a house on the lake  
where I can swim with Aunt Janey during the summer break.  
But the "J" I like is my mom Joan --  
with her I really feel at home.  
We can jump and joke and just hang out --  
she's a "J" I care a lot about.

**Kara**

Lately I've come to see  
a person in the mirror  
who looks a lot like me.  
She has my name and nose,  
and when I stick out my tongue  
she strikes the same pose.  
Lately her face has changed --  
sometimes day to day:  
her mouth and eyes get rearranged,  
her hair gets longer,  
make-up gets on her cheek --  
and she seems to be getting stronger.  
I think I like this person --  
she agrees with everything I say --  
and while our friendship might sometimes worsen  
I'm pretty sure she'll stay.  
"Kara, this is my best friend, Kara."  
"How nice to meet you. Let's go play."

## Laughing

It starts way down deep  
 in my abdomen --  
 like a burp  
 that's just roamin'  
 around until it can find  
 a way to get out.  
 Then it travels up my throat,  
 tickles my tongue,  
 makes me close my eyes  
 then my stomach pumps like a one-lung  
 engine and air whistles through  
 my nose and mouth  
 until I sound like a calliope\*  
 in the parade on July the Fourth  
 and the air fills with the wonderful  
 sound of my body enjoying itself.  
 There are lots of different kinds of laughs --  
 sniggers, guffaws, titters, snorts --  
 but nothing feels like a good belly-deep,  
 thigh-slapping, rib-hurting, cheek-tightening,  
 make-my-eyes-water, roll-on-the-floor  
 LAUGH!!

\*calliope -- a musical instrument that makes sounds by steam blowing through a whistle.

## Music

“Children, behave!

That’s what they say when we’re together...”

I’m singing as loud as I can

and bouncing up and down in my chair --

the music is blasting as loud as it can

and Tiffany -- oh, I wish I could dare

to sing like Tiffany!!

“‘Cause what would they say

If they ever knew...”

Sing louder! Start dancing around!

With these headphones on

the whole world goes away

and I don’t have to pay attention

to “Pick up this!” and “Sit up straight!”

and “Eat all you food and clean your plate.”

“Running just as fast as we can...”

I’m so into it I don’t notice

my sister standing in the door

laughing at me singing away --

but I don’t care, I’m Tiffany,

and I’ll sing some more!

Go, Tiffany, go!

## **Never**

“Never” is an interesting word.

It means that something can’t happen ever, ever.

But can you ever be sure something can’t happen?

How do you know until you try

that something won’t fly?

Never say “never” (there, I said it!)

until you know for sure

because you tried to find out.

If you always have “never”

at the top of your list

you’ll never know

how much you’ve missed.

**No "O"**

Wouldn't it be queer  
if the "O" decided to disappear?  
Then Oreos would be \_re\_ --  
and w\_uld n't taste very g\_\_d.  
And when y\_u went t\_ sit at a fire,  
there w\_uld n't be any w\_\_d.  
(And there w\_uld n't be any c\_\_kies t\_ eat  
while y\_u warmed y\_ur feet.)  
And y\_u c\_uld n't ch\_\_se y\_ur cl\_thes,  
y\_ur sh\_es w\_uld have h\_les,  
y\_ur bl\_use w\_uld n't fit,  
and y\_u c\_uld n't have cereal in b\_wls.  
I h\_pe the "O" d\_esn't g\_ \_ver the hill;  
it's place w\_uld be pretty hard to fill.

## **Peace**

What would this world be like  
if no one had any weapons?  
If countries agreed to stop killing  
and put down their guns?  
What is peace? What's it like?  
It's like this:  
it's the difference between  
not hitting your sister  
and giving her a kiss,  
between not hurting someone and  
giving someone a helping hand.  
Peace is hard work -- sometimes  
it's easier to not like someone,  
just write them off  
and not have to pay attention.  
But the easy way isn't always the best --  
work for peace, and the rest  
will be easier.

## Quintessence Of Q

Q can't go anywhere without U -- they're hitched forever.

Like ham and eggs, horse and buggy,

Abbott and Costello, Ken and Barbie.

Try to think of a Q-words without a U:

you can't. I wonder how they got together?

Maybe when the alphabet was born

everyone made fun of Q because of its short curly tail,

like a tongue hanging out of a mouth,

and they thought it was a stupid letter.

And U felt incomplete because it was open at one end

and the other letters kept dumping things into it.

So they hung out together,

one letter with a little bit extra,

the other needing just a little more.

Now they help each other out.

What do you think their story is?



## **Reveille**

When the alarm clock rings -- ooh, that stings!  
I don't want to crawl out of my warm, warm bed.  
I yell, "Just one more minute!"  
but I know I want another hour instead.  
But soon I get up, grumpy as a bear,  
and stumble to my sister's room.  
I shake her and she groans.  
"I don't want to go to school," is what I hear.  
But we both get up, sour as lemons,  
and eat our cereal and brush our teeth,  
get our clothes on and make our lunches  
and get ready to go on our way.  
But wait, there's something weird here --  
the kids who pass outside haven't passed.  
And where's the bus that stops at the corner  
(it's already quarter-past)?  
I know! I can't believe how dumb I've been!  
It's Saturday! It's the weekend!

## Short Story

Simple Sandy sat on a stool,  
sipped his snifter full of soda,  
snacked on saltines and sardines,  
and sang a silly song.  
Snotty Sully stepped on Sandy,  
stole his snifter, swiped his snacks,  
swigged them down with snorts and snickers,  
swatted Sandy and swaggered away.  
Sandy said he wasn't sad,  
said Sully just needed supper.  
Sully, shamed, went to Sandy,  
said he was sorry. Sandy smiled.

## Twilight

It's a special kind of light –  
soft, full of color (usually reds and pinks),  
the kind of light just before dinner,  
when mothers and fathers come out on the porch  
and call their sons and daughters to eat;  
when you want to get in the last “it” in tag  
or make one last catch of the football or  
ride your bike one more time around the block.  
“Twi” means two, and twilight stands between  
the day just ending and the night just starting.  
Just like you do sometimes, standing between  
being young again and going into third grade,  
between one birthday and the next.  
Twilight's a good light, just like you,  
full of color, with so much going on.

## **Due U No These?**

Ululate means howl -- why don't they say that?

Umbra means shadow -- why don't they say that?

Ultimate means last -- why don't they say that?

Umber means brown -- why don't they say that?

Umpteen means many -- why don't they say that?

Urbiculture means city life -- why don't they say that?

Utilitarian means useful -- why don't they say that?

Why use a long word when a short word will do?

I don't know -- due u?

## **V Is Very Valuable**

A lot of letters in the alphabet

wouldn't be around if it weren't for "V".

Get a pencil and try these out:

Add a leg, and you have a Y.

Put two together, you get a W.

Turn it upside down, add a bar, and you have an A.

Turn two upside down together and you get an M.

Lay it on its side, point to the left, and there's a C.

Point it the other way, add a line, and you get D.

One straight up, one upside down, gives you an N.

Take a D, add a flagpole on the left, and you get a P.

Take the P, add a leg, and you get an R.

In the old Roman alphabet, V was also used for U.

Take an N, turn it partway around, and there's a Z.

Y, W, A, M, C, D, N, P, R, U, Z -- can you make a word out of these?

## Watching People

If you're ever bored and need something to do,  
go to the mall and watch people pass by.  
It's free and they don't mind a bit,  
and no one will ever ask you why.  
You'll see bodies of every shape and design,  
from fat to skinny to pudgy to slim.  
You'll see noses both broad and refined,  
and some with hair on their chinny-chin-chin.  
They'll wear the most outrageous clothes,  
blue on purple, dots on plaid, big colors spaced,  
punk haircuts, safety pins in ears,  
torn jeans, chains, sneakers unlaced.  
Short people, tall people, people in between,  
fathers with tempers, kids who make a scene,  
teenagers eating cookies, old people drinking coffee,  
a woman walks by eating ice cream with toffee.  
The whole human race will be at the mall --  
it's great fun, and doesn't cost anything at all.

## **X-Tremely X-Pert**

“X” marks the spot, they always say.

But where is “X” anyway?

It could be the place on the map

where the treasure is stashed

by pirates who stole rubies and gold

and diamonds and pearls and cash.

Or it’s a mark on a building

that needs to be destroyed

or the bones under a skull

on a bottle you should avoid.

“X” is the mark you make over you heart

when you want to convince someone you’re true,

“X” is the mark you make on your list

when you’ve finished what you’re supposed to do.

Or “X” could be a cross

to keep a vampire away at night

or the name of a person

who doesn’t know how to write.

“X” is a useful letter – it never misses

when you us it to give lots and lots of kisses.

## **Why? Why Not?**

“Y” is a letter that’s a question, too,  
and one of the most annoying.

Want to drive someone crazy?

Just keeping asking “Y”:

“Pick up your room.”

“Y?”

“Because it’s dirty.”

“Y?”

“Because you left things all over the floor.”

“Y?”

“I don’t know! Just pick up your room!”

“Y?”

Be careful -- don’t use this a lot  
because someone will turn around  
and say “Y not?”

And then where will you be?

You may have to move on to Z.



## **Zeroing In On Z**

In England it's called "zed" --  
but that sounds kinda dead.  
"Zee" is a much better sound --  
it has more zip, more zing, it buzzes the lips,  
makes the tongue take little trips,  
and has more zoom, by zounds!  
"Z" has great words crowding up  
at the end of the dictionary:  
there's zabaglione and zany and zebu,  
zither and zizith and zloty,  
zonked and zygotic and Zulu,  
zoonosis and zombie and zymurgy.  
And when you go to sleep at night,  
there'll be a balloon over your head  
full of a bunch of "Z"'s  
as you snooze and doze and wheeze.  
It wouldn't be as much fun to hear  
if it was full of "zeds".  
Sleep well.

**Freezing Moon**

.....

**For Katie Jones**



## Chapter 1

### The Same Old Same Old Thing

---

Jennifer Caroline Williams was bored with her life. True, she was only nine years old, in third grade, but things seemed like they'd -- well, like they'd run out. She was sitting on the couch in the living room, her Punky Brewster sneaker'd feet stretched in front of her. (She was banging one foot on top of the other.) She'd just gotten home from school, and, what was unusual for her, she didn't really want a snack. Usually she badgered her mother as they walked up the stairs, speaking in baby-talk, saying "Want snack", which she knew irritated her, and acting as if she would die if she didn't get a *SSips* or crackers or a mouthful of sugar into her body in five seconds.

Something was bothering her, all right, if she didn't want a snack, wasn't falling all over herself climbing up onto the kitchen counter to get to the cabinets. She could hear the kids out on the street, Brie's voice arguing with Mandy's voice (JC noted "as usual" in her head), the boys racing around on their bikes and making explosion sounds with their voices. Kara, her sister, was already out there, but JC didn't feel like rushing down the stairs, like she usually did. She seemed to need to sit in the quiet living room for a few moments by herself and puzzle this thing through.

She liked her friends well enough, and school was school -- not bad, not good, sometimes interesting, mostly just "school" -- and Christmas and her birthday had given her some neat gifts, and Mommy loved her. But....somehow it didn't all add up to *excitement!!!* (That was the word she'd been looking for. It leapt out of her head like a flame from a match.)

Something else was disturbing her. When her mother drove her to school the other day, she asked her what the capital of New York state was. (Why did she ask her such questions, especially so early in the morning? She probably thought she was teaching her something important. Adults always think little facts about weird things would be interesting to kids -- things like spiders won't hurt you, they eat insects, and snakes aren't really slimy, they eat insects, but the fact is spiders are yucky and snakes are yucky and for that matter bugs are yucky and it would be nice if adults didn't talk about the whole mess as if it was the most interesting thing on earth.)

She had been staring out the window, not really paying attention to anything, and it automatically came out of her mouth that she didn't know (which she probably would have answered anyway even if she knew the answer, just because Mommy was acting like a teacher on the way to a place where she was going to have to spend the day with teachers – but this time she didn't really know). Mommy went on to tell her, and ask her more questions she didn't know, like the state flower and the state bird and the capital of Massachusetts (she had answered Chinatown because she'd seen it in a book at school), and she probably thought she had given her an important geography lesson on the way to school.

What she did do is disturb her – not really her fault. She realized she didn't really know where she lived. Sure, she knew the address to her house and her phone number and roughly where her house was in relation to the store where she bought her Turkish Taffy. But what about the city she lived in? Mommy always talked about all of them someday soon getting on the bus and riding around the city so she could get used to using the bus system. The idea terrified her, and no matter how many stories she heard about how her mom as a kid took the bus to here and there and how neat it was, she couldn't imagine herself leaving the few blocks around her house and getting on a bus to go downtown. (What was the name of the city anyway? Ithaca, that's right.)

She flopped over onto her stomach and started kicking the arm of the couch. But why not? Where was downtown, anyway? She lived in a city with (how many people did Ithaca have?), with, well, lots of people living in houses spread out all over the place, and it occurred to her she didn't have the faintest idea about where these houses were and what the people were like and if she admitted the truth she was scared to go out and see them. (But why was she scared? Of what? Maybe she was just lazy? Maybe. But didn't Brie tell stories about the old men who wandered around the bus station? How did she know?)

In short, she didn't know where she was except for a few blocks around her house, and for some reason that made her uneasy, though she didn't feel any big impulse to suddenly grab 60¢ from her money bank, hop on the bus, and go down to Buffalo Street. And top that off with being bored....

Her stomach growled impatiently. Kara came clomping up the stairs, breathing like an old car, and shouted "Jenny!!" JC gave the couch one more good bang, grabbed a juice out of the refrigerator, and left the kitchen door open as she ran down the stairs. She knew she should go back and close it – Mommy



---

would be irritated and say to her “How many times do I have to tell you to close the door?” – but she kept on going down the stairs and out the front door and immediately started jumping rope, whatever boredom she felt jiggled out of her as she popped up and down on the sidewalk.





## Chapter 2

### Another Day

---

“There’s a whole world out there, children, that most of us have never seen.” Ms. Strong spun the globe and JC watched it spin, its bright colors like fruit and its blue oceans like food dye. “Someone tell me to put my finger down and that’s where we’ll go for vacation.”

Someone shouted “Now!” and she plunked her finger down. Everyone laughed; her finger was smack in the middle of the Pacific Ocean (or was that the Indian Ocean, JC thought? – she couldn’t remember). “Well, we wouldn’t go very far doing that, would we?” She gave the globe another spin and JC found herself leaning forward at her desk, wondering where the painted tip of Ms. Strong’s finger would land. It landed in Europe, in Germany. Ms. Strong started telling them about beer and something called “Wiener schnitzel” (everyone laughed at the word, even when Ms. Strong told them it was just a breaded veal cutlet, but JC found herself suddenly very hungry, even though it was another hour until lunch) and a car named a Volkswagen and a man named Hitler who started something called World War Two and did something to Jews. (One of the kids at the daycare was a Jew – she wasn’t sure what that meant, only that it was something different – and Mommy didn’t even believe in religion and made fun it – was that what Hitler did?)

Ms. Strong had gone on to South Africa by the time JC’s attention came back around and her ears picked up a strange word – *apartheid* – which Ms. Strong spelled on the board and explained to them was something the government did to keep black people from having the kinds of rights we Americans liked to have. (JC knew what “rights” were – they’d just finished talking about the Constitution.) Then Ms. Strong told them a funny story about a camping trip to Canada where she’d found a frog at the bottom of her sleeping bag but thought it was a poisonous snake because all she could feel was its cold skin and was as still as stone until it let out a deep throaty honk, which made her jump six feet off the floor and run out of the tent screaming that she was being attacked. Everyone had a great laugh when they shook out her sleeping bag and found this huge green bullfrog, big as a brick and as green as new money. Lunch came around soon after that.



After school JC got on the bus that would take her to daycare. She didn't want to go to daycare. She hated daycare. She met her sister on the bus. And now they would have to spend time with Grandma. She hated Grandma -- well, not really, she didn't hate anyone, but she hated how Grandma made everyone call her Grandma when her real name was Mrs. Derochers and she wasn't anyone's real grandma (at least not of anyone in the daycare).

And she hated how Grandma played favorites with people and insulted people by making them feel small and not important and sometimes even hit people (not hard, just a little pop on head or the behind) when she got frustrated. And she was getting a little tired of Angela and Sherri and Maria and Zoe -- she still liked them and all, but they were the same old friends. (Maybe she'd start calling Angela "Wiener Schnitzel" and Grandma "Hitler" -- that made her laugh.) And she hated not knowing if Mommy was going to be able to pick them up early or if they'd have to stay there until 5:30 and be one of the last ones to go. And then there'd be supper, and if Mommy was in a bad mood (sometimes she had the worst temper) she'd yell at them to get out of the kitchen and go play outside and she'd look as if she'd gotten a spider on the back of her tongue. And then she and Kara would try to stay up as late as possible while Mommy would try to get them to go to bed as early as possible -- they would talk in their beds until Mommy would yell at them to shut up or they'd get up for some water *and* to go to the bathroom *and* say goodnight one more time, always pushing to get a little more because it was hard to give up each day and go to sleep and have to get up in the morning and start it all over again.

Luckily, Mommy picked them up early. She told them to put their sneakers on if they were going out to play (she had this thing about shoes, actually, about saving things so they'd last -- JC just wanted to get outside and play). She gave them some cookies for a snack (she heard herself say "Want snack" again, which she knew would irritate her again, but it was as if she couldn't stop herself), growled at her (something she'd started doing lately, imitating a tiger or a dog, but she didn't really know why she was doing it), finally put her sneakers on after kicking off her shoes against the wall ("Pick them up and put them in the closet!!") and making sure she protested loudly enough that she had to wear such ugly things, and ran outside, stripping off her jacket and throwing it on the porch before she ran down the alleyway.

That night, after dinner, after the three of them had watched *McGyver* and she and her sister had had their hair washed and brushed out, she and Kara sat



snuggled against their mother. She was telling her mother about her day, telling Kara occasionally to shut up so she could finish her story.

“And Ms. Strong was telling us about something called ‘Wiener schnitzel’ today and I thought I’d start calling Angela that name.” “Where’s Wiener schnitzel come from?” her mother asked.

“Germany. Who’s Hitler?”

Her mother told her a story about a man who had started a war about forty years (“Before you were born, right, Mom?”) and who had killed a lot of people called Jews.

“We’ve got a Jew in the daycare -- Joshua.”

“Do you know where the name ‘Joshua’ came from?” JC ignored the question. “What’s a Jew?”

“A Jew is someone who...”

“Knock, knock,” Kara interrupted.

“Karahhh!!”

“Knock, knock,” Kara insisted again.

“Kara!! I’m talkiinnngg!!” Kara tried it again anyway and JC, settling an exasperated look on her face, said in a grumpy voice, “Who’s there?”

“Jew.”

“Jew who?”

“Jew know who I am?” Kara broke out into an excited giggle while JC rolled her eyes up to the ceiling as if to say to everyone in the room, “Isn’t she so immature?”

“That’s not a very nice joke, Kara,” Mommy said, using that tone of voice she used when she thought she was saying something really important that she thought they should know for the rest of their lives. Kara ignored her, still tickled by her joke.

JC turned her back to Kara and continued to tell her mother about Joshua (who she sort of liked, at least today), and then the talk went on to what a brat Angela was (here Kara interrupted again to steal JC’s thunder, insisting on telling the story since what Angela had done -- crumpled up one of her pictures and threw it at her -- had happened to Kara and JC had to yield because her mother



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said that Kara had the right to tell the story but she didn't like it and showed it on her face) and then it was time for bed. The both of them squealed "No!" but Mommy herded them into their beds, kissed them, and went back to the living room.

And JC, as usual, slipped into Kara's bed and they pushed each other back and forth trying to get comfortable and complained that the other person was hogging the covers until Mommy shouted to tell them to be quiet and get to sleep or else they'd sleep in separate beds and finally sleep came to her eyes as she listened to Kara's heavy breathing beside her.

It had been an okay day, and she'd learned where Germany and South Africa was (though she never did find out if Ms. Strong' finger was in the Indian or Pacific Ocean) and had found a new name for Angela -- not altogether a bad day. But tomorrow would be pretty much the same, and this weekend they had to go to Maine to visit their father for the weekend. The living room light snapped off as her mother went to bed and in the glow thrown up by the nightlight and with sleep creeping up on her, she felt split between being happy with the way things were and this feeling inside that things wouldn't ever be different, that Angela would always be a brat and that she, JC, would never get to Germany. But sleep finally caught her and carried her away.



## Chapter 3

### The Adventure Begins

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**M**s. Strong had told them a story about a guy named Robinson Crusoe, who had gotten washed up onto a deserted island and had to figure everything out for himself. It was Adventure Week in their reading books and Ms. Strong was telling them all sorts of adventure stories – about a man named Ulysses who took ten years to sail to Ithaca, his home, from a war that lasted ten years (stupid Kirk asked if Ulysses lived anywhere in the city), about the astronauts who went to the moon, about pioneers. All week long JC felt something funny move around inside her. She didn't know what it was but she knew it felt full of electricity and she had a hard time keeping her attention straight in class.

The usual things – the bus to daycare, wrestling with Angela, getting picked up (this time early again), play outside, “Want snack”, dinner, complaining about going to bed – and the feeling in her gut didn't go away.

Her mother was just walking out of her bedroom, shutting off the light, when JC called out to her. “Mom,” she said. Her mother turned to face her, hand still on the light switch. “Yes?”

“Can you come sit down and talk to me?”

“We just finished talking, Jenny, and it's late...”

“Please?”

Her mother came back to the edge of the bed. “What's on your mind?”

“Nothin'.” She turned on her side, pleased to have her mother sitting there, pleased to be getting a little more time with her, a little more warmth and closeness.

“When people say ‘nothin'’ they usually have something bugging them. What is it?”

“Did you ever want to go to Germany?”

“Germany? Not really. But I'd like to go to England. I did go to Acapulco once, and Nassau. I had a great time. And I have been to New York and Boston.”

“I'd like to go to Germany. It must be neat in Germany. What's Acapulco?”

“It’s a beautiful place by the ocean, hot and exciting. I had a lot of fun there.”

“I want to go to Florida.”

“I know -- you’ve said that before. How come there?”

“I don’t know -- Disneyworld!!” She giggled.

“I wish we all could travel some more. It’d be nice, wouldn’t it?” She tousled JC’s hair. “C’mon, toots, time for you to get to sleep.” She tapped JC’s skull. “You can travel up here, you know. Doesn’t take any money at all.”

JC nodded yes but didn’t want to say to her mother that traveling in your head wasn’t half as much fun as traveling with your body. And how could she travel to Germany if she didn’t have any idea what Germany looked like? It would probably end up looking like Ithaca.

Her mother kissed her on the cheek and walked out of the bedroom. The glow of the nightlight cast long shadows on the wall and up onto the ceiling, shadows that looked like oceans and patches of light that looked like Ithaca as Ulysses finally, after ten years, pulled his ship into the harbor. She fell asleep and dreamed.

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She didn’t know exactly when she decided it, at what part of her dream or what time of the night, but she woke up knowing that soon, if not that very day, she was going to have herself an adventure. She didn’t know what it would be or how it would happen but she knew that she had to have an adventure soon or else her usual days were going to drive her crazy. Ms. Strong didn’t help matters as she talked about a man named Jack Kerouac and how he traveled with a bunch of friends across the United States and saw and did weird things. She decided that it had to be something that she hadn’t done before -- and then it struck her: why not sneak out tonight? She wouldn’t go far, maybe just down to the supermarket parking lot (yeah, that’s where she’d go!) and back. But at least it would be something. Her insides smiled now that she’d made her decision and had her own secret, her own little plan.

She thought she’d go that very night and not waste any time, but it didn’t work out that way. First, Mommy stayed up late reading; second, she got scared; third, she hadn’t really prepared to go (didn’t lay out any clothes, get some food ready); fourth, she fell asleep. (She’d never been out at night, and while she



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realized that being out at night was part of the excitement of the plan, she couldn't quite bring herself to do it cold turkey and just, you know, walk out the door like she was going to the store for a Turkish Taffy. It was going to take time to build up to this.)

The secret stayed with her all the next day, and the next, and the next, until the secret began to be a little annoying because she hadn't gotten herself together enough to make it out the door and down the stairs. Tonight was going to have to be the night or else she was never going to go. After dinner that night she got her homework done quickly and set out some clothes for herself – jeans, a sweatshirt, sneakers, socks. (She tucked a dollar bill into her jeans pocket, not sure why she did it since there would be no place to spend it.) She was in luck – her mother went to bed early. Soon the light went off and she lay there counting minutes (“one thousand one, one thousand two”). She made herself not look at the clock on the wall, and when she thought at least half an hour had gone by, only five minutes had slipped away. She tried to make herself lay still, but she couldn't, so she got up and got dressed, slipping the two cookies she'd put into a plastic bag into her sweatshirt pocket.

Quietly she tiptoed into the kitchen and waited. Everything seemed really still and she thought she could hear the breathing of everyone in the house. (Of course she could hear Kara – she breathed like horse running hard – and she convinced herself that she could hear her mother.) She took a step and waited. Took another step. And then another. Finally, her hand rested on the door handle and she turned it, ever so slowly, until the door began to move toward her. Light from the hallway spilled into the kitchen and for a moment she panicked, thinking that the light falling on the kitchen floor would make a big sound that would wake up everyone. But it didn't, and she told herself not to be so foolish. She stepped into the hallway and slid the door closed until she heard it click shut. She was in the hallway. She was free.





## Chapter 4

### The Adventure Continues

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She walked slowly down the stairs, putting her foot down just so, making sure she didn't make any of the stairs squeak or crunch. She got to the outside door and pushed it open, not letting it bang shut as usual but holding the handle until it eased back into its case. Then she was outside.

The stars sizzled overhead. No clouds mucked up the view. It was cool out, but not cold, and a slight breeze moved her hair. All the houses were dark, except for here and there a light on in a window (probably someone staying up late to read), and the streets were empty, the parked cars looking like sleeping dinosaurs. The streetlight threw down a thick white light almost like moonlight. She patted the two cookies in her pocket and headed down the street.

She planned on just walking down to the supermarket parking lot and back (or maybe around the block, depending on how brave she felt). She took out one of the cookies and started nibbling on it. It was so quiet. The easy wind shook the leaves in the trees and they sounded like the stove in the living room when it was cooling down. The light of the streetlamps splintered in the tree's branches and looked like stars that had come down close. A car went by and its tires on the pavement sounded like water. These were things she had never really sensed before and they pleased her.

The neighborhood she spent so much time in during the day appeared very different at night. Things that she didn't give a second glance to during the sunlight leaped out at her in the dark light of the streetlamp. Houses looked like huge tents, telephone wires whistled, electricity hummed through the transformers at the tops of the wooden poles. She found herself moving from pool of light to pool of light as if they were islands and the dark street in-between was an ocean she didn't know the name of. (Was it the Pacific Ocean or the Indian Ocean?) It was both a scary and exciting feeling, and she didn't know which feeling to feel and felt them both at once.

She reached the parking lot and saw that it was mostly empty. During the day she had to watch carefully for cars coming from every which way, but now the parking lot was like an even bigger ocean, flat and black and without any edges to it. The only vehicles around were trucks loading stuff into the



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supermarket. A man in a white coat wearing a hard hat stood in the door at the loading dock and he was talking to another man who was smoking a cigarette. The area around the loading dock was filled with trucks, some large, breathing heavy diesel fumes, others small. Some men were carrying large racks of bread into the store while others pulled dollies of boxes down rattling metal ramps onto the loading dock. She could hear faint voices but no words, and the growl of the big trucks echoed over the large carless space.

She was ready to go back, having had enough for the night and feeling a little sleepy, when she spied a truck with *DRAKE'S* written on the side of it. Drake's Cakes were one of her favorites and for some reason, instead of turning around to go home, she started walking toward the loading dock. The truck backed up to the dock and the driver, a young man with short blond hair, slid the door back and jumped out. He ran around to the back of the truck and flung open the doors. JC, circling just outside the light cast by the lamp over the loading dock door, could see inside the truck and she saw racks of cakes and other goodies and suddenly she was caught by a feeling (she didn't know why it came over her but it did) to have one of those cakes -- not just to have one but to *steal* it. Wasn't Ulysses always stealing things? Didn't a lot of the adventurers Ms. Strong talked about get things that weren't theirs? So why shouldn't she get something for herself, a little something that no one would really miss? It wouldn't be wrong, it would be part of the...adventure!!!

The man hoisted up a rack of products and walked into the store. The man with the white coat had disappeared. No one was around. With her heart pounding she ran over to the truck and looked inside. There they were -- Drake's Cakes. Hundreds of 'em. She went into the truck and stuffed one in her pocket, and then a second one for good measure. Just as she was ready to get out of the truck she heard the voice of the driver on the platform. Suddenly her heart was in her throat and her blood pounded in her head. Sweat popped out on her forehead. What was she going to do? She could run for it but he'd probably catch her and then she'd be in trouble. Maybe he's only coming back to get something and he'll be gone in just a second. So if she hid she'd have a better chance. She looked around and saw a pile of empty racks and small place right next to them that she could wedge herself into between the racks and the back wall of the truck. She tucked herself in a tight as she could, pulling her heels about against her rear-end and trying not to breathe at all.



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But he never came into the truck. He shut the doors. Shut them tight. Turned off the overhead light. Got into the truck. And took off. Took off!! She had turned to stone. What was she going to do? She should knock on the wall of the truck, get his attention and get him to stop, even if it got her in trouble. But she couldn't raise her arm, couldn't make it move. She could barely breathe. The truck swayed back and forth, picking up speed, and with each bump and corner she was being carried farther and farther away from home. She didn't know what to do. She didn't know what to do at all.





## Chapter 5

### Lost

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JC was so scared she couldn't feel anything. That is, she couldn't feel anything inside her. Her knees hurt (she didn't move from her crouch, as if she'd been frozen there like the ice cream in her freezer) and, oddly, she felt hungry. But it was as if her mind had shut off -- she couldn't think of a thing to do, though she knew she should do something. The truck rocked back and forth over the uneven streets, and the racks of pastries swayed over her head. (She wondered if they would fall over and she'd be smothered to death under a pile of cakes.) She waited because that seemed to be the only thing she could do.

The driver made several more stops, and luckily for her he never walked all the way to the back of the truck. All she could see of him were his pants legs (green) and shoes (heavy workboots). She didn't want to raise her eyes up because she thought that if she did that, he'd feel her eyes on him and then he'd find her. Every time the truck stopped her stomach twisted into a little bit tighter knot, and she thought "Now I can get out" and "Now he's going to find me" -- a little bit of hope and a little bit of fear.

But each time he left the truck he shut the doors behind him and JC, not being able to see where he went, didn't want to chance getting caught as she opened the doors and tried to be invisible. She ate one of the cakes, just to make herself feel better; then she ate a second one. They tasted dry in her mouth, like sand. And she didn't feel any better.

She soon found herself drowsing off (she had no idea what time it was), and the rocking of the truck over the road felt like a rough cradle. She shook herself to keep awake, and she began to sing songs to herself, in a low voice (though the truck rattled so loudly, like a sinkful of pots and pans, that he probably couldn't hear her). She also tried to keep out of her mind the thought that she was stupid for what she'd done because she didn't want to feel bad about herself, but the thought kept coming in, like Kara always coming in to her room, and, like Kara, it wouldn't leave when she told it to get out. Some adventure. It was only supposed to be small, a little midnight walk down the street and back. And now here she was being carted to a place she didn't know about (she had enough trouble with maps as it was) and had no idea about how to get back home.

When she thought about how worried and scared her mother would be, she burst into tears. (The truck was so loud he'd never hear her.)

After what seemed like eighteen hundred hours of traveling the truck finally stopped. She heard the driver's door slam shut and heard him walk away. Then it was all silent. The truck creaked a little as its metal body relaxed. JC stood up, her knees creaking like the truck, and moved toward the doors. (Her legs were numb and her feet tingled as the blood rushed through her toes.) She found the latch for the door and swung it open. The truck was parked in a big yard with other Drake trucks, the yard lighted by big white spotlights. To her right was a small shed with a light on in it, and inside she could see two people talking. No one else was walking around. She eased herself down out of the truck (her feet still tingled) and shut the door. Then, as if every dog in the neighborhood was after her, she ran across the open space of the parking lot to a row of trucks on the other side. She slipped into the shadows. From there she could see the gate opening into the parking lot – and of course she was going to have to go right by the shed to get out. This was an adventure all right – and she wanted to be home in her bed, asleep and bored.

She moved along the line of trucks, keeping to the shadows, until she was opposite the gate. She kept going until she reached a corner of the fence, where they'd piled some old tires and junk. She thought for a moment of trying to climb the fence, but it was too high, she'd never climbed a fence before, and she'd probably make a lot of noise doing it. So she scuttled along the fence toward the gate, keeping her eyes on the two men in the shed. Soon she couldn't go any further – she'd reached the other corner of the fence and she was going to have to go through the gate. She moved slowly toward it, trying to cover herself with shadows as much as possible, believing that if she kept her eyes straight ahead they would never see her. Finally, she was going to have to run for it – there were no more shadows, the bright spotlight shone right down, and she was either going to have to sprint or stay next to that fence until morning. She decided to sprint.

She almost got through the gate unnoticed, but one of the men saw her and charged out of the shed after her. She had a good hundred feet head start on him, but his legs were longer and it wouldn't be long before he caught her. But then he stopped and simply shouted at her, "Get the fuck outa here!!" She never really heard him (all she heard was the "fuck" and that scared her even more) and she just kept running as hard as she could. Her lungs burned and she



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could feel her legs start to turn to lead but she didn't stop, she wanted to run all the way back home (even as she realized she did not know where home was). Finally, she couldn't run anymore, and just as she slowed down she tripped over a curbing and fell, square and hard, on her right knee. Bam!! She had never felt anything hurt so much in her life.

She sat down on the curb and cried, holding her knee, feeling completely alone. No mom to tell her it was all right and don't cry (she always was a little rough that way) and wash it off, no mother to comb back her hair and kiss her forehead as she put on a bandage. And the knee was certainly bleeding. She'd torn her pants and the blood was soaking through. She straightened her leg out and felt through her pockets – she was going to have to make a bandage for herself. (For some reason she'd stopped crying.) In her jacket pocket she found a dress for Barbie (how did *that* get there?) and in her back pocket she found a piece of kite string. She rolled up her pants leg, wrapped Barbie's dress around it, tied the dress with the string, and rolled the pants leg back down. It looked like an elephant's knee, but it didn't bleed anymore.

She got up and gingerly put weight on her leg, limping a little as she walked. She had no idea where she was. She was on a street with stores and restaurants, all locked up. She was tired and her lungs hurt. She didn't know what city she was in, what state she was in. Suddenly, she remembered she could call home, but then also suddenly remembered she only had a dollar bill and no change, so that meant no public phone and there was no one around to lend her a phone. She thought about going back to the shed but was pretty sure that they'd be so mad at her that they'd wouldn't help her.

The streets were lonely and she was tired and all she wanted to do was go home.





## Chapter 6

### Trains

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She had never felt this tired in her life, not when she'd stayed up chattering to her friend on a sleepover, not when they'd come back from the ocean after a long day of swimming and hot dogs. Her leg seemed like some little kid pulling on her, tugging her and holding her back and crying (she imagined that the throbbing in her knee sounded exactly like the whining of a two-year old).

She walked down the street slowly. In one of the stores she'd seen a clock that said 2 a.m. No cars passed on the street. The sky was still dark; all the stores were locked up. Finally, she sat down on the curb and leaned her back against a parking meter. She patted her pockets and found the two cookies she'd stashed away (now considerably smashed) and began dropping the sweet crumbs into her mouth. She tried to think what to do. She knew her phone number, she knew her address – but she didn't have any specific plans for a situation like this. She'd never been lost before – and she had to admit, as tired and as scared as she was, that there was a bit of her, deep down, that sort of liked it – provided that she got home pretty quickly and be allowed to sleep until she didn't want to sleep any more. She didn't understand how she could be scared and excited at the same time. She had never liked scared, but now it seemed tied up with something she did like, which was excitement.

Too much thinking. She wanted to go home.

She got up and continued walking. She knew she should do something, but she didn't know what – her mind was like wet cotton. She walked around and walked around. A couple of times police cars cruised by and she thought about stopping them, but then she'd have to tell them how she got into this city (what city was this, anyway? – she hadn't seen a name anywhere, or at least a name she could read; maybe the city's name was one of the words she couldn't read) and then they would arrest her for stealing and they'd keep her here forever. So she wandered, not knowing what to do.

Along one long street, which seemed to stretch to China, she saw a sign which said "Train Station". They'd talked about trains in school, how they'd built a railroad line clear across the country, and because the words and the pictures in her head were as familiar to her as the city wasn't, she followed the arrow.



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She found herself in front of an enormous pile of granite and wood, with tall peaks and towers and a long, wide awning over the sidewalk. A few taxi cabs waited in front of these huge wooden doors that, from where she stood, led into a lobby full of marble and big chandeliers overhead. She stood there for a moment, never having seen anything so big or heavy. Then, looking both ways, she crossed the street and walked through the doors.

Inside it was warm. Sounds echoed from the big vaulted ceiling over her head. Benches were laid in neat rows – some of them held sleeping people (some with strange sleeping people who had big garbage bags filled with stuff on the floor next to them and their clothes were tattered and grungy). Along one wall was a ticket counter; only one of the windows was open and behind it sat a man reading a newspaper. The snack bar was closed (she felt her stomach rumble again). For a moment she felt calm, okay – here was a place people came to and went from, a place that had a *place* and which, if she asked the right questions, would tell her which way to go to get home.

If she had the money. In a panic she reached into her pocket and felt for the dollar bill. There it was. Would a dollar be enough? Probably not. She always heard mommy talk about how far money didn't stretch, and JC pretty well knew that a dollar was not going to stretch all the way to her home. She could get change and call. But then she thought of the phone ringing and Mommy answering it and her having to explain what she was doing in a strange city and how upset and angry her mother them would be and it all of a sudden sounded like a lot of work and trouble.

Besides, she was feeling a little bit more comfortable with the idea of her “adventure” and she wanted to prove to herself that she could do it. (There it was again, that strange feeling of excitement and fear. Without the driver chasing her and the fear of getting caught, this whole scene of being in a strange train station was, well, like Ulysses setting out to go home, the war finally over – something new to do.) For once she didn't want to just give up and say to someone “Do it”. She'd just have to get back home before they knew she'd gone. (She could do that, right? Just get on one of those trains she saw through the doors at the back of the station? Right? It sounded like a good idea to her. Right?)

She was feeling pretty good about herself. But she needed to go the bathroom. She saw a sign which read “Rest Rooms” and walked toward the arrow. But before she could open the door a woman dragging one of those



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stuffed garbage bags pushed it open, almost knocking JC down. For a moment the two of them looked at each other, and it was as if every detail of the woman's face and body was burned into JC's mind, so clearly did she see this woman. The woman's face was a net of wrinkles, and dirt hid in every one of them. Her eyes watered and were rimmed in red, and they didn't seem to have any color, just a pale blueish tint with a dark pupil in the middle of the paleness the size of a BB. Her mouth chattered constantly and JC could just barely hear a stream of words come out, mumblings that seemed to make no sense and which the woman did as easily as breathing. Grey hair was tucked up under a dirty knotted kerchief, but wisps of it fell out along her cheeks. Dandruff powdered the shoulders of her tattered grey cardigan. And she smelled of ammonia and sweat and garlic, and JC, staring at her, felt herself at the same time wanting to do something and run away as fast as she could.

