
MUHAMMAD'S REVENGE

By

KEITH G. LAUFENBERG

ALSO BY KEITH G. LAUFENBERG

Miami Rock
Semper-Fi-Do-Or-Die

Cover Art by **Daniel K. Laufenberg**

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FIRST EDITION

All characters in this book are fictitious, and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

ISBN:

Florida

Printed in the United States of America

For *God*, the *Father*, creator of all things and everything eternal, and for those human beings who love the truth, something I search for constantly, everytime I put pen to paper.

And for my family, my wife of thirty-three years, **Andrea**, and my four children, **Amanda**, **Natalie**, **Danny** and **Denise**, who have made my life an easier, happier journey. And for my five grandchildren, **Michael** and **Noelle**, and **Avery** and **McKenzie** and for little **Devon**; their very names always bring a smile to my face.

The following stories, in a somewhat different format, have been previously published:
“Childhood” in *Pleaidēs Magazine & aaduna*; “Peace on Earth” in *The Oracular Tree* and *Short-Story.Me*; “Muhammad’s Revenge” in *Spoiled Ink & NuVein*; “Big Sugar” in *Short Story.Me*; “Sonny Liston’s Eyes” in *The Spillway Review*; “The Good Father” in *The Oracular Tree*; “Danny-Boy” in *Struggle Magazine*; “Two for the Night” in *Down in the Dirt*; “The Kiss of Life” in the *Euonia Review*; “Fly the Friendly Skies” in *Short Story.Me*; “The Ketchup Man” in *The Whortleberry Press*; “Scumbag, Scumbag & Scumbag” in *Neonbeam Magazine*; “Bad Medicine” in *OMG Magazine*; “The Blues Act” in *The Pink Chameleon*; “Cain and Abel” in *The Corner Club Press*; “The Shill” in *Prole Magazine & Pulp Empire*; “Downsized” in *The Write Room*; “Doughnuts for Danny” in *The Ultimate Writer & The Fringe Magazine*; “Thunder and Lightning” in *AuthorTrek*; “Wooden Indian” in *The Maryland Review & Northern Stars Magazine*; “The Bee” in *AIM Magazine*; “Wildfire” in *NuVein*; “The Ants” in *The Pink Chameleon*; “The Highest Mountain” in *Danse MaCabre*; “The Human Beings” in *An Electric Tragedy & Amaterasu*; “Rudy the Bang’s Drumroll” in *The Writing Disorder*; “Drive-By” in *d.ustb.in*; “Pointman” in *Mobius Magazine*; “About Writing” in *One Million Stories*; “Christmas” in *Philae Magazine, Northern Stars Magazine & The Legion of Light Magazine*; “Liberty City” in *The Phoenix Magazine & The Oracular Tree*.

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CHILDHOOD

The days of childhood are but days of woe.
—Southey, *The Retrospect*. St. 9.

Where children are not, heaven is not.
—Swinburne, *A song of Welcome*. 1. 37.

MY name is Cole Black, that's my street name, I ain't gonna tell you my real one—cause you might turn me in. I don't wanna be turned in so's I ain't tellin'. I got a story to tell, so if you wanna listen, I'll tell it. I live on the streets and I am fifteen and I am black. I used to live over on Norf-Wes' Twenee-Firs' Stree' and Second Avenue a bad neighborhood where a lot of my friends got killed in drive-bys and drug deals. I lived there with my Moms and my Daddy but then they caught my Daddy. I got two brothers and two sisters and they all messed up—just like me. I liked it in Overtown 'cause I had friends there but now things is different 'cause they all gettin' killed so fast and put in jail. I only went to the seventh grade in school but all my teachers told me how smart I was and I did the best in English class, even though I cusses a lot. I be trying to not put none of that down here—right now. I got a friend, probably only one I got left, Jeffrey Waller—his street name is Red—and he got a tenth-grade education and he helped me write this right, so you could read it. Anyway, I'm gonna start at the beginning, cause, see, this is my life story, what there is of it. See, I ain't got much longer to live—I got Aids and I'll explain that later—it's just a part of my story, see. One of my brothers and both my sisters got it too, so it ain't nothin' special not around here. So, if you're ready to listen, here's my story. It all started when my Moms married my Daddy, in 1968. It was the same year Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy both got assassinated, my Moms told me that. I learn history things like that. So, here it is, my life: In 1968, my Moms married my Daddy 'cause he was working regular at that time. He was a construction worker; he did everything, laborer, carpenter, ironworker, he even learned how to read blueprints—he was real handy. My Daddy had a sixth-grade education and his Daddy was a sharecropper—somewhere in South Georgia—I never knew exactly where and my Daddy don't never talk much to us since he got put in prison, again. See, my oldest brother Blade, that's his street name 'cause he's so good with a knife, he was born in 1969, then came my sister Latisha, we calls her Big 'cause she's always pregnant, she's born in 1970, then my other sister Tanisha, we calls her 'Nish the dish' cause she likes to eat so much—she's born in 1971—then my other brother Tommy, his street name is Truck 'cause he's big as a truck, he's born in '72, my Daddy was in jail and he always figured Truck wasn't his; see his friend Ray Jenkins was always here when he was in prison and he always thought that Ray-Jay, that's his street name, that Ray-Jay is Truck's Daddy. That's why he kilt Ray-Jay and

that's why he's in Raiford Prison right now. See, Ray-Jay he come in one night and he brought a case of beer, and some crack too, and we all got high and see Daddy remembered Truck was Ray-Jay's son and he took a butcher knife and killed Ray-Jay. He done cut his throat; I still remember all the blood and stuff. Daddy made us cut him up and put his body-parts in a bunch ah garbage bags but he got caught anyways and they gave him life with no chance of ever getting paroled. Anyways, I was born in 1973 and everybody knows I'm Daddy's 'cause I gots a nose big as a apple and it's a pig's nose, just like Daddy's. Anyways, they call me Cole Black 'cause I sing just like Nat King Cole used to, they tells me that 'cause I don't know who Nat King Cole was, and I'm black as midnight. Anyways, my Moms began working the streets when my Daddy gots put in prison for the first time and she became a heroin addict. She always be stealing money and going to jail, ever since then. The HRS peoples came and got us the first time when I was just ten and they put me and Blade in the Shorty Unit in the Dade Juvenile Detention Center. It's where they put the littlest boys. They put Truck in with the adults, 'cause they didn't believe an eleven- year-old boy could be six feet tall and weigh almost two-hundred pounds. Anyways, they put us all in a nasty foster home where the people was nasty to us and so we runs out of there. So's the pooleece they caught us in Mama's old apartment and they put us back in the J.D.C. and we stayed there three months, until Mama got out of jail and we gots to go back to Overtown. See, so that's why I don't want to give you my real name 'cause now, in 1988, I done knows the system too good to let them get me again. See, they catch us, they puts us back in jail until we gets put in another foster care where we gonna runs away, anyways, 'cause they's all bad. It's just Truck and me now, 'cause Blade is eighteen now, he gone be nineteen next month, and both my sisters is working the streets and gots false I.D.'s. Truck is six feet five inches tall now and weighs almost three-hundred pounds but, see, they gots us in they files and they knows how old we are now. We been runnin' and gettin' locked up for so many years they knows us better than crooks. We get locked up for months and see murderers and thieves get out or go to prison before us. They sends us to another foster care when they remembers we still in jail and we escape and meets up in Overtown somewheres. Well, Red just reminded me that I said I'd tell you about my sickness. Well, see me and Blade and Truck we used to lets mens do stuff to us, over at the dumpster on Biscayne Boulevard around the causeway area, over there. So, anyways, they gave us money and I was only like about seven years old when I did it. I did it once for bus fare to Overtown. Anyways, they done tested me six times already and so's I knows that I gots Aids, 'cause they all come up positive but it's was only the last one that showed I gots signs of having immune deficiency. Red looked that word up in the dictionary and I hopes you can read this what I been writing, 'cause I'm looking up a lotta words in the dictionary. I got back in school and I was wanting to become a writer but now I know I can't do that 'cause I ain't got but a few more years to live. I started crying the other day and Red he done told me about something I didn't never know about, 'cause I only went to church a couple times when I was little. Anyways, he told me about my Lord and Savior—Jesus Christ. So, I listened to him and then he gave me his bible and I read it. It took me almost two whole weeks but I read the whole thing. I don't understand the Old Testament too much but the New Testament made me feel like I have a chance now—in the next life—and I be on my knees now every night, praying for myself and Red too but mostly for my Moms and Daddy and my brothers and sisters and everybody else I knows 'cause we all needs savin'. I called this story Childhood 'cause I know that you not an adult until you be eighteen and I don't think I'm going to make it to eighteen. I read the bible everyday and I pray everyday. I will say a prayer for you—will you say a prayer for me? They call me Cole Black.

PEACE ON EARTH

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THE AMERICANS

Be proud of those strong sons of thine
Who wretched their rights from thee!
—Tennyson, *England and America in 1782*.

The father swung his arm around his son's shoulder and told him that he would take him inside the pub and introduce him to his first pint. The son blanched sharply—he wasn't in the mood to talk to anyone, much less to take what his father thought was his first drink. For, Samuel Dewey Baldwin had been introduced to drink in his hometown of Baltimore, Maryland, when he was but a lad of thirteen, as it wasn't hard to get a drink in Baltimore in 1910. And now, in 1914, in London, England, where they had gone to visit his father's family, his father was about to *officially* introduce him to his first pint. It was the first day of August and the hot noonday sun had burned the morning fog almost completely away. Sammy Baldwin with his American accent was hailed as a Yank but was having a hard time understanding the strange accents and phrases everyone so quickly spat out, in Great Britain.

As the Baldwin father/son duo walked through the doors of the pub, another boy was slugging down his third straight beer. Just turned eighteen, and born and raised in New York, Abraham Schmidt was the son of a German father and an English mother, and, considering that England was on the eve of entering into a war with Germany, Schmidt and his father, forty-four-year-old Max Schmidt, were taking quite a ribbing from those in the pub who knew of their lineage.

William Dewey Baldwin ordered two steins of beer and when the dark liquid was set before them swigged his down with relish. As the younger Baldwin sat staring at the dark ale, the bartender smiled at him then nodded towards the two Germans. "C'mon mate, slug it down, ol' Maxie's boy done all-idee put down thray ah 'em, don't g'wan let a Jerry show yah up—A mate."

Sammy Baldwin followed the bartender's gaze to where Max and Abe Schmidt were fast getting drunk and smiled, then quickly downed the beer. His head fairly spun but he slammed the now empty mug on the counter and looked over at his father. "Well, hell, gimme two more right now then—line 'em up."

The bartender smiled, like a cat that had just swallowed a canary. "That's the spirit bloke," he said, "show 'at ol' Fritzie wot's wot—A matey."

It didn't take long for both the Baldwin's and the Schmidt's to get rip-roaring drunk and it didn't take long before an argument started on how the Germans were trying to rule the world

and how the English, along with the French and Russians, would destroy Germany, once and for all.

Max Schmidt was about to clobber William Baldwin when his son stepped in and then Baldwin's son stepped in and it was left to the two youngsters to fight for their respective genealogical glory.

They took it outside the pub and it was a gut-wrenching, all-out war. Both boys were small but compact; Sammy Baldwin was five feet six inches tall and weighed all of one hundred and forty pounds while Abe Schmidt was but five feet five inches tall and a hundred and fifty pounds. It was like two Pit Bulldogs going at each other and it lasted almost an hour.

Both the fathers quickly sobered up and, along with the spectators, finally called the fight a draw. The two boys shook hands and became friendly, especially when Sammy found out that Abe Schmidt was actually an American. They went back inside the pub, where Sammy's father bought the next round, which was soon returned by Schmidt, and, after much pushing and prodding by their father's both Sammy Baldwin and Abe Schmidt, decided to enlist, if they would take them, in the British Army.

Needn't they have worried, for the British Minister of War, Field Marshal Earl Kitchener was planning to send an Expeditionary Force to France and he felt that he needed all the soldiers he could get, be they British, Irish, American or any other nationality, for, as the Minister of War well-knew—in a war—a body was a body.

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THE GERMANS

French and Russian they matter not,
A blow for a blow and a shot for a shot!
We have one foe and one alone, England!
—Ernst Lissauer, *Hassgesang Gegen England*, (1914)

Wilhelm Helmut Laufenberg was an exhausted German infantry lieutenant. He had been there when the German Army had totally routed Belgium, in the first week of August, and then, two weeks later, had been at Arlon-Virton, in France, when the German Army had killed a reported one-hundred-forty-thousand French men, women and children; then had been in Prussia when the German Army had killed, or taken prisoner, over one-hundred-thirty-thousand Russians at what later became known as the battle of Tannenberg. And now, after another three arduous months of fighting, he found himself, and his men, in a trench, just outside Ypres, Belgium, where the fighting, at first dominated by the Germans, was now at a stalemate and Oberleutnant Laufenberg found himself battling his men's morale problems, and an eerie feeling that he was going insane.

THE WESTERN FRONT

If any question why we died,
Tell them, because our fathers lied.
—Rudyard Kipling, *Epitaphs of the War: Common Form*.

The Western Front, or the Front, as they more often called it, was to Sammy Baldwin nothing short of devastation; it was the only word that he could think of to describe it and he scribbled it down on a wet piece of paper, in a letter that he meant to try and get back to the real world. The real world, he dreamed of it constantly; of such simple, inane things as dry clothes and a warm bed, a hot dog with mustard and relish, or even just a glass of cold milk. He stared with tired, glassy eyes at the muddy trench that he sat shivering in then stood up slightly to see the barbed wire that was spread tightly around poles jammed into the ground just in front of the trenches. The German trenches were, in places, as close as fifty to sixty yards away and almost identical to the enemies'. Baldwin, along with Abe Schmidt, was a Rifleman in the London Rifle Brigade and had been hunkering down in trenches like the one he was in, near Ypres, Belgium, for over three months. He could see dead and fallen comrades' bodies, strewn all along both sides of the Front. Abe Schmidt appeared in his peripheral vision and he turned slightly sideways to see his compatriot, now hunkering down just a few yards from him. He handed Baldwin a cigarette and Baldwin nodded and reached for a book of matches. Both youngsters had begun smoking, in earnest, on the Front. It was December 23rd, and in less than thirty hours it would be Christmas; there was an eerie feeling floating everywhere, it seemed to be in the air and it got into everyone's nostrils and when they breathed it into their lungs they became light-headed and insane and they no longer wished to fight but to lay down their arms and refuse, any longer, to kill another human being. It was widespread throughout the trenches, among almost all the enlisted men and even some of the junior officers, usually those who had been pressed into service by the German threat. The higher command, the lifelong military men—of course—were immune, and thought only in terms of winning or losing and their orders were to stay the course and hold the line, at all costs. Sammy Baldwin exhaled a stream of noxious smoke and scowled. "Yah know Abe, our fathers lied to us."

"Well Sammy they-uz tryin' tah get us to be where they couldn't go."

"Don't kid yah-self Abe; they din' wanna go."

Abe Schmidt stared out at the dead bodies not more than a dozen yards from where they squatted down, in mud that was more like a clayish muck. He loved his father but the truth was something that was hard not to recognize when you risked your life every minute of every day that you breathed in a breath of air. "Yeah, youse might be right Sammy, youse might jus' be right."

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THE TRUCE

It is the province of kings to cause war, and of *God* to end it.
—Cardinal Pole, to Henry VIII. (*Notes and Queries*, 27 Jan., 1917.)

Wilhelm Laufenberg stared into space then hunkered down on a mat that was made up from two dry pairs of trousers, partially stuffed with straw. He was a lieutenant, after all, and should be allowed to get a little sleep, even in such a horrific time as the present. His eyes were so heavy that sometimes even blinking them caused him to drift off, into semi-sleep, even while he was standing upright, and even while he was walking. He laid his head against the thickest part of the straw-filled pants and immediately fell into a deep sleep. That's when he had the dream, the dream that would alter his life, and with it the course of history—forever.

In the dream, the young Oberleutnant saw clearly a mustachioed soldier that he recognized immediately as the emperor of Germany, Kaiser Wilhelm II, and then another man appeared, George V, the King of England, and dressed in his full regalia. The two men were having tea together, even as young soldiers were crying out in front of them, dying slowly, bleeding to death from gunshot and stab wounds and some freezing to death. Laufenberg knew that the two rulers were cousins, having the same grandmother, Queen Victoria, of Great Britain, and saw clearly that they were both interested in nothing but power and what they could get for themselves, through the war. He saw Paul von Hindenburg, the commander of the German forces in the East, who would become Field Marshall, two-time president of Germany and make it possible for Adolph Hitler to rise to power, step into the picture and offer a toast to the two rulers, even as the soldiers' cries grew louder. The Oberleutnant wanted to kill the three men but when he made a move towards them, a bright light blasted him awake and he stared into the sky, where he saw what he thought was an angel floating above his head. A voice bellowed forth that there would be peace on earth and he would be forevermore a peacemaker, who would reject all war, in its entirety. He blinked his eyes to see the angel better but it was gone, just that fast, and Wilhelm Helmut Laufenberg, twenty-four years old, and a structural engineer by trade, struggled to a standing position and scratched his head, wondering if what he had just seen was reality or just a part of his dream. Then, he stared straight ahead, at the bodies of his fallen comrades, as well as the enemies' comrades' bodies, withered and wilting, rotting and smelling to the high heavens and pondered which was the reality and which was the dream, knowing immediately which he wished was reality and which was not. He rubbed his eyes with the back of a frost-glazed glove and then tilted his head sideways, wondering if what he heard was yet another dream, for he heard the words clearly: "*Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht, alles Schläft einsam wacht hur das traute hochheilige Parr.*" It was lyrical and it was beautiful; someone was singing Silent Night and the vision he had had of an angel immediately came to mind, for whoever was singing had a melodic, soprano voice that seemed to be that of an angel.

“Well Blimey, stone the crows,” Corporal Thomas Williams spat, cocking his head to one side, even as several other soldiers around him, repeated the gesture.

“Jay-suz, will yer lis’en ‘air, ain’t tit bee-you-tahful though?”

Sammy Baldwin nodded at Abe Schmidt. “It’s Silent Night—ain’t it Abe?”

Schmidt, who spoke fluent German, nodded and closed his eyes. “Sure is Sammy and—oh my—what a voice it is what’s singin’ it.”

It was Christmas Eve and the mood was festive, the Germans had even implanted dozens of Christmas trees along the Front and most of them were decorated with as much merriment as the German soldiers could bestow upon their precious *weihnachtsbaums*.

Suddenly, just as it had begun, the singing stopped and there was an eerie silence of perhaps a minute, until clapping and cheering could be heard from both sides and one Englishman yelled, loudly, “Jolly good show then Fritz, jolly good, encore I say then.”

It was mid-afternoon and just as suddenly as the German had begun singing Silent Night, several Englishmen, Irishmen and at least two Americans, as Sammy Baldwin and Abe Schmidt joined in, began singing Silent Night, in their different and various accents but harmonizing remarkably well, considering the circumstances. When they finished singing, it drew quite a bit of applause from the German side, along with cheers and shouts, in broken English, of “Englander iz gut sangar,” and “Tommy, you are gut enuff for us, we vill join you.”

Sammy Baldwin had heard, along with the others, one of the Jerrys exclaiming that they would ‘join them’ but what had it meant? Had the speaker actually meant to join them in another song, or had he meant to literally join them, to desist hostilities and fraternize with the enemy? Because, if that’s what the German soldier had meant, that they wished to call a truce and stop the killing, even if only for Christmas, then Sammy Baldwin, for one, along with scores of others that Sammy knew, was ready to agree.

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THE SPIRIT THAT MOVES US

A spirit superior to every weapon.

—Ovid, *Metamorphoses*. Bk. iii, l. 54.

Once to every man and nation comes the moment to decide,

In the strife of Truth and Falsehood, for the good or evil side.

—J.R. Lowell, *The Present Crisis*. St. 5.

Wilhelm Helmut Laufenberg grabbed a tannenbaum, which they had yet to decorate and ran towards the enemies front line, their trenches, poles strung with barbed wire less than a half dozen feet in front of them, were less than sixty yards from where he began his

sprint towards the middle ground, the ground in between the two front lines—the ground everyone just referred to as No Man’s Land.

