Spontaneous Human Combustion
A Novel by
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Chapter 1

I had bombed in Boston. Graduate school had been a huge bust for me. The folks sent me plane fare to ride home in the Spring of 1981, and I took them up on it. That should have been the end of the story. I would have stuck my unaccepted thesis on the Implications of Spontaneous Human Combustion in a drawer and pulled them out when I was in my forties, read them, laughed, and tossed them in the garbage along with my Hot Wheels collection and a pile of graduation cards.

I remember riding back home in the back of a DC-9, looking out the window that evening there was the most wonderful array of thunderheads all up and down the Ohio River. Huge anvils, dwarfed by distance, flickered with lightning that I could watch all the way from the Pennsylvania line all the way down to Columbus. As we turned for
Cincinnati, I lost sight of them. It grew dark. It was hell in the air for while as we passed through the storms and landed. My folks were waiting for me. Mom was worried that I looked pale.

That was how this all started. I came home to lick my wounds, go find a job, and settle into the suburban mediocrity of the Midwest. Dad talked about looking into insurance, and wanted me to have lunch with him and an old buddy. I agreed.

Somewhere in my head, I heard a door slamming shut. Within a few days, I had dug up some friends from high school, found a job at a bookstore up by the University, and taken one of them up on sharing an apartment over on Ohio Avenue. It was getting on into warmer weather, I had reburied myself in a comfortable world not unlike the one I had left in Boston. Granted, the coffee was not as good, and you had to walk farther to find a jazz quartet playing. Still, it was a good spot to lick my wounds.

If this was my autobiography I was writing, that would have probably taken a couple of chapters to write what has taken me just a few minutes to put down. There would probably be another chapter in there about going to lunch with Dad’s friend up at that big insurance company up on the north side of town, and the month I spent studying for a life insurance exam, and how I went to work for a short while, before the Dad’s friend got really trashed at lunch one day and how I quit and how I worried about how I was going to tell Dad his friend was a rude obnoxious drunk.

“That’s okay,” said Dad. “Steve always was an incredible ass. I’m glad you had the sense to get out of there.”
Luckily I got my job back at the book store, the guy was a nice old fellow that kept a poodle. He had taken a shine to me, and was happy to have me return. I spent several hours a day over there shelving books, sorting collections that had come in, and working the register. What I did not blow on books, I blew on used records, trolling the twenty-five-centers at Mole’s. There was always food around the apartment, and everyone seemed happy for what I could kick in. Life was good.

There is a park on the end of Ohio Avenue that is particularly magical, Belleview Park. It was the terminus one of the old inclines that used to dot the hills of Cincinnati. For a nickel at turn of the century, folks could escape the heat of summer by riding a funicular out of the bottoms and onto one of the hills. The Belleview Incline had been one of the favorites, since it had place called the Belleview House at the top. From all accounts it had been a good place to hang out on a summer evening, with good food and drink, a breezy veranda and a little action going on upstairs. The incline was gone, all that was left were a few limestone foundations on Clifton Avenue, and back in the woods. The Belleview House itself was long gone, replaced with an eccentric pavilion that looked like mushrooms growing over imported Italian pink concrete. It was largely forgotten by everyone, except a few neighbor kids, a few bums, and me. When I was not working at the bookstore, I would stuff a good book in my pack, grab something to eat and head out to the park and stay there all day. Most of the time I spent there was out beyond the broken chain link fence and rusted NO-TRESSPASSING SIGNS that kept people from falling off the cliff and down onto the pavement of Clifton Avenue. If you knew the right paths to go buy, you could be treated to a wonderful view of the city as
you sat on sturdy the limestone shelves that formed a point on the cliff. I loved it out
there. It was a good place to go and heal myself. I had a lot of wounds to lick that
Spring, and a lot of things to get sorted out.

When I was not reading a book, I was often exploring the woods below. This was
a wild and forgotten place. It had been a limestone quarry in the formative days of the
city. By the time the Belleview House had been built, it was nothing more than a bare
patch of limestone, sharp shale and clay. Over the intervening century or, the hillsides
had acquired a veneer of Locust, Osage Orange, multi-flora rose, and honeysuckle. It
was somewhat inhospitable, but it suited my mood well. On the south end was the long
slope going down into Vine Street, and between the trees you could see the golden hand
on top of the Lutheran Church in Over the Rhine pointing towards heaven. On the North
End, you had views of the quainter parts of the Heights, Fairview, and beyond.

It was on one of these journeys that I met one of the few other humans I ever saw
in those woods. He was carrying a pack basket, a long-handled hoe that he used as a
staff, he had on a drab field jacket and a well worn Tilley. I said hello, and we soon we
got to talking. He and I must have spent a good several minutes making small talk,
feeling each other out. No, neither one of us was an undercover cop. No, neither one of
us was selling drugs. We were both straight, and neither one was intent on robbing,
killing, or butchering the other—the simple things one needs to get through in a
roundabout sort of way when two grown men meet up in the middle of a forbidden wood.
He seemed like a nice fellow.
I asked him what he was doing with the hoe, and he said he was doing a bit of “guerrilla gardening.” I took to mean that he was putting out pot plants. That would have explained it all. We talked about many things, and when we decided to break and move on, I found that I had skipped lunch and was late for work. Stan, the boss, did not mind. It had been a pleasant morning. It had been a lost afternoon. That bothered me a bit, but I shrugged it off. The guy had been bloody interesting to talk to, but I found myself unable to remember his name, when it came time to relate the story later that night.

Over the next couple of days, I looked for the guy, but he never showed. In time, it became less of an issue. Soon, it was late May, and the trees were fully leaved. It was growing hot out on the cliff, and I started retiring to one of the picnic tables in the shade of the old pines more and more. It was also getting windy out on the cliff. Memorial Day weekend, I tried to take some friends out to see the view, but the wind was fierce, the bugs were biting, and the path was getting choked with a fresh grown of stickers.

I was not into drinking much, but sometime around mid-June, I met a cute blonde on one of my rare forays to the Sand Bar, across the street from the bookstore. This was a hotbed of Parrotheads, devotees of Jimmy Buffet, margaritas and loud shirts. One night, as I was closing up for Stan, I saw the crowd of people, and it all started to look very attractive. Normally I would have stayed away. This was a hangout for the Law School—self-absorbed pricks blowing off steam. I went in and ordered a Scotch and was nursing it when the blonde came up and said hello. One thing led to another. It suddenly got hot in the Sand Bar. Both of us were hungry. The new Chinese place was only carry-out, and so we found ourselves walking with Curried Chicken, Happy Family, and some
appetizers down Lyon Street, looking for a place to eat. I mentioned the park, and she went for it. I stopped by my place and snatched the bathroom rug out of the laundry basket, and off we went to the park.

Her name was Vivian. She was a grad student, like I used to be. We ate our wantons and egg rolls at one of the picnic tables, and then I looked at my watch and realized the park was closing. We trundled off and slid over the hill, and down into a clearing I had found that was impossible to see from the drive. The park police would not see us, and if they did, I knew an old staircase that would lead down to Vine Street. We were covered. She was amazed that I knew so much about the park, and I kept talking about all I had learned of the history of the park and the Belleview House. We ate Chinese on the bathroom rug and then made wonderful love on the rug and the surrounding lawn. To this day, I cannot but think fondly of curried chicken and onions on a bed of rice.

When it was over, we picked up and walked back to the Heights, and to her car. I offered her my place for the night, but she was long past dealing with roommates. She offered to drive me back, but I was happy to walk. She said she was going out of town for a few days, but that she would come see me at the bookstore. I believe that was on a Thursday. I had about a day of crowing before we all decided to go out to Sunlite pool for the day. It was this huge pool that had used to be attached to big amusement park, Coney Island. Coney had folded tent and moved up the road and was now this big Kings Island thing you saw from the expressway. The pool was an attraction unto itself, however, and we all spent the day swimming in the waters where our mothers and fathers
had once had indecent contact in the shallow end. My head was still spinning, and I enjoyed it all immensely. My friends were happy to see me out of the dumps. I did not mind for a change that I was the only guy along without a date.

I worked for a while on Sunday. We would open up early and sell Sunday papers. Around noon, Stan would show up and I went over to see my favorite waitress at the Alpha. She was this zooey thing in a derby, and she cackled when she heard of my good luck.

It wasn’t like I was telling everybody. She just brought me my coffee, and said, “Well, somebody got laid last night!” she begged me for detail. “You got that written all over you,” she said. “I could tell you had gotten lucky from the moment you walked in.”

“Thanks,” I said.

“You’ve been the biggest mope, ever since you started coming in here!” she laughed. “I was going to invite you for a spin soon, just so you wouldn’t go spreading all those black vibes around.”

“You were?” I asked.

“Well,” she said. “Never mind about that now. Whole-wheat pancakes?”

It was two weeks before I stopped jumping up every time the bell on rang, announcing a customer. In the interim, I’d knocked over several stacks of books and at least a couple of customers trying to get up to the front of the store.
I am not a huge fan of baseball. I stopped playing in eighth grade. I stopped going to games after I stopped getting free tickets for straight A’s. Still, the All-Star game still holds sway in my firmament. It has become a meaningless exercise, but I never miss an All-Star Game. One year, my Grandfather took me to see the one they had in Riverfront Stadium. That was the year Rose stole home and ended the career of the opposing catcher. They don’t make All-Star Games like that any more. The game seems to have no meaning for me. I am like a divorced Catholic that only goes to church on Easter, but I still go. It always marks the end of the waxing half of the year for me. From there on out, I feel like I am heading back towards Fall, Christmas and a long slow Winter. It was the All-Star break, and I had given up all hope of seeing Vivian again.

Rene, the waitress, had given up all hope for me as well. I finally bumped into her on the street and made a half-hearted attempt to get her to go out with me. She finally said she would relent and drop over to see the All-Star Game with me on TV. She kind of flipped when I put my arm around her sometime in the fifth inning.

“I am not going to just do it with you.” She said as she grabbed my arm and threw it in my lap.”

“I did not think we were.” I said. “You sure are fickle.”

“What ‘fickle?’”
“’Fickle’ like a month ago you said you wanted to go out with me.” I said. “You kind of hinted like ‘doing it’ might be on your mind.”

“That was last month,” she said. “I change my mind sometimes.”

“Is it something I did?”

“Jeezle Petes!” she said. “What is it with guys! Just watch the game.”

Our relationship did not change, at least at the restaurant. I still came in on a regular basis. She always made a point of taking my table. We did not talk about “it” anymore.

About this time as well, I found I had a liking for my roommate, Skip. Rather, I think Skip found a liking for me. He was one of the guys in the house I had not gone to high school with. He was a big guy with a lot less on his mind than most. He got to thinking I was fun to hang out with. He had a girlfriend named Sue, that drove a Mustang convertible. She taught aerobics. He worked at a tanning salon. Both Sue and Skip took a shine to me, and would frequently include me. Sue wanted to get me set up with her friends. Skip wanted to see me get laid. The harder they worked, the more resistant I got, but I played along anyway. Finally, they took me out to a movie with a friend of theirs. It turned out later that it was the minister from their church, and he was having to slink around with the wife of one of another church member. It was a double-date plus one. After the movie—some foreign job we saw downtown—Skip drove us over to the Mohawk for pie. We sat at a round booth, and hands and footsies were flying
everywhere. Finally, I caught the minister’s hand in my lap—he had been chancing a feel at Sue and missed. Skip was playing footsies with the married lady and both of them kept kicking me out of the way. Finally, I went to the Men’s’ room and did not come back. When I explained it to Skip the next day, he finally understood.

If it sounds like that summer was all a lot of mostly-aborted sex, sulking and book stacking, it was not. I actually had quite a bit of fun. Mostly, I read. Stan let me borrow whatever I wanted, and if I wanted to keep the book, he gave me a hefty discount. I had my friends in a lot. We listened to records on my old dorm stereo. I had been collecting stuff ever since I got back. They were scratchy used records, but on my old stereo, it did not matter much. If something really stunk up the place, I could pitch it off the turntable into the corner. The albums we played most were things I had missed while studying my head off—things like Doobie Brothers, and Earth Wind and Fire and Steely Dan. It took all summer to get de-pressurized. When I went to the park, I was starting to leave the heavy philosophy and poetry behind and bringing dog-eared copies of Catch-22, Stranger in a Strange land, and the works of JRR Tolkien. By the time Labor Day came around, and the fireworks down on the river, I was unwound.

The folks had taken off with my sister for their place up in Wisconsin. I had been getting rides from Sue out to the family hermitage all summer, a few times a week. They had me water the houseplants, check on the place, and take in the mail. They were due back in a few days so Sis could start school, and I tried to get out one more time. Sue was busy. They only lived a half mile off the bus route, so I went and caught a bus out to their place. I was standing on a corner in Clifton, waiting for a 17, when I caught a
glimpse a cover of one of those supermarket tabloids, and it sucked me right back in again into the subject of Spontaneous Human Combustion.

There it was, all over the front page, and for several pages on the inside. At first, I thought this might be a new case; however, I soon found out it was a retelling of the 1980 Jacksonville Florida case. The tabloid had just doctored the pictures beyond recognition and then faked a few of their own. Still, there it was, and I spent most of the trip up to the folks, pouring over the article. The next thing I knew, I was standing in my room at home, ripping open boxes of files, looking for corroboration of the article.
Chapter 2

There have been times when I wished that Spontaneous Human Combustion did not exist. I first became aware of it in high school, reading a book about that sort of thing. You know: frogs and fish raining from the sky, ball lightning, that sort of thing. I don’t know exactly why, but the thought of someone suddenly catching fire fascinated me. Mom at first tried to discourage it. When I started collecting newspaper clippings, she balked at buying me my first file cabinet. Finally, she relented. It was a hobby of mine.

I graduated with a Bachelors in English Lit and Journalism from Miami University in the late Seventies, and shopping around for a place to go study for a Masters. All this time, I was collecting information on the subject of SHC. While I had become fully of the belief that the vast majority of the classic cases, such as the Conway case and the 1966 Bentley case had been explainable, there remained instances such as the Saffin case, the Olga Stevens case in 1964, and a large number of others that cannot be explained by the starved flame fat/wick theory. Some incidents, like the 1980 Winchester example involve people who just catch fire and burn up in a spectacular conflagration.

For those of you who do not know the classic manifestation of Spontaneous Human Combustion, allow me to frame it for you. Old, sedentary, corpulent Mister Smith sits down in his easy chair in his lonely room. He smokes a cigarette. Sometime the next day, his landlady smells something awful and breaks in with the authorities. Mister Smith has been reduced to a pile of ash. The frame of the chair is scortched but
still intact. Mister Smith’s lower left leg lies on the floor with a charred stump; the foot is still in his slipper. There are signs of intense heat. There are no bones left. However, the TV set nearby is still on and functioning. The plastic table lamp beside him is untouched. There are a lot of sooty greasy deposits on the ceiling and walls, but this all clears out about three feet off the floor.

This is the sort of case that holds no interest for me. I had speculated on this early on, and experts have tested the Human Candle and found proof. Simply put, if you put a dressed fat man in a chair, kill him quickly with something like a heart attack, and set him on fire with a burning cigarette, there is usually enough fat to provide many hours of slow burning. The clothing, the chair upholstery, the rug beneath-- all acts as a wick. The fire burns long and slow. No high heat is involved. No extraordinary process is at work. There are no witnesses, and the deceased is not seen for a day or two prior to the discovery of the ash pile.

Then you have those few gems where a woman may be in the company of her family. All of a sudden there is a flash of light, and “POOF!” A man may be walking down the street, or driving a car. “POOF!” There is no closed room to starve the flame. The victim is up and about and it is as though the Hand of God reaches out and zaps the person off the face of the Earth. This was my obsession of my teenage years. This was the Grail that I set off to seek. I was the youngest person ever to publish a monograph on the subject, and my articles started appearing in journals and magazines from my seventeenth year on.

I would like to think that I was the rising star in my field. Certainly, it was a narrow field of endeavor. My works were quoted several times in other’s books. I was
actually consulted for a few TV documentaries, although I was too young for my face to appear. I was the Mozart of Spontaneous Human Combustion. I was the prodigy. However, about when it came time for a graduate degree, one of the books that I had helped on as a ghost writer came out. The author had taken the work I did and used it to lampoon the subject in broad strokes. My world crashed in. When I finally got a ride for my Masters, it was in an unrelated field, and my thesis was never accepted, no matter how I tried to re-work it.

There, now you know the whole bloody mess of what had me standing in my old bedroom in my parents’ house, in a futile knee-jerk search through the files I had spent my life building and learning to despise.

I probably did not water all the plants that day. Some of them died, and it was probably my fault. I realized way too late that I was missing the last bus back towards campus, and I ended sticking it out overnight in my way-too-small bed without any dinner and the water turned off. The final blow came when I dug around in the medicine cabinet and found my Casper the Friendly Ghost toothbrush and some Colgate that had last been used sometime in the Sixties, and I brushed my teeth with the remaining water meant for the plants.

I was cleaning up my room and getting ready to leave when my folks showed up in their Country Squire, loaded down from the road. Sis, Muffin the dog, Mom, and Dad climbed out and came in. Mom was so happy to see me, thinking I just must have known. Dad had me carry all the bags in while he went about turning on the water, and bringing the air conditioning back to life. I stayed for a while and then had to catch the bus. I made sure I went back up to my room and filed the newspaper that had started the
whole mess before leaving. I did not want my mother to find it and start getting worried about me.

It was beyond me at that juncture in my life to understand why my life had taken such a turn. On the one hand, I was a seemingly well-adjusted young man with good looks, an affable presence, and fine breeding. On the other hand, my life seemed forever chained to a world of charred appendages, inexplicable flashes, and obnoxious fatty soot. To make matters worse, I had never even seen a victim of combustion, except through black and white glossies. I had never met a witness or a victim face to face, only conversed with a few over long distance and overseas telephone. It felt so empty.

That was why I had vowed on the flight back to Cincinnati never to touch Spontaneous Human Combustion again. That was why I had moved out of the house and found my own place. That was why I had felt so good about my life since living in Clifton Heights. That was why I was torturing myself on the bus ride back down the hill. I had fallen. I had to brush myself off and get on with my life. I did not want to go to some lousy shrink and get diagnosed with Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder and get put on some kind of dope that would make me blotto the rest of my life. I wanted to live free of all that; most of all, I wanted to be free of Spontaneous Human Combustion.

The bus dropped me off across the street from Stan’s book store, and I just went in. It was an hour before I was due. Stan did not care. I picked up where I had left off, sorting a huge shipment of romance novels that Stan wanted shelved. It was around lunch time when I got back up towards the front to see if Stan wanted to break, and I would take the register. She was standing there talking to Stan.
By now you might have been wondering who SHE was. It was the blonde, Vivian. At first, even I had trouble with the concept. This was close to Fall, and now here she was, showing up at the store as promised. I sort of played it cool and took my time getting up there.

“Perry,” said Stan, “I was just going to call you. You have a visitor.” Turning to her, he said, “Viv, it’s been really good seeing you.” She reached out and hugged Stan and kissed him on the cheek.

“I didn’t know you knew each other.” I said.

“Oh,” said Stan with a great deal of mirth.” Viv and I go way back.” Both laughed. Finally, Vivian let go of the old man and turned to me. I was beyond stunned.

To say that Vivian was ageless really did not cover it. That would make it sound like I was talking about Bridget Bardot before she let herself go. This was a woman who I could not wrap my brain around. The sunlight filtered in from the street and caught her blonde hair. It shone like it was not just lit from behind, but had its own source of luminance. It was no dye job either. Her face was untouched by time. Her body was lean and shapely—but her eyes. Even from across the room I fell into her eyes without a rope and was gone. This was not the twenty-something student I had picked up in a bar. This was a mature woman that had . . . well, it was like she had grown old without aging. It was vastly alluring. It was kind of creepy too. I wanted to take her right there in front of Stan and his poodle, but I also wanted to run. Thirty-five? Forty-two? Fifty -? I could not figure it out.

“Perry,” she said. “Come, I thought I would catch you for lunch. I’ve missed you.” I looked over at Stan, and he nodded.
“The Alpha?” she said?

“No. “ I replied all too tersely. “Let’s go eat at Pop’s”

Pop ran the Clifton Chili Parlor, but there was a lot more too it than that. One sign said “Clifton Chili” the other read “Falafel House.” Pop and his wife ran a Middle Eastern restaurant. If you came in looking like you wanted chili, you got chili. If you came in yearning for mujadara, hummus, and babbaganoosh that’s what you got. It was all exotic, but in a tame sort of way. Pop and Vivian seemed to have history too. She spoke to Pop and Mom heard and came out of the back to see her.

“Wow!” I said. “You know everyone. I said, sipping a Pepsi.

“I’ve been around this neighborhood for a long time,” Vivian replied. “I missed it while I was gone.” She reached out her hand to me. “and I really missed you.”

“I didn’t know quite what to make of it all.” I replied. “That was June.”

“I was gone longer than I expected,” she said. “I was in France.”

“Vacation?” I asked.

“Business.” She said, “It was . . . family business.” For the first time, I felt like a kid with her.

“You missed good fireworks this year.” I said.

“No, “she said. “I was with friends. I had just got back in time. I got invited to a party in Mount Adams, and got to see the whole thing.”

I guess I must have looked like I was pouting or something. She reached out and touched my cheek with her other hand.

“Perry,” she said. “ I don’t know what you think of me. I know you wanted to see me again back in June. Now here it is—you’ve probably had many girlfriends since I
“left.” she giggled and then stopped abruptly. “I just wanted to tell you that I am back in town and I would very much like to see you.” With this, Pop brought out lunch—a couple of falafels and some hummus. It gave me some time to get my head in gear.

“I feel wicked,” she went on. “I do not normally pick on nice young men such as you. You just touched me somewhere I had not felt in such a long time.”

“Glad I could be of service,” I replied. She cuffed me upside the head.

“You little creep!” she hissed. “She leaned over and in the lowest sotto voce she could she added. “You turn me on.” I really did not have an answer, so I just smiled back at her and started in on the hummus.


“You went out and shagged an older woman,” she said adding a twinge of an English accent, “And now you’re wondering how to get rid of her. That’s fine. We can be friends.”

“Is that what you want?”

“No.”

“Is that what you’re hoping I want?”

“No.”

“Well,” I said in a moment of clarity, “If you don’t mind robbing the cradle, I don’t mind either. Pray, is there a Sir Clifford about? ” Then, in a high-pitched accent, I added, ”What? Shot off? Completely?”

“Actually,” she said. “I’ve never been married.” It stopped me cold. I had originally pegged her as a young liberated grad student. I then had her figured out as a
loney professor’s wife. Now I was trying to figure out if she was merely liberated, and 
free thinking, or if there was a really tragic back story that I had blundered through. 

“Look,” I replied, “I am just being a complete putz in all this. I am completely 
out of my league. I don’t know what I am doing, and where this is all going, so I am 
sorry if the jokes are goofy. Just help me out here. I am drowning.” 

“That’s all right” She said, “That is what I like about you the most.” 

By now, you are probably thinking that this has become a story about a young guy 
having an affair with an older woman, or that I threw this is one of those cheesy side-
plots that editors make authors throw into their early novels to spice things up and get 
them to sell. The fact of the matter is that I felt that I needed to show you all what was 
going on at the time my real story started. To this day, Vivian haunts my dreams in the 
nicest sorts of ways. I cannot eat curried chicken or pass by a lake without thinking of 
her. 

That was how my affair with Vivian started in earnest. After that, I started having 
regular dates with her, a few times a week. We took in early concerts at UC, we went to 
hear the Ed Moss Trio over at the Emanon. It was sort of all on the cheap, and Vivian 
paid for some of it. Over time, my friends got used to my older woman, and did not mind 
her hanging out, and Vivian did not seem to mind them. She was just a lot of fun to have 
around. We had great sex, and she was a terrific cook. On the nights we spent together, 
she would show up with a small valise and then leave in the morning for work in her grey 
Pugeout. As the Fall wore on that year, we all started going over to the Corinthian over 
on Jefferson. It was corny, Greek, belly-dancing stuff, but the food was good, and it was 
ever all that crowded. Sue and Skip really liked her, and Skip started making plays for
her. Vivian would just blow him off. My other roommates, Tony, a violin major, and Walter, a baritone from Alabama, seemed to be starting to mix in with us just fine as well, even though they were undergraduates. I let on to Dad that I was seeing an older chick, and he did not seem to mind. He did tell me not to bring her around Mom, and I had already figured as much. Vivian was really cool about it too. She knew this was just going to have to be our little thing from the start a lot better than I did.

It was one of those brisk October weekends when the leaves were starting to fall. Campus was in full swing, and it felt weird that I was not going to classes, and had nothing to do with campus. Vivian said she was invited to a cocktail party with some University of Cincinnati people, and she wanted an escort for the evening. I stopped off at the cleaners over on Ludlow and picked up a few jackets and sweaters that had been packed up since Boston and come out of the boxes looking all creased and then went to catch a bus back to the Heights. There was a new, New Age craze going on, and I went in to a gift shop around the corner from the Esquire Theatre to pick up something for Vivian. We’d been together for a while now, and I just wanted something to show her how I felt.

Crystals were big right about then, and I figured I would bring her one as a necklace. I was looking over things in the store, feeling way off my turf, when the owner came up and asked if I needed help. I made a brief explanation, and the woman pointed down to a piece. It was a beautiful oriental aquamarine with an inclusion that looks like a crescent moon. I bought it and a silver chain for it to hang on. Vivian was by around sundown for me, and we went to Pop’s for a quick bite before heading to the party. Pop would start making whole wheat soup about this time of year, and we each had a bowl. I
popped the necklace out, just before we got our soup. It was the first time I saw Vivian cry.
Chapter 3

We went to the cocktail party. It was up in the gaslight district at one of the larger places near Lafayette Circle, on the north end of the Gaslight District. Vivian was wearing a white long dress with a blue shawl. The new necklace went well. Both it and the chain kept catching the moonlight in the car and on the sidewalk, as we parked in the circle, near the old observatory and walked down the hill to the house.

We walked in and Vivian introduced us around, and then made her way over to one end of one of the larger rooms and took a station between two marble pillars and in front of a tapestry of pomegranates. She looked quite picturesque. I went in search of drinks for the two of us while she starting knobbing hobs with a few folks that came up to her.

When I came back a bit later, she was somewhat surrounded. The room had all sort of sucked in towards Vivian. I stood away from the crowd at the pillars while holding to champagne cocktails. I felt sort of out of place, until I realized that just about every other man in the room had on a turtleneck and a sport coat, and they looked for the most part every bit as ill at ease as I. Cocktail parties had always been a mystery to me. They still were.

“She’s a hoot, don’t you think?”

“Huh?” I replied. I looked around and found a tall older man that looked remarkably familiar standing next to me.

“Viv,” he said a bit whistfully. “She’s got it.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “Have we met?”
“Why yes,” said the man. “I do believe we have. It was earlier this year. You are Perry.”

My mind raced. I must have looked like a complete geek.

“Art. Art Penn,” he said. “I’ll tell you what, go drop off that extra glass, and I would love to talk to you.” I looked over at the crowd at the pillars, and the crowd had parted a bit and I was able to sneak in and slip the drink to Vivian. I pointed back to the guy. Vivian saw the man and waved. Then the crowd sort of closed in again, and I was back with Art, with whom I was now able to shake hands.

“Ah!” he said. “Good to have you back. Has Vivian been showing you around?”

“Yes,” I answered. “She is fun to be around.”

“Indeed,” replied Art. “I have been wanting to speak with you again ever since we met that day in the park.”

“With me?” I asked. The reference to the park was still only partially gelled.

“You do not remember me, do you,” said Art. “That’s okay. I met you over at the foot of Ohio Avenue one day. We had a conversation down in the weeds.”

“Oh!” It finally sunk in where I had seen him.

“Look,” said Art. “It finally dawned on me after we met who you were. About that same time, I lost an assistant. I’m out trolling for some help right now, and you are just the man I could use.”

“What sort of work?” I asked.

“I’m up at the University,” said Art. “I am supposed to teach a bit, and write a bit, and dress up in tweed sport coats and walk about saying cerebral sorts of things. I’m allegedly in English Literature, and I could probably offer you an assistantship and a
good shot at a doctorate, and then we can lay about all day and you can listen to my
stories.”

I was stunned.

“You can think about it, if you like,” Art said. ‘If you want to, send over what you
did on your thesis, and I’ll look it over. If I can’t figure out a way to get it past in my
department, I know an arm or two I can twist. No one ever resists old Arty.” There was
a spark of playful menace in the man. I liked him. I began to remember our talk in the
woods that day almost immediately. Stuff from the conversation began to flood back in.

“Well,” said Art, “Think about it. Call up the University operator and ask for
Doctor Arthur Penn.”

“Penn.” I said flatly. “I will.” He shook my hand again and then was gone.

Vivian came up to me some time later. I had found a chair in the other room and had sat
down and was sorting out the whole thing.

“Did you and Art have a nice talk?” She said.

“I think so.” I replied. “He just offered me a job.”

“Oh,” she said. “That’s wonderful. I could have guessed you two would get along
if you ever met. I take it you knew him?”

“We met once in Belleview Park.” I said

“You must have impressed him,” she said, “if he offered you a job after only one
meeting.”

“Yes, that’s what’s so strange.”
“Strange?” she said. “Art is not strange at all. He just has acute powers of observation, and a well developed sense of purpose. He’s also a terrific salesman.”

“Did I get sold?”

“Did you?” she said. “All I can do is take you to the party. It’s up to you to decide who you’re going home with.”

I grabbed her and gave her a big kiss.

After we left the party, we drove back over to the Corinthian. Things were just getting cranked up. This had become Skip and Sue’s favorite weekend hangout. We met them at what had become OUR booth in the back. It still felt odd hanging out at a belly-dancing joint on the weekend but I had to admit it was fun. No one in our group was Greek. No one at the other tables was anything but Greek. That was strange, but I was getting used to it. They had a Greek band, several good dancers and a lot of fun action. It was so much better than getting lit at a disco. They also had great deli- sandwiches, chili, and traditional stuff like Gyros and Souflaki.

Sue and Vivian both got pretty far gone that night, and went out on the dance floor. The dress Vivian was wearing really shone as she went out and started to shimmy. She used the blue shawl, and it soon became apparent that she was a fairly accomplished belly dancer. Sue tried to match her, but ended up looking silly. I noticed Skip was really staring at Vivian, as were most of the men around the room. It took a while for her to
wind down and come back to the table. When she stopped, she kind of tossed it off to the professional dancers and came off with a flourish. The room erupted with applause.

I had Sunday dinner out at the folks, and Sis decided she wanted to take the car and drive me back. I spent some time up in my room, pulling together my thesis as it stood, and brought it with me.

“Are you shopping that around?” she asked.

“Sort of.” I said.

“It’s hard for me to conceive of someone wanting to make a living off stories of people bursting into flame.” she said. “It isn’t like life insurance.”

“Yes it is.”

“How so?”

“Look at what life insurance is,” I replied. “You make a bet with your agent that you will live long enough that he can turn a profit off the premiums. If you die early, you win. If you don’t, he wins.”

“That’s perverse,” she said.

“In insurance, you know when someone is going to die. That’s the actuarial side of it” I said. “And you know how to make money off it—that’s the investment side of it.”

“That really stinks,” she said. “There ought to be a law against that.”

“Ahh! Youth!”

“No wonder you freaked out and ran away from that place.”

“I quit, because my boss got drunk and ripped a waitress’ dress off at lunch.” I said.
“Oh, “she replied. “Would it have been any difference if it had been at dinner?”

We looked at each other and started to laugh. It was the first time I had been able to laugh about that.

“Are you dating?”

“Yes. Are you?”

“Yes.”

“Are you getting plenty?”

“Are you?”

“Are you?”

“Yes.”

“Yes.”

“Well, that was easy enough.” I said. “Is he a hunk?”

“Is she?”

“Want to meet her?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Do you want to meet my guy?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because if I did, I would probably have to kill him to save your honor.”

“But it’s okay for me to meet your chickie?”

“Yes.”

“Why’s that?”
“Because it would be a fair fight, and it would be kinky to watch.”

“You’re a perv.”

“Seriously, you want to meet her?” I said.

“Sure.”

It was all told about twenty minutes down to Clifton, and Sissy was just full of questions. I guess I was too. She wanted to know about my new girlfriend, and I wanted to know how Miami was going for her. After she dropped me off, she would have to turn around and do the ninety minute run up to planet Oxford. I missed Miami. She was my last link to up there. I missed hanging around under the water tower, and the pickles at Al and Larry’s.

“Does it ever occur to you that all you do is think of life as a series of restaurants?” she asked.

“I like eating out.” I replied.

“Do you ever eat in?” she asked.

“Sure,” I said. “Vivian is teaching me to cook French. She’s very good.”

“There’s a really good joke in there somewhere.” We both laughed.

“Is she French?”

“No, I think she said her family was Lebanese, originally. Something like that.”

“No, No, No!” she exclaimed “I didn’t say Lebanese! I said Lesbians!”

“What the heck is that from.”

“Oh, some play I saw a few years ago.” She replied. “It had Bill . . what’s his face from Maude in it.”
“Bill Macy.”

“That’s the guy.”

“I saw him in New York.” she said. “He was eating noodles in a Chinese restaurant, right out there on the sidewalk.”

“You saw Maude’s husband eating Chinese Noodles off the sidewalk?”

It was fun having a sister that was studying to be a playwright.

When we got onto Ohio Avenue, there was not an on-street spot to be had for blocks. Sissy was just going to drop me off and keep going, but I saw my light on in the apartment, and knew Vivian was waiting for me. I had her wait a minute, and I ran up and got Vivian and brought her down. I made quick introductions and then suggested that we run up to Graeters or something and have a bite. I sat in Sissy’s back seat. Sissy could not take her eyes off Vivian.

The trip for ice cream ended up being a huge mistake. We hardly talked. Vivian had us drop her off at her car that was parked way down on Warner Street so she could get some things. Sissy and I had a moment to talk while she ran me back up.

“She’s old.”

“Yeah,” I said, “and you’re rude. That didn’t mean you had to screw up the evening.”

“No, I mean old, old, old.”

“No, she’s not.”

“Take it from me,” said Sissy. “This chickie of yours is older than Mom.”

“Naw!”
“That’s Eleanor-Freaking-Roosevelt.”

“Stop it!” I said. “She is not!”

“You’re right.” she said “That looks like Teddy could have had a ride!”

“Stop it! Stop it.” I said. “It’s not funny.”

“You’re right, Perry.” She said. “It’s not. Something is very wrong.”

“You’re late for the road.” I said. “Get going.”

Okay. I still have not got to the meat of what I wanted to write about. Someone is going read this and start thinking this is a red herring I threw into the plot, and it is not. If you do not read this, some editor will have agreed with you and scratched it out. The problem remains that it is hard to properly give you the atmosphere of non-reality I was experiencing leading up to where my real story begins. My whole world felt at though it was hanging by a thin thread to the rest of humanity and the Universe. It was a cocoon, albeit cramped—it was at least comfortable. I could have been doing a lot worse for myself in those days.

I stayed outside after Sissy left and waited for Vivian. She came along a bit later. She beamed at me from a distance, and my heart melted all over again.

I had not been in the Alpha for a while. Rene was perched on a stool like a buzzard. It was a really slow night in the Alpha.

“You haven’t been in.” she said as she dropped a menu on the table.

“You never call! You never write! What’s a mother to think?” I replied.
“I saw your new squeeze,” she said. “You were coming out of Ozarka the other day with her.”

“I guess we’re an item for the society column now.” I replied.

She snorted. “The fish is on special, but I wouldn’t touch it.”

“How’s that? Is it bad?”

“No,” she said. “I just don’t like fish.”

“You watch the Series at all?”

“No,” she said. “No one invited me.”

“Did I piss you off?” I asked.

“No,” she said. “I’m just fickle. Business is bad, and I don’t feel like smiling even if it means my tip.”
Chapter 4

After breakfast on Monday, I called over to the University. The operator patched me through. I let it ring a while before hanging up. It was a let down. I read what was left of the Sunday Enquirer, before throwing on some Hubert Laws and letting the morning go. It took me a while to decide what was up. I was bummed. I was really set to talk to the guy who had made me such a generous offer. I tried a couple of more times before lunch, and got no answer. There was a haze on the world that matched my mood as I came out of the apartment and started over towards Vivian’s place. Cincinnati might have a week of that haze in the latter days of October. We had decided to meet for an early lunch. I brought a bunch of stuff and figured I would surprise her.

I had found a shortcut down at the end of Conklin. Many places around Clifton and the Heights had this sort of thing. Stairways and sidewalks that led down the hill, down to nothing or around the hillsides and off into the bracken. In its day, probably no later than the Twenties, the hills around Cincinnati were the up and coming commuter suburbs. Some were upscale, like Ohio Avenue. They had been built with carriage houses and servants quarters. Some were working class neighborhoods. Before the days of automobiles, everyone wanted to walk downtown. Later, probably after the War, these sidewalks had fallen into disuse. Some had the last ten feet or so bulldozed to prevent easy access. Some had just had galvanized railings put in to discourage further traffic.
The Conklin stairs were typical. The honeysuckle and locust had grown up over the steps, but there was still enough of a clearance to walk. The top of the stairs had disappeared, but there was enough rubble intact that it was easy to get from the street to the stairs with only a short slide down the hard clay, limestone, and chunks of concrete. Once you were on the stairs, it was like another world. The fall hillside was a bleak wasteland of old tires, and rusting shopping carts. Locusts drop the earliest of any tree in these parts, and aside from the occasional lone box elder, after mid October, there were only the pale branches of the ground cover. The bottom of the sidewalk had been cut away as well, and the path from there emptied into a tenement parking lot. Before one emerged into the light of day again, there was a no-man’s land of rock foundations and rusting appliances, the second line of tenement buildings that had passed from use around the turn of the century. One never went to these places. Every year or so, a neighborhood kid or two would fall into a hidden cellar and be gone.

I crossed Vine Street and wandered up into Inwood Park. Here, the stairs had been kept in repair. There was a Pavilion for concerts and dancing, a swimming pool, and a scenic lake and shelter house. This had been a grand park in its day. The Maples were shedding, and they had left a carpet of yellow on the ground. The Pin Oaks had turned brown. There were picnic tables with small grills at the park. Rather than just show up with sandwiches, I carried a couple of cans of soup, some cheap ribeyes, and a pot for brewing tea. I built a fire from briquets and got things going before going to the top of the hill to meet Vivian. While the fire built up, I sat on the bench and watched a city crew starting their battle with the last of the grass, and the first of the leaves up on
one hillside. Below, Vine Street was filled with late-morning traffic. Busses lumbered up the hill. Here and there, the sun came out, showing that the haze might be lifting.

October in Cincinnati could be overwhelmingly sentimental in its own quirky way. Boston had been so top-heavy with history and perfect archetypal tableaus. The lobstermen on the Cape, the little villages bathed in Fall splendor, Here, history had not been around long enough to fill our heads. You never think of the fog bound Ohio wrapping the city in an impenetrable blanket clear up to Over the Rhine when someone says “Fall.” The haze that had been hanging over the Heights when I left had just been one of those early morning fogs. The air was still heavy with the smell of Fall. When I had been younger, I had thought the smell was burning leaves. However, Fall leaf burning had been proscribed for years. Either this was the ghost of a thousand leaf piles raising their smoke to the heavens, or someone was breaking the ordinance.

I had bet that there would still be a hydrant active up in the park. There was. I drew water from the spigot and got the water boiling. About this time, I saw Vivian coming down the stairs from Wellington Place.

“You’re spoiling me.” she said.

“Not really,” I replied. “This is the last of the steaks from Memorial Day. I found them in the freezer.”

“You are such a romantic,” she said.

“I just wanted one last cookout before it gets too cold.” I said. “You’re looking winsome.” I kissed her.

“I just love this place,” she said. “It has been such a wonderful home for me.”

“Where was home originally?” I said.
Her brow knitted. I figured that, wherever it was, it had not been fun; I did not push it. The sky was cooperating, and soon we had bright beams of sunshine on the picnic table and deep blue sky.

“Did you see the fog this morning?” she asked.

“No, I did not get up until late,” I replied.

“It was really thick this morning, “ she said. “It was hard to see the streetlights, or cars or anything there for a while.” She sounded genuinely enthused about it.

“I missed it all, I got up just in time to call that Penn guy.”

“Oh, wonderful! I’m so happy. What happens next?”

“Nothing. “

“What do you mean?”

“I never got an answer. I’ll try again when I get back.” She could sense my disappointment. The tea kettle was just starting to boil. I pulled it off and threw the tea in. That made for enough room that I could throw the steaks on. With Vivian’s help, I had learned so much about cooking. The soup was still Campbells, but with fresh shallots and mushrooms, and a quick bit of this and that from the spice rack thrown in a baggie, it was quite passable. The steaks had a peppercorn sauce.

“You’re getting much better.” She said. “This is all quite extravagant for lunch.”

“I was inspired.”

“I love the way you’ve taken to all this.” She said. “Tonight, why don’t we do something special.”

“Findlay Market isn’t open today.”
“Oh, not that special,” she said. “I saw something yesterday at the store. I will come over tonight and we will have it. Do you have a really big pot?”

“How big?”

“Bigger than the soup pot.”

“Yes,” I said. “I saw one in the basement the other day.”

“Good,” she said. “Clean it up.”

Lunch went very well. We necked for a while after the meal was done. She flowed around me like water and we were wrapped in a long flowing kiss that lasted until I had to come up gasping for air.

“Wow!” I said.

“Wow yourself!,” she said. I offered to walk her back to work, but she said it was running late. We parted there at the picnic table. I collected the dishes, rinsed things out at the hydrant and then took off back towards the Heights for work.

Stan had me on the register most of the afternoon, so I had several chances to call over to the University. There was still no answer. It was starting to get dark when Stan came back from some errands and relieved me at the register. I tried to call the number one last time.

“Hello.”

“Hello, Doctor Penn?”

“Perry! I’m so happy you called. I was talking about you just a little while ago. They want to see your transcript. Can you come by with all your paperwork tomorrow?”

“I will come by with what I have.” I said. “I may have to send off for some of it.”
“Whatever you have is fine.” he said. “Let’s do it about sometime after four.” He gave me a room number in McMicken Hall. After I got off, I told Stan I was going to have to take off for a while the next afternoon. He did not mind.

Vivian was waiting for me when I got off work. I had to go down the basement and look for the pot I had promised. It was there, and only very dusty. It took no time at all to put it in shape. She had me put it in the back of the Peugeot, and we rolled down the street to Belleview Park. The haze had returned late in the day and it had grown increasingly warmer. I wore a jacket, but it was wholly unnecessary. We unpacked the Peugeot in the circle and then she parked it off in the lot. The park was deserted.

“Do we need to be out of here at any particular time?” she asked.

“The sign says one thing, but I have not seen the park police up here in months.” I said. “What are they going to do, except chase us off?”

I started a fire from the very last of the charcoal, and then fed in branches and pine cones. Vivian said she needed to boil water. The spigot in Belleview was still working as well. Vivian had brought two gallons of bottled water, but we were able to save them. We lit an oil lantern and started work on the meal.

“There is a new Krogers.” She said. “It is over in Hyde Park. They had the most wonderful seafood section. I found these.” With that, she pulled out a box with two chicken lobsters. “It’s Fall, and I knew you’d be missing these.”

They were not the sort of size you could make a meal of, but that was not all she brought. There were mussels, shrimp, and a bunch of other bits and pieces that I could not recognize in the light of the oil lamp. She showed me what to do, and I helped get things together before the pot of water boiled. After emptying the park of sticks and pine
cones, the pot finally did come to a boil. We threw everything in and threw the lid on and had popped the cork on the wine.

About the time the lobsters were ready, we had a not-quite full moon peeking out of the trees. We ate in the moonlight like ravenous dogs, and then Vivian went and grabbed the bathroom rug that she had snuck out of the house while I was cleaning the pot. We went down the hill a ways and screwed.

“Happy. . .” she tried to come up with the right word.

‘Anniversary?’ I asked.

“Well, it really isn’t.” she said.

“Congratulations on getting through to Penn?”

“Well that too!”

“Happy Birthday?”

“I thought your birthday was-“

“It is,” I replied.

‘Happy I-don’t-know,” she said. “I just thought you would enjoy this.”

“I did.” I said. “I’m thinking back now. It’s been five months, and a few days since we did this last. So is this going to be our Five-and-some-change Anniversary?”

“Agreed.”

“Happy five and change, then.”

“Happy five and change to you too.”
We drifted back to the apartment in time for the late news and Carson. Sue and Skip were up watching. Sue kicked Skip with her socked foot as we went past towards the bedroom.

“You never give me a smile like that anymore,” she said. Skip did not have a clue what she was talking about.

Tuesday was spent digging stuff out of boxes to take with me to the meeting. When I realized I was going to be marching in with whole box of stuff, I decided to pare it down a bit. I did not want to look all THAT eager. It would not hurt to have them ask for a few things. I finally got it down to what would fit in a briefcase. I had a stop at the Alpha to celebrate.

Rene was there, but I could not find a table of hers that was open. A skinny, shy waitress that I had not seen before took my order. She had a bit of punk in her outfit, and she hid her hair under a cap. My guess was that a Mohawk was underneath. I sat looking through my stuff, making sure that I had all the essentials. Rene came by with my drink.

“So, you fickle thing,” she said. “You’re taking up with the new hen in the yard?”

“I thought I’d give her a spin.” I replied.
“She is a spinner, isn’t she?” Rene said. “I’ve always wondered what that would be like—spinning, that is.”

“I’m sure you can find an industrial designer that could build you a device.”

“Whoa! Now there’s a thought,” she said. She batted her eyes. “Why Rhet! Whatever makes you say those things. It’s the devil I tell you!”

“Scarlet,” I said. “You can sit and spin all you want. Frankly, I would just like to watch.”

Rene made one of her usual cackles, but the volume was uncommonly loud, and she had every head in the room turned our way.

“Is this what we’ve fallen into?” I asked. “We just taunt each other with overt lewdness.”

“Yes, this is what we’ve fallen into,” she said. “As long as you keep coming in with that I’ve-just-found-a-goddess shit-eating grin on your face.”

“Seriously,” I said. “It shows?”

“Like that shirt tail sticking out of your zipper.” She replied. “Better tuck that thing in before you go anywhere important.” I looked down, and she tweaked my nose.

“Ha! Made you look!” She then wandered off to the kitchen.

They call the two marble lions Mick and Mack. They stand guard at the front of McMicken Hall. Supposedly they roar whenever a virgin walks past. Sue had taken classes at UC, and gave me partial directions. I went through the breezeway and turned into the right half of the hall. I went up a couple of flights and started looking for the office number Penn had given me. The number neatly fell between two classrooms, and I
could find no door that number. I was about to give up hope when Doctor Arthur Penn showed up, trudging down the hall at double-time and waved at me.

“Sorry I am late.” He said. “I meant to be here much earlier. Come.” He motioned me along. We went down the stairs.

“I could not find your office,” I said.

“That isn’t my office,” he said. “It was just a convenient place to meet.” We went back into the stairwell from which I came and kept descending after we hit the ground floor. Soon, we were in the basement and the corridors were looking less and less academic and more and more like walking the ways of a battleship. We walked this way for quite a while. Finally, we burst out into an older building that housed the Geology Department, and we came upon a dimly lit room.

“Have a seat,” he said. I looked around in the murk for a chair. Doctor Penn fell into a creaking wooden office chair, and turned on a single desk lamp.

“What do you think of this year’s incidents of human combustion,” he said. “It’s been a year, hasn’t it?” It was like someone had suddenly let the air out of the room. He went on, “By my count we have had six Type-I cases, two Type II’s, and two that are still pending. I think one will turn out to be a robbery-homicide.”

“I . . . er . . .” I was stammering. “I have not been . . . that is to say . . . I haven’t been following it much.”

“What,” said Penn, “You? The wunderkind of Spontaneous Human Combustion?”
“I see you know something about me,” I said. I felt like I was standing naked in the middle of class. It felt like one of those icky dreams that you know are inspired by either bad Kafka or bad pizza.

“Know something of you?” said Penn, “Yes, you might say so.” He brought out a file about two inches thick, and dropped it onto the pull-out on the desk. “This is yours, by the way if you turn me down,” he added. “I only put this together while I was making up my mind on you.”

“What is this?” I asked.

“It’s a job interview,” he said. “You’ve already had your initial interview. You piqued my curiosity in the park. This is where we go over the job responsibilities, the compensation, and the benefits. You say yea or nay, and either way, we shake hands.”

“You have my attention,” I said.

The next hour we talked about anything but the job. We talked about Spontaneous Human Combustion. We talked about college life. We talked about the books we had been reading. We discussed living in Clifton, and we talked about the changing of the seasons. Finally, I got my courage up to ask about the particulars of the job.

“Oh, yes! By golly, I had almost forgotten about that,” said Penn. “I did some arm twisting, and basically you can start immediately. When Winter Quarter starts, you’ll be put on a four-thousand a year stipend. You’ll have to do a thesis. You’ll have to do some teaching-assistant crap. You’ll have to sweep up behind the bull elephant, but by and large, life will be just what you’ve seen tonight. You will engage me in witty
repartee and do your best to record it all for posterity. You will be amanuensis, my
Arronax.”

“What the hell.” I said.

“Excellent!” said Penn. “I figured you would. See, I told you we would be
shaking hands on this.”

“I still do not get how Spontaneous Human Combustion enters into this.” I said.
Chapter 5

“Do you like schnitzel?” said Doctor Penn. “I really feel like a schnitzel today.”

It had been several days since our meeting. He called me on the phone.

“Schnitzel?”

“I feel like schnitzel.”

“Funny,” I said into the phone, “You don’t look like a schnitzel.”

“Meet me at Lenhardt’s, “he said. “Make it around two.”

Lenhardt’s was on the south side of campus, just down the street from the bookstore. I knew the place. I had probably been in when I was a kid. I did not remember it much. It served Viennese food—not my favorite. I had been forced to rearrange my hours with Stan quite a bit. I was now at Art Penn’s beck and call. It was getting on towards midterms. Art had said he was going to load me down with ghost-grading a bunch of essays. It was all part of my breaking-in period.

Lenhardt’s was pretty empty by the time I arrived. Art was sitting at a table by the front window. We ordered. I had the sauerbraten. Art ordered in German to the waitress.

“You asked me about Spontaneous Human Combustion the other night.” He started. “Before I begin, if you don’t mind, what started your interest in it?”

“I don’t know.” I said. “I have always been interested in it—ever since I read an article on it as a kid.”

“Fair enough,” he said. “No major event in your life to trigger it?”
“No,” I replied. “Not really. My father died when I was young. Mom raised me alone for a while. Then she re-married and I went through most of my life with things as they are. I’ve got Mom, Dad, and Sis. My fascination with SHC started after all that had been settled for years.”

That got me talking about all the cases I had researched, all the people I had contacted over the years. Art listened intently. When the soup arrived he cut me off.

“Okay.” He said. “Now I will tell you my story.”

Testament of Doctor Arthur Penn:

I had followed my mentor, Wilhelm Von Schmidt, to Vienna in early 1946. I was Von Schmidt’s first trip back to Europe after the war. Von Schmidt had spent most of the war years working on a magnum opus. We went there, partly to do research, and partly to feed Von Schmidt’s obsession with Anton Bruckner. Von Schmidt was one of those fellows that you hardly ever hear about he was every bit as tuned-in to the scene as fellows like Tillich, and Mercia Eliade. They were all big buffs of Rudolph Otto. It was fun hanging with Willie. I met a lot of good people in those days. Everyone was a hyphenated American intellectual. Eliade was a Romanian-American. Tillich was a German-American. One day, waiting for the boat, we bumped into Bob Bly and he had this new guy named Joe Campbell. I remember telling Campbell that it just wasn’t going to work, him and I being American-American intellectuals. I suggested we both shave our heads and wear a monocle. Joe took me seriously, and as God as my witness,
somewhere in world is a picture of Joe Campbell with his head shaved and wearing a monocle.

Well, at the time it seemed funny, but that was after a tremendous amount of alcohol. We all went on this massive bender and finally I woke up on the ship heading for France. We docked in Marseilles, spent a couple of days hanging out, and then found a boat going to Trieste.

When we got to Vienna, several months later—we’d taken a bunch of side trips—Von Schmidt bird-dogged a bunch of libraries with me in tow. I did not know it then, but we were just killing time. Finally, he got a letter from someone and it was asses-and-elbows trying to find passage to Linz. I think that Saint Florian’s is about 10 miles from the station. Willie and I got there in the pouring rain the next afternoon.

They were doing repairs on the church, and the organ—fixing the place up after years of neglect from the war. An older priest and Willie talked for a bit, and then the priest called an early halt to the day’s work. Everyone left, and then the priest opened up a back door and six burly guys came out and proceeded to open up a crypt next to the organ. Not a word was said the whole time. The crypt was this big ornate metal job, and this was one of those old medieval places that had skulls and bones piled up in a niche behind the crypt. It looked like the back yard at the slaughterhouse. Cripes, there must have been ten thousand skulls piled up. We’re talking creepy. All this time, the rain was pounding down on the roof of this cathedral. It sounded like drums. I would like to take you there some day and we just sit inside that church and listen to the rain. I heard nothing else like it in my life. It was oppressive. It was surreal.
It took about twenty minutes to get into the crypt. Everyone was trying to be real careful. Finally, they got the top off and down to the floor. There was a wooden coffin inside. The priest nodded, and two of the workmen went at the coffin lid. They got that open pretty quick, and then everyone stepped inside. Willie and the priest went up and looked inside, and then Willie motioned for me to come.

All that was inside was a bunch of bricks and a man’s mummified leg—just a stump burned off below the knee. There was also a cremation urn. Willie took some pictures with a flash camera, and then nodded to the priest, slipped him an envelope, and shook his hand. We ate a good plate of schnitzel and then boarded the train back to Vienna. All this time, since we’d gone to Saint Florian’s Abbey, there had not been more than a couple of words said between any of us. I think Willie was crying in his schnitzel, but he didn’t say anything.

It was not until we were in our compartment on the train that Herr Docktor came clean and told me what we had been up to. He had been cooking this up for twenty-five years. It had all started after the Great War. Anton Bruckner had only been dead a few years at that point, and he was still held as something of an avant-garde composer. Von Schmidt had been in Munich, and he gets into this little Stammtisch of Bruckner groupies. The all used to hang out at the Hofbrauhaus. Can you see where this is heading? No? Munich. Nineteen Twenty?

Okay, try this one on: Linz. We just pulled out of Linz. Does that jog your brain cells? Who should be on the fringes of this group but a little high-strung painter from Linz. One night the Painter from Linz got invited to the ‘tisch by Kurt Nebauer. He stayed quiet for a few sessions, and then gets sloshed one night and announces
categorically that Bruckner was trash, because he could not go on and committed suicide. Everyone was well into their third or fourth stein by then and an argument erupts. One quiet little guy, he was a Jew named Rosen, got into the Painter’s face and tells him that he knows for certain that the truth behind the matter was something else entirely. A bet ensued.

It seems that Rosen was from Beyruth, where Bruckner had died. He had been called in to clean up a mess at the place Bruckner had been staying. It was Sunday. You could not get gentiles to work on Sunday. Rosen had been a teenager, and had been paid by the landlord to come and clean the room, the evening after Bruckner died.

According to the official account, Bruckner had been working on the fourth movement of the D-Mol, and taken a chill and gone to bed around three in the afternoon on October the Eleventh of Ninety Six. His assistant had gone to fetch tea and found him dead. If you dug a little deeper, you got a second story. Bruckner had breathed his last and in doing so, knocked a candle off the bed stand and set the bed clothes on fire. The bed went up pretty quick and Bruckner’s body had been scorched.

You had that nasty little painter’s version: that Bruckner had not been able to finish his last symphony and done himself in to get out of facing the music, so to speak. The fire had been deliberately set by Bruckner. This Painter was still carrying a torch for Brahms, and was all gaga over Wagner, but that was all hooey. The Painter never went to concerts and was just taking sides to sound important. Von Schmidt surmised that the story had probably started as a sniggering joke by Bruckner’s detractors, but The Painter did not know any better and was just repeating what he heard. Willie and the boys
generally just laughed at him, but calling your symphonic rock idol a suicide was fighting words in those days.

Rosen’s version was quite a bit different. He had been called in before sundown on the Eleventh, the day Bruckner had died. The bed was quite intact. The bed, the bedclothes were scorched, but not badly burned. Instead, what you had was the chair by Bruckner’s writing table overturned, and a huge charred hole in the floor, and nothing left of Anton Bruckner but a stump of a leg, still in his slipper. Rosen added an interesting twist to this. He overheard the assistant crying his eyes out to another friend out in the hall. Bruckner had gotten a chill that afternoon. He had put Bruckner to bed put an extra blanket on him, and gone downstairs to brew tea. He had heard Bruckner rouse a bit, and utter a remarkably hearty “Was fickt das!” coming from the bedroom and went on fixing the tea. He came up with the pot on a tray and found a pile of ash and the smoldering hole in the floor. The total elapsed time from the assistant leaving the room until he returned was probably less than fifteen minutes—time to brew tea.

Rosen helped his brother cart the mattress out into the yard and set it on fire, and then put a patch on the floor. The two other guys in the house, the assistant and the other friend, bundled his papers up and got them out of the house. Rosen had found some of the papers under the bed as he was carting out the mattress, but did not know their significance. He slipped them to Von Schmidt as a present just before he disappeared.

It took until 1946 for the bet to be settled. By then, just about everyone was gone. Rosen had been stomped to death in the street right after The Painter got out of jail for trying to start a revolution at the Buergerbraukeller. Another guy named Reinhardt from the bunch had told The Painter he was a nut job, and followed it up by pitching the bird at
a Brown Shirt parade a few weeks later. He got on somebody’s list, and had to go hide out in the Black Forest for thirteen years. The whole happy Friends of Bruckner ended up either dying in the war or being shipped to a camp or disappearing on the wind.

Wilhelm Von Schmidt had seen the handwriting on the wall and left town in a hurry early on. He did not stop running until he hit Fairview Heights. He settled in a house there and never left. I’ll take you over to it. It had a view of the river that he said matched a painting of the Rhine that had been in his parent’s living room in Marburg. Von Schmidt was not his real name, and he never did tell me what it really was. He was most secretive about some things. He had been warned about the Bund before he arrived in Cincinnati. The secretary to the Dean of the Law School was good for helping out German ex-pats, and she got him a job teaching philosophy at UC. Whenever he was out among folks he did not know he had an entire biography that never included his days in Munich.

From around 1920 on, Wilhelm Von Schmidt was obsessed with this Anton Bruckner thing. He kept up a correspondence for years, and finally got the father of the head guy at Saint Florian’s to let him have a peek inside Bruckner’s tomb. The father died in 1940. However, the priest I met that day honored the pledge in exchange for a donation of the sheet music Rosen had given Von Schmidt. Actually, what Willie gave the priest was a forged duplicate copy he’d had done by a buddy at the Conservatory. I have the originals, but the priest never knew the difference..

Along the way, Von Schmidt got a reputation that he could stand on his own in debating with the heavyweights. What is God? What is the Meaning of It All? Who really makes the best Sachertorte? One day, I remember an argument erupting over a pitcher of Mai Tai in one of the lounges at the Waldorf. Von Schmidt claimed the best
Schwarzwäldertorte came from a ski lodge close by. The next thing we know, everyone is piling into rented cars and making a caravan to Vermont.

Von Schmidt and I rode in the lead car with a guy named Bubie. Von Schmidt teased Bubie all the way up by not telling him exactly where we were going. Bubie kept pressing, and Von Schmidt finally turned around to the back seat.

“Marty, my dearest friend.” Willie said, “All journeys in life have a secret destination of which the traveler has no knowledge. You of all people should know that.”

We ended up outside Stowe Vermont. Here is this little twenty room place up in the mountains, middle of July, and suddenly all these great luminaries of Twentieth Century thought show up and demanded rooms. I ended up sleeping on a roll-away in Willie’s room. I had to admit it was a beautiful place. The lounge was nice too—huge tree trunks supported the roof. Anyhow, we got there too late for dinner the first night, and we stuck around and ate and drank and adventured to a place called Smuggler’s Notch the next day. They all argued about whether the Frankfurt School’s ideas on Original Sin were full of crap.

We got back in time for dinner, had a magnificent spread, and then out come these Schwarzwäldertortes. It was like seeing drunken hogs being called to feed. At long last, after a few Cognacs, a Cuban cigar each, and seconds and thirds on the cake, the great displaced minds of the World agreed that this was indeed the best of all possible worlds. Von Schmidt was declared the winner of the bet, and Bubie was stuck with the tab for the whole thing. I think the Israeli government ended paying in the end. The next day, we all went back to New York after a quick drive through of the Trapp Family Lodge. Von Schmidt admitted later that he had a ringer in on the bet—he had found the
pastry chef in a chance meeting the year before and recognized him from Munich. I had
seen him talking with the chef the next morning on a bench overlooking the mountains.
They parted by first shaking hands, and then I saw the chef fall against Von Schmidt,
overcome.

The Testament of Perry Oilean

With that, Doctor Penn looked up and the waitress and a busboy flew to the table
and cleaned it off. It was growing dark. Pastry and coffee were put in front of us. Penn
reached into his pocket and pulled out a cigar. He offered me one, but I declined. The
pastry was overly rich for my taste, but I thought it was excellent for what it was. The
hour was growing late, and I was beginning was beginning to get a bit impatient. There
was this shaggy dog story that stretched from Munich to here to Vienna to New York to
God-knew-where, that seemed to have no punch line and no end. I had copied down as
best I could, but I could not make heads or tails of it.

“So who was this famous painter you were talking about?” I asked.

Doctor Penn lost all composure and started to howl. Whatever I had just said had
hit him as genuinely hilarious. Why, I had no idea.

“Funny,” he said, finally catching himself, “That is exactly what I said, when
Willie told me the story! That’s exactly what I said.” He slapped the table. “Perry, you’ll
do just fine around here. Welcome to the team.”

We shook hands. Doctor Penn put threw down some twenties and we left. On the
way out, he gave me a Shillito Department Store shopping bag filled with blue books.

“Here are the exams.” He said. “Have them back before Monday.”
I got home and Skip and Sue were in their usual perch in front of the television. Despite it being a Thursday, I announced that we were starting the weekend early. I did not know if it was to celebrate or just to blow off some steam. My head was spinning and I needed some time off. Vivian had been napping on my bed, waiting for me to get home. She thought my news, at least the short version, was terrific. Sue and Skip were into a party, so we all went out to Adrica’s for dinner up in Mount Adams and then hung out at the Blind Lemon.

About halfway through our second pitcher that night, Skip stopped my story, and started asking questions. Pretty soon, everyone was joining in.

“Wait, you’re saying your new boss knew Hitler?” he said.

“I never said anything like that.”

“Yes, you did. You said your boss knew Hitler.”

“How does Hitler get into this?”

“A house painter from Linz. That’s what he said”

“He said there was a guy named ‘The Painter.’”

“Hitler didn’t paint houses.”

“Hitler painted a lot of houses. I’ve seen his paintings.”

“I thought he was from Austria.”

“Linz is Austria, at least I think it is.”

“How does he get Munich out of this?”

“So Hitler had Bruckner killed? I thought he committed suicide.”

“Yes, Hitler committed suicide. Then he had himself burnt.”

“I thought he had Bruckner burnt.”
I never got around to the philosophers and the chocolate cakes. It was going to be impossible.
Chapter 6

On Friday, I started to dig into the Shillito bag with all the essay exams. I honestly could not figure out what was going on. Here were some of the questions being answered:

1) You are given a plan by Tecumseh to wipe out the enemies of the Shawnee with non-conventional weapons. What agents do you use and how do you deploy them? Limit yourself to the biota extent in the Northwest Territory in 1800. What is your estimation of their effect?

2) Compare and contrast Edward Longshanks to your choice of WWII general.

3) Explain Original Sin. Describe at least two different cultural responses to this concept; at least one of them must be non-Western.

4) Define a new literary device. Name it. Describe it. Give three examples of its usage in English Literature.

5) You have been stranded on an island with only a pistol capable of firing one shot. Write a short essay of what goes through your head as you sit on the beach, contemplating your next move.

6) It is June 1, 1066. You are Harald Hardrâda of Norway, and you have just been able to look into a crystal ball and allowed to see the future as it happened in the next year. Plot your course of action for gaining control of Britain.
7) You have a dog-eared tract dated 1935 entitled “The seed of Fascism is found in the synthesis of Trinitrotoluene.” First, briefly outline the arguments put forward in the pamphlet Defend or dispute this statement with only the knowledge of history extent at this time.

8) You have just been asked by The Fisher King to ghostwrite his autobiography. Write the introduction and dedication.

The shopping bag was full. At first, I did not understand that Penn had given me essays from more than one class. It took a while to figure out that some of the questions had been used in multiple classes. As it turned out, he had been teaching a course called “Pharmacology as an Extension of Politics,” as well as courses on World History, Medieval Literature, and Creative Writing. I had Vivian help me with giving everything a general proof-reading. That way, I could concentrate on the content. Even so, I spent hours digging through text books, researching at the library, and searching my soul for inspiration and guidance.

The hardest questions I had were the one with the pistol, and the Indian bio-weapon question. Most of the others had obviously good and obviously bad attempts. The pistol thing—most of the respondents had played it for laughs. The bio-weapon question brought out a myriad of answers, and I did not have the background to judge one way or the other. One student had the Indians poisoning the water supply of the white man. Another had the white man being attacked with smoke from burning poison ivy, and poison oak.
One student really seemed to have taken the question to heart and outlined a multi-step program that would have weakened the resolve of the white man through the use of an ergot-based hallucinogen that could have been easily cultured and cultivated in Indian villages. It would then be introduced through a variety of means, turning the settlers and their families into raving lunatics. It made me shudder with its simplicity and ruthlessness. I used his answer to gauge the rest.

Sunday night, I had Vivian take me over to Art’s house and drop off the bag of exams. Art came to the door, and I got to meet his wife, Sushi. He had a son and daughter as well, but I did not see them. We were invited inside and we sat in their living room while the doctor examined what I had done. Sushi went to get us some tea.

“So what do you think?” he said.

“You are a complete bastard,” I replied. “I loved it.”

He laughed, and went digging through the bundled stacks of blue books. Vivian had gotten them sorted and stacked for me. He pulled a few samples out and started reading.

“This one,” he said. “This Grey fellow—what did you think of his stuff?”

“Who is that?” I said.

“He was—“

“Pharmacology—“

“Oh, him,” I said. “I’m glad he does not work for the Indians.”

“Good,” said Art. “I was hoping he would be up to the challenge. How did he... oh, I see. He’s got a flair for this, doesn’t he? All done with a mycological sleight of hand, huh? I have a buddy over at Taft Labs that will be interested in him.” He put the exam down and picked up another.”
Sushi came back from the kitchen and brought us gunpowder tea.

He chuckled at the next one. “Yeppers! She got it right. Press the end of the barrel to the-“ He motioned with his index finger to the inside of the eye socket. “Pity, I would have liked to have heard more from her.”

“How can you put a question like that on a college exam?”

“Oh, it’s all good fun,” he said. “That was actually a trick question. You had to be there for the lecture. It was on the use of the Deus ex Machina. She wasn’t. She keeps missing classes. The whole thing is a setup. I’m going to have her read her answer on Tuesday to the class. It will be a gas.”

“Suicide is not funny,” I said.

“Neither is missing my class,” said Art. “This is all just fun and games anyway. By midterms I know what these people are getting. “

“That seems a bit-“

“Self-fulfilling?”

“Well, yes.”

“After you’ve taught a very few classes,” Art said, “You will come to understand. Sometimes by the end of the first lecture you can spot the A’s and the D’s. You know who’s going to get the joke and who isn’t. There are few surprises. Sorry if we’re boring you ladies by talking shop.”


“Have you ever thought that your preconceived ideas of a student’s performance would influence your grading?”

“You graded the exams,” he said. “You tell me.”
“But I feel bad about that.” I said. “I didn’t know the subject material.”

“I bet you do now. Tell me, son. If you were Harald, what would you have done.”

“Delayed sailing, landed quietly, and killed the Saxons as they were licking their wounds from Hastings. William would have been toast.”

“Is TNT a Fascist plot?”

“That’s absurd.”

“How did you score those that took the bait and ran with it?”

“I flayed them.”

“Good work,” Art said. “That’s what I would have done. See, it’s easy!”

The trip to Art’s proved illuminating. Art’s living room was every bit as eccentric as Art. There was a Japanese paper screen with a floor lamp behind providing a large part of the illumination for the room. That half of the room was nearly bare. The other side of the room was decorated in a mix of motifs. A stuffed owl was in flight over a Victorian couch. Fickes Reed rattan mixed with Heywood Wakefield mixed with Mission having forced sex with French Provincial.

Art started in on a story of how he and two local restauranteurs had gone boar hunting in the mountains of Tennessee one year. The boars had chased one of the brothers up a tree.

“. . .so here we find him a couple of hours later, up this little 6-inch sapling, completely out of ammo. He’d dropped his rifle and gone to his sidearm. All around
him were dead pigs—half a dozen of them. We scared off the survivors and got him down. The poor bastard had decided to shoot the biggest one in the middle of the herd, forgetting that the rest of them might want a piece of the action. He’d managed to shoot six pigs dead with one clip of Forty Five, and then dropped the second clip trying to reload upside down. The guide helps him down and starts tallying up the score. That morning cost him over two grand. He comes up to me later and says, ‘but Art, I can’t eat these! I got to keep Kosher!’”

“’Jerry,’ I said, ‘The time to think about that was before you went boar hunting.’”

“’I didn’t know they were pigs!’”

“Then he goes out and gets all these boars mounted, and his wife won’t let them in the house, and he calls me up and asks me to come over and take them off his hands. So that is why I have seven boar heads in my living room. That one is mine. The rest are all Jerry’s. That’s also why if you go into one of their restaurants, you’ll find a pork tenderloin sandwich on the menu. Jerry had it as a special to get rid of the meat, and found out that people really liked it.”

When I looked at my watch it was way after two in the morning. Art seemed like he was still just getting cranked up, but I figured it was time to clear out.

“He’s such an interesting man,” said Vivian in sort of a dreamy half-asleep way. “I am so glad you have fallen in with him.” I asked her if she was okay to drive. We went back to my place to sleep. She was up and gone to work long before I could wake up and get dressed.
One thing that was beginning to gnaw at me was the credibility of Art Penn. I found Tony was still at home and asked him if he knew of a place where I could research the life and times of Anton Bruckner. He said he was going over to campus again soon, and that he would take me to the Gorno Library. Gorno was nestled inside the College Conservatory of Music. Tony flashed his college ID. I did not have one yet. The two of us went to the back of the stacks and he helped me locate a couple of books that he had used a couple of times. Most of the information I could get about Bruckner was about his life, and critical commentary about his works. Bruckner seemed to have been a controversial character in his day, and for quite a while after. Some folks dug him; some folks obviously did not. He had ended up with considerable critical acclaim before his death in 1896. Everyone went on to talk about Bruckner in light of the Nazi’s obsession with his works. That did not make sense. If I read Penn’s recounting of the tale correctly, Hitler hated Bruckner.

The other thing I found at the Gorno was that Bruckner’s last symphony, the D-Minor had been in the works for several years, and that he had been struggling with the last movement. The symphony itself had been described by one author as “a study of Dualities.” With a little help from Tony, I was even able to go up and listen to the D-Minor in the Gorno’s listening library. It was a big broad rollicking thing, that kind of reminded me of Beethoven’s Fifth and a little like his Ninth. I was not much of a music expert. Later on, I read where the forth movement had been planned as sort of a non-choral version of Beethoven’s Ninth’s finale. It was supposed to be a monster, but Bruckner had never gotten it to its final form, or he had died trying, or he had succeeded and that was what killed him.
That was an interesting thought, the killer symphony. In all my studies of Spontaneous Human Combustion, it had never been documented that someone’s mental processes had brought on the event. The people that suffered SHC all seemed to have no idea what had brought it on. There were even survivors of SHC events that had described their plight. None of them ever said, “I suddenly realized that I was late for an appointment, and POOF! There I was, on fire!” I was highly suspect of an incident where someone had a major Eureka! and then self-immolated. The rest of the Bruckner story did seem to fit—an intense flame of unknown origin causing nearly complete combustion of the entire body.

If I could find any corroboration of Penn’s story, this would be a wonderful addition to my small, but precious collection of SHC TYPE III events. I spent most of the day tracking down Bruckner, and I must have blown several bucks at the copier. None of the references I found had any discussion of an alternative to Bruckner’s death. They all agreed that he had either died peacefully in bed on October 11, 1896 in the company of a friend. Only one mentioned that a candle had tipped over and caused minor damage in the room, but this was linked with the removal of the body, later on the 11th. There was no mention beyond this. By the time I left that night, I had accumulated many bits of evidence, including the contents of Bruckner’s will as it related to his burial arrangements. He had asked to be embalmed and placed in a metal above-ground crypt next to his favorite organ at Saint Florian’s. I found a description of his funeral, with anecdotes of a weeping Johannes Brahms being left on the steps of the church, refused admittance by the Brucknerites within.
I also discovered that numerous attempts had been made to assemble the fourth movement. None of these attempts had claimed to be a completion of the work as Bruckner had intended it. Despite years of work, enough of the work had been missing from Bruckner’s papers to negate any possibility that this work would ever be performed in its entirety.

I walked home from the library, unsated. I had gone in to prove Penn a bullshit. I had found clues that could go either way, and I had also come away with a palpable feeling that there was something to Penn’s account, even if I could not prove it was made from whole cloth. I at least had an amount of hard-won ammunition that I could use to test Penn the next time I met him.

I had not been into the Alpha for a while. I walked in to chill out a bit before heading home. The dinner crowd was starting to wane. I sat down at an open booth. From out of nowhere Rene was there with a cup of vegetable soup.

“Here!” she said, “Try this. It needs salt, but just try it.”
I sprinkled salt into the soup, and gave it a try. It was a very good Beef Barley.

“If you don’t like it, it’s free.” said Rene. “In fact, it’s free no matter what. My treat.”

“Thanks.” I said. “The soup is good, really. What else do I want?”
Rene just leered at me.

“I’m just getting decompressed,” I said. “I’ve had a hard afternoon at the library.”

“Oh?” she said. “You’re back in the saddle?”

“Not yet,” I said. “But I’m getting there.”

“What department?”
“I’m not sure.” I replied. “I haven’t found out yet.”

“Isn’t that a little strange?” she asked. “You’re going to grad school, and you don’t know what college you’re going to be in?”

“Well,” I said. “I’m working a deal with a professor. He wants me to work for him as an assistant.”

“What’s his name?” she asked.

“Penn. Art Penn.”

Rene just howled.

“What?”

“Oh, my! You just hold on.” she said. “You’re in for a ride.”

“Like what?”

“Like, well.” she said. “I had a friend, Libby. She took a class from him as an undergrad. It was fun, but . . .”

“But?”

“You’ll see. She had fun.”

“No, really. I’d like to know details.”

“No you don’t. It’ll just spoil things.”

“Seriously, I –“

“Seriously. No!”

“Aren’t you being a bit-“

“Fickle?”

“That wasn’t the word I was going to use.”

“What then?”
“If you’re not going to tell me any gossip, I’m just going to sit here and eat my soup.” She left. I did not see her again.

I put a bill on the table when I left. Rene was like that sometimes.
Chapter 7

My second long session with Art Penn was held over at the Lakewood Tavern. We had Hoagies and a big basket of steak fries. Art was in the mood for having a drink. I drank *fruit du puits* scotch neat. Art was drinking Hudepohl drafts.

“Something I still do not get,” I said. “Is if Hitler was really so against Bruckner, how Bruckner became such a big thing for the Nazi’s.”

“He’s done his homework.” Said Art. “I see you’ve figured out who the Painter was.”

“It took me a while. “ I said. “I was born late. So how did that happen?”

“Bruckner? Easy. Hitler could be swayed by anyone who knew more than he did on cultural matters. Hitler had no taste of his own. He was so worried about what others thought—heck he even had his own dog put down so he could have a more Aryan-friendly pet dog, an Alsatian. When the Nazi’s were casting about for theme music, a lot of right-thinking people did not want their music or art associated with such a bunch of thugs. When it came time to do the soundtrack for the Third Reich, the decision was made to use dead composers that could not bitch about the misuse of their work. You also have to understand that most of that story came straight from Willie, my old boss. I only got involved after the War.”

“How did you get involved?” I asked.
“Willie found me at a party. A lot like the way we met the second time. I was there with a girl who was working in the English Department. I was taking advantage of my GI-benefits. Willie took a liking to me, and worked me into his circle. “

“You were in the War?”

“Oh, yes! That’s a long story in and of itself.”

“So you claim that Willie was a drinking buddy of Hitler’s?”

“That is something that I can say with near-certainty,”

“Why is that?”

“I sat in on couple of interviews he had with the FBI after the war. They had him identify a few people from Munich, and also asked what he knew about a few more. Willie was tuned in there for a few years, but he was definitely one of the good guys. It seems that one arm of the US Army was out capturing Germans and another arm of the Army or whoever was letting them go. Once, Willie saw a man he recognized sitting at the bar over at Mecklenbergs. The next day he called up the FBI and told them who he had seen. He was very worried until the FBI called him in and identify him from behind one-way glass.”

“I read up on Bruckner too,” I said. “There is no mention of his body burning up in a fire.”

“I would not doubt that either. “ said Art, sipping on a fresh beer that had been set in front of him.”When I tried to confirm Willie’s stuff, it often led no where. I did see the burnt stump of a leg in that coffin, however. That I can say for sure. My guess is that over time the record was sanitized. There was no one to quibble. I’m sure Bruckner’s buddies did not want an alternative story to get out."
“That leg could have been anyone’s.” I said.

“Yes,” he replied. “It could have been anyone’s. I suppose you want more proof.”

“I suppose you can say that.”

The Testament of Arthur Penn

This is not any further proof of what I have been telling you. This just carries on with the story. However, you can judge for yourself if this is all a bunch of hooey. As I told you before, Wilhelm Von Schmidt was a tuned-in guy. He was always in demand. After the trip to Vienna, he sort of withdrew from the world of what other people were writing. He still consorted with the friends he had met before and during the war, but his publishing record went into the toilet. He kept telling people that he was working on something big.

I believe that it was the summer after that side-trip to Vermont that Willie started letting on that he was preparing his magnum opus. I had been helping him prepare his lectures and such. I had helped with his correspondence, but I did not really know what he was working on. He spent more and more time home alone, working in his study that looks out over the bend in the Ohio River and Price Hill—the one that made him think of the Rhine. Little by little he was giving me stuff to read, but it was always in drips and drabs—I was proofreading things, but I could not figure out where he was going with it.
One day I would be reading about Jungian archetypes. The next day I would be organizing photos of African fetishes. You could tell it all made sense to him.

The next year was all a big blur. Kathy, that girl from the cocktail party turned out to be THE girl. I married her the next Spring. We were totally smitten with each other. We had a little ceremony at her folk’s house outside Hillsboro. I took her to Miami Beach for our honeymoon. Right after we got back, we found out her Great Aunt had died from all the excitement at the wedding. The Aunt was a spinster, and her folks just let us have her house. It was this little thing on Clifton Avenue, but it was on the bus line, and it suited our needs just fine. Kathy was great. We had a lot of laughs together. She was big on decorating the place. The aunt had been an atrophied since before the crash. The house looked like a tomb. Kathy was big on French Provincial, so she stayed at home, painting old chairs a delicate shade of off-white and learning how to do antique finishes. I went to work every day as the guy who swept up after the Great Philosopher. It was a great life.

Willie finally announced that he was going to deliver a paper at a conference that was to be held in September of 1949. A few days before the conference started, Russia exploded their A-bomb, and the whole world went nuts. We left for Princeton, New Jersey with all kinds of stuff happening. The Russians were still making trouble in Berlin. The Hungarians had been overrun. The Communists were taking over China—it was just a mess.

I remember Willie looking out the window of the train as we rode East saying “This will be the Generation that Never Knows Rest.”
Willie had been writing to all of his friends. He was going to deliver a paper to this convention, and it promised to be a doozie. Everyone kept asking me what it was all about. I honestly did not know, and I had read all of it—it was over my head. He kept rambling on about the “Resolution of Dualities.”

Willie had given me slides to show during his presentation. Some were of things he had shot in Vienna and elsewhere on our trip in 1946. Others were pictures of Celtic Crosses, African masks, Siberian shamanic claptrap. From what I could gather, he had decided that it all could be explained in one grand statement of perfect and irreducible unification.