The woman never really noticed JC. As quickly as she'd appeared in JC's eyes she was gone, shuffling into the station toward one of the benches, her words left behind as strongly as her smell. JC felt soft inside, the balance between fear and excitement suddenly tipping away from excitement.

In the bathroom she looked at herself in the mirror and was surprised by what she saw. Her hair, so neatly tucked up when she left the house (how many hours had it been?) fell in strands along her cheeks. Her face looked both opened up and scrunched at the same time. There were some crumbs on her sweatshirt. She quickly splashed some water on her face and scraped it off with a rough paper towel. That felt better. She got herself into one of the stalls and found herself relaxing, momentarily safe within four wooden walls. She realized she was falling asleep.

But she didn't. A voice, sounding as if it were talking through a foot of soapy water, broke the air with an announcement about departures. She popped her eyes open and as she did she thought she heard the name "Ithaca" garbled out. She pulled her pants up quickly, flushed the toilet, and ran out of the bathroom.

In the station she saw a small knot of people move toward the doors, so she followed them, figuring they were all going to Ithaca. As they filed onto the train she just slipped in among them, her shortness disguised by their coats and baggage, and she neatly moved past the attendant standing by the door. Once inside the train she moved to a section of the car that no one was sitting in and scooted herself into a seat. Her knee was throbbing again (she realized it had been throbbing for a while, but she only noticed it now). A bit of fog had rolled



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in and she could just barely make out the platform. Then the fog seemed to roll inside her eyes, and she fell asleep, her forehead against the cool window.



## Chapter 7

### Tandy

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**D**rifting. In one of those long boats filled with people brown as leather, and they were singing, raising their paddles high and slicing them into the sea, just like out of one of those *National Geographic* specials on TV. She was in the middle of the boat, tossed from side to side, and it seemed they were singing to her. Far away her mom's eyes, like twin suns, tipped over the horizon and she could tell from them that she was smiling at her. She tried to smile back but a quick darkness descended as if someone had turned a page in book. Her mother's eyes were gone and everything froze.

She jumped awake. She shook herself, doglike, to wake up, and as she unbent herself she could feel every bone and every muscle hurt. The ruckle of the train wheels, the scene unwrapping itself outside the window – no, she wasn't in her room and Mommy wasn't making French toast. "I am Jennifer," she said out loud, "Jennifer Caroline Williams". In the old train car, the voice curdled and settled to the floor. "I am JC," she quoted to herself softly. That much was sure. The rest was not so clear, not yet – how she'd jumped this train in that town, the ride in the truck, the food she'd stolen – but one thing shook clear, like light off a lake: she was on her adventure, she was nine years old and finally doing something *unboring*!! A small pond flashed by her and she barely glimpsed a shimmer of two men fishing, their poles held out like a pencil stroke. And she was tired and a little panicky and hungry and her leg hurt where she'd fallen down. Her eyes slipped shut and the stale smell of the train car became the odor of pancakes and as the door at the end of the car opened she smiled, knowing her mother was coming to get her out of bed.

But it wasn't her mother. It was a head. The head, JC thought, was a head like any other. It scanned the car, going over each seat like a lintpicker over a suitcoat. When the head got to JC it stopped, stared, then continued the search. Bit by bit the body of a small girl emerged under the head, clutching a gnarled carpetbag. She and JC peered at each other, like first cousins who'd never met, and because she was slightly embarrassed and didn't like staring, JC finally asked her to come sit down. The girl stared at her for just a half-second more, just to let JC know who was in command, and sauntered to JC's seat.

Just as her rear-end hit the seat the train door opened again and a conductor, with a face like a dead leaf and hands like shovels, sidled into the car. The girl and JC stiffened at the same time and visions of spending the rest of her life in jail made JC shake. She'd never broken the law and suddenly here she was on a train without a ticket, having eaten food she didn't pay for, next to a strange girl with short stringy black hair and dirt on her neck. Suddenly, the whole adventure was as sour as her morning mouth.

The man advanced on them, smiling, his hand locked behind his back. As he got closer JC noticed the girl smelled, and the closer he got, the worse she smelled. She smelled like the old woman in the train station. JC wondered if the conductor noticed and would he blame JC for it. Her stomach churned so hard she was having trouble swallowing.

"Where are your parents?" He loomed over them like an oak tree.

Just as JC was about to break down and confess to everything, the girl, giggling in the most Shirley Temple fashion, said, "Oh, they're up front." She pointed vaguely forward. "Up front."

"What're you doin' back here?" He pushed his hat back on his head.

The little girl didn't answer but just smiled. His eyes wandered over to JC and she just smiled back at him, making herself as compact as possible.

"You wouldn't be riding for free now, would you?" His face grinned, but JC could sense the meanness in the man.

"Us?" She laughed and punched JC in the arm. JC, without missing a beat, started to muss up her hair. The conductor, his smile a little exasperated, told them to quiet it down.

"Which ones are your parents?" he asked. The little girl started to answer but he put up his left hand to stop her and looked at JC. JC squeezed inside and went white but she didn't stop grinning like a maniac. "They're the same parents she has!!"

The little girl squealed at the conductor, "You dummy, you dummy!" She rapped JC on the thigh as they started to tussle again and the little girl let an elbow land on the conductor's thumb. The conductor jerked away. "Damned kids!" They were giggling too hard to hear what he said.



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As soon as the door slammed shut, the little girl stopped and craned around to watch his bulk sway through the other car. "He won't bother us for a while." She turned to JC. "Who are you?"

JC, not liking the impoliteness of the girl, and now that the man was gone, unable to stand the smell, reached, opened a window, sat back down, and did something uncharacteristic of her. "You stink," she said.

The little girl appraised her coolly, like a banker counting profits. For a moment JC thought the girl was going to slap her and JC very much wanted to apologize, but something in the eyes didn't want apologies. The girl seemed to be calculating something.

"Elephants speak French at the bottom of the sea."

"What?"

"Penguins have diamonds in their guts."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. There's a lot you don't know about. Like kicking gift horses in the mouth." The little girl punched JC hard, right on the muscle where the shoulder and arm met. JC, slammed back against the window, only looked at her in astonishment.

"I know I stink. And you ain't the first to tell me." She leaned in closely. "I saved your ass."

JC, not liking this at all, and being hungry, hurt, tired, and a little homesick, pushed her face right up to the girl's and said, "I saved your ass, too, you old potato, so keep away from me." They glared at each other with an inch between their noses until, unable to keep it up, the little girl started laughing so hard her nose, eyes, and mouth scrunched together like the top of a draw-string purse. JC, still confused, but relieved, started to laugh too, and the two of them sat there, laughing quietly to themselves. When they settled down, the girl leaned over to JC and said, "I'm Tandy. You got any soap?" JC shook her head no.





## Chapter 8

### Boston

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**T**hey didn't want to see the conductor again so they decided to kill two birds and find a bathroom where Tandy could get cleaned and where they could both hide out. They squeezed themselves into the phone-booth bathroom, Tandy's bag jammed under the teacup sink. JC sat on the toilet. They were two peas in a very small pod.

"Geez, you have to be careful brushing your teeth or else you'll ram your elbows into the wall." Tandy opened the postage-stamp window and started the hot water, and tore the wrapper off a thin sliver of soap the railroad company had placed on the sink. Steam whisked out the open window. Tandy shucked off a jacket, a sweater, violet satin arm garters, chartreuse suspenders, and finally her shirt. "I wish I had a washcloth. I'm getting water all over the goddamn place." She could only wash her underarms by leaning over the sink, cupping water in her hand, and throwing it up at herself. "How do they expect a person to get cleaned up here?"

"Most people don't take showers on the train."

"Well, if you'd been what I'd been through...." She twisted the faucets off and unsnaked a towel from her bag, a ratty blue-grey towel that had seen better bathrooms, and dried off her upper body. Then she wriggled out of her skirt, washed everything below her waist, and dried herself. Then, like a film in reverse, she quickly snapped her clothes back on, sat on a small ledge by the window, and lit a tattered cigarette dug up somewhere out of a pocket. Smoke streamered out the window. "Well," she said, "now what?"

"You mentioned something about all you had to go through?"

Tandy inhaled deeply and spit the smoke out in a thin line. She threw the cigarette out the window. JC, as the cigarette was caught by the wind and carried away, suddenly realized that Tandy was about her own age and was smoking cigarettes – her own age and smoking cigarettes.

"I'm an orphan," she said, her eyes following the ground by the tracks. "Parents both killed – a bomb." She peered cagily at JC with cavernous eyes.



JC stared back at Tandy, her own eyes slightly widened in disbelief. Nobody lost their parents by bombs. Tandy's eyes (they were straw-colored, she noticed, with a touch of green at the edges) crinkled in a little mocking smile.

"It doesn't sound right," JC muttered.

"Your heart's in the wrong place," she replied bitterly. "Of course it can happen. Anything can goddamn happen." She glared out the window, her hands picking nervously at her skirt. He eyes glazed over as she looked at JC, turning a brown like dead needles on a tree. "My parents were Irish. Northern Irish. Know where that is? *Northern Ireland*?!"

JC tried to conjure up the place from anything Ms. Strong had said, but she couldn't place it. Nothing there. She shook her head no.

"Northern Ireland is a place where a lot of people blow up a lot of other people. I don't know why -- something to do with religion. Anyway, it had nothing to do with my parents. They wanted to go back and see relatives. It was gonna be a great vacation, the three of us..." Her voice clipped off. "The facts. One night, my parents went out with some of my cousins to a bar." Her hands, held together, settled like a lump in her lap. "We were going to leave the next day." She paused. "Know what gelignite is? There was fifty pounds of it in that bar. Fifteen people got killed when the bomb went off." She ran her hand through her hair and snorted. "Been on the road for a long time." She looked at JC. "I must be crazy, sitting in this fucking bathroom telling you my troubles." JC could see the tears welling in Tandy's eyes and she could also see that Tandy wouldn't let them fall. And before she knew it, tears were tumbling down her own face.

"Christ," Tandy said, "I get a Hallmark greeting card for traveling stiff." JC swiftly wiped her eyes on her sleeve, trying to stifle the thick knot of homesickness that rose in her throat. Tandy, for her part, just sat there facing JC, not quite wanting to do anything about her, embarrassed and slightly angry. "Let's eat," she said, standing up. She dragged her bag from under the sink, pushed the door rudely open, (crushing JC's knees), and slid out the door. JC hurried to catch up, but when she got into the aisle she couldn't see Tandy. Then she caught sight of the short figure with the black hair stalking down the aisle of the next car. JC caught her just as she got to the snack counter. Tandy may be rude, JC thought, but she was all she had.

"You got any money?" she whispered to JC. JC hesitantly slid her dollar bill out of her pocket. Tandy took it, gave her an "isn't-there-any-more?" look, and



when no more money came, took a dollar out of her own pocket and turned to the man behind the counter. “Two Cokes,” she ordered, “and two bags of chips.”

The young man grinned at her and asked how she was. She answered by asking him how he was, and he said, Fine, fine. He reached over with the two Cokes and told her to take a bag from a chips display at the front of the counter. She said she wanted a bag from one of the boxes up on the shelf. “They’re fresher,” she said. “I’m particular about my chips.”

He plainly didn’t like the idea.

“I bet you would do it if we were adults,” Tandy said, her voice halfway between sugar and sarcasm.

He shot her a look but turned to get the chips. As soon as he turned three bags fell off the display and into her bag. The man more or less handed the bags of chips to her, handed her the change from the dollars. “Have a nice day,” he said, clearly not meaning it. She smiled and stuck her tongue out at him, turned on her heel, and, nudging JC, moved quickly but calmly down the aisle.

“What if he notices?” JC whispered.

“Idiots!” she hissed. “The world is full of fucking idiots!”

They moved into another car and sat. JC didn’t want to eat the potato chips Tandy had stolen, out of a sense that somehow eating them made her as guilty, but she was so hungry that she found her hand grabbing even when her mind told her not to. Outside, rows of old houses, some abandoned, some with dark people pasted onto the stoops and windows, slid by. She realized, with another twitch of panic, that she didn’t know where she was headed.

“Where’re we going?”

“Boston,” Tandy replied. “Good city. Know some friends there. We’ll be okay.”

“Boston. I thought I was going to Ithaca.”

“Ithaca. There aren’t any trains that go to Ithaca.” Tandy snorted, her mouth full of crumbs. “You really thought this train was going to Ithaca? Jesus!”

Boston. She’d never been to Boston. What if she lost Tandy? The adventure was getting more complicated, more dangerous. She was hungry and tired and without any money and not at all happy. Her thoughts were a merry-go-round, with not much merry and a lot of go-round. She wanted to sleep, forever.



A voice over the intercom shouted “South Station”. Tandy suddenly climbed over JC, whapping her with her bag, and was off at a run. JC managed to trip only once as she rushed after her. Other people began to jostle her, she lost sight of Tandy, the Coke and chips sloshed in her stomach, her eyes widened with panic and drooped with fatigue, and she’d just about given up when she popped out of the crowd into South Station, right in front of an old man propped up on a bench. His eyes were runny, like a sick dog’s, and she smelled like sauerkraut. He peered at her, peered through her, as if she didn’t exist. As much as she wanted to run, she stood, cemented to the spot, wanting to prove something to him, until a hand curled around her elbow and pulled her off balance. She was so nervous that she wheeled around to defend herself and almost clobbered Tandy.

“C’mon,” she whispered, tugging, “we gotta get outa here.” JC followed, stumbling past a vendor’s cart full of pastries and out the heavy iron door into the street.

Satisfied that no one was behind her, Tandy released her grip on JC’s arm. “You never know with these assholes. Sometimes they leave you alone and sometimes they don’t.”

JC was in no mood. “What’s the idea of pulling me along like a sack of onions? And why did you almost kill me getting out of the seat?” JC was close to tears but wasn’t going to show it. “You tell me about your parents and then *bam!*, off you go like nothing happened.”

“Nothin’ did happen,” Tandy laughed, “and you have a lot to learn. My parents,” she waved her hand, “nothin’ at all. You’ll see.” She paused. “Goddamn, look at your leg.” A red splotch bloomed on JC’s knee.

JC hadn’t noticed it but when Tandy pointed, she glanced down and almost immediately the throbbing began. “Hurt?” Tandy asked. JC, her bottom lip tucked in her teeth, nodded yes. “I banged it when I fell down...a long time ago.”

“Let’s go. We’ll get you some help.” JC, with a slight hobble, followed Tandy down the street.



## Chapter 9

### ...And More

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JC found herself in a run-down part of the city. Not exactly run-down, just old. There was a cafeteria near the station but they hurried past that, past a bookstore stuck below the level of the sidewalk, past two leather stores, a shoestore with wooden shoe tree hanging in the window, an office equipment store piled high with wooden swivel chairs, a clothing outlet with a “Going Out Of Business” sign that looked fifty years old.

They walked down South Street until they reached Kneeland. JC wanted to rubberneck, despite her leg, but Tandy hurried on as if JC weren’t there. They came to a large highway and crossed it and suddenly they were in Chinatown. They passed a bakery and JC glimpsed mooncakes with black eggs. She wanted one so badly her teeth shivered, even though she’d never eaten one in her life. The telephone booths had pagodas on top. Every sign was in Chinese and English and they must have walked by a dozen restaurants that offered a luncheon special. She was tired and starved and had trouble keeping up with Tandy.

Then, like a new slide in a slide-show, they were on a street with a lot of theaters and strange title like “Come Once, Come Again” and “Sinsational Sineramas”. Posters showed people twisted together like pretzels. The bars all had pictures out in front of women with enormous breasts, each wearing tiny little cups with tassels on them or something that looked like panties but weren’t. Women, dressed in tall platform shoes and tight shorts and short dresses and hiphuggers and tube tops and halters lounged in front of the bars. Sometimes a woman would go away with a man. For a moment she forgot her hunger and fatigue and stared. She’d never seen anything like it. What in the world were peep shows?

She came to and saw Tandy up a block waiting for her. She ran, suddenly afraid that someone – one of the men or a woman or someone else she couldn’t see – would grab her and she’d disappear forever. By the time she caught Tandy, they were standing on the corner of Tremont and Boylston, near the Boylston subway station. “C’mon,” she said. JC hardly had time to catch her breath before Tandy was off and running. “What is this, a goddamn race?” she

muttered to herself, and was quite surprised she'd said it. It felt sort of good. "Where're we going?" she yelled.

"Just follow me."

JC stopped, dead on her heels. They were just inside the Boston Commons. "I've got to rest. I've got to rest." She sat down on a low wall.

"Suit yourself. I'm the only one who's got friends here." She turned and walked away.

"I don't care, I don't care," JC yelled, raising her arms. "Go fuck yourself." She let her arms collapse into her lap.

Tandy stopped short. "What'd'ya say?"

"You heard me."

"I don't like what I heard."

"Well, I'm not some dog" (she imitated a dog panting, holding up her hands like little paws). She paused, noticing the pigeons scrabbling around her. "I'm tired. I'll eat pigeons." She growled at a couple who pecked her shoelace. They scattered a few feet, then settled down. "You go home. If you have a home. For all I know, you'd sell me for a meal." JC just sat there, deep in pigeons, feeling the sun ripple over her hair and shoulders and listening to the odd quiet of the rumbling noontide traffic and the *click-slap-shuffle* of people's shoes on the pavement. For a moment she felt calm.

Tandy, in the meantime, stood on one foot, then the other, her face either scarlet with rage or loose with frustration. JC saw her nervous irritation and sat for a moment longer, relishing the small victory that Tandy needed her, then got up and joined her.

The Commons was beautiful. The asphalt paths curled through the tall trees, some of them elms slowly dying. The sun careened off the ground and bright drops of it clung to park benches and water fountains and congealed into flowers. To her right was Tremont Street and ahead of her was Park Square, where the church steeple knife the blue sky. Old men and women, some alone, some cluttered with the inevitable pigeons, young children strapped in strollers and waddling on bowed legs, young women snappily dressed to the tops of their heads, Hari Krishna singers, street musicians playing guitars -- all of this clustered around her like eddies while she flowed silently through them. In front of her was the State House, its bald gold dome barbered by the sun. She



stopped and craned her neck backward. It was the most impressive thing she'd ever seen. Tandy, as if she had a pebble in her shoe, sullenly waited for her to start walking again.

When they had climbed the stairs by the State House and after JC had rubbed her hands on the statue of the dead Union soldiers, Tandy took JC by the sleeve, dragged her across the street and down the Beacon Hill to Joy Street, then up a sharp hill to a small brick building.

"This is where we're at," Tandy announced.

The building actually had three levels to it. The basement apartment had a small door in a tall brick wall that looked like something Alice would have gone through. Just over the wall she could see a maple tree. The second and third apartments were entered up a flight of stairs that was encased by a round brick arch with a piece of granite at the keystone. "Which one?" JC asked.

"Follow." Tandy slipped a key into the door in the wall and without any ceremony walked in. JC followed, not quite sure if this was polite, and shut the door quietly behind her. They were in a sort of patio. The tree was in the corner formed by the wall. Hanging plants sprouted all over the place. Plant stands full of coleus and asparagus ferns and strawberry begonia were scattered around. Some wrought-iron furniture, white, and a couple of Parsons tables completed the tidy picture.

"Nice place, huh?" JC agreed. Tandy opened the sliding glass doors with another key and went in. JC followed. After her eyes adjusted she could see the nice furniture and wall hangings, and the thick carpet soothed her feet. She just stood there, not quite sure what to do, waiting for Tandy's lead.

There was a stirring in a room off the living room and a voice thick with sleep called "Who's there? Murray, is that you?" Tandy, giving JC an impish smile, said "No, darling, it's Alice and the Incredible Hulk."

Sounds of feet hitting the floor, a bathrobe thrown on. A woman, about twenty-five, her black hair tangled over her ears, shuffled into the room. When she saw Tandy, her face flamed into a smile. "Marci! You..." She ran to Tandy and embraced her. Tandy, to JC's surprise, hugged her back hard and had to bury her face in the woman's robe. The woman held Tandy at arm's length and inspected her quickly. "God, you stink!" she laughed. "You look tired. Where have you been?" Before Tandy could answer, the woman hugged her again.



Tandy extricated herself and pointed to JC. "This is JC. We met on the train. I'd like you to meet my sister Lin." JC shook Lin's hand firmly.

"You two must be starving." She herded them into the kitchen and made them thick sandwiches with mayonnaise and cheese and lettuce and tomato and mustard. JC's sandwich was gone before she knew it, and a second one, lubricated by milk, quickly followed the first. Tandy told Lin all about the train and Lin listened and laughed and lectured. JC just sat there and smiled, glad to be in someone's kitchen eating food.

After they'd finished eating, Tandy told Lin about JC's leg and Lin shoved JC into the bathroom. Tandy, meanwhile, went into the spare bedroom. JC gingerly pulled up her pants leg. The Barbie's dress she'd tied there was red. Lin carefully untied the string and lifted off the bandage. Next, she took Betadine soap and a cotton ball and dabbed away all the old blood.

"How'd you get hurt?"

"I—" She hesitated, wondering how much to tell. "I fell down."

"Running?"

"Yes."

"From what?"

"A truck driver."

"Oh." Lin took another cotton ball. "Why were you doing that?"

"Falling down?"

"No, running."

There wasn't much left to keep JC from telling Lin the whole story, so she did, and it all sounded so stupid in a stranger's bathroom hundreds of miles from home.

"You have to call your parents as soon as we're done here." JC nodded yes. To change the subject she asked Lin why she'd called Tandy Marci.

"Because that's her real name."

"That's not what she told me. She told me her name was --

"- Tandy, right?"

"Right."



“That’s her traveling name.” Lin sat back on her haunches and surveyed the white bandage that clung to JC’s leg. “Marci is the only part of my family that’s left. Our parents were killed.”

“In Ireland, right?”

“Ireland?” She seemed puzzled, then smiled. “That’s a story that Tandy tells. No, they did not die in a bombing.”

“So you know?”

“I know how our parents died. Their death struck Marci hard. Nothing seemed right with her then. She ran away and no one was able to find her. One day we got a letter and she showed up on our doorstep. Lord knows how she ever made it but there she was. I wanted to keep her with me but every time things felt too close, she ran. She’d lost one mother already and she wasn’t going to chance it again, even if it was only her sister. You follow?”

“I think so.”

“She invented stories to make things easier. There’s the pub story. And then there’s the one she tells about how her parents kicked her out when they were in Europe and she had to find her way back. There’re more stories, but in each one there’s a little truth. That little bit is Marci’s way of being true to herself, and the made-up part is for the rest of the world. Like blowing smoke in a person’s eyes -they can’t see you and you can get away unhurt.”

JC sat there, full of food, full of thought. “Why did you let her go? She could’ve gotten killed. Or worse.”

“It was Marci’s choice. We didn’t give it to her, she just took it. Every time we’d put her someplace, up she’d fly.”

“Who’s `we’?”

“Murray, my husband. She just slipped away. She takes care of herself, obviously. And in some ways she’s older than I am. I hope she’ll stay someday. Until then....” She stood up. “It’s time to call your parents.”

The phone call didn’t go as badly as JC thought it would. Yes, her mother was angry and upset and worried, but Lin talked to her and assured her that JC was in good hands and that within the next day or two Lin would personally see that JC got on a bus for home with plenty of money in her pocket. She got yelled at a couple more times, just to make sure she knew how her mother felt, and then Her mother told her she loved her.





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Lin helped JC to the bedroom, where Marci was already in one of the twin beds. She was reading a book by some man named D.H. Lawrence, but JC couldn't see the title. Lin grabbed the book out of her hands and put it in her bathrobe pocket. "Not for another few years. I'm home today. Day off. I need a nap. So do you. Don't make any ruckus." She pulled the shades and the room turned deliciously dark.

Lin shut the door and JC stared at the ceiling. Marci's breathing was regular, heavy sleep-breathing. "Sleep well, Marci," JC said with a smile. Marci grunted and turned to face the wall. JC, full of food and the comfort of clean sheets, was only a few seconds behind.



## Chapter 10

### The Knight and The Lady

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She had never walked so much in her whole life or had as many places to see. Marci escorted her all over Boston, showing her the high and low points. They went to the Museum of Fine Arts, peeked in a Symphony Hall, wandered through the Granary Burial Grounds, Trinity Church, the posh decor of Boylston Street and the Back Bay. They ate cannoli in the north End, fruit at Haymarket, pretzels on the Commons, pastry on Charles Street. By mid-afternoon they both slumped on a bench in the Gardens watching the swan boats curl lazily through the sluggish water, their stomachs and their eyes full and rested.

Old people sat on the benches around them and on the bridge that arched over the pond a young couple stood holding hands. Commonwealth Avenue buzzed with traffic and the flowers in the Gardens shook color into the air. JC was wilting into the warm bench when she felt Marci stiffen beside her. She opened her eyes and following Marci's gaze saw a group of ten or twelve youths, black and white, stride along the flowerbeds, hands notched in their pockets, shoulders slung back. They trampled the flowers, grinding them under their heels. None of them smiled, though one or two flicked a sneer quickly, and then it was gone.

"Who are they?"

"I don't know but they look like trouble." Some of the older people seemed to shrink in their seats. "C'mon, let's get out of here." JC just sat there. Marci tugged on her shoulder roughly, speaking to her while she watched the approaching gang. "They ain't got nothin' to lose. We do. C'mon." Still JC didn't move. Marci, seeing it was no use but not wanting to leave JC there, sat back down with an angry sigh.

They walked right in front of them, wearing jeans, tee-shirts, sweatshirts, shirts unbuttoned, long hair and short, some frizzed or spiked. They passed what looked like a cigarette back and forth and some of them held brown bags with bottles in them. They smelled of dust and sweat and something JC couldn't identify -- like the smell in certain homes her mother took her to when she did her volunteer work, where the sofas had holes in them and the front porches

sagged. Her eyes followed the gang until they were a small grey clot on the corner and then they melted into the traffic.

Marci sat stiffly, her arms folded in front of her, eyes straight ahead. "You're stupid, you know. Really dumb. Those peckers don't care about anything." She jabbed her finger at the foot-scarred flowerbeds.

JC shook her head slowly. "I didn't *like* them. They...well, we don't have anything like them where I live." She paused. "I was scared, you know, but..." She shrugged her shoulders, no words to offer.

Marci hissed "Jesus" through her teeth, got up. "You comin'? Or are you gonna stay for the second act?" When they reached Park Street subway and shared a pretzel with mustard, Marci had more or less forgive JC's stupidity.

"What now?"

"Well, we could go to the Aquarium. Or out to the airport, watch planes." She paused. "Or we could go to Cambridge, knock around there. Yeah, let's do that." So they plunged into the station, slid their tokens into the turnstile, and hustled onto a Red Line train before the doors hissed shut. The train, a newer one, had sleek steel sides and seats that whooshed when they sat down.

When the train rushed out of the tunnel to the Charles Street station, JC was fascinated by the bay, here and there dotted with sailboats. The water glistened with sun and down the river she could see the gentle arch of bridges, and suddenly she seemed to weigh nothing, out there untied and free floating in a sail or arching over a river of light. She peered at the scene until the train crashed into the darkness of the tunnel.

When a nasal voice cracked out of the loudspeaker "Harvard", Marci piled out and run up the stairs, two at a time, and burst into the Square. Across the street was the Harvard Coop and behind them was Harvard Yard. "C'mon," Marci said, and they scuttled across the street and through the iron gates into the Yard.

Here was strange peace. People quietly sauntered through the shadow-cut walks in singles or pairs or groups, some chatting, others lost in thought. On the grass a dog chased a frisbee as it sailed silver in the sun, and sprawled bodies punctuated the green, sun-soaking, idea-catching, nap-snatching. JC liked the warm dark brown of the brick buildings and the contrast of shadow and sunlight, quiet breeze and muzzled traffic outside, action and thought. All this fell on her like a cool cloth on a fever and for the time since she'd left home three long



and short days ago she was calm inside without worry. She was part of the grass, sky, shadow, wind, and when the dog leapt for the spot of turning silver something inside her rose with him.

Marci shuffled alongside JC. "I have a favorite spot here." JC only half-heard, the sun loud in her ears. "I don't know why I go there..." JC noticed the uncharacteristic hesitation and suddenly realized Marci was talking about herself. When after a silent moment Marci still hadn't spoken but seemed to be struggling, JC said quietly, "Let's go see it." Marci turned quickly and stared at JC full-face and for a second something engaged between them that neither of them had words for. "Okay."

They crossed from the old part of the Yard into the newer part and headed toward Memorial Church. The doors swung silently open and JC immediately noticed the same quiet separation from the Yard that the Yard provided from the street. The whole interior, except for the deep brown woodwork, was white. Huge wooden columns shot upward to the delicately carved ceiling. One wall was littered with the names of Harvard students who had died in the war. Off to the right were two tall swinging doors. With some hesitation, Marci, eyes to the floor, pointed to the doors. "It's in there."

The room's walls were also covered with names, some with gilt paint, and JC wasn't sure what she was supposed to see. Then she saw. To the left of the doors was a statue. Actually, it was two statues, of a man and a woman. The man was a knight in armor. He was lying on his back, his hands neatly placed on his chest, and his head was in the woman's lap. The woman, draped in a long veil that covered her hair, was kneeling and the man's head was resting on her knees and thighs. JC approached the statue, cautiously, as if afraid it were going to speak or be real. She ran her fingers over the woman's face, down the long fall of the curved cloth to the man's face, then along the intricate chain mail. Her hand rested on the man's hands and her mind began to fill in details of his history, of how he was killed, how his lady, full of sadness and love, knelt beside him, how time had stopped for both of them, each differently, each the same, and how pain took all of her except just enough life to recognize and live for his loss. JC began to drift into their world, began to smell the green hills and smell the blood on the lady's shadow, and she wrenched herself, breathless, back to the grey stone and cold touch of the statues.

Marci stood just inside the doors, her hands jammed into her pockets, looking intently at JC. JC pushed herself away from the statue but not quickly,



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not as if away from a coffin but away from the edge of canyon that made her feel scared and excited at the same time. JC swung to see Marci and Marci glared right back into her. Both of them had no words to say, couldn't say them if they had, didn't want to break the silence, and for a moment that seemed stretched out impossibly thin, JC felt closer to Marci than she'd ever felt to any human being. Then it snapped. Marci muttered something about going and they both walked out of the church into the blinding sunlight.



## Chapter 11

### Terror

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**T**hey romped around the rest of the Square, ate a pastry at Au Bon Pain, browsed through clothes at the Coop, dawdled on Brattle Street, caught a late train back to Boston. They had missed the five o'clock crowd so that train was barely full when they pulled out of the station. JC let the train rock her back and forth, her thoughts gently scooting around. Marci read all the advertisements on the opposite side of the car. The train pulled into the Charles Street station and JC swiveled in her seat to soak up the casual blue sky and sunlit water. Then the train slid back into the tunnel and came to a jerky halt at Park. They clambered up the stairs, racing each other, and scared a bunch of pigeons as they came bursting out of the doors.

"You hungry?" Marci said.

"No. I'm thirsty, though."

"There's a MacDonald's near here. Let's go."

They crossed the street, a river of bright metal and gargling sounds, and walked in an easy fashion down the sidewalk, weaving in and out of the crowd. At MacDonald's they bought their Cokes and sat down, not saying much, occasionally pointing out a funny-looking person with blue hair and a safety pin in her ear or the black kid with his huge boom box rappin' down the street. They were sitting in a booth about halfway back in the room, both of them facing the street.

When they walked back onto the street the sun was high and the people flowed around them like a river. "C'mon," said Marci, "let's go home." She started across the street, looking back at JC with a smile on her face, and neither of them saw the car. When it hit Marci, when it tossed her body twenty feet down the road, when the driver stopped and got out and ran to Marci, when JC saw that Marci wasn't moving and the man was breathing into her mouth and pumping on her chest, when she saw the police cars and ambulance pull up, when she cradled Marci's body in her arms before they loaded what she knew was Marci's body into the truck – it was as if it was all real and not real. There she was, laughing, moving, call out JC's name, and then the next moment, gone. Simple as that. Gone.

During the whole time that Lin held her and she heard the doctor as they all waited in the stuffy-smelling waiting room at the hospital say that Marci'd never even known what hit her, she noticed such stupid things as how the officer's front tooth was chipped as he took down her statement and the Spanish on the paramedic's tattoo as he lifted the stretcher into the ambulance, and she wanted to tell Marci about how weird the tooth looked and how funny the tattoo was. But Marci was gone. Marci was gone.

\* \* \* \* \*

JC lay in the bed in the room she had shared with Marci. Lin's face was puffy from crying and Murray, her husband, stood in the background, his arms crossed across his chest and his eyes cast on the floor. The three of them were silent and JC realized that there was really nothing to say.

"I'll, we'll, be right in the next room." As Lin got up she took Murray by the arm and turned out the light.

The shirt with Marci's blood on it was on the table by the bed -- JC had insisted that Lin not throw it away. The darkness pressed on her and she knew that she couldn't stay here. Lin had called her mother and JC, speaking to her through the thin telephone line, suddenly ached so hard to see her face and hear everyone's voices. Her mother was going to drive out there in the morning to pick her up.

But she couldn't wait that long. It was too much to bear. She would leave tonight. She had to leave tonight, otherwise she felt she would be crushed. She would see her mother soon enough -- maybe she would understand how something could be so good one second and so horrible the next. But she couldn't wait. She got up and put on her clothes, borrowing a pair of Marci's pants; she put the bloodstained shirt into Marci's bag. When she walked out of the room she could see the flicker of television light on the walls and Murray's head silhouetted against it. He had his arm around Lin and the two of them sat there bathed in the chatter and flare of the television. JC eased the sliding door open and slipped through and in few seconds was on Joy Street heading toward the Commons.



## Chapter 12

### Leaving

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She walked through the Commons to the Gardens and sat on the bench they'd sat on while watching the swan boats, Marci's bag at her feet like a faithful dog. Shivering, JC stared at the edge of the pond; her eyes followed the stray reflections of light on its surface. She walked over to the pond. At her feet was a feather, and she stooped to pick it up. She held it against the streetlights and looked carefully at the whiteness of each spur and the ivory white of the stiff spine. With a quick snap of the hand she tossed the feather and watched it sink wandringly in the air until it settled on the water. She turned on her heel, grabbed the bag, and walked out of the Gardens.

The subway was a quiet racket and she let its gentle sway keep her mind blank. She didn't even bother to look over the night water of the bay at Charles Street Station. She caught a Red Line and got off at Harvard. Of course the church was locked, and for a moment the fact that she wouldn't be able to touch the statue one more time shivered her with pain. She sat for a while on a bench near the Charles River, watching the lights of the passing cars etch the water, and then walked over one of the bridges to the highway and then along the highway until she saw the entrance to the Massachusetts Turnpike. JC leaned against the concrete base of a streetlight and without the slightest hesitation stuck out her thumb.

She was numb inside, as dark as the darkness of the sky; standing there with her thumb out gave her a sad pleasure. Marci would have approved. The important thing now was to get out fast and back home as quickly as possible. Lin had said it took eight hours to get to Ithaca – with luck, she'd be home before her mother had to leave. She felt like the snow inside a glass paperweight.

Much to her surprise, a large truck, hauling a trailer that looked as long as a city block, pulled over to give her a ride. She stared at the truck for a moment, not readily recognizing the connection between her small thumb and this huge panting beast. Then, as if to make up for lost time and scared that it would leave, she scooped up her bag and ran toward the door that opened for her. She disappeared into the cab and the truck grunted up to speed and pulled away.

Under the hissing blue electric light was a long thin swan feather.





## Chapter 13

### Jason

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They rode the first fifty miles in silence. JC fit herself into the corner made by the door and the front seat, her suitcase neatly laid on the floor. The cab was huge, at least to JC; the steering wheel seemed as large as one of the wheels on the trailer. JC could feel the vibration of the road and the rolling weight of the long trailer behind the cab. There was a smell of leather and coffee. She had only slightly glanced at the driver. She saw a young man, heavy but not fat, with lank black hair, high cheekbones (or cheekbone, since she could only see his profile), and a skin that looked copper in the white light of the dashboard. His eyes, when he had opened the door for her, were a full black and glinted like onyx. His hands were what impressed her the most: brown like wrapping paper with muscles like thick twine tying the fingers and palm into a neat strong package. They rested on the steering wheel but were never asleep. She tried to push him out of her mind, let herself stretch out along the road and trees and dark sky and have no thoughts, but every time he looked over at her she was uncomfortably aware of wanting to talk to him and chided herself for her weakness. At least he doesn't make dumb small talk, she thought.

He stopped at a Howard Johnson's. He climbed out of the cab, leaving the engine running, and as she watched his broad back catch the glow of the headlights then disappear, she felt the strong thrum of the diesel engine, and wondered why he hadn't shut it off. Five minutes later he came back carrying a cup of coffee and a can of soda. He leaped easily into the cab, slammed the door. "Here," he said, placing the soda on the seat, and without waiting for a reply, slipped the truck into gear and pulled onto the highway.

She watched the soda, then slowly took it. The young man, sipping the coffee gingerly, his face wreathed in steam, said gently, "At least we should share names."

JC popped the soda top. "I'm JC."

"JC," he echoed. He rolled the sound in his mouth. "Last name?"

"Yes." She took another sip.

There was a slight silence, and then he said, "I see. My name is Jason."

“Last name?”

He grinned and looked her full in the face. She was startled by the movement, but didn't feel as if she had to turn away. “Yes, I do. Skywater. Jason Skywater.”

“Skywater?” She thought for a second. This was unexpected and for a brief moment she felt lifted out of her sadness. “Are you an Indian?”

“Me big-um Indian, yes,” he answered in a deep guttural voice. Jason, glancing at her, saw her interest, and smiled. He sipped his coffee. “I am a Seneca.”

“A Seneca. What's that?”

He laughed out loud and his face seemed to glow copper. “Many white people have asked that question.”

“White people?”

“You,” he pointed his finger at her, “are a white people.”

“What's that got to do with it?”

“They don't teach you much in your history lessons.” He sipped his coffee, then snapped the plastic lid back on and put the cup in a holder on the dashboard. “Since we're going to trade histories, it's only fair that I get to ask you something. Okay?”

She heard herself say okay, but found herself squeezing into her corner, suddenly feeling pressured. She wanted to tell him, even though she didn't know him, because he seemed so sure and calm, but she didn't want to give up so easily the pain – it was too much hers, too fresh, and Marci was too much alive in her to make her into a memory just yet. Not that any of this came to words in her brain. She just felt pressured. She calmly sipped her soda, fighting herself inside, and waited.

“First of all,” he said, “when I see a kid your age standing under a streetlight with their thumb out, I immediately wonder why. Just a part of me, you see. Anyway, I don't like to see a young kid all alone like that, no matter what the reason, and so I stop. When she steps into my truck,” he tapped the seat, “I want to ask her if she's running away, and just get ready to do that when I get these...sensations. You see, we Senecas are a strange group of people. For instance, we believe everything has a spirit and is intelligent. That's right.” (She had half-turned, her profile soft in the dim light, at his mention of this.) “We talk



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to rocks, wind, tree, water, even a clod of dirt, because it was all made by the Creator and it all contains a part of him. Follow?”