He stopped in the middle of No Man’s Land and stuck the tree into the ground, a mixture of icy mud and the remnants of the all too numerous fallen soldiers’ corpses, some of which had lain there for more than a month. The young German officer could see that there were numerous rifles pointed in his direction and put his hands out in front of him, in a friendly gesture. He spoke fairly good English, he had taken it for three years in school, and had a brother who had settled in America a decade ago who also helped him, by writing him letters in English and making him write back in English. “Tommy, listen to me,” he said, “we Germans wish a truce, peace for Christmas, no more killing. I am Oberleutenant Wilhelm Laufenberg and I give to zoo my word that no German soldier vill shoot. Come out and ve vill be friends—ja? It is Christmnas, ja?”

It was mid-afternoon and the silence and stillness in the air was hauntingly eerie.

But, then, Private Sammy Baldwin looked at Private Abe Schmidt, who looked at Corporal Tommy Barnes, who looked at Sergeant Gerald Thatcher and they all smiled and jumped out of the trench and walked towards the German lieutenant, who was calling for his troops to come forward, which they were also now doing. They met in No Man’s Land and began exchanging cigars for cigarettes and jam and sweets for beer; the English had Princess Mary’s Christmas Boxes, some with cigarettes and tobacco and some with chocolates, and the Germans had their metal German belt buckles that read *Gott mit uns* or *God with us*, and German cigar boxes that had a sword with *Flammenschwert*, or Flaming sword, stenciled into the middle of the wooden box. Some of the Germans spoke

perfect English, like Harry Berg, a Berliner who had spent five years in Canada and Fritz Hoffman, who had driven a cab in London and waited tables there for a decade. And, some of the British soldiers spoke perfect German, like Abe Schmidt or Gerd Eichel, who grew up on a farm in Nova Scotia and spoke only German until the age of six, when he first entered public school. A German soldier began juggling tins of food, than miscellaneous items and did a handstand on a flat board, while he juggled three tins with his other hand; he was given an uproarious ovation and was taking a bow when another German brought out a table with pistols, plates and silverware, which he began making disappear. He spoke perfect English and had been a magician with a troupe in London.

Soldiers from both sides were applauding loudly when suddenly a silence crept over the crowd—when a British colonel and a lieutenant appeared. The colonel muttered to the lieutenant, under his breath, and the lieutenant sneered towards the enemies’ front line. “Ah, the damn *Bosches*, must bay tryin’ somethin’ sir.”

From out of the ranks an Irishman shouted, “Hey Fritz—make the colonel disappear,” and a roar of approval enveloped the air but then grew seriously deadly quiet, until Oberleutnant Laufenberg stepped forward.

“Herr Oberst, ve are here to make peace.” When Laufenberg saw the astonished look on the colonel’s face and then a look of impatience and anger, he added quickly, “Ja, and ve are here to bury our dead, ja Herr Oberst, Kerahnel? Bury your dead too?”

The colonel glanced around at the stinking and decaying corpses that littered the real estate known as No Man’s Land, and scowled viciously. “Aw-rye men bury our dead!” He stalked off slowly, his boots caked with the clayish mud, with the career, junior lieutenant fast on his heels.

Some of the men began getting shovels and fashioning crosses, trying to give their fallen comrades a decent burial, while others talked to each other; some, in small groups, were even

seen crossing over, into the other's territory. Sammy Baldwin was talking to Abe Schmidt when Baldwin noticed the German lieutenant who had been the catalyst of the truce, was speaking to another soldier, in German. "*Ja, Ich sage, Dir Kurt, Ich werde nie mehr jemanden töten.*"

Baldwin looked at Abe Schmidt and saw the strange look on his face. "What'd he say Abe?"

"He said he's not gonna kill anybody ever again, Sammy."

"Yeah, that goes for me too man. Hey Abe, I'd like tah get me one ah those belt buckles, like the one you got—you know—the one with the crown in ah middle."

"Yeah, youse want mine Sammy?"

"Naw man, I can get one."

Sammy Baldwin looked up to see the German lieutenant nodding at him and then at Schmidt and they nodded back, causing Oberleutnant Laufenberg to smile. "Do zoo boys vish to go viz us for some Deutsche Schnapps, ja?"

Baldwin glanced at Schmidt, who licked his lips and nodded, then smiled at Baldwin. "Some good drinkin' Sammy, what ah yah say? I'm game."

Baldwin was tired of the war, the orders, always to kill Jerry's and he *had* heard this German officer say he wouldn't kill any more, at least that's what Abe had just told him he had said and if he couldn't trust Abe Schmidt then he couldn't trust anyone anymore.

"Yeah lieutenant sure man. Hey, you think you can get me one ah those belt buckles, the kind with the crown on it and the German writin' saying God's wid us?"

The German officer extended his hand, which Sammy Baldwin shook. "Ja, ja, Ich vill do it for you Baldwin."

"Ah, jes' call me Sammy."

"Ja, und you jus' call me Villie—ja?"

Sammy Baldwin winked at his best friend Abe Schmidt. "Ja, ja, sure thing Villie."

They all laughed good-naturedly and walked into the German's front line trench.

It was almost unbelievable but Sammy Baldwin and Abe Schmidt saw many others like themselves, soldiers in the British Army, Irishmen Scots, Frenchmen and Belgians, who were all talking to the Germans as if they were long lost brothers. There were Christmas trees, with lit candles and decorations and men singing Christmas carols, in German and English. They followed the German lieutenant into a hollowed-out, dry bunker, where Germans and Englishmen were all drinking and singing together. Sammy Baldwin and Abe Schmidt were given glasses of Schnapps and toasted each other and everyone, then joined the caroling and a warm feeling fell over the small groups, up and down both sides of the Western Front. Sammy Baldwin saw a soldier whom he had become friendly with, a Belgian whose wife was due to have a baby any day now; the man never stopped talking about her, as she was living in Belgium, only a few miles from the Western Front, in enemy controlled territory. Baldwin moved over to him and they toasted each other and then the Belgian began talking. He was very happy that it was Christmas Eve and the fighting had stopped, even if only temporarily, but he was so sad that he couldn't see his wife, his beloved wife, his beloved pregnant wife. Sammy Baldwin moved over to where Abe Schmidt was talking to the German lieutenant and brought the Belgian with him. He introduced the Belgian to the lieutenant and the first words out of the man's mouth were: "Do you know where I can get a horse Lieutenant? I have to get to Roulers."

PEACE ON EARTH

Glory to *God* in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

—*New Testament: Luke*, ii., 14.

Blessed are the peace-makers.

—*New Testament: Matthew*, v, 9.

Where there is peace, *God* is.

—George Herbert, *Jacula Prudentum*. No. 729.

Peace be to this house.

—*New Testament: Luke*, x, 5.

The Oberleutnant held the reins to the buggy loosely in his hands and smiled at the thought of reuniting this Belgian soldier with his wife, who was about to have a baby. It was the angel that had changed his life, for the better, he decided and he would resign from the German Army as soon as he could inform his superiors that he was not fit to command a unit, that he was not even fit to be a Rifleman, for he would not kill anyone, ever again and would dedicate his life to making peace, wherever that road should take him, in the future.

The woman was in labor when they got there—there was an old farmhouse but little was left of it—the shelling having ripped most of the boards apart, and so they had gone inside what was left of an old barn, where two cows and a sheep foraged amongst scatterings of hay. There was the Belgian soldier's sister, her husband and two children, aged five and four and two women who had as yet not left the area, even though their houses were in ruins. The four men were told by the trio of women that they could best help by staying out of the way but the Belgian soldier's wife called to him and he bent down and consoled her, as she struggled to push out a child that was struggling to stay put, right where he was, inside her warm and comfortable belly.

It was after two a.m., and Sammy Baldwin, Abe Schmidt and the German lieutenant were all fast asleep, lying on a bed of hay but what was to them a warm mattress, back home with their loved ones, as the trio of battle-weary soldiers' dreams carried them to where their hearts wished they could be.

Someone—somewhere—was singing: “Hark—the Herald angels sing, Glory to the newborn King—Peace on earth and mercy mild—God and sinners reconciled!”

Oberleutnant Wilhelm Laufenberg awoke abruptly and rubbed his tired eyes. Sitting up, directly across from him, sat a wide-eyed Sammy Baldwin. “Ah, Sammy, did you hear the singing, ja?”

Sammy Baldwin nodded to where the Belgian soldier stood holding a shrieking infant and smiled. “Looks like a boy.”

The German lieutenant stood up, just as Abe Schmidt awoke, and they all went to see the newborn infant together. As they gazed down at the tiny bundle of humanity, the German lieutenant uncorked a bottle of Schnapps and they all shared a toast to the boy’s future. They all returned to sleep until the morning sun arose and spent most of the next day, Christmas of 1914, inside a barn in a small Belgium town, in the midst of the insanity of what happens to whole towns, cities, and even nations, when human beings use all their knowledge and power in an attempt to annihilate one another. Dozens of people still living in the small town, located barely a dozen miles from the German front, came to see the newborn child and to bring gifts, anything that they could spare, in tribute to a soldier’s brave wife, and now a new mother, and to a child who had been born despite the inhumanity and insanity that surrounded him. Someone brought a whole broiled pig and someone brought a pot-full of yams, and someone brought a pumpkin pie and the Oberleutnant had brought three kegs of Schnapps and the meal was fit for royalty. They didn’t leave until it was almost midnight, celebrating Christmas Day in what was left of the besieged town. The Belgian soldier wanted to stay with his wife and child but was talked into going back to the Front by Schmidt and Baldwin; the German lieutenant assuring him that he would personally see to it that his wife and child were cared for and left alone by all German soldiers. Before they left, they all sang Hark! The Herald Angels Sing and the men all basked in the warmth of peace on earth—on their share of the earth—on this Christmas Day—anyway.

-7-

THE HIGH COMMAND

Thus can the demigod Authority
Make us pay down for our offence by weight
The words of heaven.

—Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*. Act I, sc. 2, 1. 124.

We made war to the end—to the very end of the end.

—Georges Clemenceau, *Message to the American People*, Sept., 1918.

It was three in the morning and it was all quiet on the Western Front, almost as if there was no war anymore and the Oberleutnant shook the Belgian’s hand and then Schmidt’s and Baldwin’s. Just as they were turning to go back across to their side of the Front, he seemed to remember something important and put a hand on Sammy Baldwin’s shoulder. “Ah Sammy, Ich almost forget; Ich vill bring zoo a belt buckle—ja?”

Sammy Baldwin smiled widely. “Yeah, hey, great lieutenant, the one with the crown in ah middle, right?”

“Ja, ja, zah one wif the crown, Sammy, of course. As soon as Ich get sleep a little, ja.”

“Hey great lieutenant that’s jus’ great, jeez, I gotta get a lil’ shuteye myself,” Baldwin replied, yawning even as he said it.

Sammy Baldwin awoke to sporadic rife fire and saw his best friend, Abe Schmidt, staring at his rifle. “Abe, what’s goin’ on?”

“Aw, it came down from on high, youse know, to resume fightin’ wid the Jerry’s.”

“Yer kiddin’ ...? I mean—” Baldwin exhaled a stream of frosty air and frowned at Baldwin.

“No—I ain’t; youse know I ain’t gonna do it—I ain’t gonna Sammy—I don’t care what they do to me.” Abe Schmidt shook his head wearily.

“Yeah, me either—psst, Abe—a flippin’ colonel’s comin’.”

The colonel—a lieutenant fast on his heels—was walking, hunched over through the trench, until he came to Abe Schmidt, who was in a sitting position—staring at his rifle.

“Wha’ is this, soldier? I ordered resumption of the war and anyone caught slacking off or talking peace to the enemy is subject to being shot.”

“But sir, youse don’t mean it? I mean the Jerry’s ain’t firin’ at us?”

“Ah, a Yank—A—well son, they will, jus’ you wait ‘un see—now hunker down and be ready to fire yer weapon. The Bosches don’t have a sympathetic bone in thar bodies.” The colonel hurried down the trench-way, as Abe Schmidt glared at the backside of the lieutenant, now fast on the colonel’s heels. He turned back towards Baldwin.

“I ain’t gonna do it Sammy—why, they’re jus’ like us—it’s like killin’ yah friend, like killin’ yah brother—I ain’t gonna kill anybody no more.”

Sammy Baldwin nodded his head in agreement. “Me either Abe—me either.”

The German colonel stomped through the trenches screaming: “*Schiesse, oder Ich verschiess Dich. Shoot or I will shoot you.*” The colonel had a pistol in his hand, causing the German sergeant he was facing, and staring at, to raise his rifle, point it towards the enemy Front, then tilt it upwards, towards the sky, and pull the trigger. The colonel stomped away swearing under his breath that he would replace the entire unit with real soldiers and court-martial them all.

When he had returned to his unit, Oberleutnant Wilhelm Laufenberg saw that a few of his men were still awake and were engaged in a conversation—a conversation into which he became easily integrated, himself—the four soldiers telling him that the truce was still being observed, and of a football game they had engaged in with the Brits, losing by only a goal. Laufenberg told them of the Belgian soldier and the two Americans in the London Rifles and of his splendid Christmas. He then told the four German soldiers in his command of his pledge to kill no more—forevermore—a sentiment that was quickly seconded by them all, as they and the Oberleutnant parted company, each looking for a spot to lie down and catch some much needed rest, and to a man they all felt giddily happy—for the first time since they had become soldiers at war.

The colonel smiled at the thought of replacing the entire London Rifle Brigade, assign them to a support or a reserve trench somewhere in Switzerland and replace them with soldiers from the Indian Army, Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims, non-Christians to whom Christmas meant little or nothing to, and he hurried towards the Indian troop area, where he would begin the process of doing just that.

The German colonel saluted the general smartly and smiled thinly. They were going to replace their soldiers with a Prussian unit and would order them to begin shelling the enemy immediately.

Oberleutnant Wilhelm Laufenberg slipped the belt buckle into his greatcoat and smiled; he would find Sammy Baldwin and give it to him now, before the hostilities resumed, which he was certain they would, sooner or later. He crossed over easily and slipped into the British trench, which appeared deserted. Laufenberg wondered where they had all gone, then thought they might be engaging in another football game and wondered if maybe he could join them in it, as he loved football. That's when he heard the first shots and wondered if they were perhaps celebrating more, after all it was just before dusk on the day after Christmas and, as far as he knew, the truce was still in effect.

The colonel smiled at the Indian major, who turned abruptly and ordered his men to open fire on the enemy front, barely sixty yards from where they now peered up over the trench they were in. Most of the soldiers of the Eighth Gurkhas and the Fifth Jats were not much taller than five and half feet, if that, and the trenches, dug by many six foot plus Englishmen and Irishmen, afforded them plenty of room. There were still a dozen or more members of the London Rifle Brigade present and the colonel turned towards them. "Now that you've seen how it tiz done blokes—get at it."

One of the Brigades' sergeants stood to take a shot and was rewarded with a bullet through his left eye and he fell back and landed on the lap of Private Sammy Baldwin, who jumped, as the sergeant's brains splattered his coat and part of his face. He dropped the dead corpse, and the firing commenced all around him. He stood up and stumbled down the trench, then began running, the thick, murky clay-like mud slowing him down considerably, as bullets dug up the dirt everywhere. He finally slid on a frozen patch of ground and hit his head on a large boulder, slipping into a state of unconsciousness.

Oberleutnant Laufenberg saw the soldier, sitting upright and recognized him immediately, thinking 'what a coincidence that the first soldier I see is the one I am searching for.' He crouched down, as bullets chopped up the dirt around him. Not realizing that his unit had been replaced by Prussians, he thought his own men must be firing and couldn't understand what had happened to the truce.

Sammy Baldwin opened his eyes and his head spun; where was he? Then, he heard the firing and bullets cutting up the earth several yards behind him. He grabbed his rifle and sat up, then shivered reflexively, as his wartime senses alerted him that there was someone nearby. He leveled his rifle, just as the German officer came into view and he was reaching into his greatcoat when Sammy instinctively fired, hitting the approaching Oberleutnant in the chest. Baldwin struggled to a standing position and his eyes became saucers when he saw who it was. He staggered over and bent down to cradle the lieutenant's head under his arm, then gasped when Laufenberg smiled at him. "Sammy, don't worry it wasn't your vault—zoo didn't know it was me."

Tears streamed down Baldwin's face and he shivered when the German lieutenant opened his hand and the promised belt buckle fell out, as his head then fell backwards limply. Baldwin took the buckle out of his hand and felt for a pulse, first on the lieutenant's wrist then on his neck and knew there was nothing that could be done, not for a dead man. Death was, once again, all around him. He tried to pick up the lieutenant's body and finally settled on dragging it towards the shallow part of the trench, where he stood the body upright, then bent down and slung it onto his shoulder. He stood upright to begin his journey towards No Man's Land, when bullets began cutting up everything around him, including the body he was carrying. It flew from his shoulders, as he slipped sideways and then turned just in time to catch a bullet in the left side of his helmet, instead of squarely in his forehead. Nevertheless, it penetrated the metal and imbedded itself inside his cranium. He fell on top of Oberleutnant Wilhelm Laufenberg's corpse and he remembered the belt buckle and vowed to never forget what it had cost him. Then he sank, once again, into a state of unconsciousness, this time an ever-darkening, all-encompassing unconsciousness.

EPILOGUE THE BELT BUCKLE

Remembrances embellish life but forgetfulness alone makes it possible.

—General Cialdini, *Written in an Album*.

I never think of the future. It comes soon enough.

—Albert Einstein, *Interview, on Belgenland, Dec.*, 1930.

*I*t wasn't so much that he was a soldier and it was wartime, hell, the man was an ensign in the navy, whereas he had only been a private, and in a foreign army, one that he never had to, or should have joined. Ah, well, that was so long past now, why should he think of it, hell, he couldn't even remember anything of it. No, it wasn't that

so much as it was that she was his first born child and his only daughter and only twenty-one. Aw well, he was only seventeen when he joined the army, after having a fight with the German kid, what was his name, Abe, that's right Abe, Abe Schmidt, wonder what the hell ever happened to him and why is it I can still remember such things if I can't remember anything about why I got all those medals for just four months' service. Was it because of, as one doctor had said, the gunshot wound in the head? Or was it because he, as another doctor had said, didn't want to remember what had happened? Or was it as another had said, a combination of them both? But, she had only just met this guy, on a blind date, cryin' out loud. And now, now she wanted to marry him. What had she just graduated from college for, to be a housewife? Aw well, a housewife was all right and he would have some grandchildren, finally, being as he was already 45 years old. He sat in front of the fireplace in his brick home and smiled. He was to meet the man this very night, the man who wanted to make his only daughter his wife. Well, his daughter had already told him all about the man; he was born and raised in a small town in South Dakota, on a farm, and his mother was still living there, along with her oldest son and three daughters, while her middle son, this one, along with her youngest, were both in the navy, this one as an officer, the other one as an enlisted man. He knew the man's father had died only last year, of gout and exhaustion, must have worked himself to death, he well-knew the amount of work done on a farm because he had worked on one for three years while putting himself through college, back when he first came home to Baltimore. An accounting degree he had gotten and had taken a job with the B&O bus line, in New York City. Had married a girl he had met in college and moved to a nice little town that, coincidentally, carried his last name. He remembered talking to the man over the phone, his daughter all excited as he had just proposed marriage and given her a diamond ring, and all in less than a week and she wanted to accept, and he was going back over to Germany to fight against that madman Hitler. And he was German, spoke it perfectly, as it was his first language and he was in some sort of intelligence work in the navy. Well, he should get a good job then, if he lived to get one. And, he remembered that the boy had told him that he had had an uncle who had died in the Great War, his war, an uncle that he had never known but that he had a picture of. He remembered he had asked the boy about the belt buckle that he had brought back from the Great War, the one he remembered nothing about, now he must remember to show the boy when he came this evening. He shook his head and smiled, his little girl, and now she was getting hitched, God Almighty but time did fly, did it not. He was about to get up and get the belt buckle when his wife came into the room.

"Dewey, Helen's fiancé is here."