I had a copy of the presentation in front of me, with the slide changes marked. Willie mounted the rostrum. His buddies all jumped up and gave him a huge round of applause. Willie waited for the crowd to settle down. Willie gave a quick joke—the old one about the old whore who gives her pimp ten dollars and twenty five cents, and then launches into his bit. He gets about five slide changes into the speech and then leans back from the rostrum.

“Was das fickt!” he said with a sort of wry smile. All of a sudden, he burst into flames. It was a white-hot blaze. The curtains immediately behind him caught fire. Everyone in the front rows ran for their lives. In a matter of moments, there was nothing left of Wilhelm Von Schmidt, but a scorch mark on the wood floor, a pile of ash and the stump of his left leg, still in his trouser leg. That’s all, a leg, a foot, a shoe, a dress sock and his garter.

Somebody got a fire extinguisher and put out the curtain. I ran down to the stage, and stood there, looking at what was left of my good friend. Some of the guys from the
Vermont trip grabbed me and took me back to the hotel and stayed with me. Somehow, I managed to grab my copy of the notes and the slides on the way out.

Then it started. First it was the Princeton Cops. Pretty soon I had FBI asking questions. The next thing I knew, a mixed bag of military guys and black suits show up and set up a command post and start grilling me. They wanted to go through the paper, but I could not help them. This was totally out of my league. They thought I was trying to hide something, but I wasn’t.

Except for one thing. No one ever asked about my copy of the presentation or the slides. I kept that at my room. By day, I was getting grilled, by night I was going through Willie’s presentation and trying to fill my head with where he had been coming from. It had been largely nonsense. I thought I had at the time that Von Schmidt had snapped at some point in the past, perhaps as far back as the trip to Vienna. From that point on, his one major thought in life was a search for what had killed Bruckner. It had driven him mad.

He didn’t seem mad to me. He was an all-right guy all those years. He taught a good class, he was forever writing letters to all his friends all over America and Europe and Israel. It was like he had been leading a double-life. That was the theory I formed at Princeton, and that was the theory I put forward to the authorities. It was a mistake talking about double-lives with these guys. I had to do an incredible amount of backtracking.

The authorities had other theories. This was a time of extreme paranoia. There were A-bomb spies everywhere, and people were being investigated for being Communists. Hell, even Helen Keller was a commie. Can you imagine that? The
Russians had the bomb now, and everyone was worried about what might come next. The FBI was thinking there might be some assassination plot in this. Somebody had wanted Willie dead, and found an elaborate way to fry him up on the stage. The military was sort of thinking the same thing, but they were worried about this being a Russian Death Ray, and they were thinking that Willie might have had uncovered some kind of plot. The black suits—I think they were CIA, but I never heard for sure-- they were pursuing the possibility that there was a Death Ray gap with the Soviets.

It was Thanksgiving before I made it home to Cincinnati. Nobody was missing me at UC, because my only real connection to the University had been reduced to a cinder. We had a really nice Thanksgiving out at Kathy’s folks—over the river and all that. Shortly after that I got a visit from somebody up at Wright Patterson. They wanted me to come up and brief them on what my part had been in what had happened in Princeton.

In mid-December, I got a call from the local FBI office. They had put guards on Willie’s house up in Fairview heights. They had gotten bogged down in searching the house for clues and needed help cataloging the stuff. Then they got around to his office at UC that had been guarded for all these weeks by a round-the-clock guard. My life was in a shambles, but somebody had started picking up the tab and we were receiving a government-issued check every week that was even better than what I had been making at UC. Life got good all of a sudden.

Well sort of. After Thanksgiving, strange things started to happen. Cars were parking along Clifton Avenue, and guys in brown suits were beginning to canvas the area. They seemed interested in us, my wife and I. I called the people I knew at the FBI,
and they said they were not able to comment. These guys spent about a month, calling on the University, calling on our friends, her parents’ neighbors in Hillsboro. We saw signs of tampering with our mail. Most of the time we were out, Kathy and I knew we were being tailed.

I guess I must have impressed someone in the initial grilling, or perhaps in one of the later meetings. The next thing I knew, there was a meeting set up at Wright Patterson. I was offered a job where I was going to investigate this incident, get to the bottom of it and provide recommendations for its use in national defense. They wanted it done out of Wright Patt, but when I balked at the thought of relocating to Dayton, they offered an office at General Electric, Evendale. They then told me that I had been investigated for the proper security privileges and that I had passed without a major hitch. They were interested in my contacts with a few of the luminaries with whom Willie had consorted, but I guess they realized that I was entirely neutral on politics.

I still remember reporting to work on my first day. I had Willie’s old valise, packed with my copy of the little red folder I’d carried away from Princeton. I had the slides, and a letter from a general of the Air Force that reported to Curtis LeMay. I had people falling all over themselves making sure I was well taken care of. The office was in a mothballed section of the plant. I walked in and breathed air that probably had not left the room since VJ Day. There was a 1945 calendar up on the wall, and War Department posters talking about keeping my lips zipped.

Within a day, all the boxes of stuff from Willie’s house had been moved to the office at GE. Also, about this time, Kathy received a phone call from a downtown lawyer who represented the Estate of Wilhelm Von Schmidt. Unbeknownst to me, Willie had
authored a will a few months after our return from Vienna. I was named as executor and primary beneficiary. Future income from his publications were to go to University of Cincinnati, and a generous sum of money was to be given to the Law School secretary that had sponsored him in the early years. The rest after taxes, including the property in Fairview Heights, was mine. Kathy and I talked to her folks and they immediately put the house up for sale. We were living in Willie’s house before Christmas. I now had Willie’s house free and clear, a job with the government, and a tidy nest egg that the folks gave us off the sale of the house. We even sold some of Auntie’s antiques and managed to get a new dining room set and a couch.

Life was getting sweeter by the day, if I could just keep Willie’s untimely demise working to my benefit. I felt like I was on top of the world. To sweeten matters, somebody had suggested that to simplify matters, I be given a rank in the Air Force. There was some behind-the-scenes haggling, and then one day a colonel shows up and gives me the news that I am now a Captain in the Air Force. When I left that day, the armed guard snapped me a salute, and I returned it—it sure beat sweating it out on the Siegfried Line.

So there it was, March 1, 1950. Captain Art Penn finally got down to work, solving the secrets of the Universe. Willie had compiled a massive amount of information. An inordinate amount of it was on Bruckner. Some of it was his investigations into Spontaneous Human Combustion. I had not realized there were so many historical references to it. He agreed with the same conclusion you made—there are a vast number of events that take place over a long period of time. Those can be explained by the simple mechanics of combustion in an oxygen-starved environment.
His criteria was far less specific than yours. He just simply threw out any incident where the victim had not been witnessed alive in the preceding 24 hours.

As long as I kept my progress reports flowing up to Wright-Patt, I could work in relative obscurity. Nobody expected very much on a day-to-day basis, but for some reason they thought I could figure out what happened. There was bound to be something in the content of the first third of the presentation, before Willie self-immolated, that would hold the key. I looked at the slides. I read the paper over and over. I went back and read Willie’s notes and rough draft. It was just beyond me what had triggered the incident. I had seen Willie on stage, I had seen him deliver the paper. I had been waiting for the next cue in the speech. I had seen him get that funny smile and the hesitation before he stood back and said to no one in particular “Was das fickt!” This had been a premeditated action. Willie had been in control of it, or thought he was.

After a month of running in circles, the guys at Wright-Patt decided that I needed some help. That’s when Merle.Emery showed up. Merle was a crackerjack chemist and forensics expert. He set up shop in the office next door. Merle tackled what had been gleaned from the site. We had the rostrum, the burnt section of floor that had needed to be sawn out of the stage. We had the curtain, and we had what was left of Willie. The latter I did my best to stay away from. However, they had neatly preserved the leg and the bit of trouser, and the ash residue of my close friend and mentor, and Merle installed a nice big Crosley Freezer for the leg. Merle had found out about the case when it first broke, had pulled strings, and volunteered. He had his whole office from Fort Dietrich, Maryland moved so that he could work with me.
By May, Merle was up to speed on what I had discovered so far, which was not much. Merle did a variety of tests on the materials brought in from Princeton, as well as some amputated legs he got brought in from a hospital. His conclusion was that Willie had gone from a normal ninety-eight-point-six human to a plasma in under 15 seconds. The temperature at the core of the event had reached several thousand degrees Kelvin, but the heat generated by the event had been highly localized by some unknown effect. It had been concentrated in all directions such that the distance of the curtain (7 feet) and the rostrum (2 feet), the ceiling (20 feet), the temperature had fallen quickly to under about 800 degrees. The solder in the microphone connections had melted, but an aluminum foil diaphragm had not. Lastly, the gold in Willie’s watch had shown signs of melting, but the stainless steel action did not. Merle put all this into charts and graphs. It did not explain anything, but it made it crystal clear that this was not as simple as if he had fallen into a blast furnace.

It astonished me at the contradictions of Merle’s findings, but Merle seemed to take it in stride. He said that plasmas were fairly easy to confine, and that fluorescent light fixtures worked with plasmas, but they were quite cool. My line of investigation was starting to dry up in a hurry, so I pitched in and helped him as much as possible. After work, Merle often times followed me home. He was living in an apartment in the Vernon Manor. We spent many hours chatting alternately at the Vernon Manor bar or in our living room, looking out Willie’s window at the Ohio River. Kathy and Merle liked each other too. He was a lot older than us, and he seemed like a confirmed bachelor. We adopted him in a way not unlike we had adopted Willie.
The Testament of Perry Oilean

It was at this point in the conversation that the spell was broken for a moment. I looked down and there were several empty shot glasses in front of me, numerous empty beer glasses, and an empty restaurant. Time had slipped away again. It was dark outside. The waitress was nowhere around. While I hit the men’s room, he scrounged up a bartender downstairs and settled up.

Art said he wanted me to drop by his office on Friday. I agreed, but said I still did not know where to go. He said he would meet me at the lions and take me over.
Chapter 8

The weekend came and Sissy was down from Oxford. She came by Saturday morning and we hung out together. First, she took me to breakfast at Perkins. Then we went to Burnet Woods and hiked around. I was not really sure what I should be saying to her, but I did my best to tell her about Art, without getting into the time tripping. She was somewhat aghast.

“So what does this guy want out of you?”

“I guess I’m working as his amanuensis.” I said. “So far, he has just been filling me in on the background stuff. Art says most of my job will be just listening to him talk.”

“And you buy that?”

“Why shouldn’t I?”

“This is really fishy.”

“I’m not so sure you can say that.” I said. “So far, he seems to check out.”

“How?”

“Well, he’s given me places and times and such. When I check them out, they appear legitimate. The people he says were involved were able to be there.”

“But what’s the point?”

“I guess I’m on the road to finding out.”

“You’re on the road to getting taken in a major way.”

“Vivian says he’s cool.”

“Who was she, Bruckner’s mistress?”
“Bruckner was into young girls,” I said.

“Ooops, she was probably too old for him then.”

“You’re cruel, and you’re a jealous wretch.”

“You’re living in a delusional reality.”

“I’m not so sure. I’m at least having fun with it. I’m done with this now, you’re not helping, so we should just talk about something else. How’s your school doing?”

“I’m doing a play.”

“Which one?”

“Zoo Story.”

“That’s not much of a play.”

“What do you mean.”

“I mean it’s not much of a play for you—two guys on a park bench.”

“Yeah, but I’ve got the whole thing.”

“That’s cool. Can I come see it?”

“Of course.”

“Well, I didn’t know.”

“Why wouldn’t I want you?”

“Because I might bring a date from the rest home and spoil your evening. Besides, you might want to fall on your face in obscurity.”

“No, if I fall on my face, I can do it in front of you. You and Vivian can come opening night. I want Mom and Dad to come later-- Just in case.”

“So how’s your man toy doing?”
“He’s off on an orienteering outing.”

“With compasses and stuff? Sounds like a geek.”

“He is, but he’s cool too. Stu and his friends go off on these things all the time and try to find orange road cones out in the woods. It’s harmless. He’s straight, and he’s not into dope. I really can’t expect more with the life I lead.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because I’m not going to invest all that much in a relationship. I’m too busy learning my craft.”

“You’re still giving Dad his money’s worth then?”

“You bet.”

We hung out in Clifton for lunch and she went shopping in a bunch of places up on Ludlow, and then we went back to the apartment for while. Vivian came over and we decided that Sissy would come along with us to the Corinthian. I made sure Skip knew to keep his hands off. I finally got Sissy and Vivian around each other long enough that Sissy got used to her and started to warm up. Vivian and Sue were working on dinner together, and got Vivian interested in helping out. Somewhere in the middle of it Sue got interested in the wine and became a spectator. Vivian must have charmed Sissy, because soon the two of them were laughing together. When Sissy came out with a glass of wine after an hour or so, she was giggling.
“Vivvy says you’re quite a lover.”

“Of course. Did she give you details? Like how I put her on top and spin her around?”

“You’re sick.”

“No, you’re lit.”

“Sick.”

“Lit.”

Vivian had taught her to make baked onion soup, and the main course was a Béarnaise sauce over faux crab, and while they were doing this, they all three got to trading ideas on makeup. Sissy was in heaven. I also suspect that Stu was going to have some surprises when he got back from his Orienteering. By the time dinner came out, there was no sign of tension. The box of wine that had been sacrificed for universal world peace was unceremoniously thrown in the garbage and a second box was opened.

Skip was a perfect gentleman. Tony came back from campus, grabbed cold pop-tarts and ran out with his suit for a performance. Walter showed up and did not catch on that there was unattached skim. He got himself a double-helping of soup and went to the TV and watched college football. After dinner, the women retired to one of the bedrooms to do a makeover on Sissy. We loaded ourselves into various cars and drove over to the Corinthian and spent the evening. Sue and Vivian had worked out a sort-of routine with their dancing, and Sissy tried to fit in. It was fun to watch. Sissy was having a wonderful time, and it was good to see her letting loose for a change.

We stayed out late and then hit a place downtown—a hotel that served ice cream at 2 in the morning. I got the wild idea of taking everyone out to Bellevue park and
looking at the lights after we got back to the Apartment. I was able to speak eloquently about the Belleview House as I paced out the footprint. I’m not sure anyone really cared. Vivian snuggled up to me as we sat on the wall, looking out over the city below. Sissy danced on the lawn for a while with Sue, and then we went home. I gave up my bed to Sissy and Vivian, and I went out to the couch and chased out Walter, who had never left.

Sunday morning came and went with hardly anyone stirring. Somewhere around Noon, Vivian woke me up with a cup of coffee. Sissy crawled out a while later, and locked herself in the bathroom. Walter made up a box of buckwheat pancakes, and sailed them to us like Frisbees. They had cocktail peanuts in them. I ate mine like a muffin—it only took one to fill me up. That and the coffee got us going enough that we started planning our day. Skip and Sue were supposed to take off for a Bengals home game, but were going to be late for the tailgate party. Sissy finally emerged from the bathroom and offered me a ride out to the folks’ place. I begged off.

Art called shortly after Sissy took off. He was back in town and wanted to know if I wanted to bring Vivian out for an early supper. When we showed up at the house around three, we had quite a surprise. Art was out in the front yard, with the carcass of a dead deer hanging off a limb.

“Lookee what I got!” Art said, as we got out of the car.

“It looks dead,” I replied.

“Got him at seventy five yards.” He said. “I had nothing all weekend and then he walked out this morning right at sun rise.”
“Is that legal in town?” I said.

“Oh, heck! I shot him down in Kentucky. It was rifle season.”

“Oh.”

Vivian came up and began admiring the antlers.

“Is that a ten-pointer?”

“Ten or twelve,” he said. “I’m not sure these points here would count for the record book.”

“He was a magnificent animal,” she said.

“What’s he doing in your tree, “ I asked.

“I’m hanging him here until the butcher opens up on Monday. It’s cold out this weekend. It’ll keep until morning. I’ve got a guy who will do one for seventy bucks.”

“Do . . .?”

“Process it.” Art replied to me. “Take big dead deer and turn it into little bundles wrapped in freezer paper.”

“Do you mount it?” I asked.

“No, thanks,” replied Art. “I’ve got a girlfriend that keeps me happy.”

I helped Art drape a sheet over the deer and then hoist it up high in the tree to protect it from dogs. Before we did, Art reached in with his folding knife and extracted some meat, that he laid on newspaper.

“Backstraps, “ he said, up to his elbows in the deer. “This is what I wanted to feed you all tonight. It’s the best part of the deer.”

“Backstraps?”

“Tenderloins,” said Vivian. “They are the best part of the venison.”
“Sure, I guess.” Inside, I was a bit squeamish.

“Perry,” said Vivian. “Take my word for it; it will be wonderful.” I realized I was close to committing a faux-pas, so I tried my best to look excited. It was just that there was this deer, hanging from a limb, and its lifeless eyes were staring at me.

Hoisting the deer consisted of Art grabbing the deer and lifting it, while I pulled on the rope. After a couple heave-hos, Art declared the process a success and then tied the rope off to the trunk. When we went inside, I found out that I had committed another faux-pas. Suchi was not “Sushi,” but rather “Sue – Chi” or some such. I had been mispronouncing it, assuming in the introduction that Art’s broad way of speaking had been some what in error. Instead, I had been calling my boss’ wife the equivalent of “raw dead fish.” Sue, her anglicanized name, was quick to correct me on this meeting.

Art had the Bengals’ game on. I did not really follow football, but I took it that the was not a mundane thing. We did not have long to watch. It was in the middle of the fourth quarter, and Art invited me into the den to watch the end.

“So, you ever hunted.” Art asked.

“No, I haven’t.” I replied.

“Shame. It’s just a shame. I think you’d like hunting. I don’t know many good places for bird anymore, but there’s good deer hunting around here.”

“What about wild boar?”

“You want to go hunt boar?”

“No, I was just saying—are there any wild boar around?”

“Not around here. Tennessee has them.”

“Oh.”
“Ever shot?”

“No.”

“Don’t be offended. I didn’t mean it like you thought.”

“I’m not following you.”

“There’s nothing wrong with hunting or shooting. I’ve been doing it for years.”

“I didn’t say there was. I suppose if you eat what you shoot, it’s no different than going to the butcher shop.”

“Oh! It’s a lot different than a trip to the butcher shop.”

“I meant the moral part of it.”

“So do I.”

“I guess I’m not following.”

“I go out and hunt, if for no other better reason, just to get up to my elbows in deer, to stay in the game, to stay part of the food chain. It’s too doggone easy to let yourself become a grazer and stop thinking where your food is coming from.”

“I guess I hadn’t thought of it that way.”

“The cows don’t care. The deer don’t care. It’s you. You have to care. I don’t care if it’s a buffalo or a brussel sprout, you have to get in touch with it.”

“I’ve never murdered a brussel sprout.” I said.

“Murder. Now there’s a concept. Murder is the intentional killing of a human being. This is not murder. It’s dinner, for chrissakes.”

“I guess I’m pissing you off left and right today.”

“No, you’re not. I just wonder if you’ve really ever given any thought to this.”

“I guess I haven’t.”
“Think of this: if you’re going to live, something is going to have to die—a lot of things. It was made that way. Even vegetarians kill things.”

“They kill vegetables.”

“Are vegetables less important?”

“I don’t know. I never dated one.”

“They’re not, and you’re no different, either.“

This was not going well, Art realized he was beating me up for no other reason than what was rolling around in his head, and I was not trying to be offensive. Eventually, he figured it out and started to mellow. He poured himself a drink—poured me one too—and then came back to sit in front of the TV. The Bengals were taking apart the Rams, and Art was happy to see that the season was turning into something spectacular.

“So tell me about this deer hunt,” I said. “It sounds interesting.”

“Well, one of the guys that Merle brought with him way back has this hunting lease down river from Warsaw. He invites a bunch of us down every year to hunt. We all show up for the Kentucky Rifle Season, and it’s a blast. This year was too warm, and I think the deer weren’t moving all that much. It was a hard thing.”

“What, do you drive the deer? Dogs? What?”

“Mostly, we hunting the way we do it is a matter of ambush. Some of the time I was hunting from the ground. I sat for hours waiting for something to show up. This morning, I was in a tree stand. You should have seen it—it was one of those perfect mornings—not too cold, just right. The light came up, and the buck came out, and turned broadside to me and that was it. He was asking for it.”
“I doubt he was asking for it.”

“I don’t know. I just don’t know. It’s a strange thing between a deer and a man.”

“You’re kidding.”

“I just don’t know. The Indians had all kinds of ways to describe it. They would pray to the deer to come and let themselves be taken. The deer would respond by allowing themselves to be killed so that they could live on in the soul of the hunter.”

“Yeah, but that was Indians.”

“Yeah, but until you’ve taken a buck, don’t second guess things.” Art held up his glass. “To the buck!”

“To the buck!” I said.

By the time we left Art’s den, the Bengals had managed to shellac the Rams, and Art had managed to put enough chinks in my politically correct views of blood sports and firearms that I said that I would consider his kind offers of a trip to the gun range, and possibly a trip to go hunting.

Vivian had Sue-Chi had come up with a complementary dinner to Art’s plans for the venison. Art and I retired to the outdoor grill and started building a fire. I had never seen an outdoor barbeque run off wood—charcoal briquettes had always been my speed. Art was heavily into the thing, and had chunks of red oak that he fired in an outdoor fireplace and then shoveled onto his kettle grill. While we stood around watching the wood burn, we talked more.

“I’ve got a couple of pieces that my Dad left me.” I said. “I’m not sure what they are.”

“Shotguns? Rifles? What?”
“I’m not sure. I think one is a shotgun.”

“Bring them by sometime,” he said. “I’ll at least tell you what you’ve got.”
Chapter 9

I had agreed to meet Art the next night, up on Calhoun Street, at the YMCA. I pulled a few hours for Stan that afternoon, when Stan showed back up I still had some time left, and I walked around. It was an uncommonly warm day; November in Cincinnati gets like that sometimes. It’s usually after the leaves are down, and it’s usually after the first cold snap. As I walked west out of the business district and headed down McMillan, it felt like summer. The old cathedral, Our Lady of Constipation, or whatever it is, went off as I got close. Those bells were loud.

From what I understood, Fairview Park was a circular drive around one of the hills. I thought I would take a walk over there and check out the view. From there, I could probably pick out Willie’s old house. I passed the old police station and turned down Ravine. The park was easy to find. There were kids playing on the equipment, and a bunch of college-aged people were out flying Frisbees and picking up their gear after enjoying the last warm day they were going to have before Winter kicked in. I had actually entered at the exit of a one-way drive, but it did not matter for pedestrians. There were lots of people out.

The view of the city was spectacular, and it did not take me long to find a section of the drive that had the same view of the river and Price Hill as what Art had described. As soon as I turned around, I saw a set of plate-glass windows, protruding from a house on top of the hill. I knew immediately what I was seeing. I proceeded along the drive and was heading for the entrance to the park, when I came upon an odd structure and a set of abandoned stairs. The structure looked like a stone crypt, set in the hillside.
However, I was later to find that this was just an access to the failed Central Parkway subway, built in the teens. In the low-angle light of late afternoon, it looked spooky. Having learned the secret of the stairs from other parts of the heights, I knew this would be a shortcut to the top.

The way up was a bit more perilous than some of the other abandoned stairs I had found. This had far less traffic than the others, and had a lot more debris. When I arrived at the top, I found myself in a back yard, and there was a couple grilling out with wine on the table and a kerosene lamp. I waved, and they waved back, and I continued on. When I got to the sidewalk on Fairview Avenue, I turned right.

Fairview is an interesting little island. At the top, there were a mixture of upper-middle class and working class houses. It had been one of the first true commuter suburbs for the town. No original garages, no carriage houses. Everyone had taken a street car to town. Working-class Catholics had flocked here to be close to the then-new cathedral. I could see why a guy like Willie would have thought this was heaven on earth. Fairview is surrounded, three quarters of its way around by Fairview Park. Those lucky enough to live on top had backyards with woods, the park and views of the western rim of Cincinnati and the river. I went to the southern end of Fairview and found the house I had seen from the park. It still had bits and pieces of Bavarian charm to it, even though it was at heart a just a bungalow with sort of an English Tudor look. The back had been added on—a sunken living room with windows on three sides. Looking between it and next house, I got a peak at the sun setting next to the big radio tower on the horizon. I stayed and watched as the limb disappeared behind the ridgeline that formed the western rim.
Had it been a night like this when Kathy had gone up? Right now, Art and Kathy
would be finishing dinner and retiring to the back of the house for coffee, as probably the
current residents had been. It was chillingly normal out on the street, but at any moment
I expected Willie to come trudging down the sidewalk, carrying his satchel of books.

Had it been a night like this when he got the kernel of the idea that had lead to his grand
unification paper? Had it been later this night, as the cars from the train yard down in the
bottoms were humped and brakes wailed like banshees in the darkness. The bells of the
old cathedral rang again, and I realized it was time to get back up town and meet Art.

Art was waiting for me inside the lobby of the YMCA. We went back out and
down the stairs beside the building and out onto the lawn to talk. The lawn, which was a
long slope between Calhoun Street and the University Drive looked out onto the lit
façade of Pat Corbett Theatre. It was getting well past sunset, and the blue on the horizon
was shrinking past the towers of Hughes High school. The lights that shown on the front
of the theatre had come on, and bats were beginning to come out, ducking and weaving as
they picked the last insects of Autumn.

“We’re going on a field trip,” he said. “If that’s okay with you.”

“Sure.”

“Where?”

“Oh, just around the block here. We won’t go all that far.”

“Sure. Let’s go.”

“Hold on, there’s a catch to it.”
“What’s that?” I asked. “Do I run a risk of combustion?”

“Probably not,” chuckled Art. “I’ll let you know if that becomes an issue.”

The Testament of Art Penn

As I was healing up from the loss of Kathy, Merle tipped his hand on what his ulterior motive had been for getting involved. Well, at least he gave me one ulterior motive. See, he had been at Fort Dietrich in Maryland working on weaponizing psychoactive drugs and had wanted to investigate Willie’s case to see if there might be a chemical agent involved. It sound like a weak excuse, but it was good enough for him to get an invite from the Wright-Patt guys that were grubstaking my operation. Merle had ways of making the goofiest thing seem plausible. As we got into talking more about his plans, Merle wanted to get out of Fort Dietrich and work further away from the scrutiny of his sponsors. My SHC project was just the ticket.

Merle had been making headway at the Taft Labs out on the East Side of town. Taft Labs was a government lab that various agencies used. He wanted me to keep the operation at GE running, while he moved his lab down to Taft. They were building him a Quonset hut in the back end of the parking lot, and he could start moving in by late Spring. Merle had also started recruiting some additional members for the team. They were guys my age and a little younger. They all had good credentials as either field biologists, or research chemists. We all had war experience, but then who didn’t in those days. Merle suggested that I get back into the University of Cincinnati, and start
teaching. That would give us a third turgid bureaucracy in which to hide. By the time we were finished, no one would be able to figure out what we were up to.

Merle’s specialty, as well as that of a couple of other fellows, was ergot alkaloids. You may know about what Timothy Leary was up to in the Sixties. Merle’s group was investigating down the same path. However, their techniques were quite a bit more refined. As an analogy, I was talking with one of our physics profs the other day, a guy named Endorf. He’s into high-energy particle physics. He said his work on unlocking the secrets of sub-atomic particles was like trying to take a Swiss watch, accelerating it to a sizeable percentage of the speed of light and then dashing it against a brick wall and trying to deduce how the watch functioned from the way the pieces flew. Compared to how Merle went about things, Timothy Leary was researching with his own brain doing similar experiments with LSD. Ergoline derivatives were just one of Merle’s playgrounds. He had a whole closet full of them. LSD is just one ergot derivative. It works on way to many areas of the brain and its chemistry. Merle knew how to study just one effect at a time, using sophisticated receptor binding assays and other methods, and procuring or synthesizing just the right chemical to do it. LSD is to Merle’s concoctions what asphalt is to jet fuel—they’re both petroleum derivatives, but . . .

What got Merle in the door was that someone in FBI had found a link between Wilhelm Von Schmidt and Albert Hoffman. One of the pieces that fell together in this was that Von Schmidt had been carrying on correspondence with an associate of Hoffman’s in Switzerland. Hoffman had been the discoverer of LSD, and there is reason to believe that Von Schimdt had been receiving care packages from Basel throughout the war. The shipments were simply letters impregnated with various compounds. The text
of the letters had been irrelevant, but if the paper was treated correctly, a psychoactive substance would be released. Kathy had found the secret by accident, and probably dosed herself with something Von Schmidt had been playing with. These are a class of compounds that are extremely stable—they could have lasted for years.

There is also some evidence, albeit loose, that the assistant to Hoffman had been a part of the *stammtisch* of Bruckner groupies from Munich. If you had someone playing with ergot derivatives back then, you have to ask yourself whether this somehow involved others, including The Painter. That is a maddening thought, but it is not something fruitful on which to speculate. It would be fun to say that Hitler and his friends experimented with some LSD precursor, and that lead to the Third Reich. I’ve never gone down that road, and it is not a good place to go. Suffice it to say that after Hoffman synthesized LSD in 1938, there was an immediate underground of devotees shipping this stuff from Basel to Timbuktu. It was like psychedelic friendship bread, break off some dough and pass it on. That pipeline was probably in place long before 1938.

Does dosing yourself with ergot make you combust? No. However, I think it produced a state of mind that allowed Von Schmidt to see a higher (or at least altered) reality. That let him get the joke. Kathy was probably just an innocent. In truth, she was one of the most innocent creatures I have ever seen on two legs. That was what I loved about her. I think when the prophets were writing about lambs of God and Innocence, they were talking about people like Kathy. She was untainted by the world, and it was easy for her to see the truth in the joke. She only had to hear it once.
I am wandering, so I suppose I should get back on track. Merle Emery played ergot the way Bach could play an organ. More precisely, Merle played the human mind the way Back did his organ, and he used ergot and other psychoactives to create his masterworks. Merle would show up at my office with some new compound, we would go out for a long lunch, and soon we would be flying like a bird, or swimming like a fish, or talking to trees, or some other magnificent feat. I can show you places in Sharon Woods, a couple of miles up the road from the plant, where we used to do these things. God, but it was wonderful. At the end of an hour or so, Merle would rub something on my forearm, or have me chew a stick of gum, and Poof! It would be over; we would be back in reality, and it would be time to go back to the office.

Merle also got a pretty good feel for what Willie had been up to over the years. We found an expanding file of letters. It seemed to be just a bunch of correspondence between Willie and his friends still in Europe. The letters were hidden in a cubby hole that Kathy must have found while she was cleaning. We found Kathy’s fingerprints on it, and on several of the letters within. The only thing that was odd about the letters was that small strips of paper had been taken off the edges, so that no two pieces where exactly the same size. The paper seemed largely inert, but that was because they had been coated with a sealer. The edges were still quite active. Kathy had probably handled the paper and unknowingly dosed herself lightly with repeated exposure.

The other thing odd about the letters were the codings Von Schmidt had used to classify the drugs imbedded in the paper. There was a series of red asterisks and black spots. Asterisks meant good stuff; dots meant the effect was lousy. There were also little comments written on the letters:
It looses something in translation. Suffice it to say he was getting off on this stuff.

We did some experimentation with some of the letters. Just by handling the edges and reading the paper, you never really got noticeably high, but it did have a measurable effect. The one I read made my coffee mug get up and dance a jig on my desk. I was relieved to find out that Kathy had probably died happy—happier than I could have imagined at the time.

What all this is leading to is that by the Summer of 1950, Merle and I had set up bootleg operation that was partly under the auspices of the Strategic Air Command, the CIA, the FBI, the Public Health Service, General Electric, and the University of Cincinnati. We were dug in like ticks, and no one could figure out what we were up to. If they started to catch on, there was always something to slip into their coffee to make them forget, or to make them feel they had seen something wonderful when they really had not, or just give them a warm fuzzy feeling about things—whatever it took to make them go away. With a little bit of skullduggery and a dash of ergot, we had found perfect intellectual freedom amid a limitless budget—heaven. Part of our operation, a very small part, actually ended up as a topic of discussion in the National Security Council. Some bureaucrat gave it the coding NSC/EX-29. So, from there on out, we were Excalibur 29.
We actually hired a few girls to keep track of the paperwork, and keep us out of trouble. They had no idea what kind of effort they were supporting. General Electric supplied the women and made their services available as part of the overall support for the Air Force presence at the Evendale facility. Everyone we got in had been cleared for Top-Secret work, even our janitor, and GE just tacked our tab onto whatever they were doing for building jet engines. We had a fairly tidy little enterprise on our hands.

What I am proposing is that I give you a little taste of the fruits of those efforts. I have with me tonight a harmless substance that Merle and the boys concocted in the next year after we got going. It has been in for thirty years now, and the effects are well known and well documented. The exercise will last only a couple of hours, and when you are done, there will be no harmful side effects. There will be no major alteration of your perceptions. You will be under my care and protection. You will experience a normal evening in Clifton Heights, but when it is over you will have undeniable proof of what I have been saying.

Again, if you do not want to take this step, I will understand. However, I believe what I am doing in offering you this out is just a formality. I seriously doubt any man with blood in his veins would want to miss out on an adventure like this.

The Testament of Perry Oilean

He was right. I would not have missed this for the world. I had a bunch of questions for Art, but basically Art did not want to divulge any more than he already had. He said the exercise would be over soon enough that it would not be worth any additional explanation. I agreed. Art produced a vest made of sturdy nylon. It was fairly light, but
substantial. It had several handles attached to it. He asked me to wear it under my jacket and to keep it on at all times. It was a precaution, he said, and that he felt more comfortable if he had a solid way of holding on to me. He showed me that he was wearing the same sort of vest. It gave him a way of, for instance, keeping me from becoming absent-minded and stepping into oncoming traffic. It made sense, so I acceded. He then had me roll up my arm and he did an elaborate job of scrubbing my arm clean of anything that might be on it. We then walked back up to the YMCA entrance, and took a seat beside each other in the great room. Art took out a small vial of liquid, and lightly brushed an applicator brush across the skin.

“That’s DMSO.” He said. “It’s just horse liniment, but you it is very important in this process. That will take whatever I put on your skin right in. That’s why your skin has to be perfectly clean. I want to make sure you get just the right amount, and nothing else gets in. Do you taste garlic?”

I had to admit that I had just started tasting something garlicky in my mouth. It sort of made me hungry for pizza.

“That’s the DMSO.” He said. “It works fast. Okay, now here comes the magic.” With that, he produced a small brown glass vial, opened the lid and allowed a single drop fall on the skin of my inner forearm, put the vial away and pressed a button on his watch. When about five seconds had passed, he took a gauze pad and wiped off the drop, and then stuffed the gauze into baggie, poured in a little bit of clear liquid into the bag and reached over and tossed the baggie into waste basket.

“That’s Rubbing alcohol.” He said. “It eats up whatever is left.” He then took another gauze pad, put some alcohol on it and rubbed it on my forearm. “Done.”
We sat for several minutes, and did not say a word. Art looked at his watch. I
looked around the room. We had been unobserved. The YMCA was a substantial
building. The architecture made it seem like it was ageless—large vaulted ceilings and –
“Let’s go!” said Art, shaking me.
Chapter 10

“The first thing you will notice,” said Art, “is that your perception of distance will be somewhat altered. That is perfectly normal. Everything will seem to have an extra dimension to it. Try to concentrate on the world as you know it, and try not to spend too much time worrying about the differences.”

I had no idea what he was talking about. Everything inside the ‘Y’ was just as it had been.

“Another thing. Don’t look in any mirrors. It is not dangerous, but just don’t get hooked on anything you see in one. Try to keep your perceptions moving as they normally would. I’ve got a hand on you all time, and just let me lead you for now.” We were out on the front stoop of the ‘Y.’ Nothing had changed. Traffic was moving along Calhoun Street. Dubois bookstore was across the street and on the next corner. Lances was there too, down the block a bit. I looked back up the other way, and noticed that Hoagies, the bar across the street had a new sign up. It looked just like the old one, only not so ratty.

About this time, I noticed several nice cars going by on the street. One was a minty looking Cougar, from the first year. It was a nice blue and white job. I had not seen one since I was a kid. It still had the Car and Driver “BEST CAR 1968” sticker on the cozy wing. I was about to say something when an even better looking Mustang drove by. The light changed and Art told me it was time to cross.
I was never much into the campus scene at UC. It was all pretty much a strange thing to me all together. As we walked down Calhoun Street, I was amazed at how thoroughly behind the rest of the world this campus scene was. Folks were still walking around in leather fringe coats, bell-bottom jeans, and mini-skirts. Guys had hair down to their shoulders, and there were peace-signs on everything. In Boston, the New Wave was in full swing, and folks were forever dressing in black. There was a new nightclub about midway down the block, and I was surprised to see that Calhoun Street was not as backward as I had thought. I looked inside and there was a huge Retro-party in full swing. A band was playing Rolling Stones. Everyone was up dancing in gaudy late-Sixties stuff.

Art and I went down around the corner at Papa Dinos and then went up McMillan. Things began to look wrong, and out of place. I started to say something, but Art told me not to worry, and we ducked in a new restaurant that had just opened up next door to the Alpha.

A pleasant middle-aged woman was behind the counter. Art waved to her and she knew who he was. We took adjoining stools at the counter. Art ordered two coffees and two baklavas.

“You have not been in!” she said in a mock remonstration. She had a very thick Greek accent.

“I am sorry, Misses G.,” he said. “I have been so busy. I was telling my friend, Perry about your baklava.”

“Good evening, Perry.” She said. “Are you Art’s new assistant?”

“Yes, “ I said. “I am.”
“You are going to have a wonderful time,” she said. “I have known Doctor Penn here for many years. He is a good man.”

“Thank you,” said Art. “Is Mister Georgiton around?”

“Yes, “she said. “He’s in the back.” I looked in the back and there were two men at a back booth, smoking cigarettes and talking.

I also noticed a familiar face at another booth. It was Vivian. She was looking right at me, but she had not recognized my face. I started to get up from my stool. Art found a handle and jerked me back down.

“What’s up?” I said.

“Stay put!” He said. “You’re on something, remember? Stay with me.”

“But Vivian is over there.” I said.

“Stay put.” He said. “We’ll say hello to her as she leaves.”

“What’s going on?” I said.

“You’re on something.” He said. “When she sees you she will not recognize you. Actually, I had not thought about her being here. This is not good. It’s not bad either, but still . . . just don’t make a scene when she does not recognize you.”

Vivian was dressed in a shirtwaist dress that reminded me of something my mother used to have. She’d done her hair differently too—it was much much longer. She was picking through a purse which I had never seen. She looked like she was in a disguise. I stared at her to the point where she noticed me, but she never showed any recognition of me. I took Art’s advice and looked away.
As I sat, nursing my coffee, I could finally start to tell that there was something odd about my perceptions. When I looked out the window and onto the street, it was like looking down a long hall. There were images of things superimposed on each other in an endless succession. I had the feeling of vertigo, as if I was falling in all directions at once. For a brief moment, I caught sight of myself in a mirror. Art tapped me on the arm, and I looked back. Before I did, I had this incredible feeling of-

“No mirrors.” He said.”Eat your baklava. She’s leaving soon. Let me handle it.”

Soon, Vivian got up from the table and left a small tip. She walked up the register to pay. As she walked passed, I was aghast at her costume. It was so dreadfully out of style.


“Oh, Art. “ she said. “ I thought that was you.”

“It’s been a while.” He said. “This is my new assistant, Perry.”

“Nice to meet you Vivian.” I said, trying to play along. “Are you going to that party over on Calhoun Street?”

“I beg your pardon.” She said.

“The party. “ I said. “There’s a party going on at that place near Lance’s. From your dress, I thought-”

“No, “ she said. “I’m not.”

“Oh. “ I said. Art nudged me and I shut up.

“It’s nice to see you again.” Said Art.

“Yes,” she said. “The same here.”

“Say hello to Emil. “
“I will,” she said. She paid Mrs. Georgiton and then left.

“What was that all about?”

“I’ll tell you later. Just try and soak this in.”

We worked over the pastry, drank our coffee and left. I was amazed at how good the baklava was. It had a hint of something in it that was like no other Greek pastry I had ever had. On the way out, I burped a little of it, and the taste was there, only a bit stronger. Mrs. Georgiton wished us well.

“Funny, I never saw this restaurant go in.” I said.

“You eat in here all the time, I bet,” said Art.

“No, I eat next door at the Alpha.”

“That was the Alpha.”

I looked back at the restaurant. It was not next to the Alpha. It was the Alpha, only it was called the Tic-Toc.

“Wh----?”

“Stand by to receive a blow, kid.” Art pointed to Stan’s book store. The façade was the same, but the sign said “Shipley’s.” It was a co-ed hangout. My mind was reeling. All of a sudden it dawned on me that I was not anywhere I really recognized. It was the same but different. With that, the odd distortion of perception got much worse, and the world seemed to dissolve and fall away in every direction. I was falling through space and time. The pavement was rushing up to meet my face, but beyond that was an oblivion. I felt a jerk, and found Art grabbing one of the handles on the vest.

“Easy!” said Art, helping me regain my balance.
“What’s happening?”

“It isn’t ‘What’ as much as ‘When.’ My guess is about 1969.”

“What?”

“Welcome to the past, my friend. Isn’t it an absolute hoot! Not much has changed in eleven years.”

“How did we get here?”

“You picked the date as you were sitting down back at the ‘Y’ I just followed you.”

“I had no idea.”

“Which is why I’m along.”

“I had no idea you could get here. I said. Where is here?”

“Oh it’s right where you were, it’s just the when-part that has changed. You could hop on a bus right now and go home and see yourself eating dinner with your Mom, but I wouldn’t recommend it.”

“You keep saying that.”

“You’ll catch on. It’s the same as finding your legs. Are you okay now?”

“Yes, I’m a little sick to my stomach.”

“It’s not the baklava. She makes the best baklava.”

“No, it’s like motion sickness.”

“It is motion sickness. Your body is not used to time travel yet. It’s adjusting.”

“Vivian didn’t recognize me, because we haven’t met yet. But 1969—I was only Twelve. She looked like she hasn’t changed a bit.”

“That’s a long story. We can save that for later.”
“What are we going to do now.”

“I’m going to get you back to when you started, and then you are going home.”

“I want to keep going.”

“No you don’t. You need to get home. In fact, I’m going to help you get home.”

Art took me down the block and pretty soon we were off McMillan, and over on to Lyon Street. Things looked perfectly normal, and everything looked much more solid. The only thing that was odd was the cars. There was a dark set of steps on the front of a house, that had a bright streetlight. I realized that there were leaves back on the trees, and this was not November. It was still summer. Art sat me down and took out some preparations from his pocket. Some were the same. Others were different. I tasted garlic again, and then Art applied a drop of something new, and the world around me started to gel back into what it had been. I noticed the cars had changed position, make and model. I read a license plate, it said “1981 OHIO.” I was back.

We got up from the stoop and wandered up to Ohio Avenue. We talked a little about what had happened, but Art was more worried about giving me advice.

“Don’t talk about this with anyone. I will meet you for breakfast tomorrow at the Yellow Submarine at Eight. We’ll talk again then. Don’t drink alcohol. Just go to bed. Art walked me home and followed me in.

Vivian was there, back in her normal dress with her normal hair. The Eight-0’Clock movie was on Channel Nineteen. I recognized the theme from “Kelly’s Heroes.” Skip and Sue were on the couch. Art told Viv that he’d gotten me drunk and I’d gotten woozy, and she said she would put me to bed. She tried to invite Art in, but Art declined and started to go. I could tell Art and Vivian were very warm with each other. They
seemed to be old friends. I wanted to stay and watch the movie, but Vivian said she was following orders and put me to bed.

Vivian got me up as she was getting ready to go to work. I got dressed, and hit the door. The air was still remarkably warm for November. I got in the procession of students heading up to campus and then veered off and steered my way to the Yellow Submarine. Art was already there. We both had the special, a concoction called the Petersen Special, named after the cook. It was a huge plate of potato, egg, cheese and so on, all mixed together and fried. The cook was a wild man, but the food was worth it.

“How did you make out last night,” Art said.

“No problem,” I said. “I went right to sleep.”

“That’s good. I didn’t expect problems. What I gave you was a quick in-and-out sort of thing. There should not be any lingering problems.

“What the heck was that last night?”

“Time travel.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“No. No kids. Dead serious. Isn’t modern chemistry wonderful?”

“I don’t believe you.”

“That’s why we’re going on a walk this morning.”

“Where?”

“You’ll see.”

“Time travel can’t possibly work like that.”
“Oh, it does, and that is what is so amazing about it. Go outside and watch a squirrel on a telephone wire. It crawls right across like it was built for it—instinct. You just did the same thing, only it was in another dimension. Humans have an instinctual capacity to navigate in four dimensions.”

“How is that?”

“You have a memory that can allow you to travel at will into the past, as well as the ability to extrapolate a reasonable future from what has already occurred. It lets you pass a football. It let’s you find your favorite restaurant. It really is quite amazing too. Here we are moving through space in all dimensions at once. The Earth rotates on its access, it revolves around the Sun, the sun is moving in relation to other stars, and the stars are moving in a galaxy. We are never in the same point in space twice. Still, we can think back to what the cake tasted like on our third birthday, or we can be fairly certain we can schedule our dentist appointment six months out.

“That’s why I don’t see how time travel can possibly work.”

“Oh, but that’s the magic. We do make it work. We have the innate ability to line up all the points in our life and form them into a single construct of past, present and future. We line up the points in our head and see them as a single line. All I did last night was provide you with the ability to see another line.”

“It was a drug-induced hallucination.”

“Yes, but the baklava was good, wasn’t it?”

“And this morning, the Alpha stands as before.”

“Yes, but-”

“But time to eat your breakfast. We’re going to take a walk after breakfast.”
Terri, the waitress came by at this moment with two Petersen Specials, and put them down, along with a bottle of Tabasco for Art. She was pleasant young woman, with a slight limp. For a short time, I had become enthralled with the Muffinburgers that the Yellow Submarine had, and had seen her rather often when I had first hit town. She had suffered an accident over the summer that Rene had told me about. These waitresses all seemed to know each other.

After a breakfast, we wandered down McMillan street, discussing the odd bits of wisdom regarding time travel. Art explained that most of the normal concepts of time travel were based on false assumptions generated by people who had the slightest hint of what they were saying.

“Take the old paradox about going back in time and killing your father before you were born,” Art said glibly, “or schtupping your own mother. Folks don’t understand that, if there are an infinite possibilities, then there is bound to be a universe out there where this is possible. It might not be one that you like living in, but it’s out there. There’s probably one out there where water ice freezes above its boiling point, but it is not a place I would want to go on vacation. Just as there is a world to conceive and believe in, there is a world to come back to. The fact that you have experienced it makes it so.”

We got down past Hughes Corner, down past Joey’s Deli, and then turned down Victor Street. Victor was a long mixed bag of row houses. We had just passed a house with a sign that said “The Black Hole Coffee House,” when we came upon a old woman, coming off her front steps on onto the street.
“Misses G!” said Art. “Good Morning.”

“Art!” she said. “It is so good to see you. It is so good to see an old friend.”

There was no mistaking this woman for anything but the Misses Georgiton we had seen the night before. Her teeth were gone. Her hair had gone grey. She was stooped with age, but the voice was the same.

“This is Perry.” Said Art.” We were just reminiscing about the old Tic-Toc.”

“You came to the Tic-Toc?” she said. She looked me over. “You are a handsome young man. You must have been very small when you came to the Tic-Toc.”

“I was. “ I lied. “But I remember your cake, your baklava.”

“Ooooh, my!” She said, slapping her side. “I have a surprise for you—Perry, is it? I have something for you.”

She scrambled up the stairs and Art carried her shopping cart up for her. He motioned for me to follow. She brought us up on the front porch and told us to wait.

“Mister Georgiton is not well today,” she said. “I would invite you in, but he is asleep.”

“Is he ill?” said Art. Misses G. clasped her hands and pursed her lips. You could tell she was worried.

“But you stay here,” she said. “I have a surprise for you.” In a moment, she was back through the storm door with a large plate of baklava. I took a piece and it tasted as good as I had remembered the night before. This was exceptional baklava, with the same hint of whatever-it-was I had eaten the night before. We stood on the porch and talked with her for a while; Art was catching up on old Clifton Heights gossip. Art shot a thumb at the house next door.
“How are these guys.” He said.

“Very nice.” she said. “They’re good boys, there. They play the music too loud sometimes, but they are nice.”

“Good. “ said Art. “I recognize the sign. I think I had one of them in a class. If they give you any trouble, I’ll come over and whomp on them.” She laughed. Art brought her shopping cart back to the street, and we said goodbye to her. We headed down the street, and I managed to burp a bit. It was that same heavenly taste.

“Believe now?” Art said.
Chapter 11

walked down Victor and over Warner. I was going back home, and Art was going downhill to catch a bus going back towards Clifton. I still had reservations, but I realized the con job that had to have been concocted by Art was harder to believe than the story.

“There’s still the issue of Vivian,” I said.

“What?”

“That does not explain how Vivian could be in the restaurant in 1969, looking pretty much as she does now.”

“That is an interesting point.” said Art. “Vivian is an exceptional person of timeless beauty.”

“You know what I’m saying.”

“Vivian is different from us in some ways.”

“How?”

“Have you ever spent the night at her place?”

“No.”

“What is her full name?”

“Vivian Lundy.”

“Guess again.”

“She’s told me. It’s Vivian Lundy.”

“You’re pronouncing it wrong. It’s not Lundy; it’s L’Undine.” Art spelled it.

“I don’t get what you’re saying.”
“That’s okay. I’m not saying any more. The subject is closed. I will tell you one thing: Vivian is worth keeping. However, if you go down this road, you probably won’t keep her. My suggestion to you as a man is: drop it.” His look showed he meant it.

“So what’s next?”

“I guess that’s up to you,” Art said. I would suggest that we take a break from all this for a few days. You need time to think. I’m going to be handing you a bunch of papers to grade. We probably won’t get back to this for a week or so.”

“Tell me something.” I said. “Where is all this going to lead? What’s next? What should I be expecting?”

“I would be expecting the ride of your life. We’ve only gotten started. Expect that by this time next year you will be able to see your way clear and make your own way in life. This is not an assistantship; it is an apprenticeship. Figure that a year from now, you’ll at least be able to toddle across the room. You’ll still be leaving puddles, but at least you will be able to stand on your own to feet. A year from now, you can walk off the field and at least know you’ve been there and back. The pay starts in January if you’re in.”

We stood and waited for a 17 bus outside the Blue Chip. It came lumbering up Clifton Avenue a moment later. Art got on the bus and took off. I grabbed some bread, some lunchmeat and some cheese and took off for the park. I had not been going to Bellevue all that much. While the trees were in full leaf, it got boring. Now that it November, I started thinking about the park and the cliff. I crossed through the hole in the fence and sat on my favorite ledge and watched the world go by for the afternoon.
Vivian was by shortly after I got back from the cliff. We talked about what to do for dinner. Sue and Skip showed up and put their vote in for a pizza. Tony and Walter were both going over to the Conservatory to practice and wanted something fast. I finally suggested that Viv and I go out for a change. There was a good Chinese place uptown across from the Esquire. We hopped a bus rather than fight with parking.

“I may be leaving for a while,” said Vivian. “I’m not sure when, but I may be going to France.”

“That isn’t funny,” I said.

“You’re going to miss me?”

“Of course.”

“I can’t take you with me, although I wish I could. You need to apply yourself here for the Winter, working with Art. I’ll be back in the Spring.”

“When would you leave.”

“I am not sure. It would be before Christmas.”

“Can I ask why?”

“I go once or twice a year. Part of it is because I have to. It’s a long-standing family obligation. The rest is because I love it there.”

“I feel like pouting.”

“You’ll be busy. I’m sure. Just kick all the little girls out when I get back.”

“I wouldn’t –“

“Oh, Perry, “ she said. “You would.”

“Would you?” I asked.

“Would I what?”
“Screw around on me while you’re in France.”

“That is not a polite question.”

“Is that why you go?”

“You’re being childish.”

“. . . and wholly jealous and disappointed. I so hoping to take you to meet my parents and spend Christmas together.”

“Perry, you wouldn’t.”

“ Hmmmm. Maybe I would. I think it would be fun.”

“Perry, stop. That is not funny.”

“What? I’d love to bring you home for Thanksgiving. I’m proud of you.”

“Your parents are expecting you to go out and find a wife one of these days.”

“I’d rather have you.”

“Be serious. It would break their heart if you showed up with me.”

“I’ve got no problem with you.”

“You should.”

“Why?”

“Perry, we’ve been wonderful. I’ve never been happier, but you need to think about the future.”

“I am thinking about the future. I wish I could spend it with you.”

“You don’t know what you’re saying. I won’t be able to give you children.”

“Is that for sure?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, well.”
“You see?  This will only go on for so long.”

“Are you breaking up with me?”

“No. And I do want to come back to you.”

“Sure. No problem. Come and go as you want.”

“You’re really mad at me.”

“I just was not expecting this.”

“Perry, this is horrible. I did not want the night to turn out this way. Let’s just stop this now.”

“Okay.”

The bus let us off in front of the Esquire, and we went across the street and ate. The restaurant was really good. I got a plate of sesame cold noodles and an egg roll. We ended up sharing a Kung Pao Chicken together. While I was there, I found a flyer for a new movie theatre, Movieola. They were playing a mix of things, sleepers, foreign flicks, classics. It was just the sort of thing I liked. There were a bunch of good ones coming during the month of November. I wanted to see Dersu Usala again. There were a couple of Monty Python flicks too. It was a shame the Esquire had shut down. You had a hard time finding a movie theatre now that you did not need a car to drive to. Campus had some good movies on the weekend, but I really missed the theatres in Boston.

After dinner, we walked down Ludlow, towards the Corinthian to meet Sue and Skip. We would have gotten there ahead of everyone and so we took the long way, up through Burnet Woods. We went down to the lake.

“I love this lake.” I said.
“Yes, “ she said. “ It is quite pretty, but I prefer the one over in Inwood. This one has a very dirty bottom. The one in Inwood is clean.”

“I had not noticed,” I said. “I remember coming here when I was a child. My father took me over here one day, when the rest of the family was visiting someone in the hospital. There is a slide over there and a playground, where we went. It has a slide going down the hill next to the stairs.

“I’ve seen it.”

“I remember they had boats that you could rent here too. We had a boat ride, and my father let me go with him in a row boat and we rowed all the way to the back part of the lake. It doesn’t look far now, but back then it was a major adventure.”

“I used to go on those boats,” she said. “I had a friend that would take me on afternoons.”

“That must have been quite a while ago,” I said. “I have not seen the boats in years.”

“It was.”

“I’m sorry.” I said.

“No, you’re right,” she said. “I am old.”

“Stop being vain.”

“Stop being so young.”

“Why are we quarrelling tonight?”

“I am not sure. Perhaps it is because I am going to France.”

“No.” I said. “You can go.”

“How long have you known Art?”
“A long time.”

“How long?”

“A very long time.”

“Where are you going with this, Perry?”

“I just want an answer.”

“Art is reliable,” she said. “Whatever stories he has given you, they’re probably true.”

“That was not where I was going.”

“Why don’t you spell it out, Perry.” She said, “It will be better for both of us.”

“You want to know how old I am?”

“You make it sound like it’s a deep dark secret.”

“No, it isn’t.” she said. “All you have to do is ask.”

“Really?”

“That’s enough, then.”

“I love you, you are the only man in my life, I will miss you when I go to France, and I will gladly be yours when I come back. That is all that is important for me. Do you want more?”

“Yes, let’s screw at your place tonight.”

“What?”

“Let’s go back to your place.” I said. “We have never done it on your bed.”

“Perry!”

“Will you?”

“I will take you to my place, but I doubt that you will want to shag me there.”
“Is it a mess?”

“No, it is small.”

“Consider it a date.”

“I do not understand you,” she said. “Men are like grouse. They like to build their little Lech out in the field and invite their mates in, strutting and clucking. I don’t know if I have ever ‘Been’ in my place—certainly not here!”.

We had walked around the lake and stood at the stairs going up to Bishop Street.

“Shall we take the shortcut?” I asked.

“Aren’t you afraid of being mugged?”

“No.”

“You like to live dangerously.”

“I like to go where I like.”

“You are a brave young man, and it makes me shiver with anticipation—when you show your true being.”

The stairs were relatively short, and we went up the short street besides the Emanon, and got back onto Ludlow. It had not been much of a shortcut, but it had been scenic. We got to the Corinthian just ahead of Skip and Sue. We staid for only a couple of sets and then bugged out. It was still warm, but the sky was beginning to cloud up. It was going to be a long walk over to Mount Auburn, but we were having fun.

On the way over, we started to pick up some wind. It was enough to blow what was left of the dry leaves around the streets. We crossed over Vine and walked on Auburn. It was quieter than walking through the crowds on the Strip in Corryville. We
turned down Wellington, and Vivian took me to the back entrances of one of the old houses. Once inside, she went over and disarmed the alarm from a keypad on the wall.

“This is where you work,” I said.

“This is where I stay.” She replied.

“Doctor Turnwater let me have a room above the office.” She said. “I don’t need much room.” We wound our way up through the old servants’ stairs to the second and then the third floor.” The stairs above the second were all whitewashed with many coats of white enamel, as was everything on the third-floor hall. She turned on a light, and took me down to the middle of the hall and produced an old brass key and handed it to me.

“Open up your evening’s entertainment,” she said.

I slid the key into the lock and opened up the door. She reached around and pushed the switch for the overhead light. Inside, all I could see was a long closet with a window at the end. She had a chair beside the window, and a small table lamp plugged into an extension cord that ran off into the darkness.

“What is this?”

“It’s my place.” She said.

“I don’t even see a bed.”

“There isn’t. I have sheets and a blanket. If I need them, I just go down and sleep on the doctor’s couch. Here are all my dresses. I have a little chest down, below my blouses for my underwear and ose. Here are all my other worldly possessions. This is my life.”

“I don’t get it.”
“I don’t need much, Perry. What little I do need, I get from the generosity of
Doctor Turnwater and you. If you want to take me in here, you are welcome.”

“It looks romantic, but not very practical. I think I’ll pass.” I said.

“. . and I won’t let you take me on the doctor’s couch.”

“That’s okay too.”

“Will you at least put your arms around me and give me a deep kiss.”

“That, I think I will take you up on.”

We stood and kissed, there in the closet. It was as wonderful as ever, and I was
going to shaking before we finally broke it off. She really knew my on-button. She
locked up and took me back down the stairs and out. She punched a few buttons, and
while the keypad flashed and beeped, she locked the door and we left.

I tried to convince her of going my way, down through the park and over to my
place via the stairs to Conklin Street. She said she was scared of those stairs. She had
some bad things happen on those stairs once and did not want to go. We ended up
walking back up Auburn, and down McMillan, across Vine and back up into Clifton
Heights the long way. We got back from our sojourn long before either of us were ready
for bed, but Tony and Walter were hanging around, eating pizza and listening to the
stereo way too loud. We got in her Peugeot and drove over to the Highland Coffee
House and shut the place down, listening to Keith Jarrett and drinking the house blend.
She told me of the places she had been in France, and it made me want to go with her all
the more, but I knew I had to stay and work with Art.
Chapter 12

Art disappeared for a week in mid-November. I spent a lot of time trying to figure out what was going on in my life. It had been a bit of a shock finding out that Vivian had been living out of a closet for years. At first, I realized that it probably meant she had been sleeping in other men’s beds all that time. However, that did not seem to matter all that much to me. For a while I was thinking of pitying her, but then I realized that was her choice. She was living the life she wanted or seemed to want. We did not talk about it after that. It was just another piece of Vivian’s puzzle that I kept pushing aside and trying not to dwell on.

There was a growing anxiety in me. Part of it felt like fallout from the trip I had taken with Art. It had gotten me thinking about the bigger ramifications. What had me squirming the most was something Art had said while I was coming back to reality, walking along Lyon Street.

“This is just a start,” he said. “Once you are shown the way, time will reach out for you. What I put on your arm was just a peek under the tent.” It took that to mean that it was within my power to produce that effect on my own. I found that scary, but at the same time intriguing. It was hard to handle the idea that my view of time and space had been forever changed. It was even harder to handle the possibility that I had been given the keys to breaking through to a higher level of consciousness, and that I now had powers above and beyond what I had known all my life. What was more, it felt really
strange to think that I had lived my whole life without seeing the possibility of seeing more. It was all just a huge jumble for me.

About mid-week, I found that thought to be an overwhelming oppressiveness. I was not sleeping. It was driving me nuts. It was like trying to not think about the blue elephant in the corner. Midweek, I got up from bed at three, and went out for a walk. Vivian was half-dozing when I told her what I was up to. It dawned on me that if I really wanted this problem to stop, I would have to deliberately try and repeat what Art had shown me. If Art was blowing me smoke, I would fail, and I could get back to my life. If I was successful at repeating the experience, at least I would know. I grabbed the vest and took off. It did not sink in that the vest was only useful if there was someone along to hold onto it. I figured that out well after I left the apartment.

Bellevue Park at night in the fog was eerie, but it suited my mood. The sidewalk was nearly empty, except for one other fellow that seemed to be out walking, the same as I. I went the back way in, across the ball field. In the pinkish half-light of the city, bouncing off the low-hanging clouds, I could barely make out the ground. I kept my head down and tried to head for the shelter. I tried to concentrate on what I had been doing and thinking while the drug, or substance, or whatever, had been taking effect. I had just been looking at the walls and ceiling of the YMCA. That had been it.

I crossed through the ball field and hit the drive. The cobbles were wet from recent rain. There were just a few carriages waiting in front of the entrance. The incline had closed for the night. It took me a moment to catch myself and realize what I was doing. This was not Bellevue Park in the 1980’s. It was the Bellevue House in the 1890’s. It was as solid as anything I had ever seen. I went up and felt the banister. It was
wood, and it needed a coat of paint. It was starting to chalk. I stood under the awning in front and peered back. In ghostly patterns on the fog, I saw the entirety of what was Ohio Avenue stretching backwards and forwards in time. I was seeing in four dimensions. I was shocked—not at the immensity of it, but rather at the banality. It had been so plain. It then hit me that I had no way to get back to where and when I had been, and in that moment, it became clear that the here and now I had left was still there, and as easy as turning back a page in a book to recover. Without even a shiver, I stood with a foot in both scenes—an empty park and a closed entertainment house, a century apart. It was as easy as killing time; I only had to turn my attention. Then I got scared, and decided it was time to go back to where I had been. I was there.

Over the course of the next hour or so of my own perceived time, I managed a few more experiments. In one, I went over to the picnic grove and deliberately sat myself down and set about finding the evening Vivian and I had eaten lobsters. I did this with the greatest of ease, and quickly found myself watching myself preparing to have sex with my girlfriend. I was filled with jealousy, and then with shame, and then with—I’m not sure what. It just felt wrong, and I quickly vowed to myself to never do that again. From my position in the bushes, I moved off

My second experiment was to attempt to see myself approaching the park from the apartment. I stood in the shadows and waited. When I saw myself coming down to the park, I crossed the street in a hurry and tried to stay out of the streetlights until I had passed. I figured that if I stayed walking, I would remain anonymous. Sure enough, I paid hardly attention as I came up to the back entrance and went in. Once I had passed
into the darkness of the outfield, I crossed quickly back over and looked for myself on the ball field, but I was gone.

That was enough. I found the vest beginning to chafe my neck. It reminded me that I really did not know what I was doing. I vowed to stop until Art was back. I stood in a streetlight and knew that I had achieved the greatest achievement of Mankind. I had conquered the fourth dimension and claimed it as my own. I tried to hug myself, but I found that I could not. The possibilities were limitless.

I was too excited to go back to bed, so I went for a walk. It really did not matter where. About a half-hour later, I was on Vine Street, heading towards downtown, when it started to grow light, and I thought about catching Vivian on her way to work. It would be an hour or so. I crossed over to Inwood Park and sat on a park bench and watched the world start to wake up and come alive. The buildings on East Hollister began to have lights coming on. Shadows moved. Cars started. In the park, a large flock of crows moved from the East and began swirling in their morning ritual. I kept my newly found power locked in the back of my mind, and simply lived in the moment.

In the grey light of near-dawn, I saw a figure moving towards the lake. For a moment it looked like Vivian, but I knew Vivian would be driving over to Wellington. The figure was barely perceptible; without movement, she would have been invisible. From my position, I thought I saw her stop at the shelter, next to the pond, remove her clothing and then walk into the water and disappear, all in the space of only a few seconds. It did not seem real. I had decided it was just my ability to time travel acting up on me. I waited to see if she would come out. In that cold water, I knew, if she were
real, she would be flying out soon. A minute passed. Nothing happened. I was convinced what I had seen was not real, or at least not of this time.

It must have been a ghost or something. However, just as I was patting myself on the back for rationalizing the whole thing away I saw the same woman appear a few minutes later. She came out of the water without so much as making a ripple, climbed out, walked to the shelter and slipped back into her clothes and begin to leave. This was a hallucination to be sure. She walked back into the woods behind the pond and disappeared. The fact that she looked just like Vivian made it all the harder to bear. I beat it out of the park and hurried up Vine, and buried myself in the Heights.

The Yellow Submarine was just getting opened up when I arrived. I sat at the back table and Terri came over and gave me coffee.

“You look like you’ve seen spooks,” she said.

“Flashbacks,” I said. “I did not have any other way to describe it.”

“Oh, yeah! I used to get those,” she said. “It would freak me out, and I would think I was going crazy, and then they would be gone in no time. I didn’t know there was any acid around. How much did you score?”

“Just one hit,” I said. “A friend let me try it a couple of days ago.”

“Good stuff?”

“Powerful,” I said. “I started time tripping.”

“Dreamy!” she said. “Let me know if you score some more. I’ve got some friends that would like in on it too.”
“Sure.”

After a Petersen Special, and three cups of coffee, I was ready to go home. When I did, I threw Art’s vest in the corner and I went to the TV and buried myself in the Today Show and anything else I could find. Tony came back from an early class and wanted to turn over to the Perry Mason Show on Channel 64. We watched that and then a couple of more shows before Tony said his soap opera was coming on and I decided I would rather take insanity than a soap opera. I was still full from breakfast, but I decided to call up Vivian and see what she was doing for lunch, figuring we could get a bowl of soup together. Vivian said that late lunch was fine by here, and she met me at Pop’s at 1:30.

We had Mujadara and whole wheat soup. I was getting back to normal. After finishing the soup and taking a few bites, Vivian asked me what was eating me. I told her about the ghost in the park, leaving out the time travel from earlier. It was starting to become laughable, but Vivian did not take it as funny.

“It was just one of those things.” I said. “At first, I thought I was going mad, but now I’m pretty sure it was just my eyes playing tricks on me.”

“Perry,” she said. “I am not sure what to say. If you want an explanation—“

“Cool it,” I replied. “I’m okay with it—at least now. It was just kind of spooky. I’m not worried about it.”

“You are such a dear,” she said.

“I’m fine.” I said. “If you asked me a few hours ago, maybe I would have answered different. You just don’t know what you’re going to see early in the morning, I guess.”
“So you’re not interested in the Whys? You aren’t curious?”


“Would you like to see her again?”

“I’d rather see you, and I’d rather see you with your legs up in the air in my bed.”

That seemed to settle Vivian down.

When I got back to the apartment, Tony and Walter were there. Walter was cracking a textbook for what seemed like the first time that quarter. I took it that midterms had not treated him well. Tony was watching the first of seven episodes of MASH that appeared daily on local channels, running from mid-afternoon until late night. Skip came in later with Sue. They were talking about us all going in on a subscription to a new movie channel. Channel 64 had regular programming during the day, but around dinner time the signal would be scrambled and you needed a decoder box. I figured that my share would be about 8 bucks a month, and it seemed like it was easier to stay in and watch than try to ride out to movies. I put myself into the pot and said I would talk to Vivian. I mentioned that we should each pitch in a dollar extra and go out and buy a corn popper.

Once I was fully nestled back in normal reality, I started to feel quite a bit better. There seemed to be an internal TILT mechanism that went off whenever I went too far over the edge. It was loud and obnoxious, and made me feel uncomfortable. After two episodes of MASH and a late second dose of Perry Mason, and part of a bag of puffcorns, I was doing much better.
Vivian came by for me, and we beat it down to Findlay Market before it closed. She had set her sites on Coq au Vin. We got there during the last push of the day before closing. Our progress was hurried, but methodical. Vivian knew many of her favorite shopkeepers by name, and they were always charmed by her. The market looked like a throwback, and it dawned on me that, if I let myself go just a little bit, I could see all sorts of scenes stretching back through a period of time, one overlaid on another. There was one old Alsatian fellow that she always talked French to at one of the stalls. He appeared to me as a boy, as a man, and as he stood now. They were all the same, and yet they weren’t. Vivian too, seemed to stretch back through this dimension, though she appeared far more stable and unchanging. She haggled with the vegetable guy over the shallots, because they both liked to do it. She mixed her French with something else with the spice guy, and he produced some packets of powder. I was just a tourist. It was easy for me to just tell myself that I was imagining the horses and wagons that whisked by my eyes in the windows as mere imagination.

We were standing at the meat counter when the reefers melted away and I became aware of the horrible stench of raw meat. At the same time, I became disoriented. All around me, dimensions stretched out every which way. It felt like I was falling, but in all directions at once. I grabbed for something that was not there and saw the ground rush up to meet me.

The next thing I knew, the butcher and Vivian were over me. The butcher was flapping his apron in my face to give me air. Vivian was cradling me in her arms. The solidness of here and now had returned. I looked up through the trusses into the skylight, and they appeared as they always had been, not swimming in waves of time. I had a bit
of a scrape on my one wrist from grinding it into the floor when the rest of my body fell on it, but otherwise I was fine. Vivian was really fretting, and the store owner was worried that I had slipped. I let everyone know I was okay, and it was just a bit of dizziness. There was a collective sigh from the onlookers when I got up and appeared normal.

Back in the Renault, on the way back up to Clifton, Vivian wanted to know what was up. I told her that I had been having spells like that, and thought it might be an inner ear thing. She made me promise that if it happened again, I would go to a doctor. I could not really explain temporal vertigo to her; I was having a hard enough time explaining it to myself.

We got back to the apartment, and Vivian told everyone of my spell. I was more worried about getting on to dinner, and I finally got Vivian coaxed into the kitchen. She got me working on the meal, while explaining the various philosophies of why each part was done the way it was. She was an incredible encyclopedia of useless food trivia.

*buerre manie* was a whole new concept for me.

“So, you are all right?” she said.

“Yes,” I said. “I feel fine. The wrist was just a scrape.”

“I am worried about you, you know.”

“I’m fine. I had a hard time with things this morning, but I’ve made peace with them for now.”

“You know we really should talk about this.”

“About what?”

“About what you saw this morning.”
“I okay with it, really.”

“I’m surprised. Most people who see this sort of thing are filled with questions.”

“What questions are there? I see something that other people are not open to see. There. What else is there?”

“Are you sure you are comfortable . . . with me that is?”

“Why should I not be comfortable with you,” I said. “I’m just not getting you.”

“Art Penn is right about you,” she replied. “You really are special. He told me that I was most fortunate to have you as a boyfriend.”

“What’s Art got to do with it?”

“It does not hurt a woman to hear such an endorsement from an esteemed person such as Art.”

“Who is Art? To you, anyway?”

“Art is a long time friend. We have been bumping into each other over the ages. He has been very kind to me.”

“Did you date or something?”

“No, I have seen his friends at various times. We are close more out of that than anything else.”

“Is Art the real thing?“ I said. “His stories-“

“His stories are only half of what has happened to him” she replied. “If he tells you something, you can be certain that it is only a half-truth. What he has told you is true, but he knows so much more that cannot be revealed. That is what is so great about him. Once you stop doubting him for what he does not say—just believe in him.”
“I must be really rocky from that fall.” I replied. “None of this conversation has made sense to me.”

“That’s all right.” She said, "We can just concentrate on the chicken.”
Chapter 13
The weekend came and Sissy was down from Oxford. She came by Saturday morning and we hung out together. First, she took me to breakfast at Perkins. Then we went to Burnet Woods and hiked around. I was not really sure what I should be saying to her, but I did my best to tell her about Art, without getting into the time tripping. She was somewhat aghast.

“So what does this guy want out of you?”

“I guess I’m working as his amanuensis.” I said. “So far, he has just been filling me in on the background stuff. Art says most of my job will be just listening to him talk.”

“And you buy that?”

“Why shouldn’t I?”

“This is really fishy.”

“I’m not so sure you can say that.” I said. “So far, he seems to check out.”

“How?”

“Well, he’s given me places and times and such. When I check them out, they appear legitimate. The people he says were involved were able to be there.”

“But what’s the point?”

“I guess I’m on the road to finding out.”

“You’re on the road to getting taken in a major way.”

“Vivian says he’s cool.”

“Who was she, Bruckner’s mistress?”

“Bruckner was into young girls,” I said.

“Ooops, she was probably too old for him then.”

“You’re cruel, and you’re a jealous wretch.”
“You’re living in a delusional reality.”

“I’m not so sure. I’m at least having fun with it. I’m done with this now, you’re not helping, so we should just talk about something else. How’s your school doing?”

“I’m doing a play.”

“Which one?”

“Zoo Story.”

“That’s not much of a play.”

“What do you mean.”

“I mean it’s not much of a play for you—two guys on a park bench.”

“Yeah, but I’ve got the whole thing.”

“That’s cool. Can I come see it?”

“Of course.”

“Well, I didn’t know.”

“Why wouldn’t I want you?”

“Because I might bring a date from the rest home and spoil your evening. Besides, you might want to fall on your face in obscurity.”

“No, if I fall on my face, I can do it in front of you. You and Vivian can come opening night. I want Mom and Dad to come later-- Just in case.”

“So how’s your man toy doing?”

“He’s off on an orienteering outing.”

“With compasses and stuff? Sounds like a geek.”
“He is, but he’s cool too. Stu and his friends go off on these things all the time and try to find orange road cones out in the woods. It’s harmless. He’s straight, and he’s not into dope. I really can’t expect more with the life I lead.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because I’m not going to invest all that much in a relationship. I’m too busy learning my craft.”

“You’re still giving Dad his money’s worth then?”

‘You bet.’

We hung out in Clifton for lunch and she went shopping in a bunch of places up on Ludlow, and then we went back to the apartment for while. Vivian came over and we decided that Sissy would come along with us to the Corinthian. I made sure Skip knew to keep his hands off. I finally got Sissy and Vivian around each other long enough that Sissy got used to her and started to warm up. Vivian and Sue were working on dinner together, and got Vivian interested in helping out. Somewhere in the middle of it Sue got interested in the wine and became a spectator. Vivian must have charmed Sissy, because soon the two of them were laughing together. When Sissy came out with a glass of wine after an hour or so, she was giggling.

“Vivvy says you’re quite a lover.”
“Of course. Did she give you details? Like how I put her on top and spin her around?”

“You’re sick.”

“No, you’re lit.”

“Sick.”

“Lit.”

Vivian had taught her to make baked onion soup, and the main course was a Béarnaise sauce over faux crab, and while they were doing this, they all three got to trading ideas on makeup. Sissy was in heaven. I also suspect that Stu was going to have some surprises when he got back from his Orienteering. By the time dinner came out, there was no sign of tension. The box of wine that had been sacrificed for universal world peace was unceremoniously thrown in the garbage and a second box was opened.

Skip was a perfect gentleman. Tony came back from campus, grabbed cold pop-tarts and ran out with his suit for a performance. Walter showed up and did not catch on that there was unattached skim. He got himself a double-helping of soup and went to the TV and watched college football. After dinner, the women retired to one of the bedrooms to do a makeover on Sissy. We loaded ourselves into various cars and drove over to the Corinthian and spent the evening. Sue and Vivian had worked out a sort-of routine with their dancing, and Sissy tried to fit in. It was fun to watch. Sissy was having a wonderful time, and it was good to see her letting loose for a change.

We stayed out late and then hit a place downtown—a hotel that served ice cream at 2 in the morning. I got the wild idea of taking everyone out to Belleview park and looking at the lights after we got back to the Apartment. I was able to speak eloquently
about the Belleview House as I paced out the footprint. I’m not sure anyone really cared. Vivian snuggled up to me as we sat on the wall, looking out over the city below. Sissy danced on the lawn for a while with Sue, and then we went home. I gave up my bed to Sissy and Vivian, and I went out to the couch and chased out Walter, who had never left.

Sunday morning came and went with hardly anyone stirring. Somewhere around Noon, Vivian woke me up with a cup of coffee. Sissy crawled out a while later, and locked herself in the bathroom. Walter made up a box of buckwheat pancakes, and sailed them to us like Frisbees. They had cocktail peanuts in them. I ate mine like a muffin—it only took one to fill me up. That and the coffee got us going enough that we started planning our day. Skip and Sue were supposed to take off for a Bengals home game, but were going to be late for the tailgate party. Sissy finally emerged from the bathroom and offered me a ride out to the folks’ place. I begged off.

Art called shortly after Sissy took off. He was back in town and wanted to know if I wanted to bring Vivian out for an early supper. When we showed up at the house around three, we had quite a surprise. Art was out in the front yard, with the carcass of a dead deer hanging off a limb.

“Lookee what I got!” Art said, as we got out of the car.

“It looks dead,” I replied.

“Got him at seventy five yards.” He said. “I had nothing all weekend and then he walked out this morning right at sun rise.”

“Is that legal in town?” I said.
“Oh, heck! I shot him down in Kentucky. It was rifle season.”

“Oh.”

Vivian came up and began admiring the antlers.

“Is that a ten-pointer?”

“Ten or twelve,” he said. “I’m not sure these points here would count for the record book.”

“He was a magnificent animal,” she said.

“What’s he doing in your tree,” I asked.

“I’m hanging him here until the butcher opens up on Monday. It’s cold out this weekend. It’ll keep until morning. I’ve got a guy who will do one for seventy bucks.”

“Do . . .?”

“Process it.” Art replied to me. “Take big dead deer and turn it into little bundles wrapped in freezer paper.”

“Do you mount it?” I asked.

“No, thanks,” replied Art. “I’ve got a girlfriend that keeps me happy.”

I helped Art drape a sheet over the deer and then hoist it up high in the tree to protect it from dogs. Before we did, Art reached in with his folding knife and extracted some meat, that he laid on newspaper.

“Backstraps, “ he said, up to his elbows in the deer. “This is what I wanted to feed you all tonight. It’s the best part of the deer.”

“Backstraps?”

“Tenderloins,” said Vivian. “They are the best part of the venison.”

“Sure, I guess.” Inside, I was a bit squeamish.
“Perry, “ said Vivian. “Take my word for it; it will be wonderful.” I realized I was close to committing a faux-paus, so I tried my best to look excited. It was just that there was this deer, hanging from a limb, and its lifeless eyes were staring at me.

Hoisting the deer consisted of Art grabbing the deer and lifting it, while I pulled on the rope. After a couple heave-hos, Art declared the process a success and then tied the rope off to the trunk. When we went inside, I found out that I had committed another faux-paus. Suchi was not “Sushi,” but rather “Sue – Chi” or some such. I had been mispronouncing it, assuming in the introduction that Art’s broad way of speaking had been some what in error. Instead, I had been calling my boss’ wife the equivalent of “raw dead fish.” Sue, her anglicanized name, was quick to correct me on this meeting.

Art had the Bengals’ game on. I did not really follow football, but I took it that the was not a mundane thing. We did not have long to watch. It was in the middle of the fourth quarter, and Art invited me into the den to watch the end.

“So, you ever hunted.” Art asked.

“No, I haven’t.” I replied.

“Shame. It’s just a shame. I think you’d like hunting. I don’t know many good places for bird anymore, but there’s good deer hunting around here.”

“What about wild boar?”

“You want to go hunt boar?”

“No, I was just saying—are there any wild boar around?”

“Not around here. Tennessee has them.”

“Oh.”

“Ever shot?”
“No.”

“Don’t be offended. I didn’t mean it like you thought.”

“I’m not following you.”

“There’s nothing wrong with hunting or shooting. I’ve been doing it for years.”

“I didn’t say there was. I suppose if you eat what you shoot, it’s no different than going to the butcher shop.”

“Oh! It’s a lot different than a trip to the butcher shop.”

“I meant the moral part of it.”

“So do I.”

“I guess I’m not following.”

“I go out and hunt, if for no other better reason, just to get up to my elbows in deer, to stay in the game, to stay part of the food chain. It’s too doggone easy to let yourself become a grazer and stop thinking where your food is coming from.”

“I guess I hadn’t thought of it that way.”

“The cows don’t care. The deer don’t care. It’s you. You have to care. I don’t care if it’s a buffalo or a brussel sprout, you have to get in touch with it.”

“I’ve never murdered a brussel sprout.” I said.