She thought she did, but she couldn't picture a Creator, and she didn't have the least idea of how or why he'd gotten from her age to the Creator, but at least it was better than talking about the weather. And she liked the sound of his voice – it took off some of the pressure. She nodded yes and drank her soda. Some of the carbonation ran up her nose and she hiccupped loudly. “Excuse me!” she said automatically, and was startled by his laughter.

“That’s okay. We’ll just kill ourselves, me on caffeine, you on sugar. You all right?”

“Yes I am. Whew!” She wiped away some tears from her eyes. “Powerful stuff.”

“Moonshine for sure.” He waited until she finished wiping her eyes. “Anyway, to get back to what I was saying, since we’re trading histories here, everything has a spirit. We can talk to everything because we are all created out of the same stuff. Another way to put it is that all of us speak the same language coming out of our hearts. So right away I heard some of that language coming out of you and I knew it wasn’t parents. Not at all.”

“What was it then?” She wasn’t sure she said the words. When he went on she was sure she hadn’t said the words, but she wasn’t completely sure.

“Senecas are a strange people. I’ve said that. I’ll say it again, too. Strange. Some of my people have told stories of how they can send their thoughts over great distances to other people, and I believe them. I’ve seen it done.”

“Really?”

“Oh yeah. My grandmother for one. She believed she could control howling dogs as far away as twenty miles. I’ve seen it done. Oh yes, it happens. Part of this language everything speaks often goes to dead people. Senecas believe there’s a kind of Master of Souls where all souls of dead people go, and these souls help the living people get the power to live and speak to life.” He paused, staring out the windshield at the stroke of lighted highway in front of him. He seemed to be listening to something, and when JC made a movement to put her soda in the holder, he started. “Just listening to the rig. Listening to her speak.”

JC thought that over, wondered what he heard that she didn’t. She wanted to ask him what it was he’d heard out of her, and yet everything inside her was



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raw. For a moment she see-sawed over the question, then quietly dipped back into her silence. And in that silence images of Marci's face were woven, and her silence was shot with unwhispered words of ache and pain. Part of her mind needed to clean out the dead and part of her mind wanted to keep the dead safe from the living. Her whole insides were squeezed tight, were screaming, and she wondered how loud she was in the language of the heart. She glanced at him, but his face was set and seemed to be listening to other things, so she melded into the metal of the door.



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## Chapter 14

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### Freezing Moon

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**T**hey rode past Springfield in silence on into the dark hulks of the Berkshires. JC wanted to slip into their blackness, be swallowed up by their solitude. The truck hummed on the road, the wind carving out its shape in the darkness. Jason finished his coffee and put the cup into a garbage bag.

“You know” (his voice leaped out and startled her) “I may not be a mind reader, even though I have been known to penetrate the skull a few times, but I’m getting waves off you of something bad. Did you know you’ve been crying for the last five miles?” JC reached up to her cheeks and to her astonishment found them wet. “See. No one cries like that unless they’ve got a hurt down so deep it lives in the guts. What happened? You wanna tell me?”

JC floundered. “I...I...can’t.”

“What was it? A friend die? Parents? Boy tell you you stink? What? Young girl like you doesn’t take to the road unless something bad knocks you out of a warm bed. What is it?”

“The first,” JC muttered, almost inaudible.

“What?”

“The first, the first thing you said.”

“What was that?”

“A friend.”

“A friend....”

“Died.” Again, almost inaudible.

“What?”

JC gathered her strength. “Died. She died.”

And JC, the words stumbling and rushing, told Jason the whole story, from the moment she left her house to the flickering TV light in Lin’s apartment, leaving out no detail. Jason, as he listened, didn’t interrupt and kept his eyes neatly on the road.



When she finished there was a heaviness in the air, not unpleasant, like the soft humidity after a summer rainstorm. She was crying uncontrollably now “ she felt that the damp heaviness of Marci’s head in her lap would always be in her bones), saying over and over again that she just wanted to go home.

Jason downshifted, pulled off at the Lee ramp, and into a Friendly’s. He reached across the space between them and touched her hair, stroking it as if it were a precious fabric. He put his hand on her shoulder and gave JC a slight squeeze, and whispered to her “Let it out, JC, let it out, it’s got to come out.” She let the sadness run through her body and shake everything loose. The leather of his jacket smelled like chocolate and charcoal and it made her feel warm, and it made her feel safe.

Gradually the spasms of her crying died down and she found herself breathing cleanly and evenly again. He told her he’d be right back, and came back almost immediately with a hot chocolate and some wet paper towels. She washed her face off, the cool water good against her hot cheeks, and sipped the hot liquid, thankful for all the warmth is spread as it went down. “You okay?” She nodded yes. He pulled back on to the highway, back into the traveling darkness.

JC stared out the window at the white lines slipping past the headlights, the chocolate comfortably warm against the palms of her hands. “It’s my fault,” she said.

“What?”

“If it wasn’t for me, Marci’d be alive. I didn’t have to get into that truck.” Her chin started to quiver again. “It’s my fault.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” Jason said, his voice a mixture of comfort and disbelief. “When I went to college -- “

Suddenly she was hungry to know something about him. “You were in college?”

“Yeah, I went. Couple of years. Hard for an Indian to go to college and harder for him to stay there since there really isn’t any place for him to go. Well, anyway, that’s my problem.”

“That isn’t fair.”

“You’re right. I went to college with a chip on my shoulder, figuring the Indian was going to get screwed anyway, excuse me. I ended up screwing myself up and blaming everyone else.” He paused. “That was a long time ago. I did learn



one thing, though. Nothing is ever the way you think it is. Look, I've got a better story for you than my college days. You're wrong, you know, about your friend. It wasn't your fault. I don't think Marci would blame herself, and she'd be right."

JC slumped into her corner, her face in a pout, silent.

"You see Marci as gone, gone forever. But if you look at it another way, she's right next to you forever."

"I don't understand that!!" JC scowled, her voice rising slightly. "I don't understand."

"Look, the Senecas are full of stories. Story for every occasion. Listen.

"Once there was a greatly respected woman who, having reached the age of one hundred and six, decided it was time to die." (Part of JC rebelled against his soothing voice, wanting to keep her grief whole and just hers, but part of her also listened greedily to the voice, a voice like a voice in the dark in a safe bedroom at home, a voice telling her a story.) "Her name was Freezing Moon because she had been born on the first full moon of winter, and she chose for her death-day the same moon on the same day to complete the circle of her life.

"So she gathered all her relatives together and they came weeping. She laughed at them. 'My sons,' she said (she had fourteen of them), with a twinkle in her eye, 'do not cry. You are still alive in this world and are very lucky. Enjoy your bodies.' Her sons laughed through their tears and agreed she was right. 'My daughters,' she said (she had fourteen of them), 'do not fear for me. Your beauty will waste away, but you have beauty deep within you. Enjoy your hearts.' And to each relative she passed on advice, and the twinkle never left her eye. Finally, when all had been spoken to and silence filled the longhouse, she sat up and spoke (People said that even the wind stopped at the windows to listen and the animals stopped fighting to hear.)

(She noticed how his face had softened as he talked and how his eyes seemed filled with a real light, not just the reflected light of passing cars.)

"People, I will not die. Though my body will melt like fat in the sun, I will never leave you. Things are not wasted. Everywhere you go I will be there, in this world. No part of me shall die.' With that she fell back and they knew she had gone. Her words puzzled everyone, but everyone passed them on.

"One day Small Bear took her bucket to get water. In the willow at the side of the stream was something that looked like moss. Looking at it closer, she saw





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that it was hair. She pulled it off and saw the streak of black running through the grey. It was Freezing Moon's hair. With a shout of joy she gathered her water and ran back to the village as fast and as carefully as she could. The people gathered around her and all agreed that it was a miracle. Small Bear took the hair and wove it into a vest to warm her in the winter.

From that day on people all through the village found pieces of Freezing Moon and used them. Her bones were made into flutes. Her skull became a dish. Her guts were dried and made into bow strings and food for the hunters. Her stomach was made into a waterskin. Her eyes were made into torches to see in the dark with, and her teeth became jewelry. People found a thousand uses for her, and they kept finding more of her to use. Within a year she had provided them with all that they needed, and it was a happy and easy year. And when they found no more parts of her, and time became hard as usual, they knew she had left and that she had filled her time. But nothing they made from her was ever lost, and it was passed on from generation to generation, so that Freezing Moon lived and gave pleasure to everyone."

When Jason finished JC sat immobile, spinning out in her mind all the threads of the story. She caught the idea, barely, but it knocked against her anger and threatened to turn it into something she didn't understand, and she didn't want to let that sharp pain of the weight of Marci's head in her lap slip away from her. She finally yelled back at Jason (incredibly surprised by her behavior), "But it's only a story Just made up A lie!"

"Like the stories Marci told about herself to get through things?"

JC turned away from him in anger and clamped her mouth shut.



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## Chapter 15

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### Home

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It wasn't until long past Albany he said, "Look, I'm sorry I said what I said." The darkness pressed in against the windshield and only an occasional red tail-light or a distant farmhouse window gave the world any shape. Jason, his eyes fixed on the beam of his headlights, breathed evenly. The tires hummed on the pavement, the long rig glided smoothly through the night.

"Well?" he finally said. She didn't budge. "JC, look at me. Please." Slowly she let her profile face him, but no more. He sighed. "Okay, JC. But just hear what I have to say. Your friend Marci and me are very much alike. Both of us didn't have homes, we didn't trust the world, we didn't love much of anything. Too hard, and you can get hit between the eyes only so many times. And it's my guess, though it's only a guess, that she really wasn't afraid of dying. Oh, she probably didn't want to leave the scene anymore than we do, but she probably knew that dying is just part of the game, one of the risks to take when you decide to live. And she lived, didn't she? She saw all kinds of life, and all sort of people, including you...."

"But she should have had a lot of years left," JC muttered.

A flicker of pain and kindness swept over his face. "The important thing is that she lived what she had right to the hilt. Know what I mean? Right to the top. She went from day to day and sucked all she could out of it." He gripped the steering wheel with both hands and peered into the darkness. "Don't you see what she's saying to you? She doesn't want you to melt over her, mess your life up. Do you think she would lose any time over you? Not a lot. She'd go straight on. Do you see what I mean? The important thing in life is to keep going on with it. Take what you can from your friend and use it. Just like Freezing Moon." He turned to her. "The only way Marci lives is if you live. Otherwise, she's really dead." The air outside the cab whistled, the rig rocked on its springs. "I talk too much."

JC, not saying a word, looked him full in the face and smiled. He smiled back. She slept all the way past Utica to Syracuse.

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When they got to Syracuse they stopped for something to eat. JC insisted that they stop at a McDonald's. When they climbed back into the truck JC was laughing at some joke Jason told her about a man with a three-legged dog. They pulled neatly out of the parking lot and as they went down the streets looking for the highway entrance ramp, she saw the train station she been in only a few days before and knew that she'd been in Syracuse, and knew that she knew something important.

They were on their way to Cortland. JC was about to ask where he was going when he spoke out, "I know I told you I was going straight to Cleveland but it's time for you to go home. I'm not due there until whatever a.m., and who cares if I'm late?" He pointed at the empty road. "I'll say it was the traffic." JC, tired, agreed.

The ride home was uneventful. She fell asleep wondering how Jason always managed to stay awake, woke up again to see the lights of Cortland flicker by, dozed, and then popped awake as Jason pulled through the familiar streets of downtown. She gave him the directions to her house. When he drew up to the curb she leaned over and gave him a kiss on the cheek. He got out, opened the door for her, clutched her bag, and hefted her down. They stood and looked at each other for a moment, then JC stuck out her hand and said, "To Marci." Jason smiled, shook her hand, and said, "To Freezing Moon."

As he left the curb she watched until she could see no more of his red tail-lights. Then lifting her bag she faced her house, sitting quietly in the dark of early morning. There was a single light on in the living room. There were butterflies in her stomach, but her heart and head felt peaceful.

She walked quickly across the street and up the stairs. With a slight hesitation, but only the slightest, she knocked firmly on the door, and waited calmly for the sound of footsteps.



**I Dare You!**

.....

**For Katie Jones**



# Chapter 1

## The House

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**T**he words were out.  
“I dare you!”

They hung in the air like laundry.

Katie didn't quite know what to do. Mandy stood in front of her, a string of blond hair falling across her face, hands on her hips, with that look Mandy got when she was angry: chin out, head forward. At that moment she looked like a chicken, a very mad chicken.

Katie could feel everyone staring at her: Crystal, Bret, Jennifer, Brie, Kara. She tried to ignore them, make believe they didn't exist, but they stood there like pine trees in the forest. Their eyes felt like flies on her face.

If Katie didn't do it, then Mandy would tell everyone that Katie was afraid; if Katie did do it, then she might get...well, she didn't know what Mandy would do. She didn't want to give Mandy any satisfaction, but she wanted to make it home for supper, too.

She did the only thing she could do. Gathering together her best angry face Katie looked at Mandy and said, “I dare you!”

Everyone standing around knew that Mandy was in a pickle now. She couldn't back down. Mandy knew it, too. Katie thought that if she had to suffer, at least she wasn't going to suffer alone.

The group moved up the street toward the house. The house. There were as many stories about the house as there were crumbs at the bottom of the Cap'n Crunch cereal box. It was only a block from where Katie and Mandy and everyone else lived, but it might as well have been in the darkest forests of Transylvania. Everyone in the neighborhood had woven stories around the place, filling the aging house with two-headed monsters, witches making up poison potions, slobbering dwarfs ready to steal little children and make them into pies, old women who ate cats.

They edged nearer, walking in a loose huddle (even though it was three-thirty in the afternoon, the sun was shining like a gold coin, and they were only a shout away from their houses). They kept to the opposite side of the street. The

house itself was a weird mustard yellow, dingy with dirt. No one really took care of the place, so vines and bushes and trees grew up without anything holding them back. Some of the vines curled up the sides of the house, and some of the trees grew so close to the walls that their branches slapped the windows, whose glass was so smudged that they couldn't see into the house. Even now, in the middle of the afternoon, the house looked dark because of all the trees hanging over it. It was a little pocket of gloom.

While they had never seen or talked to the owner of the house, they were all convinced she was a witch. (They also didn't know it was a she - they just assumed that only a witch would live in a house like that.) The dare that Mandy had thrown at Katie, and that Katie had thrown back at Mandy, and that everyone had thrown at everyone else at least once in the last month, was to go up to every window in the house and peek in, even the ones on the front porch, until you'd gone around the house once. No one had actually ever done it because the dare wasn't a real dare - people usually said it when they were angry or couldn't think of anything else to say.

But this time it was different. The feud between Mandy and Katie had gone on almost from the day Katie had moved in. With Katie in the neighborhood, Mandy had competition. And Mandy didn't like it.

Things simmered like spaghetti water for a while, but everyone knew a storm was coming. And it came. It was about Mandy's pool. Not really a "pool", as in "a big hole in the ground with lots of water and a diving board". This was a wading pool, a foot-and-a-half deep filled with water from the garden hose. Not a big deal, but when it was hot out and parents wouldn't take them to the local pool or lake and playing in the sprinkler got boring, it was the best thing in the area.

Mandy invited everyone over for lunch and a dip - everyone, that is, except Katie. Katie, never a person to sit still for very long, decided she'd come anyway, since her sister Kara had been invited. Katie showed up, Mandy told her she had to leave. Katie refused. They argued while everyone ate the tuna fish sandwiches and watched them.

Then Mandy did what she shouldn't have done: she pushed Katie. It wasn't a big push, just a little shove on the shoulder, but it was enough to get Katie mad. Katie was ready to push back, but she remembered her mother telling her that it wasn't right to do that. So she didn't, though she really, really, really wanted to. Mandy laughed at her, seeing that Katie wasn't going to push back. "Chicken!!" she said.



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"I am not!" Katie shot back.

"Are too!"

That's when Mandy threw out her dare. She knew what she was saying. She knew Katie couldn't back down. However, she didn't expect Katie to throw it back at her. With everyone's eyes glued to her, Mandy couldn't back down either. They were stuck, and they had no one to blame but themselves.

"Well?" said Bret.

Katie wanted to look at Mandy but didn't. She wanted to say that she'd call off the dare if Mandy would call off her dare. She wondered if Mandy wanted to do the same thing. But once a dare had been laid down there was no going back. If you did, everyone would think you were a coward, a yellow-belly, and wouldn't play with you and you would grow old and alone. "Well?" said Brie.

It wasn't going to be an easy job. Some of the windows had big bushes in front them (probably full of spiders, Katie thought) and on the porch they would have to actually go up on the porch, not just look over the porch railing. It probably wasn't so bad at the front of the house. But they would disappear from view for a few seconds at the back of the house, and in all their mapping they had never bothered to figure out what the back of the house was going to be like. They would be invisible to their friends on the street. They could fall down a well and never be heard from again. Or be eaten by – Katie shook her head. She was getting silly, and the silliness was making her scared.

"Well?" said Crystal.

Katie's stomach was jumping. She found her feet moving toward the house, going across the street, although she was pretty sure she hadn't told them to do anything. This was it. Going across that street meant no coming back until she'd gone around the house. She heard Mandy say "Don't push me!" (probably to Brie they didn't like each other), and then heard the sound of Mandy's sandals scrape the gravel in the road. They were both moving toward the house. They were at the edge of the property. Just before she stepped onto the lawn (with grass that came up to her knees) she looked at Mandy. Mandy looked at her. Then they took another step.







## Chapter 2

### The Face

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It seemed to take forever to get to the house. Katie could feel the grass nick the backs of her knees, and it felt like the tongues of a thousand snakes. She could hear Mandy's footsteps right behind her - or the steps of someone. (C'mon, Katie said to herself, it's only Mandy.) Her heart felt like someone was hammering in nails and she found herself sweating like a squeezed sponge. Her mouth tasted like sneakers.

"Mandy?" she said.

"Yeah?"

"Just checkin'."

The house was suddenly right next to them, as if while they had been talking it had crept up silently. They could see the scaly paint, the grey boards underneath, the vines that choked the sides of the house. Old beer cans hid in the grass. Katie looked over at Mandy and Mandy looked at Katie. They both looked at their friends on the street and they appeared small, just the way they would if Katie and Mandy had stared at them through the wrong end of the telescope. They realized that it was only them, the sun, and this house.

"Well," said Mandy, "let's get going."

The first window, right in front of them, was behind a bush and high up on the wall above their heads. So they looked at it and pointed, and as far as they were concerned, that counted. There was another window on the same side of the house, same height. They didn't even bother to point at that one.

Next came the back of the house, the unexplored territory, the dark side of the moon. Mandy was for running as fast as they could. Her hair had almost come completely undone and little ribbons of it hung in her face. To Katie all she could see was this scared face with red cheeks staring at her through a curtain of hair. At the back of the house was another porch. It was enclosed, which meant that they would have to go on the porch to look in the windows of the house. Mandy said that looking in the porch windows was okay, but Katie felt that if they were going to do the dare, then they had to do it right. She said so.

It was as if she'd hit Mandy in the face. Mandy shook the hair out of her eyes, straightened up, and said "Okay." She wasn't going to let Katie get all the glory.

The crept up the back stairs to the porch door. The stairs sagged with their weight, and groaned a little. Katie tried to keep her mind off all the nasty things that were probably living under the porch but were taking their afternoon snooze, things with hundreds of legs, slimy bellies, and bad manners. Carefully she turned the knob and the door swung in. She took a step. Then another. Mandy stepped behind her. Something crunched underfoot. Katie looked down and saw Mandy's foot right next to hers. They'd stepped on an old flower pot. For a moment they each thought it was a skull.

The porch was filled with junk. It had once been used for gardening, but no one had used the rakes and shovels and hoes and wheelbarrow for what looked like a thousand years. Cobwebs draped themselves in the corners and a thick dust settled like snow. There were three windows and the backdoor. "Does the backdoor count?" Mandy asked, and Katie nodded yes.

Up on her tiptoes, Katie could see in pretty well. Mandy, being taller, looked over Katie's head. Between the smudges on the glass they could see a kitchen, or at least a stove. At the next window they saw a wooden kitchen table with wooden chairs. Katie noticed something odd about the table. Even though the window was streaked and hadn't been washed in a long time, the table looked like it shined, like someone had poured candle flames all over it. The chairs had round pieces of cloth hanging over the backs, and Katie could see that each piece of cloth had a rose in the middle of it.

They went to the second window. Mandy looked in first and saw a sink and dishes next to it. Katie craned over to look in. It was a pantry. Black and white tiles made a neat pattern on the floor and the wooden cabinets had glass doors (the glass was cut in the shape of diamonds); the countertop was made out of thick blond wood. No cat skins on the floor. No bones. Just, well, just a kitchen. Mandy looked at Katie. Katie felt a little disappointed.

"Hey, look at this!" Mandy said, and put on a ratty old straw sunhat that had been hanging from a nail, with more holes in it than straw. She danced around, holding it down on her head by its ratty wings. Katie made a stab at grabbing the hat, and as Mandy lunged out of the way, they banged some of the tools, and a pair of clippers fell to the floor, making a loud thud. They both stopped and listened. The leaves on the trees whispered a little in the breeze, but nothing else moved.



In fact, they couldn't help but make noise. The porch left no room to move and they had to step over cans and piles of cloth and wooden tomato stakes. By the time they got to the third window they'd pretty much announced themselves to anyone in the house. The third window was dark. They could faintly make out a kitchen counter but nothing else.

They decided they'd stayed long enough. But Mandy couldn't help feeling a little proud for doing this and she said to Katie, "I bet they probably think we've been killed." Katie smiled and nodded because she, too, was feeling a little proud of being so brave.

As they walked to the porch door, knocking over a can of nails and rattling the wheelbarrow, they looked up at the backdoor. There, framed by the peeling wood of the door, as grey as the dirty window itself, was a face. A face. A face looking straight at them.



## Chapter 3

### Death Tastes Like A Chocolate Chip Cookie

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**T**hey froze. They froze like ice, like ice cream, like “I scream!”. They wanted to run. But they couldn’t seem to get their muscles to move. Their muscles felt like stone.

The face disappeared. They sent messages down to their legs to get moving, but the legs weren’t at home. They thought they could hear every bug that scurried along the floorboards, every piece of dust as it settled down. Mandy remembered her father saying one time how rabbits froze when you shined a flashlight on them. She suddenly felt as if she had floppy ears and a pink nose.

Nothing happened for what felt like a thousand years. Then the door opened. Their bodies went stiff as they imagined all sorts of nasty things about to happen. But what happened flabbergasted them both. A hand appeared holding a plate. A plate. Of chocolate chip cookies. The hand put the plate down on the porch floor, just like it was putting out food for the cat, and then the door closed.

They looked at the plate as if might, just might, jump up and bite them. It didn’t. Gradually Katie noticed that she was still breathing. She noticed the sunlight, the trees, Mandy. Mandy noticed the same things. The plate was white, chipped on the rim, heavy. And sure enough, there was a dozen chocolate chip cookies laid in a neat circle. They had “Eat me” written all over them.

“What do you think?” Mandy said.

“I don’t know.”

They were both thinking the same thought - stories told by their parents and in the newspaper about Halloween candy filled with razor blades and strange chemicals. Maybe they were poisoned.

“They look okay to me,” Katie said.

Mandy moved a piece of hair out of her face, and nodded.

Mandy took the first step. Katie followed. They stared at each other. Katie reached down to the plate, having a crazy thought that her fingers were going to burn. She picked up a cookie, smelled it, turned it over, broke it in half. No razor blades. And the chocolate chips got gooey over her fingers just like they

were supposed to. She tasted it. Her eyes may lie but her mouth never. It was a cookie.

They each ate two quickly. Then two more. Then another two. They were incredibly hungry. They picked up the remaining six and eased their way out the door. Katie looked back and saw the white plate sitting there, empty, a few crumbs on it, then glanced up at the door. She couldn't be sure, but she thought the face had been watching them. The window was empty right now.

The backyard seemed strange to them all of a sudden. If they didn't have the cookies in their hands, with the chocolate chips melting in their palms, they would have agreed that it was a very weird - what? It wasn't a dream because they were awake. It wasn't a kidnapping because they were going to walk back out to the friends on the street. It wasn't the devil they both doubted the devil could bake cookies this good. There was definitely an old woman in the house and she could definitely bake. That was the weirdest thing of all.

They completed their circle of the house easily since there were no windows on the sides (a barn, falling down, was there) and they decided not to go up on the front porch. They almost burst out laughing as they saw their friends clustered on the street. Everyone's face looked scared and spooked, like they'd just finished watching *Poltergeist* and it was midnight and a thunderstorm was coming and everyone wanted to go to the bathroom but no one wanted to go alone. They looked even scarer when Mandy and Katie, like magic, passed around some of the best-tasting chocolate chip cookies.

"C'mon," everyone shouted, "tell us where you got 'em!" Mandy and Katie smiled, mouths shut tight for the moment. When you have a crowd begging for your attention, it doesn't hurt to keep them in suspense for a bit. They'd play out the story back at the house.

As the crowd walked away, both Mandy and Katie stared back at the house. They didn't say it to each other but each of them knew they wanted to go back. Even if she were the devil, those cookies were worth a second visit. And something else, something neither of them understood but felt in their brains and in their toes. This had been no ordinary day. And it felt good.

"Wanna go swimming?" Mandy asked, and Katie said, "Yeah."



## Chapter 4

### A Return Engagement

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**T**hat night, sitting on the porch steps, Katie and Mandy told the story again. Of course, the story had taken on a bit of a glow, each girl adding a little mystery or adventure to spice up the action. But mainly they told the truth. The parents had also gathered to hear this version and they seemed just as interested as the kids in figuring out who the lady was. Of course, they also had to throw in that it wasn't very nice to go on people's property without permission, but they didn't push it that much.

The next morning Katie found herself up, for some reason, before the sun had stretched itself out of bed. The house was quiet. (Well, almost quiet - she could hear Kara's snoring and the whirr of the fans made the curtains rustle.) But birds had begun to peep outside her window and the sky seemed to blush.

She got out of bed and got dressed. The kitchen clock said 5:45. Quietly she opened the door and walked downstairs, then out to the street. The air smelled clean, like fresh laundry, and the small breeze prickled her skin. This felt good, she thought.

Most of the street was still in blue shadow. A car passed her, its tires humming. She walked the block up to the old lady's house, and even it, in its flaking mustard vine-covered coat, had a kind of beauty to it. As she looked at the front of the house from across the street, the paperboy came up and shoved a paper in the mail slot on the front door. The paperboy walked away. The birds chirped and swung through the air. The sky brightened. The front door opened.

Their eyes met across the space of the street, the short grey-haired stooped old woman and the young eight-year old black-haired child. It was the face she'd seen in the window. It looked capable of chocolate chip cookies.

The woman raised her hand and, with one finger, motioned for Katie to cross the street. Looking both ways out of habit, Katie walked slowly, words about not going with strangers ringing through her brain. But it wasn't as if this woman was a stranger. They'd shared cookies.

The woman lost no time. "What were you doing on my porch yesterday?"



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"I don't know," Katie said, the automatic response of any kid to a question like that. Suddenly, the sun on her back felt very hot.

"Did you like the cookies?" she asked.

Katie nodded yes.

"What's your name?"

"Katie."

"And the girl who was with you?"

"Mandy."

"And the rest of the kids?"

She named off everybody in the gang.

"My name is Elizabeth Gaines. You can call me Elizabeth."

The woman didn't say anything more. She took her paper and went back in the house, leaving Katie standing on the steps. Her mother was awake by the time she'd come back to the house and asked what was for breakfast.

Kara stumbled to the breakfast table, rubbing the crunchy granola out of her eyes. Katie was already finishing up a bowl of cereal. Kara only grunted when her mother asked her if she wanted toast or cereal, and Katie said to her, with a little bit of you're-such-a-stupid-younger-sister in her voice, "Don't be rude, Kara." She was scooping out the last grains of the sugar goop at the bottom of the bowl.

Kara grunted back at Katie, her eyes still almost closed with sleep. Her hair looked like someone had run through it with a rake. Katie kept digging at the bottom of the bowl.

"I spoke to her this morning," she said, looking at the bowl, knowing that Kara, even though her sleep fog, would perk up.

Kara refused to perk up for Katie. "Who?", she said in a voice that sounded like a crow.

"The lady," Katie answered.

Her mother put the toast with butter and peanut butter in front of Kara. "You mean the old lady up the street? How did that happen?"

"I got up early this morning and went outside." She more or less threw the bowl back on the table; the spoon clattered to the floor. She could feel her



mother's look on the back of her neck as she bent over to pick up the spoon and could have repeated her mother's words right along with her: "Don't throw it on the table, place it."

"She came out to get her newspaper and I was watching the house. She told me to come over. And then she asked me if I liked the cookies. Then she went back inside."

"That's all she said?" her mother asked, wiping her hands on the dishtowel. A heap of steaming dishes sat in the strainer.

"Yep," Katie answered.

"Strange lady, huh?"

"She's crazy," said Kara, the lines of her lips extended across her face by a combination of butter and peanut butter. She wouldn't eat the crusts.

Katie shot back at her "She's not crazy!" She expected her mother to say from the pantry where she was making lunches "Don't shout at your sister!" but instead her mother said, "You really seem to like her."

"I don't know," Katie said. "I don't really know her."

Kara gurgled down the rest of her milk and slammed the cup down onto the table.

"C'mon girls, let's get going here." Her mother picked up the dish and cup and threw them into the sink. "Go get yourselves dressed." They both groaned.

On the way to the summer camp Katie talked with Mandy about seeing the old lady again and they decided that they should go visit her after camp that day. They also decided not to tell the other kids what they were going to do; they sort of wanted to keep the old lady to themselves. Having been the only people in the neighborhood to speak to her made them feel special. And they couldn't deny that it raised them a few notches in the eyes of the rest of the gang at least for a day or two.

Camp was its usual boring self, with lots of running around and sweating and dumb games. Her mother wasn't going to be able to pick them up afterwards, so Mandy and Katie and Brie and Bret and Crystal and Bruce and Jason and Ryan and Kara all walked the half-mile home, a big knot of kids chattering and running like a traveling circus.



Having said they were going to go to her house was one thing - actually knocking on her door and saying hello and making conversation with her was another. Mandy seemed a little hesitant and Katie had her own doubts. She knew that when she was talking with the woman this morning she didn't feel nervous or scared, but she didn't feel comfortable either. She felt - weird, as if she was peeking into someone's private underwear drawer.

But they didn't want to promise something to themselves and then not do it, so as soon as they'd gotten home and wolfed down their snacks, they walked the block down to the old lady's house. The front door was peeling just like the rest of the house. They knocked on it. While they waited they looked at the mildewed lawn chairs that occupied the front porch. Vines kept out a lot of the sun, and what sun made it through was filtered by several large pine trees that grew cheek-by-jowl to the house.

There was no answer. "Maybe we need to knock louder." So Katie used her fist to pound heavily on the door four times. The yard to the side of the house was heavily overgrown. Some old apple trees poked their heads out of the riot of vines and brush; a huge maple tree, perfect for climbing, spread a canopy over the corner of the lot. An old shed, its boards grey with rain and sun and snow, lay collapsed, like an old boat broken by a storm.

When there was no response again, they debated whether they should try a third time or go away. Maybe she'd heard them and didn't want anything to do with them. Maybe she didn't hear them. Maybe she was dead. (No, no, she's not dead!) They decided to try one more time. This time Mandy pounded the door.

Third time lucky. A lock rattled as its bolt was opened. To their eyes the handle seemed to take forever to turn. Mandy looked a little nervous and Katie had to admit that not knowing what was going to happen made her heart beat a little faster. Finally, the door swung in and there she stood, the old lady, Elizabeth. She looked at them, first Katie, then Mandy, and they could tell, even in the dim light of the porch, that her eyes were violet (though the word they would use later was "purple"). She was short, not much taller than Mandy, and her face was scrunched in the same way a bulldog's is. There was a blue jay somewhere screeching out one harsh note over and over again.

"Come on in, girls," she finally said, and not knowing who should go first, they both stepped into the house together.



## Chapter 5

### The Smell of Lemon, A Touch of Lace

**T**here wasn't much light in the house, which they expected, but it wasn't as dark as they'd thought a witch's house would be. In fact, it was quite pleasant. The living room, which looked out onto the porch, was filled with a kind of bluish-yellow light, and as they passed the doorway to that room, they noticed huge furniture and pictures on the wall. Then they were past it, moving down the hallway. A staircase worked its way upstairs and just where the steps turned a corner there was a picture on the wall hanging over a small table that had a lace cloth on it and a vase of brilliant red flowers. The flowers caught the sunlight that poured through a small stained-glass window.

The hallway they were in was dim but they could pick out a small bench, a coatrack, and a mirror. (They were afraid to look at themselves.) But they didn't have much time to look at anything because the old lady, without even a word to them, was walking toward the back of the house. They scurried along to keep up.

They ended up in the kitchen. "Sit down," she told them, and they each dutifully pulled out a chair at the table, the table they had seen just yesterday as they peered through the grimy window. The old lady disappeared into the pantry, where they could hear her clattering some jars around. They looked at each other this was not what they had expected. Though, to be honest, they really hadn't known what to expect when they'd decided to knock on the door.

The kitchen made them feel immediately comfortable. The stove they'd seen through the backdoor window was unlike anything either of them had seen. It was an old wood cookstove that had been converted into a gas stove. The stove top and body was a shining black, like a hunk of new coal, and the sides and edges were trimmed in chrome that had been polished like a mirror. Over the stove hung a rack of copper pots, the strawberry-blond metal the color of freshly dug-up carrots. Pictures of fruit and vegetables and farm scenes hung on the walls, and the walls were covered with small blue flowers on a white background. Katie looked closely at the wall near her shoulder. The flowers had all been painted on it wasn't wallpaper.

Cabinets of light-colored wood clung to the walls. The doors of the cabinets were made out of glass cut in the shape of diamonds, and behind the glass they

could see ruby-red and milk-white cups, dishes with patterns on them, coffee cups hung like bells, so thin that the morning light made them look like silk. A refrigerator hummed in the corner. Hung on the walls on either side of the door the old lady had gone through were braids of garlic and peppers, twists of dried wildflowers, and over the door, as if it were the greatest prize, a palm fan the size of an elephant's ear and painted with a single parrot decked out in all its colors.

She came back through the door with a plate of cookies, exactly like the one she had offered them yesterday, and put the plate down in the middle of the table. "Do you like milk?" she said. Mandy said yes. Katie hated milk, but she thought it would be impolite to refuse. "Yes, I'd love a glass of milk." The old lady took down two glasses from the cabinet, two of the ruby-red glasses, and filled them. As she filled them with milk they watched the red of the glasses change color from a deep blood red to the red of a light sunburn. The old lady carried the glasses to the table and plunked them down.

Then she did a queer thing. She waddled back to the refrigerator to put the milk away. When she'd done that she turned to them and said, "Go ahead, eat up. I'll be right back." They each picked up a cookie; Mandy dunked hers and just caught the drop of milk in her mouth as she took a bite. Katie just nibbled hers along the edges. The table they were sitting at was so highly waxed that they could easily see their reflections in it. It was a heavy table, with thick legs. It was a table that would walk like an alligator if it could walk. Katie put her face down close to see her reflection and an unmistakably strong odor of lemon struck her nose. It was so strong that for a second she had a quick memory of the time as a young child she'd gotten into the refrigerator and rubbed lemon juice all over her body. As she sat up straight she couldn't believe that she wasn't that young kid again sitting on the kitchen floor covered with the wonderful smell of lemon.

They heard her coming back. Mandy was on her second cookie, Katie still on her first. She walked into the kitchen with three of the most extraordinary hats the girls had ever seen. They were broad-brimmed sunhats, at least two feet across, made out of a beige-yellow straw. Around the crowns was a thin band of lace, and out of that band sprouted an outrageous feather. The brim of each hat was shorter in front than in back, so that when a person wore it the face was open and the back of the neck protected from the sun. Two long, slightly curling ribbons hung from the back, like the tail of a swallow.

She plopped two of the hats on the table and brought the one with the turquoise feather and red ribbon over to Katie. Katie made a move to stop her



from putting the hat on her head, but the old lady wouldn't have anything of it. She fitted the hat on Katie, and as it settled on her head she wondered why she wanted to fight it in the first place it felt so good, so light and full of air. It fit her perfectly. She wondered how the old lady knew she liked turquoise.

Mandy had the hat with the peach-colored feather and blue ribbon, and she pulled the brim over one side of her face as she pantomimed playing a southern belle. Katie burst out laughing, and Mandy joined her, and as they glanced at the old lady, they noticed her face rising at the corners, the way a sheet hangs when two people take it off the line and fold it. Mandy picked up another cookie and held it with her little finger out to the side, saying "Veddy good, madame." Katie put her hands together on the table in front of her and tried to make her blue eyes look like somebody royal.

While they played they didn't notice that the old lady had put on the third hat, the one with the black feather and white ribbon. As she pulled out a chair and sat down with them, her small thick body easing into the chair, they suddenly had a feeling that she wasn't old anymore. (They talked about this later, even though they didn't understand how they'd felt she didn't look any different, and in fact looked pretty stupid with the hat on.) She reached for a cookie and the three of them, each with a cookie in hand, took one ceremonious bite. Oddly enough, not a crumb fell to the table.

The three of them chatted for a good part of half an hour, though when Mandy and Katie talked about it later, it seemed that they did most of the talking since they couldn't remember if she'd told them anything about herself. By that time the cookies were gone, as was the milk, and somewhere in the house a clock, with a heavy gong, rung four times. Both Mandy and Katie realized that they hadn't told anybody where they'd gone and that they should probably get going before anyone got worried. They said this to the old lady and she nodded, as if she knew they'd say this to her.

They gave her back the hats, and with the hats seemed to go a kind of lightness. She disappeared for a few minutes to put them away and both Mandy and Katie felt reluctant to leave the comfortable kitchen. When the old lady returned they all walked back the way they'd come to the front door, again getting only a glimpse of the front parlor, and as they found themselves standing on the porch, they also found themselves feeling slightly deflated, like a balloon without all its helium. The street looked like an ordinary old street. When they got



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home, their friends looked like their ordinary old friends. For the rest of the day Mandy and Katie felt the light grip of a straw hat across their foreheads.



## Chapter 6

### What Is Her Name?

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All during camp the next day Katie and Mandy wondered about the little old lady. They talked at lunch about her, about the hats. They tried to remember if she said anything about herself. The only thing they could remember was that she bought the hats in Iowa when she was a young woman. They didn't even know where Iowa was or how it was spelled. They agreed that the cookies were excellent. They decided not to tell anyone about their visit just yet.

After dinner that night they were all outside playing. The sun had cooled down a little, but a few people were still splashing in the hose. Bret was riding his bike around, revving it up as fast as he could, then jamming on his brakes so that he could make the back tire squeal and kick up dirt. Ryan was throwing a Frisbee with Jason, who could never catch it and was always having to run to fetch it. Brie and Katie and Mandy and Kara were running through the water, taking mouthfuls of it and trying to spit it at each other. Their squeals of laughter echoed off the houses around them.

Debbie, Brie and Bret and Ryan's mother, came out onto the porch with a bag of marshmallows. They'd cooked steak for dinner and the coals of the grill were still warm. She'd also brought out a bunch of shish-kabob skewers to hang the marshmallows on. She called everyone over and everyone stuck their marshmallow over the heat, watching it turn brown (or, in the case of Jason, watch it catch fire and fall into the ashes) and then nibbling at the white goo, drooping it over their chin or getting it on their fingers.