He stood up and stretched. "Okay. I was just going to my room for a second, wanna get somethin'. Tell them I'll be right out."

His wife walked back into the living room and smiled at her only daughter's fiancé and thought: 'my but what a handsome man and what a head of hair he has.' Her husband was bald already, they said it had to do with his war injury but she knew it was also the stress of his job, controlling all the money at so large a company. She told him to have a seat and he sat down on the couch, next to his betrothed, just as her father walked into the room.

They shook hands and he said, "Fran-ah-nah Frank Severin Laufenberg, just call me Frank."

"Samuel Dewey Baldwin but just call me Dewey."

They stood staring at each other and then both sat down.

"Well, so you're in intelligence huh Frank?"

"Ah—that's right Dewey—I am."

He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out the belt buckle and reached over and handed it to Frank Laufenberg, who smiled. “Aw, Gott mit uns—God with us—yeah ... well ...”

“Ummm, so I been told; and the Emperor’s crown in the middle. Wonder how I got it, anyway.”

Frank Laufenberg frowned. He’d been filled in, the night before, by his betrothed, that her father had suffered a gunshot wound to the head and had no memories of his service in the British Army. “Well sir probably traded it to a German soldier for something of yours. I remember my dad tellin’ me that was done a lot.”

“But, but how would I trade with the enemy. You mean I’d taken one prisoner?”

“Well, yessir, that could be. But, you know it’s funny, my dad, well he told me my uncle Wil, he was over there, he told me my Uncle Wil wrote him that they had this time in 1914, heh, that’s the year I was born, you know, anyway, they had this time when, during Christmas, my uncle wrote him that they became good friends with the British soldiers. Said they were Anglo-Saxons and the Germans, you know, are Saxons, same kind of upbringing I guess and well, they gave each other these things as presents, you know, they exchanged presents at Christmas time.”

Samuel Dewey Baldwin blanched noticeably and his wife frowned. “Dewey, are you alright?”

“Yeah sure, some indigestion, I guess.” He turned back towards his future son-in-law. “They exchanged presents you say. Hah, interesting but I probably got it in a pawn shop, heh!”

“Hah-hah, yes well, anything’s possible. You really have no memory of your service then?”

“No, but he has a chest full of medals, don’t you Daddy?”

“Aw, well. This uncle of yours, he served over there in the German Army?”

“Yessir, I even remember he was in the Sixth Company, I read some of his letters before my dad passed away.”

“Ah, and his name was Wil, you say?”

“Yessir, Wilhelm actually, his full-name was Wilhelm Helmut Laufenberg. He was a lieutenant. Oh, here, here, I got a picture of him, here.” He handed the picture to his future father-in-law, just as his future mother-in-law called them all in to dinner. She had to call her husband three times, as he sat staring at the picture for a long time, a long, long time, before finally snapping out of it, snapping out of a failing, fading memory, as he smelled his wife’s delicious, divine cooking, and his human senses reclaimed his body.

MUHAMMAD'S REVENGE

-1-

MUHAMMAD'S HAJJ

Yes, I'm an extremist. The black race here in North America is in extremely bad condition. You show me a black who isn't an extremist and I'll show you one who needs psychiatric attention.
—Malcolm X

Turning his back on Jerusalem, Muhammad Arafat laid down his prayer shawl and faced towards Mecca—where he was on a journey to—the first Hajj he had ever made. He was a gunnery sergeant in the Marine Corps—a thirty-year man, working on his fourth hitch—he had twenty-four years in the Corps and three in grade and was so determined to make a Hajj that he had taken thirty days leave to do just that.

His name was Rodney Johnson and he had entered the Marines in 1979, at nineteen, long before the Koran was introduced into his life and long before he became a Muslim.

Prejudice was rife in the 1960's and growing up in the Nation's Capital, Washington, D.C.—where black ghettos were rampant—had intensified a feeling hopelessness in Rodney 'Lil Bit' Johnson's life. He had been but eight years old in 1968 when the poorest sections in the country erupted in violence—upon hearing of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King. The riot was primarily due to the fact that to many residents in the all too numerous ghettos around the country, Dr. King was thought to be their last hope in securing even a vestige of a decent life. Rodney Johnson had been privy, on numerous occasions, to examples of prejudice in his short eight years upon this earth—he had never known anything but dishonesty and destruction from the numerous white cops who made it their duty to bust heads and break backs in his neighborhood and ask questions later. When he came upon a trio of street toughs from his block, one steamy April night in 1968, and saw that they were beating up a particularly vicious, venal cop he couldn't help but run over and kick the prostrate policeman—just before a siren spirited the four boys into an adjoining alleyway. And so it was that one of the street toughs, a sixteen-year old living in the same tenement as Rodney, joked with his buddies that little Rod had tried his best to help, even though he had only gotten in just a lil' bit of a kick, to the fallen cops' head, and Rodney's street-name was born. He carried it throughout his youth, right up until he enlisted in the Marines, on a day that the cops were—not coincidentally—on the lookout for someone fitting his description, who had just taken part in a strong-arm robbery.

You had to be tough to be a Marine and Rodney Johnson was as tough as they came. Standing six feet tall he weighed a solid 175 pounds and could bench press twice that amount. He played varsity football in high school and boxed in the local P.A.L., but got in with the wrong crowd and started doing burglaries and robberies—never quite getting busted but being within

seconds of being caught, on numerous occasions, including the last strong-arm robbery that propelled him into the nearest hideaway, a Marine recruiter's office, where he ended up signing up for a four-year hitch and—not unlike many other Marines before him—in order to stay out of a jail-cell, although, of course, Rodney Johnson's was quite a bit more transcendental. He ended up liking the discipline and regulation, something he had very rarely experienced at home, his single mother, alone, raising him and two older brothers, both of whom ended up in prison. He had gotten out after that first four-year hitch, in the summer of 1983 but had quickly re-enlisted when he realized that he was in danger of returning to the streets and ending up like his brothers. He had always had a desire to see the world and see it he did, being stationed in such faraway lands as the Philippines, Japan, Germany, Somalia, Cuba and Turkey. It was in Turkey that he first became introduced to the Koran, by another soldier, a private who had been a Muslim his entire life and who introduced Rodney Johnson to numerous Muslims from that area of the world, none of whom carried any prejudice with them towards black men, even though many were as white as any other Anglo the two American soldiers had ever met. The reason was the fact that they were all Muslims and it propelled Rodney Johnson into a serious study of that religion.

Rodney Johnson became Muhammad Arafat in the summer of 2002, the same day that he married Hannah Hanifah, an Afghani Shia Muslim living in Turkey, in a Muslim ceremony in Ankara. He had taken the name Muhammad as many had before and after him and the name Arafat, more for Mt. Arafat, a city close to Mecca than the chairman of the PLO, and had made a conscious decision to make a Hajj as soon as he possibly could, even if it meant trouble for him on this earth, for Muhammad Arafat was now more concerned with his soul than with anything that the world could offer him, be that a military promotion—money—or any other worldly possession. When his battalion had been deployed to Kuwait, in May of 2002, being that close to Mecca, he had quickly made the decision to make his Hajj, which was the annual Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca that was required of every able Muslim at least once in his lifetime, and being as the Hajj was only once a year, in the last month of the lunar Islamic calendar, in July that year, Muhammad Arafat, Gunnery Sergeant in the United States Marine Corps, took thirty days leave, notified his wife of his decision, and prepared himself for his journey.

-2- OIL

*Do you know how “Baku” is pronounced in American? It is pronounced “oil.” And American capitalism is striving to establish a world monopoly of oil. On account of oil, blood is being shed. On account of oil, a struggle is being waged in which the American bankers and the American capitalists attempt everywhere to conquer the places and enslave the people where oil is found.—John Reed, American Communist, Quoted in John Riddell, ed. *To See the Dawn: Baku 1920-The First Congress of the Peoples of the East*. (New York: Pathfinder, 1993.)*

Abel Steinmetz glanced down at the map before him and grimaced. He was an

executive for a major American oil conglomerate and he was worried, a not unusual state for him to find himself in. Chevron, a major competitor to his company had, years ago, found a huge, untapped amount of oil and gas in Kazakhstan but due to the political climate, in the aftermath of the Cold War, had been unable to exploit this information, a nightmare to any capitalist business—to say the least.

In late 1996, Steinmetz, along with numerous other oil company executives, had attempted to create a pipeline to carry oil and gas from Baku, Azerbaijan to Ceylan, Turkey. The oil companies dubbed it the new Silk Route, referring to the age-old trade route, between Europe and Asia. And so, the games soon began, with all the major Asian and American players volleying for a say in the choice of the pipeline route.

But, the Clinton administration began focusing more and more on combating terrorism in the region and when in 1999, a new terrorist group, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, or IMU, burst upon the scene, they began pouring funds into the region to help the combating regimes build up their military strength.

When the Bush administration came to power, it was a forgone conclusion, for Steinmetz, as well as many other gas and oil executives, that their demands for easier access to oil would become reality as—after all—Bush and Cheney were both oilmen and Condoleezza Rice had worked for Chevron for a decade, and they all well-knew that it was their money that had helped substantially, to put this administration in office.

And then, in January of 2003, it looked as if the oil companies would cash in their chits, as the administration decided to take out Saddam Hussein and take over his country, an oilman's paradise. They all knew that Vladimir Putin would be against any move against Iraq, because of the oil deal he had with Saddam and the huge amount of money, rumored to be in the billions, that Saddam owed Putin, who could always take it back in oil, but they also knew that too many central figures in the administration, like Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz and Richard Perle were hawks, ready to swoop down on Saddam with everything they had. And so Abel Steinmetz sat before his map, pondering how much of the reconstruction of Iraq—even though it had yet to have been destroyed—he could wrangle for his corporation, which owned engineering as well as construction companies, and how much of the oil he could wrangle for his company. He looked up, as the general counsel for his company walked into the room

Jesse Levine smiled at Steinmetz and chuckled inwardly—Steinmetz always thought someone else had beaten him to the prize, and now was no exception, as Steinmetz nodded at Levine. “What are we gonna do? Chevron's got the ace in ah hole.”

“Yeah, the ace ah spades, huh Abe.” Jesse Levine replied, smiling thinly.

“C'mon will you Jess, everybody knows Halliburton's gonna run the show—Cheney wasn't Cee-E-Oh there for nothin'—and Bechtel's gonna get in before us too.”

“We're gonna be bigger'n Halliburton or Bechtel Abe we'll buy 'em both. Put 'em in with Unocal and Amoco, Chevron, hell we're getting the green light to buy 'em all.”

Steinmetz apprehensively glanced towards the door and frowned. “Jessie, I'll give you the partnership if you make this happen—who'd you talk to?”

Before Levine could answer him the door opened and Steinmetz stood up hesitantly, then beamed at Levine and nodded at the entrant. “Ah, Mister Secretary, how nice to see you sir,” he said, as he walked towards the outstretched palm and smiled.

I never expect a soldier to think.
—Bernard Shaw, *The Devil's Disciple*. Act iii.

The glory and the Nothing of a Name.
—Byron, *Churchill's Grave*.

John Rockiligiuo inhaled deeply—they were in Central Iraq, in the small village of Hajil and white pickup trucks were scattering everywhere. White pickups that were almost certainly being driven by the fedayeen, Saddam's henchmen, as machine gun's mounted over the roofs or tailgates were spitting forth their rounds and one of the fedayeen soldiers shouldered an RPG-7 and fired a round that landed just short of a tank, sitting just adjacent to where Rockiligiuo's platoon had been reconnoitering, under the supervision of Colonel Frank McGuire, who immediately pulled a hand grenade from his belt and let it fly. "Return fire men—return fire!"

But the Marines were already shouldering their M-16's and RPGs and were firing at the now retreating pickups. Rockiligiuo, a private first class who had been nicknamed Sergeant Rock, scored a direct hit when he blew out the front tire of one of the pickups and it skidded sideways and crashed into another truck, causing Rockiligiuo to pull a grenade from his belt, pull the pin and throw it, scoring a direct hit on the other pickup and causing them both to explode violently, into a huge blaze of fire and smoke. The Marines all let out a whoop and the colonel himself, the Regimental C.O., walked over to Rockiligiuo and slapped him on the back, bellowing, "Nice work son." He glanced at the Battalion Sergeant Major. "Sergeant Major get this soldier's name, there's a stripe or two to be had here."

Sergeant Major Glen Jones nodded at the colonel, who was accosted by a lieutenant and spirited away; as he had been summoned to a conference.

Sergeant Major Jones smiled from ear to ear and shook his head, as several of the platoon walked over to where he was standing, just next to Rockiligiuo, who also had an ear-to-ear grin on his face.

Corporal Ron Hastings reached for a cigarette and when he lit one several others mimicked him. He offered Rockiligiuo one and the Rock took it, lighting it and inhaling greedily, as one after the other of the Marines, some sarcastically, and some genuinely, praised the Rock's deadly accuracy.

Rockiligiuo took it all in and modestly stated it was just luck, even as the Sergeant Major summed up everyone's sentiments, when he barked, "Yeah, well, you jus' keep up wid that luck, Private, and in no time at all we'll all be callin' you by your nickname but for real, huh men?"

-4-

ABDULLAH AHMAD ABDULLAH

Famine is in they cheeks,

Need and oppression starveth in thine eyes,
Contempt and beggary hangs upon thy back.
—Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*. Act v, sc. 1, 1. 69.

A hungry man smells meat afar off.
—Thomas Fuller, *Gnomologia*. No. 224.

Abdullah Ahmad Abdullah scowled ruthlessly, as he drove his dump truck towards Karbala; if he had been from anywhere in America they would have nicknamed him Triple A but Abdullah Ahmad Abdullah had never been closer to America than one time when he had seen it on a map—and had—in fact—in his forty-one years on the planet never been out of Iraq, and he was hungry, as were his wife and seven children and everyone else in his village. He nodded at his brother-in-law, Mohammad Ijam, and his scowl deepened, his brother-in-law's cheeks were so hollow his lips had literally been sucked into his mouth and disappeared; you could only see his mouth now when he opened it to speak, which was very rarely nowadays, as even speaking was an effort that physically drained the forty-three year old farmer. Their truck was full of onions and garlic that they prayed that Allah would see to it they could sell or trade for bread, milk and meat, in Karbala. They knew that the American soldiers had sealed off several cities and that Karbala was probably one of them but hunger knows no master and Abdullah drove on ruthlessly, knowing that Karbala was their best chance to get money or food.

About a dozen miles behind Abdullah's dump truck a battered 1979 Chevrolet rolled towards Karbala—filled with three women in the front seat and four children in the backseat. They were from Wahdah, and were going to Karbala, where they had relatives and where, according to government soldiers, it was safe. Wahdah was inside Baghdad and bombs were going off everywhere and when Maryum Hussein's home had been totally destroyed she had packed up her mother, her aunt and her four children and fled towards Karbala—sixty miles away.

Private First Class George Young nodded at Private first Class Jesse Simons and they both lit cigarettes, exhaling streams of noxious smoke into the humid, desert air. They both stared at the razor wire that was strung across the road and then at the half dozen Bradley fighting vehicles and tanks that were parked near the checkpoint. They cradled their M-16s and savored the last of their cigarettes. Easy duty, manning this checkpoint, as least as far as Young and Simons were concerned, after all, considering the firepower staring them down, *who* wouldn't stop.

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MOHAMMAD MUHAMMAD

The child that is not clean and neat,
With lots of toys and things to eat,
He is a naughty child, I'm sure—
Or else his dear papa is poor.
—R.L. Stevenson, *System*.

The childhood shows the man,
As morning shows the day.
—Milton, *Paradise Regained*. Bk. iv, 1. 220.

Mohammad Abdullah Muhammad was twelve years old and he was the fastest, strongest runner of all the Iraqi children in his neighborhood, a poverty-stricken slum in aptly named Saddam City. Mohammad loved to play soccer, he always scored ninety percent of the goals, and played with men who couldn't contain him, as he could outrun any boy or man ever since anyone could remember and he could do it in a short sprint of fifty yards or a longer run, he had beaten them all in distances of up to one mile and everyone knew that if he could just get out of Saddam City, where his father, as well as most of the other residents were so poor that they barely had enough to eat and depended upon raising livestock, that was kept near and sometimes even inside their small apartments, that he would become a world-class soccer player because anyone that could run the way Mohammad could was a sure thing; they were already scouting him for the Iraqi Olympic soccer team. They all saw the innumerable statues of Saddam Hussein everywhere they went but they also knew that he was a ruthless tyrant who had been the cause of many disappearances of innumerable people from the many neighborhoods, in Saddam City. Many had been disfigured or disabled but most never came back, once they were taken by Saddam's henchmen. Mohammad smiled at the other boys with him, as they spoke in low monotones, copying their elders, as you never knew when there was a government spy, or just a neighborhood rat, around to squeal on you so that they could get a 'favor,' or some food. Mohammad and his half-dozen teenage friends were planning a trip to Old City, in the heart of Baghdad's sprawling commercial center, where the marketplace contained the most precious of all commodities—food.

Mohammad wanted to go that very day, it was Monday March 24, 2003, and they all knew that America's troops were bombing sporadically, but he was voted down by his friends who wanted to go that Friday, the 28th, because one of them, Hashim Ramadan had a cousin whose uncle was driving his truck into Sha'b, which was smaller than Old City but nonetheless a city with a marketplace, and that meant food, food that they all decried they would get some of, even if they had to beg, borrow or steal it.

The soldiers of America have killed more Americans, twenty times over, than they have foreign foes.—Elbert Hubbard, *The Philistine*. Vol. Xx, p. 38.

Gunnery Sergeant Rodney Johnson, a.k.a. Muhammad Arafat, had a problem—a big problem—it was March 27, 2003 and his unit was on its way towards Baghdad, where he would have to kill fellow Muslims, something he had taken a solemn vow not to do. He had taken his vow some eight months in the past—in July of 2002—on his Hajj and he could still remember it. On July 2, 2002, Muhammad Arafat had begun his pilgrimage to Mecca. He still had memories of that fateful month, when he had stood on Jabal Al-Rahma, the hill on the plain of Arafat and listened to a sermon by a Muslim Imam, a sermon that was burned into his brain, a sermon that spoke about Jihad and how every Muslim must be ready to make his own Jihad against non-Muslims—whenever and wherever it was needed. The Muslim Imam had stood on the same Mount of Mercy that the prophet Muhammad had stood upon and delivered his farewell sermon. Gy. Sgt. Rodney Johnson, Muhammad Arafat, knew that Muhammad had been a soldier too, a leader in many battles, but battles against the Meccans and the Jews, never against other Muslims and he made a solemn vow to Allah, that day, to never kill any Muslims, either. As the ever-darkening sky approached, he said his fifth prayer of the day, the ‘isha, and then prayed for wisdom from Allah, prayed that he be given the strength to do a Jihad on his own if it was Inshallah, (God willing) and reached for his M-16, which he checked to make sure was loaded with a full clip. The scuttlebutt was that a firefight in Karbala was likely and that his unit would be in the thick of it; they were going to go door-to-door and flush out any known or suspected terrorists. Karbala was where Imam Husayn, in 680 A.D., the youngest son of Ali and Fatima, and grandson of Muhammad, was killed with seventy of his followers while attempting to seize the Islamic caliphate, the caliphate ruled the Muslim faith, from Yazid ibn Mu’awiyya, the second Umayyad ruler. It was, therefore, a sacred Muslim city and Muhammad Arafat would not go there to kill his brother Muslims and he prayed now to Allah—for an answer to his predicament.

The captain explained to the gunny what the mission was to be and that they would be leaving first thing in the morning; he barely heard the soft reply the gunny made, that he wasn’t going, as he turned abruptly on his heel and headed back towards his tent. It was then that Muhammad Arafat—Gy. Sgt. Rodney Johnson, U.S.M.C.—leveled his rifle at Captain William McMann’s back, yelled that they were under attack, and squeezed the trigger on his M-16, whereupon the first 7.62-millimeter high-velocity, full-metal-jacketed bullet slapped into the back of Captain McMann’s head and threw a clod of bloody bones and brain matter onto the side of a P.F.C.’s helmet. The P.F.C. turned abruptly and saw the Gunny pointing his M-16 towards where he stood staring at the captain—who was lying several feet away in a pool of blood—and turned just as another Marine, about a hundred yards away, yelled that they were under attack and began firing his M-16 at the PFC, who shot back just before being cut down by a .50-calibre sniper rifle, as they opened up on each other with everything they had. Within ten minutes there were

thirty injured Marines and seven who lie dead, including Gunnery Sergeant Rodney Johnson, who along with the other six, would be awarded the Purple Heart—posthumously.