“Murder. Now there’s a concept. Murder is the intentional killing of a human being. This is not murder. It’s dinner, for chrissakes.”

“I guess I’m pissing you off left and right today.”

“No, you’re not. I just wonder if you’ve really ever given any thought to this.”

“I guess I haven’t.”
“Think of this: if you’re going to live, something is going to have to die—a lot of things. It was made that way. Even vegetarians kill things.”

“They kill vegetables.”

“Are vegetables less important?”

“I don’t know. I never dated one.”

“They’re not, and you’re no different, either.”

This was not going well, Art realized he was beating me up for no other reason than what was rolling around in his head, and I was not trying to be offensive. Eventually, he figured it out and started to mellow. He poured himself a drink—poured me one too—and then came back to sit in front of the TV. The Bengals were taking apart the Rams, and Art was happy to see that the season was turning into something spectacular.

“So tell me about this deer hunt,” I said. “It sounds interesting.”

“Well, one of the guys that Merle brought with him way back has this hunting lease down river from Warsaw. He invites a bunch of us down every year to hunt. We all show up for the Kentucky Rifle Season, and it’s a blast. This year was too warm, and I think the deer weren’t moving all that much. It was a hard thing.”

“What, do you drive the deer? Dogs? What?”

“ Mostly, we hunting the way we do it is a matter of ambush. Some of the time I was hunting from the ground. I sat for hours waiting for something to show up. This morning, I was in a tree stand. You should have seen it—it was one of those perfect mornings—not too cold, just right. The light came up, and the buck came out, and turned broadside to me and that was it. He was asking for it.”
“I doubt he was asking for it.”

“I don’t know. I just don’t know. It’s a strange thing between a deer and a man.”

“You’re kidding.”

“I just don’t know. The Indians had all kinds of ways to describe it. They would pray to the deer to come and let themselves be taken. The deer would respond by allowing themselves to be killed so that they could live on in the soul of the hunter.”

“Yeah, but that was Indians.”

“Yeah, but until you’ve taken a buck, don’t second guess things.” Art held up his glass. “To the buck!”

“To the buck!” I said.

By the time we left Art’s den, the Bengals had managed to shellac the Rams, and Art had managed to put enough chinks in my politically correct views of blood sports and firearms that I said that I would consider his kind offers of a trip to the gun range, and possibly a trip to go hunting.

Vivian had Sue-Chi had come up with a complementary dinner to Art’s plans for the venison. Art and I retired to the outdoor grill and started building a fire. I had never seen an outdoor barbeque run off wood—charcoal briquettes had always been my speed. Art was heavily into the thing, and had chunks of red oak that he fired in an outdoor fireplace and then shoveled onto his kettle grill. While we stood around watching the wood burn, we talked more.

“I’ve got a couple of pieces that my Dad left me.” I said. “I’m not sure what they are.”

“Shotguns? Rifles? What?”
“I’m not sure. I think one is a shotgun.”

“Bring them by sometime,” he said. “I’ll at least tell you what you’ve got.”
Chapter 14

I decided to tell Art about my experiments with time tripping. I got about half way through and he stopped me.

“That was a dumb-assed move, Chief! He said. “You might not have come back.”

“I tried to be careful.”

“I thought I told you not to do anything without me.”

“It started out as an accident.”

“It should have stopped there.”

“Okay, I know now. I’m sorry I pissed you off. I seem to be doing that today.”

“It just really reeks of irresponsibility.”

“I stopped, all right? I didn’t get to tell you about the hallucination I had.”

“What was that?” I told him about the chick at the lake.

“That wasn’t a hallucination,” he said.

“Then what was it?”

“I’m not going to say just yet.”

“You say it looked like Vivian?”

“Yes,”

“But you’re sure it wasn’t Vivian?”

“Don’t be absurd.”
“Okay. I see what’s going on.”

“What.”

“I’m not going to go any further. Ask me again later.”

“All right.”

Dinner was spectacular. Sue-Chi and Vivian had worked out a sauce to go with the venison tenderloins. The kids came home from some sort of outing, and I got to meet them. They were good looking youngsters, a boy and a girl, both just on the edge of puberty. Shika, the girl, was the older of the two. She was quick, sharp, and brazen. Keagan was solemn and quiet, but I could tell there was a lot going on with him.

“So Perry tells me you’re going back to France soon,” said Art.

“That’s right,” said Vivian.

“Same place as always?” he asked.

“Yes, I’m going in a month or so. “ she said. “I have yet to hear.”

“Will you be gone long?” asked Sue-Chi.

“Only until Spring, possibly early Summer,” she replied.

“Where is it, exactly, that you’re going?” I asked.

“It is outside of Nancy.” she said. ”L’étang du Nuvierge.”

“That’s a beautiful name,” said Sue-Chi.

“Nancy?” said Art. “I was through Nancy once. Well, actually three times.”

“Oh?” said Vivian. “I never knew that before. When was that?”

“Fall of Nineteen-Forty-Four.” He replied. “I was there on business.”

“Yes, “ replied Vivian. “There was a lot of that, wasn’t there?”
I managed to stick my foot in my mouth again as dessert was being served and I made mention of Sue-Chi and Art as being married.

“We’re not married,” said Art, flatly.

“You’re not?”

“No.”

Sue-Chi looked over at me and stared down at her plate.

“Oh.”

“I was tired of the whole thing,” said Art. “When I asked Sue-Chi into my life, I told her that I would make sure she and her issue would have everything of mine once I was gone, but that I would remain unmarried to her.”

“That sounds rather . . .”

“Weird? Yeah, well. I was determined to sire some bastards before I passed from this world, and this was the only way I could manage it. Aren’t they great? The most wonderful bastards a man ever spawned. I’m proud to call them mine.” Both children laughed at this.

“I’m the biggest bastard in my class at school,” said Keagan.

“I’m the prettiest,” said Shika. “I’m also the smartest little bastard.”

“. . . and humble.” said Sue-Chi. “They’re both humble bastards.”

Vivian’s foot found mine, and I could tell this was not a subject to pursue, so I tried to change the subject.

“Are you proud of your father’s deer?” I asked.
“Yes, “ said Keagan. “I can’t wait until I can go take one of my own. Dad says I have to be old enough to shoot one of his rifles.”

“Do you shoot?” I asked.

“All the time,” Said Keagan. “It’s just a twenty-two, but we go all the time.”

“I think it’s all barbaric!” said Shika. “I want all the killing in the world to stop.”

“What would the lions do for food?” asked Vivian.

“They could go to MacDonalds like the rest of us.” She replied.

Vivian and I left for home shortly after dinner ended. Art said he could use a hand with the deer in the morning and would pick me up at nine. As we rode home, I revisited the subject of Sue-Chi’s relationship with Art.

“I take it you know something.” I said.

“Art’s still married.” said Vivian.

“To whom.”

“His wife, silly.” We both laughed.

“What’s the score? I take it you know Gwen.”

“I knew Gwen. I knew Art. The were married for a few years and then things went bad. Art and Gwen split up long ago. The marriage was just never annulled. As long as Gwen is alive, they’ll stay married.”

“Sounds like Art could just hire a divorce lawyer.”

“Art won’t divorce Gwen.”

“So where is Gwen?”

“She’s gone to the convent.”
“That sounds rather Gothic. Doesn’t that mean she’s married to Christ or something.”

“No, she just went to the convent. I don’t think she became a nun.”

“None of this makes sense.”

“It would if you knew the whole story. I’m sure Art will tell you in his own time. He seems to be pretty open with you.”

“Everywhere I go: it’s a big freaking mystery.”

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing.”

“Like what?”

“Oh, like that hallucination I had over at Inwood Park the other day. I told Art about it, and he got all weird.”

“What hallucination?”

“Remember? The chick skinny dipping?”

“Oh. That was a hallucination?”

“Of course, what else do you think it was? I see my girlfriend dive naked into freezing water and hold her breath for five minutes?”

“Oh.”

“You were getting jealous over a hallucination?”

“No, I was not jealous.”

“I’m sorry. Did I hurt your feelings.”

“No.”

“What’s the matter then?”
“Nothing. I’m just . . . I’m just disappointed.”

“How’s that?”

“Never mind. It’s just a silly girl thing. Drop it.”

“All right.”

We beat Sue and Skip back but not by much. They had watched the Bengals from a skybox, and had stayed downtown until they were sober enough to drive home. They were whooping it up. It was still early, so we stayed up and watched TV. Shottlekotte’s News came on at Eleven. There were interviews with the players and bunch of other stuff. Sue was sure they had been in a big group shot, but the footage wasn’t shown. After that, we all went to bed.

Vivian got me up when she left for work at seven. I grabbed a cup of coffee and sat around watching the morning shows until it was about time for Art to come by. I went out and sat on the stoop. It was a cold grey morning. It had rained late and it was looking like it would rain again. Art showed up on schedule and I hopped into the truck.

“What are we up to?” I said.

“I need you to help me get the deer back into the truck,” he said. “And then offload it at the butcher.”

“Cool.” I said.

“I’ll buy you breakfast, too.”

“Cool.”
We drove back over to Art’s place on the other side of campus and got the deer off the tree. I worked the rope, and Art steadied the deer. We then put the sheet back over it, and drove over to the back of the butcher shop on Ludlow. Art introduced me to Fritzy, a short, skinny guy with glasses. Between the three of us, we got the deer out of the truck, and into the cooler. Several of the other butchers stopped to admire the antlers. Art placed the order for what he wanted—steaks, chops, and so on, and then we took off.

Art bought me breakfast at the Toddle House, a diner around the corner from the firehouse that catered to upstanding folks during the day and then reverted to a hangout for cheap prostitutes after the rest of Clifton shut down for the night. Art was moldering over something. I could see that he did not want to cough it up right away. Finally, he started his story.

“Today’s the day we lost Gerry MacErbin,” said Art, looking out the window.

“Who’s that?”

“He was a good guy—a really good guy,” said Art.

“I’m not following you.”

The testament of Art Penn

Oh, sorry. It was the war. We’d all been pulled off the line for a few days, we’d all had a chance to get drunk and rest up. They took us back up to the line after that, and then the next day they got Gerry MacErbin. Gerry was an exceptionally brave kid from down South. He was fearless. We met up with a patrol of Germans one day, and started trading fire. We’d been promised a Sherman to weed them out. We were just supposed to hold on. Gerry, and this other guy, he was a replacement from Gerry’s neck of the
woods, teamed up and decided to just wade in and have at the Krauts. They were a couple of fierce mothers. By the time the tank showed, there were twenty dead Germans, the new kid had been blown up with a potato masher, and Gerry had a belly wound and was lying around in a pool of his own guts. They had just went nuts. The Louie went nuts too. He couldn’t handle two guys wasting themselves like that. You go nuts, though. Sometimes you just get weird.

I got squirrelly during the Bulge, it was after the weather broke and we were able to get air support again. There was this one night where it was crystal clear and there was a full moon shining down. I had left our dugout to grab some fresh air, and I came out and the field and the woods beyond started looking like home, and the more I looked at it, the more I was sure it was. Right about that time I thought about opening up my coat and lying down in the snow—I figured I would be home in just a few minutes. Then I realized that my hands were too cold to work the buttons on my coat, and fumbling around there got me kind of back to my senses. About that time, some Kraut on the other side of the field must have seen me, and he opened up. That got my juices going again, and I high-tailed it back to the dugout.

The weirdest thing that happened to me was right after that. We were being moved by truck to a new place and the truck hit a mine. I came to in a snow bank later—I’d been rattled pretty bad—couldn’t hear for days. The mine had caused the jeep in front of us to veer off the road and run off into a mill pond. I staggered over and saw the Louie and his driver and Hicks, the radio man. The jeep had gone out onto the ice and hit a thin patch and broken through. All three guys were dead from the cold and just hanging in the water. You could see all the way to the bottom. There was the jeep.
guys. Anyhow, I blacked out and had this weird dream. I dreamed I was watching the whole thing, and this beautiful woman came out of the bottom of the pond and handed me a *panzerfaust* – one of those German rocket propelled grenade-things-- and pointed towards the woods. She was drop-dead gorgeous, and she was bathed in this blueish-greenish light—like what you see on these shows where they are showing you a tropical reef. She was beautiful. I’ll never forget her.

I came to again, and I was at the far edge of the pond just into the trees. I had two freshly dead Krauts in the bushes beside me, and I was holding a *panzerfaust*. How I got there, how the dead Germans got there, how the *panzerfaust* got into my hands, I haven’t a clue.

None of it made any sense. I staggered into the woods and heard something going on—just barely over the ringing. Pretty soon, I had bullets taking off limbs above me, and I knew I was close to some action. I got down and crawled for a while, and then I found my squad. They were pinned down by a machine gun nest. I got up behind a tree and sent that *panzerfaust* into the machine gun position and blew it to hell. I scared the snot out of everybody, because they thought they had left me for dead back at the truck, and the first sign they had of my return was this huge tongue of fire leaping out the back of this thing, a big trailing cloud of smoke and the explosion when it hit the nest. Man! Talk about making and entrance!

We’d driven into an ambush, and after the mine had exploded everyone had been too busy taking care of business to worry about someone who wasn’t moving. I was bloody as hell—hadn’t noticed it, but I looked like a stuck pig. It was all superficial stuff, and they patched me up at the aid station and put me back in. The Sarge had been
riding up front and both he and the driver had been taken out in the blast. I was a corporal, so they cut me a third stripe and put me in charge.

Yeah, it’s funny, but your story about the woman coming out of the pond the other day got me to thinking about that. I’ve got a real soft spot in my heart for those chicks. One of them saved my life.
Chapter 15

Art and I finished breakfast. Art was on a roll, so we left the truck parked and wandered up into Burnet Woods. The bandstand seemed like a good place to sit and talk. Art had a lot on his mind. He berated me for having played around with time tripping again. He caught himself getting angry, and apologized.

“I am still hazy on how this all works.” I said.

“Forget everything you know about time travel,” he said. “There are an infinite number of possibilities. A very few of them we experience, and they appear to us as a solid unbroken chain going from past to future by way of the present. As we move, all those possibilities we don’t experience collapse around us. However, once you step off the treadmill, you can do what you will. You can have a possibility where you go back and screw your own mother. It’s kinky, but it can be done. You can go back and kill your own grandfather, but then you have to live with it.”

“So there are no paradoxes?” I asked.

“None. The only reason why there are no paradoxes, is because you’ve taken a tack through the waves of time and space that doesn’t permit it. All you have to do is twiddle the rudder a bit, and you can go whichever way you want. You want paradoxes, you can have paradoxes. You can live a life where fish fly and you marry your grandmother. Just be ready to accept the consequences.”

“I’m not sure I understand.”

“That’s okay too. If you did, you wouldn’t need me here telling you these things. I rather enjoy it here today. I love it when the trees are down. You can see all over the
place. Look, just accept that you live in the best of all possible worlds for right now. I’ll fill in the details, and show you what I mean. It really doesn’t get much better than this.”

The Testament of Art Penn

Yes, you may well ask where all the time travelers are. The answer is simple: they’re all in the future. Once you have the ability to time travel, and mind you this is not just time travel, but dimensional travel, you move somewhere better. You go where there is better medical care. You go where you can get laid every night. You go where the food’s better. The past sucks.

Do people go to the past? Yes, certainly. I did. We all did. For a while there, we were dabbling in all sorts of little what-if scenarios. Look at the history of the past few years, and you’ll see what I mean.

Did a bunch of Excalibur-29 operatives attempt to alter Hitler’s plans? In this reality, as you’ve experienced it? Yes. The hardest part of that operation was that Hitler was so hopped up on speed all the time that nothing we could have slipped him would have worked. The trick, and believe me it was a trick, was to alter things just so. If Hitler did not make trouble for the world, you would have had a stronger Stalin. Stalin was a maniac of horrendous proportions. Hitler was a bush leaguer by comparison. However, if the Thirties and Forties had not played out like they did, the world would have gone up in a bloody cinder in the Fifties. The only thing we found that worked was putting a bug in Goering’s ear a few days before the bombing of London started. It wasn’t perfect, but it kept the world intact.
Did a guy out of Excalibur-29 stop the Earth from becoming so radioactive it was for all purposes sterile? Yes, one man. Hector de Maridos. Hector was able to insinuate himself into the private staff of Issa Alexandrovich Pliyev, and on one balmy October night, General Pliyev had the most wonderful evening of his life. After consuming a small quantity of good Russian Vodka, he strolled out onto a beach in Cuba and watched a sunset. After that, Issa Pliyev would never issue the order that lead to Admiral Robert L. Dennison and an entire carrier battle group being hit with two Luna tactical nuclear missiles. Hector was a good friend of mine. I recruited him myself out of my old outfit. We went through the Ardennes together. He never made it out of Cuba. You don’t have to look all that hard to find our work. It isn’t perfect. In Hector’s case, we also found a way to prevent Pliyev’s orders authorizing the use of the nukes from being signed in Moscow. However, we had to leave well enough alone. As it is, with the line we’re on now, we may still face oblivion.

If you’re looking for the guy who put the Benzedrine in Misses Murphy’s Ovaltine, C’est Moi. I asked Hector to go. He sacrificed not only the end of his life, but five years leading up to it. If you’re going to ask me if I did a good job, I don’t know. The path gets way too murky. It may look easy, going back a day or a year. The deeper you go back, the stranger it gets. Your mind plays tricks. Look at where you are now, are you sure the reality you’re in is the one you left when you went for your joy ride?

In the world that Excalibur-29 faced, Hitler had invaded Britain in 1940 and been beaten back off the island by a heroic stand by the British people in the countryside south of London. It was the one thing we thought we could fix. However, that brought up the
specter of a stronger position for Stalin, so that had to be fixed. In the end, we decided that this was the best way to go. After that, we got out of the game of playing God.

One of the limitations you will find in history is the fact that we are humans. It doesn’t have to be, but that’s the line we’ve chosen. Look back in the Bible. Look back in history. The Bible talks of a race of titans that existed before Jehovah created Man. It’s the best example I can give you of a shred of the other world possibilities leaking into this one. Look at Hess jumping in an airplane and flying to Scotland in 1942. Was that because he was involved in Hoffman’s ergot ratline? Was he just nuts on his own? I can’t tell you, and I’m probably even a better man to ask than Hess himself. It is an artifact from a scenario that we tried and it didn’t work, and I can’t for the life of me figure out what we were thinking of.

We’re only human, and we only live just so many years. We can only think so many thoughts in that time, and we can only take so much—only so much upheaval. You have no idea what it’s like to come home from a trip and find you’ve written your wife into oblivion, or caused your parents to never meet, or made your best friend from high school die in a war that never existed before you left. You go searching endlessly for a way back and have to settle for a time line where Mom’s okay, but Daddy lost his legs, and the repercussions never end. If the World ends tomorrow, is it my fault? Yours? I only showed you the possibilities, because I needed you to believe. Don’t go down that road, unless you’re willing to pay the price.

Oh, and don’t think we were acting alone. By the time we started working on ways to slow Stalin down, we were running into our Soviet counterparts. It seems that some of the Nazi’s that were captured with the Russians were part of Hoffman’s ratline
as well. It did not take us very long to find ourselves at war with the Russians in more
dimensions than you can ponder. They played dirty. We played dirty. They killed our
mothers, we killed their fathers. Meanwhile the world kept getting blown up around us,
and we were having a harder and harder time finding our way back.

The end came in a sit-down in 1957 in Vienna, and later that year in Miami. The
Soviets finally agreed that enough was enough. My counterpart was this sullen looking
fellow named Gregor Upizdysh, and there were these two others, Igor Shatrov and
Demitri Koshkayob. I’ve never seen a bigger bunch of dicks. Of course, by then, we
were probably all looking like a sorry bunch of peckerwoods. After the Vienna meeting, I
stole an idea from Willie, and took them all down to Miami. I got to talking with Gregor
one night, and found that he had a soft spot for seafood. I told him I knew a place that
made the world’s best turtle soup. He said I was full of shit, so I bet him. I had no idea
what I was saying, but I knew I could find something. The Vienna meeting at least got
us to agree on a moratorium on the shenanigans until we could meet back.

It turns out, one of the guys in my group knew a couple of Cincinnati guys, who
said they were very fond of the turtle soup they had down at the Lighthouse in Miami
Beach. There was also this spot down in the Keys that made good soup. The guy I
talked to was also drinking buddies with Jackie Gleason—big name at that time. Gleason
did his show from Miami. We made some contacts. One of the local radio guys had
contacts with NBC in New York, and after two months of screwing around, we had
enough of a junket put together that I got word to Gregor to meet us in Miami.

It was hard for them to get to Miami directly in those days. These were serious
Russian intelligence pukes, and Moscow did not want them off the leash to defect. They
had to arrange a trip to Cuba to advise some of Castro’s people, and then they slipped out of Havana and came to Miami.

We got them laid, let them go fishing, and let them go watch some floor shows. I used our slush fund to rent a few houses on the beach up north of Baker’s Haulover. What really did it was watching TV. After they found out about TV, I couldn’t get them out of the room. We got them tickets to the Gleason Show, and Jackie invited them over to a bender he and Arthur Godfrey were throwing at the Fontainebleau. I never got them to the place in Islamorada for the good soup. Gregor thought the soup at the Lighthouse in Baker’s Haulover was good enough to win the bet. The place had live sea turtles in the dining room, swimming around in a tank. Gregor was impressed.

After we got them sobered up, we got down to negotiations. Go down to Wolfie Cohen’s Deli just over the bridge on Collins Avenue, and go in the back room there. That’s where reality as we know it was hatched out over corned beef on rye and dill spears. We gave them the Bay of Pigs in ’61. They gave us a way out of the Cuban Blockade in ’62, and we threw in Gary Powers to close the deal. No nukes got dropped on anyone’s head, and the three great Soviet Time Lords bided their time and managed to disappear off the KGB’s radar screen right after Kennedy got shot in Dallas. For all I know, they’re in Miami pounding down Reubens at the Rascal House to this day. I know Shatrov found his way into real estate in Boca Raton. I saw him down there when I took Sue-Chi to Lauderdale last spring.

No, the place to be is the future, if you can manage it. Up to a point, the future holds the promise of good food, good woman, and a good way to die—well, at least a better one. I actually prefer the here and now. Compared to what I’ve faced, I live like a
king. I get to dress in a sport coat and wade into a bunch of college kids and act like a professor. I have a soft bed to go home to, and woman that knows a few tricks to keep me happy. Most of the guys from Excalibur-29 ended up choosing the same way.

Cincinnati is a great place if you’re a weary old warrior of time and space. Merle retired out past Portsmouth; he liked it more secluded. However, there is a bunch of us that still live around here. It isn’t hard to figure out. Start at any spot on the Earth. Move inland as far as you can before you start getting yourself close to an ocean. Make sure it’s not too hot, and not too cold, and there are no signs of recent seismic activity. If you can’t find such a spot, pick up your finger and move to another point on the globe and start over. When you find a spot you think you like, check out the politics and the healthcare. Pill Hill has seven hospitals, and I’m five minutes away from any of them. If it gets too bad, I can go check myself into the VA hospital and die on the government’s dime. This is heaven, I’ll tell you truly. You can call this place stodgy. You can call this place a cultural backwater. You can make fun of the Bengals, but there are no wars, no hurricanes and only the occasional tornado. If you stay up on the hills, you’ll keep your feet dry in the floods.

You know, I’m rather happy with the way it all turned out. I’m kind of proud the way the world has turned out. It really isn’t like that, you know. It is like when you see the sunrise and the sun comes up and starts to travel across the sky and it suddenly hits you that you have it all wrong, and the sun is standing still and it is the Earth rotating on its axis. I didn’t really influence the world, so much as escape into a world that I could accept. Still, for my own sanity, I would prefer to see it as time travel and myself as a great scion of Time and Space instead of being a refugee. When it is Noon, I can live
with this rock spinning like a top, but at sundown, I want to go back to seeing the great orb dipping below the horizon, and know that where I am is bathed in permanence and I am at the center of my Universe. It is what makes me human. I also know I cannot bear the thought that I have created this world, and that all that lives in it owes its existence, its joy and its suffering to me. That is too much for a man to take, and I have gone mad more times than I can count.

What finally got Gregor and those Russians to hunker down and parlay was not the chance to see Communism triumph. It wasn’t for Mother Russia. I gathered they were mostly Ukrainians that had come in on Khrushchev’s coat tails. No, it wasn’t ideology, it was just the promise that life could be quiet for a change, that they could have a few good yucks and then settle down. We’ve been at peace for good long time, and we may be at peace a good while longer. Ideology. Now there is a concept. I don’t know who said ‘Philosophy without History is Ideology.’ What if Ideology BECOMES History? I’m rambling. Sorry, I’m still thinking of Gerry MacErbin, and Hector de Maridos, and all the faces of people that disappeared in all the Mulligans we took trying to get it right. I get this way after I’ve been hunting. It gets me to thinking about this stuff, and I’m not much fun to be around for a few days.

The Testament of Perry Oilean

It was about this time that Art trailed off and just started looking out at the view. He was normally a man who had an engaging countenance, but for a while he wore the twenty-mile stare that marked him as a survivor. We had frittered the day away.

“How can it be so late?” I asked, looking down at my watch. It was nearly five.
“Oh,” said Art. “That. I have that effect on people. Don’t worry. Time will start flowing in a proper way again. I do that when I start rambling.”

“You mean you can change the flow of time?”

“There you go again, thinking the sun rises in the East.”

“Well, it does.”

“And the firmament beckons us at night and leads us anon to the mists of morning, and whither the sun its splendor?”

“Shakespeare?”

“Penn. I wax poetic when I get morose.”
Chapter 16

Thanksgiving Break was more of a habit than anything else. I started out with the idea of taking Vivian to my folks for Thanksgiving, but Sissy begged me not to turn the affair into a big deal. Sissy was also not going to bring her new boyfriend down. He was going home with his roommate, who lived outside Sydney. Vivian had sort of preempted the whole thing by already making plans with Doctor Turnwater’s family. She said it was a long-standing tradition.

Dad came down and picked me up on Wednesday around noon, and brought me out to the house. He was just coming from the airport; he had been on the road the previous week. As we rode up Hamilton Avenue towards the house, he quizzed me on what I had been up to. I did not get into much detail with him. He was happy that I had found a graduate program, and agreed that working unofficially for Doctor Penn without pay was better than not. The official job started in December. Dad liked the details.

The house was pretty much what you would think of as classic venue for a Thanksgiving. There were times when the house seemed out of place in the neighborhood. It was the only house on the street whose front door was not pointed at the road. It sat back a longer-than-average distance and hugged the woods behind and to the side. The bottom floor was limestone, and the top was white frame with black trim. The semi-attached garage with the loft over gave the impression that the house was tremendous, when really it had been just a nice-sized house for the four of us. My brothers had grown up and moved away before we had moved in. It gave the impression
of a large manor house that had been picked up and moved from the English countryside and set down on a suburban street. It was a world unto itself.

As we pulled in that afternoon, the house stood starkly against the bare grey trees, with only a tinge of color left from the few leaves still hanging on the beeches. Along the driveway, Mom’s gardens still had a lot of color left in them. The warm fall had left her with late roses and mums.

Mom was in the kitchen when I arrived, and I just took up a seat at the table and fell into helping her cut noodles and shell walnuts after we hugged. Mom noticed that I had gained weight. I told her my new girlfriend was teaching me to cook.

“So what is your new friend like?”

“She’s an assistant for one of the doctors over off of Auburn Avenue,” I said.

“Pretty?”

“Of course.”

“And she’s obviously a good cook.”

“Any chance we can see her this weekend.”

“None. She had prior commitments.”

“Oh.”

“Is the job at the bookstore working out?”

“I cut back my hours, so that I can start to work for Doctor Penn.”

“I thought that wasn’t starting until January.”

“I’m sort of in-training. Doctor Penn is meeting with me to . . . well, he’s getting me filled in on stuff?”

“Arthur Penn?”
“Yes, you know him?”

“Yes. He knew your father.”

“I had no idea.”

“Tell him I said hello.”

“What will you be doing for him?”

“I will be his assistant. He wants me to help him with his classes, and he has a lot of material he wants organized and such.”

“I remember him as quite a character. He had a wife, Gwen?”

“I think she’s out of the picture. He’s living with an oriental woman now, Sue-Chi.”

“That was years ago. Your father ran into him at General Electric.”

“Hmmm. Gwen was something too.”

“What was she like?”

“Oh, let’s just say she was a bit of a home-wrecker.”

“How so?”

“I don’t like to gossip.”

“You and Doctor Penn—you are getting along well.”

“Yes, I was out at their house the other weekend. Art invited us to dinner. He’d just gotten back from deer hunting.”

“Your father used to do that as well—used to go way over past Portsmouth and hunt.”

“I didn’t know that.”
“Oh yes. He never got anything, but he seemed to have a good time of it. As I remember, it was this time of year, too.”

“Won’t that be something. . .”

“What’s that?”

“Art and I were talking the other evening. I mentioned we had kept father’s guns, and he said I should bring them to him. He is going to tell me what it is I have.”

“Well, they are yours to do with as you want. . .”

“Is there a problem?”

“No, just don’t sell them—no matter what price he gives you.”

“I hadn’t even thought of it.”

“Oh.”

“No, Art belongs to a club, and he offered to take me out sometime and let me shoot them.”

“Oh.”

“Yes, I’m going to dig them out this weekend and have a look and see what it is I have. I couldn’t remember what they all were.

“Oh. I’m not so sure I approve of that.”

“Mom! I’m a grown man now.”

“Promise me you’ll be careful.”

“I promise.”
That was sort of how it was between Mom and me. She had an uncanny ability to zero in on the things that were important to her and burrow in with complete authority. There was no resistance possible. One only could delay the inevitable.

I was rescued from Mom’s interrogation after a while, when Sissy showed up. Sissy’s life seemed far more interesting than mine. We sat around the table doing the odd jobs that Mom handed us—shelling nuts, chopping celery, and so on—while Sissy got grilled, first on grades, then on her boyfriend, then on her new play. We both got our reprieve when Mom announced that it was time to get ready for dinner.

“I thought she wouldn’t stop.” Sissy said.

“You seemed to be holding your end up.” I replied.

“I thought she was going to come straight out and ask if I’d been sleeping with Phil.”

“Oh, that’s his name, huh?”

“You knew his name.”

“No, I didn’t. You don’t talk much about him. Is he still out being a boy scout?”

“You mean the orienteering? Yes. I think he’s got a big thing coming up this weekend after the holiday.”

“Phil what?”

“Phil Fangman.”

“That’s a strange name, and it’ll make for an even stranger wedding. I can see it now, ‘Phillip and Dindrane Fangman’ It sounds positively dreadful.”

“One, I am not going to marry Phil. Second. I intend on having a professional name before too long.”
“Oh, and what will that be?”

“I’m thinking of ‘Sissy Vandergraal.’”

“Why German?”

“It’s Dutch.”

“Okay, why Dutch.”

“But I have decided that Dutch is easier to market. It’s a little exotic, but not too. I won’t have to fake any strange accents.”

“Just be yourself, kid. Keep working on it. I’m going down to the basement to look for Dad’s guns. Want to come along?”

We went down the basement and worked our way through a couple of shelves of boxes. In the years I had been gone, the guns had been moved further back, behind some luggage. It was funny, but I had gone down to look at the guns several times over the years. I’d never wanted to shoot them, but I would get the urge to get them out and just feel them. The first time had been several years after my father had died. I had been sitting in a barbershop and had picked up a copy of Outdoor Life. Leafing through the ads had gotten me interested in what was there. There had also been an article on gun care and safety. After the barbershop, I had snuck down to the basement and brought out each piece and examined it. I had repeated this several times at an interval of a couple years. It had never occurred to me before that I might try and shoot one.

They were stored in a metal under-the-bed chest along with an open can of 3-in-One oil and a rag. I had always been careful to wipe them down before putting them away. Each piece was wrapped in newspaper, mostly old Post and Times Star from about
the time my father had died. In the past, I had sometimes stopped to look at ads and read stories, and some of the pages I practically knew by heart. Frank Robinson was in a slump. Hutch, the Red’s Manager was back in the hospital. Oscar Robinson was nursing a small injury. Al Schottlelkotte was being named to head WCPO-TV’s news. Mabley and Carew was having a White Sale. Murf, the Surf, was to be arraigned. It was as if time itself had stopped and been thrown in a box. Sissy had never seen the box. She had been just a baby when it had happened. This was all foreign to her. For me, it was a sacred shrine.

“Aren’t you afraid of one of these going off?”

“No,” I replied. “There’s no ammunition. It’s all over in another box.”

“These were Dad’s, huh?”

“Yes, and some of them were his Father’s, or may his Uncle’s. I’m not sure.”

“How come you’re so smart about guns.”

“I’m not. I just know you have to treat them as if they’re loaded until you’re sure they’re not. After that, they’re as safe as a hammer or a brick.”

“I’m not sure we should be doing this.”

I picked up two pieces and started assembling them. In a bit, I had a shotgun.

“This was Dad’s shotgun.”

“What’s it used for.”

“See there?” I pointed to engraved letters on the receiver. “This is a trap gun. That meant he shot trap.”

“What’s a trap? Are they like quail”
“It’s a game. They throw clay birds into the air and you shoot at them. There’s another barrel in here called skeet. It’s for a different game.”

“So he never shot anything live?”

“I’m not sure about that, but he hunted deer. Mom said so.”

“Yuck! He shot Bambi? What’s this one?” She pointed at a revolver in a basket weave leather holster.

“It’s a police revolver. “

“What’s it doing in his stuff?”

“I don’t know. If you take it out of the holster, it says it’s a Colt Police Positive. I stopped taking it out of the holster, though. The leather is starting to go rotten.”

“And this! What are these?”

“If you put this and this together, it makes a rifle.”

“This one looks my size. What’s it?”

“It’s a twenty two. You use this sort of thing on squirrels.

“That looks like it’s my size. Now this other one looks positively dangerous. It just oozes darkness.” She pointed at the Luger.

It kind of felt strange going to my room. It always did. It made me realize how small my life had been—not that I was all that really all that far removed from living at home. I still had high school text books on the shelf, and clothes from junior high in my closet. My night stand was like a shrine to my past life—my retainer still sat on in its place. The clock radio that I’d used to wake up to Jim Scott every morning was still running, even though the time had not been set in years. There was a team picture of the 1966 Reds, and an emergency lifetime flashlight. Supposedly, the flashlight had the
power to retain a charge on the battery forever—Dad had brought it home as a premium from the building and loan in 1970, and I had never needed to use it. It dawned on me then, that this might be a good time to try out the light. It took some doing to turn it on. You had to push and twist. However, I did get it on. It lit briefly and then the light died, giving less than a minute’s worth of use. When it died, I pitched it at the trash can. So much for forever.

The rest of Thanksgiving went fairly uneventfully. After a subdued Thanksgiving dinner, and the ceremonial watching of the Detroit Lions getting tromped, I went walking with Sissy out in the woods. The woods were just the wooded backyards of the neighbors, but it had been our private playground growing up, and we had spent many hours together investigating the secluded, forgotten recesses of the neighbors. A trip to the creek was really a walk over to where a drainage culvert opened out and had provided enough standing water fuel our deep mysteries and provide enough live material for endless school science projects. A trip to the field meant an adventure to the vacant lot that one of the neighbors kept as an orchard. The scale had shrunk, but the memories were still strong. Sissy was particularly interested in visiting all our old haunts.

“This was where you had your foxhole.” She said, pointing at a depression in the ground.

“I remember that.” I said. “After John went to Vietnam, I used to come out here and bivouac. I had a tommy gun that shot roll caps-”

“Greenie caps! Those were the best.”
“Yes, Greenie caps. Do you remember my boobie trap?”

“How could I forget. You made that thing go off everywhere I turned. I hated you.”

“Yeah well.”

“And then John died, and Mom picked up all the army toys and put them in the garbage.”

“I remember that too, and I remember how you just kept on going with sticks for guns and pine cones for grenades and your Denis the Menace crash helmet.”

“I hardly knew John.”

“He was your brother, ding-dong.”

“I hardly knew him. I can’t even remember what he looked like. Christ, I can’t even remember Daddy anymore, except for how he smelled. I can remember what the pictures look like for both of them, but I can’t remember anything—just a smell here, and the way John’s uniform felt when I hugged him goodbye.”

“Maybe that’s enough.”

“Sissy, what if someone gave you the power to go back in time and fix things. What would you fix?”

“I wouldn’t.”

“What do you mean? Wouldn’t you want to bring Daddy back? Or John?”

“No.”

“Why the heck not?”

“It would make everything open to a do-over. Nothing would really count. If I find a guy and I decide to love him, how would I be sure that he wasn’t going back in
time and cheating on me and then coming back into the present? How could you take a final at school, and be certain everyone else wasn’t rewinding the clock and going back to study some more.

“That’s pretty insightful. . . for a girl! “

“Eat one. Actually it isn’t all that fresh a thought. It’s something I’ve been digging around all year. I’m in a class that’s into this. See, you’ve got tragedy. That’s where the protagonist has a fatal flaw – something like pride—that brings him down and makes for a sad end, because we identify with protagonist and are sad to see him fall. Then you have comedy. That’s where you enjoy seeing the fatal flaw and its consequences. Then there’s Theatre of the Absurd. That’s where the flaws and the fall of the protagonist are made meaningless. We just don’t care one way or the other. What you’re talking about goes even beyond that—complete loss of causality. It’s a play I wouldn’t want to go see. I wouldn’t care if it did bring Daddy back.”
I was slow connecting with both Art and Vivian after Sissy got me back to Clifton. I was sort of burned out on Art; our meeting had been draining. Vivian, she was slow getting back from wherever she had gone. Sunday night came and went and then Monday. I was pulling a few extra hours at the bookstore. Stan wanted me to hang out to buy books from the crowd coming in trying to make Christmas money.

I did not get worried until Wednesday, when Doctor Turnwater came by the store, looking for Vivian. She was got all torqued out of shame when I said I had not seen her for almost a week. She said she had been due in on Monday. That sounded serious. We traded phone numbers and promised to call when we heard something.

I got home from the shop after the evening rush and found out that Art had been calling, looking for me. I was just getting the story straight from Tony when Art called again. He was wanting me to proctor one of his finals. I agreed, and mentioned Vivian’s absence. Art went into crisis mode.

“Turnwater says she’s AWOL since Monday?”

“Yes, that’s right. I didn’t know what to do. She’s a big girl. I’m sure the police would not be interested yet.”

“Tell you what, pardner, I’m coming over at first light. We can’t do anything tonight.”

“What’s the problem?”
“Vivian, that’s what.”

“I’m just not sure there is anything I can do about it. If she’s gone missing, I’m quite certain I’m not going to be able to do much about it.”

“Well, that’s just fine.”

“Do YOU think there’s something we can do.”

“I sure as hell do.”

“Well, then let’s do it. What is it?”

“I’ll be by in the morning. Be ready for me.”

“What are we going to do?”

“I’m not sure yet. Dig up some warm clothes . . . and find a bucket.”

“What?”

“Find a bucket.”

Sue and Skip wanted me to go out to the Corinthian, but I was getting really bummed out. I had no idea what Art had meant by what he said. I had no idea what sort of trouble Vivian was in. Up until Turnwater had shown up at the store, It had been no big thing. Now it was a huge emergency. I confided to Sue that I figured there was more to this than people were letting on.

“Like what?” Sue said.

“Like I don’t know.”

“She may have just had car trouble. Do you know where she went?”
“Turnwater said that it was some touchy-feely vegetarian thing. There is a bunch of . . . what do they call them. . . New Age types that were hanging out at the Unitarian church over Thanksgiving and then doing some sort of slumber party type thing. From the way I’d heard it from Vivian, I thought it was out of town, but it’s right over in the Gaslight District.”

“Oh, that doesn’t sound good,”

“Damn straight.”

“Would it help if we drove over there and looked?”

“Sure. I guess. We can swing by Wellington and see if her car is there.”

Sue got Skip to drive, and we first went over to the Unitarian church. It was a big modern thing on a side street across from the Annunciation Church on Clifton. We drove through both church parking lots, and then drove up and down the side streets. Vivian’s car was not over there. We went over to Mount Auburn and found her car at one of her usual parking places on Wellington. Doctor Turnwater must have just missed it.

I called Turnwater and told her after we got back to the apartment. The Doctor was even more upset than before. Vivian had left a change of clothes out in the waiting room as if she were going to get dressed, and then taken off, leaving the alarm turned off. That made things look all the more serious. I talked about calling the police, but Turnwater warned me not to. She did not give me a good reason, but she was adamant.

That left me with no option except wandering the streets of Mount Auburn calling her name, or waiting until Doc Penn arrived. Sue and Skip started watching TV. I went
looking for a bucket. The night was cold. The weather had turned obnoxious right after Thanksgiving Day. Sissy had been worried about getting back to Oxford and left early on Sunday. There was now a dusting of snow on the ground, and it was getting down into the teens. I had my old snorkel coat from high school along with a rabbit fur hat that Sissy had gotten me for a Christmas present. I normally never wore it; it made me sneeze. The bucket was a bit of a problem. We really did not have a bucket as such. Instead, all I had was the big pot that Vivian and I had used for lobsters. I had no idea what Art wanted with a bucket, so I did not if it was going to be sufficient.

It was still dark when Art showed up. I’d dropped off sitting on the couch. Sue and Skip had gone to bed. What woke me up was Art banging on the door downstairs. My neck had gotten all crooked while I was sleeping, and I could not get it straightened out. I showed up at the door doing the best I could to hold it in the exact position it had been when I was asleep; anything else was painful. I undid the latches, and Art stormed in.

“Aren’t you ready to go?”

“No, I just woke up.”

“What the hell are you doing?”

“What?”

“With your head.”

“Oh, I slept funny.”

“Well, get serious. We gotta go.”

“Come on in, while I get my coat.”

Art followed me in reluctantly and stood glowering.
“I don’t think you understand what’s going on.”

“You are right, Art. I don’t.”

“Vivian is in peril.”

“She may be, but I don’t understand what I can do to make things any better. I don’t know where she is. I don’t know any of her friends, and everytime I mention the police to you or Turnwater, you both get hinky on me. You both know stuff that I don’t, and I dearly wish you’d just spit it out and be done with it.”

“Get your coat. Did you find a bucket?”

“Yes, here it is.” Art looked at the lobster pot and laughed.

“I guess it will do.”

“Do for what?”

“Come on, the world’s waiting.”

Art rode me over to Welllington Place with his truck, and we parked in a somewhat less than legal spot next on the circle at the end. We sat in the truck waiting for first light. My neck was gradually working itself out, but it was still sore. Art saw I was in pain and welcomed me to middle age. He said that I should be thankful for my health and my youth. It would never be as good as this.

“What do you know about Vivian?”

“Not much. She’s an assistant to Doctor Turnwater. She lives in a spare room in Doctor Turnwater’s office. She is originally French. She has lived around here for a number of years. . . What are you getting at?”
“Most of what you know about Vivian is wrong. I’m not saying that Vivian lied to you. Nobody has lied to you, but I don’t think you have the whole story. Before we go any further, we had best get that out of the way. It will make this morning go a lot smoother. “

The Testament of Art Penn

I can tell you first off that Vivian is very guarded with her story. I’m surprised that she has not filled you in on it. I’m not going to second guess her, but that’s just how it goes.

Vivienne (he pronounced it differently than I did) L’Undine is almost exactly like other women. Somewhere, sometime, she had a mother and a father. She didn’t just happen. She was born, and grew up. Where? The best I can say is probably somewhere between what is Egypt and Turkey. It was probably in what is now Lebanon, and it was probably called Phoenicia. That is not for sure. The Phoenicians were great sea traders. Vivienne’s parents could have come from anywhere. Vivienne was part of the great pantheon of oddities that were gathered as a result of the Phoenicians explorations and trading. It is possible she came from Egypt. There are indications of folks such as her in the desert oases in ancient folklore. The early Greeks knew of her type. Vivienne is an Undine. She is a water spirit.

Water spirits, as you have discovered, are just like other people. They just have a few different rules. We have the same kind of rules. Hers are a bit different. You and your kind have rules like

You only live once.
You are born, you age, you die.

If you are not fed and hydrated on a regular basis, you croak.

If you come into contact with flame, or are hit by solid objects moving very quickly, you croak.

. . . these are the basic rules everybody takes for granted. Vivienne has a different set of rules. She is a water spirit. She is therefore tied to a particular well, spring, or pond. She must return to that body of water on a daily basis to be rejuvenated, or she croaks. She is not immortal, but her life cycle is quite a bit more drawn out than what you think of as normal. She is aging, but not at the same rate. Part of that has to do with the way in which her being is regenerated every 24 hours. It resets a lot of the normal clocks that keep ticking incessantly in normal schmucks.

In the areas where Undines were common, the local folks either worshipped them as deities, or left them alone and ignored them. The Phoenicians were one of the first to embrace their kind and bring them into the home. Rich muckity-mucks would keep an undine or even a family of undines in their garden pools the same way the Japanese keep Koi. So far, life is pretty good for the undines.

That Vivienne is French is a complete falsehood. In fact, she is a relative newcomer to France. From the story she told me, she was one of many of her kind that were captured during the crusades. Crusaders seemed fascinated with the Undines and their ilk. It used to be that folks would go to Florida and bring back a baby alligator. In this case, you had a bunch of armed tourists robbing and pillaging their way through an extended vacation. Somewhere along the way, word leaked out (pardon the pun) that the evil heathen had girlfriends that could be carried around in a goat skin and poured into a
bathtub. Voila! Instant girlfriend! This was THE hot item of acquisition during the first couple of crusades, and it became all the rage to try and get a few back home and set them up in their own little watery digs and visit them when the wife was off getting her boils lanced. They didn’t have souls, so it was okay to do whatever you wanted to with them. It didn’t count as a sin.

Vivienne is one of these forced émigrés. The guy who took her back from Palestine set her up in his mill pond. He even built her a little keep she could call her own. I won’t bore you with the next few hundred years. Viv can tell it to you herself. The important thing that happens next is somewhere in the 1870’s. Again, you’ve got rude tourists involved. However, in this case, they are Americans. Enter Charles Turnwater. Turnwater is a local Cincinnatian. He’s made it rich at a young age, and he wants to go back and see his mother’s hometown up close to the Ardennes. While he’s vacationing in France, he happens by a certain mill pond and here is this beautiful maiden. The two are smitten with each other. Charlie decides he is going to marry the girl, and proposes. The chick explains her little secret to him, and Charlie says “Que la Baise!” and off he goes carting his beloved back to America in a wine cask. When he gets back, he first installs her in a pool in the garden of the family manse. At first, Vivienne is the toast of the social scene, but Charlie quickly realizes that he’s made a mistake. It is going to be damned awkward to keep this woman. After a time, he gets tired of the idea and instead donates a lot of money to the city to build a lavish park along Vine Street, complete with the perfect reflecting pool. Vivienne is banished to the park, and Charlie is free to marry someone more befitting of his social status. The new wife finds out about Vivienne, and befriends her. Vivienne remains a ward of the family, and
several generations of Turnwaters have been doing their best to make up for Charlie’s indiscretion.

There’s a benefit to this as well for the Turnwaters. Vivienne bargains a deal with the family and in exchange for occasional passage back and forth to her home outside Nancy, she is willing to provide certain specialized waters that, when taken internally, are highly beneficial to the body and have the tendency to prolong life. The current Doctor Turnwater that you’ve met: how old do you think she is? A spry Sixty? Try Ninety with change. That’s the basis of Doctor Turnwater’s practice: lifespan elongation. She hides it all in a lot of mumbo-jumbo about nutrition and exercise. That’s all well and good. However, the real trick is the vitamin injections. Those aren’t vitamins at all—it’s coming from waters that Vivienne has to go back to France to prepare, and the family takes her there every six months or so. They’ve been doing it since before the turn of the century. It’s not a family secret recipe in the normal sense of the terms, but you need an undine making it.

Now we get to my angle in this: I knew Vivienne from way back, but I didn’t know about her secret. That story I told you? The one about the chick in white samite with the panzerfaust? I was telling that story at a party one night, and Vivienne cocked an ear and we got to comparing notes. Here it was no hallucination at all. I’d been helped by Vivienne’s long lost sister. The two of them got back together after God-know-how-many years. Here they had been living only about fifty miles from each other, and never known. The sister’s a nice woman. Vivienne brings her back to Cincinnati every few years. She speaks no English, but the three of us had a heck of a good time together. We ate down at Mike Finks on the river—these women really dig seafood.
I asked her why she saved my life. You know what she said? She said she just was just mad at the Germans for making a mess of her pond. It took forever for them to getting around to getting that jeep off the bottom of her pond, and it was like it was in her living room. I figured I’d take the outcome however it came.

Oh, one other thing: You’ll probably end up meeting Emil. Emil Turnwater is another fooler. He looks thirty-five, but he’s really Seventy. He’s the doctor’s nephew. Vivienne had a fling with him back during the Sixties, but it cooled. He’s the one helping her get back and forth to France now. Once we find Vivienne, he’ll probably show himself. Don’t muck with him. He’s not your rival—hasn’t been for years. He’s a pain in the keester, and he’s somewhat possessive of Vivienne. Just give him room, and let him do his thing. I have it on good authority that he’s got a small dick.
Chapter 18

The Testament of Perry Oilean

I was full of questions for Art, but the light was starting to come up. Art said it was time to get out, and the first thing Art did was to give me my lobster pot, and a pickaxe. He grabbed a five-gallon pickle bucket and a spade shovel. We set off down the steps into the park.

“Before we get started,” said Art “I’m going to show you something.” Partway down the stairs, we veered off and walked along the hillside. It was gloomy, but the light was coming up on the day. Art had a bit of trouble finding his way, but eventually we came to an overgrown stand of yew bushes. It turned out to be an ill-kept monument—a shoulder-high slab of marble with a bronze plaque.

“Just so you know this ain’t all horseshit.” Said Art. “Here’s the guy I’m talking about. This is Turnwater. This is the guy who got the ball rolling with Vivienne and the park. It’s a bit of an ironic twist to this whole thing, but Vivienne divulged none of her secrets about longevity until after this guy was worm food. I guess she forgave him, but not that much. Today, he’s got a plot over in Spring Grove, and this plaque, and that’s it. Charlie’s whole line died out. The woman he married outlasted all her children and Charlie too. She was the one who went back and made peace with Viv, and brought her back into the family fold. Meanwhile, his nieces and nephews are kicking up their heels—some of them are over a hundred, and showing no signs of letting up. I heard one
of them got a UC co-ed pregnant last year. Let that be a lesson to you about being careful about how you drop your girlfriends.”

It was getting well into dawn when we dropped down off the hillside and looked over the lake. It had disappeared. It had never occurred to me that you could do that with a body of water of that size, but there it was. The pond had a shallow concrete pool, no more than about three feet deep in the middle. The Recreation Commission had finally gotten around to pulling the plug on it for the winter. It had a concrete bottom and concrete sides and a large frozen puddle in the middle where subsidence and age had caused a depression. The puddle was frozen all the way to the bottom—about 8 inches total, and a thin coating of snow covered it as well as the piles of frozen leaves and muck that had accumulated over the summer.

“Why did they drain the lake?” I asked.

“They do that every year.” Said Art. It keeps the ice from cracking the concrete. They’re actually a bit late; it’s usually done before Thanksgiving. They’ve got budget problems this year, and they can’t get to everything when they should. “

“I’m still not sure what this has to do with Vivian.”

“Vivienne is probably still in this lake, somewhere. She’s still alive, and probably still in a state that can be brought back to full health. That isn’t a permanent state, however. We’ve got to do something before it’s too late.”

“What’s that?”

“Dig her out of here and get her thawed out?”

“That’s way to weird, Art.”


“Let’s hit that big puddle over by the drain. My guess is that she came back and found the lake draining, and tried to get in and got caught.”

“And if you’re wrong?”

“Then your girlfriend went down the drain over there, and is currently going through the Metropolitan Sewer District’s network and will be expelled into the Ohio River from down around the mouth of the Mill Creek in a few days, and when that happens she will have dissipated—diluted, if you will— to a point where I don’t think it’ll make any difference what happens to her beyond that.”

I walked over to the storm drain and looked in. It was a steel grate over a deep hole at the lowest point in the lake. Around me was an acre or so of old concrete, somewhat flat except for the undulations of age.

“Vivienne said that Charlie Turnwater did this place just to suit her. She always dreamed of a home that had a solid floor, and a way to pop the cork and drain it and keep it clean. This is an undine’s dream house. The little shelter house over there is just so that she has a place to dress. Even though it’s open, there’s one corner where she can go and dress without anyone seeing—unless you’re in just the right spot. Unless you’re right there, sitting on that bench, you’d never see her.

“I sat on that bench one morning.” I said. “I saw her, but I didn’t recognize her.”

“I thought that was going to cinch it for sure. I didn’t think you could be that dense. I don’t think Vivienne thought so either. You’re just too far gone. But then, that’s one of the things that impressed me about you when we met: you’re innocence and loyalty. It’s what make you, Perry. “

“I guess I should say ‘Thanks.’

Spontaneous Human Combustion
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“Oh well, enough of this jerking each other off. We need to find Viv. The light’s about right.”

Art concentrated on the big puddle. Together, we used our boots to clear off the snow from the puddle, and then we got down on all fours and started peering through the puddle. It was dark, it was murky, but all of a sudden I saw Vivian’s face peering back in a grotesque visage of frozen surprise. It looked like a hologram.

“Knew it!” said Art, when I brought him over. He bent down and examined the image. “We’ll have to figure out the rough dimensions of her body and concentrate on that. If we take the whole puddle, we’ll kill the pickup. There’s too much ice.”

“What are you talking about?”

“We’re going to hack up this piece of the puddle and put it in my truck. Then we’re going to take it somewhere and thaw it out. If all goes well, we’ll have reconstituted girlfriend in a matter of hours. If it doesn’t . . . well, you get to the Turnwaters how there’s going to be no more golden eggs coming from their pet goose.”

I kept peering down through the ice. I found two sets of toes.

“Are we going to hurt her?”

“It’s just water ice right now. She’s in there, but not in a form that we can call Vivienne—“Vivian” for those of you who grew up West of Vine Street. Once it’s thawed, there’s a potential there that will manifest itself. If there’s enough potential there, you get a fuck buddy. If not, you’ve got dirty pond water. Let’s get digging.”

We started by hacking at the ice above her head and below her feet. It looked as though she were trying to scrunch down and make all of herself fit into the puddle. Her head was turned to the side and her cheek was just a fraction of an inch below the
surface. I was chopping with the pickaxe, about six inches beyond her head. Art was down at her feet, hacking away at the ice with the shovel. When we had deep channels down to the concrete, Art made an effort to rock the slab up with the axe, but it was too heavy. We then attacked one side and then the other, chopping down to first make a channel and then hacking the excess away. In the space of a half hour or so, we had a block of ice isolated from the puddle that was a little under six feet in length and about thirty inches wide. Art took the pick again and manage to release the block from the concrete. However, he also managed to cause the block to cleave about even with the top of Vivian’s rib cage. I gasped.

“Don’t worry,” said Art. “She didn’t feel it. See? There’s no body in there. It’s all just water. The image you see is just the ice crystals forming in the block. She’s there, but she’s just water ice. I examined the edges of the block. Art was right. It was just a block of ice.

We broke up the block into slabs that the two of us could carry together. They were too heavy to get up the stairs, so Art brought the truck down to Vine Street, and then we loaded the chunks into the bed of his pickup. Two hours into it, we had a few hundred pounds of ice in large chunks, and a few bucket loads smaller pieces. In the end, we were picking up golf-ball sized pieces and putting them in the pickle bucket and the lobster pot and carrying them to the truck. When it looked like we had all of the pieces Art felt we needed, we packed up and headed out. I was exhausted and my hands were frozen, despite gloves. Art was not fairing any better. We found her clothes stashed in a niche in the shelter house, and brought them along.

“What do we do now?”
“That’s a good question. “ Said Art. “Theoretically, we take her back to your place and thaw her out in the bathtub. Would your roommates mind?”

“You’ve got to be kidding.”

“I am.”

“So what ARE we going to do.”

“I’ve got an idea, but you’re going to owe me big time.”

We drove over to Art’s place and backed the truck up to the front porch. It was now a sharp and bright mid-morning with cutting winds out of the North. I guess that Sue-Chi was in on the whole thing, because she pitched in right away and started carting ice up onto the pack porch. Art opened up a squarish cover and exposed a hot tub, steaming in the cold morning air. Art emptied all but a foot of the water out using a sump pump, and then we emptied all the buckets of ice into the spa. His theory was that we would thaw the smaller pieces first and then work our way up. With the heater turned all the way, the water in the bottom kept working on the ice chunks, and progressively thawed them. As things progressed, we started adding the bigger slabs until everything we had brought from the lake was floating in the spa. Sue-Chi made us soup and hot chocolate to keep us warm, along with a nice brunch that we ate while the first pieces were melting. By Noon, we had nothing left to do, except the long wait ahead. Art called the Turnwaters and told them that Vivian was with us. I scraped a few handfuls of ice out of the back of the truck, dumped it in the hot tub and then went with Art up to Keller’s supermarket to put together dinner. I volunteered to put together Bouillabaisse, one of
Vivian’s favorites. Art joked that it was the least I could do, now that he had saved my girlfriend. It started cloud up as we rode up town, and it was getting progressively warmer. By the time we got out of the store, the clouds were getting dark. The bright sun we had enjoyed earlier in the day was giving way to leaden skies, and clammy-moist air. It was going to snow. Sue-Chi and I worked on the soup. Art retired to his recliner with a stiff scotch to nurse his back, grumbling something about how I had no right to complain about my neck.

The snow started about five, and was coming down in bucket loads by the time it got really dark. Sue-Chi turned on the floodlights, and we watched the snow come down off the porch roof and swirl onto the lid of the spa. It was beyond my ability to comprehend that my girlfriend was under that cover slowly thawing her way out of ice chunks. We listened to All Things Considered on WGUC and then a British radio game show and then the early evening concert—Mahler’s New World Symphony. The kids were at a friends’ houses and Sue-Chi called and told them they could spend the night—that Art would come and pick them up in the truck in the morning. It was appearing more likely now that the snow was going close some schools.

We ate dinner around eight. Art got into a rant about deer hunting. I don’t know if it was the wine, but he finally got me somewhat interested.

“That sounds like fun.” I said.

“Sounds like fun, huh? It might not be for you. You’ve stayed indoors most of your life. I doubt you could stay all day in one place, waiting for a deer.”

“I bet I could.”

“Okay then, I guess we can see.”
“What?”

“It’s deer season. I suppose we could go hunting.”

“It’s finals coming up.”

“Let me worry about that.”

“You’re sure you want to do this?”

“Sure, why not?”

“Well, you don’t have a gun. You don’t have a license, you have no other gear to speak of. . . and you know nothing about hunting deer.”

“I don’t see that as insurmountable. Besides, I do have a gun.”

“What do you have?”

“I’m not sure, but it’s my Dad’s. I’ve got it back at the apartment.”

“We’ll go look at it. If it’s worthwhile, we’ll go.”

Sue-Chi had Graeter’s ice cream, and made turtle sundaes for dessert. We all retired back to the game table in front of the doors leading out to the back porch and the hot tub. Art and I went out briefly and checked under the lid. There was a lot less ice, and a lot more water, but still no sign of Vivian. We dusted the top off, and hurried back inside. Art called over to Turnwater’s house and gave the doctor a progress report.

When he got off the phone Art said, “I heard Emil was kibitzing in the background. He says that all the ice will have to melt before we see anything.

“How does he know?” said Sue-Chi.
“I guess the Turnwaters have become experts on this sort of thing. They’ve been keeping her in the family since eighteen-and-something.”

“Has she ever frozen before?”

“I guess so.”

“How did you get involved in this?” I asked.

“Emil called me last night and asked me to intervene.” said Art.

“Why didn’t they ask me?”

“I thought the doctor had?”

“If she did, she was really subtle about it.” I replied.

“She probably didn’t know how much you knew. Don’t blame her for being cagey. That old prune’s been around, and remember we’re playing with her bread and butter here.”

“That’s just so weird.” Said Sue-Chi. “I can’t imagine why Vivienne puts up with it.”

“It beats the alternatives.” Replied Art.

“Sue,” I asked playfully. “How did you ever get caught up with a guy like Art and all this kind of stuff?”

“It beat the alternatives.” She said, shooting a look at Art. I got the idea I should not pursue it further.

“Let’s play something.” I said. “What’s a good three-handed card game?” They both looked at me and did everything but roll their eyes. Art got up and pulled down a bottle of Drambuie and served us each a solid hit in small snifters. Sue downed hers in a flash. Art stared into his. I sipped a little and then settled in, and watched the snow fall.
“It was a night like this,” said Art. “We were in a shelled-out farm house. The snow fell until about 2, and then the sky cleared. The Krauts thought they could infiltrate our lines, and they sent the SS in. There were all these guys in their winter white snow-suits in the moonlight, traipsing through this field. You absolutely could not see them in the bright moonlight . . . except for their stupid black leather cartridge belts that they had on over the suits. It made a perfect cross right over their hearts. Gawd, I don’t know how many we killed that night. They never got more than forty yards out of the treeline, and we’d shoot them. Next morning, we couldn’t count the bodies.”

“That sounds gruesome.” I said.

“Nope! Never had so much fun in all my life. We just shot all night long. I don’t think we got more than a few rounds back. They were stacked like cordwood in that field. I don’t think any of us said more than one or two words in all those hours. We just shot and reloaded. We had a job to do, and we enjoyed the heck out of doing it.”

With this, Art fell silent. We all did.
Chapter 19

It was about eleven. Sue-Chi and I had been making small-talk for about an hour. Art was dozing. I decided it was about time to go check on the spa. The snow was deep enough on the porch that it was getting down into my shoes, so I took a snow shovel and cleared a path out to the hot tub. I lifted off the cover and dumped the snow to the side. Art had turned on the light. The tub was anything but clean—the water in the tub was fairly murky, and the ice was nearly gone. I looked in, and I could see something opaque forming on the bottom. Sue-Chi threw on a coat and came out to join me. We agreed that there was something in the hot tub. It did not look like Vivian; it did not look like much of anything except for a murky shadow. That was a good sign.

“What do we do now?” I asked.

“I guess we go back in and wait—probably leave off the cover.”

“What happens next?”

“How should I know?”

“Should we have Art look at this?”

“No, let him sleep. He’ll be grumpy when he wakes up.”

“It’s a pretty night.”

“Yes, it is. But the roads are probably terrible. You’ll be welcome to stay here, but should you call anyone?”

“Yes, I should call back to my place and let them know I haven’t disappeared.”

“Please use our phone.”
I went inside and called back to the apartment. Sue answered and was frantic.

“Sue?”

“Perry?”

“Yeah, it’s me.”

“What’s happened? Are you all right?”

“Sure. I’m fine.”

“Have you heard from Vivvy?”

“We know where she is, and I think she’ll be just fine.”

“What happened?”

“Oh, Art and I had a job locating her. I’m back at his place now.”

“So what happened?”

“It’s a long story. I’ll let you know when we get back. I won’t be home tonight, but we will probably be straightened out by morning. I’m sleeping at Art’s tonight.”

“Is Vivian with you?”

“She’s close by, and she’s safe.”

“Can I talk to her?”

“Probably not right now, but I’ll make sure she gets in touch soon.”

“Perry?”

“Gotta run. . . bye.”
I was in the back of the family room, talking on the phone when I saw Sue-Chi grab her coat and run for the door. There was a stirring in the hot tub. I put down the receiver and ran to the door.

We stood, frozen in the snow on the back porch, watching the surface of the spa. It bubbled and boiled a bit, sending up a wide jet of water into the air. That jet slumped back down into the tub. I started to walk towards the tub, but Sue-Chi held me back. There were two more jets of water, each a thick column that would rise up and fall in turn. Then a hump of water rolled across the center and disappeared.

Then nothing. For well over a minute, the surface of the water was quiet and all I could see was the small jet from the pump. It hiccupped and spat out the occasional bubble of air. A leaf or a twig would get caught in the flow and move past the light, causing a momentary shadow, but otherwise there was nothing.

Vivian arose from the hot tub. The water did not part. There was no splash. Her hair was dry. Her naked breasts did not drip. She just suddenly came out of the tub and was there. It was electric. It was fantastic. In the next moment, she had swung onto the deck – nearly leaped. She was standing naked in the floodlight with the snow swirling about her, wearing an expression of peeved exhilaration. Sue-Chi had a robe for her, and she stepped forward, knelt and lowered her head and presented the robe while averting her eyes. I stood dumbfounded. Vivian flashed a glare at Sue-Chi. It was like someone had open a cage door and released a wild lioness, and Sue-Chi was making an offering to placate the beast. There was such immense power standing before us that I felt as though we might both be swept off the deck and sent swirling into oblivion. Vivian’s gaze shifted to me. There was a moment where she seemed confounded, a thousand
expressions flashed over her face. I had no other idea what to do, and so I followed Sue-Chi’s lead and knelt with my head bowed. It just seemed like the right thing to do.

When I looked back up, Vivian’s face and turned gentle again. She stood posed in ultimate beauty and godly composure.

“Thank you.” Vivian said. “You are most kind.” The moment finally caught up to her, and she began to cry. I stood and took the robe from Sue-Chi and stepped forward and placed it around Vivian’s shoulders, and took her arm and helped her into the house. Art woke up with a little prodding and he opened his eyes and saw Vivian.

“Oh!” he said. “It’s about time you showed up! We were just getting ready to open the second bottle of wine.”

“Thank you,” she said, wrapping herself around Art. “You still know how to rescue a damsel.”

“I brought my apprentice along.” He said. “He did all the heavy work.” Vivian turned back to me.

“Yes, Perry.” She said. “You are forever in my heart. Please, come to me.” I came close, and she held my arms. “I am so sorry, you must feel so betrayed.”

“Betrayed? No.“ I said. “Confused, yes. I still don’t have a clue what is going on, but I am so glad you’re back.” I reached out and brought her to me and gave her a hug and then we embraced in a kiss that to this day makes me choke up from the tenderness. We sat down on the couch together, and filled each other in on the details while Sue-Chi went to the kitchen to get a bowl of soup, some bread and some wine for Vivian.

“. . . and Art tells me you are not a ‘Vivian,’ but rather a ‘Vivienne.'” I said, accentuating the difference.
“Non, mon cher. Je toujours serai votre ’VI-VEE-ANN’. Comprenez-vous ?

D’accord?”

“D’accord. VI-VEE-ANN.”

“So how did you get stuck?” asked Art. “That is not like you.”

“They must have started to drain in on Saturday morning. I came back late Sunday night from the Unitarians and found just a small puddle.” She said. “I went to the pond to get a quick dip, and as soon as I stepped in, the stupid puddle froze. I would have been in there until Spring, if it hadn’t been for you.”

“I’m sorry.” I said, “But why a stupid puddle? Why not just go for a swim at the YMCA.”

“He has much to learn,” said Art. “I didn’t have time for the fine points.”

“That’s okay.” She said. “I really should have given him his training before now. You should not have been responsible.”

“Excuse me.” I said. “There’s still a question pending here.”

“Ah, yes!” she said. “Well, you have to understand the dynamics. You see, I’m somewhat bound to that little pond out there. I have only one spot that I can really go to get . . . er. . . refreshed. Now that Art has graciously lent his hot tub to the occasion, I can now use his for a day or so. . . until I can arrange my passage back to France.”

“Ah, “I said, trying to show that I understood. “The water in the tub is somehow consecrated now?”

“Consecration is not a good term for it.” She said. “Art and you just needed to get me and a goodly amount of the water from the puddle into the hot tub. When I originally
came from France, I was brought with an ample supply of the water from the place I
came from, and . . . and so on.”

“Oh, I said, “This might seem like a goofy question, but what if I had taken
the water in the hot tub and divvied it up and put it in two separate bathtubs. Could I
have made you into twins?” Art and Vivian both laughed.

“Don’t try it.” Said Vivian. “I would never forgive you. I do not want to share you
with anyone, including my own self.”

“Oh.” I replied. “I’m just asking.”

“It is possible.” She said. “Just don’t do it.”

“Tell you what, kid.” Said Art. “When she comes back in the spring, you and I
can experiment. I say we use three bathtubs. I could use a cute secretary.”

“Perry,” she said turning very serious. “I want to know what is in your heart. Are
you mad at me?”

“ Heck no!” I replied. “Why should I be mad.”

“I didn’t tell you the truth” she said.

“I didn’t ask.” I said. “I knew you were older than me. I could tell that. What
else was there to talk about.”

“Is it really that simple?”

“I suppose it is.” I said. “There is no reason I can see why I should be cranked
out of shape. I gotta say that having a water sprite for a girlfriend is a gas.”

“I think she prefers ‘Elemental’” said Art. “It’s a term of art.”

“Okay, dating an elemental is fun.” I said. “Would someone tell me the
downside?”
“Well, for one,” she said. “You and I cannot enjoy a normal life as man and wife.”

“Why?” I said. “We seem to have matching fixtures.”

“I might have been able to bear you sons.” She said. “I am afraid that was some time ago.”

“I was not thinking about starting a family soon.” I replied. Art got up and left the room

“Yes, but you will.” She said. “Someday that will get in the way.”

“Okay, can I let you know when it does.”

“Of course, Perry. I guess I have seen more of the consequences of this sort of thing.”

“Do you want to break it off?” I said.

“No, I guess you just don’t understand yet.”

“Perhaps I don’t.”

“I suppose that normal men have other desires. You may be unique. However, I can say that someday our reason for loving each other will not seem as important to you as it does now.”

“As I said,” I replied. “I’ll let you know.”

“It is nights like this when life appears the most cruel to me. When I was younger, all I wanted was a young man, handsome and brave, to take my love and allow me to bear him a child. For this treasure, I would have had my soul. Down through the years, my torment has been meeting men who seemed to willing, but once they gained knowledge of my secret, they found one excuse or another to toss me aside. Now, I have
grown too old, and at last I have found a heart pure enough to take me as I am, and I cannot give you sons.

“I’m not so sure of that.” Said Art, returning with the wine. Sue-Chi brought the rest of the meal. “I’m not so sure an undine CAN gain a soul by giving a man a son. I am not sure there is an immortal soul to be gained. I’m doubtful there was a chance that was lost. All I know, Vi-VEE-Ann, is that you have always appeared to me to be one of the most soulful women I have ever known, and I refuse to believe that such a simple thing could keep you from gaining your immortality. If you are soul-less, you sure have done a good job of faking it to these many years.” I handed Vivian a glass of wine and then lifted his own to toast. “To our beloved Vivian. Diety béni d'eau de mon baquet chaud. L'esprit de mon chemin de whoopee. Tonight you have your soul!”

“If you don’t have a soul,” I said to her, brushing a tear away from her eye.”You sure did fool me.” I took the finger with the tear on it and put it to my tongue. “It’s as salty as mine.” I said. Vivian fell against my shoulder and wept. Soon centuries of bitterness and disillusion were flooding out in huge heaving gulps.

“That’s the one problem with these water elementals.” Said art. Once they spring a leak, it’s hard to get them plugged up. Sue-Chi took the soup back and put it in the microwave. She could see this was going to take a while.

We stayed up late and watched the all-night movie with Bob Shrieve. It was The Glass Bottom Boat with Rock Hudson and Doris Day. It was just kooky enough to give everyone a good laugh, and we all turned in when the second feature started. In the morning, Sue-Chi and Vivian got up and made crepes and while I shoveled out the walk enough to get to the truck. Vivian took her requisite little dip in the hot tub.
Finally we loaded ourselves into the truck and Art took Vivian back to Wellington Place for a change of clothes. I went in with her and saw her greet Doctor Turnwater. As he left, Art said he’d be by on Saturday and Sunday to help Vivian get her last dips.

Turnwater was quite relieved. She congratulated me on saving my first damsel and then took to remonstrating Vivian about being more careful. We agreed to stay close to the apartment until Emil came on Sunday to take Vivian to the airport. Doctor Turnwater was cordial, but you could see underneath there were the rippling sinews of a human carnivore that had just found its way out of a tight corner. She was in no mood for anything but pleasantries.

We went back to the apartment in Vivian’s car and went immediately to bed. Not to sleep, but just to get away from it all. We each had our own reasons for feeling that way, but we wanted just wanted to make the world go away for a while.

“Vivian,” I said. “I’m sad about you leaving.”

“I know,” she said.

“I’m all tied up on the inside.” I said. “I don’t know what to make of all of it.”

“Are you mad at me for not being honest.” She asked.

“No, I’m a little mad at myself. I guess I should have seen things.”

“I really thought you had. Are you able to forgive me?”

“There’s nothing to forgive. I knew I was dating an older woman. What’s a few centuries between friends?” I said. She smiled.

“You are the first man I have ever had that accepted all this without question.”

“What’s to question? I knew I loved you. You made me happy. I could see I made you happy. What else is there?”
“As I said,” she replied. “You are the first to look at it that way. I will always treasure that.”

“You are making this sound so final.”

“Perhaps I am.” She replied. “This is about the point where the young lover decides it is time to make a clean break.”

“Quit feeling sorry for yourself.” I replied. “I’m not planning on making my escape. Besides, who’s running off to France?”

“You’re right. However, I will not be hurt if you do not take me make when I return.”

“That’s just goofy,” I replied. “And another thing I think’s goofy, while we’re on the subject is how you and the Turnwaters get along. I get the feeling that they own you, or at least you think they do.”

“In some way,” she said. “I probably feel that they do. The obligation is very old, and you would not understand. I am not compelled by Emil and the Doctor. I do this all out of love. Despite what you may think, the Turnwaters have been very good to me.”

“You’re right, I have a hard time seeing that, but then I’m not like you.”

“I have something for you.” Vivian said. “It is a present.”

“What is it?” I asked.

“One is just a going away present.” She replied. “But I also want to have a token of my gratitude for saving me.” First, I will give you something that I had been planning on giving you for some time. She rolled over and dug under the bed before coming up with a box wrapped for Christmas. She gave it to me and I opened it. It was a white silk scarf.
“Cool.” I said, putting it around my neck.” Thanks.”

“That’s so- so you! “ she said. “You take this all so lightly.”

“I’m sorry, did I say something wrong?”

“No,” she said. “There is nothing wrong. It’s just the way you are.” I have something else. I had Art help me with this. This morning, while you were all inside, I had Art pull a measure of the water from the hot tub at the moment I was . . .er. . . how to say it . . . reconstituting. This was your experiment. You thought it up—no one had ever thought of it.”

“What’s that?”

“Dividing the water while I was in the hot tub, doing my thing.” She said. “Here!”

She gave me a wooden champagne box. Inside amid some excelsior paper was a clear wine bottle filled with water from the hot tub. It was stoppered, and the mouth of the bottle and the stopper had been sealed in wax. “This is my present to you. It is me.”

“What?”

“Go on, silly! Take it. You came up with the idea.”

“Should I drink it?”

“Goodness! I wonder what that would do! No, I was thinking you could keep it. If you ever need me, you need only go to a body of water, a pool, a pond, a lake, and pour it in. If your theory holds true, who knows?”

“So you don’t know what this will do?”

“No. When I was brought to this country, they brought wine casks filled with my native water. This? I don’t know. Maybe you get me, maybe you get a little pixie
version that you can put in your pocket. I honestly do not know. I will say this, my darling Perry: be very careful in how you use this. It is a terrible burden.”

“Why’s that?”

“You have seen how I live. Before you open that bottle and pour it in a pond, ask yourself if you wish the responsibility. Look at the Turnwaters. Whatever comes out will be yours to keep. I would not be at all upset if you walked over and flushed it down the toilet, or tossed it in the ocean.”

“Why wouldn’t that cause you to reconstitute.”

“It’s a fine line, Perry.” She replied. “I am an undine. I can only exist as part of a closed body of water. To pour me into an open-ended body of water would be to cause me to end. You can pour it into a bathtub, but just don’t pull the stopper. Once I am caused to rejoin the great waters of the world, I will be gone like a drop of rain. In that way, I am like you.”
Friday night, Sue and Skip got us out for a last night out—dinner at Pop’s and then a trip over to the Corinthian. It came and went with hardly a word about the excitement. Sue had just figured Vivian had been waylaid with car trouble or something. We continued our last fling at being normal couple on Saturday—a trip to the market and then an afternoon of cooking our favorites. We had way to much wine and hit the sack. Sunday morning, we stayed in bed and had great goodbye sex. She cried a little and then went over to her place to finish packing, stopping by Art’s house on the way.

Skip and Sue were glued to the television. Tony and Walter were hooked too. It was another Bengals home weekend, and it seemed like the whole world was getting interested in football. I wasn’t particularly interested, but it beat moping around the apartment. Vivian came back in a while and we went out for a walk. It was fairly nice weather, so we walked over to the park. There was a family sitting at our favorite picnic table, so we just sat on the wall, overlooking the city.

“Funny,” I said. “It seems like a lifetime ago that we came over here together for the first time.”

“It’s gone by so fast,” she replied.

“I wish you didn’t have to go.

“I wish I did not either.” There was a gust of wind that blew her hair. She turned a bit to get it out of her face. When she turned back, she was crying. We did not talk
anymore. I just held her. After a while, it seemed useless to go any further. We got up and walked slowly around the circle and back out.

Emil was waiting for us outside, when we got back. I knew it was him from way up the block. He was a dark horse’s ass in a leather coat and tyrol, laying against his yellow Olds Torando. As we got closer, you could tell we were coming up on his downwind side.

“You had no business running away like that.” He said. “We must be going soon. There will be traffic from the game.

“So nice to see you too.” Vivian replied. “This is Perry. Perry Oilean, this is Emil Turnwater. Why don’t you get to know each other while I pop in and get my purse. Here are the keys, Emil. My things are in the back.” She went in.

“So you are Perry.” Emil snorted.

“Yes,” I said.

“You are not how I imagined you.” He said.

“I guess I’m a bit of a fooler.” I replied.

“Yes.”

“My Aunt said that you only recently came to understand Vivienne’s situation. That is until -”

“Sort of.” I said. “It was nothing we really talked about.”

“There will be a man here tomorrow to take her car.” He said. “You will give him the keys.”
“Yes, “ I said. “Vivian told me the plan.

“You must be here to meet him? Yes.”

“Yes, Emil. I’ll be here all morning.”

“It is important.”

“Well Garsh- Darnit, Emil! I’m just not sure if my over-edjumacated pea-brain can handle all this. Maybe you ought to call me from France and remind me in the morning.” Our eyes met.

“I will open my boot for you.” He said. “Be careful with her things.” He pitched the car keys at me.

“Be careful, yourself.” I said, grabbing them as they went past my head. I winged them backhanded back to him. They hit his chest and fell to the ground. I had expected him to catch them, but there was no reaction from him until after the keys had bounced off the ground. “You’re the one that’s doing the taxi driving.” Emil turned red, but said nothing. He went to Peugeot and started dragging her bags out.

“If we miss this flight, I don’t know what we’ll do.” he said. “This is very dangerous. She must be back home in 24 hours.

“I suppose you could leave her here.” I replied. I got no reaction.

Vivian took her time saying her goodbyes and left us several minutes, in which I sat on the stone wall and watched Emil chain smoke Gilois and glower at me. There was really nothing to say to Emil.

Vivan came out just as I was thinking about going in to check on her. I grabbed her and took her off her feet and kissed her until I was totally drunk with her. She
hesitated a bit, perhaps because Emil was watching, but quickly gave in. We had absolutely the best bit of snogging I knew I would ever have.

“It is time.” Said Emil.

“It is.” I said.

“Au revoir, Perry.”

“Have a good trip.” I replied. “Send me a postcard or something.” She put a hand to my lips and turned and left. Emil held the door of the Toranado. She got in. Emil gave me one more glare and then took off, squeeling the tires slightly as he did. I went back inside.

The Bengals were getting it handed to them by San Francisco, and everyone was quite glum. It was more like a wake than a party. I had the Peugeot, at least for the day, so I called up Art, and asked him if he wanted to see the guns. He did, but said that would have to wait until after the game. It was already after half-time, so I hung out some more with the crowd and then loaded up the guns and went over.

Art seemed to be read for a break when I arrived. The fourth quarter was not going well. Art liked the distraction. He helped me get the big under-the-bed chest in from the car. He grabbed a quilt from the closet and spread it out on the dining room table.

“Let’s see what you have here,” Art said. He reached into the pile of newspaper, and pulled out the first piece.

“Luger, Nine millimeter parabellum. Reasonable condition.” he said. “Of course these babies were built to last forever. He put it aside and drew the next one. It was the other pistol.
“Thirty-eight Smith and Wesson Colt New Police service revolver.” He brought it close and felt the trigger pull. “Good home self defense weapon. Looks like a new barrel—bluing doesn’t match”

“What have we here?” He brought out two pieces of a rifle. “A Savage Eighteen-Nintey-Nine? . . Nope, Model 99 in 300 Savage. Obviously a takedown model. Original bluing is about sixty percent. Nice. He assembled it quickly and operated the lever. The counter works as well as the cock indicator.”