The sun was just going down and the sky was a bright orange. A few stars had started to jump out. Debbie brought over a lawn chair, sat down, and announced "Time for ghost stories!!" With marshmallows and laughter, the kids gathered around her feet. Everyone knew that Debbie was the best ghost-story teller around. "I'll have to make it quick, though. The skeets will be out pretty soon."

"I got the idea for this story from Katie and Mandy and their little dare the other day." She adjusted herself in the chair. "There was an old woman who lived alone in a big house" she smiled at Katie and Mandy, but didn't notice the look that Mandy and Katie gave each other "and all the kids in the neighborhood



thought she was a witch. The parents tried to tell them that witches didn't exist, but everybody knew differently. The old woman was a witch that was for sure.

"Of course, no one had ever seen her do any witch stuff. And they weren't quite sure what witch stuff was though they thought it had to do with frogs and turning people into rats and things like that. They played around her house and shouted at her, but she never came outside and they began to make up stories about what she looked like and what she did. She looked like a troll, with warts on her face, a nose that hooked like a boomerang, and hairs that came out of her ears. At night, they said, she came out of her house and flew around the sky and turned cats into hotdogs and fish into underwear and Coca-Cola into shampoo. Before the sun came up she'd go back to her house down the chimney and people would get up in the morning and find that a lot of things had been changed around, that their underwear had fish scales in them and that when they drank Coke soap bubbles came out of their mouths.

"Like I said, no one ever saw her do any of this." The sun had almost gone down. The coals gave off a weak red glow. "One night, when it was real hot, like it's been all this week" she looked around the group and let her eyes rest on Katie "Katie couldn't sleep very well." Everyone looked at Katie and smiled, but Katie felt distinctly weird inside, like she wasn't going to like this story at all. "She woke up because she thought she heard a noise in the kitchen. She lay in her bed, wondering if she was wide awake or dreaming, and suddenly remembered that it might be the witch!!

"She got out of bed." ("Boy, I wouldn't do that," someone in the group said out loud.) "She went into the kitchen. The only thing she could see was the moonlight coming in the windows and the sound of the fans going in each bedroom. But then, there it was again, that noise!! It sounded like someone crying and laughing and gargling with salt water all at the same time! And it wasn't coming from the kitchen. It was coming from the porch! And on the porch, lighted up by the moon, was an enormous shadow with a big hook on it, like a boomerang!

"Katie froze. Her feet had roots coming out of them into the floor so she couldn't run away. And the shadow moved! It moved like a big bat flapping incredibly huge wings. And it was going to come in the window, and it was going to take Katie away and turn her into a compact disc. She didn't want to be a compact disc for the rest of her life!



"The shadow seemed to come closer. The gargling sound got louder, it sounded like a hungry stomach with a squeak." Everyone's face was lifted up to Debbie. A car passed by on the street, its light raking across the small group on the lawn no one noticed. Little Candice moved closer to her brother. The streetlight buzzed on the corner and moths and gnats flew around its light. "For a moment Katie thought that it wouldn't be able to get through the screens on the windows but if a witch could do anything, then screens wouldn't stop her. This was it she was a goner. Her heart pounded like a hammer gone crazy.

"But somehow she moved her feet, somehow she turned and ran into her bedroom, somehow she dived into her bed under the covers. She kept saying to herself over and over again "Miss Susie had a steamboat, Miss Susie had a steamboat" (because everyone knows that saying that will keep any witch away). She waited for a pair of claws to pick her up but they never did. Finally, she had to come out from under the covers because she was suffocating and sweating. She threw them off and nothing happened. She was still in her room. She breathed deeply. And fell asleep.

"The next morning she fully intended to tell everybody about how close the witch had come to her, how she had narrowly escaped becoming a compact disc, and she rolled out of bed ready to talk. But as she ran into the kitchen and looked out onto the porch, what do you think she saw?" Debbie paused, but everyone waited for her to continue they wanted the story filled in. "The night before her mother had done some laundry. Katie hadn't heard her do it because she was asleep. On the line, drying in the morning sunlight, was a big dark blue sheet. On the line next to the sheet was her sneakers, which her mother had washed, and sure enough, they were curved up at the toe. As she looked at them a small breeze blew in and the sheet flapped a little sort of like a big bat. And the sneaker looked sort of like a boomerang or would look like a boomerang in the moonlight. At that moment the refrigerator's motor turned on and it sounded sort of like someone crying and laughing and gargling with salt water."

Someone slapped a shoulder and whispered "Got him." Debbie said, as she got up from the chair, "And that's the time the witch came to visit Katie. C'mon, let's go in. The skeeters are coming!" At that point everyone disappeared to their houses, a few parents' voices floating out a name or two calling their children home.

As Katie went upstairs she decided she liked the story, but she knew that it was also pretty wrong. Debbie had never met the old woman. So it was just a



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story. A pretty good one. But still just a story. She knew more than Debbie she knew the old woman's name. Debbie hadn't given her a name, but Katie knew the name. And she knew the old woman had hats. She thought that was funny.

Katie was tired, and after she washed her face and hands she went right to bed. Kara was sitting on the coach talking to their mother, and Katie could just hear their voices over the sound of the fans. Suddenly, she jumped out of bed and ran into the kitchen. Good, there weren't any sheets on the line. The last thing she needed to be worrying about was whether a big bat with a hook nose and sounding like gargling was going to bother her during the night.



## Chapter 7

### The Other Old Woman

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It was August, the Dog Days, days of ninety-degree temperatures and sweat. It was also the last month without school, the last month of freedom and fun, and Katie knew that the summer was going to be over soon. That made her feel sad. And it made her feel as if she had to hurry to get to know the old woman. There were so many questions she wanted answered, like how did she get her groceries and did she ever take a shower, and where did she get those hats and did she ever go out on her own.

One hot Monday afternoon she decided to go over to the house on her own. Katie and Mandy had promised each other not to tell anyone else about their “party” with the old woman. Katie now decided not to tell Mandy that she was going over on her own. She knew Mandy wouldn’t like being left out, but Katie felt that fighting with Mandy was something she didn’t much like doing anymore.

She knocked on the same door as she had before the only difference this time was that she had a gift for the old woman, a sand dollar she’d found at the beach in perfect unbroken condition. When after what seemed a long time the old woman didn’t answer the door, she knocked again. She waited. Finally, the door opened and there she stood.

She wasn’t much taller than Katie and her eyes were that strange violet, the color sometimes of her mother’s cigarette smoke. Katie just stood there, tongue-tied. The old woman gave her a strange look, a look Katie didn’t understand, then apparently making a decision asked her to come in.

The hallway was filled with the same dim light as before, and the house, even though it was baking outside, was cool a little stuffy but comfortable. (The house had huge trees around it and was almost always in shade.) She really didn’t know what she was doing there and she had this desire to run away. It wasn’t from anything the woman said or did just a feeling, like she was somewhere where she didn’t belong.

They walked into the kitchen and the old woman, as before, brought out some cookies and milk. Katie didn’t eat any. The old woman didn’t eat any. The silence hung over them like a falling tent.

Finally, the old woman spoke. "It's good to see you again. I had fun the other day."

Katie nodded, relieved somebody was saying something. "I did, too. I liked the hats."

"The hats, yes." She traced a circle on the tabletop. "Do you know where I got those hats?"

Katie shook her head. She took a cookie.

"I got those hats at a county fair. When I was your age. Actually, I only got one, the turquoise one. My two sisters got the others. They were expensive for us then a nickel each." She laughed, low and a little heavy. Only now did Katie see what the old woman was wearing a black dress with shots of silver and turquoise thread running through it. Her hair was done up in a tight bun, tighter than a cinnamon roll. The sleeves of her dress came loosely down to her elbow and Katie could see how loose the skin was under her arm.

As she talked about the fair, about how much the hat made her feel grown-up and pretty, Katie watched her face (between bites of cookie), a face that was full of wrinkles but didn't look all that old, more like a face that had been worn down. It had grown fat and the bones were hidden, but she tried to see the young girl wearing the hat in the face and believed she saw it.

The story about the fair led to some stories about her family, about her sisters, about the old woman's husband. "I'm just rambling on here, Katie," she said.

Katie didn't mind.

"What grade are you going into?"

"Fourth."

"When I was in fourth grade I was in a one-room schoolhouse. I hated it. Cold in the winter, hot in the summer. And a cranky old schoolmarm who got a lot of pleasure out of hitting people." Elizabeth screwed up her face into a reasonably good mask of a woman who seemed to love to hear children cry and said in a voice that sounded like mice in the wall, "`You children shut up or I will flay you within an inch of your lives. She really talked like that. Do you know what the word `flay means? Neither did we. But she would use words like that." Katie smiled.



From somewhere deep in the house came the sound of a bell, a hand-held bell, the kind that Katie sometimes liked to ring when she was in a gift shop. Elizabeth's face drooped a little. The bell stopped. Then it started again.

She got up from the table. "Come and meet Johanna." Katie got up as well. "Johanna is my sister, Katie. Johanna is not well." Katie listened carefully to the words "not well" and didn't know what they meant. "Johanna was the one with the black feather and white ribbon." Elizabeth started walking out of the kitchen. "We've lived together now for forty years."

In the front room, the room she and Mandy had only glimpsed as they walked to the kitchen, was a chair facing the window that let in the sight of the porch and the street. It was a big wing-backed chair with heavy claw feet and a deep-blue brocade covering. Elizabeth walked around the chair to face it. Only then did Katie notice the small table to the left of the chair with Kleenex and two glasses and a small bell on it. "Johanna," Elizabeth said in a soft voice, a voice softer than Katie thought she had, "I have someone to meet you. A young girl. Katie." She motioned for Katie to come around and Katie, for a split second that seemed to last forever, was torn between running out of the house and back to the friends she knew and fought with and walking the four steps around the chair and looking at a woman she didn't know. She took the first step, and then the rest.

Johanna's hair was white, pure white, whiter than salt or marshmallows. She wore a pink dress with white tennis sneakers. Katie stood completely still in front of her. Johanna reached out to take Katie's hand and Katie, taking hold of a hand that had skin like paper, noticed that Johanna's eyes were filmy white, like ice covered with milk. Instantly she knew Johanna was blind and holding Katie's hand was Johanna's way of "looking" at her. The brocade of the chair rustled a bit as Johanna moved her head to look at Elizabeth. "Yes," said Elizabeth, as if Johanna had said something, "I'll get you some more water." Elizabeth picked up one of the glasses and motioned for Katie to follow. Katie slipped her hand out of Johanna's and in its place put the sand dollar, and said, feeling stupid as she said it, "It was nice to meet you."

In the kitchen, as Elizabeth filled the glass with water, she told Katie about how Johanna had been married to a man who would beat her (Elizabeth did not hold back the words she didn't say "treated her badly" but came out and said "beat her".) It had happened for years. Everyone in the family knew it. Finally, one night Johanna had left the house while her husband was asleep and came



to Elizabeth's. (Elizabeth was living alone in the house at that point her husband was already dead, of a heart attack, something she mentioned without pausing and which Katie just took with all the rest of the information.)

Johanna was in a bad way black eyes, bruises all over. Of course she could stay with Elizabeth. When the husband woke up and finally figured out where she was, he came storming over to Elizabeth's house. Elizabeth was ready for him. As soon as she saw him come up the path and heard him pound on the door, she called the police (her husband always wanted the latest gadgets and had had several telephones installed in the house, an unusual thing in the 1940s) and told them that if they didn't get there right away, they would find a man shot through the stomach. She figured that would make them move a little faster. Then she took down the shotgun her husband had used when he went camping in Maine and trooped down the stairs to the front door. Johanna was hiding in the living room, turned to stone by the man's voice and presence.

She opened the front door. (Katie imagined the scene big man, little Elizabeth, a shotgun, the police on the way.) He had already taken two steps into the house and had actually gotten out the sentence "Where is that god dam wife of mine?" before he saw Elizabeth and felt the hard steel of the rifle barrel in his gut. She poked him and said "Get out." He looked at her and smiled. "It isn't loaded." She quickly dropped the gun a few inches until it was just between his legs and fired. The gunshot tore away the sill of the front door and ripped through the floorboards. Johanna screamed and the police pulled up to the curb.

They didn't press charges at all, after Elizabeth explained that she and Johanna felt in mortal danger of the man. The husband never contacted Johanna again, just sent her notice of a divorce he'd picked up somewhere out west. It was shortly after she received notice of the divorce that Johanna lost her sight. Or, as Elizabeth put it, just decided to stop seeing the world, having seen enough of it already.

Katie was full, and Elizabeth sensed how heavy the information must be that she'd been sending Katie's way. All during the story she'd been walking back and forth from the kitchen to Johanna so that Katie had spaces where she could try to put everything Elizabeth was telling her in some kind of shape. It wasn't easy because there was so much she didn't understand.

Elizabeth had been taking care of Johanna for forty years or so, almost longer than the ages of she, Kara, and her mother all put together. Johanna had been what Elizabeth had done for a very long part of her life. That was



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strange. Katie had a hard time understanding the years involved, much less why someone would do all this. Her head hurt.

When Elizabeth came back to the kitchen for the last time, Katie was more than ready to leave. Without saying a word Elizabeth started walking toward the door and as Katie passed the living room she stifled an impulse to yell “Goodbye!” to Johanna. “Come back, Katie,” Elizabeth said, and just before Katie said goodbye to Elizabeth, Elizabeth slipped something into Katie’s hand. “From Johanna.” The front door closed.

It wasn’t until she’d gotten almost home that she unclenched her hand and looked at what was in it. It was a crystal icicle, a long thin sliver of crystal that caught the sun and broke it into colors. Johanna had threaded a length of white silk thread through a small hole at the top of the icicle. That afternoon Katie watched a rainbow flick itself around the walls of her room as the gentle whirr of the fan made the needle sway slightly back and forth. Katie thought. Katie thought hard.







## Chapter 8

### The Summer Winds Down

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She was laying on her bed watching the colored patterns on the ceiling when her mother, bringing a basket of laundry, walked in. “That’s very pretty,” she said. “Where did you get it?” She put the basket down and took the crystal in her hand to look at it. The colors flew up into her face. She had the colors in her eyes when she looked down at Katie on the bed.

Katie didn’t quite know how to explain it, but it was clear her mother was not going to go away unless she did. “Do you remember the day Mandy and I did the dare around the old lady’s house?”

“And you got the cookies?” Her mother sat down on the bed. The crystal swayed a little.

“Yeah. Well, you know when I went back to see her the other morning, when I got up real early? She told me her name. Her name’s Elizabeth Gaines.”

The look on her mother’s face puzzled Katie a look that was half a smile and half the look her mother got when she was reading, with her forehead and mouth tight. “Did she give you the crystal?”

“No, well, not really.”

Her mother brushed a few strands of hair out of Katie’s face. “Why did you go back?”

“I don’t know.”

Her mother laughed. “Was it the cookies?”

Katie pouted for a second her mother always made fun of her love of cookies. Then she decided to laugh anyway as her mother, catching the pout, tickled her. “Lighten up, kiddo.”

“I don’t know why I went there.” She paused for a moment. “I took my sand dollar.” “You took your sand dollar? Fill me in, kiddo. I’m lost.”

Katie told her mother everything she could remember about the visit, especially about Johanna and giving her the sand dollar and the story of Johanna’s husband and the fact that Elizabeth had been taking care of Johanna for forty years. She was hoping as she told her mother the story that it would

make sense, like the way the stories in her books made sense when she got to the end of them. But it didn't. It was still a story of two old women living in an old house.

"Would you take care of your sister Janey if something like that happened?"

"Of course I would. Though I'm not sure your aunt would let me do that." Her mother paused. "Then again, people can change a lot when something really bad happens in their lives. Maybe Johanna was the kind of person who couldn't take care of herself. When she got married women weren't given a lot of chances to go out on their own. Or maybe she was a really strong woman who got so depressed about living because she didn't like how much hurt it caused her."

"Elizabeth said something real strange to me." She racked her brains to get the words right. "It was something like Johanna didn't really go blind, she just decided to stop seeing. I don't understand that."

"Sounds like Johanna just gave up. Her husband hurt her and she didn't want to be hurt anymore. Ever hear of the ostrich and how it sticks its head in the sand when it doesn't want to see any danger?"

"Yeah."

"Well, maybe that's what Johanna did."

"Stick her head in the sand?"

"No, you ninny." She tickled Katie again. "The ostrich believes that if he can't see the danger, then it doesn't really exist." She tickled Katie again, and Katie tickled her back, and that's how Kara found them when she came running into the house for a drink of water.

Later that night, after her mother had brushed her hair and they were watching television, Katie asked if she should go back. "That's up to you. Though, to tell you the truth, Kate, I don't like you going over to stranger's houses by yourself."

"But she's not a stranger, Mom!"

"Yes, she is. You've talked with this woman twice. And she's been very kind to you. But she...."

"She asked me to come back."

"Maybe I should go with you. I think I should, at least once."



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Katie clamped her mouth shut, partly because she was irritated by her mother's lack of trust, partly because she didn't have the words to explain to her mother how Elizabeth didn't feel like a stranger at all, that Katie felt at home there, and while it wasn't the same kind of home as she felt with her mother, it still felt safe there. Elizabeth was a person who took care of people. But adults were like that, not trusting a lot of things. Like Johanna, maybe. Katie wondered if Johanna ever wore her hat.

"Hey, talk to me. Did I say something bad?"

"No."

"Then what's the matter?"

"I don't know." Her mother knew that tone of voice, which really said, "I don't want to talk about this anymore." So instead her mother played with her hair, putting it into spikes and swirls and buns. Kara demanded the same thing, and they switched, and watched television and did hair-dos until they went to bed.

Just before she fell asleep Katie went over it all again, everything that Elizabeth had told her and her mother had told her. The crystal caught little bit of streetlight and flickered. It was the last thing she saw as she fell asleep and the first thing she saw as she woke up, bleary-eyed and grouchy as usual.





## Chapter 9

### Emergency

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**K**atie didn't really understand why everybody got into their cars for something called Labor Day and cursed and screamed and complained. She'd come in for something to drink and was watching the 5:30 news and saw videos of long lines of traffic crawling along Route 93. No fun at all. Much more fun to hang around home.

Her mother was putting together hamburgers for supper in the kitchen. The sun was fierce outside. She drank slowly, looking at the cars, then the smiling face of a weatherman, then the serious face of someone reading the news. It didn't make much sense to her. A pot of potatoes boiled on the stove, getting ready for potato salad for the picnic tomorrow.

As she got up to put her glass back in the sink she heard a police siren in the distance. She didn't really take much notice of it. "Can I have something to eat, Mom?"

"No. We're going to have supper in a little while."

"But I'm hungry!" Sometimes this got her a cookie or some potato chips. Not today.

"Go outside and play. I'll call you in for supper."

"Can I help?"

Her mother looked distracted by the preparations for dinner. "Sure. You can cut the cucumbers for the salad." Katie got out the cutting board, the peeler, and the knife. This was something she knew how to do.

The siren had gotten a little closer in fact, it sounded as if it were real close. Suddenly there was a whoosh of tires and the siren sound so loud that it felt like someone had set off a smoke alarm right next to her ear. Katie jumped up and looked out the window. She saw everyone running up the street after the siren and just through the trees she could see its flashing lights. It was just up the block. Just up the block. Right about where Elizabeth's house was. Elizabeth's house. "Mom," she shouted, "it's at Elizabeth's house!" She ran out of the kitchen and down the stairs as fast as she could. She never even heard her mother running right behind her.

For the last couple of weeks Katie had been visiting Elizabeth and Johanna steadily. Her mother had come two times and could understand why Katie wanted to go back. She allowed Katie to go as long as she didn't stay too long and bother them. Elizabeth and Katie had become good friends, and Johanna, as much as she was able, became part of that friendship.

The ambulance had pulled up in front of Elizabeth's house. A police car was there, too. Katie's friends were hanging around just outside the front lawn. A few people from the neighborhood trickled in. Katie could see Mandy mom, and Brie and Ryan and Brett's mom and dad walked up. Katie never even remembered shaking off her mother's hand as she walked toward the front door past the policeman and into the house. She never remembered that her mother followed her in. All she could remember is the scene in the living room.

Johanna was lying on the floor and two men hovered over her, one pressing on her chest and the other breathing into her mouth. Elizabeth was standing away from the action, near the window. She looked up and saw Katie and her mother and both of them crossed the room. "It happened so quickly," Elizabeth said. Her voice didn't sound worried at all, flat, as if she were reading off a grocery list. As if she'd expected this scene all along.

Katie had no idea what they were doing and the rushed voices of the men and the hiss and static of the radios made it all so blurry to her. Johanna had on her pink dress and white sneakers and her hair, usually so tightly coiled on her neck, was unfastened and spilled out on either side of her head. "We got a heartbeat, folks!! Watch out!!" They lifted her quickly and gently onto a stretcher and wheeled her out to the ambulance. The ambulance spun off. The policeman came over to her and spoke. Elizabeth turned to Katie's mother. "Would you mind giving me a ride to the hospital?" Again, the voice was flat, matter-of-fact, as if she were asking for a recipe. Katie's mother said yes without hesitation.

At the hospital they sat in a waiting room full of old magazines and a game show. Kara had stayed with Debbie downstairs. Katie and her mother sat silently together. Elizabeth was off checking on Johanna's status. Across from Katie was a young boy, still in diapers. His mother was leafing through a magazine and the boy sat on the floor between her feet. He was wearing OshKosh bib overalls and red sneakers and a tee-shirt which said "Under Construction". Katie found herself watching him fiercely, worried that he would do something that would hurt himself.



She almost jumped out of her chair when he got on his knees and started crawling under the row of chairs. There was just enough room for him to crawl and he slithered under the row of chairs from one end of the room to the other. Katie could hear the metal buttons on his overalls clink on the metal legs of the chairs. Her mother saw how closely Katie was watching the boy. She reached over and patted her knee. "She'll be okay." The boy got to the end of the row, slid out onto the hallway floor, turned around, and started making his way back. It didn't look like he was going to get stuck at all.

They waited an hour. They grabbed a bag of chips and a Coke from the vending machines and clapped out "Miss Susie Had A Steamboat" and "There's a Place Called Mars" and played "I Spy". Finally, they saw Elizabeth shuffling down the hall, looking incredibly tired. Katie had the impression that she'd shrunk.

She didn't say anything, just kept walking toward the door. In the car she kept her silence and Katie and her mother didn't dare break it. Only when they were in front of her house did she say anything, and it wasn't what Katie wanted to hear. "I want to thank you for all your help. I don't know what I would have done without you." Her voice broke, just a little, the first time either of them heard some emotion in it. Then she caught it and her voice became logical again. "Johanna died." (Again, Katie noticed that Elizabeth didn't say "passed away" or "didn't make it" just the straight phrase "Johanna died".) "She never regained consciousness. They're not sure what happened, but they suspect a stroke." She paused, adjusted the skirt of her coat, and then looked them both in the eye. "Again, thank you for your help." She got out of the car, and when Katie offered to walk her to the door Elizabeth politely said no. She disappeared into the house, a house that she now lived in completely alone.

"Well, what happens to her bones?" Kara asked.

"Will you be quiet?" Katie shouted at her.

"Don't talk to her like that, Katie. She just asked a question."

"But she's bugging me!"

"Her bones?" Kara said, glad to see Katie bugged.

"Kara, lay off on the questions. Katie, come here."

Her mother nestled Katie into her side and wrapped an arm around her shoulder. They watched television for a while, then went to bed. Her mother





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asked Katie if she wanted to talk about it, but she said no. And she really didn't. She wondered what she was supposed to be feeling. What she felt now felt like a black crayon, like a hole in the ground. She wondered what Elizabeth was doing, saw the three hats, and fell asleep.



## Chapter 10

### The Party

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**T**he wake and funeral went quickly. Katie and her mother went to both and were about the only people there. Katie tried to convince her friends to go, especially Mandy, but they all acted as if Elizabeth had a disease. Katie had no patience with them.

Then Elizabeth did a strange thing. Several days later Katie received an invitation in the mail, a silver-edged heavy piece of paper inviting her to an end-of-the-summer-beginning-of-school party. So did Mandy. So did everyone else. Parents were invited, too. The party was a costume party for the children, and the invitation said “Children, please arrive one half-hour before the party to dress. I will provide the costumes.” When Katie asked her mother what this meant, she guessed it meant that Elizabeth had something up her sleeve.

The party was several days away, just before school started, so there was plenty of time for everyone to get together and talk themselves into going. Some of the kids still thought she was a witch, but no one really believed that for very long. Some didn’t want to go, but Katie kept at them, telling them that it would be fun, that Elizabeth was a neat person, that this was their last chance to have a good time before they got trapped back in school. The last argument seemed to be the clincher. She told them to really talk to their parents, push it hard.

The invitations caused several interesting things to happen. There were parents in the neighborhood whose kids had played together for months but who had never met each other. Now they did. Phone calls flew from house to house asking whether it was safe to let their children go and eventually the calls ended up in Katie’s kitchen. Katie and her mother found themselves the neighborhood organizers for Elizabeth’s party, assuring people that it would be good for the kids, and in the process all these parents who had never really connected with one another now called each other by first names and made an effort to become visible.

On the day of the party Katie gathered all the kids together at her house and together they all trooped up the block. Over the last few days Katie found herself taking charge of the situation, and most of the other people didn’t seem to mind at least Mandy and Brie weren’t telling her that she was being too bossy and the

other kids seemed to need a lot of reassurance about going to the house of a person they used to think was a witch ready to cook their brains for supper. She sort of liked having people listen to her and not fight all the time.

They looked like some animal with a dozen heads and two dozen arms and legs as they stood in a cluster on Elizabeth's porch. Katie knocked. Elizabeth answered. She had put a slight bit of make-up on her cheeks and her eyes sparkled like a garnet. "Come in," she said, in a voice full of bubbles, and they all moved quickly over the threshold. She told them to come upstairs. In a room toward the back of the house she had laid out racks of some of the strangest clothing the children had ever seen.

"When I was a child," she said to them as they walked around the room and fingered the materials and began to lay dibs on the clothes they wanted to wear, "my mother would always have us dress up and put on plays and sing songs that she wrote. She collected quite a lot of clothes for us to do this. I've kept most everything she had. Choose what you like. The boys can get dressed in the bathroom, the girls in my bedroom."

There were dresses with high collars and long sleeves all edged with lace, with skirts that swept along the floor. There were suits made out of thick wool with military brass buttons and red piping along the cuffs. There were skirts that went straight down to the middle of the calf and which were incredibly difficult to walk in. There were suitcoats made out of linen, so light and sharply creased. There were straw hats with ostrich feathers (Katie and Mandy recognized the hats they'd worn), cloche hats, pill-box hats, berets, fedoras, panamas, bonnets, tam-o'shanters, top hats, turbans, wimples more hats than heads, all sizes, shapes, and colors. The second floor of the house filled with excited voices as boys suddenly became military officers or well-dressed polo players and girls quickly transformed themselves into flappers or debutantes or smart-looking professionals.

Elizabeth was tireless through it all. In her bedroom she supervised the joining together of snaps and laces, explaining all the while how the unfamiliar dresses worked, why a particular fashion looked the way it did. She helped each girl put a slight blush on her cheek and a bit of color over her eye. She shuttled back and forth between upstairs and downstairs, seating parents and getting them something to drink and then running back upstairs to supervise the dressing.



In her bedroom tall gawky Mandy became a delicate blond-haired girl from the rich districts of Newport, Rhode Island, her hair curled up off her neck and the high collar of the dress tickling her chin with lace.

In her bedroom Katie slipped into a red sheath skirt, with a red jacket to match that had a little skirt on it that Elizabeth called a “peplum”. On her head she wore a red beret and across her white blouse hung a strand of black onyx stones.

In her bedroom Kara wore a blue sailor’s shirt with white duck pants, a broad white, red, and blue scarf tied around her throat and hung off to the side.

In her bedroom Brie felt silk against her arms as she carefully put on a blouse that had padded shoulders and a tight waist. The buttons were made out of pearl. A pair of black sailor pants swung their huge bell-bottoms against her ankles.

Everyone looked sharp. The boys were awkward at first about trying on clothes but showed surprising good taste in what they wore (though Elizabeth did have to tell one child that two different plaids really didn’t go together). The girls stood around carefully, as if the clothes were made of china or porcelain, not quite posing but feeling very self-conscious and quite proud.

Elizabeth gathered them all at the top of the stairs and for a moment couldn’t speak. “You all look lovely,” she finally said. “Wait until your parents see you. All of you wait here until I give you the signal to come downstairs.”

Downstairs the parents were talking, finally putting names and faces together. Katie’s mother found herself becoming a sort of switchboard, routing conversation from one side of the room to the other. Trays of food that Elizabeth had prepared covered table tops everywhere, and there was a substantial gathering of liquor bottles on the sideboard. As she entered the living room she said, “I think you’ll be amazed.” Then she turned towards the stairs and said, “Come on down.”

And down they came, every century, every era, every style. The parents laughed and the children, self-conscious but feeling very neat in their clothes, smiled. The room was filled with the snap of cameras. It was a wonderful moment, their parents seeing them suddenly grown up, the children suddenly feeling a bit grown up themselves.

Then the party began. Games, food, more games Elizabeth had everyone involved in something. Parents were organizing the games and doling out prizes,



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parents were shuttling food back and forth, children were helping clean up dishes and cups. It seemed to go on forever. But of course it didn't. Soon they had to get out of the clothes and hang them back up, get back into their jeans and tee-shirts, start thinking that the day after next they would have to start school. The parents thanked Elizabeth and shepherded their children home. Finally, it was only Elizabeth and Katie and her mother behind. Over the protests of Elizabeth, they helped her clean up.

"It was a neat party, Elizabeth," Katie said.

"It was really good of you to have it," her mother added.

"It was nice having the house full of people again." Elizabeth looked tired but not sad at all. "Part of me wishes that Johanna could have seen this, but, then again, she wouldn't have seen much, would she?" She laughed, and they laughed with her. "We had been dead too long," she said, and then they moved onto other things. They thanked her again and walked home under a tent of stars.

"We had been dead too long." Katie didn't understand the phrase Elizabeth was the most alive person she'd ever met, next to her mother. She would have to talk to her mother about it. But tomorrow. She was so tired right now. She could still feel the skirt against her calves, the pinch of the shoes. It was a great party, a great party. The last thing she heard was her mother switching on the eleven o'clock news.



## Chapter 11

### If Only Everything Were Like Clothes

It came. School came. Having to get up early came. New pencils and shoes came. Every bit of it she knew, every bit of it she'd done before. Fourth grade was going to be good - she liked her teacher, learning the multiplication tables would be another thing she could have over her sister, and there were some new kids in her class from families who'd just moved into the city.

But it was fourth grade - and then there would be fifth grade, and sixth. She'd surprised her mother the other day when she said that she was saving up money for college. Her mother laughed and said that she didn't really have to worry about that yet, but there was this look on her face Katie didn't understand but sort of did - a little bit sad, a little bit worried. Sometimes she felt like that.

If only everything were like clothes, she thought, like the clothes Elizabeth let them wear. Take one set off and put another on and you could be another kind of person. And you could just go on changing clothes forever, being someone new, changing the way people looked at you.

Each day she got home from school she went up to Elizabeth's to visit. A few times she was there and they chatted about how the new teacher had two earrings in her left ear and how the deaf kids in class were pretty sharp people. But more and more she found that Elizabeth wasn't home. She didn't have a car, so Katie didn't know how she got around, but it was clear that no one was answering the door, though the morning paper got taken in, which proved that someone still lived there. Katie found herself hungry for chocolate chip cookies.

Things happened in a rush, it seemed. One day an alien thing appeared on Elizabeth's lawn, a sign saying "For Sale". Katie couldn't keep the disappointment and anger out of her voice as Elizabeth explained to her that with Johanna's death there was nothing to keep her around anymore.

"But there's us!" Katie argued. What she meant was, But there's me!

"Oh, Katie," Elizabeth replied, putting her hands on her shoulders and looking her straight in the eye, "you and all your friends are wonderful, and if I were younger I think I'd adopt you all. But - "

“But what?” Katie demanded. She had gotten into her anger pose, bottom lip jutting out in a pout, arms crossed across her chest. Her voice had risen a notch or two.

“I have lived in this house too long, Katie. Forty years I took care of Johanna.” Elizabeth sat down on the sofa. There were in the living room. Katie sat in the wing-back chair that had been Johanna’s. “I lived so long in this house that I became a witch to the children around here. And I’m not so sure you all were wrong.”

Katie just sat crumpled in the chair, trying to fight off the inevitable.

“There were times, Katie, when taking care of Johanna was a thing I hated. She depended on me completely. My life was hers. Do you understand what I am saying?” Katie nodded. “I loved my sister dearly, but forty years is a long time. It wasn’t something I asked for, but it was something I had to do. Now I don’t have to do it anymore.”

“But I don’t want you to go!”

Elizabeth’s face wrinkled and Katie could see that she was trying very hard not to cry. And it wasn’t working. Tears edged their way along her face. “Katie,” she said, “come here.” She hugged Katie fiercely and whispered, “Thank you for saying that.” Elizabeth held her for an instant more, and then said, “How about some cookies?”

Things happened too quickly after that. The house sold easily and Elizabeth, not wanting to lug anything around, sold the house as is, with all the furniture and clothing and ruby-red glasses. Not, of course, before she let the children in to pick out a few things that they wanted. Katie took her hat. So did Mandy. Everyone had a bit of something to keep.

Then she was gone. Katie got letters from Arizona for a while, then New Mexico and California. Then Hawaii. Then Japan. For a while they came steadily from Japan Elizabeth had decided to live there, learn a new language and culture. Sometimes Katie would walk by the house and see how the new owners had scraped and painted it, cut back the trees and bushes, planted gardens she couldn’t help but think that it looked beautiful, even though she felt a little like a traitor saying it. At night she and her mother and Kara would curl up on the couch to watch television and eat popcorn, and when Kara would fall asleep they’d sometimes talk about Elizabeth, about her latest letter saying that she



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was learning the tea ceremony or how cool everyone looked when they came walking down the stairs in their clothes.

The memory of Elizabeth became as neat and beautiful as the house she had lived in for forty years. It was as if the new owners, without knowing it, had made sure that no one would forget who had lived in that house. Elizabeth was gone, but she would surely never be forgotten.

And Katie went on to fifth grade, then sixth, and made new friends and lost some old ones. And kept all the letters in a box in her bottom drawer. She'd keep them forever.







## **The Evil One**

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**For Christopher Monfette**



# Chapter 1

## The Cave Entrance

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**B**ing! Bang! Burble-burble-burble!

The knight on the computer screen melted into a puddle, then disappeared, as the Evil One, a huge monster with the body of Hulk Hogan, the face of The Joker, and hands with long spiky nails on them, jumped up and down and the computer went *Ha, ha, ha!* in a low evil voice.

“Darn!” John muttered, the joystick motionless in his hand. “I can never get past the Evil One. What’s the trick?” He looked through his inventory- bird, knife, lantern, bottle - but couldn’t find anything that worked against the monster. And he’d never been able to figure out the riddle the Evil One shouted just before he killed the knight: “What makes sadness go away and happiness stay, what makes the eyes cry but not weep?” John figured that beating the Evil One had something to do with getting the answer, but he could never think of it in time. The Evil One always got to him first.

He re-booted his computer and waited while the disk drive whirled and loaded the game again. He looked at the time: 4:00. His dad would be home soon; his mom was in the kitchen getting supper ready. He had about an hour to play. John noticed that the light coming through the blinds was like the light in the story when the knight is walking north, west, south, west through the Forest of Death, all filtered through the leaves and making the knight see things that maybe did or didn’t exist. It was a tricky light.

The computer beeped and that low evil *Ha, ha, ha* floated into the room. John moved easily through the first moves, drinking the water to get the bottle, getting the bird that would scare away the first monster the knight would meet, picking up the knife and axe and rope that would get him over the cliffs and down into the cave that was the entrance to the golden room.

But as he landed at the cave entrance and the computer played its usual “Be careful!” across the screen, something strange happened. After the message usually came a question mark, which meant that John was supposed to type in a direction. But it didn’t come. Instead, there was another message: “Help.” That was all: “Help.” John scratched his head, which he knew wouldn’t do any good, but it was the only thing he could think to do, and pressed the re-set button.

Nothing happened. He banged on the keyboard: still nothing. He turned the machine off, then back on, and the message was still there: "Help."

Then what happened next was never clear to John; he was never quite sure that it really happened. He leaned in close to the screen (the way his father told him not to) and suddenly he felt his body buzz, as if there was electricity going through it, and he had the oddest feeling that he was flying apart in little pieces. But not really apart - more like he was a stream of water going through a hose, moving quickly and with a lot of force. But he could still think and feel like himself, still see the "Help" plastered on the screen. It was strange. It was very strange.

When he finally moved his face away from the screen, he wasn't looking at the screen. Well, he was and he wasn't. In front of him was the cave entrance the way it was supposed to be there, but it was a real cave, with real rock walls and real sand under his feet. John looked around him. There was no doubt about it: he was not sitting at his desk playing *The Evil One*. He was definitely not there. There was a sun over his head, and it was hot, and he had a backpack on that held a knife and an axe and a rope and a.... "Wait a second," John said, "this can't be happening," which seemed a stupid thing to say because it was happening. "What about supper?" he said to no one in particular, and the only answer he got was no answer at all.

He looked around. The cave entrance was only a little taller than he was and only a little wider than he was. To his right ("south," he knew) was the line of cliffs he'd just climbed down. To his left (north), the line extended. Behind him, which would be west, was a forest (*not* the Forest of Death, but just a simple old forest). Inside the cave, if this was the game (*if!* - he was supposed to be home getting ready to eat dinner), then there'd be the first test, the gnome with the crystal teeth, who would be defeated by the bird's high-pitched chirp that would shatter his teeth. (Took him five games to figure that out. He hurriedly checked his backpack to see if he had the bird in the bird cage - he did.) He didn't really want to face the gnome just yet, but he didn't know what else to do.

"What is going on here?" he said to himself, really wanting to get back to his house and dinner and turn this stupid game off (he would never play another game again - his parents had been telling him he'd been playing too much) and now beginning to feel a little scared. The sun, though still high in the sky, was beginning to go down behind the trees, and then what would he do when it got dark?



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Just then he saw a sign on a tree, pointing into the forest. On the sign, in big red letters, was “Help,” and an arrow pointing west, into the trees. He decided to follow the sign, and as he moved toward it, the sign jumped down off the tree, grew two legs and arms, and, signaling John to follow, took off. John, his backpack clanking and his stomach rumbling, ran after it. When he slowed down the sign would come back and stand in front of him with its hands on its hips (or where its hips would be if it had hips) and tap its foot. “You don’t have to carry all this stuff, all right!” John heard himself say - he was really annoyed at this little piece of wood acting so superior.

The forest was dense, and light from the sun only came through every once in a while. Sometimes he lost sight of the sign, or saw it in a place where it wasn’t, and he had a hard time telling if the shadows were real or not. The sign, though, always came back to find him, and it was clear the sign knew its way through the forest. Which was good for a sign - it was supposed to know the way.

Finally, after what seemed like days, they came out of the forest and stood at the edge of a town. John didn’t remember anything about a town in the game, though he knew there were levels of the game he’d never gotten to. The sign pointed its finger at the town, then jumped up and stuck itself to a tree, looking for all the world like an ordinary sign with “Help” in big red letters written across it. John looked at the town. The town gate hung on one hinge. There were crows sitting on top of the wooden walls. It felt dead. It was not a town he wanted to visit. He looked at the sign. The sign pointed its finger again, and John, shaking his head, walked toward the gate.