Not far from this battle, a British Challenger Two tank, rolling down a trail just outside Basra saw what he believed was the enemy, on his radar, just as the “enemy,” an M-1 tank saw what he also took to be the enemy, on his computer screen, and they both fired simultaneously, and blew each other to bits. Four dead Brits and five dead Marines, which, in retrospect, would not have been too bad had several more M-1 tanks and Bradley fighting vehicles not rolled up and spotted what they thought were the enemy, firing upon each other, just as a U.S. patriot missile shot down a British Tornado, overhead, and an A-10 Warthog wiped out two British armored vehicles, while an AWAC called in fire on a camp in Nasiriyah that he thought was a Republican Guard hideout but was, in reality, a Marine unit. Thirty Marines were wounded and fifteen were killed. They called it “friendly fire,” but don’t try telling that to any of the dead soldiers’ relatives; you’d be in for quite an argument.

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UNFRIENDLY FIRE

Death in my boots may-be, but fighting, fighting!
—Robert W. Service, *Song of the Soldier-Born*.

Misdeeds often return to their author.
—Seneca, *Thyestes*, 1. 311.

Priate First Class George Young exhaled a stream of cigarette smoke and nodded at his compatriot Private First Class Jesse Simmons, as a Marine corporal walked over to them. Young smiled at him. “Hey, it’s Sergeant Rock, hey Rock, when you gonna get that next stripe?”

Corporal John ‘Sgt. Rock’ Rockiligiuo lit a cigarette and returned Young’s smile. His unit had just pulled into Karbala, as a force was being built up on the outskirts of the town, where they expected to incur heavy enemy forces and were planning to take over the city in a few more days. Young and Simmons had heard the scuttlebutt about Sgt. Rock and his promotion, from PFC to Corporal, two grades for one heroic deed. They had heard the story but both Marines eagerly awaited Sgt. Rock’s version of the tale.

Cpl. John Joseph Rockiligiuo exhaled a stream of smoke from his nostrils and shouldered his M-16, taking aim at an imaginary white pickup truck like the one whose tires he had blown out in Hajil, just two weeks ago, and described it in detail for his two avid listeners. He was telling them about the grenade that he had pulled from his belt to blow up that truck and the one it had

collided with after he had blown out its front tires, when he first saw the large dump truck heading their way. He lowered his M-16 when both PFC's began yelling and screaming at the top of their lungs at the dump truck, as PFC George Young ran out and began waving his arms at the driver.

Abdullah Ahmad Abdullah stepped down hard on the gas when his brother-in-law—Mohammad Ijam—said that they must continue forward because the soldiers certainly would not let them through the impasse, several strands of razor wire strung across the roadway and they desperately needed to get through to Karbala, for their lives and those of their families, depended upon them getting through and getting some food. They ignored the tanks and Bradley fighting vehicles because no one seemed to be operating them and continued past the two sentries, just as they heard them yelling, yelling unintelligible words to the ears of two Iraqi Shia Muslims, neither of who spoke a word of English. It was at this juncture that Cpl. John 'Sgt. Rock' Rockiligiuo raised his M-16 to his shoulder and drew a bead on the large dump truck's front tire; he inhaled slowly, just as he had done in Hajil thirteen days ago, and just as he always did when he was on the rifle range, where he always shot an expert score, and delicately squeezed the trigger several times, as the copper-jacketed bullets blew the front tire apart, just as Rockiligiuo heard a commotion behind him and turned to see a beat-up Chevy Impala roaring past the checkpoint, causing him to immediately swing his M-16 towards it and take deadly aim at the front tires. He squeezed off three quick rounds and the loud pop told him that he had scored a bulls-eye, as the Impala swerved and skidded into the dump truck and the veteran Rockiligiuo knew immediately what he had to do, as he pulled a hand grenade from his belt, pulled the pin, and let it fly. A star pitcher in the Little League's throughout his youth and also on his high school varsity baseball team, Rockiligiuo pitched a strike and both vehicles were incinerated, as they blew apart, depositing glass, metal and the body parts of four children and five adult Iraqi Shi'ite Muslims, in all directions.

That very evening Cpl. John Joseph Rockiligiuo would officially become Sergeant John Joseph Rockiligiuo and his namesake became a reality—everyone still called him Sgt. Rock but with a much more elevated tone of respect, for in the United States Marine Corps, such things were what legends were made of and John Joseph Rockiligiuo, a twenty year old who had barely made it through high school would forever more become a legend, of sorts, in Marine Corps history. He would become a lifer, a thirty-year man, and one who would rise through the ranks to Sergeant Major, the highest rank an enlisted man could rise to, unless he chose to become a warrant officer or was awarded a battlefield commission, which Rockiligiuo would be offered, in the future, but would turn down, only adding to his mystique and legend among enlisted personnel in the baddest of the bad, the toughest of the tough and the elitist of the elite, the most proficient of all the killing machines, a trained killer among trained killers, a highly tuned, highly trained human being who could kill with the highest technology known to man, in the daytime or night, a detached, decorated, deadly machine, known more commonly throughout the civilized world as a United States Marine.

The boys ran through the marketplace, at Sha'b, where they had come, in the back of eleven-year-old Hashim Ramadan's cousins' pickup truck, with abandon, taking foodstuffs as they went. Mohammad Muhammad, the fastest twelve year old any of the merchants had ever seen was leading the charge and stuffing fruits and vegetables inside his shirt as he ran, his hands

almost as fast as his feet. They ducked into an alleyway and huddled around Mohammad, who had gotten maybe three times as much as the others. They were sharing the booty with one another when the first explosion sounded an ominous warning of more yet to come—destruction and decimation.

Captain Robert Toney had the target coordinates that he had just received from Central Command, in his AWACS plane, and was in the process of passing them on to a B-1B bomber flying over western Iraq, when Major Ben Franks nodded at him and intoned, “Is this Saddam’s location coordinates?”

Toney shrugged his shoulders. “Who the hell knows Ben, y’know, ours is not to question why ours is but to pass it on to the Bee-One crew and let them figure it out, what the hell they’re all Saddam sightings nowadays, anyway, huh?”

Franks nodded, as Toney passed the information along to the B-1B crew, who triple-checked them before arming four two-thousand pound JDAMs, more commonly known as smart bombs and, only minutes later, the B-1B’s computers released two hard-target-penetrating JDAMs, then, three seconds later, dropped two more but with greater explosive power inside their warheads.

They all heard the sonic boom but only Mohammad was quick-witted enough to drop the food he was eating and do what he did best—run.

The eighty-five hundred degree fireball sliced through buildings, streets, tables and chairs, and flesh and blood, collapsing the lungs, bursting the arteries and blowing apart the bodies of any human being that was caught in its path, as were Mohammad Muhammad’s four compatriots, along with thirty-five other Iraqi civilians that day, on March 28, 2003, in a marketplace, in Sha’b, Iraq. Mohammad Muhammad’s winged feet carried him away from the incineration but not far enough or fast enough to leave him completely unscathed, as the most precious thing to him was what he lost that afternoon, his legs, which lie some thirty feet away from his bloody, battered and twisted shell of what would, forevermore, pass for his body. It was twisted and torn beyond recognition and when, two hours later, it was carried towards a pickup truck and on to medical assistance, the two Iraqi’s carrying it wondered silently if it would not be better for this human being, if they just left him lying where they found him—until he died. But, they couldn’t leave another Muslim’s body lying ignominiously in the street—if it was Allah’s will for him to live then they would not be the Muslims to go against the All-mighty, for Allah might very well have something else for this boy to do, in the future.

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BIRTH OF A GRAND AYOTOLLAH

A great revolution is never the fault of the people but of the government.—Goethe.

Every revolution was first a thought in one man’s mind, and when that same thought occurs to another man, it is the key to that era.—Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays*.

God has given us all the rules of the game.
—Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini

They took over the entire country—they ruled everywhere—with soldiers and guns and tanks and they established a military base where their soldiers lived. The soldiers were very much sought after by the peasant women, whose state of poverty never really changed but only shifted gears. Before the soldiers came, there was Saddam, who ruled with an iron fist—and you couldn't trust anyone and they could take you away and you'd never be heard from again but you could eat and you could work, even if the wages made you poor. With the soldiers, you could also work but the good jobs were already taken, by English-speaking Iraqis, most of who had gone to school in America. An American general ran the country until he handed the presidency over to an Iraqi born businessman who had lived in America two-thirds of his life. They ruled the country on one premise and one premise alone—those with money ruled those without money; the American dollar was worth fifty times the Iraqi dollar and so many women and children became unable to support themselves because their parents couldn't afford to send them to school, in America or Great Britain, the Iraqi schools being frowned upon, even though run by Americans and Brits, and if you had no money your children were quickly shunted out of these schools—as soon as they turned sixteen—and so many of the women became prostitutes in the many American-owned bars and red-light districts, which were also owned by the American businessmen, whom all Iraqis knew were either oilmen, soldiers or former soldiers, or politicians or former politicians.

The hospitals in Iraq were run no differently from any other business and if you had no money, or insurance, you got no treatment. The insurance was tied to the jobs and the good jobs were all taken by the college-educated, English-speaking Iraqis, the ones the government approved of. The average worker couldn't afford the insurance and the businesses they worked for took so much out of their check that if they wanted health insurance they couldn't afford to live—just like the American system. And so, many of the war-wounded were shunted from place to place, home to shelter, in an attempt, by the government, to contain any costs to keep them alive. Unless they had a family with money they would be cast out upon the streets—sooner or later.

Mohammad Muhammad lay in the filth and the stench of his own feces. He was lying in an alleyway and he wanted to kill himself. Someone had kicked over his begging cart and he couldn't right himself back up—onto it. They passed him by and they didn't look at him because they were in such a hurry to get where they had to go and to do what they had to do, for themselves, and they always made excuses why they couldn't stop for a lowly beggar—just like in any big city in America.

Several hours passed and Mohammad Muhammad wondered silently if he were dead. He turned his head just enough so that his right eye could see blurry visions, he had lost his left eye

in the explosion in Sha'b, a year and a half ago but what seemed like ten years ago to Muhammad, who had turned thirteen and was the only one to realize it. Then, a strange thing happened, he felt himself rising off the ground and felt as if he were flying—'maybe this is what it feels like when you die,' he thought, as he blacked out, as much from malnutrition as anything else.

Mohammad Muhammad awoke, a day later, staring out at the Red Sea. He was being cared for by several clerics and they immediately welcomed him to their home, which would now become his home. They fed him and changed his clothes for him and read to him. After several days of this, he was well enough to have them begin making artificial legs for him, prosthetics, something he would eventually abandon, as his legs were missing, all the way up to his hips. After awhile, he asked one of the clerics what they were reading to him and they told him it was Allah's book.

A month passed and one day, after questioning one of the Mullah's about a verse in the Koran, a tall, stately Arab walked over to him. He had a long, dark beard speckled with silver, and he sat next to Mohammad, on the Persian rug that Mohammad used as a bed and a table to eat off of and spoke softly to him. He handed him a book and when Mohammad asked what it was, he softly replied, "It is the Holy Quran Mohammad; it is Allah's Words, it is the path to freedom and enlightenment. We will teach you here. There are many Mullahs and Caliphs here to teach you and I will teach you also." A Mullah that Mohammad particularly liked approached them from a short distance and the man turned his head.

"Ah, *Khan*, they are ready for you to lead them in prayer."

The man nodded and stood up. He appeared to be a giant, to Mohammad, who asked him who he was and what he would be taught. The tall man kneeled down and moved his mouth to within inches of Mohammad Muhammad's. He lowered his voice and the thirteen-year-old amputee felt a chill go through him—here was a great man and he was interested in him—he was going to tell him something for only his ears. The man smiled and whispered, almost conspiratorially, "I am Muhammad's messenger and I am going to teach you—Mohammad, because I feel you have suffered enough at the hands of the infidels and everyone here knows you were sent to us from Allah; you will be a great man someday."

"But what is your name? What shall I call you?"

"I am Osama!"

EPILOGUE

MUHAMMAD'S REVENGE

No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both **God** and **Money**.

—Luke 15:13

Those who avenge themselves when wronged incur no guilt.

— **The Koran**

Abel Steinmetz sat behind his large desk and exhaled a stream of noxious smoke. He was the CEO of Unicorp, or Universal Corporation, and he was one of the most powerful men on the planet. The year was 2024 and Unicorp controlled everything, in one form or another, in America, because they owned everything, they or one of their many subsidiaries. It had all begun back in 2003 when Steinmetz had gone into business with the government when his company, or one of their many subsidiaries, had taken over the reconstruction of Iraq and had then gone about taking over every country, or obtaining that country's petroleum rights that they could, throughout the world. Besides Iraq, they had taken over Nigeria and most of the African Coast, Iran and Turkey, had drained Alaska's petroleum and almost the entire Persian Gulf, with the exception of some of the rogue Muslim majority states around the Caspian Sea, like Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan and Siberia, a blow to Steinmetz, as huge new reserves were discovered there in 2010 and the Muslims had been capitalizing on them ever since, a nightmare for Steinmetz and his conglomerate cronies, including, of course, the innumerable politicians who had helped Unicorp take over Iraq in 2003. Some of them now called for a war with the IMW, or the International Muslims of the World, which was headed by who Steinmetz considered the most corrupt and despotic leader the world had ever seen but, nevertheless, one who, he had to admit, had brought all the Islamic movements and terrorist groups together, under one umbrella, that being the IMW; such groups as the IMU, the Mujahedeen, the IRP, the HT, the PLO, the Taliban, the IAP and several others, all of whom joined with IMW to produce a movement of such proportions that it was unheard of in past world history. Said to be in excess of a billion Muslims, they had enough nuclear warheads to blow up the earth ten times over and although Unicorp had fifty times that capacity, what was the difference how many times over you could destroy the earth? Steinmetz pushed the button on his desk that opened the front door to his office and Jesse Levine, the president of Unicorp walked in.

"C'mon Abe, we got a dozen of the most important people in the world waiting on you to tell them what to do; these are the most powerful people—besides us of course—in ah world. Cheer up fah Cris'sakes, the Pope's out there. You know we got all the religious leaders on our side, hell that Eye-M-aw-W-yaw may have all the A-rabs and ah rest ah them Muslims but we got all the Christians and Jews. C'mon Abe we got a hundred times their money, we can't lose we never do, not since, Gee-zuz, two thousand and what, three? Been a long time comin' huh? C'mon your ol' pal George Bee is out there, with the president. C'mon Abe, I know you memorized your speech.

Abel Steinmetz stood up and inhaled deeply; his six-foot-six-inch frame was always impressive and he straightened his shoulders, as he walked towards the huge conference room that adjoined his office. He smiled as he walked into the room, even as a sense of foreboding and doom enshrouded his entire being. He shook hands all around and walked to the podium. Levine had his speech laid out on the platform, and, even though he had memorized it thoroughly, he stared down at it and suddenly his mind went blank and his emotions put words into his mouth that hadn't been written down, or rehearsed. "That damned Mohammad Muhammad, Grand Ayatollah hell, if it wasn't for him we'd of controlled the world a decade ago. He's threatened us once too many times, gentlemen and I say this time we don't back down."

The Pope looked around and then addressed the room, "You know gentlemen, I have just been in office barely a month and many are trying to remove me because of my alliance with Unicorp and—"

“Your alliance with us has always been above board Your Excellency and I ...”

The Pope raised his right hand and Jesse Levine stopped talking. “I just want to say one thing and that is that the Grand Ayotollah, Mohammad Muhammad wishes to be a martyr and he will probably get his wish, he is very dangerous, he wants to take the world with him; one more thing you should know; a fact many have overlooked about this wish for martyrdom—he is thirty-three years old.”

Silence reigned until the president of the United and Universal States rasped, “He’s thirty-three years old? What in God’s name has that got to do with anything?”

No one spoke and the Pope just smiled. After an interminable silence, the Pope cast a thoroughly disgusted glance around the room. “Gentlemen, our Lord and Saviour—Jesus Christ was thirty-three when they crucified him.”

Mohammad Muhammad sat in front of the phalanx of microphones and stared into the monitor, the monitor that would broadcast this speech to two billion listeners around the world, half of them Muslims. Next to him sat the IMW’s leaders, there were several Mahdi’s and Emirs, including his teacher, and second in power only to him, Emir Osama Bin Laden, and a Mullah for every Muslim sect, the world over. He sat his speech before him and rose up, in his wheelchair, to his full height of three feet three inches then clenched his jaws—the speech was to be a Fatwa, a Fatwa that was backed by every leader on the podium and he—the Grand Ayotollah—would call for the destruction of the world’s infidels, which were all non-Muslims and he would call for it in the name of Allah. The light, that signaled to him that he was on, lit up and he stared brutally into the camera and began his speech, the speech that would bring an end to the world, and all because he had lost his legs and all his family and friends, in a bombing raid on his country—Iraq—some twenty-one years ago, and now—in the name of Allah—it all began, as he spoke in Arabic, which was automatically translated into whatever language the listener had his set programmed for: “*Bismiullah ar-Rahman, al-Rahim ...*”(In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful ...)

BIG SUGAR

-1-

THE PORT

God the first garden made and the first city Cain.—Abraham Cowley, *The Garden*.

Thomas Wang strode resolutely across the glistening terrazzo floor at New York City's huge Port Authority Bus Terminal. Wang, the CEO of Wang International, a huge computer-tech firm, was in a hurry but then Thomas Wang was always in a hurry. He had been in the city for two days straight, in heavy negotiations with his staff and the CEO and staff of Plum Computers, as the two firms were consolidating their assets in order to buy out an ailing microchip computer firm. It was the advent of a new year, 1990, along with a new decade and—as far as Thomas Wang was concerned, a new era—an era in which computers and high technological companies would outstrip and out-sell all others, to the extent that they would dwarf them almost into oblivion. Wang was a visionary who was consumed with buying out any software or high-tech company that showed even a hint of any intention to sell. Wang's limo driver had taken ill and, rather than employing a new one, Wang had decided to try, for the first time in his life, the mass transit system; he had decided to take the bus back to his palatial estate in New Jersey, even though several of his staff minions had offered to drive him home in their cars. Wang had been offered a large block of shares in a bus company, as part of the microchip computer deal, and he wanted to see firsthand what he might be getting involved in and how many people rode the buses, as well as what kind of people they were. He spotted a men's room on the second floor of the terminal and headed towards it, not even realizing that there would be a portable toilet on the bus. He noticed several maintenance men dressed in red jumpsuits pushing mops silently across the shiny terrazzo tiles and smiled towards them, as he began walking up the stairway that led to the bathrooms.

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THE SAVIOR

A saint may be defined as a person of heroic virtue whose private judgment is privileged.
—Bernard Shaw. *Saint Joan: Preface*.

The huge black man smiled, showing several gold-capped teeth and a pressing need of further dental work. He was six feet four inches tall and weighed 250 pounds—almost all of it sinew or muscle. Known around the port only by his street name, Big Sugar, he was a Jamaican who had been living in the port for a little over three months. The Port Authority Bus Terminal, which was situated on the corners of 42nd Street and Eighth Avenue, was home to innumerable drug-addicts and alcoholics as well as the mentally ill, the incapable and the infirm, and those innumerable human beings that found themselves homeless through circumstance, a stroke of bad luck or just that cruel, uncalculating master of us all—fate—and the Port was a veritable glass and steel-girded city within a city, for most of them. The sprawl of the two lengthy city-blocks, located in the heart of downtown Manhattan, provided this ragamuffin population with enough unguarded tourists and unsuspecting travelers for many of them to virtually make their living's off the marks, robbing and stealing from them indiscriminately, and using most of their booty to buy drugs or alcohol from the numerous dealers in and around the Port. Of course, there was always that rarity of rarities among the homeless population—like Big Sugar himself—an honest man who neither stole nor harmed anyone willingly and who, though down on their luck, rarely stayed in the Port for very long, Big Sugar being the exception that broke all the hard and fast rules, the hard and fast rules that said anyone who could escape the Port would—and did—as soon as they could, but not Big Sugar, who the homeless, the alkie, the street people and even the mentally ill it seemed, all knew. They knew Big Sugar's story, that he had come up from Belle Glade, in Florida, where he had been working, cutting sugar cane and, as the story went, had come to New York after injuring, or even killing, one of the bosses who worked for one of the major sugar cartels, cartels that held enormous financial as well as political power in the State of Florida.