“Hmmm. “ He said. “A Winchester Sixty-Two. Twenty-Two pump. Looks like it’s been around the block. Probably a kid’s rifle.” The rifle was in two pieces. He looked down the barrel approvingly and started to move on.

“It was my Dad’s—when he was young.”

“It looks like he took good care of it. Looks like someone kept the job up.”

“I tried.” I said.

“You did good. Who taught you?”

“No one,” I said. “I read how to do it in an Outdoor Life sitting in the barbershop.”

“Ah!” said Art, wistfully.” Ray Bergman. Jack O’Connor. The giants of our youth. . . . And here comes the finale: A Model 12 Winchester with one . . . no two barrels. One is obviously for trap, and the other is for skeet.”

“So which one would he have gone deer hunting with?”

“There’s two possibilities.” Art said. “If he was in a shotgun-only state like this one, he’d probably have taken this puppy with the skeet barrel on. Otherwise, he would have taken the Savage over there. It’s too bad we’re already into deer season.”
“You mean go deer hunting?”

“Sure.” He said. “The problem is that opening day was last Monday.”

“Oh.”

“You serious about going?”

“I suppose.”

“I’ll tell you what. I have to proctor an early final tomorrow, but I’ll be done with plenty of time left. We’ll see what we can do. I’ll at least take you out and show you how these things work.”

“Cool.”

“Do you have a good place to keep these?”

“I keep them in this chest.”

“We’ll get you a couple of rugs so that you can carry them better. Let’s figure on taking the ‘Twelve with the skeet barrel, the twenty-two there, and the revolver. That will be enough for tomorrow. What? Do you keep those at your folks?”

“I’ve been keeping them at my place.”

“Bad ju-ju. They’ll grow legs up in Clifton Heights. I’d keep them out at your folks. If you’ll trust me, I’ll keep them here for you tonight, and then we can drop them off on the way out to the range. Where is your parent’s house?”

“By the way.” I said. “My Mom said she knew you.”

“Oh yeah?” he said “Imagine that.”

“Yeah, “ I said. “You must have known my father as well. He worked out at General Electric.”
“I knew your father.” Said Art. “Not all that well. We both shot a little at a gun club out in Green Township. I met them at a corn roast a few times, and then I would run into him at work, sometimes in the parking lot.”

“If you don’t mind.” I said, “Can I ask why you did not say anything before. It’s not like Oilean is all that common a name.” Art frowned and took a deep breath.

“To be honest,” he said. “Your Dad’s death sort of tore me up. He seemed to be about my age. I had just come back from a series of very . . . let’s just say ‘very tragic’ business trips and I found out your father had passed on. It hit me in just the wrong way.”

“Mom mentioned your first wife, too.” I guess they knew each other.

“Oh, no doubt.” Said Art. “Gwen was hard to forget; it was probably through the picnics out at the club.”

I asked Art what sort of stuff I needed to bring along. He said that I should get ready as though I was going on a long hike, and to bring a bunch of layers along, with enough changes for at least a few days. If I’d get it laid out, he’d help me sort it all out. I went back home and munched on the leftovers from the Bengal party they had thrown. Everyone had gone out after the game.

I rounded up a few sweat shirts, a wool sweater, a couple pair of jeans, wool socks, and my hiking boots, and put my kit together. I had a green snorkel coat left over from high school that was warm. It had an orange lining that something told me was for things like hunting, but I could not remember exactly how. I was asleep before anyone came home—one last blow-off before exams started.
Art showed up around just as I was finishing my coffee. He looked over my choice of stuff, and said we could pick the things that were missing up at Swallens on the way out. We had to wait a while for the guy to show up for Vivian’s car, but eventually he did. I gave him the keys and off he went. I realized then how much had changed in just a day.

I left a note explaining my absence on the table and hauled my stuff down to the truck. Art had taken it through the car wash and had gotten all the grime off of it. In the sunshine, it looked awesome—a red Chevy Luv with a white top with a fresh coat of spray wax. We took off for my parent’s house. No one was home. Art and I took the rest of the collection to the basement. Art’s picks for the day’s shooting were in wrapped in a blanket behind the seat.

After that, we hit the Swallens out in Tri-County. Art walked through the sporting goods department and started throwing stuff into the cart. There were a few boxes of shells for our shotguns, some clay birds, some deer slugs. He found me an orange vest and an orange hat, a flashlight and some fresh batteries, and a sling for the shotgun, so I could carry it on my shoulder. We both bought hunting licenses and deer tags, and tag holders for the middle of our backs. He also had me by a gun case for both the rifle and the shotgun. They were good pieces, and he did not want them to get scratched up. By the time we had some food staples and so on in the cart, my share was probably close to $100. I started pealing twenties from my wallet and Art stopped me. Art said that if I liked deer hunting, I could pay him for the stuff like the orange vest. He was going to stake me, and I could write him a check at the end of the trip for my share. I surprised he was that generous, and grateful.
Our next stop was Art’s gun club, which was way out past Northgate and down along the Miami River. It was nearly empty when we got there. Art pulled up to a Skeet range and we unloaded a bunch of stuff from the truck and he showed me the basics of how to load and fire the shotgun. Then he gave me a set of ear muffs and threw a clay bird out into the field a few yards and had me aim and fire at it. With a good solid thump, the ground erupted in a spray of dirt and the clay target disappeared. It was exhilarating. We repeated the exercise a few times.

The next step was not something I was completely ready for. He took another clay and put it in a hand thrower. He said I should yell “Pull!” and he would toss the bird downrange. It all made sense. I yelled “Pull!” Art flung the target. I stood dumbfounded for a moment, and then put the butt of the gun against my upper arm and pulled the trigger.

“Yow!” I screamed. “My arm!”

“Silly goose!” Art said. “I told you to shoulder the shotgun solidly. Ready to try again?”

“That really hurt!” I said.

“I bet. If you don’t glue that stock to your shoulder, it’ll let you know right now! Ready?”

“Okay.” I brought the gun up and looked down the barrel as he had said. “Pull.”

This time I managed to hit the bird.

“That’s great.” Said Art. “You’re a natural. I had Sue-Chi out here a few months
ago, and she tried all afternoon to hit a bird—couldn’t to save her soul. Bless her heart. You ready for another?”

“Sure.” I said. He threw five more for me, and hit three. I then threw a few for him, and Art four out of five. One of them was a lousy throw. Art then showed me how he had gotten started shooting clays. He would have a round in an open chamber of the shotgun. He’d fling a target into the air, drop the thrower, close the action, shoulder the gun and shoot. He got 5 out of 8 this way, complaining that the skeet barrel had an open choke, and it was hard to hit the clay that far out. We then traded back and forth until all the shells were gone.

We cleaned up our mess, and loaded up, and went over to the rifle range. It was a long low roofed enclosure with concrete shooting benches overlooking a field with berms scattered at various yardages. There was one old coot shooting at one end, but he closed up shop as we started setting up. Down at the far end was a single picnic table and a berm only a stone’s throw away.

“We’re going to see how this skeet barrel of yours shoots.” He said. We turned on a switch and a bunch of lights started flashing and a buzzer sounded. “That’s so they know we’re out changing targets,” he said. We walked out, stapled a few paper plates to the board in front of the earthen berm, and then went back to the picnic table. Art opened up a green and yellow box of deer slugs, and had me load one and shoot at the pie plate. My first one nicked the upper edge of one of the plates. I tried four more, and had them all nearly touching, near the center of the plate. These were much stronger loads, but I’d learned my lesson and was grinding the stock into my shoulder before shooting. Art seemed satisfied that I had a grasp of what I was doing.
We spent the rest of the time at the range, shooting at the pie plates and other things with the pump 22. It was fun. It was an accurate little rifle, and soon I was picking pebbles out from the berm and hitting them reliably. All too soon, the ammunition was exhausted, and it was time to go. It was getting on into the afternoon, and we rode back up Blue Rock to the Circle Freeway and then headed back across to I-71. We stopped for gas just North of Kings Island and Art gave me the keys.

“Take it for a while.” He said.
Chapter 21

We had about a half-hour’s ride up I-71. We took the exit for Washington Courthouse and ran through town and back out on 22, heading towards Circleville. Along the way there was a string of little towns like New Holland and Williamsport. The afternoon wore on.

“What was my father like?” I asked.

“Your father was a really good man. He was this stolid fellow with this great sense of right and wrong—a real Old Testament sort of guy. He was an engineer. He thought logically and demanded the same of everyone around him. He did it with humor, though. He was a funny guy. He always knew how to make you smile.”

“I thought you didn’t know him that well.”

“I didn’t. That was just my observation of him. I remember that we had a meeting out at the club once. Your father listened quietly to what everyone had to say about putting in a new skeet tower, and then proceeded to point out how it was utter folly to proceed. He put forward a completely different plan that he’d sketched out while other people were talking, and it all made so much better sense than what the committee had said. We ended up doing his plan, scratched out on a napkin. Later, he went around and made sure everyone didn’t have hurt feelings, but that he felt the plan was just plain wrong, and felt compelled to speak out. By the time he was done, he had everyone laughing about it.”
“He was the sort of guy.” Art continued, “That could give you the weather or the
time of day, and make it sound like it was Sermon on the Mount. He was just that
sincere. If he liked you, you knew it. If he didn’t like you, he’d tell you straight to your
face, and before long you’d be agreeing with him.”

“I don’t have much of a memory of him.” I said. “All I can remember is the
sound of his voice and how he smelled.”

“That’s better than I remember of mine.” He said. “I draw a blank.”

“Really? That seems a shame. Do you remember much of your childhood?”

“Almost nothing. I have this one memory of being at home out in the garden.
There was this tremendous stone fence in front of me. Of course, it must not have been
that tall—I was just that small. It was a very windy day, like the sort you get in March
around here. I remember playing along the wall, and then making a dash for the gate. I
managed to get through, and I remember the wonder I felt seeing what lay beyond. I got
caught by someone, and dragged back in with a scolding, and being told not to do that
again.

“Funny,” I replied. “I’ve got a few like that. Our yard had a fence around it, and
I can remember sneeking out through a window when I was supposed to be taking a nap.
I’d go and climb the fence and play in the neighbor’s yards—hide in bushes and such. I
figured that if I could get back without being caught, I’d never really been gone.”

“I guess we were both naturals for this sort of thing.” Art replied.

“So what exactly have I signed up for,” I asked. “What’s deer hunting like?”
“It’s one of those things where you sit for hours and do absolutely nothing, and then all of a sudden, you have something drop in your lap and you have to respond. It’s an exercise in boredom and discipline.”

“Is this dangerous?”

“No, I read somewhere that it’s a lot safer than going to a church social.”

“How can that be?”

“Well, I guess you go to the church picnic, you run into all sorts of things like heat stroke, or having a heart attack during the softball game. We’re certainly taking more of a risk driving there than actually getting out and doing it.”

“I can’t believe that.”

“Look, you’re going out and you’re going to sit in the woods. If you see a deer, you’re going to shoot it. Safe for you—deadly for the deer. There’s a good chance you won’t even see a deer. You just have to follow what I told you at the range: treat that shotgun like it’s loaded at all times, don’t point it at anything you don’t want to shoot, and keep your finger off the trigger unless you mean to use it. I wouldn’t even load up until you’re sitting down, and I’d unload if I was figuring on doing any walking.”

“What about getting shot by somebody else?”

“A couple of guys get shot every year in this state. One fellow will shoot his buddy, thinking he was a deer. If you dig a little deeper, you usually find that either they weren’t wearing legal orange, or the shooter heard a noise in the bushes and just started blasting, or it was too dark to see what was really out there. If you follow the laws, no one is going to get shot. Deer have four legs, and antlers. Deer do not wear orange, and do not carry flashlights.”
“But what if we run into hunters that don’t know any better?”

“I’ve been hunting deer in Kentucky and Ohio for years now. Kentucky has a rifle season. Ohio has a shotgun season. I’ve been waiting to actually meet an honest to goodness slob hunter. The guys I know that hunt are all perfect gentlemen and perfect sportsmen. However, we all have stories of people who know people who know . . . you know what I mean? Heck, the place we’re going I doubt we’ll see anyone but us while we’re there. You’ll hear shooting all day long, and if you’re head is in just the right frame of mind, you can imagine all sorts of deadbeats pulling the trigger—that is, if you want to. The fact of the matter is, it’ll be mostly guys like you and me, and some of us will bag a buck, and some of us won’t.

“So where actually are we going?” I asked.

“Merle has a place. It’s up in the hills southeast of Columbus. There may be a couple of others there, but it might just be the three of us.”

“This is THE Merle.”

“None other. Merle retired out this way years ago. He’s got quite a spot.”

“You didn’t finish your story the other day. I take it your project got cancelled.”

The Testament of Art Penn

“Cancelled? No. No one ever said Excalibur-29 was ended. We all just drifted away. We were still operating until about five years ago, but it was mostly pure research by then. The part I was telling you—with the Soviets and all—that all ended about 1963. It’s weird. I know for a fact that Ike didn’t like us. He probably would have killed us off if he knew what was going on. He really got to distrust what he called the Military
Industrial Complex. What’s ironic is that we probably did more to thwart the Military Industrial Complex than any other single group, but I’m quite certain Eisenhower would have gotten really hot if he knew what we were doing.

Of course that’s kind of goofy speculation. The fact of the matter is that by the time we had worn out our options trying to sweeten the outcome of the war, and then trying to keep the Soviets from gaining superiority, the whole world was so jumbled that it was impossible to tell what was our real handiwork and what was just collateral chaos. To this day, I cannot tell you where one history ends and another begins. I can also tell you that it was not just us and the Soviets, and it was not just in the post-war period. If you want to dig even just a little, you will see this sort of thing all through the historical record. Pick up a copy of the Bible, and start reading. Has it ever occurred to you why nothing ever agrees with itself in the Bible? Don’t you think somebody would have hired an editor by now and cleaned up a few of the continuity problems? Four Gospels tell four different stories . . . Don’t get me started on the Old Testament. If you start reading Genesis from the beginning, you’re head’s swimming in a few pages. All of history is that way. It’s all a jumble. Look anywhere, and you will find that someone has been into the Newtonian world machine, monkeying with it, and it was not us.

Of course, give me any single paradox created by time travel, or inter-dimensional travel in general, and I’ll show you a way to break it. Causality? That’s a bedtime story we tell the kids. Conservation of energy and mass? Those are fairy tales too. You just have to have the stomach for the consequences. Look at me. I look like I’m what? Fifty? What if I told you that I had over two hundred and fifty years that I can account for? Screwy, huh?
By the time we made peace with the Soviets, I think both sides were worn out. We are, after all, human beings. Our shoulders are not broad enough to take on the responsibilities of the World. I know that sounds like whining, but at what point do you decide that you want off? When are the problems of the World at a level you can tolerate? We fixed a few things—at least we thought we did. Our goal was to keep Hitler off the beaches. It worked. When we ran it through, though, we kept bumping into an attack on Pearl Harbor. At one point, we fixed Pearl Harbor—the Japanese carriers were turned away, only to come and bite us later. We finally had to accept Pearl Harbor and move on. We had to live with a couple thousand lives lost, and a country where everyone knew where they were when they heard the news. Still, it beat the alternatives. It just went like that, year after year, and if it didn’t work out, we’d have to start over.

At what point do you let the bombs drop on Kokura and Nagasaki and let yourself off the hook, because atomic bombs are nothing compared to what Curtis LeMay could do on a good day. At what point do you say six million Jews are acceptable losses so long as the rest of Europe does not end up a self-lit glass parking lot for Russian tanks?

It finally got personal, because it started to occur to us that this was not time tripping in the way you write it in a cheap Sci-Fi novel. No, what we discovered was that all we were doing was just jumping from one set of eventualities to another. We had found not time travel, but inter-dimensional travel. All we were really doing is changing the channels of the TV set. The programs were set. All we could do was pick and chose which ones we wanted to watch. We weren’t saving civilization from itself, all we were doing was being tourists in another set of dimensions.
Not too many people ever get to really glimpse the Infinite. I did. A few of us did. You finally get to see that Infinite is just that—Infinite. There’s a universe out there where we stopped for dinner in Washington Court House, and we’re thirty miles back. There’s another out there that has us getting gas in Williamsport. There’s one out there where six million Jews go to the ovens, and another where it’s only five. It makes no difference. It’s goofy to shoot Hitler, coming out of the crapper in 1919, if another crazy bed bug is just going to crawl out from the mattress and take his place. Take my word for it, I’ve tried. Infinite is something no one can really handle—no me, not anyone who I’ve known to try. Time travel to iron out the wrinkles of History is a morally bankrupt endeavor. It is a fool’s errand.

Don’t think we didn’t fight the idea. When it all started to came in on us, we tried everything. A bunch of us even tried to travel far enough back in time that we could live out our lives in relative calm and happiness, knowing what we knew of the future. That didn’t work either, and then we had a heck of a time getting back to where we started. That’s not to say we didn’t have fun for a while. All you can really do is find a life where you’re happy—we just had our heads up our asses on how to go about doing it.

And I’ll tell you another thing: The deeper you go down this bunny hole the worse it gets. There seems to be someone always discovering that they can travel through time, and off they go—just like we did. There’s always somebody mucking with things. It makes no sense to try to do your thing, because there are an infinite number of dofi – that’s right, plural of dofus? There are an infinite number of dofi that are screwing around with the same thing. Hell, there was even a club on a backstreet in Berlin called the Zeitfliegt Klub. Before Himmler had it infiltrated, there was a whole community of
would-be Hitler time-traveling assassins hanging out there cranking each other off about how they were going to off Hitler. The Brits had also infiltrated the group, and used it to slip information indicating that the Abwehr’s codes had been compromised. Canaris launched an internal investigation, which got promptly leaked to the SS. Canaris got caught trying to hide a scandal that didn’t exist, and eventually went down in flames. Some of the Zeitfleighters got stood up against the wall. One of the funnier parts in this is that the Brits were openly working with the Foreign Ministry, and even inside the Abwehr to get Canaris hanged, while all the while Canaris had been plotting with Wild Bill Donovan to off Hitler and make peace in the West.

But I digress. So here I am, having found my way to Berlin. I show up in this hole-in-the-wall joint in 1943. This is my first time there, and it’s also my first really official attempt to get at Hitler. I walk in, and here are thirty other people in there whooping it up. Some ended up being close friends. Some ended up shot. Some I keep bumping into to this day. We were all people who’d shown up with one thing on their mind: Kill Hitler. I’ve been in a bunch of these gigs since, but I’ve never seen things so haphazard—so matter-of-fact. I’ve heard tell that half the seats in Fords Theater on the night of April 5, 1865 are filled with spectators who are there just to see the assassination; this was an out-and-out party. The craziest part of all? I ended up drinking with Admiral Canaris himself that night. I don’t care what you say about him, that guy was all right. It was Canaris, and his adjutant, and this cute little trick named Elsheva who was there from the Simon Weisenthal Center. The adjutant had this bimbo with him named Lagi—couldn’t keep her mouth shut.
If you go to see Lincoln shot, you go in and play it cool. You never acknowledge someone you know from another time. It’s a somber thing. It’s ritual. This shindig that they had going at the Zeitfleighters was pure lunacy, and I’m standing there in my tailor-made custom period clothing while some rabbinical students from Hebrew Union College wearing Izod Golf Shirts, are doing shots at the bar with a couple of turncoat Gestapo men, trying to figure out how to throw a monkey wrench into the Final Solution.

Here’s the problem: If you want your Hitler dead before Spring of 1945, you need him clean of amphetamines. If not, that bastard was so wired, he’d twang in a high wind, and he had an uncanny—and I mean un-freaking canny sense of when he was in danger. If you have him off amphetamines—remember, you pick your own reality in this—you have a dictator with a bit more of a grasp of reality. Maybe he doesn’t invade England or Russia, or even Poland. Then what? Why waste your load on a not-so-bad Hitler. If you want to off a real devil-Hitler, forget it. He gets offed by the guards before he even makes it out of Landsberg and *Mein Kampf* never gets written. So if you’re going to set about offing Hitler, you need to insinuate yourself into a universe where he’s got just the right amount of craziness, just the right amount of this, and that.

But then look what you’ve done. You’ve gone and found yourself a world that has just the right Hitler, but is that really the world you want? Is it part of a world you want to go back to? Hasn’t it just become a major bit of jerking off on the great stage of History? Going further, do you really want to travel forward in time and behold the consequences of you being the guy who punched der Furher’s ticket and know that everything that happened from that point on is on your head? And while we’re at it, let us not forget the little bastards running around through time trying to be Hitler’s guardian
angels. All these neo-Nazi guardian angels seem to swarm on a narrow band of Hitlers that are just the sort of guy you need for maximum mayhem. In the end, I have to applaud the guys that put together the July 20 thing. Guys like Canaris and Keitel, and von Stauffenberg did a wonderful thing—I ended up drinking with all those guys at one time or another. They were doing all anyone could do. The fact of the matter is, that with a puke like Hitler—dug into the fabric of a major world power like a tick, you need the forces of whole nations to make things happen. What did I add to it? Not a damn thing, really. I did manage to get in a few licks for Willy—at the end. It didn’t amount to much, but it at least gave me a universe I could live in.

The Testament of Perry Oilean

“What are you talking about?” I said. I was having trouble soaking it all in. “So actually tried to kill Hitler?”

“Several times. I succeeded on two occasions. Once in 1920, in the men’s room at the Hofbrauhaus in Munich with the help of Willy. The other time was in 1943 with the help of Canaris and the OSS. Both times we managed to make things much worse than I ever dreamed.

“You’re full of crap.”

“No, maybe in your world view I am. In mine, I was there. I saw it. It happened. The problem with you is that you’re thinking of your Hitler and your history. I go back to what I said. There are an infinite number of Hitlers out there. Only a few are worth murdering, because only a subset come to power and last as long as they did. The subset is still infinite, however. The bottom line is that there are an infinite number of Hitlers to
kill, and you can’t kill them all. If you want to go kill a Hitler, fine. All I’m saying is
that it was not worth it, because the world timeline of your universe does not include it.
You have left the timeline you started with and gone looking for a new one. If you want
to get succinct: History sucks. The Future sucks. Live in the present and be done with
it.

“My head’s spinning.”

“That’s probably a good thing, except for fact that you’re driving. Hands on the
wheel. Stay to the right of the double yellow line. Avoid mailboxes.”

“Funny. Okay, let me get this straight. There are an infinite number of Hitlers.
That means there are an infinite number of me-sis and an infinite number of you-ses, and
only some of them are going deer hunting. The rest are off doing something else.”

“Yes, I think you are getting the drift. So then you can see how any attempt to
change History with a big ‘H’ is just cranking off.”

“I’m not quite there, but I’m on the way.”

“Aren’t we all.”
Chapter 22

By the time we hit Circleville, it was getting dark. We drove through the center and then suddenly veered off onto what looked like a residential street, but it quickly turned into Route 56, heading out of town. The trip had grown quiet. Art had sunk into a pensive silence, and I really did not know what to say. It was bewildering, but I guess I could grasp that there were an infinite number of Hitlers out there, but there were also an infinite number of me as well. Were all of us just floating through this swamp, or were some of us happily selling insurance and drinking at lunch?

“The first time I came up through here,” began Art after a long silence, “It was about a year after the last of all the mucking around. Merle had disappeared. Our bunch had pretty much flown to the winds. I was back to teaching full time at UC, and in the Fall I got a letter from Merle saying that he’d settled southeast of Columbus, and he wanted me to come and visit.”

The Testament of Art Penn

So I let Clifton on a Saturday morning and drove up Route 22. It was one of those perfect Fall days. The maples were just about nearing their peak. It was beautiful. I came up here, and got caught in the middle of the stinking Pumpkin Festival. They have this Pumpkin Festival every year in October, and they get in thousands of people to look at their pumpkins. The whole town must live for this thing. Anyhow, I was stuck in the traffic, and I was getting mad, and then I realized what a beautiful thing I was seeing. For all its stupid kitschy glory, there was something deep and profound about the fact that
it was there. Little girls were on floats competing to see who’s going to be Little Miss Pumpkin. Old farts had pumpkins that filled the back of their pickups. Everyone was having fun. You should have seen it.

It all just fell into place for me. Up until then, I’d spent all those years fighting to keep a piece of this alive. “Keep the World Safe for Democracy?” Heck no, I’d been fighting to keep the world safe for pumpkin festivals. Really, that’s what it boiled down to, and after all that fighting—looking at charred bodies and stray limbs hanging in trees, and – after all that and finally coming back home, dragging my tail, whipped. After all that, I finally saw something that made me realize that I’d made it. I’d not only survived, but I had succeeded. I still hadn’t put it all together—that all I’d been doing is mucking around uselessly. I still felt time travel was worth something, and that I’d failed. This was the first sign that I hadn’t. It’s funny, I didn’t even think to stop that trip. I came back for years after though. By then, it looked like just another cheesy festival to me. But for that one shining moment, rolling up the main drag, it all made sense.

Merle’s place is way-the-hell out there. He wanted to be as far away from town as possible, and still be close to . . . I don’t know . . . maybe me. It’s hard to say. I’m forever in Merle’s debt for a lot of things, but coming up that weekend was the beginning of whatever happiness I’ve been able to find in this world. I cried my balls off from Circleville on up, and barely recovered when I hit the bottom of Merle’s mountain. It all let out of me. I can’t help believing that Merle had something to do with it, that he’d planned it that way. It’s a beautiful spot he has up there.

He’s a bit of a hermit, but in a gregarious sort of way. He gets a lot of visitors—we all stop in to see him. Merle was ingenious. He went back and bought this place way
back and had it put into a trust. He was worried about fallout, so he did study and found a good safe spot that was outside the predicted fallout plumes. We had ample empirical data. By the time he dropped out and set up shop on his little mountain, the trees had grown over road leading in, and there was no decent way up except a footpath that is fairly easy for one man to defend. Merle’s brilliant. I’ve got to admit it.

The Testament of Perry Oilean

“Kokura,” I said, somewhere out of thin air.

“What?”

“Kokura.” I said. “You said awhile back you had seen the bomb drop on Kokura.”

“Yes?”

“The A-bombs were only dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.” I replied.

“I’m sorry. I’ve seen it played out a bunch of ways. They all run together for me. If you say Hiroshima, Hiroshima it is. I’ve also seen Dayton go, and then 8 hours later seen one that landed in the train yards at Queensgate, and another take out Evendale. If you are ever in Cincinnati, and see a bright flash to the North—haul ass as fast as you can south, over the bridges, and don’t stop until you hit the Tennessee line. That first flash is Wright-Patt going up. They’ll be hitting the population centers within 8 hours.

“That’s scary.” I said.

“I hope it never comes to that.” He said. “But it has. You never know when the Soviets are going to get a hair up their ass, and start launching.”

“But doesn’t that mean they get it too?”
“Usually.”

“Why go south?”

“Prevailing winds, distance from population centers—that sort of thing. Once you get into the mountains, you’re pretty much home free. Don’t be like Merle, though. Don’t think you can dig yourself a hole and hide. Learn to assimilate yourself into the middle of whatever civilization is left. It’s like that line out of “Harvey.” Elwood Dowd says, ‘You either have to be very, very smart or very, very nice.’ Be both and try to hide the smart part.”

“That’s rather chilling.” I replied. “And I take it you’ve got experience with both?”

“Oodles.”

By this time, we had passed through Leistville and were coming close to Laurelville. There was a glimmer of light on the horizon,

“That light.” I said. “Are we getting close to Columbus?”

“No,” said Art, “That’s the sun coming up.”

“You’re kidding me! We haven’t been driving all night. We’ve only been on the road a couple of hours.”

“This is Saturday morning,” replied Art. “Last week, Saturday Morning. My watch says it’s getting on towards sunrise. Let’s catch some breakfast.”

I looked at my wristwatch. It was a few minutes before seven. Seven PM made sense Seven AM didn’t. I pulled through the sparse little square in Laurelville and stopped at the diner on the far side. It had a big banner out welcoming deer hunters.
“God how I like pulling that trick,” said Art.

“How did we get here?”

“We drove, silly.”

“You know what I mean.”

“It’s no trick, really. You just have to know where and when you’re going.”

“So we just gained back several days.”

“Yes. You wanted to go deer hunting, didn’t you?”

“Yes,”

“And we’d missed the Opener, right?”

“If you say so.”

“So what else were we going to do? Think about it. Just get yourself collected and come on in. I’ll buy.”

“Aren’t you breaking the protocols you set up with the Russians?”

“Oh well, they can write me up if they find out. I don’t think anyone’s watching right now.” I followed him into the diner. It was a small place with just a few tables. They seemed to do the majority of their business as a pizza parlor, but they were serving breakfast. We took a seat by the reefer where they kept the cold 2-liters. The waitress brought us coffee and we both ordered the special—eggs, hash browns, bacon and so on. I wasn’t paying much attention.

“This is nuts.” I said.

“Yeah, but you get used to it after a bit.” Art chuckled. “The point is that both you and I know that we’re both back in Clifton, safe and sound. There’s no way we’re going to bump into each other, and I checked the paper and nobody died in the county we’re
hunting in while we were gone. We can sneak out through the fence; have some fun and slip back right after we left. No foul.”

Breakfast was good, even though it felt more like dinner. Art said it would be a good idea to hole up for a little while and let the sun come up. It was hard finding Merle’s place except when there was good light.

“So you don’t mind breaking the rules?”

“What rules? I’ve got a gentleman’s agreement with three pesky Ukranians. It was all done on a handshake, and I’m sure they cheat like hell. The point of the protocols was to make sure we stopped meddling in the business of the superpowers. It was doing nothing for us or the countries we represented. The whole idea was a farce. I just gave them a way to bow out gracefully.”

“So you’re telling me there’s nothing wrong with what we’re doing?”

“No. Absolutely not. We’re doing the same thing everyone else is doing every moment of their existence. We’re moving from one instant to the next, and passing from one frame of the Universe to the next. All we’re doing is jumping off the carousel and striking out on our own. The carousel keeps going, and no one is hurt. What difference does it make if we take the next few days in the beginning of December or the middle?”

“I suppose you’re right. “ I said. “It just sounds like it’s wrong.”

“A lot of things sound wrong, just because you didn’t think you could do them. Trust me on this.”

From Laurelville, we kept driving on RT 56 until a sudden jog in the road at South Bloomingdale nearly made me miss. From that turn on made me fell as though we
were going down the bunny hole. For one thing, the road was deserted. For another, it was deep woods on either side, like the forest primeval. For another, we were constantly either climbing or descending a hill. We had left the flat part of the trip, and were now heading into the hills. Before we got to a lone flashing light, marking an intersection, the road had leveled off again, but we were much higher than we had been before. At the intersection, we turned left and headed North on Route 93. We passed through the nearly-nonexistant Mount Pleasant, and continued on to Isleboro. Just before the big bend in 93 at Ilseboro we turned left and headed off on a road that took us down into a deep hollow. Art started paying close attention to the road.

“It’s darn near impossible to find unless the leaves are down.” He said. “The only way I know how to get to it is to find a line of sycamores that are following the sides of a creek, going up the hill. If the leaves are on, you can’t see the white trunks of the sycamores. We shouldn’t have trouble seeing them today.” We drove a bit longer and Art suddenly pointed to out the window. “There! Look at your odometer and let me know when we’ve gone another two tenths of a mile.” I complied. We pulled off onto what looked like an abandoned roadside picnic area. The parking lot had a somewhat hidden jog in it, and we pulled back behind a thicket of pine and found another small parking apron. Art and I got out. “We hoof it from here.” He said.

It was going to take a few trips to carry everything we had brought. Art pulled out a pair of pack baskets and started to fill them with our provisions, our clothes and so on. We then crossed back over the road and followed a path along a stream that snaked its way gradually up a hill. At one point, the path and the stream diverged, and we followed a steeper gully up the hill, picking our way from one massive sycamore tree to
the next. The path was well kept but not well traveled. Occasionally you would find a place where rocks had been fashioned into steps or a tree root had been coaxed to provide a ledge. However, the trail was, by in large, untrammeled.

When we reached the top of the hill, there was a tree line. Beyond this was a farm house, a few outbuildings and a road leading into the woods on the far side. We exited the woods and walked towards the house. As we approached, I became aware of a figure, sitting in a rocking chair on the front porch. The house looked quite out of place for its setting. It was a wide, low bungalow-ish sort of thing. It looked like it should be on a tree-lined suburban street with kids playing out front.

Art and I continued up to the house. There were two dogs and a cat on the porch. The dogs came down to sniff us. The cat just watched, largely unimpressed.

“Morning!” Art said.

“Sure, you say that now,” replied the fellow. “Where were you last night?”

“How you doing?”

“I’ve had a lot worse,” said the man. “A lot worse, indeed. I’ll take what I woke up with.”

“Same here--that’s all anyone can ask.”

“Yep. Sure is. Good to see ya’ Merle. This is Perry.”

I stepped forward and shook hands with Merle, who got up out of his chair as I came.

“Perry,” he said. “Good to see you.”

“Good to meet you.”

“Good trip?”
“Interesting.” I replied. “Art took me a way I’d never been before.”

“He likes to do that.” Said Merle.

“When did you leave, Art?”

“A week from Monday.” Art replied

“Yes. That’s Art for you! So did you all come up here to bag some venison?”

“Yes.”

“There’s plenty of it up here. Don’t like those deer—they come up and eat my apples and my peaches and get into my garden and skin me. Then the turkeys come up in the Spring and get on the limbs of all my fruit trees and knock off the blossoms. You’re welcome to the lot of them.”

“Well then! It’s a good thing we showed up when we did!” Art replied. With that, we took a seat on the porch and sat with Merle.

Before lunch, we’d been down the mountain twice and back up. Merle followed us down and helped. I had imagined Merle as a much older fellow. He was, but he wasn’t. That is, he sounded like an old coot, but he looked closer to my age than Art’s. I might have pegged him at mid-twenties. He was quite fit, for whatever age he was. He was always way ahead of us, and would get a ways up the hill and then stand and wait for us to catch up. A lot of what we carried up were groceries that Art had bought for Merle—things that might be hard to find. It turned out that Merle had a penchant for a certain brand of canned peaches as well as pork rinds. Both were well represented. We had hot dogs and potato chips for lunch. This was a great delicacy for our host.

Merle took us on a tour. There were pigs and cows, a mule, and a bunch of chickens. Merle had a windmill that generated the motive power for pump that filled a
water tank on stilts. Most of the water came from runoffs from the roofs of the house and barns and was collected in a cistern. Electricity was generated by damming the stream below and powering a small turbine. It was enough to charge a small bank of golf cart batteries, and that kept his refrigerator and freezer running as well as the lights.

“Over here, we have the manna from heaven.” Merle said. “It looks like a shed, but it’s not. I just got tired of looking at it.” I peaked inside. The space was filled with one of those large overseas shipping containers. “Twice a year, I get a buddy who flies helicopters to drop one of these off. It’s a hell of a lot cheaper than driving out to the store. I send him a list of what I need, and six months later, it drops down from the sky and then he takes back the empty. It’s about an 80 mile round trip for him when he does it—just buries the gas on some other project he’s doing.”

Art asked. “Is that still-?”

“His son. He just likes coming up here.”
Chapter 23

The Bunk House was attached to the main building by a covered boardwalk. It was a long, low building with a saltbox roof, and a few sparse windows. It was divided up into four rooms with bunks for sleeping more than a dozen on double-decker steel cots. Art and I had the place to our selves, and we took bottom bunks on opposite sides. There was an attached bathroom off the back with showers, commodes and a couple of wash basins. Merle gave us some time to settle in and went back to the front porch.

Merle was up on the porch reading from a very thick old book when we finally got settled. He’d dug into our stuff and found a pack of hotdogs and had set about grilling them.

“You brought the good ones.” He said. “I really love those Big Red Smokies.”

“Knew you liked them, Merle.” Replied Art. “We brought plenty.”

“Reminds me of Old Crosley Field.” He said. “There was a place down near Crosley Field where you could buy these—long before they got out to the public. I loved going down there. I miss Crosley Field. Did you see any games this year?”

“At Riverfront?” Replied Art. “No. I watched a few games on TV. It ain’t the same team anymore. They are killing off their farm system, and they have no good blood coming up to replace guys like Rose and Perez.”

“Yep. I think the Big Red Machine has just run its course. It’s a shame. I still listen to the games. WLW comes in real good at night.”

“Have you been catching any of the Bengals games?”
“Nope. I try to listen, but I just can’t wrap myself around that Phil Samp. I don’t know what it is. I just can’t listen to him for long.”

“This may be their year.”

“They’ll do it without me.” Merle poked a finger at me. “Looks like your scouts have been working.”

“Oh, Perry?” replied Art. “He’s well on his way. He needs time, mostly.”

“Me?” I said, “I just signed up.”

“You having fun?” asked Merle.


“. . . no heavy lifting, he gets to work indoors, and I let him eat anything that falls on the floor.” Added Art.

“Yes, I guess. Art got me interested in hunting. I though I’d see what it was like.”

Lunch came and went and I found myself fagged out. It dawned on me that I was suffering from an extreme case of the time-traveler’s version of jet lag. Both Art and I went back to the bunk house and sacked out. When I woke up, it was Saturday morning, about two hours before sunrise. Art was up already, getting dressed for a morning hike. We went over to the house and hunted up eggs, biscuits, and bacon. About the time we were leaving, Merle wandered out and sat with us over a second cup of coffee.

“Good night?”

“Slept like the dead,” replied Art.
“Catches up on you, doesn’t it? What is this for you.”

“What is it? Wednesday for you?”

“Something like that.” I replied.

“Art will run you around, that’s for sure—six ways to Sunday never meant so much except when you’re with Art. So what’s up? Scouting?”

“Yes.” Said Art. “Any big changes?”

“There’s a big oak down by one of your stands—that one overlooking the creek. It blew down in a storm in September. “

“It’s been dead for years.” Said Art.

“That’s about it.”

Art had me bring a compass, a flashlight, my knife, and pack of beer nuts. When it became first light Art and I started out across the broad flat top of Merle’s mountain.

The air was crisp, and the grass was frosted. We trundled out into the middle of the field. The sky was clear, but all around us there was fog hanging in the bottoms. It appeared as if we were walking on a small island in the middle of a fog-shrouded ocean.

“Why are we going out so early?” I asked.

“A bunch of reasons.” Replied Art. “For one thing, I want to get you introduced to traipsing around in the dark, see how you react to cold—that sort of thing. That will determine how we hunt. If we get to a couple of spots and sit tight, we may see some deer moving. That will be fun. Otherwise, the main reason we’re out is this.” With that, he pulled to a stop, and looked up. He pulled off his hat and pointed to the sky. There was Orion as I had never seen it before—his belt, his sword, his arms raised. He was clubbing Taurus as his faithful dog, Canis Major ran at his heals. “This is why we came
out.” I tried to say something, but I finally had to admit that I was just plain moved.

“He waits there for every hunter,” said Art. “I have followed him for longer than you can imagine—longer than I can admit. In the woods, trying to find the North Star is always such a complicated thing. However, if you keep track of where Orion is, he’ll guide you home. In the Fall and Winter, he’s directly overhead, so if it’s foggy, or you have a lot of smoke from a battle or you’re in heavy woods, it’s often times hard to see any stars except straight up. He guided me on countless patrols in France. If your heart is with him. If you seek him, he’ll bring you home.” We just stood there in the field, looking up.

“You’re doing the right thing.” Said Art. “You’re keeping your coat open. Use your hat as a vent, for dumping body heat. When you’re moving, you can control how much you sweat. I pulled up here to dump off some of the body heat we’ve been accumulating. When you hunt, the sweat is what kills you. After you get somewhere and you’re going to be still for a while, button up and trap all that heat. The less you sweat, the less the deer are going to smell you too. They’ve got sensitive noses.”

We got going again and made our way to a tree line to our East. When we got there, we ducked into a small island of trees that was separate from the rest of the woods and sat down on a log, and started a long wait. Sunrise was still quite a ways off. Nothing was moving. It was silent. The surrounding trees were just dark colorless shadows. For a while I took stock of how I had gotten there. For a while I kicked myself for going on the trip. The cold started to creep into my boots, my gloves, and around the edges of my coat. When a small breeze blew, I could feel it on every bit of skin and even through the broad expanse of cloth across my back. I started to feel the bark of the log
through my pants and the moist earth sucking the heat out of my boots. I could barely see Art, but he seemed unmoved by the privation. I started to fidget, partly out of boredom but mostly as a way to bring warmth back to my hands and feet.

“Shhhh.” Art said after a while in a low whisper. “It’s hard, I know, but you must remain still.”

It was getting light now. The trees were starting to acquire color to their bark, and the sparse leaves were beginning to reflect a bit of brown, and the grass was becoming green. Behind us, the sky was brightening, and there was a pronounced patch of orange in anticipation of the sun. I realized that we were in a Art shifted himself without sound, and focused his attention on the bit of open field in front and slightly to our right. His head bobbed about slowly from one side to the other, trying to pick something out of the gloom.

“There!” he whispered. “Look out in that field.”

Emerging from the woods was a leaden shadow that moved slowly out into the grass. It took a while for it to fully separate itself from the tree-line, but once it was silhouetted against the grass, it quickly resolved itself into a deer. Art had a pair of small binoculars pulled from his pocket, but they did no good. It was still too dark to make anything else out. We sat transfixed on the sight, less than fifty yards from our spot. The deer came out into the middle of the small field—perhaps seventy yards from side to side and about three times that in length. The field fell away towards the back, where wisps of fog wound through the trees. I was so concerned with getting a good look at the deer that I missed three others that seem to magically emerge from the murk of the forest and out into the grass.
When at last, the sun sent its first rays into the field, a total of eight deer were in sight. Most seemed to be mature does without antlers. There were few smaller, younger looking does as well. There was a small buck with a tight basket of antlers that was sniffing about. Occasionally, he would get too close to one of the does, and she would kick her back legs at him.

“That’s probably last year’s buck.” Whispered Art. “He’s good for his age, but he can still go another year.”

The deer kept their distance from each other. Some of the smaller ones stayed close to their mothers. However, if one of a particular size got too close to another, there would be a small display of displeasure and one or the other would move aside and graze elsewhere. After a bit, it occurred to me that the deer were not in the least concerned with us, but rather with the patch of forest from which they came. The young buck grew particularly fascinated with this, and began to show real anxiety.

“There!” hissed Art. “There he is!”

Emerging from the forest was a huge animal with bleached antlers that caught the orange sunlight so that they looked like flame. He strode in with an air of haughtiness, and looked menacingly at the younger buck. The younger buck shrank and slipped away to a far corner of the field. The does paid him no attention, but soon decided that that party was over and began leaving the field, exiting on the far side. The big buck nibbled a bit and followed. By the time the sun was fully up, the entire show was over.

Art scanned the tree line with the binoculars, handed them to me and got up to stretch. He was greeted with a shrill sound from behind, emanating from dense bushes.
It sounded like a woman, blowing her nose in an angry and threatening manner. He sat back down, but the blowing noise continued.

“We’re busted. “ he said.

“What’s that?”

“That’s a doe.” He replied. “They snort like that when they’re pissed off. They also stamp their feet . . . there, like that.” I listened, the snorting and stamping suddenly became a headlong rush away from the bushes and back into the woods—branches snapped, hooves beat on leaves, and all the while the snorting continued. “If we stay here, she’ll just keep coming round to rat on us. We’d better leave. We got up and walked out of the little copse of trees that had been shielding us. When I arose, I realized that we were sitting amongst a few gravestones.

“I didn’t know this was a cemetery.” I said. It did not bother me, but I found it odd that I had been sitting amongst the dead all this time without noticing.

“Yes, it was the family plot. If you look around, you can see why.” Art was right, the view was fabulous in nearly every direction. Fog shrouded the creek bottoms, but above that was a clear, cloudless sky. “So what do you think? Worth the trip?”

“Nothing else like it!”

“You sure? We can go back to town now. Just say the word.”

“What’s next?”

“Now we’ll go around, and I’ll show you some of the finer points. Follow me.

“We took off through the field, back the way we came. At one point we stopped and Art pointed out a break in the old wire fence. We wound through an open patch of woods, surrounded by mature oak trees before Art stopped and pointed out a ladder, going up the
tree. “This is the tree stand you will be in tomorrow morning. There’s one just like it closer to the house, but I wanted to point this out to you, so you know how to get in. Do you have a compass with you?” I did. “Good, shoot an azimuth from where we are, back towards the way we came, and then you’ll know which way to come in the dark. Count your steps too. It’s easy to get lost.”

I was a bit hazy on what he was saying, so Art showed me. I used the compass, it had a sight on it, to take a reading of what direction we had come from. He then had us backtrack to the hole in the fence—about eighty paces. He then had me shoot back the way we had come to show me what was meant by a reciprocal course—in essence, putting the first reading on the opposite side of the compass, or subtracting 180 degrees, however I chose to think about it. I thought Art was going thoroughly over the top until he reminded me that I’d be performing this in the dark. That’s when I started to understand.

When we were done, Art took me over to another place, somewhat close by, where he said he was going to be hunting. It was a little finger ridge breaking to the West, with steep gullies on either side. On the south side, however, was a narrow shelf, and this was filled with mature oaks, and a lot of sign. Art showed me a line of rubs where a buck had scraped off the velvet on his antlers and a large plot of ground that looked like it had been recently spaded up. This was a scrape, a place where a buck would paw up the ground and urinate so as to attract females. Hanging above was what Art called a licking branch. This was a partially chewed branch, hanging down that the buck and the visiting does would lick in order to leave a calling card.
“It’s like one of those voice message machines.” Art said. “Hi, I called, but you weren’t home. I’ll be back later. I’ll be up in that treestand over there. I saw a similar ladder and platform arrangement to the one he had previously pointed out. The ladder was constructed of long 2X4’s with steps nailed on every couple of feet. At the top was a plywood perch about three feet square, affixed to the tree with a stout chain. It was situated a bit up the hill from the shelf, and commanded a good view of the grove of oaks. A rickety wooden hand rail surrounded it.

“Isn’t it easy to fall out of that thing?”

“Yes,” said Art. “That’s why you always tie yourself to the tree after you get up there. I’ll show you all that later. Let’s go in. I’m ready for my coffee.”
Chapter 24

Back at the house, we ate a quick second breakfast from the leftovers and then launched back into my training. Art took me to yet a third treestand, much closer to the house, but similar to the others in construction. Merle, who came along to watch. Somebody had worked it all out into a system. I brought my shotgun on a sling, and carried in a black plastic five gallon pickle bucket filled with a boat cushion, some rope, a safety harness, and whatever else. The pickle bucket was fitted with straps, so I could wear it on my back. When I came to the tree stand, I first found a length of rope hanging from the tree. To this, I attached my shotgun in such a way that the barrel would point down when I hauled up the rope. I also affixed the smaller piece of rope from the bottom of the bucket. I was instructed to also don a stout belt made of nylon webbing, to which was trailing a short length of stout rope. The belt was to be worn across my chest, under my armpits.

I climbed the ladder under Art's instruction and when I got to the top, I was told to sit on the platform, loop the rope around the tree, and use the catch, a carabiner, to form a noose. In this way, should I fall, the noose would tighten around the trunk of the tree and hold me. Once I was secure, I pulled up the shotgun and hung it on a large hook by its sling. The smaller rope, that had been paying out from the bucket as the shotgun came up, allowed me to pull up the pickle bucket. I pulled out my boat cushion, stuck in my flashlight, sat down and pulled the shotgun onto my lap.
I dropped a glove on the first attempt, but Art said I had done fine for a first try. He then instructed me on reversing the process in order to leave the stand. After a full repetition of the up and down process, I was ready. By now, the wind was starting to rise. It was getting on towards the latter part of the morning, and I became aware that the platform was swaying with the tree. At first, I was startled, but once I realized that I was in no danger, the effect was positively hypnotic. Art and Merle went off to talk for a while I was left to enjoy the moment. Never in my life had I felt so perfect-- my father’s shotgun, the late fall woods, the blue sky, the December wind on my cheek and the gently swaying tree. In all too short a time, Art and Merle were back and asking when I felt I would be ready to come down. The spell was broken, and I came back to Earth.

Lunch was another homage to ball park food, which I took was a favorite of Merle’s when he could get it. After lunch, it began to warm up significantly. Merle turned on the weather radio and got the latest forecast out of Akron. The rest of Saturday was going to be great, Sunday was going to start out warm, but the rest of it was a washout. A front was moving through and it was going to bring rain and storms through Sunday night and then drop the temperature down. Monday was going to be frosty for the opener. Art decided to get all the preparations done for hunting, because it was unknown exactly when the rain would hit on Sunday.

We spent the next hour or so running through a couple of boxes each of the slugs through our shotgun, trying to keep them on a paper pie plate at fifty paces. The shotgun was heavy to hold, but Merle gave me a piece of broomstick that I used as a brace. All of
a sudden my shots switched from touching the outside edges of the paper plate and started grouping nicely in the center. The moral of the story was that it would be wisest to rest my shotgun against a tree trunk or some such thing. I suggested carrying the stick with me, but I was reminded that the tree stands all had a rail made for this purpose. What I had mistaken for a hand rail was actually a shooting rail. Art was far more familiar with his firearm and made a consistent pattern on the plates where all the holes, a good three quarters of an inch across were touching within a four inch pattern.

My shoulder was aching when we put our shotguns away and adjourned to the porch to talk. Merle was big on sassafras tea, made from roots he dug himself every spring. We sat and talked about the old days and the Reds, and various topics of gossip of which I had not a clue. One thing I managed to get straight was that there had been a total of three wives in Art’s life—Kathy had been the first; she had been the one that had self-combusted. After her was a woman named Gwen. She was the one that my mother had met. Their marriage had ended in separation. The latest, and she was not a wife in the legal sense, was Sue-Chi. I took it that the second wife was a bit of a sore subject, when Merle mentioned her in passing. Art winced.

From every corner of the region, we heard shots going off. I asked what was in season, and Merle explained that deer hunters were starting to show up at their camps and doing the same thing we had been doing. It was amazing to me how many shots there were that afternoon. I must have diverted Merle and Art from their reverie, because soon they were guessing from the shots and the various attributes of the shooter.

“Hmmm. I’d say that was a Remington 1100 right there.” Said Art after a string of five shots. Boy’s got his plug out.”
“Nope.” Said Merle. “It was an Auto-Five.” There was another series of five shots. “I take that back. You’re right. It’s a Remmie.”

A little later, there were two shots in quick succession.

“Lefever,” said Merle. “Twelve Gauge—it’s got a short barrel and a Improved Cylinder bore on the left and a Modified on the right.”

“You lie.” Said Art.

“I don’t “ said Merle. “What’s more, that Lefever Nitro has a B-grade walnut stock on it, and the stock’s been busted once at the grip, and pinned by a gunsmith that knew what he was doing.”

“English or American stock?”

“American. Pistol grip. Somebody did a reblue on it. It’s good for a cold blue, but not a professional job. I’d say the bluing wasn’t done by the gunsmith that did the stock repair.”

“I say you’re lying.” Said Art.

“Nope. And if you keep calling me a liar, I’ll demand satisfaction and we’ll just have to settle it like men.”

“Fair enough.” Said Art, placidly.

“Wait a minute!” I said. “I’m still amazed that you can tell all that from just hearing the gun shoot. That must be a good mile or more from hear.

“Elementary, my dear young Watson.” Replied Merle. “What’s more, it isn’t a mile from hear, it’s a mile and a quarter.”

“Shoveling it pretty deep, aren’t you?” said Art.

“Once more, and I’ll just be forced to kill you outright.”
“Fair enough.”

“I’m not sure I understand.” I said. “I don’t think this is worth killing each other over.”

“Yes it is,” said Merle. “He’s attacked my honor. It must be answered.”

“Well, before you go shooting each other. . .”

“Shoot each other?” said Art. “What gave you the idea we’d shoot each other?”

“No,” said Merle. “I’d not shoot Art, unless he demanded pistols. I suppose I would then be forced to shoot him. Did you intend to demand pistols?”

“Certainly not.” Said Art. “What kind of rotter do you take me for, man.”

“I take you for the direst of rotters. I take you for one that would impugn a man’s reputation without cause.”

“If you see it that way, I suppose you have no other choice but to kill me.”

“Fair enough. Shall we dispense with all the formalities and just have at it?”

“All right. I have a pair of well matched swords over the mantle. . .”

“With which I have some familiarity. . .”

“I would be happy to oblige you, should you wish to. . .”

“I would. . .”

“Then by all means—Perry, would you be so kind as to fetch the two bastards off the fireplace and bring them to us.”

“Uh, . . .”

“Oh, Perry! “ said Art. “If you wouldn’t mind.”

I was forced to comply. I went into the house and found two swords of indeterminable age hanging on the fireplace. I took them down and brought them out to
the two antagonists. When I returned, Merle and Art were squared off on the front lawn, preparing themselves for the duel. When I approached, Merle offered Art his pick of swords, and then hoisted the other one. Both weapons were nearly the height of a man, and they looked quite lethal. Merle used his with two hands. Art started using only one.

With a nod from Art, the two ran at each other and clashed their swords together, and then fought with great vigor, dodging, thrusting, and parrying each other’s blows. Art seemed to have the advantage of strength, but Merle was a superior tactician; A lot of the time Art wasted his energy stabbing and wacking where Merle had been, but was no longer. After a couple of minutes of this, Merle made a run at Art and they locked hilts and came eye to eye.

“Satisfied?” said Art

“Hmmm. Quite.” Replied Merle, and they broke apart and came back to the porch.

“Am I liar?”

“No, I recant my accusation, and beg your forgiveness.”

“Apology accepted.”

“You’re as fit as ever,” said Art.

“I was holding myself back.” Said Merle.

“What was that all about?” I asked in astonishment.

“Oh, nothing.” Said Art, wiping his brow. “Just have to get your blood running once in a while.”

“Quite.” Replied Merle. The fight was over. I was shaking.

“Oh, come on!” Said Art. “Don’t tell me you have no stomach for this?”
“I’m sorry.” I said. “I thought it was real.”

“It is.”

“Well, it certainly looked it.”

“There’s a lot you have left to understand.”

“I suppose so.” I replied. The two combatants were now back in their chairs, sipping tea. “I really don’t understand this.”

“Oh, I think you understand more than you give yourself credit.” Said Art. “Don’t you think so?”

“Of course,” Merle said. “I see it in his eyes.”

“You’re both mad.”

“No,” said Art. “We’re just a couple of old timers that aren’t ready to give it up—at least not yet.”

“. . . and how on Earth did you make those deductions?” I asked. About the shotgun, I mean.”

“Simple.” Said Merle. “Elementary! In fact, if I had not been so rudely interrupted, I could have gone on to say that the gun was being fired by a man of medium height, with thinning dark brown hair and a slight limp. You see, those shotgun blasts came from the south and east. At that distance, the only fellow that could be is Charles Fischer, whose farm adjoins my land on that side. I’ve been to the Fischer farm and hunted with Charles on several occasions. He owns a twelve-bore Lefever Nitro, just as I described. He lost toes on his left foot from having them frozen off in The Bulge. Charles always runs a couple through his Lefever, just before season to make sure both barrels are still pointed to the same place at twenty yards.
“I should have never doubted you.” Said Art.

“You never should.” Replied Merle.

It was an uncommonly warm afternoon for December, but it was quickly slipping away. We soon had to button our jackets as the sun was slipping behind a uniformly grey bank of clouds. Art broke out steaks. Merle brought out mead that he had made himself from his own beehives. I had never had mead before, and I liked it. We stayed out and ate on the porch by the light of a single kerosene lantern and watched the stars, until a front of clouds rolled in from the southwest and filled our nostrils with a warm dampness that had a hint of the ocean still in it.

“It’s gonna pour rain.” Said Merle. “When it comes up from the Gulf like this, it’s good for an inch or two.” We soon were inside and Merle lit a fire in the fireplace. I got seriously stewed on the mead and had a hard time making it out of the rocking chair when it was time to hit the bunkhouse. Art and I pissed off the boardwalk on the way to bed and heard the first drops of rain. I went to bed with a gathering torrent of rain pounding on the roof.

Morning came and found me still in bed. Art had gotten up early and listened to the radio. Deciding that there was no good reason to go out and get wet, he had gone back to bed without waking me. I felt as though I had been hit with a truck. My shoulder ached from the shotgun. The rest of my body ached with no apparent reason. Art brought me a cup of coffee and some Advil. Within a half an hour, I was able to get up and feel somewhat normal.
The rain came and went throughout the morning. Well before lunch, Art and I were both becoming a bit antsy, and were looking for something to do. Merle suggested we ride into town, grab some lunch, and do a couple of short errands. It sounded great. We waited until the rain had tapered off to a drizzle and then headed down the trail to the truck, carrying a couple of empty pack baskets. The gully we had followed on the way up was now a torrent, and the stream it emptied into was a now quite swollen and roiled. We followed the bank back to the road, and from there to the parking apron and found the truck. Merle sat in the middle, and we took off for Logan, the nearest town of any size.

We ate at a sort of giant-sized Dairy-Queenish sort of place. Merle was fascinated with the foot long chilli dogs, and wove a story in between bites of how the owner had been the inventor of the blizzard, and how DQ had stolen the idea and not given him proper compensation, so he had gone off on his own. Afterwards, we stopped at a grocery store and picked up a few toiletries. I was starved for any sort of diversion, and spent an undo amount of time selecting a new comb, a spool of dental floss, and perusing the magazine section that seemed light on anything that had anything resembling content. I finally found a copy of Deer Hunting Annual that looked promising, but proved to be bereft of meaningful information.

After Logan, we took the long way back, finally ending up at Grandma Faye’s. It was a small store out in the sticks, to which Merle had occasionally walked when he wanted to splurge on a luxury like fresh milk. Merle took us in and introduced us around and started a conversation with several of the people there, whom he all seemed to know. There were few groups of men in the store as well. They all looked as we did, travelers a bit out of place, looking to top off their supplies and relieve the boredom of the rain—in
short, deer hunters. Some had obvious signs, orange hats and guide boots. Some you could tell, just by the look in their eyes, were waiting for it all to start. The store had a small hunting and fishing section. I was attracted to one item that seemed to be the do-all for the hunter: the Jon-E Handwarmer with the built-in deer attractor. The idea was that when it wasn’t keeping your hands warm, you could pour a little scent from the supplied bottle, and the aroma would bring the deer running. I was about to pull one off the shelf when Art came up behind and said. “Put it back. It doesn’t work.”

After I put the handwarmer back, I looked around for other things that might help put the odds in my favor. Paul Rickards Old Indian buck lure looked promising, but the package was a bit dusty and looked like it had been on the peg for quite a while. There were various pieces of camouflage clothing too that I waited for my turn to thumb through. It was nearly my turn at the clothing when Art handed me a heavy balaclava and told me that this was the ideal piece of clothing to purchase.

“It’s going to be cold Monday morning.” He said. “I’m not sure that hat you got is going to be warm enough. If you put this on, and the hat on over it, I think you’ll be warm enough.” I examined it. It was a thick acrylic knit that reversed from camo to blaze orange. For eight bucks I could not resist. I paid for my treasure and collected up Merle from his friends and took off.
Chapter 25

“I think I want to go see Morgan and Lois.” Said Merle. We were just getting into the truck.

“Morgan and Lois?” asked Art.

“Yeah.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah.”

“Who’s Morgan and Lois?” I asked.

“Friends of Merle.” Said Art. “The problem is Merle has incredibly bad taste when it comes to women.”

“Wait a minute.” I said. “Is Morgan going to be cool with this? Visiting Lois?”

“Oh, sure.” Said Merle. “I was talking with their mother in there. Morgan’s been asking for me.”

“Morgan’s not a guy, then?” I asked.

“No.” said Art “Morgan is a chick. She and Merle had a . . . a falling out way back, and now they’ve ostensibly made up, and Merle has an open invite at their trailer, but Merle likes his space and so only visits occasionally. This seems to tick the girls off--especially Morgan--and Merle has to be careful. Lois is more of a . . . hmmm. Slut, shall we say?? And has a much more easy-going view of this which causes Morgan to be extremely jealous whenever Merle comes for a visit. Merle walks a tightrope whenever
he comes calling, and usually it ends with the girls fighting and Merle leaving. Am I remembering this all right?


“Most of the time it’s purely harmless, especially now since both women have gone through the change. However, there were a few years there where . . .”

“What our dear Arthur is trying to say,” said Merle “Is that trailer is a nest of harpies, and if you don’t watch your step, you’re liable to walk out of their with a sucking chest wound. However, I would also point out that this is mere average over the past decade or so, and add that now that the cloud of menses has left their sleepy little hollow, a far more benign spirit has come to roost. As to why I have suggested that it might be advantageous to visit the sisters. . . well, let it suffice that the pickings in this rural wonderland are a bit slim, and old Merle has to get it where he can. You gentlemen are going along to provide moral, logistical, and (if needed) fire support.”

“That’s what I like about old Merle.” Said Art. “He does not beat around the bush. So I put it to you, young Perry: shall we sally forth to the den of harpies and aid our companion on his quest. “

“What the fuck,” I replied.

Morgan and Lois lived in a white trailer deep in a creek bottom, a short drive back from Route 664. A beat up white Corvair and a Travel-All spray-painted pink were in the driveway. A riding lawnmower sat in the middle of the yard along with a variety of knocked-over lawn ornaments. The grass was long and still held the fall leaves. All the windows were covered with curtains. The place looked abandoned, except for the curl of
smoke coming from the stovepipe. Merle went up and knocked while Art and I hung back.

There was considerable delay. At one point we heard voices coming from inside, and a shriek or two. All the while, the trailer was moving about on its foundation as the weight shifted. Finally, the door opened, and a vaguely female head poked itself out.

“Art!” she yelled. “You old goat! What brings you back?” Art gestured to the porch, where Merle was standing, somewhat out of sight from the door.

“Hi there, Morgan.” Said Merle coming into view. “We thought we’d stop by and see you.”

“Good you did!” said Morgan. “Good you did indeed! I’ve been asking up at the store about you. You haven’t come off the mountain in a while.”

“No, I haven’t.” he replied.

“You weren’t sick, were you?”

“No.” he said. “I was just enjoying the Fall.”

“You have to come down more often.” She replied. “Otherwise people start to worry about you.”

“Yes, I suppose I should.”

We were ushered into the trailer. It was then that I got to behold Morgan and her sister, Lois. Morgan was a tall woman, perhaps topping over six feet before age had started to bend her. She had died her hair chestnut brown at some point, but the gray had grown back in and now the brown stripe started well on the way to her shoulders. She had an oval face with a long nose that looked a tad crooked. She had a hearty smile that
revealed a nearly full set of yellow teeth, the right incisor was twisted perpendicular to the rest.

Lois came out of the bedroom. She was trying to get the door shut, having stuffed a bunch of things in quickly. There was little resemblance to Morgan. She was short and sprightly, in a feral sort of way with hair that tended towards blonde, and appeared to be natural. Lois looked the healthier of the two. Lois’ eyes were riveted to me from the moment the door finally yielded and latched. Art introduced me.

“This is Perry.” Art said. “Perry is coming deer hunting with us. He works with me down in Cincinnati.” Lois pushed through and offered her hand.

“Perry,” she said. “I am so happy to meet you. Do come in and sit down.”

I had heard stories about deer hunting in college. Some of my buddies in the dorm had clued me in that “deer hunting” was just a code word for a week of binge drinking, whoring, and cards. At the time, I had thought the whole idea to be somewhat disgusting. I think the excuse had been “blowing off steam” – or something to that effect. It occurred to me as Merle and Art got caught up on the gossip that this was the beginning of my initiation into this secret rite, and that my boss had determined that we were going to sleep with these women. I was disgusted. It was the whole nod-nod-wink-wink mentality. On top of that, they had not taken me into their confidence. This was a trick being played on me. I felt ashamed. I wanted out, but I also realized that this might be the one chance to prove myself a man in their eyes—or perhaps to prove myself by not succumbing. This had been the way it had been with that asshole insurance guy my Dad had hooked me up with. I had sat there watching him through lunch unable to make up
my mind as to whether this was my initiation into the brotherhood, a test of my moral fiber, or just an obnoxious twit grabbing ass in a restaurant. I had sat immobilized with indecision, and hated myself for it. I was not going to do that now. I was going to act. I was going to –

“Morgan,” said Lois. “You really should not talk like that in front of our guests.”

I came back to reality hard. I had not been paying attention to the conversation, lost in my own inner cesspit. I was at once alert to the tension in the room.

“My dear Lois,” replied Morgan. “I was just saying that, now that all the fences had been mended, it was not the time to be dredging up the past.”

“Ladies,” said Merle. “It’s such a nice day-“

“Dearest sister,” said Lois. “The only point I wish to object to is your insinuation that the whole affair was caused by me. I think we have it well established that I had held back my favor from these gentlemen in deference to you and your brittle sensibilities—great thou that sacrifice may have been—and slewed my attentions-”

“You stole him from me!” Thundered Morgan. “Admit it!”

“I did nothing of the sort.” retorted Lois, “He threw himself at me.”

“Uh,” said Merle. “I think the situation in question consisted of you catching me dropping off a jug of mead that was to be your Christmas present. I did not mean-“

“You wanted her.” Growled Morgan.

“I most certainly did not-“ said Merle

“You did.”

“Jealous bitch.”
“Whore!”

Merle and Art had been seated on the couch, with Merle perched on the arm closest to Merle. I had been given an over stuffed chair, and Lois had grabbed a dining chair and pulled it next to me. There was a heavy coffee table in the middle of the room with most of the women’s lives heaped upon it—dirty dishes, magazines, opened bills, and an ashtray filled with everything from Juicy Fruit wrappers to peach pits protruding from amongst the ashes. The television was on, but the sound was turned down.

As the tensions grew, I had come to realize that I was sort of trapped between the two women. About all I could do was try to sink deeper into the chair and hope that I could remain safe. Lois was so mad that she was spitting her words at her sister, and the bits of spittle became illuminated as they crossed into the light of the one window in the room, directly behind the couch. Morgan was slinging her share as well, and for a while it looked like an artillery battle of saliva coursing over my knees.

There was a gap between the women that allowed for me to sort of slide off onto the floor, with my legs going under the coffee table. Once down there, I started looking for a polite way to negotiate my way between the coffee table and the television. As I was sizing things up, I noticed that Lois had been wearing oversized pink fuzzy slippers. They had fallen off now. However, there were not bare feet showing beneath her robe, but rather talons, scaly like dried horse corn, with formidable claws. For a moment, I was transfixed by these appendages as they flexed angrily digging into the overwrought shag carpeting. I then looked over and saw that Morgan’s legs were formed similarly, I then
looked up and saw two human heads bobbing in a most inhuman manner. I guess I sort of panicked at that point, for rather than further attempting to negotiate my way around the coffee table, my body began to heave involuntarily, and I found myself wriggling under the coffee table. No one seemed to be paying attention, and although I had not fully thought it out, it seemed like a good idea to keep scooting until I found freedom.

Then I found the leg. The leg of the coffee table had come between my legs and was now riding on my groin. I looked up, and through a small open spot between magazines, I was able to see Merle’s head. She had begun hissing. Her robe had fallen away and wings were beginning to protrude from her shoulders. I tried to get my head around the other leg, but to no avail. I then turned over on my side and began to inch out towards the TV. As I did so, Lois planted a talon where my head had been and began shrieking. That gave me the impetus to move quickly. However, as I turned, my shoulder caught the inside of the table and I was now thoroughly wedged. I panicked again and started heaving against the table. That did nothing except give me nasty muscle pull. After a bit more mindless fumbling, I caught myself and began a more systematic approach. Little by little, I was able to bring myself, butt-first, out of the front of the table and slowly unwind out in front of the television. I remember looking up at a Columbus TV weatherman calmly telling me about how the front was going to remain stationary, before I felt Art’s hand on my belt as he snatched me off the floor.

“Smooth one, Perry.” He whispered. “You sure have a way with women.” I was on my feet. Merle was crawling backwards off the couch, and we were all heading for the door. The women were now oblivious to us, their eyes locked on each other. Merle made it to the door first, flung the front door open, and then fumbled with the storm door
latch, that at first seemed to be locked, but then turned out to be stuck. A couple of well-placed raps on the lock, and the three of us were out in the rain and flying off the small porch. Merle went tumbling and rolled. Art stumbled and caught himself on all fours. I went flying over the top of both of them, and landed running. The storm door banged behind me.

I was only a couple of steps away from the pink Travel-all and it caught me and bent me over the hood. There was a brief bit of silence, before the storm door slammed open again, and the two women came tumbling out into the yard, talons out, wings unfurled, and began an horrendous fight in the yard. Merle and Art were stumbling towards the truck. The screeching issuing from the women was like the sound of steel rending, like cats being killed slowly, like the hinges of the gates of Perdition. All at once, I was in the truck, Art was throwing gravel with the tires, the windshield wipers passed once and I saw two half-eagle/half women locked in what seemed like a struggle to the death. Then I heard Merle laughing. Art was laughing to. So was I.

“You sure know how to pick ‘em!” said Art.

“Me?” said Merle. “I thought you were the one that did Lois.”

“Yeah, but you introduced us.”

“What the-“

“Sorry we had to put you through that, Perry.” Said Art. “I thought they’d calmed down some.”

“So did I,” added Merle.

“You were going to set me up with those two?” I said. I was getting back to my earlier train of thought. I was getting mad again.
“What? With those two?”

“Yes. You took me here to get laid, didn’t you? That was the plan, wasn’t it?”

Art had to pull over, he was laughing so hard he was drooling on the steering wheel. Merle wasn’t doing much better.

After an eternity, Art wiped his eyes and looked over at Merle. The two started up again, and this time Art at least had enough composure left to throw it in Park I really did not see why it was so funny, but I realized anything I said was going to just make it worse.

Art pulled himself together after a bit and said, “Perry, what in the hell ever gave you that idea?”

“I just thought. . . er. . . I just figured that this was what deer hunting was all about.”

“What, going out and schtuping harpies?” The laughing started up again.

“You know what I mean.”

“You mean all this was a cover for going out and banging the ugliest, deadliest gnaw-your-own-arm-off three-baggers in the county? Is that what you mean? “

“Yes, something like that.”

“Son,” said Art. “You’ve got a lot to learn about deer hunting.”

Neither Art or Merle were much good for most of the way back. Every time one would settle down, they’d look over at the other and start laughing again. At one point, I offered to drive. That sort of sobered Art up for a while.

“Perry,” said Merle. “I just have one question for you.”
“What’s that?”

“What was that thing you did with the coffee table?”

“What do you mean?”

“That thing you did, slithering under the coffee table.”

“I got stuck.”

“Oh.”

“Why?”

“Don’t get me wrong,” said Merle. “It was pure genius. That’s probably the only way you could have gone at that point without getting impaled. It just that you seemed to be . . . how should I put it?”

“You looked like a worm on a hook.” said Art.

“Yes, Quite!” said Merle. “That’s a good metaphor.”

“Simile,” Said Art. “It’s a simile. Thank you. I do this for a living you know.”

“Squirm and slither?”

“No,” replied Art. “I teach English Literature. As a result I’m rather good at turning a phrase. Now if I had said ‘He WAS a worm on the hook,’ that would have been a metaphor.”

“Quite.” Said Merle. “Before the point is lost entirely, I just wanted to express my admiration of Perry’s tactics back there.”

“Extraordinary.” Said Art. “That maneuver will be legendary.”

“Thank you,” I said. “I guess.”

“Oh,” said Art. “Believe me, I have seen far lesser moves that have received extravagant treatment at the hands of the bards. This one is a real corker. “
“I’m still not really clear why we went.” I said.

“To say that we’ve been.” said Merle. “To say that we’ve been.”


Chapter 26

We had a bit of a break as we got back to the parking apron. The rain let up enough so that we had a light spit as long as we were in the open. There was nothing the Fates could do about the rain already on the trees. Large drops of water pelted us from the bare branches all the way back up the hill. When we got to the top, a shroud of clouds were moving towards us. We barely made it to the front porch of the house before it was pouring from the heavens again.

My coat was sodden, as was my pants. While Art and Merle got something going in the kitchen, I worked at getting the fire built up, first with cedar splits and then with logs of oak and maple. The fireplace was built of boulder-sized granite cobbles and had iron grates to either side, above and below. Soon there was hot air pouring out of the upper grates, and the room began to warm noticeably.

The rain showed no sign of letting up. Art and I took turns walking back under the covered porch to the bunkhouse to get changed. Art set a fire in the bunkhouse stove and retired there. I went back to the main house. Merle handed me a concoction of coffee and hot chocolate, and we sat in front of the fire. There was a stew cooking on the stove. However, once the fire had burned to Merle’s liking, he moved it off the stove and set it in the fireplace to simmer, along with a large kettle.
“If you would have seen your eyes!” said Merle. “When those two started going at it-- Whooo! “

“I’m still not sure why we went there.” I said.

“Merle and Lois are two bodies you don’t want to anger.” He replied. “I’ve been lying low for a quite a while, doing my best to provide benign neglect to the relationship. Then I found out at the market that it was probably time to put in an appearance. Morgan was asking for me. It was as simple as that.”

“So this was just a social call?”

“Basically, yes.”

“With a pair of harpies?”

“Two of the best.”

“I’m not sure I can wrap myself around that idea.”

“Oh, in their day they were two powerful women—you might call them witches, but that would not cover all the subtleties. Morgan was the better of the two, but she tried harder. Lois had the better looks, and things came easier for her.”

“Were they always like . . . like that?”

“It’s amazing what a bad case of PMS will do to you, if you let it. Remember how your mother used to tell you ‘Don’t make faces like that—it’ll stay that way?’ Well, that’s kind of what happened to those two—only their momma just egged them on. She’s long gone now.“

The Testament of Merle Emory
“Yeah, they’re a heck of a tribe, and there’s quite a few of them in these parts. If I was to permanently piss-off those girls, there would be an army of their kin that would come crawling up here to avenge them.”

“The story goes something like this: Morgan stayed back to take care of Momma, while Lois went off to work in the factory, back during the war. Daddy had run off right after Pearl Harbor, and they never saw him again. While Lois was off working at a defense plant, she met a man with a withered hand. After the war, he decided to come back here to live. It was probably a wrong choice. If Lois had just kept going, none of this would have happened. So they moved out here and Lois’ husband bought a parcel on the Hocking River and started building rental cottages. He was going to do the bed-and-breakfast thing long before it caught on. Nowadays, everybody has a bed-and-breakfast in these parts, but he was sort of ahead of his time.

To make matters worse, he was a bit of a perfectionist. That’s probably what did him in. I can take you down there and show you. It took him five years to finish his first cottage, a really nice A-Frame that’s set over a small feeder creek with a waterfall right off the back porch. If he’d been Frank Lloyd Wright, he’d have been written up all over the country. As it was, he was just goofy Old Dave from Logan, Ohio.

Lois had to go work in Logan to cover the costs while this was going on, and all this time she wouldn’t let him forget it. That made him rush a little bit on the second one. It only took him two years to finish that one, but it was quite a handsome little place—not quite as well finished, but a nice spot to put your feet up. There place was in a gorgeous spot too—a bit hard to get to, but it was on a section of the Hocking—well you couldn’t
have found a nicer situation. So now they’re about seven years into this, and they took another year to fix up the original old farmhouse so they had rooms and a kitchen and dining room, and now they’re in business.

The problem was the first place was back in the pines, nestled in front of that waterfall, and in no time it had mildewed to the point where you couldn’t stand to get near it. Old Dave tried everything to keep the mold out, but the place just crawled with it. If he kept a heater on in the place, he could do a pretty good job of driving out the moisture, but he had to run it full time. Otherwise, it came back. He finally just had to shut up the place and let the mold take over.

Next thing he found out was that neither he nor Lois were really cut out for the life of an innkeeper. Dave built his cottages from sunrise to sunset. Lois was the cook, the maid, the- you get the idea. Things started to sour, and then Momma and Morgan started putting in their two cents. Well, it wasn’t before long before the whole plan is falling apart. The next two cabins went—that’s what they were, just tourist cabins, got thrown up in a few months and promptly started falling apart. The main house needed repairs, and Dave is trying to build and also help out in the kitchen, washing dishes. Morgan was telling her sister to get out, but Dave wanted to see the thing through. Finally Momma and Morgan pushed hard enough and one night Lois poisoned Dave. They couldn’t prove it. The coroner ruled it natural causes on the spot, and they had old Dave cremated before there could be an autopsy. He just got up from the dinner table one night, went in and fell on the bed and died.

Then Morgan decided she’d had enough of caring for their invalid mother, and badgered Lois into taking a fifty-fifty share in the thing. The problem was that Morgan
always ran the show and between Momma acting like the dowager empress and Morgan cracking the whip—poor Lois just couldn’t handle it. So one night Momma goes tits-up under mysterious causes, and everyone suspects it’s Lois again, but nothing gets done. The two didn’t speak for a few years—that’s about the time I got involved.

Morgan wasn’t so bad—I’ve had worse. We actually had it pretty good, right after I moved into the neighborhood. Lois wasn’t so bad either. Once she got away from her sister, she sold off all the cabins. It’s turned into sort of a private club for rich people from Columbus that like to come down here and go slumming. She got a job working for a lawyer in town and made a nice life for herself. I even fixed her up with Art, when he started coming up here.

Art’s an interesting case too. It all depends on which cover story you buy into. Being a hero, you end up acquiring more than your share. You’re signed up as his amanuensis, so you’ve heard at least a couple of them. I guess in the end, we all have to pick and chose what we believe about each other and ourselves. What is it about heroes that make the stories stick? I don’t know. The stories are out there, and then somebody turns on a porch light—somebody like Art, and the stories just start dancing around them.

Oh, I’m not saying the stories aren’t real. You look like I just kicked your puppy. If Art tells you a story, it’s probably real. He’d have a hard time making them up. It’s just trying to fit one story into another. It’s just that for each bit of truth you find, there may be several stories, and vice versa.

Take Art’s war stories. The only reason they did not give him a Medal of Honor for saving everyone’s hide that day was that they found out Art had gone bonkers three days earlier. He was shell-shocked, a catatonic vegetable, when his truck got hit. If they
could have evacuated him, he’d have been in a padded room. Of course, if you’d been
through what he’d been through, going crackers would have been a normal course. How
many times did Art try to win the war single-handedly? I don’t think even he knows.

Once you get into this line of work, you learn to acquire cover stories. Sometimes
they’re so you can hide what you’ve been doing from other people. Sometimes it’s so
you can hide it from yourself. I’ve got a cover story or two myself—Fort Deitrich,
Maryland-- better wars and better living through chemistry. Nobody seems to know how
close we came to chemical Armageddon. If we’d gotten kicked off the beaches in
Normandy, or if the Russians had folded, or . . . There would have been all kinds of
things we could have dumped on Europe to sterilize it. That really wasn’t my bag—my
specialty was ergoline derivatives, but war forces compromises, and the next thing I
knew I was working on organic phosphates. Let me tell you: there’s stuff out there that is
just plain scary good when it comes to bug killers—six-legged or two. I read in a fishing
magazine somewhere that a salmon can detect dilutions of chemicals so small, that they
can smell a teaspoon of alcohol dissolved in a body of water the size of Lake Superior.
We had stuff brewing for the Nazis that could have killed humans in that dilution.

What was funny about this was most of this stuff, at least our early stuff, were
compounds that had been invented by a Kraut chemist, and published at the turn of the
century—some of them were even patented by Bayer—same folks that bring you Bayer
Aspirin? Yep. The only reason why Hitler didn’t use this stuff on us, was because they
told him we had it and were going to use it. He had all kinds of stuff loaded into artillery
shells. In fact, that’s how I got to see Europe—I was sent in at the end of the war to
retrieve samples and steal secrets from a plant in Upper Silesia out from under the noses
of the Russians. It turns out they had nothing like what we had. Heck, even the purchase of the VX secrets from the Brits was just a cover to keep the world from knowing what we had cooked up.

But after the War, I got a chance to go back to what I really wanted to do—play with ergoline. I’d met up with this guy named Lance Murlach. He’d been an grad student, studying ethnobotany before the war. He took off to South America right after the war, and we met up one day a few years later at a conference. I had stumbled on the ratline that ran LSD to Hitler’s inner circle and was trying to research that. Lance had been off in the jungles finding out what kind of jungle juice they’d been brewing for thousands of years.

Then Art, God bless him, found his boss’ stash of designer ergoline. Well, you can imagine! I was on a train to Cincinnati that afternoon. As soon as I heard we had a nearly complete set of blotters from 1936 onward—these were the Dead Sea Scrolls of Psychodelia. It saved me years of work. I brought Art into my project, or he brought me into mine, or whatever it was and the next thing you knew . . . Camelot.