## Chapter 2

### The Town Isn't Dead

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John hadn't been to a lot of towns in his nine years, but he knew a town in trouble when he saw it. And this one was in trouble. As he walked through the gate he noticed that no one was watching the gate, even though there was a guardhouse there, with a huge axe leaning against it. The streets were dirty, wagons lay on their sides or upside-down, every door and window was shut and bolted. And it was quiet. Very quiet.

John continued what he thought was the main street. Every once in a while he thought he felt someone's eyes on him, but by the time he turned to look, they'd be gone. If they were ever there to begin with. This town is a mess, he thought. Broken glass was all over the place, dead flowers drooped from broken flower pots, and the street was filled with pieces of burned wood.

"Hello," John shouted, but his voice just echoed. A few crows on top of a building jumped up, flapped their wings a few times, and settled back down. "Hello," he said again, "I'm supposed to help somebody. A sign showed the way to get here...." John stopped, realizing how foolish he sounded. He was thirsty. And hungry.

And almost as if he'd asked for it there appeared, on a doorstep, a tray with a glass and some bread. He looked up to see if he could see who put it there, but there wasn't anybody, at least anybody he could see. He went over to the doorstep, sat down, and picked up the bread. It was fresh, sort of. He ate it, then lifted up the cup.

He thought it had water in it (Coke was too much to hope for), but it didn't. It had wine. He knew it was wine from the sips he'd taken from his parents' glasses, and it wasn't something he wanted to drink. So he ate the bread, which at least quieted the rumbling in his stomach.

He heard the sound before he realized he heard it, and when he heard it he thought it was his stomach again. But it wasn't. It was sound between a belch, a fart, a hyena's laugh, and a squeaky bat. Around the corner came a cart pulled by a horse that looked like it was ready to fall over at any moment. The cart made the strange sound, its wheels tilted at an angle, the canopy over the bed of the cart swaying back and forth like palm trees in a tropical breeze.



The canopy itself was made up of dirty clothes stitched together with string. And under the canopy sat what looked like a bunch of old torn clothes. Except that they moved. Slowly.

“Whoa!! Stop!!” The horse kept on moving, ignoring the voice (the hyena’s laugh part of the noise). A head popped up, looked at John but didn’t say anything, then turned back to the horse and said, again, in a high-pitched voice, “I said stop the cart!!” The horse finally slowed down and looked back at the head, and John could swear he heard the horse say (but he wouldn’t bet his life on it) “Is this good enough, or do you want me to go another foot or so?” The horse didn’t really look like it wanted to go anywhere at all.

The head shook the rags off itself and a dwarf emerged, about three feet high, with an incredibly long filthy beard. “Pardon my appearance, kind knight, but...” and here he made a gesture that seemed to John to look like a hiccup with a burp at the end. He didn’t know what it meant, but he nodded anyway and waited.

“I suppose you’ve come to see the king?” John shrugged and said, “Have I?” “There’s no other reason to come to this town, especially since...” But here the dwarf bit his lip and shut up, and the horse, looking back again, shook its head as if it hadn’t one good thought about the dwarf the entire time he’d known him.

“Especially since what?” John asked, eating up the last crumb of bread.

“Nothing, nothing,” the dwarf said. “It’s nothing at all.” He looked around himself as if it were the finest day he’d ever seen. “Well, would you like to see the king?”

“I suppose I should,” John said, and started to walk off. The horse started, too, and the dwarf, taken by surprise, fell over. The horse, John thought (but he wouldn’t bet his life on it), smiled.



## Chapter 3

### The King Is Not A Happy Camper

**T**he palace had been beautiful at some point in the past, but was now overgrown with vines (most of which were dead or dying), walls had fallen down, and the bridges were rotting. John noticed there was no water in the moat. In fact, he remembered that all the horse troughs were dry and that the streets were incredibly dusty. The dwarf looked like it could use a bath.

John followed the cart across the creaky bridge and into the palace.

Inside, the dwarf jumped down off the cart (more like fell, John thought), and the horse took itself off to the stables, leaning dangerously to the left. “I am Joe,” said the dwarf, and John said that “Joe” was a pretty ordinary name for somebody who knew a king. “I am the king’s personal secretary and sword-sharpener.” He waited for John to be impressed, and when he wasn’t, Joe seemed to get even smaller. “C’m on,” he said, and headed for one of the dark doors.

The door itself was pitted and scarred and burned around the edges, and it opened only when John put his weight against it. “Got to get that door fixed,” Joe said, but he didn’t seem really convinced it would ever happen. They walked down a long corridor that was filled with the smell of burnt wood. John could make out large tapestries on the wall, but they were tattered and frayed. Something’s happened here, John thought, something terrible and very recent.

Joe and John entered a large room that at least was filled with sunlight. At first John didn’t see him, but at the end of the long room, hidden in shadows, sitting on a chair that had once been painted with gold paint, sat the king. They walked up to him and waited.

All they got was a big sigh. Nothing else. John looked at Joe, but Joe was just looking at the king, with a touch of sadness on his face. They waited. Another sigh. John was getting hungry again.

“Has he come to see me?” the king asked Joe, completely ignoring John.

“Yes he has, Your Excellency With Shining Face,” Joe said with a low hyena laugh voice.

Another sigh. "Well, I suppose I should talk to him," the king said, and shifted his weight a little to face John. "Hello," he said.

"Hello," John said back, not quite sure what title to use, so he added, after a pause, "Your Highness With The Round Tones."

"Oh, stop that, I hate all those names - Your Graceness With The Pointy Toes, Your Laughingness With The White Front Teeth. It gets stupid after a while. And I know nobody means it." Joe gave out a little squeak. "Except you, of course, my dear Joe."

The king got up from his chair, and John could see that he was a fine man, tall and strong, or at least had been at one time. His face, handsome as it was, was lined with worry, and there was no light in the eyes. The king walked over to the window and looked out, saying nothing. Joe's eyes were fixed on him. John waited.

"Did you notice anything strange when you came to town?"

"Well," said John, "I didn't meet anybody. Except Joe. And his horse. Though someone left me food on their doorstep."

"Anything else?"

"They left me wine instead of water, or Coke."

"Coke? What's that?"

"Something we drink from where I come."

"And where is that?"

"You ask an awful lot of questions."

"It's my job - being wise and all that."

"I'm not sure exactly where I came from. It's been a...strange day so far."

The king and Joe looked at each other at almost the same time, and then looked away. If John hadn't been paying attention, he never would have caught the look.

"I was led to this place by a wooden sign that had arms and legs. And I've noticed that there isn't much water around this place - no fountains, no flowers, no baths." He looked at Joe.

Again the king and Joe exchanged glances.

"Other than that," said John, "I can't think of anything."



“Interesting,” the king said, in a way that made John feel the king was trying to buy time.

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why `interesting’?”

“No reason.” With that the king went to another window. “Joe, you might as well tell him.”

Joe suddenly filled with importance (which made him look like a balloon being blown up). “You’ll notice that the palace is not in the best of repair.”

“I noticed a lot of things burnt, a lot of large scratch marks.”

“Well, yes, we’ve had visitor not too long ago. A monster, to be exact. Named the Evil One.”

“With the body of Hulk Hogan, the face of The Joker, and hands with long spiky nails on them, and a low evil voice that goes *Ha, ha, ha!*?”

Joe was lost. “Hulk Hogan? The Joker?”

“Yes,” the king said to John. “That’s how the Evil One described itself. Especially the voice.” The king turned his sad eyes on John. “How did you know this?”

“I’ve had encounters with him before.”

“And lived to tell about it?” The king’s voice plainly said he didn’t believe John.

“No, I haven’t survived. I haven’t been able to get past him.”

“But you’re still alive! How can you be alive if you didn’t survive?” Before John could explain, the king said, “This is quite remarkable. You come back to life. Perhaps there is hope after all.”

“Not unless I can figure out the riddle.”

“What riddle?”

“The Evil One always says, `What makes sadness go away and happiness stay, what makes the eyes cry but not weep?’ I’ve never been able to figure it out, but I know that it has something to do with killing him.”



“Would you like to kill him?” John noticed that the king’s eyes had picked up a little glint in them.

“Well, yeah, I’ve never had a chance to do that.” Suddenly John realized what he was saying. This was not the Nintendo game here - this was real. The Evil One could make hamburger out of him. “I don’t know if I could. What makes you think I could?”

“The Evil One has a mocking tone. Nothing is important to him. He took away our water because we refused to pay him the rubies and gold he wanted. When we showed him that we didn’t have what he wanted, that I was a poor king and that my people didn’t have much more than what was on their backs, he just laughed and said, ‘So what? I think I’ll make you suffer anyway.’ So he dried up our wells, filled our springs up with rocks.

“Before he left he said that I shouldn’t even think of trying to kill him. He said that the only one who could kill him would be someone who came from a place he didn’t know, and how could someone be from someplace and not know it? Then he left, after tearing things up a little and setting a few fires here and there, which we had to put out with what little water we had left in the cisterns.”

“Well, I seem to fit the bill.”

“Will you do it?”

“Don’t you even offer me dinner before you ask? Why should I?”

“How are you going to get home?”

“I don’t know because I don’t know where home is.” John thought about that for a second. “Do you have any ideas?”

“The Evil One also said that the only way to Coke is past him. Do you know what he meant? Is Coke some strange land, some far off paradise?” This information came from Joe. The king smiled. “You’re right, Joe. I had forgotten that.”

“Coke,” John said. It didn’t add up to much - these Evil Ones could be pretty tricky. But if he was going to get home, it seemed like the only way to do it was beat the Evil One, something he hadn’t been able to do ever. But he kept his thoughts to himself. “Dinner,” he said, “and then we’ll talk.”

Joe and the king looked at each other, and then nodded. The king motioned for John to follow, and the three of them went out of the great hall.



## Chapter 4

### The Gold Sword, The Iron Shield

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**T**he meal was simple but filling: bread, some stew, dried fruit. They didn't talk much during the meal; John had the feeling that they would get to the real business afterwards. The room they ate in was small, and the tapestries on the walls had been mostly burned. But John could see that they had once been very beautiful. On one of them, at least on the part that was left, was a picture of a man and a woman. The man was dressed in armor. The woman had a gold sword in her hands, one hand grabbing the blade, the other the handle. John thought that grabbing the blade would cut her hand, but the picture showed her taking the sword and breaking it across her knee. There was a smile on the man's face, and birds of brilliant blues and greens flew around their heads. John felt peaceful looking at the picture, and it almost made him want to lay down and rest.

The king noticed him looking at the tapestry. "That's a picture of what our kingdom was like before the Evil One. We didn't fight, we had a beautiful land full of smiles and birds. That's when we had water. Now the birds have gone away. And we're going to have to use the sword to save ourselves."

A woman came in and cleared the dishes away. "Now, Joe," the king said, "It's time to show our guest Aurora." They stood up, and John stood up, too, and Joe, grabbing a candle, walked to a small door at the back of the room and opened it. The king indicated that John should precede him.

Through the door (it was small; both the king and John had to stoop to get past) was a room; their shadows danced on the wall. Joe moved forward, carrying the light with him, and they followed him to another door. Joe stood in front of it. Holding the candle out at arm's length, Joe said, in a voice that suddenly lost its hyena quality and took on the rich tones of a preacher, "We have come here in a time of great need, a time so bad that we are forced to break our sacred covenant of peace. Please forgive us, but the sword is our only hope." The king took the candle from Joe, and Joe, using a small knife, began breaking apart seals from the door. There were seven of them, and when each one had been cut, Joe said, "May we have peace without delay." Finally the seventh was done, and Joe, standing back, said, "We have broken the seal

of knowledge. The power is released. We fight for the good and fear the bad.” The door, without any help from Joe, slowly opened. Joe took the candle from the king and walked through. John followed; the king came last.

Beyond the door was a room made of large blocks of stone. It was cold. On the floor were rich rugs of woven fabric, and because the Evil One hadn’t gotten here, they were in excellent condition, with pictures of the ocean, of fountains and sunsets and people of all colors smiling and dancing. Then John looked up. Suspended at his eye level, about ten feet from him, was a golden sword, just like the one in the tapestry in the dining room. He could just barely make out the two thin threads holding it aloft, but if he hadn’t been so observant he would have had to say that the sword floated all by itself. It glowed faintly in the candle light, not only throwing glints of light back but also appearing to glow from inside, as if it had its own light source.

Joe turned to John. “This is the ancient sword Aurora, named for the dawn, the coming of light. The kings’ great-grandfather put it away when he declared that his kingdom would no longer pursue the spoils of war but would work for peace and harmony in the land. He talked with the bandits and other kings and princes in the country, and together they agreed that it was better to live without war than constantly spend money and time and blood in fighting battles no one would win. Aurora had helped bring peace, but it was no longer useful, except as a reminder of the ways we should never return to.”

“But,” said the king, his voice coming from behind John, “we can’t afford to let the Evil One destroy what we have built. The Evil One can’t be talked to, reasoned with. He has no sense of right or wrong, only a sense of what he wants and doesn’t want. He doesn’t want beauty; he wants terror. We don’t want to fight; but if we don’t fight when attacked, we will have no country to speak of worth fighting for.”

“I can understand that,” said John. “And this sword is going to do the job?”

“No weapon can do anything without a person to use it, either well or not. This is just a sword, John. It doesn’t have any magical powers, nothing special about it. What makes the sword work is the quality of the person using it.”

“And what makes you think I can use it?”

“You said you’ve fought the Evil One before,” Joe spoke, “and survived his destruction.”

“Well, yeah, but you don’t understand. It was just a game.”



Joe held up his hand. John had noticed that without growing an inch Joe suddenly seemed bigger and more important-looking. “That’s not important. A game can be training. And you also come from a place you don’t know. And you mentioned Coke. The Evil One’s given us the clues to his destruction. You fit the clues. What other hope do we have?”

“John,” said the king, “Aurora won’t kill the Evil One for you; that you have to do for yourself. But it’s the best sword ever made.” John wanted to ask if they had the G.I. Joe turbo-prop flechette shoulder-held narco-blasters, which would beat a sword every time, but he figured that not only wouldn’t they have it, they couldn’t even pronounce it.

The king took Joe’s knife and cut the sword down and handed it to John: as simple as that. “There’s one other thing you’ll need.” The king took down from the wall an iron shield. It was plain and round, about the size of a snow sled. The only feature it had was a small spike, about an inch long, right in the middle. He gave it to John.

The preparations went quickly. After a night’s sleep, food was packed for him, bedding was rolled, the sword and shield were strapped to his backpack, and he was on the bridge, ready to leave. “Where does the Evil One live, by the way?” John decided to ask, since no one had given him that information.

Joe and the king looked at each other and shrugged. “We don’t know,” said Joe. “All we have are rumors and traditions. It’s not like he leaves his business card when he stops by. The most reliable legend (and it’s not all that reliable) says that you must begin the journey at the Cave of the Gnome. Once inside you must go north, west, south, and west, and then you will find a castle, where you will find two doors. If you choose the wrong door, you will plunge into a canyon that never ends. If you choose the right door, you will find the Evil One.”

“Doesn’t seem like much of a choice to me,” said John. “And they’re not very good directions. North how far? West until I hit what? C’mon, I need more information than this.”

Joe shrugged. “That’s all I know.”

The king said, “You’ll know when to do what you need to do.”

“Right,” said John.

“I don’t know if it’s right,” said the king. “It’s just something I’m supposed to say, supposedly being a wise man and all.”





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“The Cave of the Gnome. That must be the cave I was at when that stupid wooden sign came and got me.” Just as he said the phrase “stupid wooden sign,” the stupid wooden sign appeared, tapping its foot impatiently. “Well,” said John, “keeping a candle burning in the window.” He started off, sword and shield clanking, his bird cage and other things banging around, following a piece of wood that kept looking over its shoulder (if it had a shoulder) with an impatient look on its face (if it had a face). Joe waved goodbye. The king didn’t.

In the forest the light was still gloomy, but John didn’t notice. He was full of his own thoughts and confusions. How did it all add up? How would killing the Evil One get him home? The Evil One had said something about “the way to the Coke” - but what did *that* mean? And the riddle - what was the answer to that? John didn’t like the feeling of the whole thing at all. But what other choices did he have? Up ahead he saw the entrance to the Cave of the Gnome. The piece of wood had jumped back up on the tree, looking like another piece of wood that had just had arms and legs.

Taking a deep breath, he entered.



## Chapter 5

### Why Gnomes Don't Go To The Dentist or How To Get To The Forest Of Death

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**A**s he walked further into the cave the entrance to the cave got smaller and smaller until it was no bigger than basketball. It was darker than John had ever seen dark. He reached into his backpack and pulled out the lantern and turned it on. Immediately the cave blossomed into light, and just as immediately there was the gnome, not more than five feet from him. His crystal teeth glittered in the lantern light, almost blinding John.

John looked at the gnome as if he had all the time in the world. The gnome looked a little like Joe, except for the one eye in the middle of the forehead. His skin was green and warty, like a toad's, and his clothes (if you wanted to call them clothes - they were more like a collection of rags tied together with string) reeked of garlic, persimmon, and a touch of ammonia. John didn't know a whole lot about gnomes, but he knew a little. He couldn't kill them with a knife or an axe or a sword because the gnome just grew back whatever body part got cut off. Acid didn't work; the gnome just drank it. The gnome's skin was so slimy that a rope just kept slipping off, and he knocked away things like rocks and boulders as if they were pesty flies. Their favorite method of eating people was to bake them in a huge pot with onions, celery, and apples. The only weak spot on a gnome was their teeth. Made out of crystal, they were very hard until a sound reach a certain frequency. At that frequency the crystal teeth would begin to vibrate, and the gnome would give out the most lovely sound, almost like the clear tone of a perfect bell, until its teeth shattered. Then, without its teeth, it became so embarrassed that it melted into a puddle of shame and evaporated.

John reached into the bird cage and grabbed the bird carefully in his hand. The gnome watched him, apparently unaware of what was going on. The lantern played off his teeth in brilliant rainbow colors. The gnome said, "What do you want?"

"I want to go to the Forest of Death," said John, realizing how stupid that sounded: why would anybody want to go there?

The gnome picked up on it. "Why would anyone want to go there?"

John, feeling a little stupid, had to keep on going. "I'm going to kill the Evil One."

The gnome laughed, and his teeth gave out the most beautiful sound, a little tinkling bell that rings when someone opens a shop door. "You!! " the gnome howled, and John began to get irritated.

"Yeah, me. I'm in a hurry. Let me get by." John took a step, and the gnome stopped laughing immediately, his face twisting into a scowl and his one eye blinking furiously. He just simply said "No."

By this time the gnome had pulled out a rather long ugly- looking knife (John imagined that he could hear the gnome's stomach growling) and started taking steps toward John. "Look," said John, not sure why he was arguing with a creature that had the intelligence of an Oreo cookie and wanted only to make him into a stew, but not wanting to kill him if he could avoid it, "I don't want to hurt you. I only want the Evil One because he hurt friends of mine."

The gnome stopped. "Friends? What are friends?" The gnome looked as confused as any one-eyed slimy-skinned creature could, and John felt immediately felt sorry for him. It almost got him killed. Momentarily off his guard, he didn't see the gnome leaping at him until the last second, and the gnome's knife glanced off the iron shield with a loud clang. The gnome grabbed his mouth, the cave echoing with the shield's iron gonging. "What have you got in there?" the gnome finally managed to say, but he didn't wait around for John to answer.

John felt something warm in his hand as he dodged the gnome's knife, and realized that it was the bird. He let it go. "Sing, damn you!" John yelled, and the bird, sitting up on one of the out-thrusts of rock, began the most beautiful tune John had ever heard. The gnome stopped, too. The bird trilled and ran up and down the scale, and the cave was filled with joyous music.

And then it got louder and louder, and even John's ears began to hurt. Under the music he could also hear the ringing hum of the gnome's teeth, and the gnome was grabbing his mouth in pain, jumping up and down like a cat on a hot stove. Finally, with the bird singing as loudly as it could, and John hunched over, his head buried between his legs and having the worst headache he'd ever had, he heard a big explosion. He looked up. The air was filled with glinting crystal dust; the lantern light threw up rainbows all over the place. The gnome himself was dead on the cave floor (or at least the puddle of him was there, slowly



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evaporating away in a thin slimy steam). The bird stopped immediately, and then flew straight for the small ball of light that showed where the cave entrance was.

John sat up, shaking his head. The puddle had almost disappeared. The quiet of the cave was almost unnerving. The rocks were covered with the fine particles of the former gnome's former teeth. That was it, that was all; he could get on with the adventure. He wished that the gnome had listened; but he also knew that gnomes were gnomes, and there wasn't any getting around that.

He picked up the lantern and started moving down the cave. Eventually the light at the entrance to the cave disappeared. Just behind John, just outside the circle of his light, were a pair of eyes. They started moving, too.





## Chapter 6

### The Forest of Death

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**T**he light from the lantern danced over the rock walls. John had no idea how far underground he was but felt he was going down and down. It was getting colder and he could see his breath. He had no idea where he was traveling, other than Joe's less-than-helpful directions: north, west, south, west. Right now he figured that he was going east. The cave mouth faced east and he hadn't taken many turns or twists as he moved along. So, at some point when it seemed like the right thing to do, he had to take a left turn and start north.

He noticed that the cave had started to change. At first it had been like a long tube, but now it had started to broaden out, and long spikes of stone had started growing from the cave floor. He knew they were called "stalagmites" and that they happened because water that contained minerals dripped from the ceiling and the minerals built up layers over a long time.

But these stalagmites were different. They looked like trees with thick trunks. About ten feet above the floor were what looked like branches (the lantern didn't show much - and besides, the lantern's light was growing a little dimmer). He could hear the dripping of water, like rain dripping from leaves in a forest after a rainfall. And then suddenly it struck him: The Forest of Death. In the game he had never gotten to the Forest of Death and had always assumed it was a real forest. But it wasn't. It was underground. It was something that *looked* a forest.

But there was another question nagging at him: Why the Forest of Death? And then he saw why: a skull. A human skull. Then he saw others, some tucked away in the rock walls. Bones hung from branches and peeped out from under rocks, and suddenly it seemed that the whole place was filled with bones, bones on top of bones, like his dinner plate after he finished eating three pieces of chicken. So this is where all the bones of all the people who have ever lived went, sinking through the earth from their graves, down and down, until they came here, rested for a while, then started percolating up to the surface again. He'd heard stories about this, never really believing them. Now he did believe.

And then heard the sound - again. He'd been hearing it for a while now. Whatever it was tried to match its footsteps with his, but it was never quite exact,

though it was pretty good. His heart was racing, and he had never wished so hard to be somewhere other than where he was. But keep calm, he said to himself, there's got to be a way to figure this out. Maybe the thing behind him had some answers.

John stopped and put the lantern down, shucking off his backpack. He picked up the bird cage and rope walked off into the darkness. About five feet away he stopped and waited. Nothing at first, then the scrape-flop, scrape-flop he'd been hearing. Then the eyes. The creatures seemed to be all eyes at first, so big were they. But it had two, not like the gnome, and it walked into the circle of light thrown down by the lantern carefully, its large webbed feet treading lightly, its nose twitching. He poked at the backpack and then hissed out, "Where are you?"

John picked up a rock and threw it over the creature's head. It turned. John crept a little bit closer and threw another rock, and then tossed the rope gently and had it tight before the creature knew what had happened. Moving quickly John bundled the creature into the bird cage and latched the door. "Well," said John, "who do I have?"

The creature thrashed about as if it were on fire. "Cut the rope! Cut the rope! It's burning me!" At first John thought it was a distraction, but he could quickly see that the creature was in pain. Picking up his knife he cut the rope through the bars of the cage and pulled it free. Across the dark skin of the creature were long red welts, just as if John had taken a hot piece of metal to its skin.

The creature, breathing heavily, hissed at John. "Why did you do that?"

"You were following me. This isn't the friendliest place in the world."

"Let me go."

"I'd like to, but how do I know you won't kill me?"

The creature didn't answer. Instead, it said, "What are you doing here?"

"I want to kill the Evil One. Though I'm not quite sure why, except that it has something to do with getting home. It's all very confusing."

"Let me go, and I'll take you there."

"Where?"

"To the Great One's castle."



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“Why do you call him the Great One?” John sat down; he was suddenly very tired.

The creature didn’t answer.

“I asked you a question. Everyone calls him the Evil One; why do you call him the Great One?”

The creature mumbled, “I meant to say the Evil One. He used to be great; he isn’t anymore.”

“I think you have a story to tell me. But I’m too tired to hear it right now. I need sleep.”

The creature did what John could only call smile, though it looked more like someone twisting Play-Doh into a pretzel. “How will you keep me from getting away while you sleep? Maybe even killing you?”

“Can I rely on your word? Probably not. No, I’ve got a bunch of rope in here. I’m going to tie this cage up with it. You’ll be fine as long as you keep away from the bars of the cage.” John did just that, until the bird cage looked like a giant bundle of rope. Inside John could hear the slightly hissing breath of the creature.

John turned off the lantern and kept the knife by his side. Just between the strands of the rope he could see something faintly shining, a white glow, and realized it must be the creature’s eyes. “What’s your name?” John asked as he fell off to sleep.

“Pisgah,” the creature answered.

“Goodnight, Pisgah.”







## Chapter 7

### Pisgah Tells A Story

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John didn't know how long he'd slept since there was no clock and no sun or stars. When he opened his eyes he saw the faint glow of Pisgah's eyes, so knew at least that he hadn't been dreaming. He switched the lantern on and its white light bounced off the skulls and bones of the place.

"Did you sleep well?" Pisgah asked, a slight sarcasm in his voice.

"Very well, thank you." John pulled some dried fruit out of his backpack and chewed on it. "Tell me a story, Pisgah."

"What story?"

"I don't care. Anything. Like, why did you call him the Great One?"

John heard Pisgah take in a deep breath, the same kind of breath he heard when he'd just taken the rope off him, a breath of pain. "Why do you want to kill him?"

"I have friends that have been hurt by him. He dried up all their water, burned their palace, hurt people. And I need to figure how to get home, and it seems that killing him is part of it." He paused. "Would you like something to eat?"

Pisgah didn't respond. "You're a fool. You can't do it." John didn't answer, partly because he knew Pisgah was right, at least as far as knowing what he would do to kill the Evil One. He hadn't been able to do it yet - what made him think he could do it now?

"I think you and I have to make a deal," Pisgah whispered. "A deal."

"What kind of deal?"

"You let me go, and I'll tell you how to kill the Evil One."

"Nice deal, except how do I know you know how?"

"I know how. But you have to let me go."

"And what would you do then? Run off and tell him, so I could join all the bones around here? No, that's not a smart move."

“He has something I want - something precious. I want it back.” There was a tremor in his voice that told John that either Pisgah was a great actor or he really felt what he was saying deeply. John didn’t know what to do. “Tell me a story, Pisgah.”

Pisgah had been a member of a village several miles from the cave, a village that had no king. The people instead voted on everything, and everybody had to agree or something wouldn’t be done. Men and women could vote just the same. They had no soldiers and they spent all of their time growing food, making clothes, singing songs, and laughing. One day the Evil One came and set himself up as their king, calling himself the Great One. No one could vote on anything, and only a few people in the village had the right to do anything. These people were the rich ones, and they got rich because the Evil One had taken everyone’s land and given it to them. The rest of the people had to work the rich people’s land, and they never had enough food or clothes. And no one laughed anymore.

Pisgah had led a rebellion against the Evil One. All of his friends had been killed, but the Evil One kept Pisgah alive, bound by rope. The Evil One like to take the rope and twist around Pisgah’s skin until his skin got so raw from the rope burns that even the cool evening breeze blowing across it gave him pain. He kept Pisgah in the dark, feeding him raw fish, until he broke Pisgah’s spirit and Pisgah called him the Great One. From that day on Pisgah was so ashamed that he ran away to live in the caves. The Evil One eventually destroyed everyone there, bringing their bones back to the Forest of Death to amuse himself.

Pisgah said that the first thing the Evil One had done was outlaw laughter. He sewed people’s mouths together to keep them from laughing, and it seemed as if laughter was the one thing the Evil One couldn’t stand. Pisgah had lived in the caves so long that he couldn’t think of going back to the world. The caves would be where he died.

John thought for a long time about Pisgah’s story and decided he was telling the truth. He undid the rope around the cage and let Pisgah out. “What is it you want from the Evil One? What’s he got that’s so precious?”

Pisgah ignored the question. “What do you have wrapped up here?” he said, poking at the burlap covering up the sword and shield.

“Nothing,” John answered. He put the backpack on. “What’s our deal?”

“I will take you to where the Evil One lives.”

“And you’ll tell me how to kill him?”



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“Yes.”

“And what do I have to do for you?”

“You will help me get back what the Evil One took away from me.”

“Which is?”

Pisgah ignored him again and started walking off, to the north. “Hey!” said John, “you didn’t answer my question.” Pisgah turned his glowing eyes on John. John picked up the lantern and started off. “Turn off the lantern,” Pisgah commanded, and their path was lit by the faint white glow of Pisgah’s eyes. “I see better in the dark.” All around them John could feel the bones stare at him at they walked north, then west, then south, then west again.





## Chapter 8

### The Evil One

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**T**hey stood outside a wall that looked as rock-solid as any wall in the cave, but Pisgah showed John the small, almost- invisible hairline crack that showed where the door (and it was a door, the door to the Evil One's palace) fit into the rock wall. So this was it, the final challenge.

"How do you we get in?" John asked, finding that he was whispering to Pisgah.

"No one uses this door. Too drafty. We have to climb." Pisgah looked up. John looked up, too, into cold and bottomless dark. "But I can't see in the dark," John noted. "It'll be a little hard, don't you think?"

"It's not far, maybe a hundred feet. There are windows up top, for ventilation. We can get in that way." He turned his eyes on John. "You'll have to follow me; you'll have to trust me."

Pisgah took off. John made sure the backpack was sitting straight, then followed the white glow ahead of him, just like a flashlight at night. He closed his eyes, and he found that he was better able to feel the handholds. He would open them to find out where Pisgah was, then close them again. His hands and feet seemed to see for themselves, and he thought back to the king's words, "You'll know when to do what you need to do." He had to trust blindness, his own, Pisgah's. It didn't seem to make sense, but it did make sense.

Finally they came to rest on a ledge high above the cave floor. Pisgah was right - there were ventilation holes cut into the rock, one running to the east, one to the west, and from them John could feel strong drafts of warm air, air that smelled of burned meat and dirty socks. "Through here," said Pisgah, "and you can reach any part of the castle you want."

"Where do I want to go?"

"You don't know much, do you?"

"The people who asked me to come here didn't give me much information."

"You should pick better friends. The Evil One always sits in his throne room. Always. Because in the throne room is the sunfire, the source of his life. If he stays from it too long, he begins to lose his powers."

“How do you know this?”

“I’ve seen it. Remember that I was his slave. He took me here one time. I have seen it close up. He put me in it. Which is why my skin is dark. It burned me without killing me, gave me pain I could never get rid of. My pain gave him pleasure.”

“Can the fire be put out?”

“It’s not a fire like the fire you know. I don’t know where it comes from. It burns, it seems, forever.”

“Well,” said John, “here goes.” He started to crawl in the west hole. “Are you coming?”

Pisgah seemed lost in thought, and John had to repeat his question. “Yes, I’m coming,” Pisgah answered. “But do you know which air shaft goes where?”

John looked back at the two glowing eyes. “Well, no.” Pisgah pushed him aside. He threw a rock into the one John had been ready to crawl through. It fell and fell and fell. And no sound of it ever hitting. “I do,” he said, turning to John, and took off into the east shaft. John crawled after Pisgah into the darkness.

John had no idea where he was. There was darkness all around him. The rough stone was gouging into his knees and the sword and shield were cutting into his back. Pisgah didn’t seem to mind it. He scuttled along the passageway, waiting patiently for John to catch up, making little impatient clucking noises with his tongue every time John stumbled or bumped his shin. John was about ready to give up and rest when Pisgah, motioning him forward, pointed.

Below them was a room filled with bright orange light, a light so bright that it seemed thick, as if it could be cut. It came from a large bowl cut out of the rock, a bowl full of flame. And on a throne, seated in all his ugly splendor, was the Evil One. He was surrounded by a dozen ape-looking creatures, but there was not much else: no bubbling cauldrons, no plumes of steam coming out of the ground, no bats or rats. It was as cold and unloving a place as the Evil One was cold and unloving. The only thing that had any life in it was the sunfire.

He looked up at them. “It would have been easier to knock,” he said. Behind them Pisgah and John heard movement, and then hands against their bodies, and then the warm rush of air as they were pushed over the edge and started to fall through space. In their ears was the vile *Ha, ha, ha* of the Evil One. “Welcome,” the voice said, “to my humble home.”



## Chapter 9

### It Sure Would Be Nice To Have Some Coke

**W**hen Pisgah and John landed, it wasn't on the hard rock floor, as they expected, but in the arms of two hairy, foul-smelling beasts, who grunted a little as they caught their weight. The beasts then dropped them to the floor, and for a moment John and Pisgah laid there, catching their breaths (which seemed to be running all over the place and didn't want to be caught right away) and wondering what was going to happen next.

"My move," the Evil One said, "so I'll start with being gracious. How are you, my Pisgah? And you - I feel like I've seen you before? Have I?"

John looked up at the Evil One and felt his stomach turn. No image on the computer could capture how evil this...thing was, how his skin folded like a lizard's, his face white and green, the long spear-like nails on his hands built only for cruelty. This was not a creature you could argue with, not someone who would ever feel sorry for anything he did. He had no feelings like that. He had no feelings at all. John couldn't understand that, but he knew it had to be destroyed. "I don't know where we would have met," John answered, "I usually don't hang around cesspools all that much."

"Oh, someone with spirit? How boring." He got up from his throne and walked over to the fire. He put his hands out toward it, as if he were warming them, and then put his hands *into* the fire. He looked at one of his apes and pointed to John, flames leaping off the end of the claw. "Kill him."

John figured that if he didn't fight now, as much as he didn't want to, he wasn't going to be around much longer, so he quickly unwrapped the golden sword and iron shield. The sword picked up the light from the sunfire, and the fire blazed up briefly, as if the sword had called and the fire had answered. The Evil One looked at the fire, puzzled.

The ape got the flat of the sword against his head before he even knew the sword was moving, and he was out cold on the floor. John was surprised at the sword - as heavy as it was, it moved like silk and feathers, and it seemed to have its own life and mind, preferring to wound or knock out than kill. John liked the sword a lot.



The other apes got the same treatment, either knocked out or banged on the shins or ankles or stabbed just a little in the rear end. Finally they all retreated, leaving John alone in the middle of the room and the Evil One standing by the fire. John realized that Pisgah was nowhere to be found.

“Well,” said the Evil One, “we seem to be all alone. I don’t know who you are or why you’re here or where you got that ridiculous sword and shield, but I don’t appreciate you coming into my house and setting it upside down.”

“I guess you could say it’s a little bit of your own medicine,” John replied, a little put off by how cool the Evil One was trying to be. “I’m coming from some people who were a little upset that you dried up all their water.”

“Oh, wonderful, another social activist! You’re as bad as Pisgah - where is he? - that silly man who tried to lead a rebellion against me. There are no rebellions against me. I am evil, pure and simple, and there’s no power against me. Especially from someone like you, who won’t kill his enemies. Why didn’t you kill my servants, great sir knight?”

John didn’t like that - it confused him. But the Evil One’s voice went on. “People like you are weak because you have morals, because you’re interested in wrong and right. I’m not. I’m interested in power. I want to be able to tell people what to do and have them do it. Just because I want it, that’s all. No other reason - my pleasure, that’s all. Do you understand that?”

John also realized that as the Evil One was talking he was moving closer, and he felt like a rabbit in the headlights of an oncoming car. (Speaking of headlights, where was Pisgah?) So he took a few steps back to get his mind back on track and remember that he was here to get rid of this guy and get the water back. It didn’t look like it was going to be easy.

“I understand that it isn’t right to take things that aren’t yours and destroy people’s lives.” The Evil One reached out his claws toward John; John kept backing up. The fire flared in the background and the sword in his hand hummed each time it did. The sword swung itself; John couldn’t say that he had any choice in it. It clanged against the claws, lopping a foot off one of them. The Evil One withdrew his hand immediately, not hurt, just surprised. The fire flared; the sword hummed.

The Evil One backed up to the fire and, reaching into it, flung a handful of it at John. John was frozen for a moment, astonished that the Evil One could do something as amazing as throw fire, but the shield, not waiting for John, moved



up and caught the ball of fire on its sharp point. The fire hung there, sizzling, and then died. The Evil One threw another, and the same thing happened. Soon the fireballs were coming so fast it was like one long stream of fire, and the shield, without ever getting hot, diverted the flame with its point, catching it and then putting it out.

They were at a stalemate. Neither had the power to kill the other. The king had been right about Aurora: it had no special powers to kill, only to defend. Suddenly the Evil One moved to his right, where there was a door. "I don't have time for these games." He left. Pisgah appeared from behind the throne.

John shouted at him. "Well, what do I do know? You said you knew how to kill him, but a lot of help you've been! Do you know?"

Pisgah glanced at him, then away. "No. I lied. I just was too afraid to come here myself, and I was hoping you would kill him before I had to tell you this. But you can't kill him." He paused. "There's no way to kill him."

"Great! What am I going to do now?" He turned to Pisgah. "What did he have that you wanted back so badly?"

Pisgah looked back at him. "My dignity. No, my laughter."

"Your laughter?" John shook his head and couldn't help but smile. "You were going to risk my ass for laughter. That's stupid, that's so stupid that I can't even get angry." He noticed large tears coming from Pisgah's eyes. The sword moved in his hand, only the slightest amount, and the fire curled upwards, and at that same moment the riddle came into his head: "What makes sadness go away and happiness stay, what makes the eyes cry but not weep?" Pisgah was weeping, but...but...there were other things that made people cry without making them weep. Like...the answer was right there, right on the edge. Like....

"You told me the Evil One outlawed something when he took over your village?"

"Yes. Laughter."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

"That's got to be it."

"What?"



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“The answer to the riddle, what you’re looking for: laughter. It makes sadness go away, happiness stay, and you can cry when you laugh but not weep.” John paused. “But so what? What am I supposed to do - laugh my way out of this?”

“He also didn’t like to be touched in any way. If anyone came close to him, he would point his claws at them to keep their distance. And another odd thing: he never picked anything up. His servants always did. Even when he tied rope around me, he didn’t tie it: it was one of this thugs.”

John thought a moment. “I’ve got a plan.”



## Chapter 10

### Towards Home

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When they saw the Evil One again, he was sitting high in one of the stone trees, an orange glow around him. John approached him without the sword and shield. Pisgah was nowhere to be seen.

“Ah, my weakling,” the Evil One said, “where is your sword, your shield?”

“Why did you run away?”

“I didn’t run away!” the Evil One roared, and fire leapt from his words. John stood his ground.

“I didn’t come here to hear lies,” John replied. “I’m leaving - you’re not worth the trouble.”

“What?!” The Evil One jumped from the branch to the ground, lighting up the cave with his glow. Just off to the right, behind the Evil One, John could see Pisgah trailing thirty feet of rope.