Big Sugar was easily identifiable as—besides his enormous size—he had two fingers missing from his left hand and an evil looking scar that started just below his left eye and continued working its way down his face and neck only to disappear into the heavy work-shirt he usually wore. He was listening intently, as Stella, a one-legged diabetic, who lived in a wheelchair and made her living begging coins in the Port, usually in front of the north wing of the terminal, was explaining to him how a former pimp and drug-dealer, who was presently out of business and homeless, had just ripped her off, stealing all of the money in her begging cup. Big Sugar knew the culprit by his street name, Blacksnake, and saw him, standing several yards away staring intently at Stella and Big Sugar knew immediately that Blacksnake realized that the jig was up when he smiled deceptively and then turned and ran for cover. It was shoulder to shoulder on 42nd Street at this hour, just after seven p.m., and Blacksnake, who knew every crack and crevice in the sidewalks, soon disappeared from view. Big Sugar scowled. “He gone Stella—how much did he get?”

“He gots all my dinner money Sug-gah fo-ah bucks.”

Big Sugar was known for protecting the weaker of the Port's homeless. “Oh mahn Stella, that is a shame, its turbull, but I will get it back for you—you'll see.”

Stella frowned and her head drooped onto her emaciated chest, as she sniffled silently; but then a woman dropped a dollar bill into her empty cup and she perked up, thinking that maybe she *would* eat this evening and why not? After all, Big Sugar was back. He was Stella's personal savior, as well as many of the other Port's homeless and downtrodden, as they had been forced to routinely turn over their alms and possessions to the many thieves and thugs who had waylaid them on a regular basis, until, that is, three and a half months ago when Big Sugar had appeared on the scene and it had been, ever since, almost an aberration, as it had been this very evening

with Stella, that any of the weaker residents were robbed at all. Big Sugar had been on the other side of the Port helping someone else when Blacksnake had seen his chance and robbed her. Stella had never known such peace before Big Sugar had shown up—she had even taken notice of, as Goethe defined clearly, her second soul—hope. Big Sugar was her savior and had been the one who had brought that peace and hope back into her life, even as his very presence now seemed enough to scare any and all of the would-be thieves and thugs away from her—far into the night.

A man dropped two quarters into her tin cup and Stella beamed, realizing that she would make the stolen four dollars back now, in no time at all, for Big Sugar was back and he had always brought her good luck, as savior's have a way of doing.

Big Sugar stood surveying the crowded sidewalks of the metropolis known far and wide by most of its residents, simply as the City, and kept a wary eye for any of the many thugs and scam artists he knew on sight, as he put a determined grimace on his already scarecrow appearance, for Big Sugar wished not to engage anyone in physical combat unless, like Blacksnake, they had enacted a deed that called for retribution, so as to make certain that the misdeed they had performed would be their last, in the Port Authority anyway. Big Sugar was dressed in a pair of faded blue-jeans, a woolen shirt that helped to camouflage a razor-sharp thirty-inch long machete and he wore a pair of nineteen triple E work boots that he had purchased for a cut-rate price at a downtown Amy-Navy store. He was quite a sight, a savior for many, like Stella, and a nightmare for others, like Blacksnake, who would stay away from the Port for many weeks to come, his fear of Big Sugar enough to do what no blue uniform and badge had ever done.

Thomas Wang spied a telephone and made a decision that he could hold his water long enough to call his wife and let her know what his situation was. Just as he took the telephone off the receiver, a man wearing an orange wool-knit cap that was pulled down over his forehead eyed him warily then nudged his arm. “Hey-yah got a numbah for youse mane.”

“Excuse me,” Wang said slipping his left palm over the receiver.

“Mane, I got a card numbah for youse mane. Youse can call anywhere in ah world for free mane, gimme a nickel for it mane—c'mon youse can call China all night mane—it's good.”

“Excuse me but I have my own credit cards if I need to call anyone.” Wang, inside a bus terminal for the first time in his life, couldn't fathom the man's aggressive behavior or his inability to deal with him, men usually quavered or jumped whenever Thomas Wang spoke to them.

“Hey, c'mon gimme a fin for it mane; I gots a round ah bread waitin' on me, gimme a nickel mane, I needs dat vial bad mane, c'mon now!”

Thomas Wang shrank back when the man reached over and grabbed his shirt and they began scuffling, until the drug-addicted thug was picked up bodily and thrown to the floor. He jumped up and turned to face Big Sugar, who had grabbed him from behind and deposited him on the floor, where, staring up at Big Sugar's looming presence, his face turned crimson. “Ah-nah, I wuz jus' ask-in' diz mane here for some money is all Big Mane, youse know?”

Big Sugar scowled at the light-skinned Puerto Rican man who he knew only as Flash. “Git on Flash and leave this mahn alone.”

Flash took off in a flash of his own, he had once been a champion hundred-meter sprinter, and he almost bowled over a Port Authority policeman as he turned to make sure Big Sugar wasn't coming after him. The policeman frowned and walked over to Big Sugar. "Say Big Man, what's goin' on here anyway, man? I saw Flash over here, is he high again?"

Before Big Sugar could reply, Thomas Wang introduced himself and then spoke, in great detail, of the incident, praising Big Sugar for his courage and bravery but it was nothing new to the transit authority cop, he had heard the same thing, in the past, from many grateful commuters, as well as homeless beggars and itinerants, all of whom had been rescued by the big Jamaican, from someone attempting to do them harm.

Jimmy Porelli, a New York City policeman for nearly two decades and assigned to the transit authority for the past seven years, rubbed the back of his hand over his grizzled whiskers—he hadn't shaved in almost a whole day and the beginnings of the salt and pepper beard clashed slightly with his completely dark black hair. Porelli had just turned forty-one and was seriously considering taking a pension the following year. He glanced towards the two holding cells, in the small precinct on the second floor, and saw the lineup of waiting prisoners, the two cells were already stuffed to overflowing and several were shackled to the wall, handcuffs being riveted into the mortared wall, and still the perpetrators ran rampant throughout the terminal. Porelli was thankful for the big Jamaican's presence, as the Port Authority police could use all the help that they could get—especially—Porelli pondered idly, this p.m., as he had seen it coming on his ride to work, from his house in the Bronx—a full-moon. As if they didn't have enough to worry about on any given night, full-moon's, to Porelli, had always spelled disaster in the past. As he glanced at a young Hispanic boy who he saw eyeballing an elderly woman and then watched as the boy snatched her purse and took off running, Porelli quickly thanked Big Sugar and then took off after the youthful offender. Big Sugar disappeared before Wang could offer him any money and he reached for the phone—he would inform his wife of his exigent circumstances and that he would call her from the bus station in New Jersey or take a taxicab home, later that evening.

-3-

MURDER MOST FOUL

Murder most foul, as in the best it is;

But this most foul, strange and unnatural.—Shakespeare, *Hamlet*. Act I, sc. 5, l. 27.

Inside the men's bathroom on the second floor, that Thomas Wang was now entering, two homosexuals were engaging in an immoral act behind a closed and locked stall door, their growling and moaning being totally ignored by the four drug addicts who sat in a corner taking turns passing around a crack pipe. One of the addicts, a transvestite with a two-day-old beard showing through his pancake make-up and totally oblivious of the perverted rumblings inside the room, nevertheless, looked up startled when Thomas Wang opened the door and walked into the

rank public restroom. The transvestite's staring demeanor alerted the other junkies and they all looked up and saw not a human being entering the restroom but a mark, a mark wearing an Armani suit that they all envisioned was filled with cash, cash that they could buy more crack with, a habit they all shared and would do anything to feed.

Wang's nostrils closed reflexively, upon entering the stench-filled lavatory, and he hurried to the urinal and unzipped his fly, where the transvestite brushed up against him. "Oooooohhh honey, I'll do youse fo' a quarter?"

Wang kept directing his stream of urine and didn't bother to look up but rasped, "Please leave me alone sir."

Suddenly, the door to the toilet where the two perverts had been engaging one another in an unclean act opened and they ran out of the stall and then the bathroom, even as one of the four crack-heads glared over at Wang, then suddenly jumped up and jumped on his back, pulling him down to the cold, hard tile floor of the bathroom, screaming for the others to help him. He was wrestling with Wang when another crack addict reached for Wang's coat pocket and a stream of Wang's urine smacked him in the face, streaming down into his nostrils and mouth.

"Ah-ehah, piss on me mahn, I'll fuminin' kill you—I'll kill you!" The addict let go of Wang's coat and began kicking him in the genitals and then the head. You could hear Wang's screams a hundred yards away, if you were listening, which no one was, except for the crack-heads themselves now, and the one who had been the recipient of the stream of Wang's now relieved bladder, pulled out a wicked looking, razor-sharp roofer's knife and the glistening curved blade mirrored the face of the one about to lean downward and use it, the demon who had now taken complete control of the man with the knife in his hand, as well as his addict-compatriots.

Big Sugar was walking down the concourse when he spied Wheelchair Paul, who was up on the second floor trying to open the door to the men's room. He frowned obliquely, wondering how Wheelchair Paul had gotten up to the second floor, as he knew how dangerous the bathrooms were because he had been attacked there himself, upon his arrival, thirteen weeks ago. He could still remember it; he had just come up from Bell Glade after having left a straw boss writhing on the ground in the cane-fields, after he had cheated Big Sugar out of over half of his pay, owed to him from a full season of cutting sugar-cane. Big Sugar knew the man was nothing more than a shill for the powerful sugar cartels but he still had lost his temper and had struck the man down, even though only in self-defense, but he still had had lingering regrets about hamstringing a man when he was down, even though this same man had partially chopped off two of Big Sugar's fingers. He had confessed it in church and, in confession, the priest at St. Patrick's—in New York—had reassured him, assuring him that God would forgive him.

It had been in the very same bathroom that Wheelchair Paul was now struggling to open that Big Sugar had been jumped by several crack addicts and had been forced to slice one of them in the arm, almost severing it, after he had pulled a gun on Big Sugar. The word quickly spread throughout the underground city of the Port and the huge ex-cane cutter was given a very wide berth. After experiencing the horrific conditions that the Port's helpless and homeless were forced to live through daily, Big Sugar had become a troubled man. But, then he had had a dream, a vision in which a voice, a spirit, had appeared before him and told him that his days on earth, as everyone's, were numbered and that he was at the Port Authority Bus Terminal because God had called him there and that no man indeed, had a higher calling than that man called to

help the helpless and the homeless, the weak and the infirm, as Big Sugar had been called to do and so he had stayed, stayed and followed this calling, he had been there nearly three and a half months and the time went by so fast it seemed to Big Sugar only yesterday, instead of ninety-five days ago, that he had had his vision. He had eaten nothing, as he did many days, in almost twenty-four hours and, as he headed towards Wheelchair Paul, who had an I.Q. of well over two-hundred, in the genius range, and who lived on whatever he was given that day, Big Sugar wondered if he would get something somehow—that day—to eat.

Wheelchair Paul was just reaching for the bathroom door when it flew open and slammed against his steel wheelchair—shoving him backwards against the tiled wall—as all pandemonium broke loose when his chair rolled backwards towards the entrance of the bathroom, partially blocking it, as four crack-heads all attempted to pile through the opening at once.

Big Sugar ran up the stairs and to Wheelchair Paul's rescue just as the biggest of the crack addicts shoved his wheelchair backwards and came face to face with Big Sugar. A Rastafarian, from the same West Indies Island as Big Sugar, the crack-head knew him only by his street name and legendary unrivalled reputation for protecting the weak and helpless, even unto risking his own life and limb, he was known for being absolutely fearless, remarkably strong, and capable of superhuman feats of strength, that had cowed even the bravest and most reckless of thugs. The thief's eyes magnified and he hissed, "Ah mahn—Big Sugar?"

Big Sugar smiled his golden deceptive smile. "Git on niggah," he growled, scowling.

All four crack-heads quickly stormed past Big Sugar and ran, stumbling down the stairs, toward the nearest exit in the Port's main concourse.

Wheelchair Paul smiled upon seeing who it was. "Ah well, Mister Big Sugar—how are you?"

Big Sugar smiled obliquely, his street name, Big Sugar, had stuck from day one in the Port when he had unloaded his cane-field exploits to a homeless man, just before going to St. Paddy's for confession, on that very first day, his first ever in the city of New York, and as his exploits grew at the Port his name grew with them, until all that was needed for a homeless or helpless Port resident to be assured of being left alone or assured of safe passage in the deadly a.m. hours, was simply to utter his name. It was almost spiritual because those that had called on Jesus before Big Sugar's appearance now invoked his name in the same breath, knowing from past experience that Jesus was the savior but that if Big Sugar showed up your chances of staying alive in this world multiplied substantially. He returned Wheelchair Paul's smile. "Ah Paulie, and how are you tonight?"

"Good, Big Guy, good, but I'll be a lot better if I ever get inside and relieve my bladder. Hey, you look hungry—here I gotta half a sandwich."

Big Sugar pushed the sandwich back into Wheelchair Paul's shirt. "Don't want yo' sam-itch Paulie—c'mon let's get you inside." Big Sugar opened the door and nodded at Wheelchair Paul, who he knew insisted on doing everything himself. "Well? Roll on inside, Paulie."

Wheelchair Paul pushed on the wheelchairs' wheels but stopped up short. "Gee-zuz Mary and Joseph, will yah lookit this Big Guy?"

Big Sugar stepped into the bathroom and stopped next to the immobile wheelchair and stared at the bloody carnage that was lying in a heap in the middle of the floor. It had once been a man but his face was a mass of unrecognizable flesh, with blood-streaked facial bones and teeth scattered at intervals just adjacent to the corpse. The man's clothes were soaked in blood and strewn in shredded strips across the tile floor. Big Sugar walked closer and stared at the lumpy mass that had once been a human being's face. He peered closer and closer, as if it were a

rattlesnake poised to strike and Wheelchair Paul's eyes mimicked Big Sugar's, gazing hypnotically at the slimy corpse. Then, they both saw it, at the same instant, and both men recoiled at the sight. Big Sugar exhaled audibly and spat, "Animals, animals they are who did this mahn, they are not human beings."

Wheelchair Paul had rolled his chair to within only a few yards of the already decomposing corpse and literally shrank back when he saw what someone had done to the man. Besides being stomped and beaten to death, someone had taken a blade to the man's penis and had hacked it off and shoved it into his mouth. Big Sugar put his head on the man's chest and then felt for a pulse, nothing, the man's heart had stopped; he was gone, dead, finished with living, upon this earth. Big Sugar saw that the man's suit, although bloodied, was an expensive one with the initials T.W. on cuff-linked shirtsleeves and suddenly a bell went off inside his cranium, as he remembered the oriental man that he had rescued earlier that evening, from another addict. He was certain that this was the same man and his hand balled up, into a massive fist. Wheelchair Paul saw his anger and barked, "Big Sugar, we'd better report this, the station's just aroun' ah corner—on this floor.

Big Sugar smiled at the irony of this fact but shook his head. "No Paulie—I am going after the killers mahn—I know who they are you go and report it. You know as well as I do that the po-leece nevah do nuttin' anyway."

Wheelchair Paul's eyes flicked to the corpse and then back to Big Sugar. "I know it Big Man but I think they will *this time!*"

Big Sugar's eyes flashed to the corpse and he knew immediately that Wheelchair Paul might be right, as he remembered the oriental man's demeanor and dress, he was a mover and shaker, a man of wealth and power and the police were as political an organization as any other and all the killings at the Port Authority were almost always street people killing other street people, which to the police was just one less lowlife but let a wealthy man be murdered and the politicians, wealthy men themselves, came out crying law and order. Big Sugar, who felt his power came from a higher source, knew that every life was equal and he also sensed that this man had had a family and now that family would be deprived of him, and he knew that this vicious of a deed would hurt all the homeless and helpless in the Port because the police would, upon finding the corpse, make a deadly sweep of the area. He knew he had been called to protect the weak and helpless but as far as Big Sugar was concerned that included all human beings and this man had obviously been helpless at the hands of the four crack-heads that he now knew had killed him. He nodded at Wheelchair Paul and then at the door. "Aw-rye Paulie—let's go and see the po-leece then, mahn."

As they made their way towards the police station, Big Sugar could see that it was next to hopeless and the clock was ticking; he could see that the cells were jam-packed, as were the wall shackles. He knew that every second that went by made it that much harder for him to catch up with the merciless quartet of murderous crack addicts. He grabbed Wheelchair Paul's arm. "Paulie, make a report mahn. I am going after these wolves for they have caught the scent of blood and may do more mayhem. They are looking for a few rounds of bread and will stop at nothing to get it. I mean to find them mahn; make the report and show the po-leece the dead mahn's body."

Wheelchair Paul sighed and nodded, even as Big Sugar was gone, his huge form disappearing into the thick crowd of bodies, almost like a ghost.

Lt. Felix ‘the Cat’ Bandora rubbed a sweaty palm over his grizzled, heavily whiskered face and sighed audibly. It had been a typical Saturday night at the Port. More than half the force over one-hundred cops, were on duty and still they had no room at the inn, no place left to stack the lowlifes, not even any wall-shackles available and they had had to resort to handcuffing them to the chairs. He scowled at Wheelchair Paul. “Yeah, what was that again? I din’ catch youse drift sport—know what I mean?”

“I said there has been a murder in a bathroom around the corner here on the second floor.”

Bandora frowned and looked Wheelchair Paul up and down and then glanced around the room. Who should he give this to? No, who was free, that was the question tonight. “Porelli, Jimmy Porelli, c’mere Jimmy.”

Porelli scowled at the watch commander but strolled over to his desk and nodded at him with his usual forlorn expression. “Gee-zuz boss,” he said, “I was jus’ sittin’ down to make out a report.”

“Yeah-yeah,” Bandora said and turned back towards Wheelchair Paul. “Jimmy this here is Paul, He says there’s a dead poison in ah terlet, right Paul?”

“Yessir, right up here on this floor, just around the corner here,” Wheelchair Paul barked, looking at both the cops and pleading with his eyes for their attention.

Porelli opened his mouth to protest but Bandora had already motioned another cop over to his desk and was speaking to him. “Hey Billy, ‘id youse get those Knicks tickets for me?”

The other cop smiled and pulled out four tickets for the coming Tuesday’s Knicks/Bulls game and Bandora smiled then frowned at Porelli. “Jimmy, youse still here,” he said. “Go on and check this thing in the bad-room out?”

Porelli reached out and began pushing Wheelchair Paul’s chair but was quickly rebuked, as Wheelchair Paul stopped the chair and barked, “I can push myself, sir, thank you very much.”

Porelli smiled weakly when Wheelchair Paul did a reverse wheelie and Porelli skulked after him, as the cop who had given Bandora the Knicks tickets said, “What’s all that about Skipper?”

“The crip’ says there’s a stiff in ah terlet. Who knows anymore Billy, youse know?”

“Yeah, garbage on garbage Skip—it’s all we ever get anymore?”

“Yeah, maybe a wino passed out in there or sumpin’, youse know.”

-4-

PURGATORY

Purgatory-A place or state of temporary punishment.—Webster’s New American Dictionary.

Big Sugar padded into the Port’s basement, a netherworld of intransigence and insanity known only to the homeless residents who lived there and the police that swept the area

regularly. He saw several junkies passing a crack pipe around and moved in for a closer look. One of them glanced up. “Wanna hit bro-ah?”

Big Sugar shook his head solemnly; he could see they were all stoned and weren’t who he was looking for anyway and so he moved on and caught sight of two transvestites, invoking a memory of one of the murderers. He narrowed his eyes in the dark and one of them pulled up his shirt, revealing a flabby breast. “Want some titty baby—huh?”