Speaking of which, did Art ever mention his trips to New York? Willie had introduced him around quite a bit, so after Von Schmidt left the scene, Art kept up the liaisons he’d built up over the years—some of them had been in on the ratline, some of them not. We used to take the train into New York and go party crashing. It was amazing who you’d run into. Frederick Lowe had been one of Willie’s closest friends from the old days in Vienna, and when we’d come in, he’d make sure we got introduced around. You should have seen it! That was life! It took a bit to get Art out of the dumps, what with his wife dying and all, but once he got back on the horse—Wow!
I think that’s more than anything what kept him and Gwen together—the excitement. Art started back dating about a year after Kathy died. He met Leon Vandergrance at a cocktail party at Henry and Claire Luce’s. Vandergrance became quite taken with Art and set him up with a date with his daughter, Gwen. Over a weekend in the Hamptons, Art got the royal treatment, and he got on the train Monday morning with the deal sealed. What was not to like about this arrangement? Art was a war hero, an intellectual and a spy. Vandergrance was a free-wheeling gazillionaire whose family had made it in Manhattan real estate. Gwen was sharp, vivacious, gorgeous. Art was the proverbial international man of mystery. Vandergrance was backing every side he could find in the Fifty Two Election, trying to buy his way into Washington. I’m sure he used Art and his bag of tricks to try to give him an edge.

That’s the funny thing about messing with history. Art used to tell me something he got off Willie. At the time he started saying it, I’m not really sure he understood what it meant. I’m sure he does now. He used to tell me that Willie used to tell him “Everybody gets to be Hitler.” Art doesn’t talk much about those days. There was about a year there where Art was hardly working for the project—he was off in New York and Washington. It all came crashing in on him when Vandergrance got set up in one of Roy Cohn’s machinations and Leon Vandergrance committed suicide. Art came back to the office with his tail dragging, and buried himself in his work. This is when he got involved in the whole re-writing of history thing of his. It’s hard to have an objective view of this. I mean I, like you, remember that the Luftwaffe lost the Battle of Britain. The Normandy Invasion went down in June of Forty-Five and Hitler died in his bunker less than a year later. For Art and Lance and other members of the team there’s multiple
overlays to that history. I only got pulled into it after they had settled on a final outcome of the war. My gig was the Cold War. For me, I can look out over a large part of this country and see it all going up as a bloody cinder many times over.

Gwen stayed sanguine through all of it, although she missed New York after Art cut himself off from the scene. Gwen did everything she could to bring that excitement to our little group. She was our best cheerleader. She was our living, breathing pin-up girl. If you ask me, she just took it all a little too far. She was all for us when Art got it in his head to go into exile for a while and find some place in history where we could live out our days. It was a good enough plan. It was just that none of us knew how much history had to play out through us and between us before we could ever get home.

The Testament of Perry Oilean

With that, Merle got up and stirred the stew, and then went to the kitchen. He was back soon with a tray. The kettle came off the fire, and Merle brewed us a strong sweet concoction made from gunpowder tea, which he served with shortbread cookies that Art and I had brought him. We sat for a good long while without saying a thing. The rain continued to pour. I got up to stretch and saw Art coming down the boardwalk to the house. It was then I looked at my watch and realized it was close to sundown. I had again lost track of the time.

“All rested?” said Merle as Art came in. “You look ready to go fuck a harpy?”

“Get stuffed.” Said Art. “I only did her, because you dared me.”

“Yeah, but now you got bragging rights.”
“I’m lucky I didn’t end up like that sap husband of hers. What were you thinking anyway?”

“Admit it: it was the ride of a lifetime.” Said Merle. Upon hearing this, Art looked pensive for a moment and then nodded in agreement.

“Wait a minute,” I said. “You guys screwed those... those women just to say you had?”

“ Heck!” said Art. “Merle was going to marry old Morgan at one point.”

“You were?”

“Well,” said Merle. “Lois cooked for us one night, and it finally made me think about how I was never really going to know what kind of mushrooms were going to be in the sauce, and it helped a long ways towards making up my mind to stay single.”

“Merle is trying to say he chickened out.” Said Art.

“That’s not accurate.” Said Merle.

“Don’t start with me, whiz-dick!” said Art. “You don’t want to go out on the lawn and prove yourself again in this weather.”

“You have a point there.” Conceded Merle. “On the other hand, remember that it is because of me that that you were able to join that elite fraternity that got to hear the sirens song and live to tell.”

“... and the other was a pussy.” Said Art. “They had to tie him to the mast. I got my bragging rights doing it freestyle!”

“Any peckerwood can piss on the floor.” Said Merle. “It takes a hero to shit on the ceiling.”

“I wrote that,” said Art. “That’s mine!”
“It’s true,” said Merle. “He had it carved over his privy once, a long time ago. People have been copying it ever since.”
Chapter 27

There was a sudden drop in the conversation, as if there had been a knock at the door. Art and Merle both looked out the window and moved towards the porch. I followed. It was that moment of the evening of maximum gloom, just before night makes its final decent on the land. The light rain made it seem all the closer and palpable. It was not foreboding. In fact, the change from the fire was refreshing, and I realized how stuffy things had become inside. Merle pulled the door shut most of the way, allowing a bit of light and a bit of air. Merle stood against a pillar. Art sat down. I peered out into the murk and listened. The rain made an infinite number of sounds—the thumping on the roof and the grass, the running sound in the gutters and downspouts, and the splashing in puddles.

At first notice, it was hard to discern what I was seeing from the flashes of light as an occasional larger drop of water caught a reflection off the interior lights. Out in the night, I began to see flickers that were not falling. They seemed to hang in the air, twitching back and forth. For a moment, I thought they might be moths, or perhaps some sort of self-luminescent bird, then all of a sudden my reverie collapsed and I saw it was two flashlights carried by men causing the display, their beams flitting about in front of their feet, as they came from the tree line and slogged over the field.

What finally emerged onto the porch were two very wet men. Each carried a gun case and had a duffel bag beneath their dripping ponchos. Merle and Art met them and helped them lose their gear. I was given the task of hanging the ponchos to dry. When
all was settled and we were about to go inside, the two strangers stood before Merle and Art.

“So who kisses whose here?” said the larger of the two strangers, addressing Art and Merle. “Huh?”

“I’ll kiss yours the day you kiss mine.” Said Art, lifting his leg and farting. There was a tense pause as the two men fell back a step and reached for their belts as if to draw a sword. They stared at each other, waiting for one to move on the other.

“Funny, that’s what she said!” Replied the stranger and Art in unison. They all four fell together and embraced. There was a roar of laughter and we all strode into the house. Once inside, I finally got a look at the two men. The louder of the two was a tall, overbearing sort of middle-aged man with a ruddy complexion, wearing a sweater that was either dark brown or black with a wide yellow cruciform across the chest. The other had kind eyes buried in a dark beard and wore a golf sweater. Both had on purple clerical collars.

“And who is this?” said the man, pointing at me. “This isn’t-“

“This is Perry.” Said Art. “He’s with me.” They both came over to shake my hand.

Art pointed at the man in the cruciform sweater. “This is David,” he said. “Son of a nun--we call him Dewey. And this old Welch bastard over here is Dubie. He’s big on kissing lepers, so just be careful eating after him.

“They’re Episcopal bishops, so if you meet them on the street, they’re ‘Right Reverend’ to you,” added Merle, with his arm around Dubie, “but around here they’re just a holy pain in the ass.”
Dewey undid the clasp on his bag and started rooting deeply within it. He fished out two bottles of scotch, and held them aloft. “Glenfarclas for sipping, and King William for swilling! Bring me a beaker and we’ll have at it.”

Merle grabbed the King William, and began studying the label. “I’m not familiar with this one.”

“You show your good taste.” Said Dubie. “Finer folks shy away from the places that serve it.”

“Ach!” said Dewey. “King William! What brought down the house of Macdonald! The other is a cask-strength Glenfarclas.”

“I thought you were preaching temperance these days,” said Merle

“Moderation.” Said Dewey. “Moderation in all things. I am forever getting misquoted. ‘Ploughed every night, but just so you don’t go plowing the draught animals.’ Is what I said. ‘A wee bit of the branch in your dram and a bit of bread to soak it up, so you’re not face down in the stew—“ That’s what I said, but does anyone ever listen to me? Stew, now there’s a concept. Dubie and I are about to gnaw our own arms off.”

In short order, we were all camped out by the fire, with a mug of hot stew in one hand and a beaker with a couple of drams of whisky in the other. Before things got going, Dubie brought over the gun cases and Merle brought out some rags and some oil. The cases were opened, and two rather formidable pieces were brought into the firelight. One was a short, double-barreled coach gun with exposed hammers. The other was an elaborate side-by-side that got passed around after getting a good rubdown and a patch down the barrel. When it was handed to me, I tried to examine it in the light of the fire.
There was a detailed hunting scene engraved on the side of a stag being shot by a hunter.

In the flicker of the firelight, the scene was animated to such an extent it gave the illusion that the blast of the gun was felling the deer as it leapt towards the viewer.

“Brilliant, isn’t it?” asked Merle, as I handed it back to him. “How it moves in the light.”

“Yes, “ I said. “I have never seen anything like it.”

“Must have taken years to get it right.“ said Merle.

“You’re late getting up here.” Said Merle. “I would have expected you sooner.”

“We got halfway down the road and Dewey remembered he’d left his gun.” Said Dubie.

“. . . And we were late getting going in the first place,” Added Dewie, “because they needed a saintly type to bless a new sanctuary over on the far end of the state, and Dubie couldn’t say ‘No, I’m going deer hunting, find somebody else!’ Instead he tells them he’s also going to bring me along, and then that makes them hire a brass band. We’re lucky we’re here at all.”

“It wasn’t all that much. We were in and out in an hour.” Said Dubie.

“It wasn’t all that much stopping to get my shotgun, either.” Replied Dewey.

Despite all the bluster, we all drank rather lightly that evening. After a couple of helpings of stew and some bread, it was not long before folks were standing and stretching and talking about calling it a night. Art and I did a few dishes and then
followed on to the bunk house. As soon as we opened the door, it was obvious the weather had changed. There was now a sharp wind blowing out of the northwest, that caused an instant chill. Art stepped off the porch to get a better look at what was happening, and I followed. The clouds were now moving off. A clear line across the sky marked their departure, and behind them was a brilliant firmament of stars.

“It’s supposed to blow like this until early morning. By the time we get out, it’ll be done.” He said. “It’ll be cold, but still. I hope it gets the deer up and moving.”

Dewey was already snoring in one of the beds, fully clothed. Dubie was taking his time, getting set for the morning. We all wished each other a good night and turned in.

It seemed like only a moment before I woke up, with far too many covers on me, and the lights on in the other room. I remembered then once feeling chilly in the night and pulling everything available to me around my shoulders and cozying up. Someone had lit the fire and my room was growing quite toasty. Art came in a moment later to see if I was awake. I got up and immediately started digging for my clothes. Dewey and Dubie were whizzing off the porch, when I came out. Art came behind me and handed me the warm gloves, orange hat and vest, and balaclava. On the way over to the house he showed me that the balaclava went over my head first, and then I put the hat on over that. I stuffed the gloves in one pocket and the vest in the other. The air had grown cold and still. I had a vague memory of a wind over night, but that had died down. The temperature had dropped well below freezing.
When we got to the kitchen table, Dewey was in the midst of a story. “So--God as my witness-- he says ‘And you believed him???’ That buck is always such a goddamn liar. Don’t listen to anything he tells you!” Everybody laughed. “He did lie, too. “ Dewey added. “He wasn’t tough at all—mighty tasty I might add.”

“Talking deer?” I asked. “With all I’ve seen so far, do the deer talk around here?” That caused another round of laughter.

“No,” said Art. “Most of them don’t. But it’s like Dewey says, if they do talk to you, don’t believe what they say. Just plug ‘em.”

Merle had made biscuits and sausage and gravy, and we sloshed these down with coffee. Over a second cup of coffee-- we were all starting to wake up—we went over who was going where. Art was going to take me where I was going and then head off on his own. Dewey and Dubie were going to roam one side of the main ridge. They preferred keeping to the ground and sneaking up on the deer. Merle grabbed a tan field coat from a hook and said he was going to go sit on a cliff right behind the house and pick off anything he saw.

It was pitch dark when we put on all our coats, and took turns pulling our pieces off the rack in the living room and heading for the door. Art stopped me and gave me a quick checklist of what I needed to remember. I had the bucket with the strap inside. I had my coat. I had a box of deer slugs, my license pinned to my back, a flashlight and a Hershey bar. Art and I lit our flashlights, shouldered our guns, and waived to the rest. The ground was crisp and frosty. My breath hung in front of my face as a haze. The flashlight beam glistened on the frost. We walked patiently out to the south, past the
sheds and headed towards the stand Art had shown me. It seemed to take forever to get there, but was only because we were in complete darkness.

We came at last to the place in the fence Art had shown me before. We stopped walking and Art pointed skyward to Orion again. He patted me on the shoulder and shook my hand. “Don’t believe anything the deer tell you.” He said. “I’ll stop back at Ten and see how you’re doing. I’ll come from this way, so be careful not to shoot me.”

“You’ll be . . .?”

“I’ve got a spot on the other side of that little pasture we saw yesterday. We’ve got a hillside between us, so don’t worry. Stay put. Don’t go wandering too much. If I hear you shoot, I’ll come to you and we’ll track it together. Good luck.” With that, Art turned and left.

I pulled out my compass and started following the heading I’d memorized and counted my steps. It was like an alien world of tangled branches amid total darkness. I counted one hundred steps and then stopped. Nothing. Every tree looked the same. Every bush looked like every other. I was lost and I had been at this for less than five minutes. I wandered a bit and then found a log to sit on. I figured that was a better than stumbling around in the dark. I sat with the bucket between my knees. That was a mistake. The log was wet. I shifted over onto the bucket. I felt stupid and ashamed. I could not believe I had

In a short time, I got cold. I put on my coat and the balaclava, and then realized I probably didn’t need the flashlight anymore. I turned it off and was instantly bathed in cold and silence and darkness. I stayed in that state for some time. My hands got cold. I put on my gloves and held the shotgun. It sucked the heat out of my hands. I tried to keep
a grip on it in several ways, but each method left some part of my body in contact with
the metal and it ached from the cold. I finally could not take the confinement anymore
and stood up. It was then that I noticed that I could see the first ghostly signs of light.
The trunks of the trees were beginning to be discernable. I could see my own feet, and if
I moved my hands up, I could see them against the sky.

I flicked on my flashlight to see what time it was: only six forty-five. Shortly
after this, I heard the first gunshot. Off in the distance, someone had taken a shot.
Within a minute or two, there was another, and then another. Some seemed impossibly
close. Some were at the farthest reaches of perceptibility. I could not believe that anyone
could actually be seeing a deer. I craned my head about trying to see something. Perhaps
I was surrounded by deer and did not know it. Nothing.

By seven o’clock the light had grown enough that I could start making out things
around me. I shifted about on my bucket and found myself looking square at the ladder of
the stand. I had walked right up to it in the dark and not realized it. Part of me did not
want to go up. Part of me wanted to stay on the ground and hide from the gunfire.
Another part of me felt scared to stay on the ground, as if getting a few feet off the
ground might protect me. I finally decided that it would be best to get in the stand and be
done with it.

The rehearsal two days before had seemed somewhat puerile. However, it was
invaluable. I felt like an expert, getting into the stand, hauling up my shotgun and the rest
of my gear. The activity of climbing and moving around to get re-situated got my blood
running again, and I found myself beginning to crack a sweat. However, I settled back
down and got myself settled in, and soon I was a pleasant temperature again.
I reached in my pocket and pulled out a shell. I could see without a flashlight now. I racked slug into the gun and put two more into magazine, before testing the safety once more and then leaving lay across my lap. I huddled over it and put my gloves back on and waited. I was hunting now, a good fifteen feet up a tree. The light of dawn was now filling the woods. I was hunting and it felt good. Sunrise came and it was a splendid thing—a bare orb coming up over a distant mountain. It rose through a break in the trees, and I was able to see it in its entirety.

All the while, there was a constant barrage of fire.


Blam! Blam! -- a double being unloaded

On our mountain, things remained relatively quiet. The distant shots made it less than serene, but after a while the noise became trivial. Once I was up in the air, it became apparent that even the closest shooting was well over a half-mile away. I felt as though I was above it all. Once, I heard a noise in the woods quite a bit away of a slug ripping through the remaining leaves and burying itself in the ground. It might have been an acorn falling, but it seemed to travel horizontally through the trees. That made me feel a bit apprehensive, but I figured it was probably a fluke.

The rest of the forest did not seem to mind. The squirrels were out and about, digging through the leaves. Birds were everywhere: jays, cardinals, and chickadees. At various times crows would fly close, call to each other and then fly off. Each time I heard a rustle of leaves, I was fixated on that sound until I could resolve what had made
it. Sometimes it was a squirrel. More often, it was a chipmunk. There seemed to be a lot of them around. They kept me occupied.

After the sun came up, there was a general relaxation of the gunfire. It settled into a shot or two every minute and kept that way the rest of the morning. Eventually everything on the mountain had done what it was going to do for the morning and had moved off somewhere to take a fore-noon nap. I was alone.

I was apprehensive about standing up, but my butt gone quite numb. Art had warned me not to move around in the stand too much. The deer might spy me. However, I was getting cold again and that was making me fidget. After considerable deliberation, I decided to take a break from hunting and allow myself time to stretch. By this time, there was the slightest sensation of heat coming from the light of the sun. When I stood up and was able to take the sunshine directly on my face, it felt luxurious. I realized at that point that I had withstood the worst of the cold, and it would gradually get warmer. The act of standing warmed me quite a bit as well, and I resolved to remain upright for a while.
Chapter 28

Deer, squirrels and people sound a lot alike, coming through the woods. I know that now. I learned this lesson on that morning. Squirrels hop through the dry leaves and stay in pretty much one spot for quite some time. When they do make forward progress, it is often in zigzag lines. They are foraging for food, and they will move from one spot to another and rustle about. Deer are different. For the post part they move in straight lines. They sound like squirrels on a sincere mission.

Another fooler came by right after sun-up. From a distance it sounded like a herd of hunters in thick boots stomping through the forest. I could not believe the ruckus they were making. A bit later I found out what had been bothering me when a flock of turkeys came through. They looked like pea fowl without the big tails. Something in the back of my head rose out the pages of all those Outdoor Life magazines in the barber shop and reminded me of what I was seeing. It was half a dozen hens walking through, picking their way through the leaves for acorns as they went.

I heard my first deer in the woods after an hour or later. I had been standing for some time and found that my feet were getting cold. I found that by sitting down and wiggling my toes about while my feet dangled in the air off the side of the stand, I could get them warm again. Standing had pressed them against the soles of the boots and brought them into closer contact with the treestand. At first, I did not pay much attention to it, but the noise kept coming closer. Finally, I was caught with my feet dangling and my shotgun pointed in the wrong direction as the deer moved out of a group of cedar.
trees and stood. Carefully, I got myself put back together and brought the muzzle of the shotgun over the top of the shooting rail.

The doe walked by less than thirty feet from my stand, having come from some place deep in the woods behind me. She was moving a reasonable clip, not sauntering. She would walk a bit and then look behind her before moving on. She moved into an open clearing near the log I had sat on and stood for a moment. I brought my shotgun up and pointed it at her, practicing my move. It all went well for a dry run. She kept looking behind her, and only once flashed her attentions in my general direction. However, after she had passed her closest approach, I saw her suddenly whirl around and stare at the spot where I had been sitting. She stamped her foot once and then departed quickly through the briars and out into the small pasture beyond.

I was shaking. Once the she had left, I found myself let down in a big way. My senses were on edge. I could hear my heart pounding in my ears. I had a death-grip on the shotgun, and my trigger finger was numb from pressing against the side of the receiver. It took several minutes for me to settle down again. When I did, I ran the scenario over and over again, following with my eyes everywhere she had stood until she had moved into the field and left.

I became aware of another set of footfalls coming my way through the woods. These seemed quite a bit heavier and more determined. I was alert this time and focused on the source of the noise, coming from amongst a stand of cedars at the far edge of what I could see. These steps sounded faster. It was not long before I saw a deer come into view. At first, I wrote it off as just another doe. However, as the deer cleared the undergrowth and I had an unobstructed view, I realized that it had antlers. It had a large
rack that glistened that caught the sunlight. I brought the shotgun up onto the rail and waited. His head was high, and he walked a path somewhat downhill from the first doe, but generally parallel. His attentions were mostly on what was in front of him. He would step and pause, step and pause.

His closest approach to the stand would bring him within perhaps twenty yards of the side of the stand. As he came closer, he would gradually bring himself broadside to me, and I could take a clear shot. However, I did not know if I could wait. The tension in my hands alone was nearly unbearable. I could barely breathe. I slipped my left hand under the forearm of the gun, between it and the rail, both to cushion the gun and to give me a chance to relax the arm. The buck walked closer.

I am not sure what caused him to walk behind a large oak tree and hide himself from me. However, he did just that. I could see his head and his tail, but his forelegs and his chest were completely covered. The buck stayed there, surveying the territory in front of him, including the small clearing where I had been sitting. He stayed for only a minute, but it seemed like forever. In the middle of it, I gave up. I knew the play was finished. I gave up. I knew I would not shoot the deer. I nearly brought the gun down. It was melodrama, but it gave me enough of a break that I did not go to pieces during my wait.

The buck began to move again, a bit more cautiously than before, but his pace was constant now. I wanted him to stop again, so I would have an easy shot. He was so close. He was nearly to the clearing.

He stopped.
I remember the bead of that skeet barrel appearing over the receiver. The small white bead rested on his chest in the perfect spot. I slipped my finger onto the trigger and... nothing. I had forgotten to press the button and turn off the safety. The deer moved again. I moved the barrel again, but now the bead was beginning to dance about. I squeezed the trigger. The shotgun roared on its own, before I was fully prepared. The buck ran out through the same opening as the doe and sprinted out of sight. I hurriedly tried to jack another round in, but I had nothing but pasture to aim at. I was standing. My safety belt was pulling at my pounding chest. I had failed. It was all over.

It took me a little while to get the shotgun unloaded. I managed to drop one shell into the leaves. I gathered up my stuff and sent first the shotgun and then the rest of it down the rope to the ground. I climbed down and dejectedly went over to check what I had done. I found, at about forty five paces, where the buck had launched himself. There were four neat holes in the cover of leaves. One held a deep print. I poked around a bit, expecting to find a crater where the deer slug had gone. I then followed the path from there towards the field. I was about ten feet from the honeysuckles that grew along the margin of the field when I saw a bit of color on the leaves. I walked over and saw blood. I had wounded him. I stared at the blood for the longest time. My whole life had bounced from pit to summit to pit and now I stood looking down at a sure sign of partial success, and all I could summon was a still a clawing fear that somehow I had botched it.

Where the buck had gone through was a bit too dense for me, so I went around the bushes and walked out into the field. As I emerged into the morning sunshine, I realized I should probably reload the gun. I fumbled about as I came back to where the buck had emerged. On the grass was more blood. I turned and saw two more splotches and then
let my eyes rise on their own and saw him. He had made it to the middle of the pasture and then given out.

I really did not know what to do at that point. For a long time, I just hunkered down next to the dead dear and beheld my trophy. The feelings rushed through me. I was elated. It felt better than I had ever known. More than anything else, I felt accomplishment. The day was mine.

Then it occurred to me that I had the rest of my life to live. That is, I was sitting out in the middle of a pasture, on a mountain, in some parallel universe, and no freaking idea of what to do next. I had no future prospects except my association with Art Penn, a man with an enigmatic history to say the least. My grip on reality was not what it should be anymore, as a result of exposure to a strange hallucinogenic substances administered by Art, and I had no idea if my next girlfriend was going to turn out to be a mermaid or a chicken. I had four rounds of Remington Slugger ammunition, a compass, a Hershey bar and a very dead deer.

It was time to get on with things. I had the safety belt that had been keeping me tied to the tree. I looped it around the buck, this way and that, and finally found an arrangement that allowed me to drag him across the ground. The entry to the pasture was only a couple of hundred yards away. I gathered all my stuff, used the straps on the pickle bucket, unloaded my shotgun and began to haul. The deer was heavy, but it slid fairly easily. The field was flat and the grass was slick. However, after about twenty five yards, the whole kit proved to be too much. I therefore left the bucket, the coat and the
shotgun and dragged the buck for while, until I got tired, and then dropped the deer and went back for my stuff. That gave me time to rest up for another go at the deer. After five iterations of this, I wound up at the little copse of trees where Art and I had been the day before. I left the deer out in the field, and retired to my log from the day before to eat my Hershey bar. Never had a candy bar tasted so good.

About a half hour later, Art appeared in the field from the woods to the south and started walking my way. I heard him before long before seeing him and whirled around, wondering what to do if it was another deer. When I saw his orange hat, moving just inside the treeline, I relaxed. Art was making for my stand. When he finally spied me, he waived and picked up his pace. I collected my stuff and got up to greet him.

“Giving up?” He asked.

“I’m done.” I said.

“What, with hunting?”

“Nope. Just done for the season.” I replied.

“Did you see anything?”

“Yep.”

“Did you shoot?”

“Yep.”

“I was wondering if that might be you. So you ran out of ammo?”


“What’s that?”

“It’s a dead deer.”
“I believe you’re right.” He then took a few steps and spied the rack. As I came up behind him, he turned and got me in a bear hug.

“That’s terrific, son.” He said. “That is just wonderful.”

I recounted all that had happened, and Art listened intently. He went over and examined the rack. It had five points on each side. He called it as a young ten-pointer.

“It had plenty of growing to do.” He said. “It’s a shame in a way to take him that young, if he had made it through this season, he might have been a real player—a monarch of the forest. Still, by then he’d have been too smart, and no one would ever have a shot at him again. It’s the way it goes.”

“I guess.” I replied.

“One thing is for sure. “ he said. “ You feel pretty good right now?”

“Oh yeah.”

“Take a good look around, son.” Art said. “Soak this all in. Take a good deep breath of fresh air, and know that it does not get any better than this.”

“I’d been sort of thinking that way.” I replied.

“He that outlives this day and comes safe home will stand a tip-toe when this day is nam’d, And point a finger at his mounted antlers saying ‘These wounds! These wounds, I gave on Opening Day!’ For he today that sheds blood with me shall be my brother; be he ne’er so vile. This day shall gentle his condition. And Gentlemen all now in bed shall think themselves accurs’d they were not here, and hold their manhoods cheap whilst any speaks that hunted with us on Opening Day.” He handed me a folding knife and said. “You ever cleaned a deer before?”

“No.”
“I guess you’re about to learn.” Art said.

I had read about how to clean a deer many times in a magazine. The reality was something else again.

The first thing that comes to mind when I think of cleaning that deer was the smell. From the first moment I opened up the cavity of the deer, a warm blast of steaming warm air issued from the incision. Although not all that unpleasant unto itself, the odor of a deer’s insides plastered itself to the inside of my nose and will stay with me until the day I die. Coupled with the sensations of running my fingers through all the major organs as I freed them from their attachments the process was overwhelming.

Art said it, but he didn’t need to—I was already thinking it: “There ain’t much difference between your insides and this buck’s.” I was disemboweling something close to myself. It made all the steaks and hamburgers and pieces of fried chicken and pork chops come to life, and at times in the process I felt as though they were still in me and might want out. This was the first time I had ever really given it much thought—that for every cheeseburger I’d eaten in my life, there had been a cow, pretty much like this. It was humbling.

“If you are looking for a secret to the universe,” Art said. “That’s it right there. Everything that is you in this world came from something just as alive. Some day it’ll be your turn. That’s the way it works.”

Art gave me a few pointers, but it was pretty straightforward. I opened up the abdominal cavity very carefully, so as not to nick the intestines. Then I got them and the rest of the guts to spill out. Then I cut through the diaphragm and got up into the heart
and lungs and brought them out, finally severing the windpipe and esophagus. My shot had pulverized both lungs and pulped the heart. We found the slug imbedded in the hide on the opposite side. I pulled it out and stuck it in my jacket pocket. The bullet had flattened out completely into a thin wad of lead.

The final step, Art helped me, was sawing through the pelvis and removing the anus without spilling the contents. It took me about a half hour, and when I was done, I was up to my elbows in blood. The buck was considerably lighter—easy for one person to drag. The gut pile lay in the grass.

Before we left, Art took a sharp stick and poked open the stomach, saying “Let’s see what he’s been eating.” The effluent that spilled out was enough to gag a maggot. While Art dissected it, I turned away and fought hard to get the Hershey bar back down. At first he did not miss my lack of attention, but finally he looked up and sighed. “It’s not a sign of weakness,” he said. “It happens to us all. Just breath through your nose until it passes.”

I took the deer most of the way back. Art brought on the gear. Once, we traded for a while, but Art switched back before we got back to the house. Dewey and Dubie were already back on the porch and Merle was in fixing a pot of coffee. I was the hero of the morning. No one else had seen anything. Before I could sit down, I was called to stand for a blessing. Dubie had gone into the house and come back out wearing a green stole that I found out later was made from a Jaegermeister premium he’d swiped from a bar in Oberammergau. It looked official, with the cross of Saint Hubert and all. Dewie told us Dubie carried it so he could deduct his hunting trips as a business expense. After
admiring my deer, Dubie stood on the porch and had me kneel down on a footrest. Merle came out and everyone assembled and the whole thing got solemn in a hurry.

The invocation was in English. Dubie thanked the good Lord for my deer and introduced me to All as a new hunter. There was a piece in Latin, and then Dubie fell into something—I don’t know if it was Gaelic or what—that went on for quite a while. Dewie sprinkled me with water off a cedar bow, and made the sign of the cross on my forehead. I was later to find out that his finger had been covered with deer blood, marking me to all who saw me as a fresh initiate. There was also a short piece where Dubie opened the mouth of the deer and placed a green sprig in its mouth and blessed it. Art produced my shotgun, and Dubie blessed that too and then handed it back to me.

When it was all over, I got up and everybody shook my hand. I was very flattered.

Art came up and patted me on the back, and said. “See? I told you this deer hunting thing was serious business. When was the last time you got the personal blessing of the saints? Huh?”

“I guess.” I replied. “I’m happy.”

“You should be.” Said Art. “Let’s get those backstraps out and get that buck down the mountain and over to the check-in.”

After we had coffee and a quick bite to eat, that is exactly what we did. Art harvested the tenderloins out of the deer, and gave them to Merle. We would feast on them that night. Next, we tied the deer to a pole, slung an orange vest over it, and Art and I took off to the truck. At the last minute Art remembered that I needed to tag the carcass, and so I stopped and filled out the temporary deer tag and tied it on an antler.
“Not that we’ll get caught,” he said. “But poaching the King’s deer without a tag has always been a hanging offence.”

“Didn’t you invent that rule?” said Dewie, joking.

“Of course I did!” said Art. “That was mine, and I did it to keep the dang churchmen out of my woods!”

Off we went, across the field, down the trail, and out to the truck. On the ride to the ranger station at the park, Art had me recount the whole thing from start to finish several times over.

“It’s not for me.” He said. “It’s for you. You need to get your story straight and work on your form and delivery. This will be a story you tell until you die.”
Chapter 29

The trip in to the grocery was breathtaking. The fog had lifted completely from the hills and the afternoon sun bore down on not-quite-barren trees. The sky was bluer than I had ever seen. I felt for the first time on the trip that I was in a different world. Art was in a great mood. For all you could tell, it had been his buck and not mine.

“I told you.” Art said. “It doesn’t get any better than this.” He handed me a canteen of water. At first, I passed, but then thought better of it. I had not had anything to drink since before sunrise. The water was chilled from sitting in the truck. It tasted better than anything I had ever drunk.

“Yeah,” I replied. “I’m feeling pretty good right now. Life ain’t so bad.”

“You’ve lived your life in the field, grazing like a cow. Now you have awakened from the dream only to discover you are leopard that hunts for his food.”

Along the road, we fell in behind other pickup trucks. Each had one or more deer in the back. By the time we came to the grocery store, which was the official state checking station, the procession had grown to quite a parade. We were tenth in line to get checked in, and we had a bit of a wait. I wandered around the trucks and saw many deer. Mine was middling by comparison. Some deer were huge, some of the bucks sprouted only a small fork or spike. Eventually I got a metal tag on mine and we rode out towards town. Art was going to take my deer to a meat processor in South Bloomingdale. It was on our way out, so we could pick up my deer later on in the week as the last thing before we drove home.
When we got there, we unloaded the deer on the dock, and a guy slung it up on a pile of carcasses waiting to go into the cooler. We found out we could pick it up on Wednesday. Art gave the guy a twenty for a down payment and off we went.

The Testament of Art Penn

I don’t know how many times I’ve done that, but it never ceases to move me. Here you are walking the line between the ultimate acts of sanctity and profanity in the same act. On the one hand, you are sacrificing life in an affirmation of your connectedness with all life, and at the same time you are gutting a deer. It’s like that—just like that.

That’s what holds me to this world, the love of that particular dance. I can’t help it. I can’t help loving life. For all its misery and despair, there are days like this where Life nods at you—you know you are in the game. You know you are dancing the dance, and it matters very little, at least to me any more, what end of the fork you’re on. That’s what I can’t see with all this talk about Jesus Christ, and the Resurrection. I never felt I needed to be forgiven. I never felt I wanted to be called up yonder. I was reviewing books for a class a few years ago, and I read through Arthur Clarke’s book-- what was it? Childhoods End. It occurred to me while I was reading it that I could be very happy if the rest of Humanity was saved, lifted off the planet and I was the only one who was left. I would not feel cheated in the least. Gawd, how I love this world! I suppose I’m the luckiest man alive. I’ve lived so many lifetimes. I’ve seen so many things. Life has nodded at me, and I, in turn, have nodded back then and reached over and tweaked Life’s
nose. It is just so twisted when you think about it: Life from Death, Joy from Despair. I remember Kathy and I talking in the week or so after Willie combusted.

“Life,” she said to me, “is perverse. It can be beautiful, but it won’t.” At the time, I wanted to argue the point with her. A few weeks later, she was a pile of cinders on the living room floor. Go figure. I’ve seen men as young as you-- Heck, I’ve seen you, looking up at me with your guts in your hands looking at me for an answer and I had none to give. I still don’t, but I at least feel better about the not knowing.

Don’t get me wrong, Perry. I still have days like this morning, where I can be out sitting on a stump in the woods, and the shooting starts, and the next thing I know I’m back on the Siegfried Line, and I feel those bloody Eighty-Eights hitting the treetops. There’s no foxhole. I’m naked, out in the open under the trees. As hard as I try to shake it, it’s just more than I can handle. Half an hour later, I come to in a cold sweat and I’m back out on Merle’s mountain, hunting deer. This is good, really. The more mornings I find myself going off over nothing, the easier it gets—the more I can laugh it off. One of these days, maybe I’ll kick it. Yeah, that’s right. While you were out getting your deer, I was out dry heaving and hugging a stump.

The Testament of Perry Oilean

Art looked over at me. We shared an awkward moment where I suppose I was supposed to say something. I did not know quite what to say. It passed, but it made Art clam up. We drove a couple miles in silence. The heater was on, and truck felt stuffy. It was becoming late afternoon, and I rolled down the window to catch the breeze that was noticeably cooler.
“Thanks for helping me with the deer.” I said. “I would have been lost without you.”

“Not a problem.” Art said. “It’s good to see someone pick up on this stuff. . . deer hunting I mean. “

“Oh, yeah.” I replied. “No problems there. Sign me up.”

“You are,” said Art.

Dubie and Dewey both came in from hunting right after we arrived back at the house. Dubie had heard something in the bushes at one point. Dewey had drawn a blank. It was no big deal for either of them. Both of them seemed happy for the time out, and Art handed them both a beaker of scotch as they turned away from hanging up their shotguns; any lingering regrets were soon gone.

Merle had doctored up the tenderloins of my buck and he grilled them for us along with fried potatoes and some sort of odd-looking pea or bean that he said someone had brought him from Peru. I had grown particularly fond of Merle’s mead, and I had probably more than I should have over the course of the meal. I didn’t notice until I tried to get up from the table and found myself staggering to the door to pee. I do not think anyone noticed or minded.

When dinner was done, we all retired to fire and talked about old times. I was not privy to most of the background, but I was able to figure out that Art and Merle had at one point decided that the lives they were leading in the Cold War were not giving them much satisfaction. They decided to travel by way of their methods to a reality quite a bit
more primitive. Once there, they insinuated themselves into the local culture and attempted to lead normal lives. Dubie had been a churchman in those days, and had received word of Art and Merle’s appearance. At some point, Dubie had been taken into their confidence and in return, Dubie had used his influence within the church to help Art and Merle assimilate.

Dewie was a fellow they had picked up along the way. Dewie had been another churchman of rank. Dubie had used his influence to bring Dewie and several other close friends into the confidence of Art and Merle. Eventually Dubie had gotten Dewie into a position of prominence within the church. This had allowed Dubie to take a back seat in church matters and spend more time in what kept Art’s operation moving along.

Merle would have been content to simply live out his life, but once Art had established himself in local politics the machine kept building momentum. Art had tried to build an American-style democracy in an Iron Age backwater, and it snowballed into a big thing. Merle and Art parted ways for a while and Dubie had stepped in. Eventually, internal strife and external rivalries had caused the bubble to break. Art decided that there was no place like home. Art decided to seek out Merle and go back.

When it came time to quit and go home, Art quietly pulled out a few of those who had helped out over the years, asking him to return with them. Dubie had gone with them, but once in the modern world, he had decided to go back to find some of his buddies. Some balked at the idea, and I took it that the parting had been a great loss. Some had followed Dubie. Dewie was one who chose to jump forward in time. Dubie had come back for Dewie and had lead him back to a quiet life in western Ohio. There the two had helped each other attain rank within the Episcopal Church.
Some of this I gleaned from the conversation that night. Some of this story I figured out over time. For the most part I stayed quiet, but could not help being fascinated by the story.

“Dubie,” I said. “How did you ever decide to throw in with Art?”

The Testament of Archbishop Dubricius:

“That’s simple. I was made for it. You have to remember that the only reason I joined the church in the first place was there was no place for me elsewhere in the world. I was not only a bastard, but I was the product of a union with my mother and my grandfather. This guy was a real son-of-a-bitch-- Peabo Clayfrog—how’s that for a name. He came back from whomping on some his neighbors one year, and finds out his daughter is with child. Back in those days, women had a pretty good way of keeping that sort of thing from happening, so if my Mom had wanted to no one would have been the wiser. She did it just to spite her Dad, and let everyone know what was up between them. Old Peabo could have done a lot of things including owning up to it. But instead he decided to have her condemned as an adulterer and tied in a sack and thrown in the river. Mom got free, swam out of the sack, and she stayed with relatives until I was born. Peabo was still not a Christian, so naturally Mom got herself washed in the Blood of the Lamb first thing she could. It was protection against Peabo, and also just a little extra finger in Peabo’s eye. In those days, Christianity had not made it into the backwaters. Most folks could take it or leave it.

Years later, Peabo was dying of what they thought was leprosy. Actually, the old pisser had developed conscience in his old age. He’d had help. His wife and her whole
family had been working him over for three years for knocking up their only daughter and then throwing her off a bridge tied in a sack. He’d taken to a nervous affliction of scratching himself all the time. Henpecked? You have no idea. He’d pretty well scratched all his skin off. He eventually relented. They brought me to him, and I—I was too young to remember all this—I kissed my Grandpa, and the family slowly got reconciled. Everyone thought it was a miracle. At the time, I think my grandma’s kin were going to kill him if he didn’t cave in. I don’t know if it was guilt or what, but he set Mom and me up with a nice spread and left us alone and we eventually ended up living a fairly nice life. Mom surrounded us with Grandma’s side of the family—invited the whole tribe to come live with us on Grandpa’s dime. Life was good.

The upshot of all this was that I was still a bastard and could not stand to inherit anything, so I found my way into the church. I already had one miracle under my belt, and Christianity was just taking hold. It was a sure thing. However, all that fuss around me being born and all left me with what you could describe as a basic distrust of the system. When I came of age, I stuck it back to Grandpa and had all the lands he’d let Mom and me have set aside as a monastery. Nowadays, it would be like buying into franchise. By signing up for the whole Christian thing, Mom, me, and her whole family had a certain legitimacy and political standing. Besides if Peabo moved against us, Grandma would have had his balls cut off.

When Art showed up on my doorstep and offered me a piece of the action, I was more than willing to lend a hand. The local political scene had offered me nothing more than a trip down the river in a sack. I wanted out. Art offered a way. On the surface, Art embraced the new religion and helped out our operation. Behind the scenes, he kept
Merle working the old ways. Between them, they got everyone on board, and started ramming--what was it?--“baseball, hotdogs, apple pie, lemonade and Chevrolet” down our throats.

The Testament of Perry Oilean

“That’s not true.” Said Art. “I just felt that a version of Jeffersonian Democracy would transplant well in that sort of situation. You had a landed elite that could understand the complexities inherent in running a socio-economic situation in a pre-industrialized setting. What better model did we have?”

“God save us from the Intellectuals! You wanted to bring the Gilded Age to the savages” Said Merle. “I was there. You can’t shit me. In another few years, we would have had band concerts on the green. and ice cream socials in the middle of the Iron Age.”

“Well, “ shrugged Art. “I thought it was a good idea at the time.”

“Don’t get us wrong, “ said Dewey. “Art was a big step up for all of us. Most of the folks we had to deal with before him made Peabo Clayfrog look like a saint. From what I understand of things, the Romans weren’t much better even though they thought themselves civilized. Art was all for giving everyone a fair shake. I just always thought it was too much too soon.

“See?” said Art. “Somebody appreciates what I tried to do.”

“You were a putz, Art.” Said Dewey. “Make no mistake about it. You were a first rate horse’s ass, but we loved you anyway.”

“We loved you, because you were a horse’s ass,” said Dubie.
“And most if us think you still are,” chimed in Merle.

“Don’t look at me.” I said. “He’s my boss.”

“I still maintain that we had no better solution available to us,” said Art. “What we had was tribal anarchy. If our experiment was to succeed, we needed to establish an order that was friendly to our designs. I can’t help it if it got off track.”

“Off track???” said Merle “Off track my crazy Aunt Matilda! It was all in a cocked hat the day we set foot in the place. If it was not for Dubie, I doubt you would have lasted the first week.”

“I have to admit, Dubie, “ said Arthur. “You really did save our adventure early on.”

“It was a pleasure,” said Dubie. “I was only doing my duty as a Christian—the whole story of the Good Samaritan, What?” That got a laugh.

“How did you save him” I asked.

“I told everyone he was a recently arrived from Breton.” Said Dubie. “That he was a high-born lord of the house of Ambrosius.”

“What he did,” simplified Merle “Was tell everyone that Art was from France, and they should cut him some slack. How’s that for original?”

“It worked, didn’t it?” said Dubie.

“True enough.” Said Merle. “And I appreciate your willingness to include me under your protection.”

“Myrddin Emrys.” Said Dubie. “I am always inclined towards supporting wisdom, no matter what flag it may be flying. You see, I had a real conundrum. Merle here represented—how shall I put this -- the old way of doing business. As a defender of
the Faith, Merle and I were on opposite sides of the fence. Christianity was the new hot thing. I could not be seen giving ground to the old school.”

“Ah! Those were the good old days.” said Dewey raising his beaker. “Here’s to them!”

“Aye!” said one and all.

“I have something special.” Said Merle. “It’s special for the occasion.” He went to a back room and emerged with a wooden test tube rack. Five test tubes, half filled with a greenish-yellow liquid were on the rack.

“Why the test tubes?”

“It was just easier to measure the dosage.” said Merle.

“The dosage?” I asked.

“Don’t ask.” Said Dewey. “It will just wreck the surprise.”

“They’re not test tubes.” Said Merle. “They’re vials.”

“Okay, they’re vials.” I said. “What’s in them?”

“We don’t ask.” Said Art.” If you don’t want one, you can pass. But if you do, you’ll miss out on the show.”

“Screw you.” Said Dubie. “I ain’t waiting. Here’s to Eeltoe and Samson, and all the fine men who didn’t make the trip.” He grabbed a vial and downed it.

“To Life and to Love and the love of life and a life of love!” said Dewey as he downed his.

“Am I going to trip?” I asked.
“It’s all a trip.” Said Art upending his vial. “Tonight’s not a good time to ask too many questions. To God on High. I know he’s in heaven tonight, and he’s having a good time.”

“To Perry.” Said Merle, bringing me the last two vials. I took one and left one for Merle. “You make an old fart feel like it was not all a waste.”

“Thank you Merle.” I said. “Thank you, all of you, for letting me in on this. So, to I guess my toast is to you all.” I drank the vile. It tasted a bit green and a bit alcoholic. It tasted strange, but not in a bad sort of way. “But why the test tubes?” I asked.


“They’re vials,” said Art. “And we are a vial sort of group. We do vial things in vial ways. We walk through history as the vial-ist of the vial. We are vial men.”

“The Vial.” Said Dewey, picking up his beaker again. “Merle, there are few so vial as thee.”

“Here! Here!” said Dubie. “I applaud you on your vial-ness.”

“Ah,” said Merle. “I am but an instrument of the most vial among us, Art!”

“Thank you.” Said Art. “It’s just nice to know my being so vial is appreciated.”

“But what’s going to happen?” I asked.

“Happen?” said Art. “I don’t know about you, but I’m going to bed and I’m going to go deer hunting in the morning.”

“So are we,” said Dewey as he and Dubie got up to leave.

“I’m going to bed too.” Said Merle. “I’m done.”

“But what was in the vial?”

“Our nightcap.” Said Merle flatly. “Good night.”
Chapter 30

I awoke with a thud. It could have just as easily been audible, but something told me that it had come from within. I could not remember a dream. It felt like I had been dropped onto my mattress from a couple of feet up. I had laid awake for quite a while the night before waiting for something to happen, for the “nightcap” to take effect. It had not, and I had drifted off. Light was streaming in through the window. I had overslept. I started to grab all my gear and hurry, before I caught myself. I had used up my one tag. Deer season was over for me. For a brief moment I felt cheated, then I felt relieved that I did not have to rush.

There was still a hot pot of coffee in the kitchen, as well as some biscuits and gravy and toast and sassafras jelly. No one else was in the house. I ate, did some dishes and then went out on the porch. I had missed sunrise and then some. It felt wonderfully luxurious to be sitting on the porch in a rocking chair gazing out at the hills—green islands set between the sea of fog and the blue sky. I could hardly remember my life before coming to Merle’s mountain, my life was that consumed.

It was pretty chilly, but the air was still. I started to get cold, so I went inside to get my coat and get a refill on my coffee. It was as I was getting my coffee that I looked down at my hands and realized that my fingernails had really grown. I thought back and was sure I had cut them before I left . . . which was . . . by my counting it was only four days ago. However, I was actually still three days in the past if you looked on it another
way. I went back to my bunk and pulled a pair of clippers from my kit. My nails were pretty far gone; the corners had grown out much faster than the center. I had parings that were long enough that I had to go over some nails twice. For grins, I pulled off my boots and found that my toenails were in equal disarray. I cut a paring of my big toe that went a quarter inch. While I was on the personal hygiene kick, I stopped by the mirror and checked the rest of myself out. I had not shaved the day before, but my beard looked like a week’s worth and my hair looked like I was long past for a trip to the barber. I started feeling like Rip Van Winkle.

I came back to the porch after a shave and a wash. By this time it was getting on towards late morning. Merle showed up shortly afterwards.

“Did you sleep well?” asked Merle.

“Yes,” I said. I had trouble falling asleep. I was worried about what sort of drug you had given me.”

“Drug?” he chuckled. “No, it was no drug. It’s just—well, let’s just say it’s a fall tonic. It’s sort of like vitamins, only different. Most of what you had was just Drambuie.”

“Dram what?”

“Drambuie. It’s a Scottish liquor—as I said: a nightcap.”

“Still though . . . There was something else in it.”

“Yes.” Said Merle. “It’s not mysterious. It’s something I whip up for the guys to maintain their good health. You don’t get out past two hundred years old without help.”

“I suppose so. So this was—this is the Fountain of Youth?”
“No,” said Merle. “As I said, it’s just a good tonic. There’s stuff in you that tells you its time for you to be an adolescent and grow like a weed. There’s also stuff in you that tells you to pull in your horns, settle back and age gracefully. This is a tonic that plays with those things. I bet you feel pretty good this morning.”

“Yes, I sure do.”

“I just finished cutting my toenails, they must have grown overnight.”

“That’s a good sign. Everything in your body is being to told to fire up and turn on—like you’re a kid again. It’ll last for quite a while too. Eventually your nails and such will throttle back. I’m still not sure about that mechanism. However, don’t be surprised if you don’t grow a half and inch in the next six months.”

“What is this made of?”

“Oh, all sorts of things. I brought back some things as I was traveling around the world. Other things people sent me. Most of it is plant extracts, but most of the plants they come from don’t have names.”

“So, I will live forever?”

“No. In fact you might die tomorrow. I can’t stop accidents. I cannot stop an aneurism. All I can do is give you a little boost once in a while to keep your body stop looking over its own shoulder and counting the years. For us guys, for us vial individuals, that is usually enough.”

“So how old are you all?”

“Dewie and Dubie go back to the Sixth Century, but they missed a millennium or two along the way. Art and I are practically ageless, but we have been bouncing back and forth. After a while, counting gets to be an exercise in futility.”
“But you said over two hundred years.”

“Art’s odometer, if he had one would be somewhere in the neighborhood of two hundred and fifty years. I’m the mechanic that knows how to set odometers back—knock a couple of bad miles off here and there. There are other mechanisms at work as well.”

“Which are. . .?”

There was a shot across the field and down in the woods before Merle could answer me. Before we could really react to it, there was another.

“That’s probably Art.” Said Merle. “He’s got one.”

“How do you know?”

“Art had said he was going that way this morning.” Merle replied. “When you hear a shot, a pause like that and then one more shot that usually means he’s got it down and is just putting a second into it to finish it off. We can wait a little while for him to get settled and then go find out.”

That is what we did. Merle waited with me and after about twenty minutes, we walked over the open field and got down to the old fence line inside the trees. As we waited, I tried to get Merle back onto the subject of longevity, but most of what we talked about was slug guns and deer.

“Hallooo!” called Merle into the woods. We waited for a reply.

“Hallooo yourself!” Answered Art, from the general direction of the stand I had used for my training. He sounded like he was calling from further down the hill.

“Did you get one?” Asked Merle

“Yes,” called Art. “I could use help!”
It did not take us long to find Art. We went to the stand and called to him. He was about seventy-five yards further down the hill. We found him standing next to a buck with a smallish, tightly basketted rack. He had already gutted it out. We put a rope around him and ran it through a branch and then two of us at a time dragged it up the hill as Art explained what had happened.

“I was thinking about moving to another spot,” he said. “This little guy came in and stood at the base of the tree and looked right up at me. I said to him, ‘Little fella, if you don’t repent your ways right now, you’re going to be venison.’ I did. I spoke right to him. All he did was look at me and then put his head down and start munching acorns. I really would have rather let him grow up, but there you have it. I gave him every chance in the world to grow up and be majestic, but he chose to be venison. What else could I do?”

“You did the right thing,” said Merle.

“You bet I did.” Said Art. “That little boy is going to taste real good.”


“So I shot him.” Said Art. “And the little guy decides then to get second thoughts on the deal and ran downhill. That’s why deer are not running this world. They decide they want to sacrifice themselves, and then they get cold feet after it’s a done deal and try to chicken out on the deal. He ran down that way a bit, and then stopped and looked at me like he still could not make up his mind. So I shot him again.”

“It looks like it convinced him.” Said Merle.
“Finally. He still ran a little bit.” Replied Art. “You really have to get with your
deer and explain to them that when they’re shot they’re supposed to run uphill towards
the meat pole. This down hill stuff is for the birds.

“I’ll bring it up at the next meeting.” Said Merle.

and I are going home.” With that, he put his end of the stick down and hugged Merle.

“Brother,” said Art. “You save my soul every year. My life is yours.”

“Eh.” Said Merle. “You can keep your life. Go be a teacher. I’ll stay here and
bugger the harpies.”

“Deal.” Said Art. When they pulled apart, they were both crying.

The rest of the trip was pure denouement. I helped art march the deer down the
hill and we did a repeat of the day before, the only difference was that there were fewer
trucks with fewer deer at the check station and the processor. Art got the processor to
promise he would put a rush on his deer and have both ready to go by noon on Friday.

Dubie and Dewey were both in about the same time as before after sunset. Both
had resorted to what they called their secret weapons. Dubie had a small transistor radio
that he had placed in the crotch of a tree at waist level. The station was tuned to a station
that played easy listening music. He kept the volume down low and swore by this as a
surefire way to attract deer. Dewey had brought out his pipe and had been smoking
cherry cavendish all morning. He said that the pipe smoke would be enticing to deer. Art
said they were both superstitious fools. Merle refused to enter into the argument. We had
venison tenderloins for a second night. This time they were medallions done in a sweet
brown gravy with popovers. We ate, we drank, we swapped stories. I told a few stories about cases of spectacular spontaneous human combustion, and mentioned the show I had seen on PBS about Edward the Martyr.

Dewie managed to dredge up a story about a Welch abbot who had burst into flames from drinking too much. However, the more Dewie got into the story the more dubious Dubie got. They got into a disagreement and argued at length, at one point attributing it to Samson of Dol. They finally figured out it was the Abbot Pyr and that he had gotten drunk and managed to catch himself on fire, before throwing himself down a well. Dubie was skeptical, but Dewie assured him that the story was true.

Art got me up early on Wednesday morning, and we took off. I reminded Art that the deer would not be ready until Friday. Art told me not to sweat the details. We had breakfast with the remaining deer hunters and then started down the mountain again. I thanked Merle for a terrific time. Dewie blessed me. As I was saying my goodbyes, Merle took both my hands in his.

“Promise you will come see me again for Turkey Season.” He said. I told him that I would, not really knowing much more about it.

We rode into the processor in South Bloomingdale as the place was opening up on Friday morning. Don’t ask me how. All I know is that we took our time after breakfast. Art sat on the porch and did his nails and drank his coffee. We walked down the mountain, loaded up the truck, fired it up and rolled out. The world was clouding up, looking like it might rain. We let a guy ahead of us that was dropping off a deer. Art paid the fellow and we filled up two coolers with deep-frozen packages wrapped in white
butcher paper, and two garbage bags with the skins and heads. We stopped for some fried chicken at a truck stop on I-71 and caught a weather report that snow was on the way. Art was in the can at the time and I told him about it. He seemed worried.

“Hmmm.” He said. “That would put us somewhere on Thursday, and what we’re looking for is Monday. I’m going to have to think about this one. He ate chicken for a while and then sat going through the days counting with his fingers. It took him a couple of times. At one point he pulled out a pen and started to sketch things on a napkin.

“When you’re trying to figure out centuries and years and all, it’s really easy. When you get down to hours and days, it can really get the best of you.”

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

“Well see there was once this spaceman named Wright.”

“Yeah?”

“His speed was much faster than light.”

I nodded.

“He set off one day in a relative way and returned on the previous night.” Art laughed, having caught me flatfooted. “See, as I see it, we took off the Monday afternoon after the Monday after Thanksgiving. We went to Merle’s on the Friday after Thanksgiving and hunted Monday and Tuesday. We left Wednesday in time to make it to the butcher on Friday, and now we’re on our way back and have to show up on Monday evening a few hours after we left. Got that?”

“I think.” I said.

“The problem is that we’re somehow on Thursday now, and we definitely want to miss the snow. I say we sit here for a while and let our lunch settle and then ride on in.”
“Whatever you say.” I said.

That’s what we did. We sat and chatted about things, repeated our deer hunting stories over to each other and then paid the bill and left. By the time we got down as far as Lebanon, the sky was clearing again. Art relaxed his grip on the truck, pulled off around Kings Island and got gas. He had me take the wheel going into town. There was a lot of snow on the ground. The sun was going down, but the roads were clear.

We got off on Taft Road and rolled in the back way into Clifton and the heights. Art said he’d hold onto my shotgun and my venison until I could figure something out. He left me off in front of my place.

“Remember,” he said. “We’ve only been hunting for the day.”

“That’s impossible.” I said.

“No it’s not.” He said. “They’ll just think you were incredibly lucky.”

That’s how it went down, too. I walked in like nothing special had happened.

Sue and Skip were watching the TV. They asked where I’d been and I told them I’d been deer hunting. Over a plate of onion rings at the Corinthian, I told them the details. I had gone hunting with my boss over south of Columbus. I’d shot a nice buck. My boss had shot one. The two Episcopal bishops had gotten skunked. We got in the car and came home. Sue thought I had balls of steel. Skip looked skeptical, but appreciative. The floorshow started with the belly dancers. Life was good.

I got to pull a bunch of hours at Stan’s the next few days. Stan had a big rush as kids were selling books on their way home for the holidays. By Friday, campus had cleaned out. I was over at the Alpha having dinner on Friday night. Rene came up and asked where I’d been.
“Deer hunting.” I said. She did not ask for details.
Chapter 31

The next few weeks were a whirl. Right after I came back, the quarter ended. I was busy helping Art grade finals. Walter and Tony both announced that they were not coming back after the break. Walter had decided to go back to North Carolina and Tony just said something about finding another place. Right before I left for Christmas, I sort of got a hint as to why.

I was watching the Bengals hand it to the Steelers. It was a close-run thing, but it was great fun to watch. Sue and Skip were on the couch with me, and I noticed that Sue was being exceptionally friendly to me. Along about half time, Sue started talking about how she and Skip were thinking about expanding their horizons. Sue said that she had decided to invite me into their bed and wondered what I thought of it. Skip was on the other side of me and said that he really dug the idea too.

Things quickly fell together. First, I could figure out why Walter and Tony had decided to leave. When I finally caught up to Tony a few months later, I found out Tony had actually given it a shot once. That time out, Sue had marketed it to him as Skip just wanting to watch. Tony found out that Skip decided about half-way through to join in the festivities, and that had freaked him out. We never heard from Walter again. A good old boy like that must have headed for the hills. He passed a bunch of bad checks just before he left, so we had a lasting reminder of him above the cash register of every one of our favorite establishments for months to come.

Secondly, a long-forgotten memory resurfaced of one of the neighbor’s dogs. This dog had ironically been called Skippy—a monstrous Airedale that followed us kids
around in the neighborhood. Skippy had been a bit over-zealous, and had taken to humping everything that he could. I was too young to fight it and had learned to simply avoid him. That did not always work, and so one day during a touch football game at a neighbor's, I had been too slow to get off the ground. The thought of getting it from behind by another Skippy was just too much to contemplate.

Lastly, it dawned on me that I was Sue and Skip's third choice. Don't get me wrong. I was not jealous in the least. It was just way to obvious. I told them that I would think on it. Sue wondered if I would like a sample after the game. I responded with a walk in the fresh air. I went over to a phone booth on the corner and called Art. Art was watching the game, but understood the nature of the call without any details. We spent the third quarter loading my stuff into the back of his truck. We watched the fourth quarter from his place, and then I found myself moving into Art's carriage house as if it had been a well-planned thing. It was a really neat little apartment. It was largely unmodified from the days when horses were still kept. There actually two apartments— one that held Sue-Chi's studio. Both were plumbed and wired, although Art had used the original fixtures wherever possible. As a result I had two exposed wires, snaking down the wall to my light switch. The toilet had a tank up near the ceiling that operated with a pull chain. By late that evening, I had fully settled in and had even managed a run uptown on the bus for dinner at Skyline.

Christmas went all right. Sissy brought her boyfriend around, and we went on an orienteering trip through Winton Woods. One thing that they found fascinating was my new found knowledge of deer. It was funny, but the part of the woods he picked was
crawling with deer. We followed one trail from the park road to the dam and pretty much forgot about the orienteering thing. Along the way, I pointed out rubs and scrapes and bedding areas and signs of feeding. It culminated with us bumping into a sizeable herd of them out in a little glade. It was the first time Sissy had ever seen a live deer outside of a pen. She still could not abide the idea that I had gone and shot one. We finished off the day with a trip to the Hitching Post in Greenhills for some fried chicken. I could tell Sissy was stringing this guy a long, but he was on the hook but good. It was a bit sad, but typical for Sissy. After that, he went back up to his folks, but Sissy stayed with us through the holiday. I spent my time half-and-half between the folks and Art’s place with Sissy doing most of the driving between.

Sissy was far less put out by the idea of Sue and Skip’s offer than I had expected. She understood my desire to keep things straight, but assured me that her time in theatre had convinced her that there were far stranger things afoot. I felt like telling her about my run-in with Morgan and Lois, but decided not to.

I found out how hard it was to buy for me when Christmas day came and I was deluged with deer hunting gifts. I had hunting pants, hunting socks, a deer lamp, and a Jon-E Giant-Size Handwarmer with the buck lure attachment waiting for me under the tree. It turned out my family had been waiting years for me to find a hobby that would lend itself to a decent gift. Considering there is not much out there for the discerning Spontaneous Human Combustion buff—outside of perhaps a fancy butane lighter—I guess it was a huge relief. Christmas at Art’s place was somewhat of a subdued thing. I missed the whole thing, but Sue-Chi did not do much for the holiday, and the kids got a bunch of toys and that was that.
The carriage house started turning into something. I visited a little shop over in Clifton Heights that did TV repair. A guy named Jay sold me a used set, and delivered it to the place and got it hooked up. Art had installed a small gas furnace, and that kept the place fairly warm as long as we kept the vent turned off in Sue-Chi’s half of the upstairs. That was generally not a problem. Sue-Chi did her thing by day and I slept there at night. The phone company had a heck of a time running a phone out there. For about a week, there was about a hundred yards of phone cable laying on the ground, while they figured out how to get me a more permanent connection.

Then New Years came. It occurred to me that I had no where to go to. Art and Sue-Chi were otherwise occupied. Sissy was gone back to school. The rest of the family was not in the mood to party, and the last place I wanted to be was at the Corinthian with Sue and Skippy. I was working a few hours at Stan’s, and went over to the Alpha for lunch. Rene was there, and she could see I was in a spot. I had come in late, so there was no one else around. I was her only customer.

“You look like something the poodle passed.” She said.

“You’re probably right.” I said.

“What’s up?”

I told her bits and pieces of what had been going on. About half way through, she put her pad away and sat down across from me. We talked longer than we had since summer. I got to the part about New Years shaping up to be a huge drag.

“It’s going to be a drag for me too.” She said. “Why don’t we get together and screw for New Years.” I gasped.

“Or not.” She replied.
“It’s just that . . .” I was sputtering. “I thought you weren’t interested.”

“I am.” She said.

“Rene,” I replied. “I just never know how to take you.”

“I usually like variations of the missionary position.” She said. “I’m not real fond of doggy style, but if you have something you want to try-“

“So you want to spend New Years with me?” I said.

“Sure,” she said. “Why not? I’m not very good in bed, but I’m learning. I don’t really want to be ravaged by some self-styled performance artist, but you look like the kind of guy who might be fun, and I am in a horny sort of mood and . . . well . . .”

“I’m just not sure why the change.” I said.

“Neither am I,” she replied. “I’ll probably not want to look at you for a while afterwards, but I’ll stick it out until I have to go to work Until then you’ll have my undivided attention.”

That is pretty much how New Year’s went. I dropped by around closing on New Year’s Eve and escorted Rene to the bus stop. She had an over-sized shoulder bag with her, and we caught a 17 going up towards the Gaslight District, grabbed dinner at the Busy Bee and then I walked her up Clifton Avenue to Art’s place. Rene went through my record collection. She said she could tell all about someone from the records he had. She had me put on Keith Jarret’s Paris concert and my funky little turntable kept playing it over and over, wearing a groove in the vinyl.

Rene was right, she was not all that good in bed. What made the night go so well was that she did not have a whole lot of expectations of me, and she made sure I had no
expectations of her. I had an old Crosley fridge stocked with everything I could think of.

Most of the time was spent cooking, listening to records and exploring the carriage house.

Sue-Chi’s studio was open and I gave Rene a tour. Rene dug the sculpture and the photographs, having been an art student at one point.

“What was this all about.” I asked as she was dressing for work the next morning.

“You tell me.” She said.

“I don’t know. “ I said. “I guess I feel like the New Year started off pretty well.”

“Same here.”

“I feel like the world took an odd spin and smiled on me.”

“Same here.”

“Is that what this was about?” I asked.

“I don’t know.” She said. “I got my brains fucked out by a very nice man and I had a nice time, and this year is starting out a hell of a lot better than some. As I said, don’t expect anything. I’ll throw coffee on you if you come around in the next few weeks. Just leave me alone and let me sort this all out in my head.”

“I take it you’re moody.” I said.

“Very.” She replied. “I’m extremely neurotic, and I’m just so happy it didn’t screw up this thing.”

“I guess that is something I shouldn’t push.” I said.

“You should not.” She said. “It was just very nice spending the holiday with a real human being.”

“You know,” I replied. “That’s how I was getting to feel.”
“One human being to another, then.” She said and gave me a big hug and a kiss. We walked out together up the driveway. Art was out in his bathrobe, probably preparing to piss off the deck and saw us coming. He stood at attention and saluted. I returned the salute.

“He’s a trip.” Said Rene. “Isn’t he?”

“You have no idea. “ I said. Rene smiled at me as if she knew something. We walked quietly to the bus stop. By the time we got there, I was already beginning to feel a change in her.

“Look, “ she said. “ Just let’s call it at and end. It was nice, but it’s over and we both have a good year, okay.”

“Sure, I guess. I take it wasn’t something I said.”

“You’re right.” She said. “It was nothing.”

On Sunday I was invited into Art’s to watch the Buffalo game when the Bengals won their division. One thing that stands out in my mind was Art watching one of Kenny Anderson’s passes and suddenly launching into a dissertation on the mechanics behind the magic he employed.

The Testament of Art Penn

You see that? You see how he plants that bomb? That’s what it’s all about. We as human beings have a fairly unique way of looking at the universe that allows us to predict all the complex variables of time and motion and to adjust the throw of the football to nail the receiver down field. It’s really all the same mechanism. We can
imagine all the variables of travel through the all the possibilities of the world and we are able to project ourselves into a place and time of our choosing. You see that? That’s what it’s about. What makes Ken Anderson a good quarterback is that he can intuitively scan through the possibilities—the possible universes open to him, and pick the one where the ball gets to where he wants it. Ken—he’s a wizard. He’s got the right feel for it.

The Testament of Perry Oilean

I tried to get Art to expand on the idea, but he clammed up, claiming that he was just spouting bullshit from too much beer. I had not seen him drink much at all—neither of us had. I pressed a little further, and what I got was outright hostility.

“You just mind your self.” He said. “You have to keep focus. You’ve got a big quarter coming up, and the last thing either one of us needs is you chasing tail all over Clifton. You need to be girding yourself, not wasting time.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” I said.

“Neither do I,” said Art, having a rapid change of heart. “Let’s just watch the game and let me sober up.”
Chapter 32

On the next Tuesday we had the first meeting of Art’s big Winter Quarter class on Arthurian legend. It took place in the Zimmer Auditorium, one of the large venues on campus. Art ran this class as a combination of multi-media circus and stand-up act. It actually was a melding of several classes, you could take it at the 101 level as a Freshman and take a series of hundred-question multiple choice exams. It was also offered as a 400-level course with three papers due, topics to be personally assigned by the instructor. Lastly, the course was also available at the graduate 800 level. This was largely an excuse for Art to go drinking with selected grad students at the Bearcat.

I walked into Zimmer that first cold afternoon after lunch and took my place just off to the side in the front row. The media guys were playing medley of Shel Silverstein, including “Sarah Sylvia Cynthia Stout” segued to “Freaking at the Freaker’s Ball” That just added to carnival atmosphere.

Art appeared on stage in slacks, plain shirt and tie under a wool sweater, and called the class to order. He went through the usual rigmarole of introducing the class, himself and the requirements before loosening his tie, sitting down on a stool and getting down to business. There was nothing but a pinpoint spot on him and the rest of houselights were brought down to darkness.
Since none of you have been able to prepare for this class, I thought I would go about introducing you to the subject of all this: Arthur. Is there an historical Arthur? Yes and no. We have at least a half-dozen candidates that could be THE Arthur. You can earn yourself a very nice graduate degree from a prestigious university—a better one than this—for a decent dissertation arguing for one or the other or whether or not Arthur even existed. Fifteen hundred years have gone by, and still this guy occupies our attention. Today, I stand before you as the other candidate for the real Arthur. There are no papers arguing against my being the real Arthur, so I am putting myself forward as THE Arthur. Heck, I’ll even dress the part.

[With this, Art started stripping off his clothes and reaching for various things that had been brought in on a rack by unseen stage hands. In no time, he was decked out in the regalia of a late Iron Age warrior, complete with a mail shirt, helmet and bastard sword.]

It helps a lot that my name happens to be Art Penn. It also helps that I am a decorated veteran of our last war with the Germanic Tribes. I can speak with some authority as to what it is like to unite a people and perform acts of valor, smiting foes and what -- even the occasional heroic deed. My assistant there, Perry, can attest that I am still pretty good at the old hero business.

[The spotlight briefly swung to me, and caught me laughing. I gave Art a thumbs-up, and the spotlight swung back. Art was now sitting in a large wooden throne.]
Questions? There’s a mike over on either side of the stage. Line up and throw me questions, and I’ll be happy to answer them.

[Spotlights bathed two mike stands to either side of the stage. Some wag yelled out from the darkness “So how was Guinevere in bed?”]

The question was how was Guinevere as a wife. Find that fellow and have him flogged for me, will you? Thank you ever so much. Disrespectful little snot. Of course you’ve got to expect that at a state school. Fact of the matter was Guinevere was absolutely fantastic in bed. That was her main problem. Quite frankly, she was an absolute whore. I should have seen it coming, but I didn’t. You see, I married her a few years before I started going through my mid-life crisis. It hit me like many men just as I was first starting to feel the first signs that I was not a young man anymore. Mind you, I was not even approaching my peak as a man, as a leader of men, and so on. However, I was just not . . . well . . . twenty—one anymore. That bugged me, and frankly I was sitting around the house at night and drinking too much beer.

You see, folks think of Camelot as this big beautiful place. Frankly, it was a dump. It was small too. We kept it small so that it would be easier to heat. That limited seating to only about twenty or so in the main room. I was there, off in the corner in this big upholstered chair. You think of a throne room and you think of something like what I’m sitting in here. Actually it was a big green overstuffed chair off in the corner, close to the firepit. Why? It was warmer there.

Anyhow, how things got out of hand are all related to several things. One was mead. We drank a lot of it in those days—everybody did. That was the only way you
had to cut the everyday pain of living. Living hurt. There were a lot of saintly men in
those days preaching temperance, but even they drank. You came home from a hard day
of riding, and your back was killing you, and all you wanted to do was sit down
somewhere comfortable and drink. Of course that did nothing for your love life.

Now, there was only seating for twenty, but everyone is swilling mead. So that
meant everyone was getting up to water the garden on a regular basis. That was,
everyone except those guys who could hold their water. Guys like Kay and Bedweyr
could hold a piss for days, and no one could hold it better than me. That was important in
our line of work. We spent a lot of time in armor and the last thing you wanted was to be
pissing yourself. You’d be there with your trousers down around your knees and you’d be
ambushed. Generally, you’d just let fly. That was really messy, especially with all the
padding soaking it up. It also made the ground you were standing on wet. It was wet
enough with all the blood and brains and what-not. You didn’t want to be standing in a
puddle and go to stick it to somebody and find yourself on your back in your own urine
getting a bash in the head from some guy with an ax. A lot of the vetting process of
picking a most trusted knight revolved around who could hold a piss. You can say “Piss”
in here, right? You can’t? Oh well, you know what I mean.

So you have people running out the door to go whiz, and there is a steady stream
of folks coming and going and pretty soon you see who has the best bladder, and the
cream quickly rose to the top. Me? I could stick it out all night.

So how does this figure in with Guinny? Real easy. She had a much easier life
and never really drank all that much as a rule, and she just kind of kept her own court
going on the other side of the fire. Guys like Lancelot, young and full of vim were easy
pickings for her. Lance was not the first. No, siree! He wasn’t the last either. They came to see us and started working their way towards my throne by way of bladder attrition, and Guinny would catch them about halfway through the evening and engage them in spirited conversation and offer them a private audience.

We had a rule at court, it went something like this: If you got up, someone could take your seat, if he uttered the secret word. The secret word, by the way, was “Snarf!” Don’t ask me what it means. I found out when I first started coming to court, long before I was made king. If the guy didn’t say the secret word, then the other guy, when he came back from draining the serpent, could demand his old seat back. You had to have at least one witness who would vouch for you—that you’d said the secret word, otherwise you’d be chucked out of your seat, and you’d have to go to the back of the line that extended out the door and round through the courtyard. It might be hours before you would make it back inside. Outside of court, well, it was outside. Inside was the place to be.

This worked a lot of ways. If you were particularly boorish, someone would get up to tap one and you’d go sit in his spot, and the knight would come back and demand his seat. You’d swear that you’d uttered the secret word, but no one around you would have heard you. Out you go! The same thing could work in reverse. Somebody new might come in and not know the secret word. You like him, and when challenged, you’d stand up for him, so he could keep his seat over the smelly git who had come back from taking the dragon for a walk. Eventually only the very best and brightest made it as far as the fire, and if you had a bladder of iron, you might actually get to meet me—that is, if I hadn’t fallen asleep yet.
Yes? How did I keep from losing my spot? Good question. I always farted in the green chair, and no one but Kay and Bedweyr could put up with it. As a result, no one wanted to sit in my big green chair. It was stuffed, so if you laid one down you could be certain the smell would linger.

Next question? Lancelot. Everybody wants to know about Lancelot. Lance was a cock hound, same as all the rest of us. All this purity stuff was just that-- stuff. We were on top of the world and we were all screwing like minks. Guinny just burrowed into the center of the pile and found Lance there waiting for her. I’m largely to blame. As I said, I was going through sort of a mid-life angst thing. Lancelot was just picking up the slack for me.

Camelot? Where was Camelot? That’s easy an easy one: Broadway and forty second street. I think it was here for a while too, playing at the Shubert. Lovely musical. Did I tell you about how I actually gave Fritz Lowe the idea? This is a hoot. I was in New York with my drinking buddy, Wilhelm Von Schmidt. Willie was a philosophy professor here for years. We were at the Lambs Club in Manhattan and Fritz Lowe joined in one night—he and Willie were old buddies from back in Vienna. Anyhow, Fritz joined in about halfway through a discussion that Willie and I were having over Hitler. Hitler was absolutely gaga over Arthurian legend. Did you know that? Absolutely head-where-the-sun-don’t-shine in love with the romance version of Arthur. In fact does anyone know what he did to prove this? Does anyone remember when Hitler killed himself? April Thirtieth of Forty-Five? Anyone know what link this has with Arthurian tradition? Anyone? It was the Pentecost. Hitler offed himself on the Pentecost—a few weeks after Easter. After the ascension, Jesus’ Apostles gathered and
so on . . . ? Well, actually it was a bit off, but who cares? Anyone know what the Pentecost is to the Arthurian tradition? No? It’s the feast over which the round table was convened every year. The Knights of the Round Table would gather over the Feast of the Pentecost to decide what to do for the next year. Most of the rest of the year, we were scattered to the winds taking care of our own holdings. We just needed at least one time in the year when we could all get together and get some face time. However, to Hitler, this was a magical thing—the diseased little twit—somehow he thought he was going to save the Reich by sacrificing himself on the Pentecost.

So anyhow, I’m sitting in the Lambs Club with Willie and Fritz Lowe and Lowe is looking for an idea for a new musical, and asks Willie and me a bunch of questions about Arthurian legend. The next thing you know—voila! You’ve got Robert Goulet and Julie Andrews on the Ed Sullivan show. That’s how most people know Arthur. The fact of the matter is there is really no truth to any of it. It’s all a bunch of hogwash. I was there for it—not a word of truth. It was a real dead fish too—stunk on ice, and before somebody arrange to have Bob Goulet on the Sullivan show, it was going to close.

But you see, that’s what makes Arthur so enduring. There really IS no truth to it. It is all a pack of lies. Nobody wants to hear the truth of it—my truth. They all want to find some aspect of Arthur and his knights and the court of Camelot and go off in their own direction. Some focus on the romance. Some focus on the heroic battles. Some, like Henry Tudor want to link Arthur with their own lineage so they can claim a blood right to the throne. It is all hogwash. If you are looking for the true Arthur, here I am. If you don’t want to buy that one, go drop the class.
[stunned silence. Art got up and started pacing the stage, occasionally pulling out his sword and swinging it about and wacking at unseen foes in a scary sort of way]

The Arthur we are going to study is the Arthur that people have made up over the years. The medieval Arthur with the shining court at Camelot and the gallant knights and the Round Table and the evil Mordred and Morganna de Fay that’s the meat of this class. The fated lovers, Lancelot and Guinevere, Tristan and Isolde. The Green Knight. The Grail. The Chapel Perilous--You name it, we’ve got it this quarter.

The Grail? What if I was to tell you that there really was a Grail? Saint Dubricius and I were drinking out of it one night and got particularly sloshed and decided to go hide it? We gave it to Percival’s kid sister and told her to go stick it in her sock drawer and not tell anyone and then we sent everyone on a wild goose chase looking for it? The only reason the joke got out of hand was Danbrann, little sissy, lost the drinking bowl and people have been looking for it ever since. That isn’t too dramatic, is it? Sorry. We weren’t expecting it to become such a big thing back then.

Next? Merlin? What about Merlin. Merlin and I had a falling out shortly after I consolidated my power. Merlin wanted to go study among the Druids, as they were disappearing rapidly from the face of Europe. I was hopping into bed with the Christian church. We did not speak for a number of years, Merlin and I. We eventually reconciled though. All the other trash that you hear—things like living backwards and being imprisoned by Morgana—there’s only a shred of truth to it. Merlin is not too lucky with women—he would be the first to admit it.

Next question? Oh yes? The Lady of the Lake? Yes, I know her. Perry, my assistant has met her. In fact I saw her recently. She spends a lot of time here in
Cincinnati with friends. She’s a very nice lady. She’s got family scattered all over. Most of the rest of what you heard is pure distortion. She dated both myself and Merlin at times. In fact, we used to double with her sister when they were both in town. Bob Braun was a lifeguard out at Sunlite Pool—out at Coney Island—used to sneak us in for free. They loved it out there.

How did Merlin and Uther Pendragon bewitch Arthur’s mother? What, are you looking for tips? What? An ether-soaked rag isn’t enough for you? What a perv! Ladies, watch out for this guy. Get a good look at him. If he comes up to you at the Lighthouse tonight, run. But seriously folks, the whole thing is a huge distortion. It just never happened that way. On the other hand . . . Take a common sense view of this: Igraine, my mother, knew Uther had slain her husband, Gorlois. You’re Igraine. If somebody, soaked in your husband’s blood shows up at the door and says “Hi Honey, I’m home!!!” You’ve got to think fast. That’s all I have to say.

Good question. How did I win so many battles? That’s an easy one. I lied. That was not an easy thing to do back in those times. I occasionally drink with Julian Jaynes when I visit Princeton. Jaynes has a book out that has been making a lot of waves. Julian is a bit of a crank, but what he says is that the primitive mind did not have, among other things, the capacity for deceit. I agree with him. You put a good liar down in the middle of Late Iron Age Europe, and you’ve got a guy who can conquer the entire continent. I just knew how to bluff, how to feint, how to do one thing while looking like I was doing another. We could call a baron to parlay and then kill him, the horse he rode in on and everyone of his party without batting an eye. Then we would concoct some seriously bogus story about how a miracle had happened. We were good liars and we were good
propagandists. The primitive mind of the indigenous population just could not wrap their heads around it. The Romans were good at deceit, but their influence was long gone by the time we hit town. Even if I did not know the inside skinny on the this, the mere fact that Arthur and his knights are so revered and beloved by history would tell me there was some serious spinmeistering going on.

What? Say that again? You are disappointed. Look lady, I’m being paid to entertain you guys for two hours today. I’ve got you guys right after the Christmas break. Probably half of you are even remotely sober, and a good number of you smoked up before coming in here. How do you play to a house like this?

[Applause! Art began removing his costume a bit at a time as he proceeded]

What do you expect? There’s no two drink minimum. If you don’t like it, try Doctor Barry’s Econ class. I hear it’s a gas. Doctor Center’s Psych 101 is pretty good too. I hear he’s hired some new writers this year. People. People. What am I trying to tell you here? The truth is that the real Arthur is right here. The Knights of the Round Table were a bunch of mead swilling thugs, and everything you have heard, seen or read about Arthur is either a lie, a fabrication, or a distortion. I know. I was there.