John turned around and walked away, but he could feel the Evil One behind him moving closer. He had to time this just right or else it was all over.

“How dare you walk away from *me*!” the Evil One shouted. John kept walking. The Evil One reached one of his claws to grab John by the shoulder, and as soon as John felt the claw against his body, he turned and grabbed it and started pulling as quickly as he could. The Evil One writhed at the unaccustomed touch, and John, talking as quickly as he could, shouted, “You can’t bear any human touch. And you can’t bear any laughter. They show you everything you aren’t, show you everything you don’t have in your life. Power? It’s all yours.” With that John began to laugh, as loud and as hard as he could, and the cave filled with echoes. The Evil One, in John’s hands, twisted as if in great pain, and while he did, Pisgah looped the rope around him, again and again until the Evil One was bound as tight as a drum. Then, without John knowing what Pisgah was doing until it was too late, Pisgah dragged the Evil One to the edge of an abyss and threw him in. As John ran up to Pisgah, Pisgah’s eyes burning white hot, he saw a small flash of bright orange flame in the deep darkness, then nothing.

Back in the throne room Aurora flashed the light of the sunfire onto the walls. John looked at Pisgah. Pisgah, to his own surprise, smiled, then laughed.

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John laughed, too. “Well,” said John, “at least we’ll get some peace and quiet for a while.” And Pisgah laughed at that as if he’d never laughed at anything in his life, and laughing was a whole new feeling.

“I’m thirsty,” John said, and snapped his head around when he heard Aurora fall to the ground. Then John looked at the flame. He walked over to it, and without quite knowing why he was doing was he was doing, he stuck his hand into the fire. There was no pain. And in the middle of the flame was something metallic and round. He pulled it out, and laughed when he saw what it was: a can of Coke Classic. And, oddly enough, cold.

“Pisgah, you’ve got to take Aurora and the shield back, tell them that the Evil One is gone. As for me,” he popped the can open and drank, “I’m outa here. Goodbye.”



## Chapter 11

### Time For Supper

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**T**he “Help” message had disappeared from the screen and he heard his mother yelling to him in that tone of voice which said that she’d already called him two times. “John! It’s time for dinner.”

On the screen was another message. “You have beaten the Evil One this time. But he will come back.” The game started to play the Evil One’s laugh, but John turned off the computer in the middle of that. What a weird dream, John thought, as he put away the disks.

Just before he turned off the light he reached into his pocket and pulled out a feather, a bright blue and green one. Now how did that get there? he thought. His mom called him again, a “This is the Last Time” very much in her voice. He put the feather on his desk and turned out the light.

His father was at the table. “How’d the game go?”

“I tell you,” his mother said, “he gets so wrapped up in that thing.”

“Well, Dad, I got the Evil One this time. But he’ll be back.”

“What do you want to drink?” his mother asked him. “Coke,” he said. She handed him a can and a glass. On the back of the can, in an advertisement about seeing the magic kingdom at Disneyworld, was a small gold sword. His hand tingled from the coldness of the can.

He looked at his mom as she spooned vegetables onto his plate. “What’s for dessert?” he asked.



## **Plays for the Stage**

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## Brain Drain

### DESCRIPTION

In this tale of gentle trickery, Crocodile is ready to eat El Mono (The Monkey) when El Mono fools him with a diversion. Though Crocodile is faster and stronger than El Mono, El Mono uses his brains to outwit brawn, showing (at least sometimes) that the mind is faster than muscle.

### CHARACTERS

- **El Mono**, should be played by a young child, male or female - the salient feature, aside from good acting ability, is that the child be light in weight, since CROCODILE will have to carry him or her for most of the play. "He" is used for convenience.
- **Crocodile**, should be played an adult or a strong adolescent, who will carry MONO on his or her shoulders - "he" is used for convenience.
- **Narrator**, can be male or female - "he" is used for convenience. It would be good, in terms of costumes, to have NARRATOR wear something like painter's pants, with pockets.

### SETTING

- By the banks of a river

### TIME

- Fluid

### PROPS

- Two kazoos
- A fake brain
- A bunch of bananas (one real, the rest fake), held at the end of a pole
- A small paper boat, folded origami-style
- Small bowl or bucket of water
- Similar small bowl or bucket of confetti
- A piece of light blue cloth on a stick, like a flag.
- A small, battery-operated handfan
- A flashlight
- A wood block with mallet
- A tail for CROCODILE

### MISCELLANEOUS

- Three step ladders: two used upstage, one by NARRATOR
- One heavy board between the two upstage ladders on which MONO will stand
- Director is free to create some other arrangement that accomplishes the same effect of a monkey in a tree.

## NOTES

- Sound effects by the actors; pre-show music, such as lively dance tunes, would be nice.
- Lighting is kept general. If there are facilities in the space for lighting, then the director is free to put in any lighting effect he or she wants.
- No make-up is required, but the director is free to use any sort of make-up and/or masks.
- NARRATOR is pretty free to ad lib with the audience, as long as it keeps the flow going.
- CROCODILE can swim on a skateboard.

\* \* \* \* \*

Pre-show music out. MONO and CROCODILE come out, one on each side of the stage, and do a kazoo fanfare. NARRATOR comes onstage with a bound, like a game show host - encourages the audience to applaud. The kazoo fanfare ends with a button. MONO climbs up on the board between the two upstage ladders; CROCODILE sits underneath after he puts on his tail. NARRATOR is holding a fake brain.

NARRATOR

You all know what this is, right? A *brain*. I got one, you got one, all God's chillun got one.

He tries to balance it on top of his head, but it falls off.

NARRATOR

I really like my brain. Do you like yours? I especially like it when I use it - I feel like my head is just *sizzling*!

NARRATOR holds his brain with his knees.

NARRATOR

Everyone do this: put your hands on top of your head, and get your fingers going like you're scratching your head. And now go, "Zzzzzzzzz!" like it's electricity. *That's* what the brain feels like when it's smokin'! Feels *gooooood*! Okay, this is a story about what happens when you really use your brain and don't just use it for a hatrack.

He goes to someone in the first row, can ad lib as needed.



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NARRATOR

Would you hold on to my brain for me while I tell this story?  
I'll pick it up later. Don't let it slip out of your hands! I need  
it, so be careful, okay? All right, I have to get back to work  
up here, so I'll be by later my brain. Take good care of it.

NARRATOR to the audience, making "muscle moves."

NARRATOR

A story of brain versus brawn, mind versus muscle. One  
day, El Mono, the monkey -

MONO signals from where he is.

NARRATOR

- saw some delicious bananas on the other side of the river.

NARRATOR lifts up the bananas, holding them as if they were just out of  
MONO's reach.

NARRATOR

You'd like these, wouldn't you?

MONO

Every single delicious one of them.

NARRATOR

But you have a problem. He has a problem.

MONO

I can't reach them!

NARRATOR

Mono, bananas; bananas, Mono; river in-between.

MONO

(despairingly)

How am I going to get them?

NARRATOR puts the bananas down and brings both buckets to MONO.

NARRATOR

He thought maybe he'd swim across.



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MONO tentatively sticks a toe in the water but takes it out quickly - this will establish that there is water in one of the buckets.

MONO

I hate getting wet!

MONO reaches down to flick some water at NARRATOR.

NARRATOR

Hey, stop it. Aw, come on, try it again.

MONO tries it again with the other toe, in the other bucket, with the same response.

MONO

Getting wet is for the birds!

NARRATOR

But not for the monkey.

NARRATOR puts the buckets down.

NARRATOR

Because he didn't know how to swim.

MONO takes out the paper boat. When he gets in it, it crumples, and he throws it away.

NARRATOR

Mono tried making a little boat.

MONO

But it sank - with me in it!

NARRATOR

And he really hated getting wet!

MONO

(shaking himself dry)

I really hate getting wet!

NARRATOR

He had to figure out a way to get those bananas.



---

MONO takes up the Thinker's pose.

NARRATOR

He thought really hard - you could see the steam rise from his ears, you could smell the rubber burning, you could -

MONO

All right, already, they get the picture!

NARRATOR

But not one idea came to him.

MONO

And, boy, is my stomach growling.

All the actors make a growling noise.

MONO

Really growling.

They make an even bigger growl.

MONO

That's more like it - oh, poor me!

NARRATOR

Just then, Crocodile -

CROCODILE

That's me.

NARRATOR

- cruised on by like silk.

CROCODILE, as he swims, comes close to the audience with his tail.

CROCODILE

Don't you just love my tail? Huh? Huh?

NARRATOR

Looks like he wants some applause - so let's give him some applause.



NARRATOR starts clapping in a rhythmical way and gets the audiences clapping as well. CROCODILE responds to the rhythm with rhyme.

### CROCODILE

I'm a Crocodile  
See me smile  
Got a long flashy tail  
That goes for a mile

My teeth are keen  
My skin is green  
I'm the sleekest piece of Nature  
You've ever seen.

Boom, chakalakala  
Boom, chakalakala

When the sun was new  
I was right here, too,  
I am as old as the earth  
And a lot older than you

So clap for me  
Clap for my beau-tee  
I'm the ruler of the river  
And a mystery

Boom, chakalakala  
Boom, chakalakala  
Boom, chakalakala - BOOM!

### NARRATOR

(finishing up the clapping)

Thank you Crocodile.

### CROCODILE

(in an Elvis voice)

Thank you very much. Thank you, thank you.

### MONO

Can we get back to *my* problem, now?



---

CROCODILE

Hey!

He makes a gesture of something orbiting something else.

NARRATOR

Oh, that's right. Everything in the world revolves around El Mono.

CROCODILE

I don't know if I like you.

MONO

Who cares? Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who's the fairest of them all? Me, of course!

NARRATOR

So, the Crocodile was swimming in the river.

(to CROCODILE)

Go on, swim.

CROCODILE reluctantly starts swimming back and forth in the river.

NARRATOR

And Mono called out to him.

MONO

Hey, Crocodile!

CROCODILE does not answer.

MONO

Hey, Crocodile!

CROCODILE

Did I hear my name?

MONO

Hey!





---

CROCODILE

No, I think it's just the buzzing of some really annoying flies.  
Do you hear anything important? No, I didn't think so. I  
think I'll just swim here in the river.

MONO  
(really loud)

Hey, Crocodile, come here!

CROCODILE

Oh, are you speaking to me?

MONO

No, I just thought I'd stand here and yell until my lungs fell  
out for the heck of it.

CROCODILE

How may I help you?

NARRATOR holds up the bananas.

MONO

Can you carry me on your back to get those bananas?

NARRATOR puts the bananas down, picks up the bucket, and sprinkles  
water on MONO.

CROCODILE

Why don't you swim over there?

MONO

Because I don't like water.

(to NARRATOR)

Hey, enough!

CROCODILE

I *could* do it, I suppose -

MONO

But will you?



---

CROCODILE  
(to the audience)

Should I?

MONO  
I'm really hungry. I'm soooo hungry. I'm really, really hungry.

NARRATOR  
He's pretty hungry.

CROCODILE  
I'll give you a ride.

MONO  
You will?

CROCODILE  
(to the audience)  
I'll give you a - very interesting ride.

CROCODILE take MONO on his back and begins the trip across the river. NARRATOR, while continuing the story, also adds the “special effects,” standing on the third ladder to do them. The effects are wind (the handheld battery fan), waves (the blue cloth on a stick, with the CROCODILE bobbing up and down), lightning (the NARRATOR making thunder and lightning sounds with the flashlight), and rain (which will be the bucket of confetti poured on MONO). NARRATOR will have to move the ladder as CROCODILE swims the river.

NARRATOR  
Okay, here comes our big special effects budget. The ride across the river was not easy. There was lots of wind.

Blows them with the hand-held fan and makes a big “Whoosh!” sound.

NARRATOR  
There were waves that made them bounce like a bumpy bus ride.

CROCODILE bobs MONO up and down while NARRATOR waves the blue cloth over him; MONO looks nauseous.



---

MONO

I think I'm going to lose it.

NARRATOR

There was lightning.

NARRATOR blinks the flashlight on and off, making the appropriate lightning sounds.

NARRATOR

And there was rain.

NARRATOR can play with the audience a bit as he holds the bucket - then he dumps the confetti onto MONO.

MONO

Hey, Crocodile, how much longer?

NARRATOR brings the ladder downstage and stands on it while holding out the bunch of bananas.

CROCODILE

It won't be long now.

Finally, they get there, and MONO takes the real banana out of the bunch and eats it in a funny manner. He takes the rest of the bananas and holds them.

NARRATOR

Mono had gotten what he wanted, and he was very happy.

MONO

Hey, Crocodile, I'm done. Hey! Let's get back.

NARRATOR

But what did Crocodile get out of the deal?

CROCODILE

Oh, you'll see.

NARRATOR

I think Crocodile knows something that Mono doesn't know.  
What do you think?



---

NARRATOR gets audience responses.

MONO

Hey, let's go.

CROCODILE

Yes, little master, we have a long way to go.

NARRATOR

So they turned around to come back. I don't have the energy to do all the special effects again. There was wind.

NARRATOR pulls out the fan, turns in on and off quickly.

NARRATOR

There were waves.

NARRATOR waves the blue cloth.

NARRATOR

There was lightning.

NARRATOR flashes the flashlight.

NARRATOR

There was rain. Enough. As they got closer to the shore, Mono began thinking about all the bananas he was going to eat.

MONO

First, I'll eat one - a little one. I'll eat it slowly - little, little bites. It'll taste yummy to my tummy. Then, maybe, another one -

NARRATOR

But Mono suddenly realized that Crocodile wasn't taking him back to where they had started out.

If possible, this sequence should be taken out into the audience.

MONO

Hey, where are we going?



---

CROCODILE

We're going to *my* special place now.

MONO

I think I like my place better.

CROCODILE

Oh, trust me - this place is much better.

CROCODILE winks at the audience.

CROCODILE

Better for me, that is. We're going to look for my special food.

NARRATOR

Mono didn't like the sound of that.

MONO

I don't like the sound of that.

NARRATOR

Mono was in a tight place.

MONO

I can't outfight him.

CROCODILE

You certainly can't outswim me.

NARRATOR runs to the audience member who is holding the brain.  
NARRATOR holds it up and shines the flashlight on it.

NARRATOR

But -

MONO

(looking at NARRATOR)

But - But what? What are you doing?

NARRATOR is indicating the brain with the flashlight.



---

NARRATOR

Look! Look at what you have! What does he have?

Gets audience responses.

MONO

Ohhh - ohhh! Right! Ahem. Mr. Crocodylus, for that is your Latin name, you know -

CROCODILE

Just call me Crocky, for short -

CROCODILE gives an exaggerated laugh: "Bwa-ha-ha"

CROCODILE

- because you only have a *short* time left!

MONO

Well, Mr. Crocky, just where are you taking me?

CROCODILE

My poor mother is ill -

MONO

I am sorry to hear that - bring me to my home so that I can write her a get-well card.

CROCODILE

Wouldn't help. No, the only thing that will cure her is -

CROCODILE begins crying "crocodile tears."

CROCODILE

I hate to tell you this - it really pains me - but the only thing that will make her better is a bowl of soup made out of - *monkey brains!*

Again, the exaggerated laugh: "Bwa-ha-ha"

CROCODILE

Ah, here is my house now.



---

NARRATOR

Mono only had a moment to come up with a brilliant idea.

MONO

Oh, silly crocodile! I wish you had told me *before* we left.

CROCODILE

Why?

MONO

Because - I'm such a ninny! - I left my brain at my house *on the other side of the river*.

Big wink to the audience.

CROCODILE

You what?

MONO

I don't want to wear it out, so sometimes I take it out just to give it a rest. My brain is *on the other side of the river*.

CROCODILE

Where is it?

NARRATOR

Let's give Mono some help.

Gets audience to repeat the phrase.

NARRATOR

"On the other side of the river."

MONO

On the other side of the river. You'll have to take me to *the other side of the river* so that I can plug it back in, and then I'd be glad to come help your poor, poor mother.

CROCODILE

Hmmm -

MONO

Really.



---

Knocks his head with his knuckles; as he does, NARRATOR raps the wood block.

MONO

Can't you hear it echo? Empty -

Knocks head, knocks block.

MONO

- empty -

Knocks head, knocks block.

MONO

- empty -

Knocks head, knocks block.

CROCODILE

Sounds empty. All right.

CROCODILE reverses direction and swims towards MONO's home.

NARRATOR

You already know the special effects, so I won't go through them again:

NARRATOR makes abbreviated gestures and sounds.

NARRATOR

- wind, waves, lightning, and rain.

CROCODILE gets to MONO's house.

MONO

Okay, let me off.

CROCODILE

Can't you reach your brain from here?

MONO

Oh, no, no - I keep it up in the tree there, away from all the ants and birds and creepy-crawly things.





---

NARRATOR

(to audience)

Can you see the brain up there?

MONO

It's right up there. See, right there.

NARRATOR takes the brain and stands upstage with it over his head.

NARRATOR

Now can you see it? Good.

MONO

See, there's my brain. Now move closer.

CROCODILE moves closer but not close enough.

MONO

You've got to get closer so I can get up into the tree.

CROCODILE

I don't know.

MONO

I don't have a brain in my head - how could I trick you?

CROCODILE

All right.

MONO gets off CROCODILE and does an exaggerated laugh: "Bwa-ha-ha"

CROCODILE

Go get your brain!

MONO

(pointing to his head)

I've got it right here! I never let it go, you loopy lizard!

CROCODILE tries to catch MONO, who stays out of his reach.

MONO

It's not up there - it's in here -



---

MONO points to his head.

MONO

- at the top of the tree, right where it belongs. I *never* let it go! And if your mother has to eat *your* brains, she'll die from starvation! Nah-nah-nah-nah-nah.

CROCODILE

You pip-squeak primate!

MONO makes faces at CROCODILE.

CROCODILE

You moronic monkey! You oleaginous orangutan! You blathering baboon!

MONO

But I'm the one up at the top of the tree / You can insult all you want, but you can't get me.

MONO gets on the shoulders of NARRATOR and takes the brain.

MONO

What a beautiful thing!

All three come downstage.

NARRATOR

And that's how El Mono tricked Crocodile. Crocodile was bigger -

CROCODILE

See my nice tail!

NARRATOR

And Crocodile was quicker -

CROCODILE

I could have you for dinner in three snaps and a shiver.

MONO

But El Mono used his brain.



---

NARRATOR

And *this* time, El Mono got away with it.

CROCODILE

*This* time.

MONO

But next time -

ALL

Who knows?

NARRATOR

In the meantime -

CROCODILE

Use your brains -

MONO

And eat lots of bananas!

Music. Blackout.



## The Fox Outfoxed

### DESCRIPTION

Based on a South American folk tale, this is a story of one-ups-manship as Fox tries to get, and keep, a bag of meet in a battle of wits with Jaguar, Lan Chuña, and Turtledove.

### CHARACTERS

- Fox
- Jaguar
- La Chuña
- Turtledove
- If needed, one or two UTILITY ACTORS to help with props, costumes changes, crowd control

### SETTING

- Somewhere in the country

### TIME

- No special time

### MUSIC

- As desired

### MOVEMENT

- The piece needs to be choreographed well, with built-in exaggerations for comic effect.

### MISCELLANEOUS

- Props as mentioned in the script

\* \* \* \* \*

FOX cleans himself, combs his fur, etc. It is clear he thinks a great deal of himself. But in spite of that, he looks worried. And he looks -- well, he looks pretty hungry. Make that very hungry.

FOX

(to the audience)

Any of you got anything to eat? Not that I'm hungry, you see, but -- I wouldn't mind a little *something*. Anyone, huh?

FOX keeps trying to work the crowd, but he doesn't get a thing from them. If someone in the audience is tempted to give him anything, one of the ACTORS can warn him or her away.

ACTOR

You shouldn't feed wild animals -- can you really trust somebody who looks like him?

FOX preens himself a little more, trying to keep up his dignity.

FOX

I *am* a wild animal, and I'm proud of it. Man, I am wild and free and beautiful -- if I do say so myself -- and clever -- ever hear the saying, "Crazy like a fox"? They were talking about *me* when they made that up. Yeah, they were. But, you know, I'm just a little hungry, and if any of you, you know, like has a little something to eat --

One ACTOR becomes the JAGUAR. He carries a bag.

FOX

Hup -- wait -- I think my meal has arrived. That's the Jaguar -- now people might think he is wild and free and beautiful, too, you know, sliding through the jungle, but, boy, what you don't know is all that muscle went to his head and he is as dumb as a stump! Watch me get that food away from him one two three.

(to JAGUAR)

Hey, there, what'cha got?

JAGUAR

I got meat in the bag.

FOX

If I beat you three times, you give me the meat. What'd'ya say?

JAGUAR

Not interested.



---

FOX

That's because you're a wuss, *Spotty*.  
(to audience)  
He *hates* it when I call him Spotty.

JAGUAR

I hate it when you call me Spotty.

JAGUAR throws the bag down, and they begin to "fight" -- mock kung-fu, mock boxing. FOX wins and goes to pick up the bag.

JAGUAR

No no no -- that wasn't fair -- I wasn't ready.

FOX

So get ready, Spotty -- hey, Spotty, c'mon, Spotty --

They fight again -- FOX wins and goes to pick up the bag

JAGUAR

No no on -- I got something in my eye.

FOX

Yeah, Spotty, you got your finger in your eye.

One more time they fight -- and one more time FOX wins. He goes to pick up the bag, but JAGUAR grabs it from him and circles away, clearly steamed, and this time he tries to surprise FOX.

But one ACTOR hands FOX a *sonaja*, a little rattle, made from a gourd with seeds inside and beautifully decorated.

Just as JAGUAR is about to jump on FOX (perhaps with a little warning from the audience to FOX to "Watch out!"), FOX holds up the rattle and shakes it.

FOX

Uh-uh-ah --

JAGUAR becomes transfixed.

JAGUAR

What a beautiful rattle!



---

FOX

Do you like it? I made it.

JAGUAR

No.

FOX

Yeah. And you know what? I made it out of my heart.

JAGUAR

No.

FOX

Yeah. A rattle made out of the heart makes the best sound.  
There is no other like it.

JAGUAR can't take his eyes off it, but he looks confused.

FOX

What?

JAGUAR

How did you take out your heart without killing yourself?

FOX

Do I look dead?

(to audience)

Do I look dead?

(to JAGUAR)

Of course, if you do it with an *ordinary* knife -- well, *any* fool  
knows what would happen *then*. Right?

JAGUAR

(not hearing him)

I want it.

FOX

Keep your hands off.

JAGUAR chases FOX, but it's clear FOX can't be caught.

JAGUAR

Give it to me.



---

FOX

You really really want this?

JAGUAR

Yes!

FOX

WeeeeIIIII -- I know some magic where you can take out the heart without killing yourself -- and make beautiful rattles.

JAGUAR

I want you take out my heart!

JAGUAR freezes. FOX addresses the audience.

FOX

At this point you're probably thinking that I'm making it up about how stupid this guy is. Nah-uh. He wanted this rattle bad -- and I wanted the guy's food.

FOX shakes the rattle in JAGUAR's face. JAGUAR comes back.

FOX

Sorry, but this is only for me -- just for me --

JAGUAR  
(roaring)

Right now!

FOX

Okay, okay -- sheesh! If there is no other way out -- then, all right.

FOX hands off the rattle to an ACTOR, who hands him a knife, made out of something that a knife has never been made out of.

FOX

I want you to lay down with your belly in the air, close your eyes, and stay quiet, while I cut with my magic knife and take out your heart without doing anything bad to you.

JAGUAR gets on his back exactly as FOX said to do. FOX speaks to the audience.





FOX

Does this look like a magic knife to you? And can you really cut out someone's heart without hurting them? You guys are a *lot* smarter than he is. But he wants what he wants -- and who's to say he shouldn't get what he wants? So I did it.

FOX puts the tip of the knife against JAGUAR's heart and makes believe that he's cutting out JAGUAR's heart. It tickles, and JAGUAR giggles.

FOX

No giggling!

FOX finishes "cutting out" his heart. The ACTOR hands FOX another rattle, and FOX shakes it, says some gibberish over it.

FOX

All right, Spotty, you can open your eyes. I got your rattle.

JAGUAR jumps and grabs for the rattle.

FOX

Hey, wait -- you owe me something.

JAGUAR

Gimme the rattle.

FOX

I want the bag.

JAGUAR

Take the bag -- I want the rattle.

And they make the exchange. JAGUAR goes off, fascinated with his new toy.

FOX

Some people will believe *anything*. What an octamaroon! Now I think I have enough to eat for a long time.

FOX opens the bag and eats what's inside, and suddenly his face takes on a very pained expression.



---

FOX

Hot hot hot -- boy, he put some spicy spice on this! Yow!  
Oh boy oh boy --

FOX runs among the audience looking for water, but the other ACTORS encourage the audience not to give him anything.

LA CHUÑA comes on -- a heron-like bird with grey feathers, white stomach, long orange legs, a sharp beak, and a mean face.

Hanging from LA CHUÑA's beak is a fat drop of water.

FOX

Water! You've got water! Right there! Right there! Give me that water!

LA CHUÑA looks at FOX on one side, then on the other, as birds do.

LA CHUÑA

I don't have any water.

FOX

What? That fat drop that's falling from your beak -- what's that?

LA CHUÑA

It's spit. You want some spit?

FOX

That's not spit -- that's water.

LA CHUÑA

I don't have any water.

FOX

You liar! That's water you have hanging from your mouth, and I want it! I want it!

FOX harasses LA CHUÑA for the water, but he can't get to it. But he's such a bother that LA CHUÑA finally speaks to him.



---

LA CHUÑA

All right -- I do have water -- I have a whole lake of it -- but I'm not giving it to you as a gift. I will exchange it for something else -- like that really good-smelling meat you have in that bag.

FOX

(to himself)

Do I give him the meat for the water? I'm really really thirsty -- but I'm really really hungry, too -- what should I do? What should I do?

An ACTOR holds a light bulb over his head. FOX smiles.

FOX

Aha! I got it.

(to LA CHUÑA)

I'll make you a bet: let's see who can hold his breath without breathing under the water the longest. If I lose, I will give you the bag of meat. If I win, you give me the lake.

LA CHUÑA

Okey-dokey.

LA CHUÑA moves off. FOX speaks to the audience.

FOX

Just like that stupid Jaguar, I'll trick this stupid bird, keep the meat, and get all the water I'll ever want. You just watch.

An ACTOR comes out and becomes a tree. FOX hangs the bag on the tree, and FOX and LA CHUÑA move into the water of the lake.

FOX

Ready?

LA CHUÑA

Ready.

FOX

You first.



---

LA CHUÑA

No, you -- you are the one that made the bet.

FOX

Okay -- got me there.

FOX takes a deep breath and sinks. LA CHUÑA waits to make sure that FOX is really under, then takes off his tail-feathers and sticks them up as if he has his butt in the air. Then he grabs the bag of meat and sneaks off.

Meanwhile, FOX is running out of air -- face squinching and so on. Finally, he has to come up for air -- and he sees the tail-feathers sticking out.

FOX

He's still down there -- wow.

FOX takes another deep breath but can't hold it for long and has to come up again. He looks at the tail-feathers.

FOX

He hasn't moved. That fool is going to drown himself.

FOX goes to take another deep breath then stops -- thinks. He steps toward the feathers, touches them. Nothing. Whacks them. Nothing. Plays them like a harp. Nothing. Pulls them up. Nothing.

FOX

Oh man!

FOX throws down the feathers and goes to the tree. The bag is gone!

FOX

(to the ACTOR)

Where did he go?

ACTOR

I'm just a tree.

FOX

You're just dead wood. Go!

The ACTOR exits. FOX is outraged, and he dances, skips, cartwheels, dances some more, all the time saying --



---

FOX

I can't believe it! He tricked me! I was going to trick him first -- it's not fair!

And so on and so on with such stuff until FOX finally calms down, an evil look on his face. An ACTOR hands him a magnifying glass, and FOX moves around the stage looking for clues.

FOX

I am going to find that bird, and when I do -- oh, there's his footstep -- and another -- I am going to pluck him till he's bald and -- another sign -- aha! --

By this time LA CHUÑA has set himself up in a lounge chair with sunglasses and a glass of lemonade and the bag of meat nearby.

LA CHUÑA

Ah, this is the good life.

FOX is still looking at the ground, muttering to himself.

FOX

I'm gonna -- I'm gonna -- ooh, it's gonna be horrible what I'm going to do with him --

LA CHUÑA

I would thank that stupid fox if he were still around --

(laughing)

I hope he hasn't drowned!

Finally, FOX looks up and sees LA CHUÑA lounging away and laughing. He hands the magnifying glass off to an ACTOR, who hands him a telescope.

FOX

Aha! Aha! There he is, the rat-fink!

FOX hands back the telescope.

FOX

All right, think think think --



---

Two ACTORS enter, on one either side of the stage, with changes of clothes, some wigs, etc.

FOX

What can I do? I could walk right up to him, pop him in the nose, and say "Give me back my meat" -- even though it's not really my meat, I did take it from the Jaguar -- doesn't matter, doesn't matter, that bird tricked me! Okay okay, think think think --

(snaps his fingers)

Got it!

FOX goes to one side of the stage and does some magic incantation stuff. As he does so, the ACTOR dresses FOX up as a GRIEVING WOMAN, with a bag slung across her shoulder. FOX then shuffles in front of LA CHUÑA.

FOX

(crying)

My husband died and I have nothing to eat. Can you give me some meat?

LA CHUÑA

Well, I don't know --

FOX

(crying even more)

Please please please please you're such a beautiful bird --

LA CHUÑA

Of course of course I'm sorry I'm sorry -- a widow -- how can I say no?

And LA CHUÑA hands FOX some meat, who puts it in his bag.

FOX

Thank you --

(pinches his cheek)

You are a good person.

FOX moves off to the other side, where the ACTOR helps him quick change into a wrinkled old man with a walking stick.



---

LA CHUÑA

(smiling)

Well, I guess I *am* a good person. From now on I promise to be a good person -- who is this? Hey, old man.

FOX

You should have more respect. I am a poor old man without any family.

(look really really sad)

You wouldn't happen to have a little bit of meat for me, would you? Just a little, for a fine old man. Please?

(smiling to audience)

You look like a good person.

LA CHUÑA

What can I do?

And LA CHUÑA gives FOX some meat, who takes it and moves back to the other side. LA CHUÑA checks the bag of meat. FOX changes into his next disguise.

LA CHUÑA

Okay -- I've been a good-hearted person twice -- I still have enough meat left -- some for me, some for them -- I am being such a good person.

LA CHUÑA goes back to lounging. In quick succession, FOX becomes different people who each ask for some meat and tell LA CHUÑA that he is a good person.

It can be up to the ACTORS which people FOX becomes, but the changes should be quick and funny, and the ad libs should fly. FOX does this until LA CHUÑA is down to his last piece of meat.

LA CHUÑA

But this is my last piece of meat.

FOX

If you give it to me, you'll be the bestest goodest good person ever ever ever --

LA CHUÑA

Are those real words?



---

FOX

Bestest goodest is what you'll be.

FOX's smile is so brilliant that LA CHUÑA can't resist, and LA CHUÑA gives him the last piece of meat, and FOX's bag is full.

LA CHUÑA

I have been such a good person that now I am hungry -- I've got to go find myself something to eat! Darn!

LA CHUÑA takes out a cellphone, places a call.

LA CHUÑA

Hey there -- I was wondering if --

LA CHUÑA exits talking on the phone. Meanwhile, FOX walks along with his meat, happy that he has tricked LA CHUÑA and gotten it all back.

On his path he comes across TURTLEDOVE just finishing up a cellphone call and then pecking for seeds. The TURTLEDOVE have a lovely red color around her eyes.

FOX

Hey there.

TURTLEDOVE

Hey there yourself.

FOX

You have the most beautiful eyes --

TURTLEDOVE

Why thank you --

FOX

That color -- I want that same color around *my* eyes!

TURTLEDOVE

It comes naturally -- I don't have to do anything to get it.

FOX

No it doesn't -- you put it there, and I want to you put it around *my* eyes --





TURTLEDOVE

Is that food you have in your bag?

FOX

Yeah, forget about that -- make me look even more beautiful than I am!

An ACTOR gives TURTLEDOVE something that looks like a red hot pepper. The ACTOR can do something to indicate to the audience just how hot this pepper is.

TURTLEDOVE

Well, to tell the truth -- I just use this little fruit. I rub it around my eyes and *voila!* I am beautiful.

FOX

Do it to me! Do it to me!

TURTLEDOVE gives the audience a knowing evil grin.

TURTLEDOVE

(very slowly)

Are you sure?

FOX

I'm sure! I want my eyes to be red!

TURTLEDOVE

Okay. But you have to take your bag off first.

FOX takes off his bag, sets it down, sticks his face out. TURTLEDOVE paints his eyes with the red hot pepper. Within seconds, FOX is in pain, rubbing his eyes until they are, indeed, red. TURTLEDOVE hands off the pepper to an ACTOR.

FOX

Ow, that hurts, that hurts! Give me some water or something!

TURTLEDOVE

What are you complaining about? You wanted red eyes -- now your eyes are all red! Sheesh, you can't please some people!

TURTLEDOVE picks up the bag of meat, looks inside, smells, and smiles.

TURTLEDOVE

This is exactly what I was looking for.

LA CHUÑA enters and greets TURTLEDOVE.

TURTLEDOVE

Hey there. Got your call. And I got us something to eat.

LA CHUÑA

Great!

TURTLEDOVE and LA CHUÑA circle upstage, leaving FOX rubbing his eyes. In some way FOX should have big red circles around his eye.

FOX

It's not fair -- now I'm hungry and thirsty again -- and my eyes hurt from that stupid Turtledove. I'll bet you she doesn't do that to her own eyes -- I'll just bet you she just did that to --

And the realization comes to FOX. He runs around looking for his bag -- gone!

FOX turns to face upstage and sees TURTLEDOVE and LA CHUÑA eating. FOX turns back to the audience, a grin on his face.

FOX

What kind of person should I become this time?  
(asks audience)

Give me some suggestions.

FOX takes one of the suggestions he likes -- can either dress with the help of the ACTOR or just do it through physicality -- and moves to TURTLEDOVE and LA CHUÑA.

FOX

Hey there people. What's happening? Care to make a little bet?

End of play.



## The Tale Of Blanca Flor

### DESCRIPTION

Juan is a good dancer but a lousy gambler. One day, tired of losing his shirt, he says to himself, "I would give anything to be able to win when I gamble." Just then, El Diablo shows up riding a black horse and says, "Tell me what you want." When Juan tells him his desire to have a little bit of money and a mountain of luck, El Diablo grants him his wish, with the proviso that in five years, he must come to El Diablo's *hacienda* and obey three commands. For five years, he has phenomenal luck -- but it comes time to pay the piper, and Juan sets off to find El Diablo. When he arrives, he meets Blanca Flor, one of El Diablo's three daughters, and with her help, he is able to complete the three commands. There is a moment when their love is in jeopardy because he forgets a command she gave him, but in the end they remember to love one another, and the story concludes happily.

### CHARACTERS

- NARRATOR, male or female -- will often participate in scenes as a character: "he" is used for convenience in the script
- JUAN, a basically decent fellow who is a good dancer but a lousy gambler
- EL DIABLO -- it would be good if the actor could do any sleight-of-hand tricks with coins or cards, but this is not essential
- BLANCA FLOR, one of EL DIABLO's three daughters
- FOUR UTILITY CHARACTERS: two men and two women -- they will play various other characters

**Note #1:** All actors must be able to move well, including dance.

**Note #2: Ethnicity/race** -- All parts are open to all actors except where indicated. A mix is more visually interesting -- just be careful about resonances, e.g., casting EL DIABLO with a black actor may carry unintended messages.

**Note #3:** While I make suggestions around lighting, sound, and movement in this script, the director is free to substitute at any point as long as the substitution moves the story along and is visually and aurally striking. The sole purpose must be to keep the children in the audience thoroughly engaged.

**Note #4:** Actors are free to ad lib with the audience as long as it doesn't detract from the flow of the story. Again, the prime criterion is whatever keeps the children engaged.

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**SETTING**

- JUAN's village
- The *hacienda* of El DIABLO
- Other places

**TIME**

- No special time

**MUSIC**

Music is essential to the production. The ideal would be to have a single musician on stage who plays hand drums, guitar, and other instruments to accompany the action. If this cannot be done, then recorded music would be the only other option. The choice of music is left open to the director, the musicians, and others producing the show. In any case, it is best to keep it simple.

**MOVEMENT**

There is a great deal of movement in the show, and the choreographer is free to invent as needed. For instance, in the opening dance sequence, the choreographer can have the people dance something "traditional" but also throw in any moves that the audience would recognize: hip hop, "moonwalk," etc. Wherever possible, use movement that would be recognized by the audience as "theirs." Also, all movement in the play should, at some level, be choreographed -- there should be an economy of gesture and purpose for every movement the actors make.

**MISCELLANEOUS**

While certain effects are called for, there are no specific directions about how to accomplish them -- that will be left up to the imaginations of the director and others producing the show. The suggestion is to try to achieve the effects as simply as possible, using ordinary materials that can morph from one use to the next. The impulse should be to surprise and please the young audience with the ingenuity of the production as well as the interesting content of the story.

The play must be done in a space where the actors can have free access to the audience since much of the script has the actors moving through them.

\* \* \* \* \*

In JUAN's village. JUAN is a dancer and a gambler, but he is a far better dancer than a gambler. As the play opens, we hear dance music -- a slow,



steady, enticing beat. The NARRATOR begins speaking from the back of the house and continues to enter through the audience.

NARRATOR

Nice music, huh? Music you can really dance to.

NARRATOR begins to dance as he enters.

NARRATOR

Music that makes your feet move. Can you all move your feet? Go ahead, move them -- let them move.

NARRATOR continues to move to the stage.

NARRATOR

It feels good to move your feet. In the small village of *Buena Suerte*, in Mexico, many people could dance really well, but none of them -- none of them -- could dance like Juan.

JUAN appears on the stage and begins to dance to the rhythm. The UTILITY actors appear and dance with JUAN.

NARRATOR

Juan was the best dancer of them all. Young, full of energy -- Juan loved life to the fullest. Watch how he moves. Watch how they all move. All full of life. Yeah, yeah, yeah. You move your feet, too!

By this time, NARRATOR should reach the stage; he begins dancing with the group, which ends the short ensemble piece on a strong button. Change in music, underscore. As NARRATOR speaks, JUAN gets on his knees to roll dice.

As NARRATOR speaks, the others gather around and mime what NARRATOR is saying. The movements should become more and more frenzied as JUAN keeps losing. Finally, he starts pulling losing lottery tickets from his pockets -- a veritable shower of them. The director, of course, is free to modify this in any way with movement and props as long as the central idea comes across, and the gambling sequence is well-choreographed.

NARRATOR

But -- Juan also liked to gamble, which was too bad because he was really terrible at it. When he held the dice



in his hands, they would laugh at him as he rolled them on the ground. If it was cards, the cards would change their colors and numbers right in front of him. At the racetrack, the horse he wanted would pull up lame or get a phone call or fall in love and come in last. Watching the greyhounds chase the rabbit, scratching ticket after ticket at the lottery, flipping coins for heads and tails, more cards, more horses, more dice, more dogs, more tickets, more cards, more everything -- Juan almost always lost. The truth? He was a rotten gambler. He had all the luck of nine dead cats.

(sees JUAN lose again)

Make that ten dead cats.