Big Sugar scowled and was drawn towards a commotion coming from the end of a narrow curving pathway. He narrowed his eyes again and looked towards a darkened corner where someone had hung an old blanket from a water pipe, partially covering what appeared to be either a table or a chair. Big Sugar moved in for a closer inspection, even as he heard someone moaning and the piece of furniture creaking. He heard a man’s voice bark something unintelligible and then the blanket parted and a form appeared and walked past Big Sugar. When he got close enough he smiled at Big Sugar. “Cheap head man,” he said.

Almost at the same instant a woman’s voice shrieked, “Hey-hey, come back here youse bastid, youse ain’t paid me yet.”

Big Sugar walked to the blanket that was being used as a curtain, and moved it aside. Sitting in a wheelchair was a woman of indeterminable age, who only stopped screaming when she caught sight of Big Sugar. “Big Sue-gar, stop dat man, he raped me Big Sue—”

Big Sugar scowled at the woman, who was a notorious prostitute known for screaming rape whenever any of her Johns failed to pay her, which, in the Port’s own personal Purgatory, was more often than not. Big Sugar shook his head and wagged his finger at her. “Rose, you know better than this, you mus’ stop these evil ways.”

Rose Marone, known vicariously as Fat Rose, reached for a beer bottle and took a quick gulp from it. She had one leg amputated at the knee and an eye-patch over her useless left orb. She looked around nervously. “My cigarettes—bastid took my cigarettes.”

Big Sugar watched as Fat Rose spied her crumpled package of cigarettes and reached for them addictively. She lit one and immediately smiled at Big Sugar and held out the pack, which he refused. He described the four men he was searching for to her but she was of no help, her interest being only in something if it benefited her personally. She exhaled a stream of smoke through her nostrils and smiled, showing a mouthful of rotten and decaying teeth. She coughed harshly and spat out a globule of sputum, then put out her arms towards Big Sugar. “C’mere Big Sue-gar,” she hissed, “Rosy gone give yous some free head. C’mon Sue-gar you’s my man.”

Big Sugar shook his head and turned and headed down the pathway but couldn’t help but smile obliquely, as Fat Rose’s voice croaked out, “Git dat niggah fo’ me Sue-gar—he rape me.”

-5-

SWEEP OR SEARCH

We love force and we care very little how it is exhibited.—Emerson, *Journal*, Vol. V, p. 262.

What follows I flee; what flees I ever pursue.—Ovid, *Amores*. Bk. ii, eleg. 19, 1. 36.

Captain Joseph Giambra read the report sitting on his desk slowly, then glanced up at Lieutenant Felix ‘the Cat’ Bandora and Officer Jimmy Porelli. “Youse guys are tellin’ me diz guy had is peckah cut off and stuck in ‘is mouth?”

“Yessir, I ain’t seen nothing like it since ‘Nam Skipper,” Porelli rasped, eyeballing Lt. Bandora, who Capt. Giambra now turned to and barked, “What ah youse t’ink Cat—a hit?”

“Yeah, could be. I mean we need to eye-dee the body and see whether it’s a wiseguy or what. He did obviously have a set of expensive threads on and he had no wallet or jewelry—they picked ‘im clean.”

“Yeah, they coulda done it jus’ to make it look like a robbery. I t’ink we should sweep the place, wha’ ah youse t’ink Cat?”

Bandora glanced outside the door, to where Wheelchair Paul sat in an otherwise isolated corner. “Well Joe—I dunno—this guy in ah chair says diz jah-mook frien’ ah his is on ah trail right now and he means to find them and extract some payback.”

Capt. Giambra followed Lt. Bandora’s gaze to Wheelchair Paul and then eyed Porelli, who nodded. “Sir, I know this man, this Jamaican, and I t’ink he’ll maybe do what he says he’ll do. Big Sugar’s a pretty capable guy—Skipper.”

Giambra lit a cigarette and eyeballed Porelli and Bandora. He exhaled a stream of noxious smoke. “Big Sugar ...? A street-name—”

“Ah, yessir—he ah—he protects the homeless people around the Port sir; I mean, that is, he has before and he does help us a lot.”

Giambra’s face showed amusement, as he blew smoke rings in the air and then glanced at Bandora and chuckled. “What ah youse mean Officer Porelli? Isn’t this Jamaican homeless himself? Ain’t diz the guy we put out an all-points on more’n once, din’ he cut a guy’s hand off a while back?”

Porelli smiled deceptively. “They sewed the guy’s hand back on Skip’. It was Card Mullins.”

“Card Mullins, what, Card,” Giambra said, studying Porelli’s face.

“Yessir and he’s already back on the street again but he hasn’t worked the Port since.”

“Card Mullins, why dat lowlife’s been woikin’ dah Port ever since I’ve had this command and that’s six years in September, Geezuz, so *that’s that* guy, he carries a damn Bowie knife ah sumpin’?”

“A machete Skip’,” Porelli said, grinning.

“A machete ...? What ah we got, a Crocodile Dundee chasin’ some wiseguys—or what?”

“Well sir, Wheelchair Paul,” Porelli nodded his head back towards Wheelchair Paul, “says that there were four crackheads and Big Sugar knew them—two of them are transvestites.”

“Great, I gotta freakin’ machete-wieldin’ jah-mook chasin’ a bunch a sissy crack-heads all over dah Port. What a youse t’ink Cat? We sweep the area?”

“I think we gotta locate this molly-ah-nard Joe, I can roundup my best men, you know before we send the troops in, and see if we can find this Jamaican jahmook—this Big Sugar.”

Giambra nodded and exhaled a stream of noxious smoke. “Find this ‘mook quick Cat. I can give you ‘till midnight.”

Porelli glanced at Felix ‘the Cat’ Bandora and Bandora nodded at Giambra. “And if we can’t find him by then Cap’?”

Giambra smiled obliquely and summed up what would happen, in two ice-cold syllables when he snapped, “We sweep!”

DEATH IN THE DARKNESS

Death is the port where all may refuge find,
The end of labour, entry into rest.—William Alexander, *Tragedy of Darius*.

Death is the final Master and Lord. But Death must await my good pleasure. I command Death because I have no fear of Death, but only love.

—Havelock Ellis, *Impressions and Comments*. Ser. Iii, p. 55.

Big Sugar glanced at his watch, it was a few minutes before midnight and he knew they would be closing off most of the terminal's wings, anytime now. He stared straight ahead and quickly headed for the emergency stairwells; they were worse than even the basement, for if the basement was purgatory then the stairwells were hell incarnate.

Big Sugar descended into this hell slowly; he noticed small groups of men on virtually every stair landing and, as he walked past the second landing, he saw that the concrete floor was littered with crack vials, dead lighters and matchbooks, used condoms, dirty needles and discarded, worn-out belts and pieces of tubing or rope. You could barely see even a piece of the concrete, as along with the aforementioned items, dozens of empty cans, bottles and containers were piled into various corners of the landings, giving them the appearances of being nothing more than small garbage dumps. Big Sugar nodded at anyone looking his way and tried to make eye contact with someone but they were all in their own little world's, zombies, knocked out of the realities of life by their various inhalants, injections and inebriants or just their inability to make any sense out of an insane world, where the homeless, the mentally ill, the rebels and renegades and the plain old down and out poor were all subject to harassment and abandonment. And they all well-knew, no matter how much they feigned ignorance, that if they could just get their hands on that one sought after commodity, money, then they could live above ground again, in a cleaner, more subtle atmosphere. Oh, they knew the world was still crazy but if they could only get that money then they could pretend it wasn't, along with the rest of those that identified themselves as human beings but who they knew would turn on them like the pack of raging animals they really were, unless they could produce that green paper with a dead president's picture on them. Big Sugar walked past a homeless couple who appeared to be sleeping on top of the littered floor—on the fourth landing down—on top of what looked like a paper-thin beach towel, it being the only thing between them and the filth littered below them. Big Sugar stooped down and saw that they were breathing when he heard his name called. He jumped up and turned to see that it was Edward 'Dumb Eddie' Morton, a homeless, retarded Port resident who Big Sugar had rescued from thugs many times. He grabbed Big Sugar's arm and hugged it to him,

then slobbered, “Big Shoe-gah, Big Shoe-gah. Is Doris come quick, she gone kill herself.”

“Where Eddie, show me where Doris is—**NOW!**”

Dumb Eddie jumped when Big Sugar barked his name but turned and motioned for Big Sugar to follow him, as he began a journey downwards. Big Sugar followed him down a labyrinth of hallways and stairwells, until finally they emerged at a dimly-lit emergency stairwell where a young girl was sitting on a battered, paint-splattered milk carton. She had a .44 caliber revolver in her right hand and was staring, glassy-eyed, at it. Big Sugar walked over to her. “Hello Doris.”

She whipped her head up and glared at Big Sugar, then clutched the .44 closer to her bosom, pointing it inward, over her heart, and screamed, “No get away, I found it and it’s mine. It can get rid of my constant pain. I know, I talked to it and it told me it would, I don’t want no more bread; I wanna go home now. I wanna go somewhere where there’s no pain, the preacher tol’ me there’s no pain if I can just go home.”

Big Sugar knew that Doris was a sixteen or seventeen-year-old runaway and that she had lived on the street for several years. It was rumored that she had been sexually abused by her own father and sometimes spoke of tracking him down and killing him. She stuck the gun in her mouth and Big Sugar saw the motion and grabbed the barrel. His grip was so powerful that by a mere twist of his wrist the gun-barrel quickly came out of her mouth, slightly cutting the inside of her cheek. The pistol, a .44 Magnum, had been on the street for years, the serial numbers had long ago been filed off, and it had been the cause of several deaths, before turning up in the garbage can that Doris had found it in, with a fully-loaded chamber. It had been set to have a hair trigger and when Big Sugar pulled it from Doris’ grasp it went off and the bullet, cut on the top to explode on contact and do more damage than an ordinary bullet, being referred to on the street as a dum-dum, exploded into Big Sugar’s left eyeball, ripped through his eye-socket and exited out of the top of his head, taking blood-splattered clumps of brain matter, facial bones, sinus fluids and uprooted teeth with it and slamming them onto an already blood-smearred concrete wall, like a new age painter, who had just finished a masterpiece. It was too much for Dumb Eddie, who stared at Big Sugar’s slumped over body for several seconds before letting out an inhuman, ghoulish howl that awoke even the most inebriated of the incoherent residents in this section of hell.

It was also too much for Doris, who delicately walked over to Big Sugar’s corpse and snatched up the .44 Magnum, which was so full of blood and gristle that it nearly slipped out of her hand but the hair-trigger outdid even its own intentions when it went off at almost the instant that Doris turned it towards her own face, leaving her with a lump of unrecognizable bloody flesh, where once had been a beautiful, angelic child’s face. She was so young and emaciated, and her skin so thin and pale white, that she looked incredibly like a store mannequin. A store mannequin that no longer had a face and therefore was of no further use, in a capitalistic society that discarded any object or piece of merchandize that could not financially benefit the owner, amazingly like Doris’ own life, for, in reality, the store mannequin would be thrown out, much as Doris had been thrown out; the mannequin would go to the city dump, Doris’ corpse would go to the city morgue and then, along with the Jamaican known only as Big Sugar, to a pauper’s grave.

The setting of a great hope is like the setting of the sun. The brightness of our life is gone.
—Longfellow, *Hyperion*. Bk. I, ch. 1.

We did not dare to breathe a prayer
Or give our anguish hope!
Something was dead in each of us,
And what was dead was hope.—Oscar Wilde, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*. Pt. iii, st. 31.

Wheelchair Paul stared at Stella—who sat in her own wheelchair just alongside of him—at the north wing of the Port, on 42nd Street amid Eighth Avenue. Wheelchair Paul had known Stella for years but had never seen her in this state—she was no longer coherent. Wheelchair Paul had been hit hard also, by Big Sugar’s death, but you had to go on living, eating and talking. The police had swept the area clean and most of the residents had spent a night or two in a jail-cell, as Wheelchair Paul had with Stella, but she had been totally mute then also. The police never found the four crack addicts who had murdered Thomas Wang but had thinned out the Port’s homeless population almost in half, leaving only the physically and/or mentally ill such as Stella now seemed to qualify for, in both categories. She was emaciated enough as it was and it had been nearly a month since Big Sugar’s death and Stella had not eaten anything of any substance or even said a coherent word to anyone since. Wheelchair Paul—for all his street smarts and high intellect—simply could not figure her out.

Stella stared into space, hypnotized like a zombie, as she was no longer among the living. Nothing drew any reaction from her, not when a well-heeled man dropped a five-dollar bill into her begging cup and not when a crackhead took it out, for Stella’s life was over and she knew it. Her light had gone out and with that light the last vestige of humanity that she had clung to so stubbornly over the years, had gone with it. Her hope was gone, blown into the far reaches of the voices that now talked to her daily, assuring her that she was indeed dead and Stella knew it was true because her hero had been smashed to smithereens, blown to bits by a steel-jacked .44 dum-dum bullet. For Stella, totally immobile in her wheelchair, all hope was gone—Big Sugar was dead!

EPILOGUE

PLEASE JESUS PLEASE

Streetlife, but you better not get old,
Streetlife, or you’re gonna feel the cold.
—*Streetlife*, *The Crusaders*, featuring Randy Crawford.

Stella rolled her wheelchair slowly up Fifth Avenue and past Rockefeller Center and the huge St. Patrick's Cathedral. It was 10:00 p.m. on Christmas Eve and the bone-chilling cold made her teeth chatter, as her fingers turned numb. She stopped the wheelchair for just an instant and stared at the church she was approaching—wondering if it was the church of St. Thomas or St. Paddy's?

As her wheelchair came to a stop in front of what appeared to her to be a looming, foreboding structure, and one of the churches, the fingers on her left hand turned blue and froze to the metal side of the wheelchair. She tried to close her fingers around the wheel but could not, as she couldn't feel if the frozen appendages were closed or open. Her left stump felt as if there was a knife inside of it and she desperately searched through her pocket for a lighter she remembered picking up at the Port. She found the lighter and immediately began rubbing her right thumb over the striker but it was no use; it was dead, one of dozens of lighters that littered the stairwells, floors and hallways at the Port Authority Bus Terminal, discarded by crack-heads and addicts that used them to keep their pipes lit. Stella glanced around and saw an alleyway, dark and dangerous, as they all were in New York, but at least it would deter the biting, bone-chilling wind. She struggled with her frozen left hand but finally managed to roll in between the two large buildings and into the alley. She hadn't eaten anything in over a week and was very weak and dehydrated, and her desire to live, which had disappeared the moment she had heard of Big Sugar's untimely death—had never been lower, as she mumbled incoherently, talking to herself and to what she perceived as God; she was looking for God and, being a lifelong Catholic, she knew exactly where to look; she had to get as close as she could to a church.

As the night wore on and the bitter cold became even more unbearable, Stella Burke heard the clanging of bells and suddenly realized that it was midnight and that it was no longer Christmas Eve but Christmas Day. Her shrunken stomach trembled and she was suddenly awakened from her mental stupor and realized that she was hungry, then remembered that Father Hennessy always visited the Port Authority on Christmas Day; he would transport anyone that would go, to a shelter for a traditional Christmas meal and shelter for the night and she quietly pondered attempting to steer her wheelchair back towards the Port Authority.

She looked up, into the heavens, and saw only blackness, and the sides of the two looming, concrete and steel buildings. Suddenly, she bowed her head and prayed with the last bit of strength in her, she prayed for all mankind then prayed for Big Sugar's soul, she prayed for all her helpless friends in the Port and she prayed for herself—for her own soul. She could no longer take the pain and tears ran down her face as unendurable agony suddenly racked her body. She was weak—oh so weak—but she prayed with the last ounce of strength she had in her, as she closed her eyes tightly and whispered, "Please Jesus—please—the pain is too much." She felt something pulling on her and opened her eyes and it was then that Big Sugar appeared to her—once again.

FAITH

Loveless and cold, with your last breath you saved my very soul, when you smiled at me, like *Jesus to a child*.—*Like Jesus to a Child*, George Michael.

For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.—Philippians 1:21

But all God’s angels come to us disguised: Sorrow and sickness, poverty and death, one after another lift their frowning masks, and we behold the Seraph’s face beneath, all radiant with the glory and the calm, of having looked at the front of *God*.

—**J.R. Lowell**, *On the Death of a Friend’s Child*.

Father James J. Hennessy pulled the bus up to the curb, just in front of the entrance to the Port Authority Bus terminal, on 42nd Street. He stepped out and looked around, then heard his name being called and strolled over to where a man on crutches, and another in a wheelchair, sat, beckoning to him. He nodded at them. “Hey fellas, where’s everybody at?”

“Geez, I dunno Faddah—but we’re ready.”

Hennessy nodded and held open the door for both cripples, even though he knew the majority of them disdained any such help, preferring to get along on their own steam. But, today, the holiest of days, both men allowed he priest the courtesy. As they walked towards the bus, the trio could plainly see several people loitering around the vehicle, several in wheelchairs or on crutches and all of them homeless.

Father Hennessy watched in the rearview mirror, as everyone settled into a seat and then asked if anyone had seen Stella Burke, who everyone knew. When no one answered, Hennessy shrugged and headed out towards the shelter.

As he was unloading his human cargo, Hennessy noticed that several people were climbing off another bus that was parked just adjacent to the shelter. He frowned when he saw the number painted on its side, 500, as it was a bus that had been in the repair shop the last time he had seen it. He watched the transients head for the shelter and walked over to the 500 bus where lifting the hood, Hennessy saw that it was minus a water pump and the spark plugs were not even hooked up; it was indeed the defective bus that had been in the shop but who had towed it to the shelter? And why had they towed it to the shelter?

Hennessy stared after the passengers, who had just departed off the bus, and hurried after them. Grabbing the closest man, he saw it was Gerald ‘Hairy Jerry’ Winslow a homeless man Hennessy knew had been living at the Port for the past year or so. “Hey Faddah Hen-see,” Winslow said. “Mar-ree Criz-muz,” he barked.

“Merry Christmas Gerry, ah, Gerry, did you just get off that bus?”

Winslow glanced at the bus with the number five-hundred painted on its side and smiled. “Yeah Faddah,” he said, “Big Shoe’gah brought us here.”

Father Hennessy turned a paler shade of white, when Susan ‘Dirty Sue’ McBride smiled a toothless grin and hissed, “That’s right Faddah, Big Sugar brought us, he loves us, he tol’ me so.”

Hennessy inhaled deeply and frowned, as several others, upon hearing the conversation, had come over to confirm that Big Sugar, whom Hennessy well-knew had been killed in a gun accident, had brought them to the shelter, in the bus bearing the number 500. Hennessy, a priest for over twenty years, was shocked, as he had identified Moses ‘Big Sugar’ Moore himself, after going to the morgue and hearing the story of the struggle between Big Sugar and Doris

McQuade, the sixteen-year-old drug-addicted prostitute who had been attempting to kill herself with a .44 Magnum when Big Sugar took a .44 slug to his head, killing him instantly after he had attempted to wrestle the gun from her hand. Hennessy could still remember the torn and twisted flesh that had once been Big Sugar's face and wondered if it could have been another man, even though he had been so certain that it had indeed been Big Sugar that he had seen on that cold, dank coroner's slab, little more than a week ago. Or, was someone impersonating Big Sugar? And if someone was, then why; and, how did the 500 bus get to the shelter, anyway? Were they all playing a joke on the good father? Hennessy pushed through the lengthening line and into the shelter and immediately saw Big Sugar, as he was standing talking to Eddie 'Dumb Eddie' Malone, a semi-retarded homeless man, who roamed the streets endlessly mumbling to himself. Next to Dumb Eddie was Wheelchair Paul, an epileptic cripple that Hennessy knew had an I.Q. that approached the genius range of around two-hundred. Suddenly, Hennessy was grabbed by his forearm and spun around, by Joe 'Punchy Joe' Marabelli, an ex-prizefighter who had once been a world champion but now lived the life of an alcoholic, on the streets of the Bowery. He put his battered, oft-broken beak next to Hennessy's and barked, "Hey Faddah, Merry Criz-muz."