On the other hand, the Arthur of legend has nothing to do with me. He has nothing to do with history. He has everything to do with the time in which he was made up. You can look at Geoffrey’s Arthur and see what Geoffrey’s time was like. Just as you can go watch a production of Camelot and see a bit of today’s culture mixed with a bit of your parent’s world, the pre-Vietnam, America as the shining city on the hill, the New Jerusalem that Jack Kennedy walked into in January of 1961 and then tragically left in Dallas in November of 1963. People, this is the true realm of Arthur, and he and his
comrades speak out across the ages to us. That is what we’re going to learn about this quarter, those are the voices to which we are going to turn our ears, and we shall turn the legend of Arthur over in the midday sun and watch him squirm like a turtle trying to get back into the cool shade of nostalgia.

[By now, Arthur was nearly returned to his street clothes.]

Folks, I want to thank you all for putting up with me. We’ve been handing out the syllabus that includes the required readings for next week. Make sure you have the texts as soon as possible. They’re all over in Dubois Bookstore, if you want to give the campus bookstore a pass. I hear there are used copies still available. Please read what’s required. We’ve got a long ride ahead of us, and stragglers will be left behind. Thank you and good afternoon.

[The room went to blackout, and when the houselights came back on, Art Penn and his props were gone from the stage.]
Chapter 33

It did not do my mood any good when I found out from one of the grad students that Art would be holding court over at the Bearcat. I had planned on just going home and sulking, but I got myself into being dragged over to the bar over around Hughes Corner. It was one of the last surviving neighborhood bars, a remnant of the days when Clifton Heights had a bar on nearly every corner. It had a dark, cavernous interior and smelled of stale beer. Art was in a well-lit corner in the back at a large round table telling war stories. For a while, there was not a seat available, so I stood, but soon someone had to get up to take a leak.

“Snarf,” I said, taking the seat. Art looked up and waived and went back to telling a story. It was close to being over. I’d heard it before.

“Oh!” said Art. “Perry learned something today.”

“Yep,” I replied. “And I found out how to get to the head of the class.”

“Just hold your water,” Art said. “Just hold your water, and you get there eventually. People, this is Perry. Perry is my new amanuensis. That’s an assistant for those of you with public school educations. Perry’s been living a life filled with Art for the past few months. He’s going to be helping me on a few projects and will go on to write the definitive work on Art. How do you find your life as an Art historian?”

“Watch out if he decides to introduce you to his old girlfriends.” I replied. Art laughed. The table thought it was funny, but obviously did not know why. I looked around the table and saw them all consulting their little inner Arthurian encyclopedia,
trying to figure out what legend I was referencing. They really were for the most part clueless.

I lasted all of about a half-hour. Folks were drinking pitchers, and I really did not have much of a stomach for beer at the moment. It did not take long for me to want some fresh air. I got up. The next person to sit down said nothing.

Clifton Heights was in an extended Winter twilight. It had snowed and grown cold. The sidewalks were pretty clear, however, so I decided to walk back to the house. There was a part of me that was just fuming, but I look on that night now and realize the main issue on my mind at that time was that I had been a dolt and not seen it coming. I wanted to tell Art he was a bastard for not letting me in on the whole story earlier. Of course, Art WAS a bastard, at least if the classic story of his birth was true. On the other hand, I did not want to tip my hand and let him know I had not guessed. I wanted to just play it cool and see where things lead.

It was a long cold walk home. It did not take long for me to begin regretting my choice not to do the bus, but the further I went, the closer it got. A part of me felt as stale as the Christmas decorations that were still up. The part seemed over for some reason. I ate a bowl of chili at the Skyline on Ludlow and got warmed up enough that I did not dread the walk on down Clifton back to the carriage house.

When I got back, Art’s truck was still not there. However, I saw Sue Chi and the kids piling out of her station wagon, and I stopped to say hello. She had been up at Keller’s, doing her marketing for the week, and I helped her with the bags. She offered me dinner, but I declined. I found out then that Art had these outings with the students on a fairly regular basis, and missed him on those nights. She invited me to stay and help
her make some soup, but after talking to her a while, I decided to go back to my
apartment and watch television.

The Nine O’Clock movie on Channel 19 was a really cut up version of the Sterile
Cuckoo with Lisa Minelli as Pookie. I spent the evening trying to remember the movie. I
knew I’d seen it before, but always remembered it with Patty Duke. It was well done, but
I could not help thinking I had seen another version of it. After that, I fixed an obligatory
bowl of popcorn, watched the obligatory episode of M*A*S*H, caught the Carson
Monologue, and headed for bed. Life without Sue and Skippy was not going to delay me
from my regular chores.

In the morning, I heard Sue-Chi come up the stairs and after I ate breakfast I went
over to see her. She was cropping photos and mounting them. She had been playing with
infrared film and done a black and white study of the snow. A lot of the stuff had been
shot over in Mount Storm Park. I especially liked a shot of the gazebo covered in snow.
She set about cropping and mounting and extra copy for me.

“So how did you and Art meet?” I asked.

“He kidnapped me.” She said.

“Kidnapped you?”

“Yes.”

“There’s got to be a story behind this.”

“Oh, there is.”

The Testament of Sue-Chi
I really don’t have much of a memory of my childhood prior to Art taking me. What I do have, feels like a dream. I do not have much of memory beyond Saint John’s up in Painesville. That’s where I grew up. The story is that Art got to be in a bit of a mood after one of his so-called business trips. He came home and found out Gwen was not going to have any kids. It just sort of set him off. As soon as he was healed up, he took off again. When he came back, he had me under his arm. Try as he might he could not get Gwen to go for the adoption. So he took me to the orphanage here and had his buddy, Dubie pull some strings. Eventually I was adopted out to an older couple and raised out in Greenhills. When I came out of high school, I had a full ticket ride waiting for me to Saint David’s in Cardiff. I never met Art, my only contact was through Dubie. I might see him once or twice a year—he’d cruise through to see how I was doing.

I was always in awe of Dubie. They would dress me up in a new outfit whenever Dubie came to visit. I would play the piano for him, and show him my art work, and he would give me a big hug and tell me to take care and mind the sisters. It was not until I was ready to graduate that Dubie showed up with Art and we met for the first time. That is when they told me what had happened.

Art had come back from saving the world and gotten into a fight with Gwen. At the time, he was pretty well beaten-up. Whatever he had been doing had torn him up. Being around the house with Gwen was eating on him so he skipped out to get his head on straight. He showed up at Dubie’s place and Dubie put him up for a few days. While he was there, they got into a discussion on the whole Sodom and Gomorrah thing. Dubie got him riled up and Art basically said to Dubie to put up or shut up. That’s how Dubie and Art ended up in matching seersucker suits and straw hats—don’t ask me why—at a
little orphanage in Kokura, Japan in August of 1945. I don’t think either one of them was particularly sober. They go up to the door, Dubie introduces themselves as the angels of doom and engages the priest in a dialog that had the poor priest wetting himself. Art then explains that God himself is pissed at the Japanese and that they had ten minutes to produce their brightest, sweetest, most talented orphan, or they were going to leave empty handed. The priest produced me in under two minutes. I don’t know if I was the best and brightest, but I was available and I had a clean dress on. Dubie then blesses the place and tells the priest that he would do what he could with the man upstairs to spare Kokura, Art added that they should all kiss their sorry Jap asses goodbye just in case.

Well, you know the rest of the story. They ended up bombing Nagasaki and Kokura remains as the luckiest place on Earth—cloud cover over the target or something. Both Dubie and Art tell me that when they left to do this thing, Kokura was a radioactive parking lot. You know how that is. If you travel with Art, there are all sorts of screwy things waiting for you when you get back. You should have seen it when Art came back and found himself in bed with me. That was a hoot. Even Art had to step back a bit and scratch his head. The two of them went in the den and worked it out on a pad of paper and then one of them went off and the other came back to bed.

Anyhow, Art eventually chucked Gwen out. I can’t say this around Art, but she was a real bimbo. About that time I was getting out of college. I know the timelines don’t match up, but Art sort of comes and goes when he pleases. Dubie got the idea of putting the two of us together and one thing led to another. I ended up on a honeymoon, going up and down the Nile in a boat until we could not stand it anymore—that and we had to come home because we both had dysentery.
The Testament of Perry Oilean

“You don’t sound grateful.” I said, commenting on her tone. She sounded more honked off than anything else.

“Grateful?” she laughed. “I am not sure quite what word to use, but grateful does not come close to covering it.”

“I’m sorry.” I said. “I guess I hit a nerve.”

“No, you did not hit a nerve. It’s just that what do you say to a man like Art? He gets in a fight with a saint and to settle the bet they go out and save a couple hundred thousand lives, including mine. On the other hand, the bastard did next to nothing with me for fifteen years, except send money to an orphanage. Oh, I didn’t tell you, there was no clear winner to the bet so he and Dubie split my tab. How does it feel to be the object of a bet like that?”

“Are you mad?”

“I’m always mad at Art.” She said, wacking off some paste board in the paper cutter. “He’s . . . he’s . . . See, I’m sorry, he’s just so . . . “ She put down the blade of the paper cutter and started to cry. “He’s just sometimes hard to take.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I didn’t mean to make you upset.”

“It’s not you, silly.” She said. “It’s just that I’ve gone my whole life in awe of a God that would come down from heaven and rescue me and give me a decent life to live and take care of me. He would send his angels to watch over me. Then I ended up falling in love and living with the son of a bitch, and I find out he farts in bed and stays out late.”
“I guess you have a point.” I said. “It kind of makes my problems seem small.”

“Problems?” she said. “What’s he done now?”

“Oh nothing.” I said. “I sat through his first lecture today in Arthurian Legends.”

“Oh that!” she said. “He’s a hoot and a half. What’s there to be mad at?”

“I didn’t know.” I said. “Not until the lecture.”

“You didn’t know?” she asked. “Welcome to the club, Perry. Art is a god that reveals himself to us mortals a little bit at a time. He serves up the truth in meals we can stomach. I think hanging Dewey and Dubie taught him that—to couch the truth so that the soul finds sustenance. They’re all a bunch of arcane bastards—Merle’s even worse. Don’t ever ask Art for more than he’s willing to let you know. He’ll just go and unload it all on you, and then you’ll regret it. You’ll never ask again.”

“That sounds really ominous.” I said.

“It’s not. “she said. “It’s no more oppressive than all the rest of the crap you have to put up with living with Art. He can’t help it. We get in arguments sometimes. I threaten to go back to the orphanage, and he threatens to bring home my kinky twin sister and do her on the couch. He says he’s got her stashed in a brothel in Newport and she’s ten years younger than me, and he’s holding her back waiting the day that I go slack.”

“You people are strange.” I said, laughing.

“You’re well on your way, kitten.” Said Sue-Chi. “I just hope it rubs off on the kids the right way and they don’t end up in therapy. It seems to be rubbing off on you all right.”

“Thanks,” I said. “So what else hasn’t Art told me?”
“Who knows? Don’t go trying to pry stuff out of me. If I open my mouth about the wrong thing, you’re liable to end up curled in the corner sucking your thumb for the next ten years.”

“You know stuff like that?” I asked.

“The problem is I don’t know what you know or don’t know. I’m not trying to be sinister, but some little thing might leak out that’s little to me, but big to you. Or it could be the other way around. You never know. Has Art taken you to meet my evil twin in Newport yet?”

“No, he hasn’t.” I said.

“Drat.” she said. “If you ever meet her, let me know. I want to swap places with her for a while.”

Later in the day, Art called to let her know that he wanted me to move into the main house for a few days. It was turning colder, and Art wanted to shut down the carriage house until it warmed up. I packed a bag, and Sue-Chi got me set up in the guest room. As Sue-Chi was bringing me linens and I was unloading my stuff, she looked at me with her big deep black saucers.

“Perry,” she said. “I’m really glad you’ve come here. I am not going to say anything so arch as that I’ve felt like a prisoner here. It’s just that life with Art can be a little oppressive, and I’m so glad I have someone to talk to that understands.” With this, she kissed me.

When Art came home that evening, I helped him drain the water from all the pipes, throw anti-freeze in the sinks and toilets and shut off the electricity. I had a little bit of food in the refrigerator that we moved over. The frozen pizza and ice cream would
stay put until the power came back on. After all this was done, Art had Sue-Chi serve up some of my venison. We ate Venison Bourguignon for dinner that night and Art saluted me. The kids tried some, but thought it tasted funny. Sue-Chi made them venison burgers.

On Thursday, we had another meeting of Art’s big class on Arthurian legend. This one was a bit more normal, but Art filled it with a lot of slides and a lot of lively discussion. The topic was the story of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.

The testament of Arthur Penn

So what does this all mean in the end? Let’s look at this from the Green Knight’s perspective. Why does he make the challenge? This is all a put-up job. Morgan Le Fay is behind all this. It is a test of Arthur’s knights. When you look into Bercilak’s motives in all this, you have to be asking yourself: “What sort of drugs was this dude on?”

I can see Morgan Le Fay playing “hit the shovel” with Bercilak. Hit the shovel is where you get some dolt to try to punch at a shovel, or a shield or whatever, before you can pull it away. The joke is that once you’ve got the git roped in, you hold the shovel right in front of a brick wall or a tree. You pull the shovel out of the way and the stupid turd punches the tree. Everyone has a good laugh. Mind you, this was still a new joke back in those times. They didn’t have The Gong Show to watch at night, so this was hot stuff. Retard jokes were all the rage. If you could get the retard to take off his clothes and dance on the tables, it was even better fun. So here you have Bercilak and Morgan Le Fay playing punch the shovel, and Bercilak damn near breaks his hand, and then he thinks he has the joke, and goes over to Arthur’s court and tries to play it with him. Only
this time, as all good retard jokes go, Bercilak has failed to catch on to the heart of the matter and puts his shovel across his face and says “Hit the shovel.” Gawain is ever so eager to show him how. I’m paraphrasing here, but you get the idea, right?

The next part of all this is sort of like Looney Tunes. The Coyote does something to get the Road Runner, the big rock falls on him, but he’s up an alive again for the next scene. I’ve got a little clip of Bugs Bunny and Daffy Duck that covers similar ground.

[ Up on the screen behind Art Penn, appears a short piece of a Bugs Bunny cartoon where Daffy gets his head blown off by Elmar Fudd. He walks back to Bugs with his severed head carried in his hands and announces “You’re Dithpicable.” ]

See? Nothing changes. Now here is the part that I just cannot fathom. Fast forward to the point where Gawain finds himself in Bercilak’s castle. Gawain hasn’t a clue, but Bercilak does. What is going through Bercilak’s head? He’s got to know that as soon as he’s gone, his hot little wife is going to go for Gawain. What’s with the test?

What would have happened, might you ask if Gawain had not been so gallant? Would this have turned into something wholly unsavory? I’ll tell you what’s going on here. This is the medieval mind going on here. Bercilak is just a pawn of a larger lesson being told. Look at how this plays out: The wife kisses Gawain, and Gawain is cool as long as he in turn kisses the Bercilak. Two kisses? That’s okay too. Now here comes the important lesson: The green girdle.

What happens here? Bersilak’s wife gives him a magic girdle that will protect him, but she makes him promise not to tell Bersilak. You can sort of see Morgan Le Fay standing in the background on this. It’s probably her girdle. Now wait! Let’s get this straight. Gawain has to wear the green girdle of his boss’ half-sister and not tell anyone,
in order to be saved from certain death. How do you get stuck in a gig like this? Let me
tell you: I’d be keeping mum too. We won’t go into the green panties, bra and stockings
that went along with the ensemble. Those Gawain kept secret from everyone, but you
need to buy the unabridged version to get those details. This is an exclusive; you will
only hear about them in this class.

It comes down to it, and Gawain submits himself to what may be certain death,
wearing his boss’ half-sister’s green underwear. Sheesh! Of course, Bersilak already
knows all this and gives him three hits. The first two he deliberately misses—he’s
forgiven Gawain for the minor transgression of the kisses. The third one hits, but only
leaves a scratch. Why? Because he can’t stand cross-dressing perverts? No! Cross-
dressing pervs were a standard part of medieval fiction. No! Because everyone
recognizes that lying to save your skin is a completely forgivable offense—even for a
knight dressed in lady’s underwear. Yes, I kissed your wife, but that’s as far as it went,
just don’t kill me. See? I’m even wearing my boss’ half-sister’s green trousseau just to
show you how much I want to live. Give me a freaking break!

To the medieval reader this all makes perfect sense. To us . . . [ the crowd
responded with laugher as Art Penn gave the crowd a look that Jack Benny would have
envied]

Well . . . Bersilak looks like a very one dimensional character, as does Gawain, the
wife, everyone in it looks like they’re made of cardboard. We , in modern times, expect
depth in our characters when they are not in a cartoon. However, some things are eternal.
Some things call down from the ages. There is a moral here, and let’s make this perfectly
clear. This I will tell you: If I leave for the day and come back and find you’ve been
diddling with my woman, no green girdle will save you. The rest is negotiable. The other moral of the story is that having a witch like Morgan Le Fay around will really wreck your home life. Throw her out. Go home tonight, pack her bags and call a taxi.

That’s all. Keep reading. There’s a bunch of us going over to the Bearcat to play punch the shovel. Loser buys a pitcher.
Chapter 34

The next morning it was noticeably cold when I arose. The temperature had plummeted overnight. My window had gone from fog to frost to a covering of thick ice that left no way to see out. Art had taken off early to drop the kids at school, and then got to Keller’s when they opened up to stock up for the weekend. I had a vague memory of hearing the truck turning over and warming up. When I got up, Sue-Chi was in the kitchen, and brought me a bowl of oatmeal and a cup of coffee as I sat down in front of the television. My eyes nearly bugged out of my head when I saw her come out from around the island in the kitchen dressed in a green leotard. She looked like an elf. She looked like some forest spirit. Her dark hair and dark eyes and lithe body were beyond my ability to accept or deny.

She sat with me for a while making small talk and then asked me if I would mind terribly if she did her exercises. I really could not say no, but I offered to go in the other room so she could have privacy. She said she didn’t mind if I watched. She put on a video tape and started exercising. I stayed for a little and then ate up and left, taking my coffee with me. We ran into each other an hour later. She had covered her tights with some jeans and some legwarmers and put on a sweater, but the green was still peeking out here and there. I had a hard time making eye contact with her the rest of the day, but whenever I looked down, I saw the green showing through a hole in the knee of her jeans, or at her waist whenever her sweater rode up. It seemed that I was locked in a spell. Back in my room, I marveled to myself on how simple and yet how consuming that spell was. I tried to wade through some bob and wheel, but my mind was trapped with visions
of Sue-Chi in front of the television, Sue-Chi cross-legged on the couch, Sue-Chi wishing me a good morning.

Art came back in a couple of hours and decided to go downstairs and bring up a few pounds of wild boar meat he had left from a previous hunt. He used Gold Star chili packets for a starter and worked from there. Art claimed Gold Star was the better chili for game. Being this was Cincinnati, it was not a choice of chili or not. Rather it was which chili—Skyline, Gold Star, Empress, or Dixie. Everyone had made their pilgrimage to Camp Washington, and had an opinion on beans versus no beans. Having been away for several years, this obsession was poignant. Boston had had its baked beans, but this was wholly different.

Pretty soon the place was inundated with the smell of boar chili, and Sue-Chi served it up for a late lunch with a side of garlic bread. I made sure that I complemented Art and Sue-Chi on the boar and on the venison from the night before. As we were clearing the dishes, I reached over and planted a kiss on Art’s cheek.

“You’re catching on, son.” He said. “You’re catching on. Nothing more was ever said, and once freed of this burden, I felt as though Sue-Chi held no more allure for me.

We continued eating on boar chili throughout the weekend. Art had scored a major load of cheddar cheese and Vidalia onions. The new food processor that Art had given Sue-Chi got a constant workout. That evening, Art and I went out on the lawn, ostensibly to hunt fox. With the temperatures just above zero, Art brought out lawn chaises and we laid in sleeping bags up against the yew bushes in front of the house deep in shadow. We both had our 12 GA shotguns, loaded with buckshot. The moon was out,
and it produced and the lawn was bathed in a glow so bright I could see the lines in my hand, from the reflected light alone. I was not too sure about the legality of hunting inside the city limits, nor was I all that sure about sitting for that long in that much cold. However, between the wool blankets, sleeping bags and space blankets underneath, I had to admit that I was toasty warm. Art threw something out onto the lawn. I later found out it was a plush toy tied tie to a piece of kite string. We sat and let the quiet of the night settle in on us. After about twenty minutes, Art was moved to speak in a whisper.

The Testament of Art Penn

I had a lot of nights like this up around the Ardennes. Some of the guys were never issued winter gear, and it was more than likely on a night like this that somebody would freeze to death in a foxhole and you’d find him the next morning stiff as a board. This was about the time I started really losing it. One night, we were on the edge of a field, and the moonlight was on the snow like this and I started to remember my mother’s cottage, and I started thinking how much it looked like the fields near her house. The next thing I knew I was convinced that this was my mother’s house and that I could be home and warming myself by her fire. All I had to do was open up my coat and walk out into the field and I would be home in a few minutes. I was starting to feel warm already, just thinking about it. Of course there were Germans on the other side of the field; they had a machine gun nest up at the other end. We knew they were there, because you could hear them servicing the gun in the cold. Still, I had my coat open and I was out in the field, about ready to lie down when somebody tackled me from behind and knocked the wind out of me and then dragged me back into the tree line. It’s funny, but nights like this
really make me think about that. All the pain is gone, and all I have left is the feeling of peace.

The Testament of Perry Oilean

We had a long period of silence after that, where all that we could hear was the occasional passing of cars on Clifton Avenue. I did not know exactly what to say. Art had obviously completed his thought. I guessed that it was a story that did not need comment.

Art pulled a call out of his pocket and started blowing on it. It sounded terrible, like and animal that had been run over or worse. Art told me it was a predator call, a rabbit in distress. He blew it incessantly for a while and then we sat back and waited. After ten minutes he blew it again and gave the bunny on a string a little jerk. There was a stirring in the bushes and a grey form went streaking from behind decorative trellis and shot across the yard towards the toy. Art grabbed for his shotgun, but had the string hang up in his hands. By the time he was able to get the gun up, the fox had already struck and rolled the toy and was trying to get back to it. The fox also noticed us in the bushes. For an instant, he was trying to make up his mind whether to press his attack and run.

“Take him!” hissed Art. I started to pull off my gloves, shoulder the shotgun, and the fox finally figured out what was up and took off back the way he came. Art swiveled in the chair and shot, but between the clothes, the sleeping bag, and the cold he managed only to blow a hole in the snow a bit above and a bit behind the fox. Art had also over-committed himself in the chaise, and he and the chair fell over in the snow. As he went down in slow motion, I was amazed how he kept control of the shotgun. The whole
process seemed to pivot on the shotgun, which stayed in the general direction of the fox. When he landed, Art was sprawled prone in the snow like a plastic toy soldier. Having cycled the pump, he took another shot. This one blew a hole in the trellis and also did a pretty good job of excavating a lot of dirt.

“Little sonofabitch” said Art, as we examined the base of the trellis and the hole. “He got in there and I lost sight of him. All I could see was his tail sticking out. He hid behind the trellis to check his back trail and make sure we weren’t going to follow him.” It turned out that there was a set of tracks only a few feet behind the trellis. Art had been nearly dead on with his second shot, but the ground fell away behind the trellis and the head of the fox had been mostly protected by the dirt. “Why didn’t you shoot?”

“I had trouble with my gloves.” I said.

“Yeah, I had my troubles too.” Said Art.

I looked up to see that there were now more lights lit in the few neighboring houses we could see. Art said it was time to pack up and go inside. Art folded up the lawn chairs and I carried in the shotguns. We then went back for the blankets and the stuffed toy. When we were all safe inside, I expressed worry about what would happen next. We were watching Art rather hurriedly clean and stash the guns in the case.

“Police?” said Sue-Chi. “Yes, we’ve had police. Art just tells them it must be a car backfiring and that we were in the other end of the house and didn’t hear anything. I think District Five is onto him, but Art says they have better things to do.”

“Naw!” said Art. “They have better things to do. Perry, did you pick up the spent shells?”
Art debated about going back out for the spent cartridges. However, he figured that we would be safe, and it was a better idea to go warm ourselves at the fire and try to look innocent. I was a bit scared for a while, but eventually realized that nothing else was going to happen.

“I’m just as happy we missed him.” Said Art, as we sat watching a commercial and sipping hot chocolate. “Don’t you?”

“I suppose.” I said.

“I think it was the best for all.” He said. “Including the fox.”

Game day arrived, and it did nothing except get colder. We did not set foot outside all day, and the house showed obvious signs of the cold. Icicles formed on the inside of the windows. There were cold spots in the house where you could feel a drop of ten or fifteen degrees. Art kept a constant vigil on the pipes, and all the cabinets under the sinks were left open and the sinks themselves were left drizzling water. Art took the lids off the toilet tanks, and we put blankets over the door to the dining room and between the living room and the front all to keep the heat of the fire place locked in.

The kids grumbled, but Art brought the TV set from out of their playroom in the basement and let them play their Intellivision in the back of the living room. The pre-game came on with news that San Diego had asked to have the game postponed due to the cold. The Bengals management, sensing the advantage, had told them no way.

I remember watching the whole stadium bathed in the steam of tens of thousands of frozen lungs. Passes seem to be hitting a brick wall and falling from out of the air.

Ken Anderson opened things up with a drive into the wind, although there were few
spectacular plays, the Bengals just kept rolling over their opponents. The passes were all short, but the Bengals were able to catch theirs, and San Diego’s were frequently intercepted.

It seemed to me that Art felt some sort of personal triumph over this. He was totally absorbed by the game. I could not figure out how Art could be so engrossed in football, let alone the Bengals. However, I did have to admit to myself that I too was getting caught up in it. After it was clear the Bengals were going to win, I asked him why it all seemed so important.

The Testament of Art Penn

That’s simple. For a brief moment in time, these are the best football players that ever have been. This is the best team ever. I’m not saying they are going to go down in the annals of the game that way. It’s a special, ephemeral sort of thing. There is a wave of history flowing through them. Once in a while, a wave like this comes through and grabs a group of men, and the mediocre shine, and the talented will blind you. I was there once—just long enough to recognize it. This is something special—this whole season has been special. It’s been building to today, and today this team has conquered the day.

We had a time like that. There was a time when we could wade into a mass of men and we could feel the wave building through us and a hundred good soldiers would suddenly die. We could walk out and walk in and although we were tired, and covered with blood and gore and brains, when we washed it all off we were clean—not a scratch. It sounds horrible. Yes, but it was also wonderful. I shudder to think of it, and yet
watching this reminds me of it and how good it felt to be lifted up on that wave and carried to victory. Everything else in life is shit by comparison, and these fellows will all carry the mark of it with them for the rest of their lives I wish I could say this is romantic hogwash, but it isn’t. It’s awful and terrible and it is a face of Life that even I cannot quite comprehend. Most of the time, you came off the field wishing you were dead—either that or thinking that you already were. I can remember reloading my M1 and puking at the same time. Once in a while, though, you pulled your sword out of the last belly and knew why you were alive and why.

It was funny too. Once in a while, that wave would hit you at the damndest times. You think about killing as serious business. Sometimes it is. Sometimes it’s just plain fun. I remember one night in the snow we were in the wreck of a barn and they sent a bunch of crack SS troupas at us across this big field in the moonlight. We’d found some gas and were keeping warm by putting the gas on top of a few inches of water in a gallon can and then setting it on fire. Anyhow, the Krauts sent these guys through in white snow suits. The only thing they did wrong was they had these black leather cartridge belts on the outside of their snow suits making a big “X” over their hearts. All you had to do was aim for where the belts crossed. I don’t know how many I killed that night. God! It was fun. I’ve never had so much fun before or since. That sounds really tacky, doesn’t it? It’s true though. In the morning we had hundreds of them piled up in the field, and it was only about eight of us.

It was just plain fun, and then the wave of history was gone and in two days all but three of us were dead, and I watched a guy—a complete stranger jump on one of those potato mashers that came over a wall and didn’t go off. The poor guy didn’t even
know me, but he was going to take it to save my skin. The darn thing didn’t go off, and he just laid there. Later in the day, I saw him get it --an eighty-eight took his head off. I never did find out his name. It blew off his dog tags and we never did find them.

The Testament of Perry Oilean

Art sort of trailed off after that and in a little while he was up, getting a fresh scotch and the fourth quarter came and went and the Bengals had won the AFC. Sue-Chi and I cheered when the game was over, as did the kids. Art was lost in some deep funk and did not get off the couch for dinner. After dinner I called to check in with my folks and also called Sissy to let them know I was all right—that I’d moved into the house for a few days. When I got back to the couch, Art had gone to bed.

Monday came and there was a slow gradual warming. When it was certain that we were over the worst of it, Art helped me turn the utilities back on and I moved back to the carriage house. I spent a lot of time up and around campus.

Art’s lectures in the next week were concerning the Fisher King, Percival, and their links with Welsh legends on the one hand and their extensions into Wagnerian Opera. His ability to jump from one epoch to the next had my head spinning, but Art had plenty of jokes laid in to keep it lively. I stopped by the round table at the Bearcat and found that I was getting to appreciate it more. The younger students did not bother me quite as much. Art loved being the ringmaster of it all.

The Super Bowl came and went with a fizzle. When it was all over and the Forty Niners had won, I felt let down. I tried to tell myself it was just football, but I found that
I had been hooked, and the high was over, and the cold hard reality of life had come back in. It was no longer bitter cold. It was just a normal rainy winter in Cincinnati with the daytime highs in the forties and a lot of gloomy days. I finally told Stan that I was not going to be working for him anymore. I was starting to get paid by the university. I decided to hold out in the carriage house as long as possible, so that I could save up and get a car.

Before long, the center of my life had shifted to the round table at the Bearcat and I was usually the first to show up and the last to leave. Sue-Chi and I had settled into a friendship that had sort of skewed itself towards more of a mother thing. It was all her doing, not mine. Soon after the Ice Bowl weekend, she started bringing me food and doing stuff for me and reminding me of things, and referring to me as her fourth kid (the third being Art) that told me I had passed out of the potential for being a lover. That suited me fine, but it also left me with zero prospects. I tried going into the Alpha for lunch one day, but Rene came up to me and said it was not time yet. I left.
One day at the Arthurian Legend class, a rather radical young woman, an undergraduate, got into it with Art. Her problem seemed to revolve around the Arthurian Legend being yet another fairy tale that the male race had used to imprison women. Art held his tongue and let her finish her manifesto. She had obviously spent a long time preparing it. Art asked her a few clarifying questions, and then Art attempted an answer.

The Testament of Art Penn

Every generation looks at Arthur and sees something new. Perhaps you will someday write the novel or the screenplay that recasts these tales in just that light. I hope you make a lot of money on it. Before the Romance writers looked at Arthur, you had a period of hundreds of years where Arthur was looked on the same way you might revere George Washington or Alexander. The focus was on his brave deeds and acts as warrior—some of which were brutally efficient, even after you strip away the hyperbole and the wear of time. It was the Romance authors, the Grail authors, the ones who were hot on courtly love, the chivalric code, and so forth that used Arthur as a springboard for their tales of lust, unrequited love, fallen honor and so forth. I know you want to see a three-dimensional woman in this, but she’s not going to be there. No one has three dimensions in this—male or female. So, it’s hard to say, even until fairly recent times that a woman in a story is actually going to have some depth to her, let alone a man. You’re right, it’s all our fault—men I mean. We were too busy listening to our testicles to really give it much thought. You have my humble apology for not only myself, but the rest of the entire gender. Let us not forget, that it took until the 1950’s for a male scientist to
discover the G-spot, named for its discoverer, Doctor Ernst Grafenberg. What men were
doing before that . . .?

[laughter]

You also have to look at Guinevere, the quintessential Arthurian woman, and dig
deeper into what made her tick. I was going to talk today about something else, but we
can put that off for later in the quarter. Who was this Guinevere? Her name meant White
Shadow, sometimes wrongly interpreted as White Fay or White Ghost. It’s meaning was
that Gwen could turn night into day just by walking into the room.

What I can tell you is that Gwen was a beautiful woman, she was and still would
be considered without peer. She was demur and yet powerful in her presence. She was
taller than most women, but still fit nicely under a man’s chin. When she looked up at
you and turned on the charm, you wilted. Leo . . . Leo Van . . . I mean King
Leodegrance held her as his most cherished possession, but he also knew he would one
day have to spend her capitol, by giving her hand in marriage to some suitor, or else lose
her as an asset. He gave her to Arthur to cement a bond between them, and also because
he knew Arthur was the best choice for who would be able to protect her going forward.
Leodegrance knew there was the possibility of things looming on the horizon as they
always are, and he wanted Gwen out of harm’s way. Leodegrance also gave Arthur the
round table as a wedding gift. This was apart from the sizeable dowry. Daddy really
liked Arthur, and wanted to show it.

Guinevere was not a spoiled girl. She came into court as a woman with her eyes
open. I think Leodegrance ran a house that followed the Roman model as best as it could
be remembered. This included a lot of outward Roman virtuous family schtick with a lot
of playful running amok when the family got behind closed doors. Both Mom and Dad had their lovers. Gwen was trained in the old school ways by one of Dad’s mistresses who was a beloved personal servant to both of them. To put it simply: Gwen was not a virgin when she came to court. She had enjoyed Roman-style feasting with all its attendant pleasures. The rest of the countryside was generally not of this mind, and so right there you have a problem. I know Arthur was not fully prepared for it, and a lot of his knights were not. What Gwen did with Lancelot, and then others—many others—was just good old-school family entertainment to Gwen. She was a force of nature. She was a man’s woman. Arthur cherished her. Most all of the knights adored her. She was a congenital flirt. She could do more with her eyes than any woman any man ever met.

Now you have Arthur. Arthur had been to war. Arthur had been there, done that, had the scars to prove it. Arthur was King Yertle the Turtle, master of all he surveyed. He’s won the battle, won the war. He’d won the girl. What next? Arthur went into an early mid-life crisis. After some small reverses, he sits at night in his big easy chair and drinks, and pretty soon he is one limp dog. Meanwhile Gwen is just starting to reach her stride. You can see this train wreck coming.

The problem was that Arthur and Gwen were not just your average post-war couple out in the burbs surrounded by nosy neighbors. Arthur was King. He had to maintain order. Gwen was doing as Gwen did. People’s lives were on the line and in fact the whole operation could have gone down the tubes, because Gwen could not keep her legs from flying up in the air on every freaking feast day.

[There was a long pause as Arthur collected himself. The whole hall was silent.]
A lot of this sort of thing takes years, digging through the literature to put together, and for most, you will have to just accept this as my surmise. Male chauvinists for centuries want to cast Gwen in the light of Eve and original sin. It is hooey to us here, in contemporary life, and it is true that if Gwen had been able to enjoy a stronger Arthur, she and Lancelot would not have ended up as poster children for adultery. On the one hand we condemn Gwen for putting the cause at jeopardy, but we also have to question a cause that was so frail that it could only last so long as the charade of chastity was maintained. It is also an irony that the modern-day Camelot, seems to have been wracked with the same sort of intrigues. I refer of course to the Kennedy Presidency. It is funny how history resembles art, how Art resembles history. How Art and Gwen, Jack and Jacky, Harris and Andrews all sort of merge into one swirl. However, in this most recent retelling we end with a martyred king and the vision of that pink dress covered with her husband’s brains. Perhaps that sort of ending to the Arthur legend of yore would have saved Gwen’s reputation as it certainly cemented Jacqueline Kennedy’s as the saintly wife of the martyr. Instead, you have intrigue at court, familial intrigues at the heart of the inner circle, causing things to come undone. Arthur and the Age of Camelot in literature fades with a whimper.

[another long pause]

I need to move off our discussion of Guinevere for now. I hope I have given some light to this character for you, and I would appreciate a continuation of this line of
discussion later. The women of Arthur’s time are often overlooked, but their stories are every bit as powerful as the men.

I need to move on now, because I have a special demonstration lined up for today, to give you a taste for what it was like to be an Arthurian knight. Why did these guys get to be so respected and so successful as warriors and lovers? I would like to welcome a volunteer I have from our illustrious football team, the Cincinnati Bearcats. He is going to show us how it was done.

The Testament of Perry Oilean

Art brought out a mountainous young man, wearing a football jersey and interviewed him for a bit, much like a game show host. He also brought out a few cheerleaders and a table of paraphernalia. The fellow turned out to be a guy they called “The Rock.” I had not followed the UC football program, but I took from the applause that a lot of students knew who he was.

Art got The Rock all fitted out with a vest filled with lead weights that approximated the weight of armor a knight might be wearing, along with a steel pot helmet that had a few lead weights riveted on. He then gave him a plywood shield and a bastard sword and had him begin whomping on an angled piece of plywood and a padded dummy. Art gave him a routine to perform. Two whacks at the plywood and then a thrust to the dummy, followed by a hack at the neck of the dummy. All this time, he had to keep the heavy piece of plywood on his left arm elevated.

The Rock took it all in stride. He was a quiet easy-going fellow and somewhat reserved. The cheerleaders, helping him on with the equipment struggled with the heavy
lead weights, and you could see The Rock was not used to carrying such weight. As a final addition, Art had them put small ankle and wrist weights on him. The cheerleaders started doing their cheers, the UC fight song played over the speakers and Art went on with his lecture.

The Testament of Art Penn

You have to understand that what Mister Rock is doing. Would have to be repeated over and over throughout the day in a battle. Plus, he would have to be up to his ankles in blood and gore, and up to his knees or worse in dead bodies. At Badon Hill, Arthur is reported by several sources to have been able to knock off over 900 opponents. Now let’s look at this. Whack, whack, jab, jab, hack. Very good. We’ll figure it’s going to take an average of five cycles of this to bring down three men, and each cycle. . . I’ve got a watch with a second hand here is . . . oh, we’ll call it about ten second. Let’s do the math. 900 men, 50 seconds for 5 cycles that produce 3 bodies at peak efficiency. That’s about say four hours of continuous bashing to produce 900 bodies. Meanwhile I’ve been talking for only a few minutes and we can see. . . yes, we can see that Mister Rock is starting to tire.

This is a process that would be kept up for quite some time. Most battles were short. Some only lasted about fifteen minutes to produce a result. However, if one fellow is going to do this and produce nine hundred corpses, it is going to take some time. We’ll let Mister Rock just keep going for a while, whilst I explain that four hours is not even close to what it would take. In fact, a real blood bath like Badon Hill lasted more like all day. Anyone who participated in that shindig and managed to walked off the hill
would have been considered in far higher regard than a Super Bowl winner of today. I see Mister Rock is really starting to tire here, and we’ve only gone a few minutes. This is not Mister Rock’s fault. He has not been doing this since he was a child. I daresay if we got Anthony Munoz up here of the Bengals, we would be getting very similar results. This is a lot of serious exercise. You have to prepare a lifetime for it, and that’s what these men did. Warfare of this nature is extremely strenuous . . . and ooops! Here’s what it usually produces.

The Testament of Perry Oilean

The Rock had stopped bashing the target. He had managed to come down on the angled plywood and was trying to lift his arm and the sword, but the muscles had stopped responding. The look of agony on his face was tremendous. He was doing everything he could to bring the sword back up one more time. Eventually his grip relaxed and the sword clattered to the floor. His arm was no longer working. Art thanked him profusely and then brought over one of the cheerleaders.

“What do you think of this guy.” Asked Art.

“He’s wonderful, “ she said.

“Would you go out on a date with him?” Art asked.

“No,” said the cheerleader. “His girlfriend is sitting in the front row.”

“But,” said Art. “If your rival over there were to die of some horrible dread disease, suddenly, would you mind if he asked you out? Just between you and me. Remember, this is for academic research.”

“No,” said the cheerleader, “ I would not mind at all.”
Next, Art had the cute blonde girlfriend stand up and waive. He then brought her up on the stage.

“What do you think of your guy here?” He asked.

“He’s my man.” She replied.

“Are you going to get married? I see you have a ring there.”

“Yes, we are.”

“Are you going to go and have fun tonight?”

“Oh, you bet!” she replied. “I’m taking him home and then we’re going out tonight.”

“There you have it ladies and gentlemen!” cried Art, placing something in the Rock’s breast pocket. “We have a successful experiment. Thank you all for participating. Go on over to Lenhardts tonight and dinner is on me. Class is dismissed.”

“Is that how it was?” I asked. Art and I were alone in his office. Art put down his papers and looked over at me.

“Oh,” he said. “Right now, you have no idea. I would prefer it that way, and so would you, if you knew what I was talking about. I have had to wade through unfathomable gore to get to the next man. I’ve sucked in a man’s brains trying to get my breath and spat them out and kept going. I once - “

“Gwen, I mean.” I interrupted.

“Oh yeah,” he said. “Gwen was like that.” Art went back to his papers.
I got to watch the second round of Art’s meeting with the feminista. Art called me in one day and gave me some filing to do. I was in the office when she came in, but I was sort of in the background, and Art did not introduce me. Celia was her name. She was a raving Communist in a Mao jacket and she carried her little red book with her wherever she went. Art charmed the socks off of her, agreeing with all she said, giving ground all the way back to some pre-determined spot in the conversation. Donna was very much at ease with him and was showing signs of flirting.

“So,” said Art. “If you don’t mind me asking, how much did you pay for your shoes?”

“These?” she brought a pair of black, ankle length work boots, which went well with her proletarian/unisex attire. “I paid about twenty dollars for them.”

“Did you know that the average worker in this country has to pay the equivalent of about three hours’ wage for a good pair of shoes like that?”

“No,” she said. “I did not, but it would not surprise me. The system rips them off every step of the way.”

“In Russia, they have to spend about a month’s wage to get a pair of shoes.” He said. “And a worker might have to stand in line for half a day to get them.”

“The state provides those shoes to the worker.” She said.

“No, sweetie.” Said Art. “They don’t. I’ve been there. Furthermore, you told me that you’re not working and you’re living in the dorms, so I’m going bet you’re sponging off Mom and Dad. I bet you that pair of boots that your dress in a nice skirt and sweater when you go home with your laundry to Mom and Dad’s house and you give your big old
Daddy a kiss and he gives you some money so you can go out and have fun. Mom and Dad think you’re here for Pre-Law. And the fact of the matter is you’re just a Communist so you have an excuse for having sex, luring the frat boys to the cause, and you’re a feminist, because you want someone besides yourself to blame for feeling shitty about yourself for being such a slut, and you wear that Mao jacket, because you think it makes you look powerful, when all it does is cover your figure, which you think is fat and ugly, but is actually quite nice if you would only start eating again. Am I getting warm?”

“I’m going to have you thrown out of here!” she screamed and left in a blind rage.

“Is that something to worry about?” I asked.

“Nope.” Said Art. “I could see this one coming from a mile off. That’s why I had you here as a witness. She’s going to accuse me of attempting to have my way with her, and they are going to ask you, and you are going to tell them the truth, and it will all die down and go away, and a month from now they’ll haul her sorry ass out of the dorm and have to re-hydrate her, because she’s suffering from anorexia and when they finally get to her, she’ll have already slipped into renal failure.”

Sure enough, I got a call from someone a few days later asking me to confirm what had happened. I gave my statement over the phone. I probably softened up on what Art said to her at the end, but they did not seem interested in that part of the episode anyway. They asked me if I would be willing to file a written statement, and I said that I would. I was thanked and that was the end of it. I do not know if she was really hauled off. However, knowing Art, he was probably correct. Art had a capacity for ducking the
punches. I always suspected that Art spent a considerable part of his life in front of a

keyhole

Chapter 35

We were sitting around the round table at the Bearcat a few days later. Art and I
were finishing off the first round together, waiting for the regulars to show up, and I
mentioned my interest in Spontaneous Human Combustion. It had all faded into the
background of my awareness in the previous months, but I thought it was still an
interesting topic.

“What?” said Art. “You haven’t had enough of that?”

“It used to be my one and only passion.” I said.

“People burn up all the time.” He said. “They always have, and they always will. Look at that little chickie that was in my office the other day. She’s on her way.”

“You can predict these things?” I asked.

“Sure.” He said. “It doesn’t hurt any that I have seen this so many times before it’s scary. Kids come in to their freshman year—usually they’re the bright ones. They have some talent. They try to do some major makeover in themselves. They are away from Mommy and Daddy for the first time, and they want to be the person they always wanted. The next thing they know they’re up to eyebrows with problems: the stress of school, the stress of being away from home, the stress of making new friends. The next thing you know they just burn up. That little number that wanted a piece of me is well on her way. I give her about a fifty-fifty chance of making it to summer.”
“They combust?” I said. “I mean really catch fire and burn up?”

“Oh,” said Art. “Not quite as spectacularly as you’re interested in, but they burn up just as bad. Suicides, eating disorders, drugs, booze—they do it all. Most go quietly. Mom and Dad come and get them and you never see them again. Some never leave home again. Some get diagnosed with what’s really eating them—manic depression, or something like that and get on meds and they go on living. That girl we had in our office had me worried from the first time I laid eyes on her. That look—that skeletal, I-haven’t-eaten-in-so-long-I-forget-what-it’s-like look always hits me. Something’s wrong when you see that in a crowded room full of well-fed people. I did some checking. She hadn’t punched in with her meal card in three days at the cafeteria.”

“You looked into it?” I said. “You spied on her?”

“Sure,” said Art. “I could tell she wanted a piece of me, so I had one of the grad students check her out. She is a real piece of work.”

“That’s pretty Machiavellian.” I said.

“Not really.” Said Art. “You’d rather I waited and let her claim I was trying to dip the wick? I’m not going down over some little nut case.”

I realized I was not going to win an argument with him, so I tried to let it go.

“I’ve got good news.” Said Art. “I had word from Merle that you’re all set for turkey hunting this Spring. You want to go, don’t you?”

“I suppose.” I said. “I don’t know that much about it. Is it like deer hunting?”

“Nothing like deer hunting.” Said Art. “This is completely different. Deer hunting can be a hobby. Turkeys are a second religion. You ready for your baptism?”
“I don’t know.” I said. “Can you tell me something about it? I thought you hunt turkeys in the Fall.”

“Noope.” Said Art. “Some people hunt them in the Fall, but around here it’s in the Spring. You go out in the woods and sit on the ground and make noises like a gobbler’s horny girlfriend and then you blow their heads off with a twelve-gauge. Sound like fun?”


“We’ve got to start thinking about it.” said Art “The applications for the tags are going to be available soon. These critters are like dinosaurs—they’re dragons. And they fly?”

“No, “ I replied , “They don’t. I saw it on TV. WKRP in Cincinnati had an episode where Les Nessman threw live turkeys out of a helicopter and they all died. Haven’t you heard the line, ‘As God as my witness, Andy, I thought turkeys could fly?’”

‘No, “ said Art. “I’m here to tell you they do.”

“It was the funniest line I ever saw on a TV show.” I said.

“They fly.” Said Art. “They’re as close as you want to get to a dragon, and they really do fly.”

“They breathe fire too?”

“You’ll see.” Said Art, getting miffed. “You’ll see if you want to go and see.” His tone sobered me up.

“Sure Art,” I replied. “I want to go see.”
The next Thursday was a bit of a surprise for everyone. Art broke off a lecture on Tristan and Isolde and began a digression that had even the grad students scratching their heads.

The Testament of Art Penn

A lot of you are sitting back at this point in the course probably still wondering why it is important to study Arthur. What was going on back in the sixth century that was so important. Well, actually it is not. Arthur then is a lot like the Arthur before you now. He is but a man. However, a wave of history, of archetype, a wave of synchronicity flowed through him and moved on, and in that brief time that he walked upon the Earth, we saw a reflection of ourselves. This wave has been swirling through time. The relation between Arthur and the Fisher Kings and the water fays, places him at various points in history as far back as the Phoenicians, the Sumerians, and beyond. For as long as we have had writing, it seems that the descendants of some ancient line of kings has been mucking about doing about the same thing with the same bunch of characters. Is this Arthur Pendragon son of Uther or the Arthur Penn before you? Who is to say? What difference does it make? It is the same story, the same twisted plot told to each generation and lived out by them in turn. We can trace the Fisher Kings back to the cross in Jerusalem, the tale of Merlin and Vivian back to Sumer.

As I stand before you now, I look out upon your faces and see myself as I was. It is as though we are but the same bright young mind, yearning for a peek under the tent, a glimpse at the one great sustaining truth. It is as though a towering wave is coming from behind and shall pass through you. Like a tidal wave, it looms just over your shoulder.
Don’t look. It will only bring it closer. It will hit you and you will find yourself caught in its maelstrom and then it will move on, leaving you as disillusioned adults, waiting for your pension to kick in.

I look back on you now, and see the faces of brave knights I have known. I see tragic lovers. I see the entirety of Man, and I, Arthur weep for your sins. My heart soars at your triumphs. I laugh as you laugh. Some of us will play Tristan to some skanky Isolde, or play Galahad, led to some corporate Siege Perilous and asked to save the company with the Holy Grail of increased profit. You there, yes you. . .

[Art points at a female underclassman, hiding her face behind long bangs]

What major are you? Nursing? What if I was to tell you that the boyfriend you secretly admire today, that fellow you can’t bring yourself to speak to, what if I was to tell you that some day, after a bout with kidney failure, you will nurse your young Lancelot him back to health, only to be offered payment instead of his wedding bed? What then?

And you. You will make a fitting Olwen. Stand up. Please.

[A tall blond, handsome young woman arose from middle of the room]

Do you have a father? Yes. Is he a big guy? Sure. Does he love you dearly. I thought so. Has he told you yet that he will die of a heart attack if you should ever marry? If he hasn’t, he’s keeping a secret from you. Please turn around for the crowd and gentlemen please feel free to look. Is this young lady worth doing impossible deeds for? If her father asks you to do forty impossible tasks, will you do them? What if I
pledged to help you? Would you do it then. Olwen, will you marry that man, even though you suspect that to do so will kill your father? Think about it, folks.

Not that Arthur gives us any good answers. All this just asks the questions. And I, Arthur, stand before you as a reluctant god on high and I say to you, all of you young faces I have seen grow old and die in cheap succession. That if I had a son to give thee, I would nail him gladly to a cross so that I might live once more in the gentle caress of ignorance. For all of Man’s mighty quests are but a swirl upon the stream of time, all his folly but a glint upon the water. And this is one sad old country boy who is sitting on the bank wishing it tweren’t so cold, that it weren’t heading into fall, and that it would be good to go for one more good swim. Class dismissed.

The Testament of Perry Oilean

We all sat there stunned, and then there was a hoot from the back of the auditorium—a group of underclassmen glad to be out early. I did not move, as I had been watching Art, and he seemed to have gotten himself into quite a snit. Art sat on the edge of the table and looked up into space vacantly. Most people were trying to get out of there in a hurry. The grad students stuck around a while, and then they too left. I went up on the stage.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“Hmmm?” said Art. “Oh, I guess I’m all right now. I was in the middle of my lecture and I got waylaid. I feel like walking home. Do you want to come along?”

“Sure.” I said. “What about the Bearcat.”
“I’ll call over and tell the bartender to send folks my best. I really don’t feel like drinking with that crowd right now.” He said.

The auditorium had emptied out, save for a single soul in the middle. It was the girl with bangs, even from down on the stage you could see that she was crying. Art asked her to come down. At first, she tried to beg off, but Art was insistent.

“Please come down and say hello.” He said. She reluctantly complied.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“Elaine.” She said. “How did you know?”

“Know what?” Art asked.

“My boyfriend.” She said. “He has kidney trouble.”

“It was an inspired guess.” Said Art. “I get these things once in a while. I did not mean to be so . . . so . . . well, I’m sorry at any rate. I’m not psychic. I’m more of a physic; I predict your future movements.”

“That’s okay.” She said, the pun was lost on her completely.

“He does not love you.” Said Art. “You know that don’t you?”

“I just thought that- “ she burst into tears again.

“I know just what you thought,” said Art. “You thought that if you could become a nurse, you could take care of him. And although it’s a noble idea, it just is not going to work. You’re going to be there for him when he gets sick and when it’s all over and he gets his new kidney, he’s going to offer to marry you. However, both you and he are going to know it’s not really love, and as soon as he’s up to it, he’s going to run off with a barmaid.”

“Are you sure about that?” she asked.
“Absolutely,” said Art. “You ought to go and change your major. You’re already loaded up on English Lit classes. Go ahead and move over to the English department. Your boyfriend will survive just fine without you. Take my word for it, Elaine: no one is worth that kind of commitment if he does not love you.” He scratched a name down on a scrap of paper and handed it to her. “Call this guy tomorrow and tell him I sent you.” She took the piece of paper and left.

“What was that all about?” I asked.

“Eh,” said Art, shrugging winsomely. “I do what I can.”

“What?” I said. “Do you spy on all your students?”

“God hears every prayer.” Art said. “He sees every sparrow fall.”


“. . . but he lets them fall just the same.” said Art. “He lets them fall. I dunno. I get something like this handed to me, I feel I got to take a stab at it.”

“You play God?” I asked.

“No.” said Art, becoming serious. “I don’t play. Let’s go take a walk.”

We wandered out of Zimmer and headed over to Burnet Woods. Art carried his bag and the bastard sword that he often brought to class as a prop. Art picked a way that took him up the sledding hill across from Crosley Tower and once up on top we stopped at the first picnic table we came to. We had our backs to campus. We could hear traffic, but we were alone in the woods. It was getting to be the latter part of winter. There were a few leaves on the ground.

“I’m deeply sorry for today.” Art said. “It was not anything I could help.”
“What? The thing with that student?”

“No, “ said Art. “What got me going today—what got me off track in the lecture.”

“Yeah,” I said. “What was all that about.”

The Testament of Art Penn

I like coming up here sometimes. This all used to be a farm belonging to the Durrell family—nice family. They were Huguenots from Maine and came down on flatboats to settle at Limestone, but their Maine script wasn’t taken in Kentucky, so they floated on down here. That was in the Seventeen-Nineties, and you still had to worry about Indians. The last of them is living up in Mason I think.

I always liked taking walks in the woods. All that changed in October of Forty-Four. I had an errand to run back to HQ, and I decided to take a shortcut. All the leaves had just come off the trees, and I was kicking through them just like home. They were a foot deep in some places. The ground was dry, the air was crisp. The sky was blue and you could not hear the artillery for miles around, just the rustle of the leaves in the wind. And then it dawned on me that I was walking through a mine field and it took me six hours to retrace my steps back out of those woods. I can’t walk through standing leaves without getting the dry heaves anymore.

[Art was shivering]

It’s funny, but I stopped seeing the students faces there for a while, and for a while there that whole auditorium was filled with people I saw that I know are dead. It was a horrible thing. Some of them were buddies I had in the War. I landed on D-Day plus fourteen, and every dead man I saw, ours, theirs, every one of them was out in the
audience staring back at me. It made me lose my composure. I lost my grip there for a while. It’s been a long time since it happened like that. I know a lot of things slipped out, but hopefully I didn’t embarrass myself too much.

I went through a period there for a while, where I could hear the souls of men. It was horrible. You walk past a dying man and you hear their soul crying out in fear and pain, and there is nothing for you to do. We all keep brave fronts up for ourselves, but in war everyone is crying out on the inside. To hear that come from others and not be able to shut it out—that became unbearable. I could not take it. It was February of Forty-Five. I’d survived the Bulge, but I knew I could not survive this. It’s been years since they all came flooding through like that. All those young faces looking down on me for answers today—I just was not prepared for them all.

The Testament of Perry Oilean

Art was having a hard time getting his point across, or at least that is how it seemed.

“So all of what you said was true?” I asked. “That girl’s father is going to die of a heart attack if she marries?”

“Isn’t that what every girl’s father is going to do?” Asked Art. “They give away their daughters, the pride of their lives, and then they fade away. Isn’t that every daughter’s conundrum. She has to let go of daddy and go off with another man so that she can enjoy her own life. No, I was trying to hold back and keep it general. My point was just to say that we breathe life into the archetypes, each new generation does. I got carried away there with that poor one girl. Something else slipped in.”
“So you’re saying you’re psychic.” I said.

“I’m saying that after this long on the road I’ve been on it’s harder to keep the voices out than not.” Replied Art. “If it were not so, I should like to live forever. As it is, there are times I would gladly welcome my own death, just to be rid of the noise.”

“Do you have a choice?” I asked.

“I assume I do. “ said Art. “I have rejuvenated myself through the various means available to me. Days like this make me think about changing that plan. As long as I can stay out from under busses and dodge bullets, I can go as long as I want. It’s the wanting that becomes the problem.”

“So you would just give up?” I asked.

“I’d just stop trying to hard.” Art replied. “You’re just getting started. Someday you will face this decision too. I’ve had to on several occasions. I’m not a suicide, but I can stop trying to live so long.”

“I wish you wouldn’t.” I said. “I kind of like you, Art.” Art patted me on the back.

“Oh, “ he said. “Don’t worry. I’ll get over this. It’s just that it’s getting late in the Winter and I wish Spring would get here and get my mind off these things. As I said, it’s been years. This winter has just been harder than others.”

“Why’s that?” I asked.

“It’s a winter that reminds me of too many things. “ he said. “Like the other day, I really got to missing my mother.”

“Is she alive?”

“She never existed.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.
“In this reality,” Art said. “She never existed. When I left for a trip long ago, I had had a mother. She wasn’t alive anymore, but she had existed. When I got back, she had never existed. Not her, not her family—all gone. I’m sure that I could go and find her in some other reality, but she is not here in this one.”

“You had to have had a mother.” I said.

“I know.” Said Art. “It’s hard to say what I traded for a mother. The Russians did not get their bomb until Forty-Nine. The Cuban Missile Crises ended peacefully. Hitler never got a toe-hold in the south of England. Somewhere along the way I lost my mother, and I had to face up to that.”
Chapter 36

We walked on. About the time we got to Good Samaritan Hospital, a light rain started. It did not feel all that bad, and there was not a whole lot we could do about it. We crossed over Ludlow and kept going towards the house. We had been silent for a long while.

“Perry,” she said. “Do you still wish to be with me?”

“More than anything,” I replied.

“Very well,” she said. “We will begin again. Do you want me to spend the night with you?”

“Of course,” I said.

“Very well,” she said. “Will you take me home in the morning? Early?”

“Sure thing.” I said.

That’s how it went down. We got back to the house late, soaked. Art had put her suitcase in my room, and left me the keys for the truck—one step ahead of me. Vivian and I stripped down and took a shower together and then sat together on the couch, watching MASH and then Johnny Carson. We talked about Skip and Sue. I was surprised that Vivian did not see anything wrong in their offer, but she agreed that it would have been a difficult friendship to continue, once I had turned them down. It did not take long after we were in bed with the lights out for our old habits to kick back in. It felt good to have Vivian back.
The next morning, Vivian left her suitcase at my place and we got in Art’s truck and rode over to Wellington Place in the half-light of early dawn. It had gotten cold over night, and brought up the fog. Her Peugeot was parked out front. I kissed her goodbye and watched as she let herself in. I then drove down to the circle and was met by the pear trees lining the stairs down to the pond in full bloom, as I had seen them the night before. There was a wonderful muted beauty to them, and I thought about Vivian slipping down in a little while to take her dip in the fog. Art and Sue-Chi were both right—it was beautiful all right, but it still could give you serious wood.

I found a spot out in front of the Alpha and went in for breakfast. Rene saw me and came over to put down a menu.


“Yes to both,” I replied.

“Girlfriend’s back, huh?” she shot back. It was somewhat harsh, more of an accusation than anything.

“Excuse me,” I replied. “How is it that you know these things? Am I wearing a sign? Is her underwear sticking out of my jeans? What is it?”

“Nothing,” said Rene. “I’m just an incredible waitress.”

“But you’re never wrong.” I said.

“I’m incredible.” She replied.

“But what I don’t understand is what your stake is in this?” I said. “We’ve had only a couple of dates. Half the time you won’t talk to me. What am I to you, exactly?”
“The pancake batter is left over from yesterday.” Replied Rene. “If I were you I would go for the bacon and egg omelet. That is something I can guarantee.”

“You’re not going to answer me.”

“Toast?”

“Wheat.” I replied, and she snatched the menu out of my hands and left.

Maybe it was my English Literature studies—too much Hamlet at an impressionable age. Maybe I had listened to Art for too long. A few days after Vivian got back, I was in a blue funk sitting on a park bench in Burnet Woods. I had nothing to do but sit around until four in the afternoon, when I was due to meet up with Art and the crowd at the Bearcat. My back was to the stairs leading up to Bishop Street. I was looking out on the pond and wondering what to do. I spent a long time watching an old black man with one of those 2-wheel shopping carts, parked on a bench next to me fishing. He was deadlining for carp, using some kind of doughball thing, mashed onto the hook. Occasionally his line would twitch and he would pay attention for a bit, and then pull in an empty hook and curse at the bluegills for stripping his bait. It was warm, and there was a stiff wind hitting me in the face. Sometimes the gusts would do strange things the lake, blowing a little eddy in the water or scooting an empty pop can from one side to the other.

What had me so confused was what to do about my situation. Art was under suspicion, and that left my future as a grad student under question. I was glad Vivian was back, but I think she knew my mind had been elsewhere over the winter. Elsewhere.
Now there was a concept that needed further refinement in my case--

Elsewhere/Elsewhen? I did not have the slightest clue. It was bothering me as well that the more I looked at my life, stuff was just falling apart. One day I had come back from an outing to find Ronald Reagan still sitting as President—the assassin, Hinckley, had not killed him at all. George Bush was just Vice President. Another day I came back to find John Lennon dead instead of Yoko and MASH still running as a series. Argentina decided that same day to invade the Falklands. I ran and hid; the world was coming unglued.

I still did not know what I wanted to be when I grew up, and that was beginning to chafe. Everyone I had known in high school and college had moved off and started their lives and I was stuck in a twilight zone of perpetual about-to-be. There was a conflict in that too, for I could see a perfectly happy alternative to hard work and striving in Art’s example. However, it had taken him years of torment to finally get himself to let go and largely let things just happen. I would no sooner go down his road as pull my own head off.

Art had said something to me as we were sitting at the stammtisch waiting for things to get started at the Bearcat one day that had stuck in my head.

“Perry,” he said. “Most people walk through life half asleep. It’s like you walk into a bar, sit on a stool and start watching the TV and not care what’s on. Somebody puts a drink in front of you and stare at the screen popping peanuts in your mouth. It takes a special kind of bastard to reach over the bar, grab the knob and change the channel. Somebody’s gonna bitch, but you don’t even look at them.
“There’s another thing too.” He said. “Most folks don’t know this, but there’s more than three channels on the TV. In fact there’s more than 12.”

“There’s UHF.” I said.

“Screw UHF.” He replied. “There’s more channels on that TV than you can conceive. There’s more channels than you can conceive of conceiving. All it takes is the right kind of hero to reach up and turn the dial. The crazy part of it is that most people have an inkling of that truth and it scares the snot out of them. They’d rather just sit on their stools and wait for the last call. The most they’ll ever do is complain when they need a refill on the peanuts. That, my son, is the truth of it.”

So here I was, sitting on a park bench watching somebody else fish. To make matters more ironic, I had a bag of peanuts I’d scored from the fruit store sitting beside me and I realized I’d been shucking them mindlessly and had a huge pile of empties at my feet. Damnit, but it was time to get up and turn the dial. But hell!, I didn’t even know what I wanted.

I wanted to be out of this mess. I wanted to be released. It was Spring, and I did not want to be sitting on my ass waiting for the other shoe to fall with Art. I wanted to start living up to being a hero. I wanted-

I caught myself. This kind of thinking was going to get me dead. There were thousands of heroes on ships right now on their way to some pimple called the Falklands that were lined up waiting to become dead heroes, saving England in her hour of peril. That was what signing up to be a hero was. No, I did not want a piece of that action. What I wanted was – I stared at the pile of peanut shucks at my feet and felt like shit.
It was quite a while before I roused myself out of that funk. I had eaten close to the whole bag of nuts and it was sitting like a lump in my stomach. I belched and that is when I realized my butt had gone to sleep on the park bench and I got up and stretched. The black man that had been fishing was gone. In his place was a young guy in a UC sweatshirt, in a considerable swizzle over something.

His problems were obviously heavier than mine. At first, I thought he might be strung out on something. He was pounding his fists on his knees, talking to himself, lost in some private agony. He looked very yuppie, very undergrad, very self-consumed. My first impulse was just to get up and put some distance between me and him.

Both our eyes were caught suddenly by a flight of four Canadian geese coming in for a landing. For a moment we were transfixed as they cupped, dropped their feet and dropped into the water. However, one goose did not quite pull the maneuver off, and dropped onto another goose. The two tangled about a foot off the water. One came in all right, but the bottom one went head-in and turned upside down. There was a huge ruckus as the two geese honked insults at each other.

“You don’t see that every day.” I said, half way to no one.

“No,” said the yuppie. “You don’t.” I was sort of surprised he answered me.

“You can bet that one is in for some teasing.” I said.

“I’m sure.” Said the guy. “I’m Tom, by the way.”

“Hi Tom.” I said, suddenly thinking this was a queer thing. “I’m Perry.”

“I know.” He replied. “I know you from class.”

That was an exceedingly weird thing. I froze.
“You’re one of the TA’s in Doctor Penn’s class, aren’t you?” he said, breaking the long silence.

“Yes,” I replied. “I’m sorry, but it’s hard to see up into the lights. I didn’t recognize you.”

“A bunch of us would sit mid-way down in the front.” He said. “My girlfriend and I and a couple of our friends heard what trip it was and decided to take it together. Wouldn’t miss that class for the world.”

“I’m glad you liked it.” I said. “I know Art, Doctor Penn, really tries to give folks their money’s worth.”

“My girlfriend especially liked Doctor Penn.” He said. “I think he liked her too.”

“Oh, “ I said. “What’s her name?”

“Donna.” He said. I wrote it off as a coincidence.

“Well, tell Donna that the ‘Friends of Art’ meet Thursdays over at the Bearcat—big table in the back. You’re both welcome.”

“That’s gonna be hard.” He said.

“Why’s that?”

“She’s . . . I just found out that she died.” He said. “I’m sorry. I’m not holding it together too well.”

One thing led to another. Tom’s last name was Lincoln. He was somewhere between a Sophomore and a Junior, and had been bouncing around majors, before falling in with Donna, the goofball. He was in need of help. I got him up and walking and we
headed over to the Bearcat and I bought him a couple of beers. He poured his heart out to me. He had been Donna’s boyfriend, but mostly in his own mind. Donna had been somewhat of a bicycle and leaned on him as shoulder to cry on in between bouts of Chlamydia, PMS, and the clap. She’d promised to pop his cherry if he turned twenty without getting laid, and then had to make good on the bet. He was in love with her and idolized her Maoist, feminist rantings, and admired her running battle with anorexia. He had been the only one who could get her to eat at times.

The promised hot weekend, ending Tom’ virginity, had been very special for Tom, but rather boring for Donna. Years of promiscuous behavior had left her in such a state that she needed serious work to get off, and mostly she would let Tom do his thing and then bark orders to him while he attempted to satisfy her. He had held up his end all right, but Donna had set out to do the whole thing as an up-front mercy fuck—not the most romantic frame of mind. It had turned sour however, after Donna started getting morning sickness. She had attributed it to bad food in from the Siddall Hall cafeteria, but Tom knew she was pregnant. Tom had offered to do the right thing, but Donna had said she would take care of the problem. Had the kid been his? Donna had been taken off the pill due to deteriorating health. Tom had brought condoms, but Donna refused. She said condoms made her feel like a whore. She’d used contraceptive foam and then had the audacity to make Tom eat her off. His tongue had been numb for a week, but he thought this was how love was.

After another beer I asked Tom about a diary. He knew about it, and had occasionally been allowed to read it—mostly the slice-and-dice gossipy stuff. Why would Donna have implicated Art Penn as the father? Tom had no clue, but he
speculated that this was some way of Donna striking out at the establishment: lure
Doctor Penn into a compromising situation and then blame the pregnancy on him.
I asked Tom if he would call her parents and set things right, and he said he would. We
traded phone numbers, and sent him on his way.

I called back to the house to tell Art the good news. Sue-Chi was the only one
there. She was using the portable phone out in the carriage house so it was hard to get
through the static. However, she got the gist of it and said Art was out walking around. I
left word with her and the bartender, George, the bartender. Art needed to meet me at the
Bearcat at the usual time I went by Chicago Gyro and picked up one to go. It was such a
nice day, I decided to walk over to Belleview Park and eat my lunch.

There is a back way into the park from Sauer Street. The woods were starting to
green up, and with the wind blowing I had a sincerely beautiful trudge up along the east
face of the hill that led to the cliff. As the face of the cliff warmed in the sun it became
alive with the neighborhood’s population of garter snakes, using the clay and sharp shale
as a sunny place for mating. As I walked just inside the treeline, on my way to the top, I
could see the snakes crawling everywhere on the cliff, and I had a hard time missing
them as they crawled underfoot. Eventually I hit the well-worn toe-path that took me to
the top and I camped out on my favorite ledge and ate my sandwich and a Coke. Beyond
me spread the southern face of Clifton Heights and Fairview Heights as well as Brighton
and Downtown. I could see Willy’s place at the end of Fairview and I counted rooftops
from Ravine street and made out Greta’s house. I thought about coming down off my
perch and walking over there and looking her up, but Tom’s story about Donna had really soured me towards promiscuous women for a while.

Beyond all that, it felt like I had my whole world laid out before me. I need to only point my finger in a direction and take off and my fortune would follow. But what fortune was that? Now there was a rub indeed—back to being Hamlet. If I was going to be a hero, I was going to have to get this decisiveness thing down a little better.

When I was done with lunch, I watched the ants crawl off with my food. One ant found a huge sliver of lettuce and hoisted it into air and tried to carry it back home in its jaws. I wondered what the other ants were going to say when it arrived. Were they going to admire him, or just try to gnaw off a piece for themselves? Was this ant going to be carried into the hill a hero, or left exhausted and dying—to weak to make it the last bit of the way. Was this what it was to be a hero? Did the ant even care?

Did I care?
Chapter 37

“Let me give you a quick geometry lesson.” Said Art. We were still up on the hill in the park. I had kind of let go on him. It was just a little to much to believe that a man without a mother, both omnipotent and omnipresent, had saved England in its hour of gravest need, whipped the Germans, the Russians, the Japanese, and all the rest and stood there claiming to be Arthur Rex. That was just a little too much bullshit for an assistant to accept; the University was just not paying me enough money to buy that.

“Come over here and stand on this line.” Art dragged his foot over the dirt and made a line." I complied.

The Testament of Art Penn

When you were out deer hunting, you learned how to cross a barbwire fence, Right? You slide your gun underneath or pass it to your buddy. Fences are dangerous, right? A man is in mortal danger when confronting a fence with a loaded firearm and he must take care. This line represents that fence. When a man stands at ease, that fence is running under his feet, locked under his heels. That line is the here and now. What is ahead of him is the future, what’s behind him is the past. As long as a man can stand and feel that strand of barbwire on his heels, he’s right where he needs to be.

If a man moves away from that position, if he should allow one foot into the present and one into the past, he is straddling the fence. In that situation the wire slips from where it should be and rides up, catching the man in the balls.

[Art goosed me good with a stick from behind.]
The trick is that at all times a man must be aware of that strand of barbwire and the promise it keeps to the unobserving. You can move forward. You can move backward, but you must pay attention to that line beneath your feet, or by God it will make you sing soprano.

Are you with me so far. I see you nodding your head, but I honestly do not believe you. You think you know what I am talking about, but really you have only the slightest inkling of a clue. This is a lifetime pursuit. You will pursue the understanding of this simple geometry lesson for your entire life, and someday you may just get it right—right just once before you draw your last breath. I am still trying to get it right, and I’ve got a two hundred and fifty year head start on you. That strand of wire still snaps me a good one every chance it gets. But I digress.

Lesson number two in this geometry lesson is a bit harder to grasp. I draw a circle on the ground and you come and stand in it. This circle is your universe. You are at the center of it. The entire world stretches out before you in all directions. There are an infinite number of directions you can take, represented as rays I draw emanating from the center point. The circumference represents what you can reach in a given moment. This is your universe. I can draw one over here and stand in it, and it represents mine. As you can see, your universe is separate and distinct from mine. If we drew the circles bigger, mine would part of yours, and vice versa.

Now comes the tricky part. We will draw a line from the center point of my circle to the center point of your circle. From some vantage, over there that one can sight down that line and see us on a continuum, stretching in either direction. Now put the center
point of everyone else’s circle, everyone that ever was and everyone that ever will be, along that line. Sight down that line and you see all of humanity. I’m on it, you’re on it.

There is no front of the line, there is no back of the line, but everybody has to walk that line. All you and I have learned is how to jump places in that line, for fun and profit. We still have to walk that line. Some days we get to be Hitler. Some days we get to be you. Some days we get to be me. It makes no difference. There are an infinite number of places on that line and we will walk them all.

Now we come to the next concept. Bear with me, this one is subtle. You may look at this and say where is time? Where is the linear progression from past into future through the present. That is an illusion. It comes from taking the steps and moving the fence line, and then looking back over your shoulder. You seem to be always leaving the pasture for the woods or the woods to the pasture, but in fact you are just shuffling your feet in place and the barbwire is always beneath you, either locked under your heels where it should be, or riding up your crotch. Once you grasp that, you can start jumping the fence and jumping places in line. You are on your way, son.

Somewhere out there is a last fence. Beyond it is nothing but an endless expanse of frozen oblivion. You will know when you get there, and you’ll give yourself the choice of crossing over or turning back to the warmth of the nearest campfire and a good meal. You will either want to move on past that last fence or yearn for your mother’s arms again. And so it goes.

Someday you will realize that you just keep running yourself out to the last fence and then limping on back only to lick your wounds by some fire so that you can go do it again, and you gladly cross over, thinking that it will end. Once you cross, you think to
yourself “Hey, this ain’t so bad.” And then you realize that you back where were and just a little colder and it’s time to go home. Maybe there are Germans on the other side that start shooting at you. Sometimes it’s Russians. It’s always somebody, and they’re always in a bad mood, because it’s so freaking cold.

Now I will give you one more lesson. It is not geometry, because I have not found a line or a circle to represent it. Maybe you can. See, that last fence is the eternal joke. Once you’re on the other side, well, you’re on the other side. Now what? Some people get the joke. It’s a stupid joke with no punchline, but some people get the joke. Some are good, solid, loving innocents like Cathy. Some are eternally wise, tortured souls like Willie. Some are just lonely people in overstuffed chairs smoking cigarettes in the dead of night. Some people get the joke. They get that wry smile on their face, and poof! Up they go.

Me, I don’t get the joke. I spent years trying to get the joke. I tried my blessed best to find the answer. I just kept coming back to the fucking last fence. Finally, I gave up trying to get across and stop trying to figure out what lay beyond and concentrate on making what was in my circle a little better. That didn’t work either. I’ve spent two-hundred years jumping in and out of line trying to do it, and it does not get better. It only gets a little different. Now I’m here, up on this hill, and I’ll show you something. I found it the other day. It’s this little bit of fence I found in the bushes. This has been a park for—I forget—generations. Still, there’s a little bit of fence here in the bushes that has not quite yet rotted away.

One cold night recently I couldn’t sleep and I came out here, and I was out walking around, and I came upon it. I thought about just laying down and opening up my
coat and trying to make it home to my mom’s house, and it dawned on me that it really was not worth the trouble, and that if I did that and somehow made it back to my mother, it was all going to start over again, and I would just be trading all my experience in this world for ignorance.

See sometimes, Perry. You have no choice. Sometimes you find yourself out past the last fence and you have no idea how you got there, and it’s cold and lonely and you’re lost and hungry and there is no thought of home. Somebody picks you up and holds you and makes you happy again and starts things anew. That was you a few short years ago. I had to leave you on the other side of the fence. I had to get the rest of my men back, and you were shot up pretty bad, and we both knew it. I made that promise to you. I promised I’d come back and get you, and I know you died thinking I was a shit for not coming back, but I did and now I am here. Percival, I have come back for thee. I am sorry it took so long.

Your father was a good man--one of the best. Pellinore was from the Dark Isle. In one way of looking at it, he came back with us, and built a life for himself here in this world. Merle never particularly took to him, always underrated him, but he was a good man. We were able to get him out of there just in time, and I got him on the team at Evendale. Your father was a consummate hunter and was consumed with the pursuit of the Questing Beast, as he called it. It was a dragon with the head of a snake and the feet of a chicken and it had wings and when it flew it look like someone had thrown a bushel basket into the air. It was Pellinore that found the spot where Merle built for his homestead, and it was he that taught us to hunt the beast.
When we lost you, we also lost Pellinore. That was also the trip where I came back and realized that I no longer had a mother. I have no idea where Mom got off to. It’s just as well, because I had been tempted way too many times to try to find her.

Pellinore, your father did not go with us, but fate took him with a heart attack while we were gone. It then dawned on me that the strange spirals that make up life had fulfilled themselves again and Pellinore had sons and a daughter in this world and I vowed to stay put and wait and bring Percival, son of Pellinore, back across the fence.

Perry, I have spent twenty years of my life waiting for this moment. What was lost has been regained. What had been forgotten has been revealed. Your mother and your brothers protected you well, but now it is time to take the next step.

The Testament of Perry Oilean

I did not quite know what to do. Art had pulled his sword out. I was not quite sure what he expected. “What do you want from me?” I asked

“Nothing,” replied Art. “I’ve brought you here as I said. You were pissed off when I left you. You’re pissed off now. You can walk back over the fence with me or go your own way. I have fulfilled my pledge to you and restored the knowledge you lost. Pellinore has gone elsewhere. If you wish, we can go find him together. You followed me willingly and journeyed to find the grail without questioning your task. Perhaps it is up to me to do the same for you. I’ve been leading for too long.”

“I don’t know how to lead yet.” I replied. “You seem to be doing a good job.”
“Good then,” said Art. “Let’s get home and get some letters in the mail tonight, asking for a set of turkey tags. We have not much time before the time of the Questing Beast will be upon us. Before that, however, there is one thing left to be done.”

“What’s that?”

“Kneel.” Replied Art.

I knelt.

Art took out his sword and tapped it lightly on my head and shoulders and mumbled some stuff that I could not understand.


The rest of the evening was spent filling out a letter requesting that an application for turkey permits be mailed to us. Sue-Chi made us a venison roast. Art then busied himself making phone calls. He also wrote a letter to Merle, explaining what had happened. While he was doing that, Sue-Chi and I were in the kitchen.

“I’m not too sure what to make of all this.” I said. “Is this all for real, or is Art nuts?”

“Oh,” said Sue-Chi. “He’s nuts all right, but I would believe him. I watched him look for his mother a few years ago. I finally started to help. He never knew his father, but he knew who his mother was, and where she was buried. At least he thought he did. I started researching him. There is no record of him prior to his service record in the Army. It’s like he fell out of the sky. His induction papers list a city that does not exist.”

“So who am I?” I asked. “In your mind, does this make any sense?”
“Very little Art says makes sense,” she replied. “You are Perry Oilean. In Art’s mind you are also Percival, son of Pellinore, and you’re also some brave kid that he had to leave out somewhere in the Ardennes. I guess it’s up to you to pick what’s real in all this. That is how I would handle it. That is how I do it.”

“So you don’t buy it all either?” I asked.

“Oh, I buy it.” She said. “I buy it. I don’t understand his motivations all the time. You look at my life and how it’s played out, and you really have to question where he is coming from. He’s a troubled god. When he grumbles, the Earth trembles. When he’s happy, the sun shines. When he’s constipated, wars start.”

“That’s a scary thought.” I said.

“He’s definitely the center of his universe.” Sue-Chi said. “The only way to deal with it is to learn to be the center of yours.”

That next weekend, Sissy came down from Miami and picked me up for dinner with the family. I waited until we had some time. Dad and my brothers sat watching basketball. I took Sissy up to my room and explained what had been going on. After about an hour of summing up my previous six months, I asked her what she thought. Was I crazy? What Art? Who needed the medication more?

“I think Sue-Chi is right.” She said, buying a lot more of what I had said than I expected. “I always did suspect that we were being hidden away and that someday our true destinies would be revealed.”

“You’re not serious,” I replied.

“Well,” said Sissy. “It all fits, doesn’t it?”
“I guess it does.” I replied. “But then you live in that Theatre of the Absurd world of yours.”

“What are you talking about?” she said.

“Theatre of the Absurd.” I said. “You know, Edward Albee and all that. When are you going to put that play on anyways?”

“What play?” she asked.

“What do you mean?” I said. “You were doing a play at school. You were in charge of the production design or something. It was an Edward Albee thing, Zoo Story.”

“Now I know you’re smoking something.” Sissy replied.

“Wait a minute.” I said. “Did you change majors or something?”