By this time, JUAN is prostrate on the ground, pockets turned out, shirt untucked, a complete loser. The four UTILITY actors walk off chatting and counting the money they have won. NARRATOR comes up to JUAN.

NARRATOR

Bad day today, huh?

JUAN

The only thing I didn't lose was my hair.

NARRATOR

I don't know -- looks a little thin to me.

JUAN

(sits up)

When's the next bingo game start?

NARRATOR

(to the audience)

The man has a problem.

JUAN

It wouldn't be a problem if I won.

(to the audience)

Right? I mean, who likes losing? Any of you like losing?

Takes various responses from the audience, ad libs as necessary. Tucking in shirt, pockets, etc.



---

NARRATOR

I didn't think so. I bet they would give anything to win. I know I would. I would give anything if I could have a mountain of luck. A big Mount Everest of really good luck. I would give anything to be able to win when I gamble.

NARRATOR

Did you say anything?

(to the audience)

Did he say anything? We have to check this out. Ask him the question: Did you say "anything"?

NARRATOR gets the audience to ask JUAN, "Did you say 'anything'?" JUAN nods yes. The UTILITY actors come on just as there is some sort of lighting/sound/music effect that indicates trouble; they give JUAN a flip and a tumble. From the back of the house speaks EL DIABLO. Another flip and tumble. The two male actors rush to DIABLO to become his fine black horse. The female actors become a "tree" that JUAN hides behind.

DIABLO

Did you say "anything"?

JUAN

(stuttering)

Who are you?

NARRATOR

(to the audience)

I bet you can already guess who he is.

DIABLO

Who do you think I am?

JUAN

You ain't \_\_\_\_\_ (whoever is a performer the audience would know).

NARRATOR

Nope, he isn't \_\_\_\_\_ (whoever is named).

DIABLO

Guess again, Mr. Green Teeth.







---

JUAN

Can I have double or nothing on that?

DIABLO

Juan, Juan, you and your gambling. I am just going to have to make you an offer you can't refuse.

DIABLO touches the tree, which shrivels, and the female actors go to one knee as well. JUAN stands alone. If DIABLO can do it, he should do a few sleight-of-hand tricks as he speaks to JUAN. If he cannot do that, then DIABLO takes some gold glitter and sprinkles it in a circle around JUAN as he speaks.

DIABLO

Here's your offer.

NARRATOR

Juan listened very closely.

Music change. The UTILITY actors begin a synchronized movement to correspond to DIABLO's offer, that underscores the selling of the soul.

DIABLO

I will give you a mountain of good luck. You will win every game you play, even (whatever is the current big jackpot game) and (the name of a current scratch ticket) and Thursday night bingo and seven-card stud and Yahtzee.

NARRATOR

Not bad.

JUAN

Not bad. But --

NARRATOR

Diablo does not give things away for free.

DIABLO

I don't give things away for free. Kneel.

One female actor comes in front of JUAN to become an altar, behind which JUAN kneels. The two male actors kneel on all fours in front of DIABLO; he steps up on their backs. The other female actor takes a gold cord or a



length of gold cloth (if cloth, it should glitter) out of her pocket and hands one end to DIABLO. As DIABLO speaks, she uncoils it and ties it around JUAN's neck. When she is done, she goes behind JUAN and assumes a demon's face. As DIABLO speaks, she always moves in a way that shapes his words and makes them visual.

DIABLO

I am lending you the power to make gold, and you will make a lot of it, Juan. Hand over fist. Year after year. But at the end of five years --

NARRATOR

Here comes the hook and the bait.

JUAN

At the end of five years?

DIABLO

You will come and find me at my *hacienda* and do three commands.

JUAN

And if I don't?

DIABLO jerks the golden cord or cloth, and JUAN falls across the altar. The demon hisses.

JUAN

I just asked!

DIABLO

The gold and I know exactly where you live.

JUAN

I don't suppose I could change my address?

DIABLO

(shaking his head no)

Not even to the moon.

JUAN

Just thought I'd ask.



---

DIABLO

It never hurts to ask.

The altar bucks her back and the demon grabs JUAN's hair. Together, they get him back into his kneeling position.

DIABLO

Do you agree?

JUAN

Three commands?

DIABLO

After five years and a Mount Everest of luck.

JUAN hesitates.

JUAN

(to NARRATOR)

Should I take the gamble?

NARRATOR

(to the audience)

Should he?

(gets responses)

We have a split vote. You are going to have to make up your own mind, Juan. What are you going to do?

The demon hisses softly. DIABLO gives gentle tugs on the cord/cloth to keep JUAN focused.

DIABLO

Lots of money. *Lots* of money.

JUAN

(indicating the audience)

Do I have to share it with them?

DIABLO

Up to you.

JUAN

Will I get into trouble?



---

DIABLO

No more than you are in now.

JUAN

I mean, like a sin?

DIABLO

“Sin” is something you have plenty of. How much money do you owe people?

JUAN makes a gesture to show that he owes a lot, and he knows it.

DIABLO

How much money do you have in your pockets right now?

JUAN pulls out an empty pocket. The demon makes a “moth” with her hands, which flutters away; then she goes back to being the demon.

DIABLO

What’s one more sin?

JUAN

I’d just like to think my soul is worth something.

DIABLO

Oh, it is to me. Can you really say no?

JUAN

Lots, huh?

NARRATOR

You’re beginning to repeat yourself.

DIABLO

Make up what little mind that you have!

Lights flash, music rises, the altar bucks, the two male actors move as if the earth just moved.

JUAN

I agree!



---

DIABLO

Good. Finally. Now, pull.

JUAN pulls the gold cord/cloth out of DIABLO's hand. He unties it from his neck and wraps it around his waist like a belt.

DIABLO

Your five years begin *now*.

NARRATOR

So Juan gambled up a storm, a hurricane. Everything he touched turned to gold, to money, to land, to animals, to Gap clothes [or whatever the name would be for the audience], to more *tacos* than he could eat and more *café con leche* than he could drink.

Music change. The "demon" gets a bunch of clothes that are golden/yellow in color and brings them to JUAN. As JUAN gambles, he gets more and more golden as he puts on the clothes with the demon's help, all in coordinated movements. While DIABLO gets down from his "pedestal," the "altar" gets five placards, on which are written the numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 and on the reverse, the letters "S-T-O-P-!" As JUAN gambles, the three UTILITY actors parade in front of him, each time holding up the year and saying it out loud, and after the fifth year, they hold up the reverse side of the placards, which spells "S-T-O-P-!"

DIABLO

We'll be seeing you.

Lights and music change. DIABLO exits. The UTILITY actors circle JUAN, with the "STOP!" facing him and the years facing outward. They then give the placards to the NARRATOR, who puts them aside, and the four actors kneel around JUAN as he speaks. JUAN starts taking off the golden clothes. As he does, he hands them to NARRATOR, who carefully folds and puts them to one side.

JUAN

The five years are up. I own land, animals, real golden arches -- I'm rich, people respect me -- I get invited to all the parties -- but --

(big crocodile tears)

-- alas, alack, oh woe is me, have mercy on me, my life is ruined --



---

ALL ACTORS

Oh, be quiet.

NARRATOR

A *very* little pity party.

JUAN

Well, *I've* got to go look for El Diablo's *hacienda*. How much fun is *that* going to be?

ACTORS

You made your bed -- now squirm in it.

JUAN

Big help you are.

(an idea strikes him)

Maybe -- maybe I don't have to go. Maybe he forgot. Yeah, yeah. I'll just -- skip it. Yeah, that's what I'll do.

Lights and music change: ominous, not a good idea.

ACTORS

Probably not a good idea.

JUAN

It was just a *thought*!

Lights and music back. By this time he is back to his original clothes.

NARRATOR

Time to go.

The actors begin to nudge him to move, but very light, funny moves: a slight nudge in the ribs, a finger against his arm, etc. JUAN is reluctant, but finally he gets moving.

JUAN

All right, I know I have to go. Any of you have any idea *where* I'm supposed to go? Mister Diablo conveniently forgot to provide a road map.

The UTILITY actors shrug. So JUAN begins his journey. The "journey" will be a coördination between NARRATOR's words and the movement work



of the actors. What is written below is merely suggestive; the actors and director are free to modify the words and the timing so as to create the most comic effect. And they should not confine themselves to the stage -- the audience members can also become obstacles on the path, having to be stepped over, etc. Music and lights should change to reflect the journey.

As for the journey, the UTILITY actors become JUAN's "path": he has to walk over a rock, look behind a tree, perhaps even climb the tree as a lookout post, cross a bridge, come across someone and ask directions, etc. Also, JUAN can come up with appropriate comments to match the activities, e.g., "Where is this place?", "Uggh, that bug tastes terrible!", etc. Music and lights change to follow the "path."

NARRATOR

(while JUAN is traveling)

So Juan set out, not very pleased with the situation, but not having much choice, which sometimes happens in life. He had a few scrapes --

JUAN

Oww!

NARRATOR

A banged toe or two --

JUAN

That *hurts*!

NARRATOR

He asked people for directions, who were a little put off by his bad breath (he'd forgotten to pack a toothbrush) --

ACTOR

Pee-yew!

NARRATOR

And had a few other unpleasant things happen to him --  
(the actors demonstrate something funny)  
-- but he finally made it there in mostly one piece.

JUAN

Can this be the place? There's no sign at all. There should be a sign.





Three of the actors make a “gate”: two of the actors hold the third horizontally.

JUAN

In the village they said that this ranch was owned by someone tall, dark, and handsome -- though I wouldn't call El Diablo handsome.

Light and music change: not a good thing to say.

JUAN

All right! The guy is fussy. Hey, El Diablo! I'm here. What do you want me to do? Hey, is anyone home? I've come a long way to get here, with the --

(mimes these parts of his journey)

-- bugs and the rocks and the trees and stubbing my toe and getting poked in the eye --

The male actor comes out as an old man, the KING OF THE BIRDS, who comes to the “gate” and opens it. He is holding a small drum. The actors make a creaking sound as the gate opens and closes. They then “dismantle” themselves and sit to one side.

KING

Who are you?

JUAN

Do you own this place?

KING

I live here.

JUAN

Do you *own* this place?

KING

I live here.

JUAN

Look, I've come a long way. I've got blisters on my blisters and bruises on my bruises, and I just need to know if this is the *hacienda* of El Diablo.



---

NARRATOR

Juan was a little cranky.

JUAN

You bet I am.

KING  
(gently)

And who are you?

NARRATOR comes over to help JUAN straighten his clothes and his manners.

JUAN

I'm sorry -- I am forgetting my manners, and my parents taught me better. I am Juan, from the village of *Buena Suerte*, and as I said, I am looking for the *hacienda* of El Diablo. Could this be it?

KING

I have lived in this forest for three hundred years --

Exaggerated politeness, as if to humor a crazy man.

JUAN

Oh, three hundred years, you say --

Makes a "crazy" sign to NARRATOR.

KING

Give or take a few -- not so sure about the leap years sometimes --

JUAN

It can be confusing.

KING

And I've never heard of a place like that. El Diablo, you say?

JUAN

Yes. El Diablo.



KING

Well, let me ask the birds.

JUAN

The birds.

KING

Yes.

JUAN

Sure -- ask the birds.

KING

I am the King of the Birds.

JUAN

And I am Prince of the Pu Pu Platter.

NARRATOR  
(to JUAN)

Sssh! A little respect.

The KING begins drumming on his drum. Lights change, and the music should evoke a congress of singing, squawking birds. The three actors now become birds, as the KING calls them in, in rhythm. The actors do not necessarily need to become birds but more to suggest flocks of birds answering the KING's call.

KING

Birds of every shape and size  
Fly to me from distant skies  
Come to me, canary who sings  
Come the hawk on razor wings  
Doves as white as a summer moon  
Larks that trill the evening's tune  
Crows and gulls and kites and daws  
Help me with this young man's cause

JUAN is amazed at the collection of birds the KING has collected.

NARRATOR

Of every form and fit they came, of every color and cry, and they listened to the King as if he were God.



---

KING  
(looking them over)  
This young man needs your help.

ACTOR  
What does he need?

KING  
He has lost his way.

ACTOR  
We'll find it for him.

KING  
Do any of you know the whereabouts of the *hacienda* of El  
Diablo?

Music change: they do not like the name.

ACTOR  
I don't know.

ACTOR  
I don't know.

ACTOR  
I don't know.

ALL  
We don't want to know.

ACTOR  
El Diablo -- awk!

ACTOR  
El Diablo -- scree!

ACTOR  
El Diablo -- caw!

JUAN  
Well, I guess I can't get there from here.



---

JUAN turns to leave, but NARRATOR catches him and turns him back.

KING

Where is Eagle?

NARRATOR

(to JUAN)

If anyone knows, it will be Eagle.

The KING pounds his drum even harder, and there is a music change. The birds disperse.

KING

Eagle sharp as a hunting knife

Eagle eye sees all of life

Eagle, whether far or near

Eagle, bring your wisdom here

One of the actors comes back as EAGLE. The other two actors lift him by the feet so that he/she stands above them.

KING

Where were you?

EAGLE

Oh, king, I am sorry I did not answer your call sooner. But I was far away at El Diablo's *hacienda*.

NARRATOR

See, I told you.

JUAN

Great.

KING

This young man needs your help, since he seeks that same place.

EAGLE

(to JUAN)

Really?



---

JUAN  
Yes.

EAGLE  
Why?

JUAN  
I made a promise.

EAGLE  
To El Diablo?

JUAN  
Yes.

EAGLE  
Only stupid or really stressed-out people do that.

NARRATOR  
He's both.

JUAN  
Hey!

KING  
Eagle, I want you to help this man complete his journey.  
Tomorrow morning, you will carry him to El Diablo's  
*hacienda*.

EAGLE  
I obey.

Lights and music change: night. The UTILITY actors kneel with their hands out and become JUAN's bed; he lays across them. As NARRATOR speaks, the "bed" tosses JUAN, to indicate his sleeplessness.

NARRATOR  
Juan passed a hard night -- full of dreams, full of worry.  
He was thinking about going to El Diablo's *hacienda* and  
the three commands he would have to perform and about  
losing his soul and how hungry he was and how his blisters  
had blisters. Finally, the dawn came.



The KING crows like a rooster, and they dump JUAN out of bed.

KING

Prepare yourself for your journey. Climb on the eagle's back, and he will take you where you need to go. Good luck.

JUAN

Haven't had much of that lately. All right, let's get going.

Two actors lift JUAN as they had lifted EAGLE, and, with EAGLE leading, they take JUAN in a circle through the audience. The KING and NARRATOR wave good-bye. Music change.

NARRATOR

Off he went. Everything looked eenie-weenie, itsy-bitsy as Eagle carried Juan a mile, two miles, three miles above the earth. And before long they came to El Diablo's *hacienda*, deep in the mountains.

JUAN and EAGLE land.

EAGLE

Eagle has landed.

JUAN

Well, thanks -- I guess.

EAGLE

Most people wouldn't have come -- you are a decent fellow, even if a little *loco* for getting involved with El Diablo.

JUAN

*Gracias*, but my life is over now.

EAGLE

Not if you play your cards well.

JUAN

Cards?

EAGLE

Your luck can change if you want to take a risk.



The two actors and EAGLE join the KING while NARRATOR speaks. As NARRATOR speaks, BLANCA FLOR enters, wearing a colorful shawl. The two female UTILITY actors also get colorful shawls. The two male UTILITY actors unroll a piece of blue cloth, which will be the “lake.” They then sit at either end as if they were stone figures.

NARRATOR

And here is what the Eagle told him. See that lake near El Diablo's home? In a little while, three beautiful doves will come to the water.

In coordinated movements, the three women come to the lake as if they were doves, using the shawls for their “wings.”

NARRATOR

They are not really birds, though; they are El Diablo's daughters. When the first two women take off their wings to sun, do not bother them. But when the third daughter, Blanca Flor, arrives, you must talk to her.

JUAN

What will I say to her?

NARRATOR

You will know.

JUAN watches the lake. The two female UTILITY actors take off their shawls and spread them on the backs of the two male UTILITY actors and sit on them, face up to the “sun.” BLANCA takes off her shawl, and instead of sitting, she begins dancing with it. JUAN, ever the good dancer, is drawn to her immediately. He comes up to her.

JUAN

May I dance with you?

Stops for a moment to give JUAN a full appraisal.

BLANCA

Yes.

They begin to dance with music, reminiscent of the opening scene. As they dance, the four UTILITY actors take up the “lake” and retreat upstage.





NARRATOR

They danced and they talked. Juan told her about his good luck and his country and about his promise to her father. She told him that her name was Blanca Flor, which meant “white flower,” and what it was like to live in her father’s home and she didn’t always agree with his stealing souls. The whole day they danced, and on into the night.

(lights change)

When the moon and the stars came out, she told him --

The four UTILITY actors bring out a moon and three big stars, each one attached to a stick, and hold them over JUAN and BLANCA.

BLANCA

I will help you with my father, El Diablo.

JUAN

You will go against him?

BLANCA

Yes.

JUAN

You are my best luck yet.

NARRATOR

As the sun came up, she told him what he had to do.

Lights change. The four UTILITY actors reverse their items: the moon becomes a sun and the stars become fluffy clouds. The clouds move through the sky as the sun rises.

BLANCA

Do not take anything my father offers you.

NARRATOR

Nothing at all.

BLANCA

Not a bed nor food nor anything else.

JUAN

He’s going to know you’re helping me!



---

BLANCA

No, he won't.

NARRATOR

He won't.

BLANCA

I am supposed to be locked in my room with seven locks on the door.

JUAN

Seven!

BLANCA

But my papa doesn't know that I can open them. Remember, take nothing, no matter how nicely my papa offers. I must leave now, but I won't be far away.

NARRATOR

And Blanca took up her wings and flew back to her room. Juan gathered up his courage --

JUAN

Not too much of that left --

NARRATOR

And walked up to El Diablo's house.

Lights and music change. Three of the four UTILITY actors form a corridor down which JUAN walks: they assume grotesque and scary shapes, and as JUAN passes each one, that actor goes down the line and assumes another shape, so that the effect is walking down an endless corridor. Finally, JUAN gets to the front door, which is formed by one of the UTILITY actors, with the left hand open and raised to shoulder level and the right hand held out like a doorknob at waist-level. The other three UTILITY go to one side of the stage and form a small cabin, which is going to be JUAN's "house." DIABLO comes out and stands behind the door. BLANCA is off to one side.

JUAN knocks on the upraised hand of the door; knocking sounds.

NARRATOR

Juan knocked on El Diablo's front door. The door also knocked on Juan.



Mock battle until the “knob” turns with a click, and the door pivots on one foot to open, revealing DIABLO.

DIABLO

You have arrived.

JUAN

Yep, just little old me.

DIABLO

Good. You’ve had a long journey. You can stay with us.

BLANCA

Remember --

NARRATOR

Should he accept?

Gets audience responses.

JUAN

No thanks. I’m happy with --

(indicating the other actors)

-- the little shed down by the lake.

DIABLO

Well, at least come in and eat with us.

NARRATOR

(to the audience)

And what did Blanca tell Juan?

Gets audience responses.

BLANCA

(with the audience)

Remember --

JUAN

Oh, no thanks. I’ll just eat my dry stale tortillas.

DIABLO gives him a suspicious look.



---

DIABLO

You're sure?

JUAN

Very sure.

DIABLO

Then you had better get some rest because tomorrow I am going to give you my first command.

JUAN

I can't wait.

The door closes, and JUAN goes to his 'house,' where he finds BLANCA. BLANCA has a small bag. Music change.

NARRATOR

At his shed he found Blanca waiting for him, which lifted his spirits, and they talked and danced and fell very much in love. Though what she ever saw in --

JUAN

Hey, I'm a good guy.

BLANCA

And a wonderful dancer.

NARRATOR

Love is strange. The next day, Diablo gave Juan his first command.

DIABLO in his own light, BLANCA and FLOR at the "house." The UTILITY actors place themselves in a heap to become a "mountain."

DIABLO

Ready?

JUAN

Ready.

DIABLO

Do you see that mountain over there?



---

JUAN

Yes.

DIABLO

I want you to move it to over there.

JUAN

That's all?

DIABLO

That's all.

JUAN

Just move the mountain?

DIABLO

Just move the mountain.

JUAN

There to there?

DIABLO

There to there.

JUAN

No hay problemo.

DIABLO

I'm glad you're enjoying this.

NARRATOR

Which he wasn't.

JUAN

But I keep a strong face.

Light out on DIABLO.

JUAN

(to BLANCA, slumping)

I can't do that!



---

BLANCA

But I can.

JUAN

(not really listening to her)

If I shovel real fast, get a wheelbarrow --

BLANCA

Juan --

JUAN

No, no, a big old *tractor* --

BLANCA

Have faith. Don't forget who I am.

BLANCA points at the mountain, and the UTILITY actors begin to shake and move until they fly apart across the stage and reassemble themselves.

BLANCA

There.

JUAN

Talk about a mountain of good luck.

Light up on DIABLO. BLANCA hides.

DIABLO

Well?

JUAN

From there, to there.

(slaps his hands clean)

Like I said, *no hay problema*.

DIABLO pauses, a bit confused and very angry.

DIABLO

You did this yourself?

JUAN

Without even getting any dirt under my fingernails.



Shows the audience his fingernails.

DIABLO

Blanca!

JUAN is frightened by the shout. As BLANCA answers, the four UTILITY actors unpile themselves and act as echoes for BLANCA. NARRATOR is part of the voices as well.

BLANCA

(making her voice sound far away)

Yes, father?

ACTORS

Yes, father -- yes, father -- yes, father --

DIABLO

Are you in your room?

BLANCA

Of course, father.

ACTORS

Of course, father -- Of course, father -- Of course, father --

DIABLO

Let me hear the locks.

The UTILITY actors and NARRATOR make the sound of seven opening locks.

DIABLO

Now close them.

They do the same.

DIABLO

(clearly mystified)

All right. You must stay right there.

BLANCA

Yes, father.



---

ACTORS

Yes, father -- yes, father -- yes, father --

DIABLO

(to JUAN)

Well, *señor* magician, here's my second command.

JUAN

Pitch it right down the middle.

The four UTILITY actors get the blue cloth that had been the lake and spread it out.

DIABLO

Do you see that lagoon over there?

JUAN

Clear as clockwork.

DIABLO

It's empty. I want you to make it full of fishes.

NARRATOR

And his response?

Encouraging the audience to say it.

JUAN

No hay problema.

(turning to BLANCA)

Now what?

BLANCA

Relax, my love -- we're going fishing.

Lights on the "lagoon," which is empty. One by one, the UTILITY actors and NARRATOR bring in rods hung with mobiles of fish of all sizes, shapes, and colors and hang them over the "lagoon" and move them about as if they were fish. Lights up on DIABLO.

DIABLO

Well?





---

JUAN  
(pointing to the lagoon)

See.

All the “fish” look up at DIABLO and smile.

JUAN  
(to the audience)  
Ready? No hay problema.

DIABLO waves his hand, and the “lagoon” disappears, along with the fish.

DIABLO  
Blanca!

Same echo effect.

BLANCA  
Yes, father.

ACTORS  
Yes, father -- yes, father -- yes, father --

DIABLO  
The seven locks.

The actors make the opening and closing lock sounds. DIABLO looks more suspicious than ever.

DIABLO  
All right.

(to JUAN)  
My third command. I have a black horse, in my stable, that has never known saddle, spur or bridle. I want you to tame it.

JUAN  
(to audience)  
Help me out here: *no hay problema*.

(to BLANCA)  
I can do that without you! In my village, I am known as the best horseman. I can't bet on the horses very well, but I can ride them.



---

BLANCA

Gentle lover, this will be no ordinary horse: this will be my father.

JUAN

Oh.

BLANCA

Here is what you must do. In the stable you will find spurs, a saddle, and a bridle hanging on hooks. Throw away the spurs because they will be one of my sisters. Throw away the saddle because it will be my other sister. But be gentle with the bridle because that will be me.

The four UTILITY actors arrange themselves as NARRATOR separates himself to tell the story. One actor lays flat on the floor, the second actor on elbows and knees, the third actor on hands and knees, and the fourth bent over with hands resting on the knees. Completing the incline is DIABLO, standing upright.

NARRATOR

Juan went to the stable and, taking the bridle, mounted the horse bareback.

JUAN climbs the “steps” formed by the actors and “mounts” DIABLO by sitting on his shoulders.

NARRATOR

That horse tried every trick to throw Juan to the ground.

JUAN falls from DIABLO’s shoulders into the hands of the other actors, and in a coördinated fashion, the UTILITY actors make it look as if JUAN is on a bucking bronco. DIABLO returns to his spot.

NARRATOR

It heaved, it bucked, it kicked its heels -- but Juan held the bridle tight, and soon the horse was as tame as milk.

They put JUAN down and retreat upstage.

DIABLO

(to JUAN, enraged)

I have lost your soul!



JUAN  
(to BLANCA)

Uh-oh -- *problemo*. The first bet I win, and I'm in trouble.  
What do we do now?

BLANCA

Escape.

DIABLO

Blanca!

DIABLO turns upstage to go to BLANCA's room, and he mimes opening seven locks, the locks being created by the UTILITY actors. He finds her room empty.

DIABLO

Argghhh! Blanca, I will not let you escape.

Music for the escape. DIABLO is now upstage, and BLANCA, with her bag, and JUAN are downstage. DIABLO should be higher than the two of them. The UTILITY actors are in between them.

NARRATOR

Diablo hated to lose a soul, and it made him even more angry that his daughter helped him lose it. So he chased them.

DIABLO

When I catch you, you will never escape again.

JUAN

What are we going to do? He's almost up to us!

NARRATOR

Blanca reached into her bag and pulled out a hair brush. She threw it on the ground behind them.

BLANCA hands the brush to one of the UTILITY actors.

NARRATOR

Immediately, it turned into a huge thorn bush, and Diablo had to fight his way through it.



---

BLANCA and JUAN move to one side of the stage while the UTILITY actors form the thorn bush through DIABLO fights his way. If possible, the bush should include part of the audience so that DIABLO actually moves into the audience. Finally he breaks free. They are now on opposite sides of the stage.

NARRATOR

It slowed him down a little --

JUAN

It slowed him down a little --

NARRATOR

But before long he was almost up to them again.

JUAN

What now?

NARRATOR

Blanca reached into her bag and pulled out a handful of seeds and threw them on the ground.

BLANCA hands a UTILITY actor a packet of seeds.

NARRATOR

They immediately grew into a dense forest.

The UTILITY actors become the forest; DIABLO fights his way through.

JUAN

Look at that!

NARRATOR

Diablo fought his way through, the branches grabbing at him, the roots tripping him up, the leaves covering his eyes.

Finally DIABLO breaks free. BLANCA and JUAN move upstage and DIABLO is on one side of the stage.

NARRATOR

But it didn't slow him down. He was almost up to them again.



---

JUAN

Blanca, I hope you have a third trick.

NARRATOR

She did. She reached into her bag and took out a blue cloth and threw it on the ground.

BLANCA hands it to the UTILITY actors, who open it out. If possible, the ends of it could be handed to a couple of audience members, who could riffle it as if the surface of the water were being moved by the wind.

NARRATOR

It became a huge lake.

The UTILITY actors become rocks, but only half-way across. DIABLO walks out into the lake on the rocks. The three of them look at each other for several beats.

NARRATOR

Would Diablo swim the rest of the way? It was long way.

DIABLO

And I could drown.

JUAN

I'd lay odds on that.

A beat, then DIABLO retreats. Music stops.

DIABLO

There are a lot more like you in the world. Daughter, beware -- you may have great powers, but you don't know much about human beings. They're not a good bet. They'll break your heart.

JUAN

Not me! Not her! I love her.

DIABLO

(laughing nastily)

Oh, that's a good one! Have fun, you two!

DIABLO exits. Music begins.



---

JUAN

I don't think I like him. I'm sorry. He is your father.

BLANCA

Not my father any more. Now, it is you.

NARRATOR

Juan loved her very much for saying that.

JUAN

I love you very much.

The UTILITY actors gather up the "lake" and remove it from the stage.

JUAN

My village is not far from here. I will go there and tell everyone about you, and then return to bring you home in triumph.

BLANCA

Excellent.

NARRATOR

But she had something important to tell him.

BLANCA

But if you let another woman kiss you, even the smallest brush of the lips, you will no longer remember me.

JUAN

You're the only one I need to kiss.

NARRATOR

And with that they kissed and promised to see each other soon. Then Juan left to go to his village.

The UTILITY actors become the villagers welcoming him, and as they come up to greet him, there are a lot of "air kisses," done as broadly as possible, as JUAN tries to avoid kissing any of the women. They can also carry cards, dice, etc. to get JUAN to gamble again. He happily refuses.



NARRATOR

They greeted him wildly, having given him up for dead. And out of the crowd came his *abuela*, his dear grandmother, and in a flood of emotion he forgot his promise to Blanca Flor and kissed her.

The action freezes.

NARRATOR

And Juan forgot all about Blanca Flor.

BLANCA

But I did not forget about Juan -- I know that is hard to keep promises sometimes, and so I will give him a second chance.

Music change: festive. BLANCA gets the shawl she wore when she was the dove.

NARRATOR

Three days later, at a grand *fiesta* in his honor, a beautiful woman wearing a colorful shawl walked through the crowd, and she almost seem to float, she walked so gracefully. Juan noticed her.

JUAN

Who is she?

NARRATOR

And Blanca told the village the story of how Juan came to El Diablo's *hacienda* and the wild adventures that occurred there, and of her final words by the lake.

JUAN

I'm sorry, but I do not remember you.

GRANDMOTHER

(sobbing at the sadness of it)

He kissed me.

BLANCA

*Abuela*, do not blame yourself.



---

NARRATOR

Instead, Blanca smiled.

BLANCA

Would you dance with me?

NARRATOR

And they danced as they had danced the first time Juan met her, and all the memories flooded back into him.

JUAN

I remember you! I remember you! No one dances like you do. No one fits into my arms as you do.

They dance for a few moments, then face the audience directly, side by side. The lights stay up on them and dim everywhere else.

NARRATOR

Juan and Blanca got married and lived very happily. And, you know -- Juan never again had the impulse to gamble. Because when you're really happy --

JUAN

You've got all the luck you ever need --

BLANCA

And a lot more time to dance.

Dance music comes up as JUAN and BLANCA and the four UTILITY actors dance. Lights out.







## **No More Prisons**

### **BRIEF DESCRIPTION**

Clique, a young woman, is on a quest. She has been tagging every available surface with the phrase “No More Prisons.” On one of her “outings,” she is found by QT, a counselor working with at-risk youth, who has been looking for her to ask her questions about what she is doing and to offer her help. Clique’s story unfolds the life of her sister, Johanna, imprisoned for a murder she committed at the age of seventeen.

### **CHARACTERS**

- Clique, a young woman, age 16 or so
- QT, woman, about five or so years older than CLIQUE
- Johanna, CLIQUE’s sister, in jail; also, a friend of QT’s and about the same age

Note about ethnicity: The characters can be played by actors of any ethnicity.

### **SETTING**

- Urban street - the director can make it look as maximal or minimal as possible, but there should be something in the scene which CLIQUE can jump up on.
- Hospital room, indicated by several moving screens - other paraphernalia as needed.

### **MISCELLANEOUS**

- Marker that CLIQUE can use to tag the phrase “No More Prisons”
- In Scene 1, a surface, visible to the audience, where CLIQUE can tag the phrase
- Walkman with headphones
- Cell phone
- Hospital screens
- Cutouts of “No More Prisons” for silhouettes
- Red marker - washable (or a way of making a red mark on the skin)
- White lab coat and janitor’s cart
- A small package, containing a gift of a butterfly artifact. The artifact can be anything as long as it is clearly a butterfly or butterfly motif and can be worn or shown during the final scene
- Three fresh apples
- Chairs

### **MUSIC**

- Music for scene transitions - up to director/actors

## SLIDES

- Scene 4 calls for slides of pictures of prisoners and prison guards - if these cannot be used, then simply play the scene through without them.

\* \* \* \* \*

### Scene 1

Lighting oblique, late at night on the street. CLIQUE enters, moving to a tune that she hears on her Walkman. The audience can also hear the music. She drops to the ground and tags a manhole cover with the phrase. She rises, then sees the visible surface and tags that with the phrase, several times.

As she does that, QT enters, watches. CLIQUE finishes one tag, starts on a second one.

QT

Hey.

CLIQUE cannot hear QT because of the music.

QT

(much louder)

Hey!

CLIQUE hears QT and is startled; she spins around, ripping off the headphones. The music for the audience stops but continues on the Walkman through the headphones. QT backs off a step, to show she's not a threat.

CLIQUE

You a cop?

QT

No.

CLIQUE

What?

QT

Shut the music down.



---

CLIQUE  
(not hearing her)

You with the law?

QT indicates to turn the music down; CLIQUE shuts the Walkman off.

Are you a cop?

No.

Should I be afraid of you?

No.

You going to stop me?

No.

You going to reprimand me?

No.

Then back off and leave me alone.

CLIQUE goes back to what she has been doing.

You've been tagging.

CLIQUE ignores her.

You've been tagging everywhere. All over everywhere.  
No-More-Prisons. People's feet walk on it. Under their



butts when they sit on a bench. Eye-level at the doorway to the corporation - it moves way in, you know?

CLIQUE continues to ignore her.

QT

It moved its way into me. Which is why I have been looking around for you - for the artist.

CLIQUE looks at her.

QT

What?

CLIQUE

You're looking for me?

QT

Looking for the artist.

CLIQUE

Searching me out?

QT

You an artist?

QT goes to say something more, but CLIQUE cuts her off.

CLIQUE

I don't need anybody making tracks for me.

QT

I'm cool.

CLIQUE

Cool? You're a stranger. When it's late, strangers are dangers.

QT

Wait - I'm no danger to you.

CLIQUE

Too much of your nose under my business.



---

QT

I'm backing away.

CLIQUE

Way too late for you.

CLIQUE circles at a distance from QT in preparation of leaving.

CLIQUE

Like I said -

(with a gesture)

- gone.

QT

People call me QT - like "on the q.t."

CLIQUE

So?

QT

You got nothing to be afraid of in me, Clique -

CLIQUE stops.

CLIQUE

You know my name.

QT

I know your name.

CLIQUE

But you don't know me.

QT

I do know you.

CLIQUE

How?

QT

I know your sister, too.



---

●

CLIQUE

How?

QT

Johanna.

CLIQUE

Johanna.

QT

Johanna, sister of Clique. You, Clique, a.k.a. Cassandra, a.k.a. sassie Cassie. You don't remember me, do you?

(pointing to the tag)

I asked around who's been out on this tagging "mission" - you are known out there, Clique, very well known. You've done hundreds, Clique. Hundreds. Your pulse astonishes people. They can't help but see what you've done, what you're doing, even if they don't like it, even if it offends them. You stick it in their eye - and that makes you very known. And that made you interesting to me.

QT goes up to the tag and traces it with an index finger. As she does so, she says the words.

QT

"No."

CLIQUE makes a move toward QT.

CLIQUE

Get -

CLIQUE takes a step closer.

QT

"More."

CLIQUE

Get your hand off -

QT

"Prisons."



---

CLIQUE comes closer but not quite up to QT.

QT  
(looks at her finger)

It's dry.

CLIQUE  
Supposed to be permanent.

QT  
Few thousand years, it'll wash off.

CLIQUE  
A few years, I'll be done. Then I'll be done enough to be dead.

QT  
(touching the tag again)  
No more prisons -

CLIQUE  
Don't - !

QT  
What's it mean?

An incredulous look from CLIQUE.

QT  
What's it mean?

CLIQUE  
What's it mean.

QT  
What's it mean?

CLIQUE  
You can't read?

QT  
What's it mean to you, Clique? What's it mean to Johanna,  
sister of Clique, Cassie, Cassandra?





---

●

CLIQUE

You're just trying to break into my head. It's just a tag.

QT

Is it?

CLIQUE

Just a tag!

CLIQUE acts as if she is trying to resist the temptation to do another one, then she gives in and does another tag, quickly. She continues to do them as they talk.

CLIQUE

Yeah. Just a tag. Just a tag. Just a tag. Just a tag.

QT touches CLIQUE, and this causes her to jerk, which causes a mistake, an errant line, in the tag.

CLIQUE

Fool!

CLIQUE tries to correct it.

CLIQUE

(increasing irritation)

Man! Man! Man!

(gives up the attempt)

Nothing but sad nothing but sad nothing but sad nothing  
but sad -

QT

Sorry -

In frustration, CLIQUE rips off another tag as fast as she can and speaks as she does.

CLIQUE

Fool! Fool! Fool! You're a fool!

CLIQUE speaks to herself, more or less, as she tries again to correct the "mistake."



---

CLIQUE

Now it ain't going to work - got to make it work - It's my work! It's my work! It's my work! You don't go messing up a person's work!

QT

What's it mean, Clique?

CLIQUE

Oh, man!

QT

Clique -

CLIQUE

(to herself, as she moves around)

Man oh man oh man oh man -

QT

Clique -

CLIQUE

Not going to work, now it's not going to work at all.

QT

What's not going to work?

CLIQUE

It's not going to work. It's not going to work.

CLIQUE, agitatedly repeating this phrase, not paying attention to QT, jumps up on something and starts essentially speaking in tongues, not entirely in control of herself.

CLIQUE

Clique, you're so stupid, Clique, you're so stupid, Clique, you're so stupid, Clique, you're so stupid, Clique, you're so stupid, Clique, you're so stupid, Clique, you're so stupid, I see the long lines, chains, blood - another and another and another they're going to lock them up and devour them, eat them whole - whole people, a whole people in chains, buried, blood and



blood and blood, drowning in blood, all of us sick in blood,  
 Johanna, Johanna, Johanna, Johanna - aaaaahhhh!!! -  
 (in a long wail, the name JOHANNA)  
 - Jooohhhhaaannnaaa!!!

Suddenly, CLIQUE looks tired, confused, and looks as if she is going to fall off. QT rushes over and catches her just as she slumps. QT lowers her to the ground gently, CLIQUE's body is quivering, unconscious.

QT  
 Clique, Clique, take it easy, girl - slow, slow, slow down.  
 Let me slow you down. There. Rest. Rest of angels,  
 sweetheart.

QT cradles CLIQUE, and for several moments, it is completely silent on the stage. Then QT pulls a cell phone out of her pocket and pushes a button. As QT waits for the call to go through, the lights go to black. Music for transition added to an EMT siren, all very loud.

\* \* \* \* \*

## Scene 2

Several white hospital screens set up to indicate a hospital room. CLIQUE stands in the middle of the space formed by the screens.

CLIQUE  
 (out of the darkness)  
 Jooohhhhaaannnaaa!!!

As she speaks, lights come up behind the screens to reveal, written over and over again, "No More Prisons" in silhouette. At the same moment, a tight light on CLIQUE's face, full of fear.

CLIQUE  
 (softer)  
 Johanna. Johanna. Johanna.

Out of the darkness comes JOHANNA's voice.

JOHANNA  
 I'm right here, baby. I'm as here as here can be.



---

CLIQUE responds with a mixture of fear and delight. JOHANNA enters, bathed in the reflected light from the screens. CLIQUE sees her and runs to her, embraces her. JOHANNA smoothes her hair, rubs her back.

Lighting changes - logo still in silhouette but also JOHANNA and CLIQUE in brighter light. They sit on the floor, JOHANNA behind CLIQUE.