Hennessy patted Punchy Joe's head, then quickly removed Joe's vice-like grip from his forearm. He approached Dumb Eddie and Wheelchair Paul but Big Sugar was gone. "Eddie," he said, "who was that you were just talking to ... was it—"

Dumb Eddie bobbed his head up and down and swallowed a mouthful of turkey. "Yeah-up Faddah, 'at was Big Sugar. Yeah-up, he say Stella is happy now!"

Hennessy looked at Wheelchair Paul. "Dumb Eddie's speaking the gospel Father that was Big Sugar and he did say Stella's happy now." Wheelchair Paul smiled at Father Hennessy.

Hennessy exhaled loudly and ran his hand through his salt-and-pepper hair. He had been a priest for a little over two decades and had read of, and heard about, many miracles; it was just that he had never been this close to one before. Was it a test of his faith or was it some sort of a practical joke? He stared at Dumb Eddie and then at Wheelchair Paul just as Wheelchair Paul motioned at him with his head and he turned to see two uniformed policemen striding towards them. Hennessy recognized them, as they were both Port Authority cops. They were almost upon him, as he searched the room for Punchy Joe. "What 'id Joe do this time?" he said, scanning the room again.

Officer Jimmy Porelli nodded at Hennessy and smiled amiably. "Oh, it's not about Punchy this time Father." Porelli hated working on Christmas, even with the overtime pay, and nodded at his partner, Bobby McLarnin.

"Faddah, we know it's Christmas and all but we really need to ask for your help; we need an eye-dee?"

Hennessy shook his head; no day was sacred in the city of New York, death was always ever present. He looked at McLarnin and shook his head. "Who was it Officer?"

"It was One-legged Stella, you remember her, don't yah Faddah? She was here every Christmas for the past half-dozen years?" McLarnin said, reaching for a pack of cigarettes.

"Yeah Father the one in the wheelchair, she was a diabetic, remember? You used to bring her insulin to the Port?" Porelli added, bumming a cigarette from his partner.

"What?" Hennessy glanced towards Dumb Eddie and Wheelchair Paul.

"Ah, yessir, they found her body on Fifth Av-nah, next to Saint Thomas."

"Yes-yes, I know it well. How did she ... what, that is—"

Officer Robert B. McLarnin lowered his voice and leaned in towards Hennessy. “Well sir, she officially froze to death but foul play is suspected, know what I mean, ah, sir?”

“Foul play Officer McLarnin?”

“Well sir several witnesses saw her in an alleyway next to Saint Thomas and also saw a big niggah, ah-er, I mean African-American, scuze me Faddah, ah diz African-American was seen hangin’ aroun’ her, see? So we figure he was probably robbin’ her—know what I mean sir? The streets are bad sir, especially this time of the year; know what I mean Faddah?”

Father James J. Hennessy immediately turned pale then jerked his head towards where Dumb Eddie and Wheelchair Paul both were standing, grinning widely.

ADAM

-1-

MONEY BUYS THE LAWYER

A man might as well open an oyster without a knife, as a lawyer's mouth without a fee.
—Barten Holyday, *Technogamia*, ii, 5.

John 'Fast Jack' Levine scowled and sat down heavily, into the chair at the defense table. He had an eerie feeling that he wasn't in control—a feeling Levine very seldom had and didn't like whatsoever.

Levine was a criminal defense attorney of the highest order and had been for two decades. He had worked for the largest law firm in the city of Tampa, but only for a year, before he and another attorney had quit and opened their own office, Levine & Cohen. It was the spring of 1990 and Levine & Cohen were celebrating their twentieth anniversary as a business partnership. They had their main office in Tampa, one in St. Petersburg and were set to open yet another one in New Port Richey, a fast-growing suburb, just north of Tampa. Levine glanced at his client; it was a hit-and-run in which the client was obviously guilty but his client was Bernard 'Biz' Bizcardelinto, a general contractor whose company had built fifty million dollars worth of custom homes the previous year. The victim in this case was a seventy-five-year-old black itinerant, who had been in the same condition as Bizcardelinto at the time of the accident, intoxicated, however the itinerant had been standing on the side of the road and Bizcardelinto had been behind the wheel of his 1989 Ford pickup truck when he had plowed into the man. He had driven off and had only realized that he had hit something the next day when he surveyed his damaged truck.

The itinerant laborer, Andrew 'Double A' Adkins, had been living alone and when no immediate family showed up to claim his remains 'Fast Jack' Levine had quickly lived up to his nickname and cut a deal with the prosecutor, getting his man off on three years probation. Bizcardelinto's story was that he thought that he had hit a dog and that the man, irregardless, had been in the middle of the street. The investigators had determined that he had been hit in the very beginning of a crosswalk but that he *was* intoxicated. Bizcardelinto didn't turn himself in for over a week, until the police flashed an almost exact description of his truck across the television screen and consequently there was no evidence that *he* was intoxicated, causing the judge to award Bizcardelinto probation instead of jail-time but the fine was something else. The judge, well aware of the financial capability of Levine's client had upped it ten-fold, from ten grand to a hundred, and Levine, realizing it would be more difficult to collect his six-figure bill, adamantly protested. The judge called for a conference in her chambers and ended up settling for fifty grand

when Levine happened to mention that he was about to donate a tidy sum to the Republican Party coffers—the same Republican Party that the Honorable Mary ‘Maximum Mary’ Miller belonged to.

-2-
LISA

A woman is an angel at ten, a saint at fifteen, a devil at forty, and a witch at fourscore.
—Unknown, *Swetnam, Woman-Hater*. (1620)

Lisa Williams was just fourteen years old but all the boys were already after her—she was just a little over five feet tall but her figure had blossomed early into that of a model. She barely weighed a hundred pounds but had a thirty-two-inch bust, hips to match and a waist barely the equal of her age. She was the color of coffee with a large dose of cream and her smile lit up any room. She was excited because she was invited to a sleepover at one of her friends’ house and it had been a long while since she had been invited to anything, as most of her female classmates at this age didn’t want to take any chance of her stealing their boyfriends away from them but this would just be Lisa at her friend’s house. She yelled for her mother to hurry up and finish packing her sleepover clothes and make-up, as it was already six o’clock, the sleepover was for six-thirty, and they were eating dinner at her friend’s house and it was homemade potato pie, one of her favorites. She grabbed her bag, “I’m goin’ Moms, they here.”

She ran out the front door to the waiting station wagon her friend’s father was driving and jumped in and hugged her girlfriend, then noticed there was another girl sitting in the car, an acquaintance from school, who, her friend said, was also spending the night. When they ate dinner that night it was arranged that Lisa would be sleeping in a room across the hall from her girlfriend, as there was only room for two people in the her friend’s bedroom and this caused Lisa no end of embarrassment and discontent—especially considering that her girlfriend’s uncle, who was visiting from Los Angeles, kept leering at her all through dinner.

What happened that night, actually in the early a.m., would alter her life forevermore—it happened when she turned in her sleep and woke up with the man in her bed. She knew immediately that it was the uncle and she became terrified when he told her to be quiet and that if she made any noise he would kill her. After he had raped her, he repeated his threat, this time telling her that if she told anyone, he would surely kill her.

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JENNIFER

Children think not of what is past, nor what is to come, but enjoy the

present time, which few of us do.
—La Bruyere, *Les Caracteres: De L’Homme*.

Jennifer Fernandez waved at her mother and danced across the room, stopping every few feet to try a pirouette and always smiling towards her mother and her dance teacher, who were standing off to the side. Jennifer was only five years old but already she loved to dance and her mother just knew it was something she had inherited, as her mother had always aspired to becoming a professional dancer but then she had married Miguel Fernandez, a Cuban refugee who she had met in college.

Miguel Fernandez was studying pre-law at the University of South Florida, in Tampa, but had to quit when his wife gave birth to their first child, Jennifer. He would never go back, having finished almost two years, but would always dream of what his life would have been like as a lawyer, usually whenever there was a big case in the news.

His wife would give birth to another girl three years after Jennifer and would enroll her second daughter, Kelly, in the same dance classes as her older sister. The two girls grew very close when they began sharing a room when Jennifer was eight and her sister was five and just beginning ballet lessons. Jennifer would choreograph routines for her sister and her father would eventually convert the garage in their home into a dance studio where Jennifer would teach her sister, along with numerous other neighborhood girls. She loved choreographing routines for her friends and they all looked upon her as a teacher, which she would eventually become, when she graduated from the University of South Florida, in Tampa, in 1999. Along with her sister, they decided to move to Miami, where they would both teach dance classes. But, after a year, Jennifer decided to move back to her parents’ house in Land O’ Lakes, a suburb of Tampa, as her sister had a live-in boyfriend and she disliked the intense competition, the rat-race, in Miami and the rush-hour’s that took her thirty minutes to drive barely five miles, to her apartment complex. She drove her 1993 Toyota Corolla all the way from Miami and it began rattling when she pulled into the driveway at her parents’ house. Her father said he’d look at it later that day and when he did he found that it was probably in need of a ring-job—costly work because you had to go through the whole engine to get to the problem.

Jennifer put in an application for a teaching position at an elementary school in St. Petersburg and when she was accepted she was overjoyed but it was a fifty-five mile trip into St. Petersburg, a 110-mile round-trip and she was worried about her car but then her father bought her a new car and she loved it; it was a beautiful metal-flaked, emerald green Toyota Echo, a brand-new 2001, and it would change her life, she told her father, and she was right, it did, but in a way than she never could have imagined.

-4-

THE HOOD

Well, let the world change on,-still must
Endure

While earth is earth, one changeless race,
The poor!
—Bulwer-Lytton, *The New Timon*. Pt. i, st. 1.

Lisa Williams smiled at her twelve-year-old son Laurent, as he fed his three-year-old brother LaJuan and kept after her to let him go across the street to the park, part of the University Area Community Center Complex, as it had basketball courts and Laurent was a budding point guard who idolized Koby Bryant and predicted he would follow in the Lakers all-star's footsteps. The Complex also had swings and slides for her little ones and her eight-year-old daughter LaQuita could watch LaJuan and her other two little boys, LaVern and LaMont. She never got any respite from her five children lately and she was seven months pregnant and always tired and so she gave Laurent permission to take all the children except the youngest, nine-month-old LaMont, who was sleeping in his crib.

Suitcase City, that was what they called several blocks of run-down architecture, crumbling apartments and litter-strewn lots, not far from the University of South Florida, in Tampa, where Lisa Williams' latest apartment was a ground-floor three bedroom with peeling paint, a refrigerator that was so small and warm that her dairy products—milk and ice cream—spoiled within twenty-four hours. The apartment also came already well-stocked with cockroaches and a yard so full of weeds, broken glass and cigarette butts that it was a hazard to her children. There had already been two drive-by shootings in the two months that she had been there and the drug dealers were so brazen that they waited for the kids at the school bus stops. There was a middle school not far away and a new elementary—Muller Elementary—even closer and both well within easy walking distance. Yes, Suitcase City is what they called it but Lisa Williams, along with the rest of the inhabitants knew where they lived, as many had moved there from similar circumstances in other states or cities; it was the hood—the ghetto—and if you weren't poor you wouldn't be there because it was a haven for thievery, drugs and prostitution.

Lisa Williams had been talked out of an abortion when her parents found out that she was pregnant. She was already three months along and they talked her out of it when they and others convinced her it could be put up for adoption and gotten into a good home. And so the baby was given up, just after Lisa had named him and got to hold him, but for barely a minute, before the adoption agency took him away from her, something she would never really quite get over. She had had five children since then, and all by different men, as they always seemed to get locked up before they could provide any her with any type of support, and she had kept them all. The housing subsidy that she got barely kept her and her kids in an apartment and she was constantly moving, being chased by the unpaid rent and utility bills, which seemed to follow her everywhere. She glanced at her watch, it was just past five p.m. and it didn't start getting dark until six-thirty so she told Laurent and LaQuita to get the two little ones and head for the park. She stood outside and watched as they crossed Twenty-Second Street, which had but two lanes and was known for accidents, even though the speed limit was thirty mph. Laurent waved to her, as they stood in the crosswalk and waited for the traffic to disappear. There was no light even though many in the neighborhood had complained about it innumerable times. They crossed safely and Lisa breathed a sigh of relief. She had told Laurent to come home before seven p.m.

and he was always punctual. She glanced at her nine-month-old son as he smiled in his sleep and collapsed onto a worn-out sofa and her eyes immediately closed, as she rubbed her extended belly, where a seven-month-old fetus was sleeping as peacefully as her nine month old.

-5-
LOVELY

Everything has its beauty but not everyone sees it.
—Confucius, *Analects*.

Lovely, that was the word that Miguel Fernandez thought of when he first set his eyes upon the Land O' Lakes neighborhood he bought a house in, in 1975. It was a working-class neighborhood and his first child, Jennifer, was born there barely a year after he and his wife moved in. To his wife, Barbara, it was a step down, as she had been raised in Boca Raton, in an exclusive area close to her architect father's office. But, to Miguel, who had lived in a poor section of Havana, Cuba, for the first six years of his life and in an apartment in 'Little Havana,' in Miami, until he was eighteen and headed for college, in Tampa, it was like a dream come true and he paid down his life's savings, three thousand dollars as a down payment for the three-bedroom, two-bath, two-car garage home, that overlooked a lake and that he paid thirty thousand dollars for.

Jennifer grew tired of the long drive to her teaching job in St. Petersburg and was happy when she was accepted at Muller Elementary school, a school not as far from her parents' home, where she still lived and she also talked her father—a mailman for almost fifteen years—and her mother, a dental assistant, into loaning her the money to open her own dance studio in a shopping mall—not far from her home. She glanced at her watch and frowned—it was almost seven p.m. at night and she hated driving through the neighborhood, as it was getting dark and when she had attended the University of South Florida, the students had always been careful to avoid the area, which was well-known as a ghetto, proliferated, as they almost all were, with drugs, prostitution and young gangsters and would-be gangsters roaming the streets at all hours. She locked the door to her classroom and walked out of the school and into the parking lot, where her sparkling green Toyota Echo awaited her. She got in and zipped away, then turned off One-hundred-Fortieth Avenue and onto N. Twenty-Second Street and headed for home. She smiled, as things were going so well, she was living out her dream of owning her own dance studio and teaching dance at a local school and soon, she knew she would meet her Prince Charming and her life would fall into that daydream she had always had of moving into a nice, warm and comfortable home—just like her mom and dad.

THE KIDS IN THE CROSSWALK

Whene'er I walk this beauteous earth
How many poor I see,

But as I never speaks to them,
They never speaks to me.

—Unknown, *Travesty of Seaman's Bitter Cry of the Great Unpaid*.

It was five minutes 'till seven p.m. and Laurent was standing at the beginning of the crosswalk, with LaJuan's hand tightly in his, he loved his little brother, he was about to have his fourth birthday next week and just a day before his own thirteenth birthday. He smiled over at his sister, LaQuita, who tightly held onto little two-year-old LaVern's right hand, even as he stuck the remainder of a hot dog into his mouth with his left and they began crossing the street—while there was nothing coming in either direction.

Jennifer Fernandez looked out her car window and saw the litter strewn throughout the block, beer and wine bottles, a discarded mattress and several shopping carts, some empty some filled to overflowing with junk and discarded aluminum cans and soda bottles. She saw a toothless old woman wave at her and then what she knew were two crack addicts, as she slowed down to thirty mph, knowing that there was a crosswalk due about a mile farther on. But, when she saw the crack addicts pointing towards her car, she immediately stepped down on the gas and the Echo shot forward, as the speedometer quickly hit forty, then fifty and was nearing sixty mph when she plowed into the four children, who were standing in the middle of the crosswalk when she hit them. Laurent was the only one to really get a chance to do anything, as his reflexes, honed through hour upon hour of basketball practice and scrimmage games, reacted just in time for him to turn sideways and begin to throw LaJuan away from him but the Echo, still traveling at over sixty mph, ran straight over Laurent, sideswiping LaQuita, who tried to shield little LaVern, who was thrown from her arms and partially run over, even as LaJuan's body—thrown into the air by Laurent in an act of desperation—came down upon her windshield and cracked almost through it, one of his little legs getting caught underneath the driver-side windshield wiper. Jennifer shrieked and gunned her accelerator even more, as she realized where she was and saw the many black faces looking over from the basketball courts and some sort of a cook-out. LaJuan's body slid off her car about a hundred yards further up the street and she screamed again, even as her brain clicked into action, telling her body to head for her dance studio, it was closer than her home and she had to stop driving and look at her car as soon as she could.

Miguel Fernandez pulled his 1999 Honda Accord into a parking space and he and his wife got out and walked into the dance studio, where Jennifer sobbed out her story.

“Jen’, you’ve go to the police; let’s go back and see if you really hurt anybody?”

“Bu’ ... but Daddy, it’s—it’s across from the basketball courts.”

“The ones across from ah-hun’red-Forty-Second Avenue ... the ones you mean ... the ones—”

“Daddy ... well ... yes—yes Daddy ... they’re ... they’re all black there, they’re all—”

“—I know they’re all drug addicts and pimps,” her mother hissed.

“A bunch ah thieves over there aw-rye, they’re all on welfare too,” her father added.

“Oh Daddy, what are we gonna do?”

“First thing is to get you home—what?”

“Wha’ ... what about my car ... what about—”

“Where is it?”

“Out back Daddy, it’s right out back of the studio.”

They went through the rear exit of her studio and walked to where she had parked the Echo, in the grass and partially blacktopped area just adjacent to a Dumpster.

Miguel Fernandez leaned over and rubbed the cracked windshield and his hand came back wet, wet with blood. He bent down and rubbed the dented-in hard plastic fender and came back with even more blood. He nodded at his wife. “We need to go to the police.”

But his wife made a face. “Don’t be silly, she might not have hurt anyone—maybe it was a dog or something?” Miguel Fernandez, who had just heard his daughter describe hitting three or four black children, scowled and opened his mouth but his wife cut him off. “Michael you take Jen home—I’ll drive her car home. Go on now I’ll be right behind you.”

Miguel Fernandez shook his head but followed his daughter through her studio and out the front door to his car.

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FRENZY

News fitting to the night

Black, fearful, comfortless and horrible.

—Shakespeare, *King John*. Act v, sc. 6, l. 19.

Christine Walker rubbed her tired eyes and sipped at her coffee. It was just a quarter past seven p.m. but she was already tired, as she sat in her 2004 Mercedes Benz coupe. Suddenly her police-band radio crackled and she listened intently, as the alert came over that there was a hit-and-run on Twenty-Second Street, just across from the University Area

Community Center's basketball courts. She sighed and stuck her key in the ignition, turned it and it roared to life—she was forty-two years old and had been working as a news reporter for nearly two decades. She had worked in almost every department but had been on the police beat since her third year with the paper and it had quickly turned into a way of life for her, the hours she didn't particularly like but the action, the adrenaline rush when you were the first to break a story, for her there was nothing like it, nothing that she had found yet—anyway. It was better than any of the few drugs she had tried or any sport she had ever competed in and she had tried them all, including jumping off a mountain hanging onto only a glider. No—this was her life and, as her car's motor revved to life, so did she, as her eyes popped open and she put the black coffee she had been sipping in the cup-holder next to her and stepped down hard on the gas-pedal.

Stephanie Slider leaned over, as the make-up man hissed at her, “Now Stevie—pleez-zuh—hold still.”

But Slider, a twenty-nine-year-old news anchor for the largest and most frequently watched local station in Tampa, was up, out of her chair already. She glanced at the clock on the wall, a quarter to eight p.m., fifteen minutes until show-time and she had barely had time to go over her notes—but there was something going on in the director's office and she wanted to know what it was. She barged into the office and two assistant directors looked up and both of them frowned. The director was still on the telephone and his voice was rising, “Well, find out damn-it Jackie, wha' ah yah think we pay you for? Find out?”

He slammed the phone down on the receiver and stared at the question mark that was Stephanie Slider's face. She had her hands on her hips and her forehead wrinkled slightly when she barked, “Herbie, what's going on?”

“Nothin' ... nada ... look, it don't—it ain't news *yet*, alright?”

“Well, what is it about?”