“No.” she said. “Whatever are you talking about. I’m still pre-law.”

“You’re kidding me.” I said.

“Nope. Pre-law.” She said.

“You weren’t the last time I checked.” I said. “I’ve been noticing things since I got back from deer hunting—stuff that’s changed. This is the first really big thing, though. Tell me, did you ever want to be in theatre?”

“Of course, silly.” Sissy exclaimed. “I did all those plays in high school, but when it came down to it, I decided that I’d much rather study to be something I could make money on. I want to be a success you know.”

“You’re still dating what’s-his-face?” I asked. “The guy with the compass?”

“Yes,” she said. “Stewart and I are doing just fine, thank you.”

“This is the weirdest thing.” I said, and explained the whole thing with the deer hunt.
“So what you are saying is that you came back from deer hunting and the whole world had changed a little bit, and the biggest thing that was different was that I am no longer a Theatre major at Miami? Didn’t you notice that over Christmas?”

“I guess it never came up.” I said. “I just didn’t notice. You didn’t seem any different.”

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“There’s nothing inside.” I said.

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“That’s a turkey call.” I said. “I’ll be damned.”
Chapter 38
“Let me give you a quick geometry lesson.” Said Art. We were still up on the hill in the park. I had kind of let go on him. It was just a little too much to believe that a man without a mother, both omnipotent and omnipresent, had saved England in its hour of gravest need, whipped the Germans, the Russians, the Japanese, and all the rest and stood there claiming to be Arthur Rex. That was just a little too much bullshit for an assistant to accept; the University was just not paying me enough money to buy that.

“Come over here and stand on this line.” Art dragged his foot over the dirt and made a line. “I complied.

The Testament of Art Penn

When you were out deer hunting, you learned how to cross a barbwire fence, Right? You slide your gun underneath or pass it to your buddy. Fences are dangerous, right? A man is in mortal danger when confronting a fence with a loaded firearm and he must take care. This line represents that fence. When a man stands at ease, that fence is running under his feet, locked under his heels. That line is the here and now. What is ahead of him is the future, what’s behind him is the past. As long as a man can stand and feel that strand of barbwire on his heels, he’s right where he needs to be.

If a man moves away from that position, if he should allow one foot into the present and one into the past, he is straddling the fence. In that situation the wire slips from where it should be and rides up, catching the man in the balls.

[Art goosed me good with a stick from behind. ]

The trick is that at all times a man must be aware of that strand of barbwire and the promise it keeps to the unobserving. You can move forward. You can move
backward, but you must pay attention to that line beneath your feet, or by God it will make you sing soprano.

Are you with me so far. I see you nodding your head, but I honestly do not believe you. You think you know what I am talking about, but really you have only the slightest inkling of a clue. This is a lifetime pursuit. You will pursue the understanding of this simple geometry lesson for your entire life, and someday you may just get it right—right just once before you draw your last breath. I am still trying to get it right, and I’ve got a two hundred and fifty year head start on you. That strand of wire still snaps me a good one every chance it gets. But I digress.

Lesson number two in this geometry lesson is a bit harder to grasp. I draw a circle on the ground and you come and stand in it. This circle is your universe. You are at the center of it. The entire world stretches out before you in all directions. There are an infinite number of directions you can take, represented as rays. I draw emanating from the center point. The circumference represents what you can reach in a given moment. This is your universe. I can draw one over here and stand in it, and it represents mine. As you can see, your universe is separate and distinct from mine. If we drew the circles bigger, mine would part of yours, and vice versa.

Now comes the tricky part. We will draw a line from the center point of my circle to the center point of your circle. From some vantage, over there that one can sight down that line and see us on a continuum, stretching in either direction. Now put the center point of everyone else’s circle, everyone that ever was and everyone that ever will be, along that line. Sight down that line and you see all of humanity. I’m on it, you’re on it.
There is no front of the line, there is no back of the line, but everybody has to walk that line. All you and I have learned is how to jump places in that line, for fun and profit. We still have to walk that line. Some days we get to be Hitler. Some days we get to be you. Some days we get to be me. It makes no difference. There are an infinite number of places on that line and we will walk them all.

Now we come to the next concept. Bear with me, this one is subtle. You may look at this and say where is time? Where is the linear progression from past into future through the present. That is an illusion. It comes from taking the steps and moving the fence line, and then looking back over your shoulder. You seem to be always leaving the pasture for the woods or the woods to the pasture, but in fact you are just shuffling your feet in place and the barbwire is always beneath you, either locked under your heels where it should be, or riding up your crotch. Once you grasp that, you can start jumping the fence and jumping places in line. You are on your way, son.

Somewhere out there is a last fence. Beyond it is nothing but an endless expanse of frozen oblivion. You will know when you get there, and you’ll give yourself the choice of crossing over or turning back to the warmth of the nearest campfire and a good meal. You will either want to move on past that last fence or yearn for your mother’s arms again. And so it goes.

Someday you will realize that you just keep running yourself out to the last fence and then limping on back only to lick your wounds by some fire so that you can go do it again, and you gladly cross over, thinking that it will end. Once you cross, you think to yourself “Hey, this ain’t so bad.” And then you realize that you back where were and just a little colder and it’s time to go home. Maybe there are Germans on the other side that
start shooting at you. Sometimes it’s Russians. It’s always somebody, and they’re always in a bad mood, because it’s so freaking cold.

Now I will give you one more lesson. It is not geometry, because I have not found a line or a circle to represent it. Maybe you can. See, that last fence is the eternal joke. Once you’re on the other side, well, you’re on the other side. Now what? Some people get the joke. It’s a stupid joke with no punchline, but some people get the joke. Some are good, solid, loving innocents like Cathy. Some are eternally wise, tortured souls like Willie. Some are just lonely people in overstuffed chairs smoking cigarettes in the dead of night. Some people get the joke. They get that wry smile on their face, and poof! Up they go.

Me, I don’t get the joke. I spent years trying to get the joke. I tried my blessed best to find the answer. I just kept coming back to the fucking last fence. Finally, I gave up trying to get across and stop trying to figure out what lay beyond and concentrate on making what was in my circle a little better. That didn’t work either. I’ve spent two-hundred years jumping in and out of line trying to do it, and it does not get better. It only gets a little different. Now I’m here, up on this hill, and I’ll show you something. I found it the other day. It’s this little bit of fence I found in the bushes. This has been a park for—I forget—generations. Still, there’s a little bit of fence here in the bushes that has not quite yet rotted away.

One cold night recently I couldn’t sleep and I came out here, and I was out walking around, and I came upon it. I thought about just laying down and opening up my coat and trying to make it home to my mom’s house, and it dawned on me that it really was not worth the trouble, and that if I did that and somehow made it back to my mother,
it was all going to start over again, and I would just be trading all my experience in this world for ignorance.

See sometimes, Perry. You have no choice. Sometimes you find yourself out past the last fence and you have no idea how you got there, and it’s cold and lonely and you’re lost and hungry and there is no thought of home. Somebody picks you up and holds you and makes you happy again and starts things anew. That was you a few short years ago. I had to leave you on the other side of the fence. I had to get the rest of my men back, and you were shot up pretty bad, and we both knew it. I made that promise to you. I promised I’d come back and get you, and I know you died thinking I was a shit for not coming back, but I did and now I am here. Percival, I have come back for thee. I am sorry it took so long.

Your father was a good man--one of the best. Pellinore was from the Dark Isle. In one way of looking at it, he came back with us, and built a life for himself here in this world. Merle never particularly took to him, always underrated him, but he was a good man. We were able to get him out of there just in time, and I got him on the team at Evendale. Your father was a consummate hunter and was consumed with the pursuit of the Questing Beast, as he called it. It was a dragon with the head of a snake and the feet of a chicken and it had wings and when it flew it look like someone had thrown a bushel basket into the air. It was Pellinore that found the spot where Merle built for his homestead, and it was he that taught us to hunt the beast.

When we lost you, we also lost Pellinore. That was also the trip where I came back and realized that I no longer had a mother. I have no idea where Mom got off to. It’s just as well, because I had been tempted way too many times to try to find her.
Pellinore, your father did not go with us, but fate took him with a heart attack while we were gone. It then dawned on me that the strange spirals that make up life had fulfilled themselves again and Pellinore had sons and a daughter in this world and I vowed to stay put and wait and bring Percival, son of Pellinore, back across the fence.

Perry, I have spent twenty years of my life waiting for this moment. What was lost has been regained. What had been forgotten has been revealed. Your mother and your brothers protected you well, but now it is time to take the next step.

The Testament of Perry Oilean

I did not quite know what to do. Art had pulled his sword out. I was not quite sure what he expected. “What do you want from me?” I asked

“Nothing,” replied Art. “I’ve brought you here as I said. You were pissed off when I left you. You’re pissed off now. You can walk back over the fence with me or go your own way. I have fulfilled my pledge to you and restored the knowledge you lost. Pellinore has gone elsewhere. If you wish, we can go find him together. You followed me willingly and journeyed to find the grail without questioning your task. Perhaps it is up to me to do the same for you. I’ve been leading for too long.”

“I don’t know how to lead yet.” I replied. “You seem to be doing a good job.”

“Good then,” said Art. “Let’s get home and get some letters in the mail tonight, asking for a set of turkey tags. We have not much time before the time of the Questing Beast will be upon us. Before that, however, there is one thing left to be done.”

“What’s that?”

“Kneel.” Replied Art.
I knelt.

Art took out his sword and tapped it lightly on my head and shoulders and mumbled some stuff that I could not understand.


The rest of the evening was spent filling out a letter requesting that an application for turkey permits be mailed to us. Sue-Chi made us a venison roast. Art then busied himself making phone calls. He also wrote a letter to Merle, explaining what had happened. While he was doing that, Sue-Chi and I were in the kitchen.

“I’m not too sure what to make of all this.” I said. “Is this all for real, or is Art nuts?”

“Oh,” said Sue-Chi. “He’s nuts all right, but I would believe him. I watched him look for his mother a few years ago. I finally started to help. He never knew his father, but he knew who his mother was, and where she was buried. At least he thought he did. I started researching him. There is no record of him prior to his service record in the Army. It’s like he fell out of the sky. His induction papers list a city that does not exist.”

“So who am I?” I asked. “In your mind, does this make any sense?”

“Very little Art says makes sense,” she replied. “You are Perry O ilean. In Art’s mind you are also Percival, son of Pellinore, and you’re also some brave kid that he had to leave out somewhere in the Ardennes. I guess it’s up to you to pick what’s real in all this. That is how I would handle it. That is how I do it.”

“So you don’t buy it all either?” I asked.
“Oh, I buy it.” She said. “I buy it. I don’t understand his motivations all the time. You look at my life and how it’s played out, and you really have to question where he is coming from. He’s a troubled god. When he grumbles, the Earth trembles. When he’s happy, the sun shines. When he’s constipated, wars start.”

“That’s a scary thought.” I said.

“He’s definitely the center of his universe.” Sue-Chi said. “The only way to deal with it is to learn to be the center of yours.”

That next weekend, Sissy came down from Miami and picked me up for dinner with the family. I waited until we had some time. Dad and my brothers sat watching basketball. I took Sissy up to my room and explained what had been going on. After about an hour of summing up my previous six months, I asked her what she thought. Was I crazy? What Art? Who needed the medication more?

“I think Sue-Chi is right.” She said, buying a lot more of what I had said than I expected. “I always did suspect that we were being hidden away and that someday our true destinies would be revealed.”

“You’re not serious,” I replied.

“Well,” said Sissy. “It all fits, doesn’t it?”

“I guess it does.” I replied. “But then you live in that Theatre of the Absurd world of yours.”

“What are you talking about?” she said.

“Theatre of the Absurd.” I said. “You know, Edward Albee and all that. When are you going to put that play on anyways?”
“What play?” she asked.

“What do you mean?” I said. “You were doing a play at school. You were in charge of the production design or something. It was an Edward Albee thing, Zoo Story.”

“Now I know you’re smoking something.” Sissy replied.

“Wait a minute.” I said. “Did you change majors or something?”

“No.” she said. “Whatever are you talking about. I’m still pre-law.”

“You’re kidding me.” I said.

“Nope. Pre-law.” She said.

“You weren’t the last time I checked.” I said. “I’ve been noticing things since I got back from deer hunting—stuff that’s changed. This is the first really big thing, though. Tell me, did you ever want to be in theatre?”

“Of course, silly.” Sissy exclaimed. “I did all those plays in high school, but when it came down to it, I decided that I’d much rather study to be something I could make money on. I want to be a success you know.”

“You’re still dating what’s-his-face?” I asked. “The guy with the compass?”

“Yes,” she said. “Stewart and I are doing just fine, thank you.”

“This is the weirdest thing.” I said, and explained the whole thing with the deer hunt.

“So what you are saying is that you came back from deer hunting and the whole world had changed a little bit, and the biggest thing that was different was that I am no longer a Theatre major at Miami? Didn’t you notice that over Christmas?”

“I guess it never came up.” I said. “I just didn’t notice. You didn’t seem any different.”
“I must have been awful.” She said, “I could never in million years picture myself as at Theatre major. They’re all so . . . self-involved.”

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“That’s a turkey call.” I said. “I’ll be damned.”
After dinner on Sunday, I finally found a way to sit with my mother for a while. I helped her with the dishes. Sissy helped with getting the table cleared off and then disappeared. It was one of those wild nights where the rain was driving and the sky was red and you could hear the wind over the TV in the other room and the roar of the dishwasher. Mom had a sweater she was working on, and she went to work in the chair she kept in the kitchen.

“Mom,” I said. “I’ve been talking to Art about Daddy. He filled me in on a lot of things.”

“I figured that he would.” She said. “I knew he would come for my son some day. It is a day I have always feared. But now that it is done, I can do nothing more than wish you well.”

“You followed Daddy?” I asked. “That was a brave thing to do.”

“I followed your father.” She said. “I could do nothing else.”

“Still, though. “ I said. “I had no idea until now what it took. I thought we had come up from down South—not the Dark Ages.”

“It was down South.” She said. “The Excalibur Project found places for us in places-- Georgia, Tennessee, Ohio—places where we could get used to things. I spent two years in the woods with you and your brothers, never catching a glimpse of the world around me. Your father would go with other men and they would go to town and board a train and take them to Cincinnati. The first time I ever saw a train, I thought it was going to eat me. They took your father to train him to work against the Nazis, and then against the Russians, and then against the Chinese. They taught me to be a housewife.”

“What was it like?” I asked. “Back then—back before you came here.”
“Cold. Smelly.” She said “There was a lot of dirt, and everyone had fleas—and everyone was always trying to kill everyone else. That’s why we wanted to leave—you never felt safe. Your father died with his pistol next to the bed, and his sword at arm’s reach. To this day, I have dreams where they are coming in the night and we have to flee. If I had to do it again, I would gladly trade being a queen for the safety and warmth of this house. I do miss your father, though. He was quite a man.”

“Don’t you ever miss it though? “ I pressed. “Not even a little.”

“No.” she replied. “I lost two babies before your brothers to diseases doctors have never heard of in this time. I watched my mother die of dysentery when she was thirty-eight. My father died hunting boar. By the time I was twelve I knew how to sew up wounds and I’d seen my first amputation. No. I do not miss it, and I get down on my knees at night and praise God for sending us Art. I just don’t want him to take you away to die.”

“He isn’t” I said. “I think he’s retired from all that. He’s just a college professor now.” With this, my mother’s knitting took a turn for the violent. Unless one has seen it, there is no way to describe how truly threatening the simple act of knitting can become. I had seldom seen it myself except in rare instances, such as when I had brought home a report card with a ‘D’ in handwriting.

“Oh, “ she said, “Mark my words well. He’ll have you jumping the fence with him soon enough. After that, who knows? He’ll take you to that devil, Merlin. . . or have you consorting with she-demons. I know Arthur, I knew his whore of a wife, and I know he has diced with Satan himself. I also know I cannot stop you. You’ve been this way your entire life. You want to see what’s out past the garden gate. Just take care.”
In the succeeding days, the applications arrived for our turkey permits, and Art and I sat around the dining table, filling them out and mailing them back with a check. That night, Art introduced me to turkey calling. We went out to Swallens and picked out a couple of calls for me. One was a Penn gobble box, similar to the device Sissy had given me. The other was something called a Super Hen. It was a piece of slate set into a wood frame. Using a striker, one drew it along the slate and made a noise not unlike scratching fingernails against a chalkboard. Art said that was how a girl turkey would tell the gobblers she was ready for love. I said it probably was the reason wild turkeys were so rare nowadays. He also bought both of us some calls made by stretching a piece of condom over a metal frame. You inserted it in your mouth and blew across it. It sounded like air escaping from a balloon. Again, it was made to mimic the calls of a love-sick hen. Art had a couple of tapes at home from a guy named Ben Lee. We sat around all one Sunday and we listened to the tapes and I learned how to call.

I learned quite a bit from the tapes. Much of what I learned was contrary to what I had believed about the Questing Beast. Ben Rogers Lee was not the most eloquent speaker, but he seemed to know his turkeys. I learned as a for instance that we were only hunting the males, and that in order to do so, we needed to make sounds other than a gobble. The hen had a variety of noises that she made, depending on her mood. When she got up in the morning, she’d call softly and gently to alert her neighbors in the flock that she was okay. She would make a cackling sound when she left the branch to fly to the ground. After she was settled in and the rest of the flock had joined her, she and the other hens would begin feeding, making little clucks and yelps as they went. You could tell the direction of their movement by looking for the V-shaped scratches in the forest
litter that they made as they went. Which ever way the V pointed, that was how they went.

I learned about turkey poop. Gobblers had poop that looked like question marks, where hens had droppings that did not curl. When you found turkey droppings a good turkey hunter should pick them up to see if they are warm and fresh. I found that exceedingly icky.

Gobblers had super powers. At least that is what Ben Lee said. They could hear a sound in the woods from along ways off and know exactly where it was. They had super eyesight, and could spot the slightest movement. Many times Ben had hunted gobblers and waited patiently for them to walk behind a large tree so he could get his gun up, but the gobbler would somehow know and be gone. Art amplified the idea, saying that using modern rules for turkey hunting, i.e. shotguns with bird shot, no rifles, no bait, no shooting them out of the roost, etc. gobbler turkeys were well-nigh impossible to hunt. That was what made them so desirable.

The way to hunt them was to scout out a roost and get as close as you could to it while it was still dark before sunrise. After the turkeys flew down from the roost, you attempted to attract a gobbler within shooting range by trying to sound like a horny hen. If the gobbler bought into it, he would come running to you and you blew his head off with a blast of #4’s from your shotgun. That was the theory, anyway. There were alternate methods. If a roost was not readily available, you could make the sound of a barred owl—sort of an elaborate “Who-cooks-for-you-Who-cooks-for-you-all.” The barred owl was the one of the few predators of young turkeys, so the gobblers would get nervous and sound off at great distance when they heard an owl call early in the morning.
All this was deeply foreign to me. However, Art made it sound like a life-or-death deal that I get it all down pat. We rehearsed clucks, cackles, purrs, putts, cuts, yelps and gobbles. After light lunch on Sunday, Art put our shotguns in the back of the truck and we headed out to a place he knew outside of Mason, where I could learn how to shoot a turkey. Art knew a farmer and he let us shoot our shotguns in one of his barren fields. Art put up a small wooden frame out in the middle of the field and stapled some newspaper to it. He then stuck a stick in the ground and put a Styrofoam coffee cup on the end. From twenty yards out, sitting on the ground, the cup was centered in the newspaper. Art handed me some shells that we had purchased at Swallens, #4 Remington Buffered Magnums, and I chucked one in the shotgun and steadied it on my knee. I put the bead on the end of the barrel on the cup and touched it off.

I smelled blood. My shoulder was throbbing. I was on my back, staring up at the winter sky. I still had the shotgun in my hands, but I was dumbstruck.

“You need to lean into it a little.” Said Art. “You were leaning too far back. Normally you set up with your back to a tree, but this is just practice. Watch yourself.”

“Wow!” I said. “What was in that shell?”

“Just a bunch of lead.” Said Art. “Just what you need to kill a turkey.” He gave me a hand up and we went over to the target. The newspaper was obliterated in the center and there were numerous holes in the cup. “That right there is a dead gobbler.” He said. “If you can put two into his head and neck, it’s a kill.” We tried it again at thirty yards and forty yards. At forty, I had barely two holes in the cup. By this time, I was starting to get the hang of the shotgun. “Now you see how this shotgun pattern widens out at 40. You probably should call him in closer, say thirty or better, before you shoot
him. Remember that inside 20, that load is like a bullet—you’ll miss him unless you’re dead on.

“I can’t believe it’s so hard.” I said. “I can’t believe an elephant gun would kick any harder.”

“That’s the funny thing about turkeys.” Said Art. “It’s hard to hunt them right. If you hit them any place other than the head and neck, they’ll just spit at you. Those feathers are like armor plating. Aim for the base of the neck. That way, you’ll probably get the head and the neck.”

Art practiced a bit with his turkey gun, a long bolt-action contraption called a Marlin Goose Gun that he had spray-painted with various colors to be camouflaged. His pattern was a bit tighter than mine at forty yards, something he attributed to the extra long barrel. He also shot different loads than mine that were longer. However, I could tell the punishment he was taking was greater. After we had expended a half a box of shells each, we loaded up and headed back down the way, stopping at a place called the Houston Inn to eat. Art said he dug the salad bar. We had a late second lunch of filet mignon on toast. The bar was closed, because it was Sunday, but no one objected when Art pulled out a flask and gave us each a shot of scotch in a coffee mug.

“I’m taking off next quarter.” He said. “I talked to the boss this week. I said I needed a rest, and he agreed.”

“But . . .” I sputtered. Scotch went down the wrong way and I coughed.

“It’s okay.” he said. “I’ve got papers to write. You’ll still be with me. I’m just not going to teach.”

“What brought this on.” I asked.
“Winter quarter.” Art said. “I’m in a bad mood after all that.”

“All what?” I asked.

“That little chickie that tried to do me in.” he said. “Then the thing with the nursing student. Then you. It just got me down.”

“Me?” I asked. “What about me?”

“Well, “ Art replied. “It’s you and it’s not. I’ve got enough of a footing in this world to know that the boy I left behind and you are two totally separate people. You’re linked somehow, but not in a way that matters to anyone than me. I was stuffing it all these years, and now that . . . that you know . . . well, I suppose it’s safe to let some things out. That’s what I’m doing—letting things get out.”

“Like what?” I asked.

“Well, for one thing, I don’t know if you know how badly that thing with that female student could have gone.” He said. “I replayed that thing every which way I could, and then realized that there I was running down the bunny hole again, and not making anything any better for anyone. I really wanted things to work out. I wanted her—by the way, her name was Donna? I wanted things to work out for Donna and I wanted things to work out for me and finally, after about eight attempts, I walked away from her taking her second leap out of a window at Siddall Hall, and realized what I was doing. This was no different than what I’d been up to trying to save the world from Communism, Fascism, and a few ‘isms you probably haven’t heard of—thank God! I vowed to just let it go after your father turned up dead, and I found myself off the wagon but good. It took a real struggle to get back to where I had been. It’s taken a lot out of me, and I need a rest.”
“I didn’t know you were gone.” I said.

“In your world view, I wasn’t.” Art replied. “For me, I probably spent a couple of months running around trying to make it all work out. That girl, that Claire, she was just a trigger for it. Oh, by the way, that little nursing student? She was the bonus. I picked her up one night crying on the steps going to Memorial. She poured her heart out to me. That’s how that went down—all in another time.”

“So you are telling me you are not omnipotent and omniscient?” I said.

“Once you learn how to skip out of class and play hooky with the space-time continuum, what else is there?” he replied.

“So what has you so beat?” I asked after our second trip to the salad bar.

“Two things.” Art said. “The first was that I had let this Winter get the best of me. The second . . . well, the second is you.”

“Me?” I said.

“Well,” said Art “ Not you, but see that’s where this whole business of waltzing about time starts to wear on a guy. Most people can put their past behind them. Me? I get to see and hear variations on a theme no matter where I go. “

“I don’t follow.” I said.

The Testament of Art Penn

There was another you, or at least to me, there was. It was a long time ago. It was the straw that broke this old camel’s back. We had a few days holed up in this barn. We were up north of the Ardennes and had not seen the absolute worst of the action that
Winter. We considered ourselves pretty lucky. We had acquired some gasoline and we’d figured out an old GI trick of cutting the top off a gallon can, putting water in the bottom and then putting some gasoline on top of that. When you lit it, it burned just right. You could cook off of it, or you could stay warm by it. It made a dandy little stove. So we were hunkered down with our stove one night, and someone on the other side decided to turn the eighty-eights on our barn. Everyone survived the first barrage and was able to scoot—all except you . . . well, you know. A timber off the barn came down and pinned you and it also knocked over the can with the gas in it. You went up like a roman candle. We got the fire out as quick as we could and pulled you out, but your legs were crushed and you were burned really badly. About that time we found out the Germans were just kidding with the first round and they decided to fire for effect. We got a good shellacking—lost a couple. We were going to move you, but you were too bad off. Then we got the order to pull back—the Germans were breaking through on our left and we were being called in to plug the gap. I left you with two grenades and your rifle, and a promise to send back help. This is the best I could do. Sorry it took so long.

The Testament of Perry Oilean

“Art,” I said. “I’m not bitter—for what it’s worth. “


“So what was my name?” I said.

“Huh?”

“What was my name?”

“Percy.” Said Art. “Here’s to both of you.”
“So what happens now?” I asked.

“I’ll take off a quarter and maybe the summer.” Art replied. “It’s funny, but every time I take off, I come back with some really great insight into medieval literature--some new take on an old manuscript, sometimes a newly discovered manuscript. Of course it helps tremendously that I’ve been off drinking with the author, or maybe ghost writing one of the heretofore unrecognized classics. Have you ever thought what would happen if you dropped a copy of *Ivanhoe* on the doorstep of Geoffrey of Monmouth? Anyhow, the main goal right now is to prepare you for the hunt—me too. I’ve been dry for two years.”
Chapter 40
I was a bit worried about how things were going to work out, with Art being on leave, but he assured me that the checks would keep coming. As it was, I was able to start stashing away some cash, and I was also contributing to the family groceries along with my own. I also did part of the laundry for Sue-Chi, and that seemed to be all that was needed to keep me in most-favored-guest status. Art was subdued throughout the end of the Winter Quarter, and soon there were finals.

Starting over Spring break, I was out and about, shaking off the extra weight and lethargy that had built up over the Winter. Clifton, the university, and the surrounding heights were all built on an intricate ridge overlooking the Mill Creek Valley. Before the last Ice Age, it had been the valley of the Licking River, but the ice had moved the Ohio River south from Morrow Ohio and left a large alluvial plain. Everyone talked of Cincinnati being built on seven hills, like Rome. In fact, Cincinnati was built in the bottoms of a now-truncated Licking River, which now ran into the Ohio in front of Downtown. What this all meant for me was that there was a band of steep hillside running for several miles all around us stretching from the north end of Clifton, where Art lived, all the way around to my old stomping grounds in Bellevue Park and beyond. A hiker who did not care for a well-beaten trail could therefore make a good adventure for himself, eschewing the bus and going for the long way round.

On most days, I now set off in the morning and would attempt to tackle one segment of this forgotten world or the other. I might slip into the woods near Art’s and travel as far as I could before nighfall, or take a 17 bus all the way down to downtown and start from the other direction. I just loved being out in the fresh air, and I loved the fact that I was on the edge of civilization in the midst of the city.
All around me were the remnants of Man’s attempts to embrace this ribbon, as well as his eventual surrender and disgust. What Man could not conquer outright, he defiled. I hiked among broken concrete, broken bottles, old shopping carts and other debris, being slowly subsumed by the slow progression of honeysuckle, locust and box elder.

I had not told Art, but I was starting to stretch myself into other dimensions. It was coming along in small steps. I would set off down Clifton Avenue going towards town and by the time I reached Clifton School, the roads would have turned to cobbles and carriages and delivery wagons would be filling the streets. I would go down to Clifton and Ludlow, hang about for a while, soaking in the flavor of it all and then head back. I did not stray too far. Clifton in 1910 was pleasant in a postcard sort way. Once I got more adventurous, I would stray further back. I remember one morning I made it as far as Brighton Corner. The Erie Canal was running where Central Parkway stands. I observed from the hillside above. The canal had long past its heyday, but there were still boats rotting in the canal. I made my way all the way down to Music Hall. That was as far as I dared. I wanted to make sure I had recognizable landmarks for fear of getting lost.

It was on that trip that I chose to go back up Ravine Street. Ravine is as steep a road as you would ever want. I found it amazing that a horse drawn wagon could make it up even in good weather, but it was the fastest way back into Clifton Heights from the bottoms. In those days Mohawk was still a recognizable community—seedy little houses
not much more than shacks set in the hillside. I felt it necessary to hurry my pace and get up to Warner Street as quickly as possible.

There were a couple of markets on the corner of Ravine and Warner. The newly built community of Fairview was primarily populated by pedestrians. They came and went from their homes on top of the hill by foot, using Ravine McMillan or the Fairview Incline as needed. As such, small businesses sprang up on every corner, just far enough apart to give a person walking home with a sack a pleasant trip. Robinson’s Market had a few benches out front as a convenience—someplace to sit and rest on your way up the various hills. I went inside and purchased a pint of milk and sat on the bench, resting before I resumed my trip back to the present.

A young lady went in the store after me, and I had nearly forgotten her when she emerged some time later with a basket of groceries. As she was passing by, the handle of the wicker basket let go and all the groceries went tumbling. I sprang up from my seat and caught everything that was making for the gutter—potatoes and onions, and such.

“Thank you.” She said. “Thank you so much.” There was a hint of something in her voice that I could not quite put my finger on. As I was to find out shortly, the something was a touch of German. One thing led to another. I fascinated her, and she sat and talked with me on the bench. Her name was Greta. She had not yet married, because her father was ill and her brothers had asked her to stay with him. She lived close by in the house in which she had grown up, overlooking downtown. Her brothers both worked at the Hauck brewery. She had been born in Cincinnati, but both her brothers had been born in Munich. She was a Lutheran. She loved to sing at church and
was a member of the choir. All this just poured out of her non-stop. I found it, and her, quite appealing.

Greta was nearly as tall as I, blonde, within a year or two of myself in age and drop-dead gorgeous. Somewhere in the one-sided conversation, she finally got around to asking me a bit about myself. I told her I was working for one of the professors at the university. I had to think quickly on this, since I had not much of a clue as to how far evolved the University of Cincinnati had become. Nor did I have an exact date in mind. Before I followed her home for lunch, I managed to duck back into Robinsons and pick myself up a newspaper, with the idea of boning up on things before I got caught in an irreparable lie.

Greta took me to her house, on the south side of Warner Street in a house that was a bit older than the surrounding development. The inside was like a cave, filled with dark woodwork. Greta went to the kitchen and started making a meal, while I sat at the table in the dining room, and read as much as I could. The date was March 29, 1911. There was not much going on locally, but details were still emerging on the big fire in New York at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory. Dayton’s Glen Curtiss was in the news, having flown the first seaplane earlier in the year. Political debates were centered on the growing rift between Teddy Roosevelt and Cincinnati’s favorite son, President Taft. In baseball, all I had to do was remember the name Bob Bescher of the Reds. In five minutes, I had absorbed enough that I thought I could make my way through.

Greta’s father was in a downstairs bedroom. Once Greta had something going with lunch, she ushered me in to meet the old man. He was a stroke victim, who could not speak. She introduced me glowingly to her father. I shook his withered hand, and I
thought I saw a glimpse of friendly acknowledgement. Greta lit a cigar for him and put it in his mouth, and promised to be back with a meal.

Lunch was warmed-over sauerbraten, with pumpernickel bread and milk. Over lunch I tried to make small talk over some of the things I had seen in the paper as well as what I new of the neighborhood. It did not take much priming for Greta to go off on a tangent. I heard about her family, the family back home, the church in which she sang, the gossip of the neighborhood. She asked me to stay while she fed her father and I acceded.

Greta fed her father lovingly from a bowl. She removed the cigar from his mouth, and flicked the ash for him. It looked as though it had not moved from his mouth the entire time. She had taken the sauerbraten and minced it up into something like a porridge that did not need to be chewed and then fed it to him with a spoon. There was great love between them. Greta prattled on as her father slurped his lunch and you could see he enjoyed the attention greatly. When Greta was finished, she turned his chair so that he could catch the afternoon sun.

I was trying to figure out how and when I should make my departure, when Greta took off her apron and approached me with intent.

“I am not a bad girl,” she started. “But I do like to have fun.”

“I am sure you do.” I answered.

“Do you like to have fun too?”

“Yes, I do.”

“If I were to invite you to spend the afternoon with me, would you think that was bad?”
“Not at all.”

“I do not do bad things.” She said sternly. “You cannot do just anything with me.”

“Since I assume what we’re discussing does not involve playing cards or looking at the family pictures, I’ll tell you what,” I said. “Since I am completely in the dark about what you consider bad, why don’t you call the shots, and I’m certain we can both have fun.”

Greta liked that idea immensely. I was surprised what she thought was not bad, and I was able to have quite a nice time with her in the upstairs bedroom. Greta asked me if I wanted to stay for dinner. One of her brothers would be coming by for stew. I told her that I had to be elsewhere for dinner. In retrospect, I think Greta knew this was a polite way of getting me to go home.

As I was dressing to leave, I tried to formulate a question. How does one politely say, “How do you come to be such a wonderfully horny individual?” or “Are there more chicks like you on this planet?” I ruminated on this for quite some time until Greta asked me why I was frowning. I decided to table the question for later. One thing I did manage to do was ask her, as a matter of small talk, what had happened to her mother. Greta said her mother had died a few years ago and told me about how they had gone about finding her a nice place in Spring Grove Cemetery. I told her that her mother had raised a wonderful young lady, and that I was forever grateful to her. I then kissed her once more and left.
Getting home was harder than I thought. My mind must have been on other things, and it took until late that evening for me to find the right sort of automobile, the right color of bus, and the right sort of police car coming up Clifton Avenue. When at last I was comfortable that I was back in my own time, I had made little headway past Good Samaritan Hospital. However, from there, I could find my way to Skyline for a bowl of chili and from there I found my way back to Art’s house. The next morning, I had a plan in mind. I borrowed Sue-Chi’s station wagon after offering to take the kids to school. I dropped down to Spring Grove Avenue and visited the sextant’s office. It took a little doing, but I found what I was looking for.

It was cold that morning, but there was every sign that Spring was coming soon. The pussy willows were breaking open. The forsythia was just starting to bud, and the crocus and the snow bells were already out. In a section near to the wall that stands along Winton Road, I parked the car and got out. It did not take long for me to find it.

There was Greta’s stone, along side her mother’s and her father’s. Her father had died in 1912, less than a year after my visit. Greta’s gravestone said she had only lasted until 1919—perhaps a victim of the bad influenza that year. Devoted daughter. The grave was a little sunken in; the marker was a bit off plumb. Someone had once planted daffodils, and they were pushing up through the grass. It occurred to me that there were forced daffodils in the father’s sickroom and on the kitchen window sill. She must have liked them. Elsewhere in the plot, I found her brother and his family. He had died in the fifties. The wife had died only a few years ago, and there had been two children that did not survive infancy. It occurred to me then that I had managed to really muck things up. I had gotten impatient and turned to the end of the book, and now the novel seemed
spoiled. I was mad at myself. I was in a real funk. I drove back home and brooded the rest of the day.

I was invited to dinner by Sue-Chi, and I came over to the main house just as Art was coming home. We walked in together. Over a scotch in the den, I told him what I had been up to. Art was furious, but he kept his cool.

“I know you are probably proud of yourself.” He said. “But that was a damn lame stunt.”

“I’ve actually gotten pretty good at this sort of thing” I said. “I try to keep to what I know.”

“I’m not going to try to tell you the danger.” He said. “It wouldn’t do any good. No sense writing the instructions on the heel, if the cowboy can’t pour piss out of a boot to begin with.”

“I’m sorry if I disappointed you.” I said.

Art thought about it for quite some time, staring into his beaker as he turned the scotch around. After a minute or so, he had a sudden change of heart.

“Disappointed?” he said. “No. The more I think about his, the more I’m glad you’ve got the balls not to listen to an old pisswad like me. Heck, if I hadn’t meant for you to walk the path, I’d never introduced you to it. Welcome to the club.”

“Thanks,” I said. “I guess.”

“So what’s the matter then?” he said.

“I feel so rotten about Greta.” I said. “She’s dead.”

“You knew that, before you went to the cemetery.”
“Well, I figured she’d gotten married and had a life and all that. I feel like I was making love to a corpse now.”

“What? Because she died eight years after your little fling? Heck, I’ve diddled in the morning and planted them in the afternoon. What’s your beef?”

“It just bummed me out.”

“You’ll just have to grow a thicker skin, boy. Either that, or stay home and date the girl next door.”

“I guess.”

“So what are you going to do now?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Are you going back for some more sauerbraten?”

“I might.”

“You know, that other chicky of yours is coming back soon. Remember? Ol’ what’s-her-name? Vivienne?”

“Yeah . . . I -“

“Not to worry. I’m sure you’ll work out something.”

“If I really liked Greta—I mean really liked her—what would be the best way to-“

“What? You want to marry her?”

“No, I mean . . . I’m just talking hypothetically. Let’s say I got interested in someone out there, back there, whatever—would it be better for me to try and live back there or to try and bring her here or-“
“If you find the girl of your dreams, and you know you will never find another one like her. That is probably for you to decide with her. Pick a time and a place and go have at it. There are no rules in this game.”

“It just that it occurred to me this afternoon that the tombstone does not mean anything permanent. I mean, I could help her change all that if she wanted, and there would not be any real effect on History, because she died in 1919 having never married.”

“Stop thinking about this stuff like it’s an episode in The Twilight Zone. You want to go schtupp a little fraulein on Warner Street, go do it. Marry her. Make little blond babies. There is nothing to stop you. The only rules you have to break are the ones that you set for yourself.”

“I guess I’m still trying to color in between the lines.”

“There ain’t no lines in this coloring book. But I will say this one thing to you: be very careful what you choose. You can walk the path. You can sell insurance. You can do whatever you please. Just make sure it’s something you can live with.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m just guessing here. I’m just blowing stuff out of my ass. But you’ve just rubbed the lamp, the genie has popped out, and offered you three wishes. Your third wish can be for three more wishes. Don’t blow your wishes on a hamburger and fries with a Coke. You know what I mean?”

“Genie?”

“At your command.”

“I’m not sure I’m following you.”
“One of the tricks in this life,” said Art. “Is learning what to wish for. The rest is amazingly easy.”

Chapter 41
A few nights later Art asked me to come up to the house for dinner. The kids were off somewhere. Sue-Chi prepared a nice venison roast. Art and I sat in the study, sipping his good scotch. The honeysuckle had just started to leaf, and the daffodils were in bloom. Winter had officially ended, and I had spent the day up in Burnet Woods watching the season come on and tripping lightly between the ages. I had walked the toe paths and the driveways and watched the last of the indians leave, and the old Durrell farm turn slowly into a city park, using the white trunks of the old beeches by the bandstand as a beacon.

“I’ve got some news for you.” Art said. He sounded unnaturally grim. “First, I thought you would like to know that your Vivian is due into town tomorrow night. She has been trying to write to you, but the mail is somehow screwed up. She just got her first postcard she sent back the other day and wrote me.

“That’s great!” I said. “Is she all right?”

“She’s just fine.” Art said. “I phoned this morning and talked to her briefly. You were not around. She was missing you terribly.”

“I am.” I said. And all of a sudden the thought of having her back meant more to me than anything. It was strange. I hadn’t really noticed her gone, but now the interval between seeing her off and right then seemed like a black abyss. I realized I had just been killing time from then to now.

“Why don’t we go tomorrow all together and pick her up?” he said. We’ll take Sue-Chi’s wagon and you can snof on the way back.

“That’s great, Art.” I said. “This is terrific.”
“Well, now that that is out the way,” replied Art. “I’ve got something else to tell you. In fact, several things.”

“What’s that?” I said.

“Remember that little dust-up last quarter with that little slip of a thing in a Mao jacket? Donna was her name. “

“Yeah.”

“There was more to it.” Said Art.

“Like what.”

“Like little Donna’s is dead.” Said Art flatly.

“That’s a real shame.” I said.

“Oh, there’s more.” Said Art.

“More?”

“Little Donna was preggers.” Said Art. He paused to take a strong hit off the beaker. “... and she told people it was mine.”

“That’s preposterous.” I said. Art did not look at me. “It is preposterous isn’t it?”

“Let’s hope so.” Said Art.

“Tell me you didn’t screw that girl.” I said.

“There are an infinite number of universes.” He replied. “I can tell you that in most of them I never laid a hand on her. The problem here is not which universe we’re living in, but what universe Donna was in.”

“I don’t get it.” I replied.
“Oh, but you do, Laddy.” Said Art. “You above all should be seeing this. Let us just theorize for a moment what would happen if we all start living in the Art-screwed-Donna continuum. That sounds like a world I don’t want to live in.

“But is it the real one?”

“I’m not sure.” replied Art.

“Stop equivocating with me.” I said. “Tell me straight up.”

“There is no straight up.” Said Art. “Not for us. There is no ultimate authority in this. What evidence do you want? A criminal court would convict on ‘beyond a reasonable doubt.’ The parents can sue me and win if they can convince a jury based on a ‘preponderance of the evidence.’ The university will make their ruling on another basis entirely, namely, which is in the best interest of the college. And in that you have a vast array of political forces at play. Not all of them are within my grasp to control. Oh, I know where a whole lot of skeletons are buried, that’s probably how I’ve been able to keep this gig for so long. But real political clout? Hmmmm. We’ll see about that.”

“But I want to know the truth.” I said.

“Okay.” Said Art. “You want the truth? Here it is. Donna and I met. We met several times. No, I did not schtupp her. No, I did not come close. I was not in the least bit enamored of Donna. I think she was of me. I did not see it. I was being too much of a middle-aged putz and thinking a few kind words might get her to pull out of her nosedive.”

“Is that it?” I said. “Then there is no problem.”

“The problem is that I am not sure my story will stand up to scrutiny.” Art said.

“Why?”
“Because she kept a diary.”

“Oh.”

“Don’t look like I just kicked your puppy.” Said Art. “A diary does not mean it is true. It just means Mom and Dad have something solid to throw at the Administration. A diary can be refuted. I can hire a private investigator to find out who really was giving Donna the high and hard. It just shows how time and again a woman with a real bad attitude towards you can really put a turd in the punch bowl.”

Dinner was a sullen affair. Sue-Chi had heard the news about the co-ed and I think she believed Art’s story. She knew this was not going to be an easy thing. She knew it would be damn tough to dig their way out of it.

Thursday Night, Sue-Chi let the kids stay at friends. We packed up the station wagon and drove to the airport to pick up Vivian. She came in on the Allegheny dinner-time flight out of Newark. She had already been through customs at JFK and then taken a shuttle to the other airport. At first I recognized her immediately, but as she drew closer, things changed. She was not the same. She had gone from timeless to time-worn, ageless to aged. Art must have known what was going on. He had ducked back and snagged a wheelchair. She fell into my arms, and I thought she was going to melt right there.

“I have returned, my love.” She whispered to me. I hugged her deeply, but felt like she was no longer solid enough. She wore her white fur jacket, the same in which she had left. As I held her, I could feel only the jacket. What lay beneath gave way to my touch. Nothing solid remained as I put her into the chair.
Art gave me the chair and told me to head out. Sue Chi ran to get the car. We poured her into the back seat of the car and headed back down through the Cut in the Hill towards town. Sue-Chi drove way too fast down through the cut, and we were shortly flying over Liberty to Vine and up the hill to the park. I was just playing along. I did not really know what was going on. For the most part, I felt like I was holding a sack of laundry in the back seat.

From what I gather, we made the park with not much time to spare. Art was barking orders when we got there. It was a warmish moonlit night. The park was empty. The pond had been refilled. Sue-Chi had dug a wine bottle out of Vivian’s bag and she ran ahead and poured the contents into the pond. He had me carry Vivian to the edge and then he jumped in and had me hand her to him, in about the same spot where Sue-Chi had emptied the bottle. Then I jumped in as well to help. The water was ice cold, but the air was warm.

Vivian looked up at me as we lowered her to the surface of the water. There was a look of vague recognition and then she was gone, having melted completely into the pond. I was left holding only wet clothes.

“That was close.” Said Art. “That bastard Emil—he should be here.”

“Where are the Turnwaters?” I asked. Art climbed out and then gave me a hand up out of the pond.

“Emil decided to stay behind in New York for a few days.” Said Art. “The dear doctor isn’t here either, is she? Sometimes I get the feeling I’m like the hired help to those people. I have half a mind to—“ he stopped himself. “Nevermind.”
Sue-Chi laid some fresh clothes and a towel on the bench in the shelter house and then gave us a bag of shoes and socks so that we could at least have something dry on our feet. I stole a cue from Art and watched him wring out the bottom of his trousers. It stopped them from dripping at least. The three of us sat down on the park bench across the pond from the shelter.

“Now what?” I asked.

“We wait.” Said Sue-Chi. “The floor show is about to start. I guess it’s the Nippon in me, but this right here—it’s like the ultimate Japanese esthetic. A moonlit night, the pears in blossom, a glassy pond and an undine about to rise naked from the waters—I don’t care what you are, that’s beautiful.”


“No.” I said. For some reason, I felt it was a repulsive idea. I guess seeing Vivian like that at the airport had done something to me. I felt annoyed. I was peaved about the whole thing. I did not have to wait long. It only a few minutes, the surface of the pond became disturbed and Vivian shot out, standing naked and wet in the moonlight. She stretched a little, as if she had been sitting a long time, and then stepped out and disappeared into the shadows of the shelter. In a moment, she was back out, dressed in a sweat suit and a jacket. Art and Sue-Chi ran to her. I followed along.

Sue-Chi hugged her and then Art came up and hugged both of them. “Close shave, there little sister.” Said Art. “We brought lover boy with us—thought you two might have some things to discuss.”
Vivian’s eyes met mine. There was instant sadness in them. I came up and hugged her. “You should not have seen me like that.” Was all she said, before she buried herself in my shoulder and wept in heaving waves.

“I am so sorry.” Said Vivian, “I am just so sorry.”

“That’s okay.” I said. However, I knew exactly what she meant and she was right.

“Did you miss me?” she asked.

“The whole winter was a black hole.” I said. “As soon as Art told me you were coming back, I realized how empty my life had been these months.”

“But now you have seen me as I really am.” She said. “We shall not be able to have again what was.”

“You’re being hysterical—jet lagged or something.” I said.

We all four went to Pop’s Falafel House for Middle Eastern. Art had called over ahead of time and Mom had made an elaborate dinner with many courses. Somewhere between the hummus and the harisse I got a chance to look at Vivian again seriously. Everything I had seen at the airport was now gone. I could no longer see the crone we had put into the wheelchair. I realized then that was I had seen was a natural part of Vivian’s life. It was a normal consequence of being away from her water too long. If I was going to continue dating her, I was going to have to live with that as a limitation—it wasn’t a limitation it was more of a quirk, an eccentricity. I could deal with that.

“That was so beautiful.” Said Sue-Chi. “I have never been so moved by anything. The way your wet skin reflected the moonlight, the way the shadows from the trees
played on the grass, the way the blossoms in the pears—they were glowing. I wish I
could capture that somehow. I wish I could put that beauty into my work.

“You can.” Said Art. “Shot day-for-night. Stop it down a couple of stops. That
will give you the moonlight. Get yourself a model that wants to stand nude in the pool,
cover her with Vaseline. Shoot the whole thing in black and white and then use filters to
do what you want and print it on color paper. It would work.”

cannot put spirit into a photograph using Vaselined models and filters.”

“You’re a snob.” Said Art. “Give me a jar of Vaseline and I’ll prove it to you.”

“Sue-Chi, my friend,” said Vivian. “I appreciate your appreciation in the deepest
way. But I must say that from my end, it’s no different than taking a bath. Still, I must
say I enjoy myself immensely, and I love my little dips. That probably cannot be taken
with a camera either. Oh well, some things are just left for the heart to see. “

“I just get all hot and bothered watching nude chicks bathing in the moonlight.”
Said Art. “I should commission Frazetta to do a painting of tonight and put it the upstairs
bathroom. I bet you could sell a million posters of it to teenage boys.”

“No.” said Sue-Chi. “I am not going to compete with a painting, you old goat. If
you get frisky, you come see me.”

After the Falafel House, we debated for a bit and decided that Vivian and I would
walk back to the house in Clifton. It was a warm night, and Vivian seemed quite
recovered. Art and Sue-Chi had to get back for the kids. I was having trouble meeting
her eyes, and walking together in the dark made it easier. It did not take long for the conversation to get beyond pleasantries.

“You have changed, Perry.” Said Vivian.

“Have I?”

“You are not the innocent I left.”

“I’ve just got a lot weighing on me.” I said. “It’s really Art’s thing. He has this thing with one of his students—she died, and implicated him in some stuff before she checked out.”

“And you’re worried for him?” she asked. “Or for you.”

“I just don’t know what to make of it.” I said. I filled her in on the details that I knew.

“Art will succeed in this.” She said. “I know Art. He seldom loses. What I worry about is you.”

“Me?”

“You do not trust Art anymore.” She said. “You sound as if you have lost faith in him, and you feel guilty and betrayed at the same time.”

“No.” I said. “I’m cool with whatever he did.”

“If he said he did not have this woman, you must believe him.” She said. “He did not deny it as I thought he would.” I said. “It makes me wonder.”

“Art has been through the worst of life.” She said. “He sees the possibilities. That does not mean he raped a student—or even had an affair with her.”

“I suppose you are right.” I said.

“But that is not what is really bothering you.” Vivian said. “What is it?”
“It was tonight.” I said. “It really felt bad, seeing you that way.” I tried to look at her, but the more I tried to look into her face, all I could see was a mask in the moonlight. I felt the reality, the deathly reality of her, now lay beneath what I had once loved.

“Perry,” she said. “Do not think you can hide this from me. My love is like water. It is bound to flow always down hill. I cannot change that. If you have put yourself away from me, I can go there.”

“I saw you tonight.” I said. “And it scared me. It scared me a lot.”

“You have lost your innocence tonight.” She said. “I am sorry it was taken from you in that way. But now that it is gone, I want you to gain strength from it. Will you do that for me? You have seen your eternal lover as she really is, an ephemeral thing—a whisp, a fantasy. No? Listen to me, Perry. This is the fate of all lovers. Eternal love is like that. Eventually, if love is truly eternal, it grows old and it dies and it is reborn. It cannot be any other way. Me? I can be rejuvenated over and over, pour me into my little pond and I pop back out. You? You must struggle every day to be rejuvenated, to keep your love alive. For this I pity you, and I pity all men. I see this in you. I see it in Art. Art’s love of life is waning. Otherwise, he would not be in this fix you have described to me. This is what it is to be mortal.

“Vivian,” I said. “It’s so damn hard.”

“Perry,” she said. “I know far better than you. I have had so many boys, so many young men lose their innocence with me. I had hoped that we would be as we were, but that was not fated to be. You have grown while I was gone.”

“I don’t feel like I have.” I said.

“I did not expect you to remain faithful to me.” She said.
“I did not mean that to be.” I said.

“This is not a problem for me.” She said. “I know men. Is she beautiful?”

“She’s dead.” I said.

We walked on. About the time we got to Good Samaritan Hospital, a light rain started. It did not feel all that bad, and there was not a whole lot we could do about it. We crossed over Ludlow and kept going towards the house. We had been silent for a long while.

“Perry,” she said. “Do you still wish to be with me?”

“More than anything,” I replied.

“Very well,” she said. “We will begin again. Do you want me to spend the night with you?”

“Of course,” I said.

“Very well,” she said. “Will you take me home in the morning? Early?”

“Sure thing.” I said.

That’s how it went down. We got back to the house late, soaked. Art had put her suitcase in my room, and left me the keys for the truck—one step ahead of me. Vivian and I stripped down and took a shower together and then sat together on the couch, watching MASH and then Johnny Carson. We talked about Skip and Sue. I was surprised that Vivian did not see anything wrong in their offer, but she agreed that it would have been a difficult friendship to continue, once I had turned them down. It did not take long after we were in bed with the lights out for our old habits to kick back in. It felt good to have Vivian back.

The next morning, Vivian left her suitcase at my place and we got in Art’s truck and rode over to Wellington Place in the half-light of early dawn. It had gotten cold over
night, and brought up the fog. Her Peugeot was parked out front. I kissed her goodbye and watched as she let herself in. I then drove down to the circle and was met by the pear trees lining the stairs down to the pond in full bloom, as I had seen them the night before. There was a wonderful muted beauty to them, and I thought about Vivian slipping down in a little while to take her dip in the fog. Art and Sue-Chi were both right—it was beautiful all right, but it still could give you serious wood.

I found a spot out in front of the Alpha and went in for breakfast. Rene saw me and came over to put down a menu.


“Yes to both,” I replied.

“Girlfriend’s back, huh?” she shot back. It was somewhat harsh, more of an accusation than anything.

“Excuse me,” I replied. “How is it that you know these things? Am I wearing a sign? Is her underwear sticking out of my jeans? What is it?”

“Nothing,” said Rene. “I’m just an incredible waitress.”

“But you’re never wrong.” I said.

“I’m incredible.” She replied.

“But what I don’t understand is what your stake is in this?” I said. “We’ve had only a couple of dates. Half the time you won’t talk to me. What am I to you, exactly?”

“The pancake batter is left over from yesterday.” Replied Rene. “If I were you I would go for the bacon and egg omelet. That is something I can guarantee.”

“You’re not going to answer me.”

“Toast?”
“Wheat.” I replied, and she snatched the menu out of my hands and left.

Maybe it was my English Literature studies—too much Hamlet at an impressionable age. Maybe I had listened to Art for too long. A few days after Vivian got back, I was in a blue funk sitting on a park bench in Burnet Woods. I had nothing to do but sit around until four in the afternoon, when I was due to meet up with Art and the crowd at the Bearcat. My back was to the stairs leading up to Bishop Street. I was looking out on the pond and wondering what to do. I spent a long time watching an old black man with one of those 2-wheel shopping carts, parked on a bench next to me fishing. He was deadlining for carp, using some kind of doughball thing, mashed onto the hook. Occasionally his line would twitch and he would pay attention for a bit, and then pull in an empty hook and curse at the bluegills for stripping his bait. It was warm, and there was a stiff wind hitting me in the face. Sometimes the gusts would do strange things the lake, blowing a little eddy in the water or scooting an empty pop can from one side to the other.

What had me so confused was what to do about my situation. Art was under suspicion, and that left my future as a grad student under question. I was glad Vivian was back, but I think she knew my mind had been elsewhere over the winter. Elsewhere. Now there was a concept that needed further refinement in my case--Elsewhere/Elsewhen? I did not have the slightest clue. It was bothering me as well that the more I looked at my life, stuff was just falling apart. One day I had come back from an outing to find Ronald Reagan still sitting as President—the assassin, Hinckley, had not
killed him at all. George Bush was just Vice President. Another day I came back to find
John Lennon dead instead of Yoko and MASH still running as a series. Argentina
decided that same day to invade the Falklands. I ran and hid; the world was coming
unglued.

I still did not know what I wanted to be when I grew up, and that was beginning
to chafe. Everyone I had known in high school and college had moved off and started
their lives and I was stuck in a twilight zone of perpetual about-to-be. There was a
conflict in that too, for I could see a perfectly happy alternative to hard work and striving
in Art’s example. However, it had taken him years of torment to finally get himself to let
go and largely let things just happen. I would no sooner go down his road as pull my
own head off.

Art had said something to me as we were sitting at the stammtisch waiting for
things to get started at the Bearcat one day that had stuck in my head.

“Perry,” he said. “Most people walk through life half asleep. It’s like you walk
into a bar, sit on a stool and start watching the TV and not care what’s on. Somebody
puts a drink in front of you and stare at the screen popping peanuts in your mouth. It
takes a special kind of bastard to reach over the bar, grab the knob and change the
channel. Somebody’s gonna bitch, but you don’t even look at them.

“There’s another thing too.” He said. “Most folks don’t know this, but there’s
more than three channels on the TV. In fact there’s more than 12.”

“There’s UHF.” I said.

“Screw UHF.” He replied. “There’s more channels on that TV than you can
conceive. There’s more channels than you can conceive of conceiving. All it takes is the
right kind of hero to reach up and turn the dial. The crazy part of it is that most people have an inkling of that truth and it scares the snot out of them. They’d rather just sit on their stools and wait for the last call. The most they’ll ever do is complain when they need a refill on the peanuts. That, my son, is the truth of it."

So here I was, sitting on a park bench watching somebody else fish. To make matters more ironic, I had a bag of peanuts I’d scored from the fruit store sitting beside me and I realized I’d been shucking them mindlessly and had a huge pile of empties at my feet. Damnit, but it was time to get up and turn the dial. But hell!, I didn’t even know what I wanted.

I wanted to be out of this mess. I wanted to be released. It was Spring, and I did not want to be sitting on my ass waiting for the other shoe to fall with Art. I wanted to start living up to being a hero. I wanted-

I caught myself. This kind of thinking was going to get me dead. There were thousands of heroes on ships right now on their way to some pimple called the Falklands that were lined up waiting to become dead heroes, saving England in her hour of peril. That was what signing up to be a hero was. No, I did not want a piece of that action.

What I wanted was – I stared at the pile of peanut shucks at my feet and felt like shit.

It was quite a while before I roused myself out of that funk. I had eaten close to the whole bag of nuts and it was sitting like a lump in my stomach. I belched and that is when I realized my butt had gone to sleep on the park bench and I got up and stretched. The black man that had been fishing was gone. In his place was a young guy in a UC sweatshirt, in a considerable swizzle over something.
His problems were obviously heavier than mine. At first, I thought he might be strung out on something. He was pounding his fists on his knees, talking to himself, lost in some private agony. He looked very yuppie, very undergrad, very self-consumed. My first impulse was just to get up and put some distance between me and him.

Both our eyes were caught suddenly by a flight of four Canadian geese coming in for a landing. For a moment we were transfixed as they cupped, dropped their feet and dropped into the water. However, one goose did not quite pull the maneuver off, and dropped onto another goose. The two tangled about a foot off the water. One came in all right, but the bottom one went head-in and turned upside down. There was a huge ruckus as the two geese honked insults at each other.

“You don’t see that every day.” I said, half way to no one.

“No,” said the yuppie. “You don’t.” I was sort of surprised he answered me.

“You can bet that one is in for some teasing.” I said.

“I’m sure.” Said the guy. “I’m Tom, by the way.”

“Hi Tom.” I said, suddenly thinking this was a queer thing. “I’m Perry.”

“I know.” He replied. “I know you from class.”

That was an exceedingly weird thing. I froze.

“You’re one of the TA’s in Doctor Penn’s class, aren’t you?” he said, breaking the long silence.

“Yes,” I replied. “I’m sorry, but it’s hard to see up into the lights. I didn’t recognize you.”
“A bunch of us would sit mid-way down in the front.” He said. “My girlfriend and I and a couple of our friends heard what trip it was and decided to take it together. Wouldn’t miss that class for the world.”

“I’m glad you liked it.” I said. “I know Art, Doctor Penn, really tries to give folks their money’s worth.”

“My girlfriend especially liked Doctor Penn.” He said. “I think he liked her too.”

“Oh, I said. “What’s her name?”

“Donna.” He said. I wrote it off as a coincidence.

“Well, tell Donna that the ‘Friends of Art’ meet Thursdays over at the Bearcat—big table in the back. You’re both welcome.”

“That’s gonna be hard.” He said.

“Why’s that?”

“She’s . . . I just found out that she died.” He said. “I’m sorry. I’m not holding it together too well.”

One thing led to another. Tom’s last name was Lincoln. He was somewhere between a Sophomore and a Junior, and had been bouncing around majors, before falling in with Donna, the goofball. He was in need of help. I got him up and walking and we headed over to the Bearcat and I bought him a couple of beers. He poured his heart out to me. He had been Donna’s boyfriend, but mostly in his own mind. Donna had been somewhat of a bicycle and leaned on him as shoulder to cry on in between bouts of Chlamydia, PMS, and the clap. She’d promised to pop his cherry if he turned twenty without getting laid, and then had to make good on the bet. He was in love with her and
idolized her Maoist, feminist rantings, and admired her running battle with anorexia. He had been the only one who could get her to eat at times.

The promised hot weekend, ending Tom’s virginity, had been very special for Tom, but rather boring for Donna. Years of promiscuous behavior had left her in such a state that she needed serious work to get off, and mostly she would let Tom do his thing and then bark orders to him while he attempted to satisfy her. He had held up his end all right, but Donna had set out to do the whole thing as an up-front mercy fuck—not the most romantic frame of mind. It had turned sour however, after Donna started getting morning sickness. She had attributed it to bad food in from the Siddall Hall cafeteria, but Tom knew she was pregnant. Tom had offered to do the right thing, but Donna had said she would take care of the problem. Had the kid been his? Donna had been taken off the pill due to deteriorating health. Tom had brought condoms, but Donna refused. She said condoms made her feel like a whore. She’d used contraceptive foam and then had the audacity to make Tom eat her off. His tongue had been numb for a week, but he thought this was how love was.

After another beer I asked Tom about a diary. He knew about it, and had occasionally been allowed to read it—mostly the slice-and-dice gossipy stuff. Why would Donna have implicated Art Penn as the father? Tom had no clue, but he speculated that this was some way of Donna striking out at the establishment: lure Doctor Penn into a compromising situation and then blame the pregnancy on him. I asked Tom if he would call her parents and set things right, and he said he would. We traded phone numbers, and sent him on his way.
I called back to the house to tell Art the good news. Sue-Chi was the only one there. She was using the portable phone out in the carriage house so it was hard to get through the static. However, she got the gist of it and said Art was out walking around. I left word with her and the bartender, George, the bartender. Art needed to meet me at the Bearcat at the usual time. I went by Chicago Gyro and picked up one to go. It was such a nice day, I decided to walk over to Belleview Park and eat my lunch.

There is a back way into the park from Sauer Street. The woods were starting to green up, and with the wind blowing I had a sincerely beautiful trudge up along the east face of the hill that led to the cliff. As the face of the cliff warmed in the sun it became alive with the neighborhood’s population of garter snakes, using the clay and sharp shale as a sunny place for mating. As I walked just inside the treeline, on my way to the top, I could see the snakes crawling everywhere on the cliff, and I had a hard time missing them as they crawled underfoot. Eventually I hit the well-worn toe-path that took me to the top and I camped out on my favorite ledge and ate my sandwich and a Coke. Beyond me spread the southern face of Clifton Heights and Fairview Heights as well as Brighton and Downtown. I could see Willy’s place at the end of Fairview and I counted rooftops from Ravine street and made out Greta’s house. I thought about coming down off my perch and walking over there and looking her up, but Tom’s story about Donna had really soured me towards promiscuous women for a while.

Beyond all that, it felt like I had my whole world laid out before me. I need to only point my finger in a direction and take off and my fortune would follow. But what
fortune was that? Now there was a rub indeed—back to being Hamlet. If I was going to be a hero, I was going to have to get this decisiveness thing down a little better.

When I was done with lunch, I watched the ants crawl of with my food. One ant found a huge sliver of lettuce and hoisted it into air and tried to carry it back home in its jaws. I wondered what the other ants were going to say when it arrived. Were they going to admire him, or just try to gnaw off a piece for themselves? Was this ant going to be carried into the hill a hero, or left exhausted and dying—to weak to make it the last bit of the way. Was this what it was to be a hero? Did the ant even care?

Did I care?

Chapter 43
After lunch on the cliff, I had several hours to kill. The wind was picking up, and when it got like this it always gave me the uncomfortable feeling that I might get blown off. Ninety feet straight down onto Clifton Avenue did not look like fun. I figured that I would wander down the steps on Conklin and walk up to Wellington Place and see Vivian before coming back to the Bearcat. I went the back way, around the section of the park that held the foundations for the old Belleview Incline. I paused at one of the piers to look out at the city for a bit. It was an odd view, seeing the skyline of downtown through bare trees from a forgotten piece of rocky hillside—a bit like sweet and sour. The wind was at my back now and the trees were sheltering me a bit. I was feeling warm.

In one of the quiet moments between gusts I thought I heard humming. I attributed it to the wind, but when I came around a point, there was a man with a hoe digging at weeds on a clear bit of the hill. I seldom saw anyone in the park at all, let alone in the off-limits parts beyond the fence. This was a rare specimen indeed. He was intent on his work and did not notice me and I stayed just far enough back that I was hidden in the shadow of the cliff. He was singing in German.

*Sie werden mich finden, wenn Sie mich im Garten wollen,*

*es sei denn es gießt mit Regen hinunter*

*Sie warden finden mir, wenn Sie mich im Garten wollen,*

*es sei denn es gießt mit Regen hinunter*

*Sie werden finden mir, wenn Sie mich im Garten wollen,*

*es sei denn es gießt mit Regen hinunter*

*Sie werden finden mir, wenn Sie mich im Garten wollen,*
es sei denn es gießt mit hinunter

Sie werden mich finden, der durch Feder wartet,

und Sommer Sie werden mich finden, der auf den Sturz wartet,

Sie werden finden mir, der auf die Äpfel wartet,

Sie zu reifen, werden mich finden, der auf sie wartet,

Sie zufallen, werden mich durch die Banken von allen vier Flüssen

Sie werden finden mir an der Feder des Bewusstseins finden

Sie werden finden mir finden, wenn Sie mich im Garten wollen,

es sei denn es gießt mit hinunter

Sie werden mich finden,

wenn Sie mich im Garten wollen,

es sei denn es gießt mit Regen hinunter

Sie werden finden mir, wenn Sie mich im Garten wollen,

es sei denn es gießt mit Regen hinunter

Sie werden finden mir, wenn Sie mich im Garten wollen,

es sei denn es gießt mit Regen hinunter

You will find me if you want me in the garden
unless it's pouring down with rain
You will find me if you want me in the garden
unless it's pouring down with rain
You will find me if you want me in the garden
unless it's pouring down with rain
You will find me if you want me in the garden
unless it's pouring down with rain
You will find me waiting through spring and summer
You will find me waiting for the fall
You will find me waiting for the apples to ripen
You will find me waiting for them to fall
You will find me by the banks of all four rivers
You will find me at the spring of consciousness
You will find me if you want me in the garden
    unless it's pouring down with rain
You will find me if you want me in the garden
    unless it's pouring down with rain
You will find me if you want me in the garden
    unless it's pouring down with rain
You will find me if you want me in the garden
    unless it's pouring down with rain

It was a haunting melody that sort of clumped along, but it made a good song for
working with a hoe. It sounded sweet, but overly so, like a Frisch’s hot fudge cake and a
Coke float on a hot night. When he had finished his song he looked straight up at me,
and I realized it was Art, dressed as I had seen him when we had first met a year before.
He had a cloth shoulder bag on he looked like an old hippie that had lost his way to the
commune.

“You found me, “ he said.

“I did not know you were going to be here.” I said.

“I knew you would be here.” Said Art. “Sue-Chi said you were coming this way. I
stopped to do an errand.”

“What are you doing.” I asked.

“Gardening,” he said. “See this? This is the plant from which Merle makes his
magic potion. I don’t remember the name of it. I just call it Pedro. It comes from high
in the Andes. Lance brought it out years ago after learning its secret from a shaman.
There are parts of it that he and Merle were able to synthesize, but they never got the
whole package. I’ve had Pedro up here for years. He likes this spot for some reason. I
come up and tend him about twice a year, once to gather some of his leaves. Merle’s taught me how to make the potion—lots of drying and grinding and running it through coffee filters and stuff. It’s not hard, once you get the hang of it, and Pedro here is fairly easy to take care of, once you put him in a spot he likes.”

“Seems pretty wretched up here.” I said. I looked over the plant. It looked like a sort of feral cabbage-like thing—maybe a giant-size brussel sprout or maybe an aloe with a hangover—it was in a netherworld between cactus and leafy plant.

“Yeah,” said Art, “But I guess this reminds him of home, somehow. I’ve had him here for twenty years. He starts greening up in March, I come up in May and harvest some leaves, and then he dies back right away and you hardly see a sign of him above ground until the next year. Some day, I will dig down in the fall some time and break off one of Pedro’s children for you, and we’ll go find a spot for you to start your little Son-of-Pedro, and by then Merle or I can teach you what to do.

“Sue-Chi said you had news.” Art said. I told him about meeting Tom.

“Had to be something like that.” Said Art, rather blankly. “Okay, I’ll go up to the Dean tomorrow and tell him I’m back in the Fall. But I’m taking sabbatical, damnit. I’m long overdue for some decent turkey hunting. You still in?”

I tried my best to yelp like a turkey in response.

“Don’t quit your day job, son.” He said.

“What was that you were singing back there?” I said. “It sounded sort of odd.”

“Oh that?” he said. “It’s a little ditty I learned from some friends I met in Berlin. We were clearing rubble away from buildings after an Allied raid—brand new building, breathtaking architecture one minute and the next minute it was rubble. I was in a
bucket-brigade line. A bunch of us from the Zeitfliegt Klub had all gone to the shelter together and when we came out, there was call for volunteers to clear rubble away. I was standing next to this young guy who kept singing that song. By the time I walked away—I don’t know how many hours later—I had that song permanently etched in my head.”

“It’ll stick with you.” I said, rolling my eyes. “Thanks.”

“Kein Problem, Kamerad.”

We said our goodbyes to Pedro, the plant, and walked out into the populated part of the park. Art’s truck was parked up in the lot. We came out below the picnic tables and made our way up. There was no one around. Art threw his hoe in the back and we took off.

The stamtisch at the Bearcat was rather subdued. The highlight of the meeting was Art repeating the story about a wild weekend with Jack Lescoulie, Jackie Gleason, Arthur Godfrey, and a cameo appearance by Kitty Carlisle. I figured only half of the grad students understood. When we left the bar, there were big flashes of lightning and the bell tower of Hughes High School was looming menacingly like something out of an old Frankenstein movie. Art and I found our way to the truck, parked down on Rohs Street and took off. We were parked going south and had to go all the way down to Warner to get turned around. I had a good view of the sky as the storm began to spill over Price Hill and head our way. We beat it back to the house just before it cut loose on us. We hit the porch about the same time as the first drops. Art did not have a good view of anything more than the front yard, but we sat on the porch on the lounge chairs we had
used for his fox hunt and watched the storm until the rain came in on us, and we went inside. Sue-Chi and Vivian were on the couch together watching TV. Channel 5 had broken into national programming to show the radar and give a tornado watch for Hamilton County. It was going to be a lousy night for everyone but the frogs. I was just trying to figure out how Vivian and I were going to get out to the carriage house when there was a knock at the door. Sue-Chi got up to answer. It was for Art.

“Roadkill!!!” I heard Art boom, “Come on in!!” I turned to look and there was a tall man in the front hall, dripping wet. “Where have you been, fellow!” Everyone got up to see Art’s friend. I was introduced to him. Both Sue-Chi and Vivian seemed to know him already. He was introduced to me as “Roadkill, the Wanderer.” He looked the part: tall, gaunt, disheveled. He carried a bed roll on a string. He smelled of body odor, wet wool, and pond muck. It turned out he’d fallen into a ditch on the way. Sue-Chi got him into the downstairs shower and threw his entire kit into the washing machine that was reserved for Art’s hunting gear. While he was getting cleaned up enough for polite company, we went back to the family room to watch the end of the show—some made-for-TV movie that I never did catch what was going on.

“That’s a hoot,” said Art. “But that’s typical for him!”

“Who or what is Roadkill?” I asked.

“Oh,” said Art. “That’s really Lance underneath all that. After he cleans up, he’ll be much better.”

“You mean Lance as in-“ I started to ask incredulously.

“Yes,” said Art. “He’s decided on the hard road these past few years. He’s got...
I did not see a whole lot of difference when Lance-call-me-Roadkill showed up in one of Art’s bathrobes a while later. He did not have such the look of a drowned cat anymore—more like a sheepdog that had been left out too long—long, salt-and-pepper hair in a ponytail, a salt-and-pepper beard. He had obviously been formidable in his day, but now he was just large. Whatever fire there had been was gone. Sue-Chi turned off the TV and we sat, drinking tea that Vivian had brewed.

“Good to see you,” said Art. “It’s been a few, hasn’t it?”

“Yes,” said Lance. “Yes it has.”

“Like about three stinking years?” said Art accusingly.

“More like five,” said Sue-Chi. “We were worried about you.”

“I am sorry.” Said Lance. “I have had a hard time.”

“Obviously.” Said Art. “But then, you went looking for it, didn’t you?”

The story Lance-call-me-Roadkill told was a long hard one. He had dropped out five years earlier after battling a bad bump on the head in a bar fight. He’d lost his job, his will to live, his whole being and after a number of years of folks trying to prop him up, he’d taken off—run off more like it—to live as a homeless road bum. The bar fight had actually taken place several years before his dropping-out—a couple of years after Gwen and Art had broken up. Someone had been rearing back with a bar stool to hit someone else and put the end of the leg into Lance’s head, nearly killing him. He’d languished in a hospital in Logan, Ohio until somebody realized he was somebody and got him transferred to Columbus. He’d recovered most of the big pieces of his being, but
you could tell he wasn’t the stuff of legend anymore. After his departure, he had been to
Quebec, Oregon, Alaska, and most recently Northern Maine.

“That’s when they diagnosed me with the cancer.” He said. “It’s prostate cancer,
so it’s going to grow slowly.” The room gasped.

“But Lance,” said Art. “If you had just stayed around, we could have taken care of
you.”

“I know.” He said. “I guess it was time to come home.”

“Are you fixing to come to Merle’s for turkey hunting?” Art said.

“I thought so.” Replied Lance. “If Merle will still have me.”

“He’ll have you. By God, I’ll have you! I’ll have your diseased nuts on my wall
if you don’t lie still and let someone take care of you.”

“I don’t like hospitals.” Said Lance.

“I can see your point.” Said Art.

“I came to ask you a favor.” Said Lance.

“Name it, my friend.” Said Art.

“I’d understand if you said no.”

“I told you to name it. Now name it.”

“You know that book you keep?”

“You want a look at the book?”

“Yes.”

“I figured it would come to this.” Said Art. “We might as well get it over with. I
will let you look at the book, but you have to promise me one thing.”

“What’s that?”
“That once you’ve looked at the book, you will go and see a doctor and get this taken care of.”

“I will do as you say.” Said Lance

Lance was happy to see me, but understood why I had not the slightest clue who he was except on the other’s say-so. He and Art agreed that I should come along to watch. Art took us into his study, and brought out the red binder that he had handed me several months ago. It was Willy’s lecture notes from the Princeton incident. I realized then what the game was: Lance wanted to read the book. If he got the joke, he’d go up like a torch and it would all be over. This meant I might actually see a spontaneous human combustion happen before my eyes. I was more scared than either Art or Lance. For all their tension, Art could have been showing him his stamp collection. Lance took the book, held it on his lap, crossed himself hurriedly and then opened it.

Over the next hour, the thunderstorm slowly moved through in two more large waves. The second of these were worse than the others and at one point the sirens went off. Art sent me in the other room to see what was going on. Sue-Chi and Vivian were watching the TV and there was a severe thunderstorm warning for other parts of the county. Downtown and Clifton were not expected to be hit. I hurried back and Art looked up. I shook my head and then sat back down. Lance-call-me-Roadkill was in the middle of the floor in a straight chair, reading from the light of a pole-lamp that Art had brought over. After the better part of two hours, and as the third wave of the storm was starting to wane into the north and east, Lance put the book down.

“I don’t get it.” He said.
“Don’t feel too bad,” said Art. “I don’t either.”

“I really thought I had it this time.” He said.

“I was really routing for you, big guy.” Said Art. “I’ll call the doctor tomorrow, and after he’s passed judgment on you, you can come up with us turkey hunting and Merle can get you back on a regimen. We’ll whip this thing. You’ll see.”

“I suppose so.” Said Lance. “There really is no other way now.”

The next morning, Art and Lance took off in the truck to find a doctor friend of theirs over at University Hospital. Sue-Chi left to take Vivian to work. I ate cereal with the kids and watched cartoons with them before getting them ready for school. Art came back without Lance and went back into his study and fumed for a while, slamming the door as he went. Sue-Chi took a call late in the morning. It was from someone over at the University calling to tell Art he didn’t have to worry about anything. He would not give details, but Sue-Chi and I both knew what it meant. The Donna-incident was ended.

Lunch came and Sue-Chi dragged Art out of his hole and told him the good news. Art came to lunch, but was still brooding. It seems the doctor had kept Lance for tests. If everything Lance had told him was correct, the prognosis was good. However, Lance was beginning to balk already. It took Art and the doctor both to convince Lance to go the distance. A compromise had been reached. Lance would do the tests and then take off on his own for Merle’s place. When he got back, he would submit to treatment. That was the best deal that could be struck.
Art, Lance, and I had drinks on the front porch that night. We drank Art’s best scotch and toasted things I was supposed to understand, but had no clue. Finally it came down to it, and Lance collected his things to leave.

“Listen, buddy.” Said Art. “What you do to yourself, you do to yourself, for only yourself. The score between you and me was settled long ago.”

“I know.” Said Lance. “I’ve just got to get away and think.” They hugged and then Lance walked out of the yard and headed out onto Clifton Avenue, going North.

“That.” Said Art. “Is what happens when you do too many hallucinogens and screw one to many wives.” He hoisted his beaker in the direction of the disappearing vagrant, poured himself another and then said. “Go tell Sue-Chi there’s one less for dinner tonight.”
Chapter 44

Lance dropped by another time before we left for turkey hunting. He was vague about where he had gone or where he had been. However, he stopped by in early April the day after the turkey permits arrived. Surprisingly, there were three in the mailbox that morning. Art, Lance’s and mine. Art handled his with a great measure of care and told me to make sure mine was put with my hunting license immediately. It took me a while to find the license holder—I had not thought much of it since returning from my deer hunt in December. Art was quite peeved with me for having lost it. Lance did not stay long and left again before dinner. Art told me Lance was still too embarrassed to share food with him.

The Donna incident lost steam in a hurry. Art invited the family over for a sit down and they apologized for having suspected him. Art was generous and told them he had been meaning to take time off anyway. He did his best to put their mind at ease about their lost daughter. I think the parents were horrified as to what their daughter had become while their back was turned. I stayed in the kitchen and helped Sue-Chi with the appetizers she served. I preferred to listen in as Sue Chi did for the most part, behind the pocket doors to the dining room. When it was over and the parents had left, Art came back to the kitchen with a huge snifter of his best scotch.

“Whew!” said Art. “That was tight in there.”

“I still do not get what the point was.” I said. “This girl was going to do what? Hang you for child support? Make you pay for the abortion? That’s twisted.”
Art held up his hand. “Now that it is all buried,” he said. “I can confess. It did not make much sense until the last piece fell into place just now.”

“What’s that?” said Sue Chi. “She stopped chopping vegetables, but held onto the knife.”

“It all makes sense,” said Art. “I did not realize that Donna was not really a ‘Donna.’ That was a name she gave herself after she went to college. Her real name was Celia.”

“Celia?” asked Sue-Chi. “What difference does that make?”

“Don’t you get it?” said Art. “He disappeared into the study and brought out a really old book, opened to a passage about a Welsh witch named Caelia. Sue-Chi and I both read it and were still unenlightened.

“Buy them the books, send them to school,” said Art, “And all they want to do is eat the teacher! Can’t you guys see?”

“That Celia-call-me-Donna is linked to this ‘Caelia?’” I asked.

“Which makes Tom Lincoln, the boy you met in the park. . . “ prodded Art.

“Your son.” Said Sue-Chi. “Omigod! He’s your bastard son!”

“I still don’t get it.” I said. That got me a playful cuff on the head from both Sue-Chi and Art. I guess I could never quite get the hang of taking what I had read in story and relating it to current reality. I knew the story of Tom a’Lincoln, the purported illegitimate son of Arthur and father of the Black Knight. I knew his lover (I admit I had forgotten her name) had committed suicide by drowning. I read the books passage again and things all fell into place in a confused sort of way. The Tom of legend had been the son of Arthur. He had taken a lover, Caelia, the Faerie Queen, and she had borne him a
son that had grown to be the Faerie Knight before committing suicide. Tom had gone on
to father other knights and had become one of Arthur’s favored generals.

“Reflections of reflections of reflections.” said Art winsomely. ”This one was just
too close. I should have seen it. This Tom’s such a sitzpinkle though. I would hardly
believe him to be mine.”

“So who’s the Angelica in this?” said Sue-Chi. She was still brandishing the
knife.

“I’m quite sure I don’t know.” Said Art. “I had fun in my day, but I don’t know
Tom’s mom straight off.”