JOHANNA

You did it again, didn't you?

CLIQUE

I couldn't help it. I can't help it. My hands just - go, and I go with them.

JOHANNA

Crying in the wilderness, you are, my lovely sister.

CLIQUE

You - all of them -

(knocking her head)

- up here -

JOHANNA

(with affection)

Crying in the wilderness for all us poor, poor prisoners, locked down and disposed of. You're probably the only one in America who cries and remembers to remember.

CLIQUE

I dream you can't breathe. None of you.

JOHANNA

I know - I know that you have had those visions.

CLIQUE

You have these stones in your lungs -

JOHANNA

It's okay, it's okay -



CLIQUE

- and dirt in your eyes -

JOHANNA

It's all right -

CLIQUE

- all of you - really deep - can't breathe, and then I can't breathe, even when I wake up, I got stones in my lungs, and it makes me remember all over - all over -

(looking at JOHANNA)

I have to go - I got to keep going on - got to -

JOHANNA

The prophet in the desert.

CLIQUE

If I do enough - Johanna, if I do enough -

(using her hand, she writes on the air)

"No." "More." "Prisons." - then you can breathe. "No."

"More." "Prisons." Again. They all can breathe. "No."

"More." "Prisons." It's okay - I'll make enough, I'll make enough. I'll put it everywhere.

JOHANNA

Baby, baby -

CLIQUE

And then you'll be free.

CLIQUE again writes on the air, and as she does, JOHANNA tightly embraces her.

JOHANNA

Come back, come back.

CLIQUE struggles in the embrace to continue writing until she just lets go and sinks against JOHANNA.

CLIQUE

Oh, don't let me go, don't let me go, don't let me go, don't let me go, don't let me go, don't let me go!



---

They remain there, for a moment, in silence, holding each other.

JOHANNA  
(reluctantly)

That's not it, Clique, honey.

CLIQUE

What?

JOHANNA

You have to let me go.

(JOHANNA opens one arm)

Let.

(JOHANNA opens the other man)

Me.

(rises)

Go.

JOHANNA goes behind the screens and takes down the logos until all the screens are empty. She discards them. The lights come down on the screens, now just ordinary screens. She speaks as she moves, and CLIQUE listens as if in shock.

JOHANNA

My life is not your life, Clique. My life is - not your life. You have life left for life. I do not. You have to stop this. I do not want you to do this anymore.

CLIQUE

They locked you away.

JOHANNA

For something bad I really did.

CLIQUE

Forever.

JOHANNA

Forever it is, because the bad I did will last forever. Which is why you can't make your life mine. You can't turn your life into that forever!



---

CLIQUE

Johanna - Johanna - I miss you so much. I miss you so much.

JOHANNA melts, seeing CLIQUE so devastated.

JOHANNA

Ah, Cassie, Cassie - Cassie, Cassie, my sassy lassie - remember - remember what I did with your hair when you turned eleven, the big One-One?

CLIQUE

Oh, yeah, yeah - Mom freaked!

JOHANNA

Freaky, freaky, freaky, freaked!

CLIQUE

Freaked out!

JOHANNA

The nails -

CLIQUE

The eyes -

JOHANNA

You'd try on my underwear -

CLIQUE

You showed me that dirty picture -

JOHANNA

Which I am sure you never forgot! We'd do that crazy little funky dance routine -

Dance routine - director/actors free to invent it. Beat.

CLIQUE

Sister of mine.

JOHANNA

Sister of yours.



They do their own invented handshake routine, with sound effects or special chant. They laugh.

CLIQUE

But then -

JOHANNA

I know -

CLIQUE

But then you went away.

JOHANNA

No, no, no, little sister - this where you need to get on the right path. I didn't "go away."

CLIQUE

You did! You went away!

JOHANNA grabs one of the screens and revolves it around her.

JOHANNA

No, no, no - I flew! I rocketed! I burned up the sky!

(hiding herself behind the screen)

I - detached, Cassandra, like those booster rockets that fall away and get burned up.

CLIQUE

Didn't I love you enough? Didn't I? I tried.

JOHANNA slowly replaces the screen.

JOHANNA

Oh, honey, you loved me full throttle, straight out, pedal to the metal -

CLIQUE

- but it wasn't enough -

JOHANNA

- and I loved you - love you - love you, love you, so very much -





---

CLIQUE

But it wasn't enough, was it? Answer to me.

JOHANNA

I can't.

As she speaks the next line, CLIQUE does a part of the "funky" sister dance, but now with an edge, with anger.

CLIQUE

Answer. To. Me.

JOHANNA

My Tallahassee Cassie, you could have mainlined your love to me - direct tube from heart to heart - but the minute your love touched my scalded veins - ssstt! off it would have burned like steam, my veins the hot metal of rocket parts flaming through the upper air where no one can breathe, thermonuclear evaporation -

CLIQUE

Stop it, stop it, stop it, stop it! Stop the goddamn slamming and talk to me!

Doing her own part of the "funky" sister dance, but with sadness - note the rhythm in the next two lines.

JOHANNA

Nobody's love could have saved me from me. Not even your premium mix, Cassandra.

(stops the dance)

Truth? I was empty and hollow and anything anyone put into me ran right out of me. You can't take love in if you can't give it back, and you can't give it back if you can't take it in. Your love of me - wasted.

CLIQUE

No!

JOHANNA

Oh, very much yes! I wasted it.



---

CLIQUE

No!

JOHANNA

I wasted it, and knew I wasted it as I did it.

CLIQUE

No!

JOHANNA

(goes to touch her)

Such innocence, that you think you can love someone like me.

CLIQUE

(slaps her hand away)

Don't little-girl me like you just braided my hair!

JOHANNA

(goes to touch her again)

Someone got their veins scalded.

CLIQUE slaps her hand away a second time.

CLIQUE

I am out there because I love someone like you. It doesn't stop for you just because yours stopped for me. My veins - as hot as yours. Always were hot.

JOHANNA

Gemlike flame.

CLIQUE

Difference? I burn you to bring you back, not like you, burning everything to push everything away. I refuse to take your "no"! And that's why!

CLIQUE waits expectantly. JOHANNA goes to touch CLIQUE once again; this time, CLIQUE lets her.

JOHANNA

Pure. Gemlike. Flame.



CLIQUE

I want -

JOHANNA

What do you want?

CLIQUE

I want to save you, Johanna. I need to -

JOHANNA

Ssshhh. For a moment. Just ssshhh. Cool, cool, cool.

JOHANNA strokes her hair.

JOHANNA

You want to save me.

CLIQUE

Yes.

JOHANNA

Then you need to know.

CLIQUE

Know what?

JOHANNA

You need to know how much you do not know about what you think you know about me.

CLIQUE

If you love me, you will tell me. If you tell me, you will love me - again.

JOHANNA

Close your eyes and breathe, little sister.

CLIQUE closes her eyes and breathes deeply. JOHANNA takes a few steps away and look at CLIQUE quizzically, speaking to herself.

JOHANNA

Such innocence - say it again and again. And does the saying make it possible? Is it possible that she - could -



---

CLIQUE  
(opening her eyes)

Tell me.

JOHANNA

I had everything - everything! Loving parents - now shattered apart. Loving sister - who burns in front of me. No over-sized pains and hatreds, nothing that could not be comforted. Except - Except - something. This - something. I haven't been able to name it - dig it out - excavate it - a shift - a - a -

JOHANNA makes some kind of twisting, wrenching motion with her body.

JOHANNA

- God, I can't grab the word - the slamming me! can't grab it - I have been trying -

(looks at CLIQUE, softens)

Maybe it was just because I was stupid and seventeen and for a moment, when I was not in any kind of right mind, when that -

(makes the same twisting, wrenching motion)

- happened, I was running down the wrong road to Damascus and had darkness rather than light blind me.

Low, dark sound. QT appears but dressed differently in order to make her look more masculine, certainly not QT as in Scene 1. She is now playing JOHANNA's victim. She carries in a chair, stands and waits.

JOHANNA

Little sister, here is that darkness.

JOHANNA takes the chair and sets it stage center. QT sits in it, JOHANNA takes QT's hand and puts them up as if on a steering wheel. The screens light up. JOHANNA pulls CLIQUE close to her.



JOHANNA

We wanted drugs, pure and simple. JB had a gun, stuffed up in the ceiling of her car, right over my head, hanging there. We cruised until we found him -

(pointing to QT)

- sitting in his car. He was leaving friends he'd just had dinner with. Just had dinner with to celebrate his graduation.

JOHANNA pulls out a red marker out of QT's jacket. As she speaks, JOHANNA puts the marker in CLIQUE's hand and, guiding her hand, has CLIQUE draw a small dot on QT's left temple and a thick wavy line down QT's right cheek from the right temple. JOHANNA puts the marker in her own pocket.

JOHANNA

JB said that he looked like the dealer who had ripped her off. I could hardly see him - I had a smoke of weed and Colt 45 clouding in my head. "Yeah, yeah, that's him, that's him! The m/f owes me!" "Not him," I slur out. "Let's go." "Naw, naw, it's him! It's him!" "Let's go." "It's him. He's gotta pay." "Go!" "No!" Suddenly, JB pulls over hard, throws me against the dashboard. Stars, like in the cartoons. Suddenly, I have the gun in my hand.

(JOHANNA uses CLIQUE's hand as the gun)

Suddenly, I'm out of the car walking towards his car. I have the gun in my hand. Suddenly, I am at his car, yelling at him. Yelling at him about -

(shouts)

- drugs and -

(shouts)

- money and -

(shouts)

- give them to me, motherfucker! Yelling at him about his -

(shouts)

- life. His -

(shouts)

- life! His - life. And then, suddenly -

JOHANNA places CLIQUE's finger against the temple that has the dot on it.

JOHANNA

Suddenly, there is no more "suddenly" any more.



Beat - then QT slumps forward, hands falling off the steering wheel; JOHANNA lets go of CLIQUE and, for a moment, puts a gentle hand on the back of QT's neck. QT then gets up, takes the chair downstage right, places it to one side, and stands on it. The thick red mark should be towards the audience.

QT

Do you know why?

JOHANNA

No.

QT

Do you remember doing it?

JOHANNA

I remember the gun going off.

QT

Did you intend to do it?

CLIQUE

You didn't mean to do it!

(to QT)

She didn't!

JOHANNA

(warningly)

Clique -

(to QT)

I was not human at that moment.

(to CLIQUE)

I wasn't.

QT

You were weed and Colt 45 and your miserable selfishness.

JOHANNA

Yes.



CLIQUE

But you did my hair!

(to QT)

She did my hair!

QT

So?

CLIQUE

We danced!

QT

So what if she used to know what human was?

CLIQUE

She still does!

QT

No.

(to CLIQUE, cold and direct)

Your problem is that you're trying to remember for her. You can't. She killed off fond memories for everybody one mild night in September, and for that she will always be a murderer. A murderer. Of me and you and everything. You cannot be like Jesus Christ breathing on Lazarus because murderers do not come back from their dead. Ever. They are immune to redemption. So get out, little girl, go home, and cut her pictures out of the photo album.

CLIQUE

(lamenting)

We danced and danced and danced -

JOHANNA puts a hand on her to calm her. CLIQUE shudders to a halt. JOHANNA looks at QT.

JOHANNA

Sentence me.

(to CLIQUE)

Watch this, little girl.



---

QT

(writing the words on the air)

Life. Without. Parole. Until you remember.

JOHANNA

I never forget, especially what I can't remember completely.

QT

(emphasizing the words)

Even better. But it will never be enough. We need you to be the murderer forever so that we can make sense out of your senselessness, so we will never let you go.

JOHANNA

It is the only thing that makes sense of senselessness for me as well.

QT

Wonderful - we can both damn you together! Wonderful!  
Case closed.

JOHANNA goes over to QT and lifts QT off the chair, QT's hands on JOHANNA's shoulders for support, and puts her down. QT then exits. JOHANNA takes the chair and puts it in the same place as when QT sat in it. She takes out the red marker and hands it to CLIQUE, then sits, her hands up on the steering wheel. CLIQUE, understanding, draws a dot on the left temple and a red wavy line on the right cheek from the right temple.

JOHANNA

I stole a man's life for no reason at all. Your loving sister murdered the sweet innocent sleep of a young man, the sweet innocent sleep of his whole family - and your sweet innocent sleep as well.

JOHANNA reacts as if she has just been shot in the head, then slumps forward, just like QT. CLIQUE kneels in front of JOHANNA and gently lifts her head up.

JOHANNA

Look at me, Clique. How much of anyone's life do I deserve? How much of your life? Nothing, Clique - you owe me none of yours. You have to find another way.





JOHANNA stand and seats CLIQUE, then stands behind the chair and slightly off to one side or the other. JOHANNA starts a rhythm with her right fist or hand over her heart, similar to the double-beat of a heart. CLIQUE does the same.

JOHANNA  
(to the rhythm)

Under the bone is a beating heart  
There's a sound track to life  
It's the beating heart  
And I made one stop.

They both stop. Count to two. JOHANNA begins again; CLIQUE follows.

JOHANNA

I live each day as best I can  
But murderer I am  
And murderer I'll stay  
That is my color, that is my name  
No one believes I'll be anything more  
Than killer -  
Than killer -  
Than killer -

Than killer -

They both stop.

JOHANNA  
(to CLIQUE)

Than killer.

JOHANNA fondles CLIQUE's hair for a moment, then leaves. CLIQUE turns to watch her, then turns back and closes her eyes; she lets her head drop just as QT and CLIQUE did. Then the lights change to the tight light on her face at the top of the scene. A beat or two, then CLIQUE begins the rhythm, her eyes still closed.

CLIQUE

(2 beats) But you are / (2 beats)  
(2 beats) Still a human / (2 beats)  
(2 beats) Being / (2 beats)  
(2 beats) Human / (2 beats) Being



---

We are all still human beings.

Lights go to black. Transition music.

\* \* \* \* \*

### Scene 3

It is now the hospital room in real time, and it should be somewhat furnished: table, old magazines, a trash barrel, etc. However, nothing should be hung on the screens. In the dark, QT enters with two chairs, dressed as she was in Scene 1; the red marks are gone. She puts one chair to one side, and then sits in the second chair. QT hands CLIQUE her Walkman; CLIQUE hangs the headphones around her neck but does not turn on the music. Lights up.

QT is leafing through a magazine, then tosses it on the table - she is tired and exasperated. CLIQUE is stone-like.

QT

I hate hospitals - too many old magazines there.

QT looks at her watch.

QT

Three AM. Three hours. What symmetry. Your tape ran out.

CLIQUE looks at the Walkman, then puts it in her pocket and continues to sit.

QT

(in a little sing-song)

"Three hours in the ER" - sounds like the title for something.

(continues with the rhythm)

"With old magazines and disinfectant." Are you hungry?  
You're probably hungry. There are some vending machines

-

CLIQUE shakes her head no.



QT

I don't think I have ever sat with someone for three solid hours and not exchanged one word - after name, rank, serial number to the nurse, that is. I have tried my best social worker moves, Clique, and you have dodged 'em all by just sitting there in the deepest silence I have ever heard. Last time I went to the bathroom, I called your mother again. Well, I left another message at least - full details again. She can't miss it. Have you remembered me yet?

CLIQUE does not respond.

QT

What else? What else? I already told you about me and Johanna braiding your hair.

(holds up her hand)

That little hand-jive thing you guys made up. Do you remember the half-finger leather gloves I liked to wear? Your sister never liked them - preferred metal - things. I am sorry about Johanna - what - happened.

CLIQUE

(turning to face QT)

Alanna.

QT

Right!

CLIQUE

"Alley."

QT

My nickname -

CLIQUE

Right.

QT

Right.

CLIQUE

Now shut up.



---

CLIQUE jams on the headphones and turns on the Walkman. QT, shut out, remains silent. A beat or two, then JOHANNA enters, now a janitor wearing a white coat and pushing a janitorial cart. She should look very different from Scene 2, older, more tired. QT, hearing her enter, turns to her, thinking it's the doctor. CLIQUE does not notice her. During the scene, JOHANNA can empty the wastebasket, sweep the floor, arrange magazines, etc.

NOTE: JOHANNA has to notice something about CLIQUE from the moment she enters that leads to the line, "She just seems really alone."

QT  
(seeing who it is, mutters)

Damn!

JOHANNA  
Sorry, not my name.

QT  
Sorry, too - thought you might be a doctor. Or a nurse.

JOHANNA  
No, no, just a lowly janitor.

JOHANNA tears off a sheet of paper towels and hold it up.

JOHANNA  
My diploma -

QT  
We've been here three hours.

JOHANNA  
I know, I know - it's never easy, is it? Is - she - all right?

QT  
I'd be guessing if I said yes - which is why we're here -

JOHANNA  
(overlapping)  
- why you're here, yes - silly question of mine. Though I try to ask it of everyone, just to ease things a bit - it can get a little cold around here. Well, hopefully they'll be by soon.



As for me, I'm on my own grand rounds for garbage - do you have anything to throw away?

QT

No.

JOHANNA

Her?

QT

Nothing she can put her hands on right away.

JOHANNA

That's an -

QT

Sorry.

JOHANNA

- odd answer.

QT

I'm sorry - just tired - a little too sarcastic.

JOHANNA

No, no, not that, not that at all. Though tired I am sure you are. No, no, you were fine. It's what you said following what I asked you that caught the ear. I hear lots of things around here on my grand rounds, so I get to listen a lot, you know, underneath. I asked you if she had any actual garbage, and you answered me underneath, which may be true: she can't put a hand on it even if she's got it. Even if it's choking her. If that's the case, then it's a shame in one so young. Social worker, right? Or something in that way?

QT

Spot on.

JOHANNA

Thought so. You listen deep enough long enough -  
(making a gesture of discovery)  
- metaphor abounds.



---

QT

You're very philosophical.

JOHANNA

You'd have to be a stump to work here and not be. Though we got our share of stumps, like anywhere, and not all in the janitorial pool. So what dam do you try to keep from breaking open, if I may ask?

QT

(indicating CLIQUE)

At-risk youth.

JOHANNA

What child isn't - at-risk, that is? I have two of my own at home -

(indicating CLIQUE, elongating the "e" sound)

- two teenagers. God, if there was ever a [two syllables] curséd species upon this earth.

QT

Oh, I don't know -

JOHANNA

(holding up her hand)

Though I love 'em, love 'em dearly. At least three double-shifts a week dearly, with my husband doing the graveyard stint at UPS to feed the college fund. It's that it's just not made very easy for them, you know - life. She looks very much like one of my own -

QT

Any idea when a doctor might -

JOHANNA

Right, right, sorry, I don't mean to pry. No, I wouldn't know - they don't let me do the scheduling. I'd offer you my hook, line, and sinker to grab one when they come by, but they're kinda rare. Like a coelacanth [SEE-la-kanth].

(QT looks confused)

The fossil fish they nabbed in 1938, thinking it'd been dead since Adam and Eve? That's my education - late-night



science shows, educational TV re-runs. Pulling stuff up from the deeps.

(taps her head)

Well, garbage in - I hope you both go away with what you need.

JOHANNA has finished but hesitates to leave, looks at CLIQUE.

JOHANNA

What do the kids call you?

QT

They call me QT - "on the q.t."

JOHANNA

Because you give them -

QT

At least I like to think I do.

JOHANNA

That speaks well of you.

QT

I hope so.

JOHANNA

Kids dub those they find to be the knights in their lives with special names - their underneath way -

QT

Yes. Is there someplace you're leading?

JOHANNA

This is not usual for me, I want you to know, Ms. QT -

QT

Alanna - adults can call me Alanna.

JOHANNA

Alanna, then. The cleaning crew is here and not here, you know? In, out, gone - that's our jobs. But we notice a lot and we think a lot - most of us - and I'm just standing here



thinking - been thinking this since the minute I walked in here - my own two kids, thank God, I know are home in bed right now with my mother, their grandmother, probably parked frontside of the TV - my husband UPS-ing it around the warehouse - Why -

(hesitating)

Why is she here - here - at whatever time it is - with a social worker? I don't mean to be nosy, and you can just tell me to butt out and be on my way, but -

(indicating CLIQUE)

- the questions are sitting right there - looking like one of my own -

QT

I have called her mother.

JOHANNA

You've been here three hours?

QT

More, now.

JOHANNA

I see.

QT

She has to come from a distance.

JOHANNA

I see.

QT hesitates, but the hesitation says all.

JOHANNA

I see.

QT

I really can't be talking about her.

JOHANNA

Fine, fine. I get your nudge, and I should be going, anyway. It's just something, though. She just seems really - this is what struck me, Ms. Alanna - she just seems really alone.





Hesitating for a moment more, JOHANNA takes the remaining chair, sits next to CLIQUE, and taps her on the knee.

QT

Shouldn't you -

CLIQUE looks up and notices JOHANNA for the first time.

JOHANNA

Hello.

CLIQUE switches off the music and pulls down the headphones.

JOHANNA

Are you doing all right?

CLIQUE looks at JOHANNA, at QT, at the janitor's cart, as if coming out of a dream. CLIQUE then touches JOHANNA's face lightly.

CLIQUE

Johanna?

JOHANNA

Child, who is Johanna?

QT

Her sister, Johanna.

JOHANNA

(to CLIQUE, taking her hand)

No, I'm not Johanna.

CLIQUE

You look like her.

JOHANNA

Do I now?

CLIQUE

Yes.

JOHANNA

Is that good?



---

CLIQUE

Yes.

JOHANNA

Then I'm glad I look like her. I just wanted to know if you're doing all right.

CLIQUE seems perplexed by the question.

CLIQUE

But you're not Johanna?

QT

Clique -

JOHANNA

(noticing the name)

Clique -

QT

Clique -

JOHANNA

Your name is Clique?

QT

- it would be hard for Johanna to be here.

JOHANNA

(to QT)

Yes?

Waits a moment for a response, does not get it. Back to CLIQUE.

JOHANNA

No, I am not Johanna, but I can still want to know if you're doing all right. "Clique" is an interesting nickname. What name did your birth give you?



CLIQUE  
(to JOHANNA)

Cassandra -  
(turning to QT)  
My name is Cassandra.

QT  
Sassy Cassie -

CLIQUE  
Cassandra.

JOHANNA  
Cassandra. And Johanna.

CLIQUE  
Yes.

JOHANNA  
And Johanna - not around.

QT  
That's probably enough questions.

CLIQUE  
No, not around. Are you sure you are not - ?

QT  
Clique -

CLIQUE  
Cassandra -

QT  
You should probably wait for the doctor.

JOHANNA gesturing to QT to hold for a second.

JOHANNA  
Is that why -  
(indicating the headphones)  
- like buried?



---

CLIQUE nods yes.

JOHANNA

I used to do the same thing - I still do, sometimes. Bury my head in music because I don't want something else to fill it up. Is that something like you?

CLIQUE nods yes.

JOHANNA

So, Cassandra, are you all right with your sister not around?

QT

(to JOHANNA)

You should leave.

CLIQUE looks JOHANNA straight in the eyes for several beats, then gets up and goes to the janitor's cart. She takes a roll of paper towels and tears off at least two connected sheets. She drops to the floor, takes out her marker, and writes on the towel "No More Prisons." She then hands it to JOHANNA. JOHANNA reads it and nods.

JOHANNA

I have seen this. I have seen this. The sidewalks, the walls. All over. You? This is your work? All of it? You have done hundreds, Cassandra. Like those origami cranes they do for peace.

(holding up the paper)

May I?

CLIQUE nods yes. JOHANNA folds it.

JOHANNA

I will keep this.

QT

And I'm trying to keep her out of trouble.

JOHANNA

It could get you into real trouble, Cassandra - she's right. Nobody needs that kind of trouble with the police.



---

QT

No one.

JOHANNA

(to QT)

And it's good that you're doing that -

(to CLIQUE)

- good friend over there. But, well, hundreds! It must be something powerful to you, I imagine, Cassandra, to drive you like that. Powerful. I'm not one for defacing public and private property - my father's ghost even now gives me a hard look for thinking anything admirable about it - but I am impressed by your - by how bright you shine.

QT

You've done enough - you should leave.

JOHANNA

(unfolding the paper)

"No. More. Prisons."

QT

Leave.

JOHANNA

And Johanna not here.

QT

Leave! Or I will get a s[ecurity guard] -

CLIQUE

Life without parole.

JOHANNA

I am so sorry.

QT

Clique - Cassandra - you don't want to talk about it.



---

JOHANNA  
(to CLIQUE)

I know.

(to QT)

I know precisely where she's broadcasting from. Know the exact frequency. Listen, Cassandra.

JOHANNA moves her chair so that its back faces the audience, and she straddles it. She leans back like a motorcycle rider, perhaps even makes Harley sounds.

JOHANNA

My brother.

JOHANNA leans forward and mock-snorts coke along the top of the chair's back.

JOHANNA

My brother.

JOHANNA stands to the side of the chair and mock-drinks liquor from a bottle.

JOHANNA

My brother.

JOHANNA flips the mock-bottle to catch it by its neck and then smashes it down onto the head of someone, killing him - at least two blows.

JOHANNA

My brother.

JOHANNA puts the chair back next to CLIQUE.

JOHANNA

My brother, my brother, my brother - the murder-man. Life without parole, too. Life without parole - and when they get that, that's what we get, too, isn't it?

CLIQUE

How do you live with it?



---

JOHANNA

How do make sense of the senseless act?

CLIQUE

How do you live with it?

JOHANNA

Why do we keep asking an eye for an eye until we are all blind?

CLIQUE

How do you live with it?

JOHANNA

Sister of mine, there is no magic.

CLIQUE

There has to be.

JOHANNA

Either you decide to, or not to.

CLIQUE

There has to be -

JOHANNA

Everything flies up from that yes or that no.

CLIQUE

How do you live with it?

JOHANNA

I have decided to live with my brother - and without him.

CLIQUE

And me?

JOHANNA

The hardest work? To live with my brother when he did not want to live with himself. Him telling me how foolish I was to love a corrupt and evil man while I was saying to him, yelling almost, our words slap-dashing over and against each other, pushing my words into his face, "I will love you, damn



it, against all the grain!" I don't know if it saved him. I know it didn't kill him to hear that someone could still love his cracked life. And it didn't kill me to have his words shatter themselves against my heart.

CLIQUE

And today?

JOHANNA

He's alive and trying to be as human as he can every day. Doing just what the rest of us are trying to do. He's trying to stay a part of the family.

CLIQUE gets out of her chair and walks to the white screens. Nervously, she begins air-writing the tag, as if she cannot leave any blank space free.

JOHANNA

(to QT)

Why is she here tonight? This night, of all nights?

QT

She fainted. Had a seizure of some sort.

JOHANNA

Doing that?

QT

Yes.

JOHANNA

And you just happened to be around?

While QT speaks, JOHANNA goes to CLIQUE and embraces her. Then she has CLIQUE put the imaginary marker into her, JOHANNA's, hand and guide the hand in "writing" the tag on the screens.

QT

I was actually looking for her. I'd seen the tag everywhere, just like you, and so dug around. Wasn't hard to find out who. So I'd go to where I thought she'd go, follow the trail of the tags, seeing her pattern, so I could "bring her in" before she got into trouble. I found her. She fainted.





---

JOHANNA

You couldn't find her at home, could you?

QT

Like I said, home is a distance.

JOHANNA has finished with the screens and now has CLIQUE writing the tag on the air. JOHANNA uses this to guide CLIQUE back to the chair. As she sits CLIQUE down, she keeps the imaginary marker, which stops CLIQUE for a moment from writing. CLIQUE speaks while JOHANNA guides her back to the chair.

CLIQUE

If I do enough - If I do enough - "No." "More." "Prisons." -  
"No." "More." "Prisons." - then she can breathe.

JOHANNA

(to QT)

Like this?

QT

Yes.

CLIQUE

Breathe again. They all can breathe again.

JOHANNA sits CLIQUE down.

CLIQUE

(to JOHANNA)

I will make enough.

JOHANNA

Angel, you will never do enough.

CLIQUE

I will make enough! I will put them everywhere.

JOHANNA

There is not enough everywhere to put them.

With great agitation, CLIQUE bursts out of her chair. Note: because this takes place in a public space, the voicing should be fierce yet restrained -



go for playing the words and feelings with restraint rather than overplaying them. Throughout, JOHANNA and QT look for places they can physically intervene, but CLIQUE should play this so that she gives them no opportunity to stop her, i.e., she does not rant or scream but tries to argue them into understanding. She is not out of control but she is also in the control of her strong feelings.

#### CLIQUE

Don't, don't, don't! It's grace, it's grace, it's all about grace. I do them, one by one by one. It's my work! People see them, they read the words - no more prisons - again and again and again - no more prisons, no more prisons, no more prisons - and it drives into the cracks of their brains and it stirs up the juices and they see them again and then again and they're all over the place and eventually something's got to cut through that fog - that hatred - that hatred -

(changing tack)

You see, that's why, that's why - they hate them, hate them all - hate Johanna! Hate Johanna! Not my sister! They can't! To them, just animals, beasts - "not like me, I wouldn't ever do that!" - and so -

(clap of the hands or some other gesture)

- bury them! Turn them into animals and bury them! Out of sight - out of mind! Bury them.

(hissing the words)

Murderer! Killer! Criminal! Animal! Animal! Not my sister!

CLIQUE drops the level of her voice for this next part, tense but also intimate.

#### CLIQUE

I have these - dreams. Stones in my lungs. Dirt stuffed in my eyes. And I can't breathe! And she can't breathe - in my mind's eye, up here, I see her turn into death. I see them all turn into death. And then I see all of them out there - "good folks" - turn my sister into death, turn all of them into death, those ones, the ones we can piss on because you can always piss on dirt and get away with it. I know what she did. I know what she did! She took away a life. She is a murderer. But still - Out of sight, maybe - but not out of mind, not out of mind, not out of mind -



JOHANNA embraces her, and, interrupted, CLIQUE suddenly looks lost and confused.

CLIQUE

I am so tired -

Through the next lines, CLIQUE tries to write the phrase one more time but can only write, and say, "No." "More." Her arm then falls, exhausted.

JOHANNA

I know.

(to QT)

Could you go find a nurse?

QT

I shouldn't leave -

JOHANNA

Nurses - by the station. Tell them that Cassandra has collapsed again.

CLIQUE

No more forgetting.

CLIQUE trails off, letting her weight fall against JOHANNA.

JOHANNA

She'll be fine with me for the short time.

QT still hesitates.

JOHANNA

We've come this far and shown this much, Ms. Alanna. Trust.

QT exits. JOHANNA holds CLIQUE, speaks with affectionate fierceness.

JOHANNA

I know you can't hear this, but you will. You're wrong, angel - noble, praiseworthy, misguided angel. "Martyr" is not what your sister needs, nor my brother, not even the victims, even though their hearts feel crucified and as brute as coal. The grace for which you hunger - never by magic - not by tags



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numbered as many as the stars. How? Angel, listen to this  
- the grace - the grace is only found in the sweet connection  
with other souls deep enough in this fragile bluster of pain  
we call "life" to go deep enough for peace and silence.

QT re-enters.

QT

Nurse is coming.

JOHANNA  
(low-voiced)

In time, sweet angel, I will show you how. Sweet angel, in  
time I will show you what your life can do.

Lights come down; transition music.

\* \* \* \* \*

#### Scene 4

Some time later. JOHANNA is discovered on stage wearing headphones  
and sweeping, cleaning, etc. CLIQUE enters with QT.

JOHANNA  
(pulling off the headphones)

Hey, hey, hey! If it isn't our own St. Joan D'Arc of the  
taggers. Come, come, give me your arms.

CLIQUE embraces her.

JOHANNA  
You, too, Ms. Alanna. Where I come from, we are not shy  
about being sweet.

QT embraces her.

JOHANNA  
This is, I take it, a non-emergency visit?

CLIQUE  
Non-emergency.



JOHANNA

I like those so much better.

(to QT)

You told me she was getting along much better, and I see you've told me the truth.

QT

What a difference a month makes.

CLIQUE

Five weeks.

JOHANNA

A stickler, I see. So, "whazup"?

CLIQUE takes a small package out of her jacket pocket and hands it to JOHANNA.

JOHANNA

What's this?

CLIQUE

I'm bringing it as a thank you.

JOHANNA

Now, a "thank you" for being a natural human being is not something we get a lot of around here.

(indicating the package)

For me, really?

CLIQUE nods yes. JOHANNA opens it and takes out a butterfly. JOHANNA holds it up.

CLIQUE

It's a symbol of transformation.

JOHANNA

So I have heard.

QT

Those late-night TV shows, huh?



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JOHANNA

Metaphor everywhere.

(to CLIQUE)

Transformation -

CLIQUE

I know what you're going to say!

JOHANNA

Whose?

CLIQUE

Knew it.

JOHANNA

Yours?

(to QT)

Hers? Mine - not that I need much, being the highly evolved creature that I am.

CLIQUE

I figured a little to go around for everybody.

JOHANNA

(to QT)

Is she getting wise all of a sudden?

QT

(indicating JOHANNA)

Comes from hanging with the philosopher.

CLIQUE

Not wise. Just beginning at the beginning.

JOHANNA

Well, wise enough for now.

(holding up the butterfly)

Thanks right back to you.

CLIQUE

No -



JOHANNA

What do you mean, “no”? I can’t thank the thanker?

CLIQUE

(a little ironic)

Thanker?

JOHANNA

Making it up on the spot - it’s late in my shift.

CLIQUE

Well, “thankee” -

JOHANNA

(mock-impressed)

“Thankee.”

CLIQUE

- it’s not like Christmas, you know, I give, you give, and we do this little dance like “thank you,” “no, thank you,” “no, thank you.” Dum-dee-dum-dee-dum-dee-dum. I can’t take thanks back yet. You both talked me down, you both talked me through - both of you stayed. Both of you hung in and hung out with me. I think that’s worth a lot more thanks than I can pay out at the moment.

JOHANNA

What we did is we “tagged” you -

(to QT)

- right, eh?

QT

Right.

JOHANNA

Like one of those endangered wolves let free into the wilderness. So we can track you.

QT

So we can keep you honest!



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JOHANNA

So we can find you when you need to be found.

(tags CLIQUE)

“Tag, you’re it.” Keep track of who’s in the family.

(tags QT)

“Tag, you’re it.” So no one gets completely lost.

(tags herself)

“Tag, I’m it.” Bring them all back in.

(taking CLIQUE’s hand)

You have some different tagging to do now.

CLIQUE

It still itches, you know, to make -

JOHANNA

(still holding on to the hand)

So, when it does, you take this hand and go

(presses CLIQUE’s hand against QT in a “tag”)

- go ahead, say it -

CLIQUE

Tag, you’re it.

JOHANNA

And to me -

(does the same with CLIQUE’s hand to herself)

- c’mom -

CLIQUE

Tag, you’re it.

JOHANNA

And, most especially -

Presses CLIQUE’s hand against CLIQUE.

CLIQUE

Tag, I’m it.

JOHANNA

And now, St. Joan, we’re all keeping track of each other’s tracks.





At this point, the actors move to either downstage right or left, and the lights shift to their new location. From this time on until the end of the play, rear-projected slides will be shown on the hospital screens of both prisoners and prison guards, public officials, etc., male and female - in short, all in the "family."

NOTE: If the slides cannot be done, then simply continue with the scene.

JOHANNA

(holding up the butterfly, to QT)

What'd she give to you?

QT

I already got my gift - she's coming to work for me.

JOHANNA

Yeah?

QT

She starts an internship next week, at the agency.

JOHANNA

Yeah?

QT

Tell her.

CLIQUE

Working with the outreach coördinator -

QT

Youth outreach coördinator -

CLIQUE

Youth outreach coördinator - on prison issues.

QT

We have so many kids -

JOHANNA

(holding up a hand)

Already know it - you slam a couple a million into prison, a lot of families are going to get the ripple effect.



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CLIQUE

It's only part-time.

JOHANNA

Only in hours.

CLIQUE

Yeah.

QT

Go ahead - ask her.

JOHANNA

What?

QT

Go on.

CLIQUE

Would you come and talk at some point about -

JOHANNA

My murder-man brother?

CLIQUE

Yeah.

JOHANNA

I'll do you even better. I got my own links - lot of us may be under the radar and banished from the public eye - kind of like janitors, don't you know? - but that doesn't mean we ain't organized. You just made your first professional networking connection. Got a business card?

QT

Order form's been signed and sent.

JOHANNA

I want one fresh off the press when they come.

CLIQUE

Deal.



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JOHANNA

And one more "tag, you're it": your mama?

CLIQUE

(writing the phrase on the air)

I got her to write it. Once.

JOHANNA

"Once" is a start - so good for her. You keep it up with her -

(with a nod to QT)

- she's got a long distance to come. And your sister?

CLIQUE

And your brother?

JOHANNA

I saw him last week - he's put on weight, lost some hair.

Seeking. Finding. Johanna?

CLIQUE

I saw her for the first time since.

JOHANNA

First time?

CLIQUE

Yes.

JOHANNA

Brave. And good.

CLIQUE

QT came with me.

QT

I needed to make my own peace as well.

CLIQUE

I will be seeing her again soon.



---

JOHANNA

Even better. The long road begins, eh? Meanwhile, I have to earn the bread that keeps my children fed. Bring me that card as soon as it comes and we'll set dates.

CLIQUE

Okay.

JOHANNA

Oh, wait.

JOHANNA reaches into her pocket and pulls out three apples.

JOHANNA

Got these from the cafeteria - fresh Empires. No bruises, faults, or corruptions, as the man at the register told me. For a buck.

JOHANNA hands each of them an apple, and as they eat, they turn upstage to watch the slides as the lights fade to blackness on them. For several seconds after the blackout the slides continue, holding for a few seconds on a final face, and then blackout.

NOTE: If no slides are used, then simply fade the lights as they eat and laugh.





## About Block & Tackle Productions

After more than a decade of projects together, Michael Bettencourt and Elfin Frederick Vogel joined forces to form Block & Tackle Productions. In addition to producing Michael's plays with Elfin directing, B&T Productions also looks to collaborate with other playwrights and directors and explore different media for dramatic narrative, such as live-streaming theatrical productions, recording radio-play podcasts, and creating short films.

Whichever project B&T Productions pursues, it will create theatre narratives focused on our present times and where every part of the production - design (set, lighting, sound, media), performance, script, the brand of beer sold in the lobby, and the pre-show music - relates to and nourishes every other part. As often as possible, B&T Productions will do this in collaboration or conjunction with like-minded theatre-makers.

*Elfin Frederick Vogel (Producer/Director)* - Elfin has directed over thirty productions in New York City and regional theatres, from classical plays (among others, *Othello*, *As You Like It*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Measure for Measure*, *All's Well That Ends Well*, *Three Sisters*, *The Cherry Orchard*) to 20th-century plays (*Six Characters in Search of an Author*, *The Real Thing*, *Exit the King*) and new plays, among them *Only the Dead Know Brooklyn*, *Excerpts from the Lost Letters of Hester Prynne*, *No Great Loss*, *Four Plays*, *The Sin Eater* (all by Michael Bettencourt), and *Moral and Political Lessons on "Wyoming"* and *Reckless Abandon* (by Vincent Sessa).

*Michael Bettencourt (Producer/Writer)* - Michael is an award-winning playwright and screenwriter. As always, special thanks to María Beatriz. All his work can be seen at [www.m-bettencourt.com](http://www.m-bettencourt.com)

**Block  
&Tackle**  
**PRODUCTIONS**

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