“Good,” said Sue-Chi. “So long as it isn’t one I’ve got to meet.”

“... at least I don’t think so.” Said Art. “I guess I’ll have to call Tom and start
asking questions.” The knife in Sue-Chi’s hand started to come up. “ On second
thought,” said Art, “I’m not so sure I want to get into that. They’ll probably want me to
acknowledge him so he can get free tuition. I’ll just wait and see how this plays out.”

Sue Chi went back to chopping vegetables. The matter was closed.

Finally the Friday came that it was time to leave for Turkey Camp. Everything
was loaded into the Luv, Sue-Chi and Vivian kissed us goodbye and off we went. As
soon as we were out of the driveway and rolling down Clifton Hill towards the
Expressway I felt as though we were no longer living on the same plane of Existence. It
was as though the whole world had changed. I mentioned it to Art. He laughed.

“You’re absolutely right,” said Art. “Good call.”
“What is it?” I said. “What is it? Is it me?”

“It’s the World, it’s you, it’s me. It’s the bustle in the hedgerow.”

“I didn’t know you liked Led Zeppelin.” I said. “You don’t look the type.”

“Oh,” said Art. “Sue-Chi and I went to our share of wild faculty parties. I love this stuff.” With that, he shoved an 8-track in and started playing the *Immigrant Song*. We continued listening to it all the way out of town. When it had been all the way through and then some, Art pulled it out. We were now well out onto I-71 with a good half-hour before Washington Courthouse.

“Enough of that.” Said Art. “I always like to start this trip with that—sets the mood up right.”

“What else did you bring?” I asked.

“Oh probably a couple of things back behind the seat.” He said. “I’d just as soon not though.”

“I take it that this isn’t just turkey hunting.” I said. “There’s more to this trip.”

“Yes,” said Art. “and no. It is turkey hunting. It’s just that turkey hunting can be so much more.”

“How so?” I said.

The Testament of Art Penn

Well first you have to understand how we got into this in the first place. See, your father was really into this whole thing from way back. When we were first getting settled in, Pellinore came by to pay his respects. We were partying one night and he says he would be willing to take us all hunting. Somebody boasted about killing a bear and
somebody else made a comment about how the boar around those parts seemed like they were tame from breeding with peasants. Pellinore claimed he knew of a beast so wily it was nearly unhuntable. We told him he full of it. He took a bunch of us out. Looking back on it now, it could have been nothing more than a snipe hunt. However, we saw sign and heard calls that first time out, and we were hooked.

Pellinore said that the Questing Beast had been brought back from a land in the west by some monks. It was all the fashion in those days for a bunch of monks to get in a boat and just go. Into the Great Unknown, you know. Well, by the time we showed up, the Great Unknown was getting pretty well known—guys like Patrick, Columbo, and those fellows had picked off most of the British Isles. So the next wave, Brendan and that crew had to go further out. Eventually they made North America. Somebody decided to bring back a couple of turkeys, and there you have it.

They had released them on the island Pellinore had his keep after the abbey had gotten tired of them. You’ve probably heard the descriptions of it—head of a snake, body of a deer, hooves of a—something like that. Well, what these monks had brought back were just plain old wild turkeys. We knew them from the barnyard, but to these guys they were something really special. I was like you too, I thought, “Big stinking deal, turkeys.” Ah! But if you try to hunt these suckers with nothing more than a spear or a bow, you’ve got something. Pellinore was right. You can just put out a pile of grain and wait for them to come around and then drop a net on them, but if you let them go and let them build up flocks—not so easy to hunt anymore. In fact, they’re damn near impossible. So that’s what we did—every chance we had, we would go hunt the Questing Beast with Pellinore.
This got to be a regular thing. There was not much use in trying to hunt them any other time but Spring, usually right after Easter. We found out that is when they breed, and there is a small window when the big gobblers get jiggy and it makes them stupid. So gradually we just made it so that we all got together right after Easter and hunted through to the Pentecost. After that, the hens start nesting, and it’s a good idea to leave them alone to raise their broods. Occasionally we hunted them in the fall of the year, but there is so much else that is good to hunt that time of year it was not worth bothering.

When we all pulled out, we made sure Pellinore had plenty of access to his beloved beasts. We settled him down South where there were plenty of flocks and plenty of people who knew turkey for him to hang with. Then Merle got this place out on the edge of Hocking Hills, and we were in business. Your father, Pellinore, was a master turkey hunter in his day. All told, I guess we had about twenty five good seasons with him between there and here. Of course, after we pulled out, no one really cared what great sport they were. Folks just rounded them up and ate them—they’re easy birds to kill. The point is hunting them on their own terms.

I still remember the first time I saw one of those things. We were down in a creek bottom. Somebody had brought dogs, thinking we could run them like deer. Of course Pellinore didn’t tell us the darn things could fly. Well here I am, armed with a long bow and a sword, expecting a leopard or some thing. We were attempting drive the beast to some pickets we had posted along a creek. I was in the center of the standers. The beaters had the dogs and were trying to run the beast towards us. Out pops this big old gobbler, trotting along down one side of the bank, right at me. I started to stand up, and it sees me. As it hopped across the creek, it blew up as big as house, and this big black thing
takes off and flies right over my head, sails over the other bank and I finally heard it crash to the ground and run off. A few minutes later, the dogs show up, and they’re completely vexed, because the scent trail just ends right there with one lousy feather. Then the rest of the hunting party shows up and hears my story.

Of course that was no way to hunt a turkey. You have to learn to set down and either two-on-one or one-on-one call in a gobbler. You have to romance him, you have to get inside his head, you have to understand what he wants and how he wants it. You need to make him desire you more than anything in the world. . . and then blow his head off. You need to pee or something? Let’s stop at this rest area; I need to drain the worm.

The Testament of Perry Oilean

The trip was relatively uneventful. After stopping for a bit at the rest area, we continued on up to Washington Courthouse, on through little towns like New Holland and Higginson. Just before Circleville, there was a detour that took us south for a ways—something to do with a bridge being out—but we caught back up with Route 56 and on into the Hocking Hills. I recognized the diner in Laurelville. Having only been gone from it about six months, it all looked quite familiar. Although the newly greening trees and rushing creeks made it all look quite a bit cheerier and active. The world was definitely coming alive again after a long hard winter. We turned onto Route 93 and headed up towards Isleboro, and then onto the road the led to Merles.

“Merle’s place is tough to spot.” Said Art. “I look for the line of Sycamores running up the hill. In the summer, I’d be lost. We rode for what seemed a time longer than I remembered. I had my window rolled down and was peering out to the right,
looking for the mottled sycamore trunks. We had come off the top of a ridge and were
down in a creek bottom. Art was starting to fume. He was sure we had missed it.
Finally, I saw the glint of afternoon sun off the white of a trunk. Just ahead was the turn
off. Art nearly went past it, before making a hard turn. We had arrived. There were
several other trucks and cars in the apron. One was a dark blue Mercedes with clergy
plates that I recognized was Doobie’s.

Two burly fellows I did not know were waiting by the creek when we came to it.
I was later to find that they were Ector and Cai. However, they looked more like a father-
and-son-pair of briar farmers in brown Carharts and faded camo field shirts. They
offered to take our loads from us and headed on up the trail, leaving us to go back for our
second trip. We met them on the trail, coming back down with our pack baskets emptied.
So it was that most of our baggage train made it to the house before us.

Merle was as he had been. He was happy to see us, as was Doobie and Dewey.
They were sitting on the porch, enjoying the afternoon sun, and nursing a grill loaded
with Big Red Smokies, and discussing whether Russ Nixon was going to be able to whip
the Cincinnati Reds back into shape. After a warm welcome, a hot dog and a chance to
put our guns up on the rack, we left to get settled in at the bunk house. Art and I both got
our beds back. We had the weekend to scout and socialize. The season would start
Monday morning.

One of the big thrills of the trip occurred just as I was trying out my bed, having
put my gear away. It began as an annoying low feeling and grew into an audible
“WHOMP WHOMP WHOMP. . .” It felt like it was coming out of walls and floors of the
building. Finally, it grew louder and I realized it was coming from outside. I went out on
the porch just in time to see a big Sikorsky Sky Crane helicopter come over the ridge, carrying an international shipping container underneath. Everyone on the ridgetop was scrambling, running towards the shed out in the field at the edge of Merle’s compound.

The helicopter hovered near the shed and then lowered the container onto a gravel patch next to the shed. In the meanwhile, several fellows had crawled up on the roof of the shed and hooked rigging to the eaves. One man detached the hook from the first container, and handed it to the man standing on the roof. This man attached the hook to the rigging on the roof and then made a signal to a third man, out in the field. This fellow, I was later to know him as Gorey, signaled the pilot, who then lifted off and carried the roof of the shed with him.

With a little bit of waving and gesturing, the guy in the field was able to guide the pilot. The roof was put neatly onto the container that had just arrived. While folks were moving rigging cables around, two other guys joined in and started working at the walls of the shed. In less than a minute, the walls were off, and another container was exposed. The walls were light. Three men were able to grab handles on the side of each wall and carry them into place under the roof. Meanwhile cables were attached to the old container. The helicopter came in, the hook was attached and the pilot saluted the crew on the ground and took off, carrying the old container with him. I realized I was standing slack jawed when Art came up behind me and patted me on the back.

“You might want to close that before you catch some debris in your teeth.” He said.

“What was that?” I sputtered.

“Merle was getting his groceries delivered.” He replied.
In less than 15 minutes, an entire container of supplies had been airlifted onto the ridge and neatly camouflaged to look like a shed. The empty container had been removed, leaving a gravel pad identical to the one where the shed now stood. Six men, one helicopter. Spit-spat. Job done.

This was Merle’s buddy in the business making grocery deliveries. This would be booked as a maintenance test flight on somebody’s log book. The flight had originated from a field in Columbus and that Merle got these deliveries twice a year, it relieved him of having to drive out to a supermarket in Logan.
Chapter 45
By the time dinner arrived, there were ever more men showing up. I never did get a good count. Some were sons of fathers present. Some were younger grandfathers, hunting with their older progeny. Some, I took it, were just earlier incarnations of the same men, twisted in time. From what I gathered, this had been a particularly good year for the turkey, despite the cold winter. It therefore had a tendency to draw dedicated turkey hunters from all manner of time. It looked to be quite a mess, except that there was a certain etiquette at play. Everyone seemed to be living in the moment. Not only were past differences laid aside, but so was the future. All that concerned these men was the turkey, the Questing Beast.

Dewey came by with an excellent bottle of scotch and filled my beaker to near-overflowing. Merle left me a big plate of beans and wieners, that came from a cauldron in the yard that never seemed to empty. While the plate cooled a bit, I started nursing the scotch. It had a fruity finish to it, that I found pleasing. Gradually my vision narrowed, and focused on the setting sun and the lengthening shadows, on the lawn. Art came by with a couple of burgers and we sat and talked. He reminisced about some of the groups forming out on the lawn, and great turkey hunts of old.

“Why is my father not here?” I asked. “Why would he not want to be in on this?”

“Good question.” Said Art. “It’s hard to say, exactly. He’s been here plenty of times, and he was not one to hold to the rules of space and time when there was turkey hunting to be had. Maybe he just found a better hunt. I don’t know. It’s hard to tell with the dead. When you see him again, you can ask him.”

“Should I go looking for him?” I asked.
“I wouldn’t let it bother you, son. “ said Art. “About all you can say is that you’re here and he’s not. If both of you decide that it is a good idea to meet up and go hunt turkey’s I’m sure you will run into each other.”

“Would you help me find him?” I asked.

“I already have.” replied Art. “I’ve at least started you on the road. I’ve done about all I can. I’m sure you’ll meet some day if you both have a mind to.” About this time, I felt a dark presence at my back. Art looked up and his eyes brightened in recognition. “Gorey! You old son of a gun! I was just thinking about you.” I turned to look. There was a giant of a man standing directly behind me.

“Art.” Said Gorey. “It’s good to see you. We’ve been missing each other.”

“Now here’s the guy that you need to hook up with.” Said Art. “This guy can teach you about turkeys. Kevin Gorgemont, meet Perry Oilean. Vice- versa, etcetera ad nauseam In Excremental Day-glow Amen. Sit yourself down and tell us of your travels.

“Oh,” said Gorey. “I started down in Florida this year—bagged an Osceola—nice one. Then a bunch of us all met up and hunted out of Hernando, Mississippi. It rained most every day, but we got a couple each—did some bass fishing and then came here.

“Gorey is what you call a true connoisseur of turkey hunting.” Said Art. “Is it a full-time job now?”

“Oh, heck no!” said Gorey. “This is just a part-time fancy. I’m still doing contract work for DOD.”

“That’s a polite way of saying Gorey is a paid assassin of the US Department of Defense.” Said Art.
“I do logistics work for Wright-Patterson.” said Gorey. “Art’s full of it.”


“I just got back from greasing an entire weather station up in the Arctic.” Said Gorey. “They extracted me on a submarine. There was a Russian up there that looked just like the guy from McHale’s Navy— incredible likeness.”

“You’re full of shit.” Said Art. Gorey patted him on the back and sat down with a burger and a mug of something. Before the evening was through, Gorey had signed on to be my guide and get my cherry busted on a gobbler. Two older guys, both named Fred, that finished each other’s sentences in an annoying way, had also joined to make a foursome. Gorey talked to Merle and decided that we would hunt the Fischer’s property in the morning. The Fischers had a long bit of creek bottom to which Merle had secured permission. Art was going to dabble alone in one of the pastures close to the house. Most of the others were going to scatter like the down on a dandelion and hunt secret hollows, mountainsides and oak groves scattered through the surrounding counties.

Just before lights out, it started to rain. Those that had not already done so, scurried to set up a tent, or bundled their stuff into the bunkhouse. Eventually there was no room left, except in an aging barn that Merle kept for the overflow. The roof was intact, but that was about all you could say for it. Just as the rain began in earnest, Lance came traipsing in, soaked to the bone. Merle chewed him out for showing up late without proper gear. I had been on my way to bed, but for some reason decided to stay and sit in on the conversation. Lance had been hitchhiking and gotten as far as Athens easily, before having trouble getting the rest of the way. He’d walked from Logan. Merle got
him a blanket and built a fire for him to warm himself. Art got him a stiff drink. They sat with Lance and got him jump-started again.

Lance asked if Merle had sold his gun. Merle got mad and told him of course he hadn’t, and went to the cabinet and produced it. It was an extremely long-barreled pump shotgun, built by a French manufacturer after the war under license from one of the American companies. It looked unwieldy, but I was assured that “The Frenchman” was a deadly long-range turkey killer without peer. Lance had hawked it to Merle several years ago to get traveling money. Merle had kept it, and loaned it out to Lance whenever he showed up to hunt. Lance brought the gun up and aimed it into the fire to feel its balance. For the first time I saw a crack in Lance’s otherwise grim clay-like indifference to the world. He was truly cheered by the feel of that gun. He sat the rest of the evening with it cradled in his arms.

Art and Merle tried to get Lance to talk to them about the cancer. Lance said it was going to be taken care of in due course. He did not want to go any deeper. Both men tried to get Lance to promise them that he would do what it took to take care of himself. Lance hedged but did what he could to keep his two friend calm. Finally it came down to the bitter truth.

“Art,” said Lance. “Did you bring what I asked?” I did not know what he was talking about.

“Yes, I did.” said Art.

“You said you would.” Said Lance.

“Can I see it?” said Lance.

“Of course you can.” Said Art

“Lance,” said Merle. “You’re a damn fool. This isn’t the answer.”

“Why is that?” asked Lance. “What do I have to look forward to?”

“What do you have not to look forward to?”

“You’re a damn fool.”

“I’ve paid enough for my mistakes.”

“Yes, absolutely. Get yourself back together, let Art and me help you. Give up on this thing you have.”

“How can I?”

“Try.”

“Are you going to let me see it?” asked Lance, turning defiantly to Art. “Are you at least going to let me see it?”

“You can see it right now.” Said Art, hissing with anger. “Old buddy, I won’t waste another fucking moment of your time.” He stomped out of the house and went towards the bunkhouse. I tried to hide in my chair. In a minute, I could feel Art’s boots pounding down the length of the porch, and he flew into the room with a somewhat familiar red binder under his arms. He gave it to Lance and then took a seat beside Merle.

“There you are, buddy.” Said Art. “Have a read. Have a good long read.”

With a complete lack of emotion, Lance stood up and walked over to my chair and handed me “The Frenchman.”

“Will you hold this for me?” He asked.

“Sure.” I replied.
“Do it over there on the stone floor” said Art. “You’ll make less of a mess for Merle. In fact-- Vat Das Fickt! Why don’t you just take your shotgun in the yard and stick your toe in the bloody goddamn trigger guard!”

“I need to know.” Said Lance, patting the binder. “Before I go, I need to know what’s really in this.” We all turned while Lance moved to the hearth of the fireplace. He opened the book and squinted, trying to read it. “The light’s not very good in here.”

“Here,” said Art, “Try these.” He handed Lance a pair of reading glasses.

“I never needed these before.” Said Lance. “I’ve always had good vision.”

“Neither did I until my arms started getting too short.” Said Art. “They aren’t real glasses. I got these at the drug store for five bucks. Welcome to the club.”

Lance took the glasses and found that he could read the contents of the binder. I wish I could tell you what was in that binder that held so much power. By then, I knew of at least two people who had died reading it. I was watching my first suicide, and probably my first attempt at spontaneous human combustion. I had read the red binder. It was drivel. It wandered. It never came to a point. I found hard to follow and easy to forget. Sitting there, I realized that I had completely forgotten what was in the binder outside of a few pasted-in pictures that had been part of the accompanying slide show, a mask that was either African or possibly Eskimo, and a ceremonial mace that had come from somewhere in Polynesia. Then I caught myself in my reverie and realized that a man was about to die and yanked myself back to the present. Lance was well into the contents of the binder, and I could tell that it was making about as much sense as it had to me.
“It’s crap.” Said Lance, suddenly flipping through several pages. “There’s nothing in here.”

“You said that the last time you read it.” Said Art.

“Why am I not ready for this?” said Lance. “Why can’t I see it?”

“You’re not ready.” Said Merle. “You’re not meant to.”


“Look, ol’ buddy. “ said Art. “Quit being a dick about it, pass me the damn book and let’s go grab some shut-eye. What do you say?”

“I suppose.” said Lance.

“Or go you head off on the lawn.” Said Art.

“No, I don’t think I’ll do that.” Said Lance.

“Good. It’s a plan then.” Said Art. “Perry, give Lance back his shotgun. Merle, thanks for your hospitality. Until the morning.”

“Sweet dreams, my king.” Said Merle. “Goodnight all.”

“Fucking drama queen!” said Art.

“What?”

“That turd, Lance.” Said Art. “I woke up still mad at him. Come on. Get up.” It took me a moment to get my bearings. It was no longer late, but early. I had been asleep. Art was waking me up to go turkey hunting.

“I know what he’s going to do.” Said Art.
“What’s that?”

“Now that he sees he isn’t going to get a free ticket out of here, “ said Art. “He’s probably going to go wander the countryside looking for a turkey hunter to blow his head off.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I got to tell Merle to keep him off the public lands—out of the state park.” He said. “We’ve got to keep that bastard in one piece.”

“I’m not quite sure why.” I said, starting to dress. Art was fully dressed in proper turkey hunting attire—worn duck brush pants, a dark green sweater under a camouflage fatigue jacket, a camouflage Jones hat, and a pair of well-worn jungle boots. I had a similar outfit.

“What do you mean?” Art snapped.

“I mean the guy has no love for life.” I replied. “He’s just going through the motions, breathing and what-all. Why not let him go?”

“Why?” said Art. “I’ll tell you why.” He paused for a moment and thought. “I’ll tell you why: cause I wouldn’t want to be the dumb sap that shoots him! Come on! We’re going to fix this.”

Somewhere in the night, it had stopped raining. We went over to the house. There were a few hunters already gathering. Merle had his legendary bottomless urn of coffee going and a few fellows had taken it on themselves to bake biscuits and cook sausage gravy. Art found Merle and Gorey and took them aside to explain his predicament. I took it from their reactions that they felt his concerns were warranted, but overblown. It was agreed that Merle would find Lance a partner and that they would be kept away from
any public hunting land. Art was told to chill. Gorey took an opportunity to slip out, grab a couple of biscuits, wrap bacon around them and stuff them in his pocket. I did the same. We grabbed coffee and left. Fred and Fred were out on the porch, finishing off their breakfasts. We scooped them up, along with our gear and headed down the hill to the truck. Fred and Fred had driven in Fred’s old green LTD, the Fredmobile. Gorey had a fancy white GMC 2500 with a cap. We stowed all our gear in that and took off with Gorey in the lead. Gorey was in a hurry. When we were out on the road, Gorey seemed to relax.

“I didn’t want to be around that. “ said Gorey. “I know where this is going to end up. Art is going to baby sit Lance; it’s going to put Art in a foul mood. They’ve got way to much baggage together, but they love each other too much to let it go. It’s going to be a bum week for Art. Lance is on his way to being mulch. It’s tough to see your buddy going that way, especially when they could easily do something about it.

We had about a ten mile ride to get to the Fischer’s farm, even though it was less than a mile from the house. The roads just didn’t go that way. It gave me time to finish off the biscuits and drink my coffee. While we drove, Gorey explained the morning’s set-up. Fred and Fred were going to hunt a point that comprised one side of a deep hollow. The point had several large oaks known to be used by the turkeys for roosting. We were going to slip down an old road to the bottom and hunt the creek where the hollow emptied out. When we pulled into a gravel apron some time later, it was still pitch dark. I put on my flashlight and followed Gorey. For a bit, we could see Fred and Fred, but they turned off rather quickly, and I was left slogging behind Gorey down a track through a pasture. It was wet, but the rain had stopped. It was cold enough that I was glad I had my
sweater. It seemed like we walked forever. Finally the path took a sharp turn downwards and we descended into a creek bottom and holed up behind a few cedar trees that had been partially cut down and left to sprout along the ground, providing a natural blind. Gorey told me to put my back against a large cedar stump and he went a few yards off and did the same. He turned off his flashlight and I turned off mine and we were in the dark. After a considerable wait, I noticed that I could barely make out trees across the way, and I could see my gloved hands. Gradually the light came up and within twenty minutes or so, it began to look and sound like morning.
Chapter 46
Let me tell you about one of the icons of turkey hunting, the morning flydown. To the uninitiated, the event is other-worldly. It sounds so simple. The owls come back to roost. The turkeys wake up, fly down off their roost and begin their morning routine. Spit-spot, done. The actual event is electric. I was glad I was armed.

 Shortly after the first bit of daylight began to find its way into our creek bottom, I began hearing barred owls—first one and then two others beginning to sound off. Their calls begin as a low “Who cooks for you. Who cooks for you all.” The last part is rolled. It is a bit different than what the average person might think of when they think of an owl hoot, but when they are first getting cranked up, the call is truncated and all you get is “Who cooks for you. . . Who cooks for you.”

 Early Spring is the owl’s breeding season and so they are not only calling to mark their territory, they are calling to establish breeding dominance and attract a mate. Very soon, the calling escalates into what is known as the chuckle. Without warning, an owl will burst into a completely inside-out version of its normal call and make topsy-turvy free form display.

 For my initiation, I had Gorey close by whispering to me, “That’s an owl, don’t worry.” I was glad he was there. Out of the gloom, there was the call of what sounded like a human woman crying for help. I could not make out the words, but she seemed to be in great distress. “Screech owl. “ he said. “The turkeys will wake up soon. Sit tight.”

 From what I understand, the barred owl is one of the few predators of young turkeys. This seems to affect the turkeys greatly, for it was not long before the owls had the turkeys stirring on their branches. I suppose if your neighbors ate your children, you
too would be upset to hear them coming home from the night-shift and slamming their
car doors as they went in to sleep. This was no different.

There are two sorts of turkey calls in the morning. The hens go from quiet peeps
and yelps before letting out a cackle when the at last fly down. The big gobblers stay on
their branches and gobble enthusiastically, letting the hens and their rival gobblers where
they are and how strong and healthy they are. In the woods to our rear I could hear hens
beginning to fret, when a loud gobbler sounded off just across the way. He was nearly on
top of us. I brought out my box call, but Gorey motioned for me to just stay quiet. We
both had coverings for our faces. His was a bandana. Mine was a piece of camo-mesh
netting that I wore more like a veil. We put these on, along with camouflage gloves,
loaded our shotguns and waited.

Gorey occasionally made soft calls on a slate pot, that closely mimicked the tone
and temper of the hens that were calling behind us. The gobbler answered. He did not
just answer; he cut off the end Gorey’s call. This was a good sign, meaning that the
gobbler was really interested. He did this a few times, before letting the hens behind us
pick up the slack. Gorey’s plan was to let the real hens do all the calling. If the gobbler
was interested, he would come over and we would intercept him.

There are things in nature that absolutely must be seen and heard. I have seen
starlings form an undulating fabric of themselves and fly off in a formation resembling a
wind-blown scarf. I have seen a pike pull a duckling beneath the surface of a pond
without a sound. Nothing has impressed me as much as the chorus of gobbles that erupted
on that nameless creek bottom that morning. Somewhere beyond the reach of our ears, a
gobbler would sound off, and he in turn would inspire his neighbor, and so on. Waves of
gobbling issued up and down the creek at an incredible volume. All this happened without a single visible sign, except the growing dawn.

The hens were first to come down off their roost, flopping down with cackle and a beat of wings that sounded like a man shaking out his rain slicker. Once on the ground, the hens worked themselves into what seemed like an angry frenzy. They are a contentious bird and constantly arguing over status and the right to stand where they are.

“Yauk-yauk-yauk-yauk-yauk-yauk-“ the strings of hen yelping went on and on. Across the bottom, the gobblers were attempting to answer. Gorey leaned over and explained that as long as the hens kept up the noise, the gobblers would just stay on their branch, and not fly down. We lay low behind our blinds and did nothing more than listen.

And then it was gone. It took almost no time at all for the calling to subside. The gobblers calmed themselves, flew down and began strutting. The hens began their morning feeding routine and wandered off with a series of clucks and purrs. It sounded like an army marching in the leaves and then they were gone. All this was completely invisible to us, despite having turkeys less than a hundred yards away.

Gorey relaxed, let down his mask and said, “That big gobbler we were calling to just jumped down and headed off with some hens. At first, I thought he was all alone, but I heard a few hen calls by him. He’s following his little harem there. We’ll just wait and let him take care of business. He knows we’re here if he wants us.” The woods fell fairly silent after that, except for the normal sounds of morning: crows, jays and the rest of the chorus that the suburban mind hears as it is going to work. Gorey had me bring out my call and make small clucks and purrs, while he would occasionally chime in with a yelp or two. We wanted the gobblers to think that there was a small flock of hens feeding
close by in case they got spurned by their normal girlfriends. We kept this up periodically, every few minutes until the sun had come up far enough to reach down into our bottom. By this time it was maybe about eight-thirty. I had heard a few shots at a variety of distances—hunters unloading their shotguns at turkeys. Gorey finally relaxed and rolled over onto his side, and put his call down.

“They’re henned up.” He said. “Some days are like that.”

“What do we do now?” I asked.

“Wait.” He said. “I scouted this bottom earlier in the week. Those gobblers will be back.”

“There was surely enough of them.” I said. “Exactly what’s the plan? Or is there one?

“We’ll listen for hens.” He replied. “As long as we don’t kick up a whole lot of commotion one of two things will happen: either the hens will come down and feed in this little green beside the creek and draw a gobbler down with them, or a stray gobbler will come down and start strutting this area. There is lots of sign in that green clover over there-- feathers, tracks, turds. You wait, something will come.”

It did not take long for something to happen. Within a few minutes, we heard a rustling in the leaves behind us. Gorey had me turn around and set up in reverse, hiding myself behind the stump and pointing my barrel out the way the sound had come. In a little bit I heard a noise and saw a blue head pop out of the underbrush.

“What is that?” I asked in a very low whisper. “Do I shoot?”

“It’s a hen,” said Gorey. “Relax and let her go by without seeing you.”
Over several minutes, the hen walked on through, at one point getting within just a few feet of Gorey before turning to peck at some leaves and wandering off up the hill behind us. After she had exited, Gorey and I worked our calls, throwing out a few runs of excited yelping ending in a very horny cutt. That must have triggered something in a gobbler’s heart. Suddenly a bird came crashing through the underbrush a good sixty yards away and went straight for Gorey. Gorey told me to get my gun up, but I did not dare for fear of hitting my guide, just a few feet away. The turkey came out from behind a log less than twenty yards away. Gorey checked again to see if I had a clear shot. I did not. He said he was going to bag it, and he lit up his gun and dropped the bird as it was in full strut. My ears rang from the shot. Gorey launched himself at the bird and sprinted over to it. The bird was still flopping on the ground. He got his boot on the bird’s neck and jammed it into the dirt. I followed quickly and arrived in time to see the bird expire.

“I am so sorry,” said Gorey. “I wanted that bird for you.”

“He wasn’t cooperating.” I said. “I hardly saw him, but I could hear him. I’d have had to shoot through your back to get him.”

“That’s a shame, Perry.” Said Gorey. “That was just a crying shame. Oh well.” Gorey showed me the fan, the beard, the spurs. He said it was a two year old gobbler—fully mature, but only his first year as a full-grown breeding gobbler. “We snuffed him before he learned any tricks.” He said. “After this year, that turkey might have gotten to smart to be taken.” He picked a loop of cord from his pocket and fitted it around the legs. We unloaded our shotguns and began the long trek out with Gorey’s gobbler slung over his back.
We were perhaps half-way up the track that lead out of the bottoms when the woods to our right erupted in a fusillade of gunfire. Gorey went to one knee, and I followed him. Two shotguns emptied their magazines into the air. We heard shot falling in the leaves and then two hens running for their lives down into an erosion gully. When they saw us, they took to the air and sailed out into the bottom and landed in the clover patch near where we had come.

“Fred?” Gorey yelled.

“Yes.” Came an answer in unison.

“Did you get one?” Gorey yelled.

“No.” Came an answer in unison again.

“We’re on our way out with a gobbler. See you at the truck.” Said Gorey. We stood up and kept walking. By the time we hit the pasture, it had started to heat up. I undid my coat and removed the sweater from underneath. I was addicted. It made no difference that Gorey had shot the gobbler. I could see how men could dedicate their lives to this sort of hunting. All I wanted to do was get back out and get one of my own.

We made it back to the car about twenty minutes ahead of the two Freds. There story was one of utter frustration. A gobbler had snuck in on their back side. One Fred had attempted to turn around and the gobbler had run, prompting one Fred and then the other to attempt their shots. A running gobbler was nearly impossible to kill, as was one attempting to take flight. The feathers on the bird were like armor and unless you hit the snakelike head and neck, the chances of killing it were about nil. The Freds had fired in complete desperation.
It was now Ten-Thirty, and we would have to stop hunting at Noon. The Freds said they knew the way back and were going to putter around a bit before heading in. Gorey put the turkey in the truck and we headed for the check-in station.

“That’s how it goes, sometimes.” Said Gorey. “If that bird wants you, there is little that is going to stop him except a tall fence or maybe a river. These birds are cranked up—well, you heard them. I had a good feeling about this morning. I just wish it’d been you instead of me.” Gorey pulled off at a farm house a half mile from where we had left. “Now we need to go see the Fischers first. I want to introduce you to them and let them know you’ll be hunting here. They’re nice people. The old man limps around a lot-- he’s missing toes from the war. The son does most of the heavy stuff now. His Dad mostly rides the tractor and keeps the books. He doesn’t talk much—something went wrong with his head in ‘Nam. They’re both damn good turkey hunters though.’

Gorey stopped the truck and we both got out. Gorey spied and open barn door and started to head for it. He was met about half-way with a shotgun barrel protruding from the back kitchen door.

“Er, Gorey.” I said. “You’ve got their attention.” Gorey came to dead stop, brought his hands out to his sides, and turned around slowly.

“Mister Fischer?” he said. “It’s Gorey.”

There was no answer, but the shotgun barrel came down and a figure emerged onto the porch. It was a very tall, very heavy man in duck coveralls and worn sweatshirt.

“Edmund? It’s Gorey. I brought my buddy Perry over to meet you. We bagged a turkey down in the bottoms this morning.”

“Beard?” said Edmund.
“About eight inches.” Said Gorey. “I was hoping to call one up for Perry here, but things just did not work out to plan. Merle sent two other guys down with me. They’re still out rakin’ leaves.” (I found out later that was turkey hunter’s jargon for a late-morning hunt where the hunters are picking through the leavings of others.) There was no response from Edmund, except he walked down the porch steps and walked into the barn. In a short while, the elder Fischer came limping out to a bench in the yard. We followed. Edmund emerged a bit later and eyed us. He kept an eye on the proceedings from the shadows of the barn.

“Good morning Mister Fischer.” Said Gorey. “I was just telling Edmund that we were out this morning and bagged a nice one.”

“Bring him over.” Said Mister Fischer. Gorey left for the truck to fetch the turkey. I stayed.

“So did you shoot him, son?” he asked me.

“No, sir. Mister Fischer.” I replied. “Gorey was hoping the turkey would come towards me, but he didn’t. Gorey shot him. By the way, my name is Perry Oilean, sir. Thank you very much for letting us hunt.”

“You’re Pelly’s kid?” asked the man.

“Yes, sir.” I replied.

“He was a wonderful man, your father.” Said the man. “My name is Jack, and it’s a pleasure to meet you.” He put out his hand and I shook it. “Your father used to come down here and hunt turkey with me back in the old days. In fact, he helped Edmund there. Edmund was never much of a talker, but your Dad used to take him for walks in
the woods and Edmund would open up to him and carry on conversations with him. It was a shame your father was taken from us. He was such a gentleman.”

“Thank you,” I said. “I’ve heard that a lot.”

“. . .and he’d be proud to see you out like this today.” He went on. “I think you’re the first of his sons to come up this way.”

“I think I am to.” I replied. “My brothers are all businessmen and I think tennis and golf are their sports.”

“And this is just your first time?” said Jack Fischer.

“I was up here deer hunting in the Fall.” I replied. “I came up with a guy named Art Penn.” Jack Fischer frowned at the name.

“Art’s a good man too.” Said Jack. “His heart’s in the right place at least.” I could sense some baggage there. “He and Merle Emrys have been banging around here for as long as I can remember. I want to say they grew up here, but I’m not sure that’s right.”

“I’m not sure either.” I said. “I work with Art back at the University of Cincinnati.”

“You a professor?”

“No, I’m his assistant.” I replied. “He’s teaching me the ropes.” Again the old man frowned but said nothing.

“Edmund!” cried Jack. “Come on out here. This is your Uncle Pelly’s son, Perry.” Edmund put down the shotgun and came trotting out.

“You’re Uncle Pelly’s boy?” he said, sticking out a huge hand.

“I really liked Uncle Pelly.” He said. “We used to go exploring together.” There was a younerness to what he was saying that did not fit the man. In fact, there was a change coming over the man. Instead of a brooding slug, he suddenly seemed like a cloud had passed out of his life. “When I was little Uncle Pelly used to take me for walks, and we’d go places. Sometimes we’d go see castles. Sometimes we would go see Indians.”

“He had a really great imagination when he was a boy.” Said Jack. “He sure did love his Uncle Pelly. I suppose you remember him like that too, don’t you.”

“Actually,” I said. “I don’t. I was too young. About all I can remember of him was the way he smelled.”

“No that just isn’t fair,” said Edmund. “Being Pelly’s kid and not. . . well, it just isn’t fair.” You could tell the thought hurt him. “I wanted Uncle Pelly to take me home with him.”

“He sure did.” Said Jack. “I remember Edmund packed his bag one time, put it out on the front porch and told us he was going to leave with Uncle Pelly and go live with him. We told him he couldn’t; he had to stay and be our boy. That was about the last time we saw Pelly. I think he died the next year.”

Gorey had brought the turkey from the truck and had laid it out for Jack’s inspection. Jack found the silence impolite, and moved away from the subject entirely and focused his attention on Gorey’s turkey.

“Good gobbler.” He said. “He’s two. Came right in you say?”

“Yes.” Replied Gorey.

“You have to throw your calls better.” Said Jack. “Like this!” Jack let out a string of yelps from his mouth, no call, and by cupping his hand to his mouth they really did
seem to be coming from the direction of the barn. “Misdirect the gobbler,” he said.

“Make him come looking for you where you aren’t.”

“That’s amazing.” I said. “You did that without any sort of call.”

“Course!” said Jack. “You gotta be able to talk turkey.” He then let out another string of calls, the likes of which I had never heard on any tape. “Come hunting with me, son.” Said Jack. “Between Edmund and me, we can teach you a thing or two.”
“Turkey hunters are famous for shooting other turkey hunters,” said Gorey said, sitting on the porch that afternoon. “It isn’t lack of experience—not like deer hunters. It’s the old farts like me. You get your mind so focused on seeing a turkey that somebody shows you a flash red their sock, or a bit of blue jean in the woods and your head constructs a whole turkey. It’s never happened to me, but that’s why you never wear red white or blue in the woods. You’re not are you?”

“No,” I said, “Art had me go out and buy new stuff before we came up here.”

“Well, don’t.” said Gorey. “No red, no white, no blue. What Art’s thinking is, and it’s goofy, that Lance will slip off some where and let some unsuspecting turkey hunter hunt him.” I had been asking Gorey about Art’s behavior. I had expected that Art and I would go turkey hunting together. I certainly did not mind Gorey as a partner, but this had sounded like a big thing for Art.

“You’ve got to understand,” said Gorey. “Lance and Art have a lot of history. I just came in on the tail end of it.”

“What is your connection to Art?” I asked.

“I was a grad student at UC when I got snapped up in into Excalibur.” he said. “You’ve heard of Excalibur, right?”

“Yes.”

“Did Art tell you how Excalibur became unraveled?” he asked.

“No.” I said.
By the time I got written in, Lance had come in and become somewhat of the number-two guy. Merle had become disaffected and had taken a back seat. I got pulled into the project, because they needed someone to organize what was supposedly a live drug testing program. The guys at Fort Dietrich had come up with an ergot extract that would motivate soldiers. If you slipped a little into their C-Rations, it would make them killing machines. Lance and his group had come up with some root from some rain forest somewhere that, with a little bit of tinkering got you the exact opposite—the anti-war pill. It made people totally unmotivated to fight, it made them completely against violence.

Look at rabies effect on the brain—it makes the victim prone to biting others and therefore spreading itself. There are viruses and other bugs out there that cause other behavior modifications in animals. I think there’s some parasite that gets into an insect, and when the parasite needs to move on, it causes the host to climb up to the top of grass stems so it will be eaten by cattle—something like that. Merle had found ergot extracts that caused both the pro-war and anti-war effects, but could never isolate them away from the agents that also caused hallucinations and dementia. Lance had found a naturally occurring root extract that pretty much did the same thing—bound itself to just the right receptors in the brain. I don’t know. I’m just the logistics guy.

Anyhow, I got pulled in to see if we could use this in a mass trial. I came up with the idea of spreading it via the cleaning crews, spraying the seats and wiping down the desks in the classrooms. I got promoted to the head of the class and the next thing you know we had anti-war protests out the yin-yang, and this from a stodgy little mid-western
college that never thought twice about getting out of line. We reported our findings up the line and went out to celebrate.

The problem was that somebody who had Fort Dietrich under his thumb was looking for just that sort of thing to ramp up support for the new war in Southeast Asia. The next thing you know, we’re being told to stand down and the Fort Dietrich program got put into high gear.

Art, Merle, Lance—they were all old-school. Most of the guys that ran Excalibur were troglydytes that had fought der Furher and Tojo. They didn’t like Russians either, but they really did not like the idea of getting benched. It makes sense when you look at it: why build supermen, why take the nation to war, when you’ve got the antidote to war sitting in your back pocket? All you had to do was sprinkle a little of Lance’s Lotus Eater’s Deluxe in Uncle Ho’s rice and he’ll put down his gun and enter a monastery. A little in Breshnev’s borscht, and he’ll be doing benefits with Lennon outside the Kremlin.

Anyhow, we all went underground for a while and started spreading the Lotus-5, that was the name of our stuff. I forget the other guy’s stuff, what it’s name was. We started putting Lotus-5 everywhere we could, and started developing data trying to figure out what concentrations it would take to do a whole population. Ooops—wrong thing to do. We started finding out that the stuff spread. People who came into contact with people acted like they’d gotten exposed. We never could find out why, whereas the stuff Fort Dietrich was using required constant reapplication.

Long story short, Art got mad at the boys in Maryland that were trying to squelch his program. They threatened to yank his program entirely, so he took the last scheduled live test and called up a buddy in the business—scored tickets to the 1967 NAB
convention—National Association of Broadcasters. They dosed Cronkite. They dosed Huntley. They dosed Brinkley. They dosed the whole lot of them. I know, because I went along and scored them uniforms for the food service staff. It turns out the stuff works well when thrown in with the coffee grounds.

Well, that was the end of Excalibur, but what an end! What a freaking swan song. Nobody could say anything, because then the other project would come out. Nobody knows how far they went with our Lotus-5 stuff after we got shoved aside. It turns out it’s got a fairly long half-life, and the effect takes years to dampen out. I hear someone at CIA stumbled onto it by accident and they ramped up a program last year to manufacture it for use on the Russians in Afghanistan.

Of course guys like me got the short end of the stick. I suddenly found myself thrown out of UC-- lost my student deferment and ended up feeding punch cards to a IBM system 360 being used for logistics in a god-forsaken jungle. Then one day I saw what a Viet Cong rocket can do to one of those trailers—six inch hole going in and punch cards scattered all over the jungle on the other side. Punch cards and bits of things that looked like sausage hanging off the trees—that’s what was left. Luckily it wasn’t my turn to be in that trailer. I went to the C/O and asked for a transfer. He said the only thing that was open was one-eleven-ten —basic cannon fodder. I snapped it up and spent the rest of my tour schlepping an M60 around rice paddies, rather than spend another shift in one of those boxes. When I got out, I immediately applied to the Air Force and I’ve been in and out ever since.

This thing with Lance—I dunno. It’s complicated. You’ve got to understand that Art there’s not only this old triangle thing with Gwen. It’s also between Art, Lance, and
Merle. Art, Lance and his relationship with Dewey, and Art and Lance, and everyone else. I’m just the logistics guy, but Lance is like Art’s shadow. And what’s more Lance has been out on the road for several years now, staying away. Art can’t help feel the loss, and if Lance is letting himself die of cancer—I can see why Art is having a hard time taking it.

Why doesn’t Lance let himself be cured, or just take a walk one day and go somewhere where cancer never existed? Let me ask you this: why doesn’t Art go somewhere and do the same. The road is open to both of them. Lance is here, because he wants to be. Art is where he wants to be. Why? Answer that and you’ve got the secret of the human heart, and you’re well on your way to learning the big secret of the Universe. I’m not going to try and answer it. I’m just there to keep the supply chain moving and hunt turkeys.

My hunt the next morning was to be with Jack Fischer. Art and Lance came back in mid-afternoon. They had hunted together. Lance had been slow and had taken a long time to get where they had needed to go. They had hunted up until Noon and had scared up only one hen, but they had a plan for the next day and were going to pursue a big gobbler, whose tracks they had seen. Dewey had scored a jake, a yearling gobbler, with Doobie calling for him. They were going to switch places and hunt the same woods on the morrow. Fred came back with Fred and told a wild story of the missed bird. That had been the lot of it for Opening Day, everyone else had been skunked and were formulating excuses. Some folks went back out to put the turkeys to bed—follow them to the roost so they would have a good idea of where to set up on the morrow. Gorey was done for the
season, but planned to stick around and call for those who wanted it. I spent a good deal of time with him, perfecting my calls. Gorey taught me to cutt with my box call, the same call he had used to bring in the gobbler. It was a screech of ultimate sexual frustration from a hen that was at the peak of her season and needed relief. Gorey said that a cutt thrown in suddenly, in the midst of normal feeding calls had always been his ticket to success. That evening Art and Lance stayed to themselves. No one bothered them. They took a post on the far end of the porch.

Gorey woke me later than planned. It had turned rainy and cold overnight. I was supposed to hunt with the Fischers, but Gorey said no one was going to be heading out before the rain lifted. We would wait for a while and then he would drive me over to the Fischers. Some of the hunters that were going to hunt close to the house were already taking off in ponchos with their shotguns held underneath. It was still dark and the rain was pouring down. Among them were Art and Lance.

“I feel weird not going out this morning.” I said.

“Relax.” Said Gorey. “I know the Fischers. They won’t be out until the weather clears. Some folks have to go—they’re out chasing their own private demons in the woods. It’s a long season.”

“Art and Lance are going.” I replied.

“They’re a case all to themselves.” Replied Gorey. “Lance felt he missed the Big Show somewhere along the way. At some point in time, he had the opportunity to stay stateside and took it. Art went to the Big Show and lost his mind, at least for a time. Lance has always tried to make up for it by being Mister Over-the-Top. Art’s always let him do it; I guess it was to soothe his own demon. He wants to be first man in, last man
out. We wants to bring back the lost sheep, save the day, light the way. The two of them walked through hell together until Gwen split them up. Now they have a lot of making up to do.”

Along about eight, the rain began to taper off. Gorey said it was time to how-up and depart. As we headed towards the path down to the trucks, I asked Gorey if it would make sense for us to just walk down the hill across the lawn from house, past the tree stand I had learned on. It seemed to be just a shorter way down to the Fischer’s farm than all the driving we would have to do.

“You’d never make it.” Said Gorey. “Merle’s got this place rigged. You would never make it to the bottom. What’s more, if you try to reach the top of the hill from the bottom, you’d never make the top. I’m not sure how he did it, but he’s got the woods around here all turned in on itself. It does two things: for one thing it gives him protection. No one can just walk in. There’s the path we take, and an emergency exit that only Merle knows. The other is that it makes a sort of weir, all the animals that stumble in, never get out. As a result, Merle keeps an abundance of game up on this hill.

“I don’t understand how that would work.” I said. “People can’t get in, but game animals can. That doesn’t make any sense.”

“The difference,” said Gorey, “Is a matter of intent. People trying to get to Merle have a clear intention to get to the top of the hill. The animals have no such pre-conceived plan. They just are.”

“So how does he keep them in?”
“That you would have to take up with Merle.” Said Gorey. “I just keep the trucks rolling. I don’t know a Klein bottle from a beer bottle. All I know is that you follow the line of sycamore trees going up and follow the gully going down.”

We had heard no shots that morning. Either the rain had kept the hunters in or the turkeys from coming out. Either way, the action in our part of the world had been non-existent. We got in to Gorey’s truck and headed over to the Fischer farm.

When we got there, the two Fischers were in the kitchen chowing down on a venison goetta, a concoction of meat and oatmeal. The elder Fischer was eating his plain. The younger was flavoring his with dandelion jelly. For the first time, I met Momma Fischer, a big silent humorless frau that served us coffee like it was a punishment. I could see where Edmund had gotten his disposition. Goetta was always a delicacy that left me cold, but Gorey seemed to relish it. There was both dandelion and sassafras jelly on the table. I stayed with toast and sassafras jelly. There was not much said until after the current helping of food had disappeared from the plates.

Edmund had returned to his foreboding sullenness. Jack perked up after Gorey told him the rain had let up as we were coming in. It was still cold, however, and getting colder.

“We won’t hunt them in the bottoms today.” Jack said as if he had been in conversation with himself and had just decided to let us in. “I think we need to get up on the ridge tops. They’ll be out there, in the pastures, trying to get their feathers dried out.”

“I’ve been practicing my calls.” I said. “Gorey was teaching me some new ones.”

“Let’s hear you yelp.” Said Jack.
I reached into my coat pocket and brought out the wooden box call.

“No, son.” Jack said. “With your mouth. Just with your mouth. Like this.” He then ran a series of yelps that sounded closer to the real thing than most turkeys. I tried to match him, but there was too much saliva in my mouth and all I could do was sort of gurgle.

“Practice,” said Jack. “You need to practice. Those box calls are okay but they require two hands. A turkey will see the movement and be gone in a flash. At least be able to cluck with your mouth.” He clucked. “Now you try it.”

I made a passable cluck with my mouth.

“That will do.” Said Jack “That may be all you need. Let me see that call.”

I handed the box call to him. Jack wiped his hands with a paper towel and took it from me. He held it out and examined it closely.

“My goodness!” he said. “That was your Papa’s call. Hold on right there.” Jack got up and left the room. He returned a moment later with a small purple velvet bag, from which he brought out a nearly identical copy of my box call. “I haven’t seen another one of these in over twenty years.” He said.


“Your father made me this as a Christmas gift,” Jack said. “He sent it out just before he died. I didn’t hear about the accident until months later.”

“Accident?” I asked. “He died of a heart attack.”

“They thought it was a heart attack.” Said Jack. “Something happened that made him veer of a road and hit a tree. From what I heard there was not enough left of him after the fire to know exactly what it was.”
“Fire?” I asked. “I never heard of a fire.”

“I could be wrong,” said Jack. “The story I heard was the interior of the car burned, burned right through the floor boards, but the gas tank was still full.” That hit me like a rock the face. All of a sudden I needed to get outside and get air. Some amount of time went by before I found myself holding onto the tree in the yard, next to the bench where we had all congregated the day before. So my father had died by spontaneous human combustion, and the world had kept it a secret from me all these years. Gorey was patting me on the shoulder when I started becoming aware of world again.

“You okay, pardner.” He asked. “Jack’s mighty sorry if he upset you.”

“No,” I said. “That’s all right. I’ll be fine in a minute. I just didn’t know before now—about the fire. There’s a lot of stuff making sense for the first time.” In reality, I had only started to grasp the significance of it all, but this was not the best time to be dealing with it. I pulled myself together in time to seeing Jack and Edmund coming out with their gear.

“I had Lena find you a bread bag for your call,” said Jack. “Box calls aren’t worth spit once the wood gets humid. That call belongs in a museum somewhere. You ought to find a good call for working and put that on a shelf.” He handed it to me in a Stay-Fresh bag.
Chapter 48
The four of us headed out in two trucks. With Gorey driving Edmund and Jack taking me in an old Ford truck up. We were only on the main road a short time before pulling off on the opposite side and heading up the side of a ridge. Jack walked with a pronounced limp, but didn’t lag behind any. When we got to the pasture Edmund went with Gorey to the low side of a narrow pasture while Jack took me to an upper corner, where we hunkered down under some pines. It misted for a while, one of those drizzles that cannot make up its mind to be fog or honest rain. I tried my call, but could not get a sound out of it. Jack occasionally yelped, clucked and purred, giving the impression of a small group of hens feeding. It was nearly an hour before I could hold my coffee any longer and went to stand up.

“Sit down” hissed Jack.

“I’ve got to pee. “ I said.

“Make it quick” he said, offering to hold my shotgun. I went back a few steps and unloaded on the trunk of an oak, before taking my place again.

“That’s your Dad’s gun.” He whispered. “I recognize it.”

“Yes.” I said. “Did he do much turkey hunting with you?”

“Every chance we could.” He said “Not here. We did not have this farm in those days. It was. . . It was down south where we hunted.” Something told me this was a code word. “We need to pipe down. We’ll see turkeys any time now.”

The mist ended, and the air grew cold and still. Presently a group of hens came out from the opposite corner of the pasture and loitered around, between the two hunting parties. From far off we heard a gobbler sound off, the first one we had heard all morning. Jack answered with a run of excited yelps that put the hens in the field aback.
The altered course and moved up and out away from our corner. I heard calls from Gorey and Edmund. These, the gobbler did not honor. However, whenever Jack would call, the gobbler would cut in on him and things progressed you could tell the gobbler was coming closer. Jack then stopped calling entirely, and gave the gobbler the silent treatment. The gobble came closer and you could hear his footsteps far down in the woods, running up the hill. Gorey and Jack were both silent. Jack whispered to me to get my gun up. He put his aside. We waited.

The gobbler was just suddenly there. I did not see him emerge from the tree line. All of a sudden he was there, out in the middle of the field, trying to make up his mind which way to go. He had Gorey and Edmund to his right, us to his left and the real hens that had come through somewhere up ahead of him. At this moment, Jack let out some low purrs and clucks and reached down with a hand and began to massage the leaves beside him. That was enough to throw the gobbler into a strut, walking straight toward us.

“Get ready.” He whispered. The gobbler would walk and strut, pulling his head back and fanning his tail in a display. He would gobble furiously as well. first one way towards us and then the other way towards the hens. “Let him come in closer.” Jack said. So it went for what seemed like hours, but was perhaps a quarter of an hour. The big guy just could not make up his mind which way to go, and was trying to entice us out into the field where he could breed us. “This is not working.” Said Jack. In frustration, he threw a call towards the gobbler that I had never heard, and which defied any description. It made the gobbler turn towards us, and take a step or two closer. However, he quickly reversed his course and took off up the hill towards the hens. We stayed silent for a while, before Jack poked the bill of his cap up and leaned back.
“No way to compete with live hens.” He said. “That gobbler just got fed up with us not showing ourselves. “

“Could I have shot?” I asked.

“No, “ he said. “It was never a sure thing. That gobbler was a good fifty yards out. He needed to close about another twenty to thirty before you’d have had him in range. All you might have done is dust his feathers.” Jack took the time out to pull up his pant leg and began to scratch his leg furiously. He had large open sores on the front and sides of his calf.

“Poison Ivy?” I asked.

“No,” said Jack. “Nervous habit--I’ve had it since the war. They taught us to be very careful with our feet. I always kept a clean pair of socks pinned inside my coat, always rinsed them out when I could, always tried to keep my feet dry and powdered. Then one day the sergeant got a head wound and I got picked to carry him back to the aid station on my back. I went about twelve hours in the snow unable to tend to my feet. When I got there, I tried to take my boots off and found my feet were frozen. They slapped a bandage on the Sarge and sent him back up to the line. Me? They cut some toes off and then shipped me back home. I spent the last few months of the war in a hospital in South Carolina. The scratching started there, and I haven’t been able to quit. It gets worse in weather like this. It gets me to thinking.”

“What do you think about?” I asked.

“I get to thinking about all those guys I left behind.” Said Jack, staring off into the pasture, “ I felt I let them down by letting my feet go. Most of them never made it home. I was about the only one that got to see the end of the war.”
“I don’t know if this makes any sense,” I said. “But did you ever think that you chose to be here?”

“What?” he said. “Chose to freeze my feet?”

“Well,” I said. “I was watching two of my friends yesterday. They have been close friends for many years, and now it looks like one is dying. I asked Gorey about it, and he said something back—that either one of them could have chosen a path in life where this didn’t happen, but both chose to be where they are. I don’t know if it makes any sense to you, it didn’t to me. It’s the only answer I’ve gotten so far.”

“I suppose.” Said Jack. “If I had been given a choice that day of freezing my feet and spending the rest of the war in a nice hospital bed I would have. If it was either that or getting caught in an artillery barrage a month later, I guess I would have taken the feet. There’s really nothing anyone can do once the shells start falling, except get low and hope one doesn’t have your number on it. Yeah, I suppose.”

“That turkey I guess made the right choice.” I said. “He picked the right bunch of hens to run to.”

“Turkey hunting is like that,” said Jack. “You gotta accept the heartache or it isn’t worth your time.” He had stopped scratching his legs and put his pant leg down.

“Is that what it’s like?” I said. “Turkey hunting?”

“Most every time you go out.” Jack replied. “Most days it’s worse. We’ve been having great luck the past couple of days. Normally, you not only don’t get a shot, you don’t know why. At least today we saw the hens that drew him off. In the end, I think the days it comes this close are better than the ones where you have to go dragging a dead turkey out.” He looked at his watch. It was nearly Noon.
“I don’t know if I am making this worse,” said Jack, “but I wanted to apologize about talking about your father in front of you. He was a dear friend of mine.”

“That’s okay.” I said. “I think one of my problems in life as been that up until now, no one has talked about him. I really appreciated what you said. I had no idea there had been . . . a fire and all that. I just heard he’d fallen over dead on his way home from work.”

We went the way the hens and the gobbler had gone in order to bypass Gorey and Edmund’s set-up. They came out a half-hour later, having seen nothing of the hens or the gobbler we had seen. It had all been hidden to them by a fold in the pasture. They had been battling their own situation. A jake had come to their calls from the rear while they were trying to work in a gobbler further down the pasture. They had turned around to address the jake and been left with the gobbler coming in on their now-blind front and coming within ten feet of them un-noticed. The mature gobbler had only made his presence known when he putted-off in disgust.

We dropped off Jack and Edmund and then took off for Merles. Gorey decided to drive up to Granny Fay’s to see what had been brought in for checking. Zilch. For all our trials on that ridge top, we were the lucky ones that day. Everyone else we talked to in the parking lot had gone out at first light, braved the rain and come in at Nine or so, drenched to the gills and had not seen a thing. I started to tell our story, but Gorey interrupted and pulled me away. He said it did not do to go educating the world on our secrets. We went into the store for some pop. I found the rack of calls and was going through the pegboarded cards when Gorey came up behind me and pointed to a call.
“Jack’s right,” he said. “You outta learn how to either do it with your mouth or with a mouth-call. But here’s something you can try in the meanwhile.” He pulled down a Ben Lee Super Hen. It was the same as what I had back at camp. He suggested strongly that I put my Dad’s call aside and use the other calls that Art had helped me buy.

“I hunted with Ben once.” Said Gorey. “I was down in Mississippi hunting an old plantation that backed up right onto the river. They’d invited Ben Lee over too. He’s a great turkey hunter I’ll tell you—knows his birds.”

I spent the rest of the day at the house, practicing calling on my other. The scratch box was no problem. The mouth calls were. You were supposed to put them in the roof of your mouth and blow over the top of your tongue. I kept gagging on it. The guys on the porch said I sounded like a Bangkok virgin.

Of what became of Art and Lance in those days I have only a shadow of an idea. They hunted together, ate together and would go for long rides in Art’s truck. About the only insight I have into it, and this is only a glimpse is that I joined Art and Lance and a host of the others, sitting around the bonfire one night. Art had been drinking heavily, and the tales had gotten wilder and wilder. Towards the end of the evening Art became maudlin. A couple of guys tried to get him to turn in, but Art wanted to bare his soul.

“It does not make sense to me,” he said. “How it is that we send our children to wars we can no longer fight for ourselves? One generation sacrificing another attempting to win what was lost. In our shining moment it was me, Arthur Rex, at the front of the line, hacking it out with the rest of you all, and as I fell the need for the battle fell. Nowadays we fight by proxy and the crush of iron and wood on bone and sinew is left to our children to feel. It is sad. It is madness. It debases us and slaughters our innocents.
“Lance, forgive me. I played on your honor and your trust and sent you in my name. That you bedded my wife is a trivial payment for your service to me and my stupidity. How many worlds burned so that we could be here tonight? How many sons died, so that we could sit by this fire and our fat bloated asses and toast ourselves? Lance I beg of you not to do this to yourself. Don’t leave us.”

There was a polite silence and quickly the host at the fire began to thin. It was Merle who came around to Art and suggested he get up and go to bed, but Art wanted to put another log on the fire and keep going. Finally it was Lance that spoke up.

“Listen here, old man.” He said. “Don’t go pissing on our Wheaties, just because you don’t like how things are turning out. We did this all not just for you and not just for our country. We did this for ourselves, too. This wasn’t just for your entertainment. We did it, because we could and we were damn proud of it. I wouldn’t give up a day of it—not for you or for anyone. I’m glad I stood with you, but I’m also glad I screwed your wife. I’m just tired of it all, and I want it to end.” Lance stormed off. Merle and I got Art up and put him to bed. I heard nothing more of the incident, but a lot of guys decided pack up and leave the next day.

There is a lot to turkey hunting that still escaped me that first season. I did finally get a shot at a gobbler a few days later. It was a respectable mature gobbler. I had him dead to rights inside ten yards while I sat in a ditch and aimed out into a freshly disked field. He walked right through my pattern, and I saw the wad barely graze the top of his outstretched neck. He looked at me, and I at him, and I expected him to fall over dead, but he and two of his buddies did a column-wheel right and marched off of the field. I was so surprised that I forgot I had two other shells in my magazine. Gorey called it a
bad case of Golfer’s Syndrome and we let it go at that. That gobbler haunts me to this day.

The season ended and the conclave at Merle’s place wound down. I had one other opportunity to hunt with Jack and Edmund that season. In parting, Jack had me promise to remember him to my mother on my return. I never had a chance to hunt with them again after that, however. Jack, Lena, his wife, and Edmund were killed late that summer by a drunk driver on their way home from shopping in Logan. I did not hear what happened to the farm after that.

I did have one other spectacular outing on that trip. Towards the end of the three weeks we spent chasing turkeys, I managed to get out alone and spend some time hunting by myself. It felt terrific to go out on my own with my father’s call, scratch off a few yelps at first light and have a gobbler respond. If I had not been permanently hooked on hunting the turkeys up until then, I was then and for ever more. I made the mistake of getting caught up in cat-and-mouse game with him in a wooded creek bottom, and we chased each other up and down its length before Noontime came and I had to leave to get my ride back. On the way out, I happened upon a bed of mayapple, blooming in the late-morning sun. All around me was a profusion of wildflowers and birds, and for the first time in my life, I felt the true sublime blessing of Nature, a feeling that has never left me.
Chapter 49
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morning sun. All around me was a profusion of wildflowers and birds, and for the first time in my life, I felt the presence of the great Earth Mother shining on me.

The trip back home to Cincinnati was sour, due to a sad goodbye at the end, when Art realized he could watch Lance no longer and had to let him go. Art was happy that I had enjoyed myself. Both of us were birdless, but satisfied. Instead of turning back towards South Bloomingdale and Route 56, the way home, Art struck off up Route 93, and headed North.

“I think it’s about time to go see Gwen.” He said. “You’ll like her. We’ll hit 71 back in Columbus and ride down that way. It won’t be that much out of our way. We drove towards Lancaster and exited off onto a side road just before town.

Gwen lived at a converted convent that had been bought up by the Lancaster Campus of Ohio University and turned into an artist studio/commune. It was populated by mostly women, and the atmosphere there was one of palpable mistrust of anything masculine. We were as welcome as jock itch. Gwen was summoned from the pottery barn and met us under a gazebo in the back of the main building.

“This is Perry,” said Art. “He was Pelly’s youngest.” Gwen looked up at me with her hair, partly white and partly blonde, gleaming like a halo.

“Perry,” said Gwen. “I am very happy to meet you. Your father was very dear to us.”

“Thank you.” I said. “It is also a pleasure to meet you. I’ve heard so much about –“ I realized I’d put my foot in my mouth somehow. “. . . er, about you. “

“That’s okay.” She smiled. “A lot of people have. How is your mother?”
“Mom’s still Mom.” I said. “She remembered you.” Gwen smiled widened. She turned back to Art, and it was like the heavenly spotlight had moved off me.

“What brings you all the way up here?” she asked.


“Yes,” she said. “I know.”

“I tried to talk some sense into him.” Said Art. “I was with him for most of three weeks. I thought he was going to kill himself out turkey hunting.”

“That isn’t Lance.” She said. “He just wants to go out peacefully.”

“I take it you talked to him.” Said Art.

“I talked to him a few months ago.” She said. “He said he was coming to see you in Cincinnati.”

“What are we going to do?” said Art. “He’s got to get treated.”

“I know you feel that way.” Said Gwen. “All I can say is that I understand where both of you are coming from.”

“He’s doing this over you, you know.” Said Art.

“You know that’s not true.” She said. “He’s doing it over all of us. What we were, what we did. It’s hard, sometimes unbearably hard, to get up in the morning and remember who we are. That’s why I came here.”

“I just wish you’d try and talk some sense into him.” Said Art.

“I will try and do what you say.” Said Gwen. “He’s not our son, Art. He’s only our friend.”

“Come on, Perry.” Said Art, angrily, “We’ve got to get on the road.”
“Art.” Said Gwen. “You had every right to divorce me. It would have made things so much easier for Sue-Chi and the kids.”

“Never mind that.” Said Art. “My mind is made up. It’s old news”

“Still,” she said. “I want you to know I still appreciate what it means.”


The rest of the ride back was a rehash of the trip, retelling over and over the hunts the turkeys, and the hunters. It was well below Grove City, after the road had become flat and monotonous before Art said anything to me about Gwen or Lance.

“You know that Lance is going to die.” He said.

“I kind of figured that out.” I replied.

“There’s not a damn thing anyone can do about it in the end.” Said Art. “Not a damn thing.”

“He’s grown tired.” I said. “It was like you were saying a few months ago. Sometimes the idea of letting things take their course becomes very appealing.”

“I was full of shit.” Said Art. “All I needed was to get out and do a little turkey hunting. I feel twenty years younger. I feel great. Why would you not want to feel great.”

“Maybe that’s why one of you has to go.” I said. “The world just isn’t big enough for the two of you.”

“That’s literary—very literary.” Art said. “It’s crap. If this were a book it’d fly, but this is real life—real people living and dying. It’s not that neat.”

“Isn’t it?” I asked. “Somewhere in all of this mess is a story line that keeps getting repeated over and over. We’re not characters in a book, but then again you and I both
know we can pick up a book and find ourselves. Why not look at it the other way—that all of this is in the pages of some book somewhere and it all does try make sense in a literary way in the end. “


When we got back to town, Vivian and Sue-Chi both hugged and kissed us. The kids came home from their friends house and welcomed us both. Art brought forth a belated Mother’s Day gift for Sue-Chi, a necklace and a pin that made her cry. He took her out to eat. Vivian and I babysat the kids, fed them hot dogs on the grill, before going out to the hot tub and watching the robins deal with Art’s overgrown lawn. After it grew dark, I cleaned both shotguns, Art’s and mine and placed them back in the case. We then went back to the carriage house and made up for weeks away from each other. I look back on this night and see that coming back from the Pentecost/ turkey hunt at Merle’s marked the true end of my story.

That next week, I went into Duttenhoffers and found out Stan had sold out, and taken off. The story was he wanted to sailing with his dog and managed to find a buyer. The store kept his name, but it was never quite the same without him. I went over to the Alpha and found Terry, a waitress I knew from The Yellow Submarine. Rene was gone and no one could remember where she had gone.

In June, Doctor Turnwater died without warning of a massive brain hemorrhage. She went peacefully in her sleep. The estate quickly sold out to a substance abuse specialist and a Jungian therapist. Vivian was evicted from her little room by the pond.
Vivian felt she was released from her obligations to the family at that point and decided to leave for France to visit her family. She never returned. We traded letters for a couple of years. She stayed fond of me until the last letter arrived. I forget who stopped writing first.

I got bored in August and decided that once and for all I would set out to see if I could make things work with Greta. However, it was an ill-planned affair. It was hot and muggy and the way around Fairview Park was choked with fresh growth. When I finally stumbled out onto Ravine Street at the right place at the right time, I was completely overextended. I went and sat at the same bench I had been to originally and tried to concentrate on what I should do next, but I could not get Jack Fischer’s wife Lena out of my mind—a bloated and menacing, slinging goetta on the plates of her victims. I wondered how beautiful German girls became such monsters. I decided it was not worth finding out. I would seek an object for my love elsewhere.

Close to the end of the summer, school was nearly ready to start, Art received a package in the mail. It was from Lance by way of Gwen. Well, actually it WAS Lance. Lance had died in a Columbus hospice with Gwen in attendance. His last wishes were to be cremated and sent to Art. Art held the little cardboard package and retired to the back porch. He stopped by the liquor shelf to pour himself a scotch, thought better of the plan and just took the whole bottle. The next morning, I found Lance still out on the dining table. Art must have finally stumbled into bed. The door was still open. After that, I saw Art frequently in the possession of Willy’s little red binder, and I thought the worse might happened. However, I did not know what to say to Sue-Chi, and ended up doing nothing.
Classes began the last week in September, and Art showed up for his Arthurian Legend class at Zimmer Auditorium a bit late in a cheerful, if not self-absorbed, mood. He spent a few minutes going over the usual first-session instructions, and then went to the lectern to begin his lecture. For anyone who knew Art Penn well, you could tell he had been drinking. It was the one and only time I sensed it. It was then I noticed that the red binder was at the top of his notes. He drew a deep breath, and looked about the room. I put it all together way too late to do anything about it.

“Vat das fickt!” he said, mostly to himself and stood there waiting for something to happen. It didn’t. The room grew nervous, and when he realized that nothing was going to happen, he proceeded with his lecture without a hitch. It wasn’t his best class, but for anyone who was seeing it for the first time, it was great entertainment as usual. After class was over Art threw the red binder in the trash, took a bow and went down to talk to the graduate students. I went up on the stage and grabbed the red binder and hid it in my briefcase. I have it to this day on my shelf.

I would like to say that this was only the start of many great adventures, how I slew the dragons of Clifton Heights and rescued damsels from the Twin Towers. I would like to come to you as a wanderer of space and time. I would like to say I became a consummate turkey hunter. I am certain, based on the reality that Art Penn showed me, all these things are true. Somewhere out in the realm of infinite possibilities, I turned off the well-beaten path and made my way through thousands of adventures on every star shining in the firmament. This account is only about one of those adventures, and the
bulk of it ended right there, that day, in Zimmer Auditorium on the campus of the University of Cincinnati, Anus Domini 1982.

One of my graduate students came in the other day to show me a new gadget she had found on the web, called Google Earth and we took turns showing each other where each of us grew up. I could still find my house on north of Cincinnati, but the field where Sissy and I used to play was eventually used as a lot to build a nice Cape Cod on an adjoining street. My student’s house was hidden amongst old trees on a street in Cleveland Heights. She pointed out her elementary school, her house, and the cinder path which ran between the streets on which she used to ride her bike. After she left, I tried to find Merle’s place. By tracing the way back from Granny Fay’s Grocery, I could find the Fischer’s farm, but Merle’s mountain was gone. My guess was that Merle must have moved it somewhere. I have driven all over Hocking Hills, at all times of the year, looking for that line of Sycamores that lead to the top, but for all my trying I have never been able to go back.

The pain of never again sitting the knights of that hilltop, hunting with them and enjoying their hospitality was always a palpable force in my life from that day on. It colored all my life’s decisions and haunted me as a man who had been thrown from heaven. I managed to find a job after leaving Art’s side that allowed me ample access to good deer and turkey hunting. Our campus, up river from Cincinnati is on the edge of the Shawnee State Forest, and I have 200 acres of worthless ridge tops and creek bottoms on which I built my house. My passion for hunting has never abated, and though my wife does not hunt, she loves the solitude of the country. She never minded when I built my house with the idea of having a permanent deer camp, in which to raise my sons as
hunters. They have grown sturdy and confident with the lessons learned in the field, and that process, or at least the greatest measure of my input to the process is now slowly growing to a close.

I have led a good life, and my association with Art left me with an insight into my work that makes my lectures both entertaining and informative. I am loved by my students, and I always seem to have a little knot of alum gathering in one corner of the lecture hall, mouthing the punch lines to their favorite jokes. I stole Art’s portrayal of the warrior Arthur, but I am not nearly as adept with a sword as he, and I wear out quickly and it lends a comic aspect to that lecture that Arthur Penn never had in his.

Arthur Penn disappeared from the campus of UC after Sue-Chi’s children went off to college. He traveled with her extensively, and then he fell of the radar for a number of years. I received a letter from him only last year and visited him and Sue-Chi, at their apartment in Walnut Hills. The building is a huge turn-of-the-last-century monstrosity called the Avalon Hills. Art’s place overlooks the corner where Macmillan comes into Woodburn. Art is doing well, but he has decided to put teaching on the back burner for a while and take up researching some books on the Normandy Invasion and the Sigfreid Line. He said he had dined with Vivian and her sister in Nance just last Spring. Art has not aged a day, but Sue-Chi is not well. Arthritis has gotten to her, and she can no longer hold a camera. Art confirmed for me that Merle had moved his operation elsewhere, and for a time wanted to be by himself. The knights had moved on to other hunting grounds.

Above my house, high on a south-facing hillside there is a small bit of bare hillside I’ve excavated down to the bare clay. In the center of this patch, I’ve planted Peppito, son of Pedro the plant. Art spent an afternoon with me once, showing how
cuttings from the plant could be rendered into a form that was suitable for human
consumption. I keep a Melita coffee maker, a tea strainer, a pyrex measuring cup, and a
few other essential tools in a corner of my workshop on a warm day in March, I go and
make my cuttings, and the process is done and the potion drunk before I leave for turkey
hunting, and again on the weekend after Thanksgiving before deer season in Ohio
commences. I am still amazed how fast my beard and nails grow after each dose, and it
has kept me in ideal condition for all these years. I attempted to broach the subject with
my wife, once after marriage and last year with her first signs of menopause. Her answer
was firm—she wanted nothing to do with it. I do not know yet what I want to do with
myself after I have grown weary of the world I have built for myself. I must at last face
the question of what do I want to do when I grow up. For now at least Willy’s red binder
remains a mere trophy. It’s secrets are meaningless to me, and I hope they remain so for
many seasons to come.
The Testament of Perry Oilean  Fall, 2007

That was how I left it in 2005, what I considered my last good year. Shortly after writing the last chapter things began to unravel in my life. Jenny, my wife of nearly 20 years, came down with what looked at first like a bad case of the flu. We found out within a week that she had pancreatic cancer and she was dead within a month. I would like to say she was brave and died with dignity, but it really went too fast and she was way too sick for anything heroic. My eldest son, was already at Ohio State, and took off a semester to help me dig my way out. My youngest graduated high school that Spring and decided to go to the University of Cincinnati the next Fall. It all went so fast that I never really had time to think or feel about it. Things sunk in that December when I found myself hunting alone for the first time in a decade. It was a hard winter to bear, and by the time turkey season rolled around, I was contemplating putting a toe in the trigger guard and being done with it all.

I think that Art was my inspiration for hanging in. We had lost touch ages ago, but looking back on my association with him gave me a lot of important insights. The first was that Art had put up with a lot of personal tragedy in his life, a lot of it was self-inflicted, and managed to bear up and keep going. The second was the possibility that Art was truly right: from his perspective, he could see himself and all of Mankind as a single consciousness. From his viewpoint, he was both Alpha and Omega as well as the Dark Angel that had fallen from heaven. It also meant that I was too. It was a terrible burden, but from that lofty view, any personal loss was but a drop in the ocean of collective tears. He had given me that vision and I now realized why death would not stop anything.
except my understanding of it all. It was better to live and deal with it, than to die only to be reborn into ignorance. It also occurred to me that I had chosen this course when I had taken a wife that took her Methodism at face value and did not want to discuss the more arcane subjects I brought up over the years.

It was early in Spring Gobbler season when I stumbled on a protected grove of pine that had mayapple and wildflowers of all types beginning to flower. I sat down against a trunk and had a good cry and found myself being healed by the power of that spot. Amid the late morning dew, the warm Earth, the flowers and the birds I resolved that it was not time to go to my grave, not yet. I did not know where I stood in the line Art had shown me. I did not know if I was further along or just beginning, but I had stood on the shoulders of a giant of a man, and I was going to try and live life by the example he had shown me, moral and immoral, light and dark, but always struggling towards the light. I was behind in my tending of Peppito, and I visited my plant on the way home that morning and cleared some weeds and peed in the dirt at the edge of his roots, and cut some leaves for brewing Art’s concoction. While the tincture was filtering through the Melita, my eye caught the red binder on the shelf. I thought about picking it up to read, and realized that even if it was my time, I would prefer to stick around. The enlightenment that had caused Willy and Art’s wife, my father and others to combust and be gone could elude me for another year or another millennium. I was not ready leave quite yet.

That night, after a good steak dinner, and some of my better scotch, I decided to go looking for the wine bottle Vivian had given me. It was still in the back of the cupboard in its wooden casket. That is when I seized on an idea. The next morning, I
drove into Portsmouth and filled the back of the pickup with 2X4, barn siding, shingles, and concrete, and for the next week I took every free moment to construct a shelter up next to the bass pond. I had a friend with a dump truck, and he came up a week later and left me a few loads of river stone and gravel. By the end of Spring Turkey Season, I had two nice gobblers in the freezer and a shed with an overhanging porch and a rock path leading down to the edge of the pond. I rented a pump for a day and pumped a few feet of water out of the pond and then fashioned a concrete apron that went out about ten feet into the water. The pond was spring fed and started to fill back up immediately with the first rain. Classes ended in June, and I was able to work almost full time on the project. I planted a few bushes and added a trellis for some clematis.

It is hard to conceal age. It is even harder to hide a lack of it. After years of comments by everyone, I did my best to do add some age to my outward persona. Adopting a beard did a lot, especially since I had a small touch of grey in it from a scar on my chin. I shaved it all off, and saw in the mirror myself as I had been twenty years earlier. I also went out and got some better clothes that did not look as baggy and sedate as I had been dressing for years.

It was a warm moonlit night in June when I realized that the project was done and it was time to proceed with my plan. I brought up the grill to cook out. I had a chilled bottle of wine, and some of Jenny’s clothes, including her bathrobe and sandals. I fired up the grill, and while the coals were burning, I waded out into the pond and opened the wooded casket, producing the bottle Vivian had given me many years ago. The water was still clear and I could still smell Art’s hot tub when I uncorked it. In the light of the nearly full moon, I poured the contents of the bottle into the pond and waited.
Nothing happened. I waited a while in the pond, then withdrew and drank a scotch and then two. I finally decided nothing was going to happen and ate dinner before the grill had completely died and found myself dozing on one of the chaise lounges. I went back down the hill to go to bed, as it seemed that the whole thing had been a dismal failure. The spare steak and the wine got thrown back in the fridge for another night. The peppercorn sauce and vegetables went down the disposal.

The sun had just come up, and the disappointment from the night before had faded somewhat. I was going to go up the hill and see if I could nail a nice bass for dinner, before driving into campus to catch up on some of the backlog. I had the coffee on, and was about to throw a breakfast sandwich in the microwave when there was a knock on the back door.

“Hello,” she said. The sun caught her hair at that moment, and I fell in love all over again.

“I’ve got coffee on.” I said. “Come on in.”

“What the hell happened?” she said. “All I remember was it was bitter cold when I left the house. Where is this?”

“My place.” I said. “It’s been a while, and it’s a long story. Are you hungry?”


“Sure thing.” I said. I took the sandwich out of the microwave and put it back in the freezer. Out came the fixings for a nice quiche, and I started to work on it. Vivian recognized the recipe from what I put on the table started dicing the onions.

“I’m sorry about your clothes.” I said. “I hope these fit.”
“No problem.” She said. “They’ll do just fine. So tell me what’s been happening?”

Vivian was not at all put out with the situation. She was eager to get in touch with herself and her sister and give them the news. It took a couple of days on the phone to trace their whereabouts. The sister was elated beyond belief. Vivian, the one she knew, had been caught in a bad auto accident in the late Nineties and had melted away in a French ICU unit before anyone could explain about her peculiar nature. The sisters planned a reunion for the early Fall, and I bought a small above-ground pool at Walmart that would act as a temporary vessel for our guest. We later found that this was not necessary, and all I had to do was to install an aerator in the bass pond to keep it ice free in the Winter to keep both women happy.

The new Vivian seemed none the worse for wear for over twenty years in a wine bottle, and I offered both her and her sister the service of being the permanent keeper of their bottled essences, so that an accident such as had befallen the de-constituted Vivian. When the sister came in September, I found that she was twin, also named Vivienne, and although the incident was now lost to both of their memories, circumstances of a similar nature must have happened in their past. As it turned out, the three of us were very compatible together, and the sister found a way to extend her visa by enrolling at my college. I was able to get both women work there, and we settled in to a peaceful existence. My sons liked the women as well, and we spent a very happy Christmas together.
This past Winter, I received first a call and then a visit from Paul Gorgemont, Gorey. He had found my name on the Web and decided to look me up. He stayed a few days before heading for Florida to hunt Oceolas. It seemed that Merle had opened his operation again, and was now expecting visitors for the Pentecost. I tried to wangle an invite for my sons, and received a nice e-mail from Merle a few days later extending a greeting to the three of us. The reason for his disappearance was never explained, nor was Merle’s sudden reappearance, nor was his sudden adoption of modern technology such as personal computing and e-mail. However, his place is yet to appear on any satellite map available on the web. You still must follow your memory and look for the line of sycamores that extend up the hill. They only appear in the Spring and Fall.

Before Gorey left for Florida, we had an opportunity to talk about things, sipping scotch out on the back deck.

“The road is open you, Perry.” He said. “Art is not asking anything of you. I am not asking anything of you. However, you are always welcome to come afield with us.”

“I’m happy.” I replied. “I do not need to travel very far.”

“Maybe so,” he said, “But remember that, should you wish do so, all you need to do is slip out the garden gate. Whatever you do, you can still be home by morning.”

Such is how I have left it. The garden gate is always there, beckoning to the Great Beyond.