“Hit and run over by the University Area Community Center.”

“University Community Center ... the—”

“Yeah, it's a bad area Stevie, you've never been there.”

Herbert Hansen who was bedding his star anchor-woman down, and had gotten her from a small station in Iowa, knew exactly where Stephanie Slider had and hadn't been in her ninety-three days in Tampa; he ought to know, he paid the rent on her beach-front condominium, and spent most of his time there or at the station—with her.

“Well, is it news?”

“Yeah, its news baby, we're just tryin' to find out if there are any eyewitnesses before we give it to you.”

“Any deaths ... any—”

“I don't know yet for sure but four kids were apparently hit in a crosswalk, in a thirty-mile-an-hour zone.”

“Ah-oh-oh, oh my-my—tragic—tragic, what a shame, a pity, four you say?” Stephanie Slider's face showed what appeared to be deep concern and pity but Herbie Hansen knew that it wasn't real, as he knew how good an actress she was, for the former Miss Iowa, and runner-up in the Miss America pageant of several years past would do anything, *anything*, to further her journalistic television career and he knew it well—all too well.

Clinton Tompson nodded at the ambulance as it pulled away and smiled at the reporter—he had known her for ten of the twelve years he had been a deputy with the Sheriff’s Department. She was the best at what she did, he knew that but he also knew why—she worked the hardest—she was always the first on the scene and usually the last to leave, she stayed until she found something, *anything*, that would make a story.

Tompson smiled now. “C’mon Chris, I don’t know—aw-eye.”

“C’mon Clint, youse know more in-at c’mon now?” Tompson’s smile widened, Walker’s Brooklyn accent always snuck in whenever she got excited, the primary reason why she wasn’t in the broadcast media field. “C’mon Clint, you saw them, didn’t youse?”

“Yeah okay,” Clint Tompson said and leaned over and lowered his voice. “I don’t know for sure but the biggest kid looked dead to me and there was a real little one—dead for sure—for sure Chris.”

Chris Walker’s countenance lit up and she gave the deputy a kiss on the cheek and ran for her car. Just as she put her hand on the handle, Clint Tompson barked, “Gee-zuz Chrissy, I remember when info like that got a lot more ‘an a little peck on ah cheek?”

Chris Walker, who everyone knew had gotten married less than a month ago, waved and smiled at Tompson. “Times have changed Clint, times have changed but I’ll buy youse a soda nex’ time baby, ‘kay?”

The Mercedes-Benz pulled away from the curb, just as another Deputy accosted Clint Tompson. Wasn’t that Chris Walker? Some set ah pips man. You still poppin’ her—Cee-Tee?” Clint Tompson shook his head forlornly and hissed, “Naw-aw man, she got hitched.”

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BEAT BY PRINT

Time is ... Time was ... Time is past.

—Robert Greene, *The Honourable Historie of Friar Bacon*, xi, 55. (1589)

Stephanie Slider shook her head and her eyes magnified, even as she sipped at the piping hot cup of coffee. She sat on the porch of her condo—on the fifty-second floor—overlooking the Atlantic Ocean, and stared at the front page of the newspaper sitting on the glass table in front of her. It had the picture of the mother of the four hit-and-run victims, four children ranging in ages from twelve down to two, and a caption underneath it that two of them had died. The eyewitness accounts had all varied but the majority described the vehicle as being either a white Ford or Chevy van or a Honda Civic or Accord, or both. Some of the eyewitnesses were sure they had seen a white van just before or after the accident and just as many had seen a blue

or green Honda and just as many claimed to have seen both and the assorted descriptions of how the children had been hit were so varied this soon after the accident that it was reported the police would have to individually screen all of them. Herb Hansen snatched the paper from the table and scowled when Stephanie Slider shrieked, “She did it again Herbie—damnit where does she get this information?”

Hansen scowled. It was unheard of for the print media to break a story before the broadcast media, as it took them so much longer to get the word out. Of course, the newspapers were the fastest of the print media but twenty-four hours in which to break a story was exceptional, except—it appeared to Hansen—for Christine Walker. The only thing approaching her speed were the Bloggers on the Internet but there were so many of them and so much of the information was unsubstantiated that little if any attention was paid to them, as yet anyway, by the ‘real world.’ “I tol’ jew before Stevie, she’s been at this for over two decades in Tampa and Saint Pete and she’s got sources nobody else has.”

“Shit Herbie, and all the money this station has, you’d think we’d have somebody besides the station’s dummy private dick chasin’ himself.”

Herb Hansen smiled at Slider. She was almost twenty years his junior and she was costing him a lot in dollars and maybe more than that, being as the station’s movers and shakers had informed him that, although the ratings had dramatically improved over the three months Stephanie Slider had been in the anchor position the quality of the news was slipping and they were sure that even a former Miss America runner-up, with 38-22-38 measurements, could not keep the number-one rating for long unless it improved and this was the third time in as many months that the print media, via none other than the indubitable Christine Walker, had cost them breaking a story and there was nothing worse than being beat by a newspaper, considering all the edges broadcast journalism had over them. Herb Hansen’s smile turned upside down, as he lit his second cigarette of the day and he thought to himself that he might just have to hire Chris Walker before she put him out of business.

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SUSPECTS

There is nothing makes a man suspect much, more than to know little.

Francis Bacon, *Essays: Of Suspicion*.

Joseph ‘J.J.’ Johnson swished the basketball through the hoop and smiled at his companion, whose eyes opened widely, as he nodded his head slightly upward, causing J.J. to swivel his head around quickly. He saw the two plainclothes cops getting out of an undercover car that everyone knew was a cop car and panicked. He looked to the left and then to the right. His 1998 Ford Van was parked at the curb and he could see that the cops were looking it over, as one stood next to it even as his partner headed for the courts and his quarry, nineteen-year-old J.J. Johnson—a known neighborhood drug dealer.

J.J. jumped over the two kids easily but then came to a screeching halt when he saw another plainclothes cop standing a dozen feet away from him, staring straight at him and smiling slightly. He had a service revolver in his right hand and J.J. thought about running but didn't want to chance it, as too many cops had killed too many fleeing felons, as far as he was concerned. So he did what any self-respecting pimp and drug-dealer, who wanted to stay alive, would do, he put his hands behind his head and hissed, "I ain't done nuffin' officahs—I swear I ain't."

Detective Michael 'Big Mac' McGuire, all six feet, six inches and 285 pounds of him, smiled and pushed J.J.'s hands behind his back and handcuffed him, even as J.J. continued to wail that he hadn't sold any drugs since the last time he was arrested. But, Big Mac just smiled and nodded towards J.J.'s white Ford Econoline van, with a dented-in right fender and a smashed headlight. "That's yah truck ain't it JayJay?"

"Yeah-yeah, the van, yeah, why ... wha' ... why—what jew—"

Big Mac simply pushed J.J. towards his car. "C'mon, let's go."

They sweated J.J.—five straight hours of questioning, but they couldn't break him. He admitted to selling drugs in his van but claimed he pulled out just after the accident, scared the cops would finger him for dealing. He took a polygraph and passed it and Big Mac was considering whether to charge him with possession, they had found a small amount of grass and some crack in his van, when the report from the inspectors arrived that his van couldn't have been involved in the accident and Big Mac let him go.

Big Mac, as the lead traffic homicide investigator of the hit-and-run, was taking most of the heat for the lack of results, and ran his bear-paw of a hand over his face and glared at three of his best investigators. They were all sitting around a table, sipping from cups of coffee and nibbling from a platter of sandwiches. They were in the operations center of the Sheriff's Department and Big Mac was in an uproar. "Dammit, we need to can every deputy that was on the scene then—Kee-rice—nobody marked where the bodies fell, they let the witnesses go before getting any information—how we supposed to do our jobs?"

"Yeah, well, least we finally got the make ah the freakin' car Big Guy, y'know—huh?"

Big Mac nodded at Dennis 'Rock' Rockigiullio. They had identified a piece of black fender molding that had been found on the scene. The inside marking had identified it as belonging to a Toyota and the police had, at first, figured it for a minivan but it turned out to be from a Toyota Echo, a 2001, 2002 or 2003 Toyota Echo.

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JENNIFER CRACKS

Children sweeten labours, but they make misfortunes more bitter: they increase the cares of life, but they mitigate the remembrance of death.

—Bacon, *Essays: Of Parents and Children*.

Jennifer Fernandez walked down the hallway with her friend and fellow teacher Kathy Amandes when suddenly Amandes said, “Oh Jen isn’t it terrible about that hit-and-run? It was right down the street here. Gawd, I mean who could have run over four children and then drove away? And, Lord, two of them are dead—Jen—Jen are you alright?”

Jennifer Fernandez appeared to be choking but finally stopped coughing. “I’m feeling a little sick Kate sorry but I have to run now, bye.”

Kathy Amandes watched as Fernandez ran out to the parking lot and jumped into a Chevy Blazer. “That’s funny,” Amandes whispered to herself, “I thought she drove a Toyota?”

Barbara Fernandez hugged her first-born to her bosom and stroked her head, even as the television set blurted forth the identification of the Toyota Echo. Jennifer Fernandez cried to her mother that she couldn’t take anymore of the tension and stress of not knowing when she would be caught and she *couldn’t* go back to the school the next day. Her sister, Kelly, had lent her the 1998 Chevy Blazer that belonged to her fiancé, John, who had moved in with Kelly two weeks ago and who was helping as much as he could at keeping Jennifer’s secret. Jennifer looked up at her father but then heard the television blare out again that a Toyota Echo, a two thousand and one, two or three was now the make of vehicle that had been determined to have caused the fatal accident on North Twenty-second Street, just across from the University Area Community Center’s basketball courts and playground, three days in the past.

-11- MOUTHPIECE

If the laws could speak for themselves, they would complain of the lawyers in the first place.
—Lord Halifax, *Works*, 224.

John ‘Fast Jack’ Levine nodded at his partner Lawrence J. Cohen II and smiled, then sipped at his coffee. The two shysters were in their prestigious office on the fifteenth floor of their downtown Tampa office. They were in Levine’s private office, surrounded on all sides by pictures of predators and with a stuffed wolf in one corner and huge grizzly bear in another. The bear’s huge head, baring fangs as long as your finger and claws to match, stood to its full height of nine and a half feet, Levine’s high twelve foot ceilings providing the backdrop for the monstrous beast, whose head just brushed it thanks to a two-foot stand. The office building, of which Levine and Cohen owned a quarter interest, overlooked the courthouse, several blocks away; a courthouse famous for the vultures that were rampant in the area and that hung on the courthouse roofs and windowsills. The two-legged variety were rampant also and it was a running joke that whenever a Tampa shyster died he got his wings immediately, wings to come

back to the courthouse and hang out for all eternity. Cohen stared at the headlines and reached for a cigarette. He nodded towards the paper, lying in front of them on the large table they sat at and growled, “Think they’ll ever catch this maniac Jackie?”

“Sure hope so, runnin’ over kids like that—a scumbag—huh Larry.”

“Yeah, ‘at’s one case I don’t want.”

“Lare, we’d never take that one—I can tell you anyway—it’s some drunk scumbag that was over there buyin’ drugs guaranteed, huh?”

“Yeah—you’re probably right. Well, shhh, look-it the time—I better get back to it. We still up for tomorrow, big guy?”

“Yeah, sure thing Lare, seven in the a.m. buddy, I’ll be there and we’ll get in eighteen holes this time—just don’t bring your cell-phone.

Cohen stood up and smiled. “I won’t if you don’t pal.”

Larry Cohen picked up the telephone and frowned when he realized who it was; he lowered his voice without even realizing it. “Well Mr. Fernandez that would be my partner John Levine, he’s not here right now but will be in shortly. Yes, well, you would have to come in and we could talk. What, well, let me, ah-er, fine-fine, we’ll see you then Michael.”

Levine sipped his coffee; he and Cohen had played golf that morning and Levine had stayed on the putting green until noon. It was now one p.m. in the afternoon and Larry Cohen was explaining to him who it was they were scheduled to meet with at one-thirty. “Well, what say Jack?”

“Shhhh, what *could* they have to say. Well, it *should* be interesting, to say the least—but—as far representin’ them, I don’t think so Lare.”

“It’ll give us a lot of free publicity Jack?”

Cohen well-knew that they had split over a million bucks the previous year, 2003, and that they didn’t really *need* the publicity—he also knew how much his partner craved the spotlight.

They held the meeting in Jack Levine’s spacious office and Levine noticed immediately that the diminutive Jennifer Fernandez was very shy and embarrassed and kept her head down, almost reverently. Levine had two daughters of his own and could imagine what her father must be going through. Miguel Fernandez introduced himself and his family and then explained that it was a terrible accident and that his daughter had attended the University of South Florida in Tampa and the crowd she hung out with had always avoided the University Area Community Center, and neighboring streets, at all costs, as many professors warned them about the area, about the drugs and the violence and so she had been scared to stop and hadn’t even realized she had hit anyone, as it was getting dark.

Levine looked at Jennifer Fernandez, who appeared to be crying as she explained that what her father said was all true. Levine glanced at Larry Cohen and nodded almost imperceptibly, they would take the case, especially considering that Mr. Fernandez not only pleaded with them to take it but offered that he had ten grand in the bank but would mortgage his house if need be, to get his daughter off. Just what Levine liked to hear and, of course, the publicity never hurt a lawyer’s business.

Little griefs make us tender; great ones make us hard.
—Andre Chenier.

Lisa Williams saw the deep dark pit ahead but she couldn't help walking right into it and she fell headfirst into the pit and found herself suspended in space, almost like in a dream but this was no dream, this was too real to be a dream and she knew that for sure. Then it got darker and darker, it was so pitch black that she couldn't see her hand in front of her face. Then she saw the sliver of light up ahead and then it began opening up—first the size of a pin-hole and then bigger—until the light exploded inside her cranium and she sat up, screaming maniacally.

“Mama—Mama, Mama why are you crying Mama . . . why are you—”

“—I'm alright,” she said and looked up, as the daylight coming through the window stabbed her in the eyes and she reached for her two-year-old son LaVern and then smiled at LaQuita, her eight-year-old daughter, who had a cast on her left foot and one on her right arm. She glanced to where her nine-month-old son, Lamont, lie sleeping in his crib. Finally, she realized her telephone was ringing and answered it. After thirty seconds of yes's and no's she put it down and rolled off the mattress. She looked at the disheveled room and said a silent prayer that she could escape it someday soon. It was her lawyer, Stanley Shineberg, who had offered his services, knowing there would be money in it and having Lisa Williams sign a contract giving him a third of any settlement and, of course, the publicity could never hurt him. A sole practitioner for the past twenty years, Shineberg was primarily a personal injury lawyer and he knew money when he smelled it and he smelled plenty here. It seemed Shineberg wanted her to come to his office, as there had been a new development in the case, an attorney had taken the police to the vehicle that had killed her two children.

-13- MONEY

O Lord, the sin
Done for the things there's money in.
—John Masefield, *The Everlasting Mercy*.

Lisa Williams put the handkerchief to her nose and blew—it had been over a year since her two children had died. She still owed money for the funeral and for the caskets and she was only able to pay her rent with the help of her attorney, Stanley Shineberg, who had already advanced her over five-hundred dollars. She had been shocked when the television crews showed

up and her surviving daughter LaQuita, when she saw herself on T.V. asked her mother if they were movie stars now. She had been stunned again and again at the people who seemed to drift in and out of her apartment, besides the television crews, there were newspaper and magazine reporters, politicians and lawyers, so many lawyers, that was one reason that she was glad she had hired Stanley Shineberg, because he got them all to go away, even though it had taken a month before anything returned to normal for her and she still got an occasional phone call or someone coming up to her in a store or restaurant and sounding off, usually telling her what a bad mother she was but occasionally people told her how sorry they were. And now it was a year already that the accident had taken place and the culprit—Jennifer Fernandez—was *still* free, on bail and—even though she had met with Lisa and apologized—Lisa Williams was still not convinced that she was *really* sorry or even had any remorse but now her attorney was informing her that Jennifer Fernandez’s attorney, Levine, knew an attorney who worked for the insurance company, the same insurance company that Shineberg, on behalf of his client, Lisa Williams, was suing in a civil lawsuit for punitive and compensatory damages, for two dead children and two injured ones and Shineberg—with Levine’s help—had talked this insurance attorney into settling for a cool million smackers, of which Shineberg would pocket close to three-hundred and thirty-four thousand bucks. Of course, there was a catch, as Lisa Williams had to agree to Jennifer Fernandez getting probation instead of jail-time. Shineberg knew it would be touch and go at first but he knew she would take it because he already had the house picked out to show her what she could do with this much money, more than Lisa Williams could have ever dreamed of seeing much less having—in her lifetime.

Lisa Williams walked into the six-bedroom three-and-a-half-bath monstrosity and cried when she saw that all her kids could have their own bedrooms. She had four kids now, as she had just delivered a girl, only her second, Linda, who was already ten months old and—although she hated to see Jennifer Fernandez go free—she agreed to the deal.

Two days later, Stanley Shineberg, already counting his money, frowned when he heard Lisa Williams talking to herself in the hallway after they had signed papers to get the money, she was whispering to herself, “Oh Lawd-God, Gee-zuz the things we does, Lawd why I gots to be like this, fo’ money, fo’ money?”

He put it out of his mind, as now all that was left was the trial, where the settlement deal would be agreed to. The prosecutor’s office had offered a deal, three years imprisonment but only because Levine had found a loophole to get the prosecutor’s office to offer such a lowly sentence and it was Florida Statute 316.027 which made leaving the scene of a fatal accident a crime; the statute read that anyone who willfully left a scene was guilty and Levine snatched out the word ‘willfully’ and hired a psychiatrist to say that Jennifer Fernandez was temporarily insane at the time of the accident and Levine was sure that it would meet the M’Naghten Rule, the legal definition of insanity, which said that anyone with the “inability to distinguish right from wrong” met that standard. He had an expert in psychological trauma and post-traumatic stress flown in from a medical college in New York, where he was a professor, and who testified that he had examined Jennifer Fernandez and stated that she went into traumatic shock when she hit the children and became disembodied from her very mind, the shock making her drive on, on autopilot as it were, until she woke up and drove to her dance studio. And now the deal was that the three years imprisonment would be three years of probation. Shineberg smiled slightly; he wondered what the media would do when they found out about the deal, the ruling, as they had gone wild on all the talk-radio and Internet chat-rooms and websites when they found out about the three-year prison term, screaming and bellowing that it was too little for running over four

children and killing two of them. The airwaves and Internet were adamant and rampant with opinions, but one opinion seemed in the majority, that Jennifer Fernandez should be charged with vehicular homicide, not just leaving the scene of an accident, and many callers-in voiced the opinion that if the shoe was on the other foot and Lisa Williams had run over four white children and killed two of them she'd be in prison for life, if not lynched. Lisa Williams wanted to see Jennifer Fernandez behind bars it's just that six-hundred-sixty thousand dollars plus change, was *more money* than she could ever imagine and the house she would buy with half of it was a dream come true—and so—the fix was in—or was it?

Kimberly Carson was the assistant state attorney who got the brass ring and was picked to prosecute the case. She and Levine had breakfast together one morning and Levine made the case that he thought that Lisa Williams would be willing to agree to his client receiving parole rather than jail-time. Carson stopped a forkful of scrambled eggs from entering her mouth and glared at Levine. “Jack, what are you saying? What do you know that I don't?”

“No, no nothin’—I just, that is—when I spoke to Lisa, why she seemed touched by ah-er, her ah-er-num, her talk with Jennifer.”

“She told me right after that meeting she wanted Jennifer behind bars?”

“Well, lah-ah, yeah but that was before she talked to the Reverend.”

“The woman—that woman is a reverend?”

“Yes, and Lisa forgave Jennifer—that's what I heard her say anyway.”

“Jack, what did you do? You fool with speeding up that civil judgment against the insurance company or what? Because if you did—”

“—I didn't, c'mon Kim, you know me better'n that.”

Kimberly Carson, who barely knew Levine except by his reputation as being fast to act and even faster to settle, stood up. “I'm going to find out what happened Jack—believe me, I will.”

Levine put his hands out, palms up. “C'mon Kim, sit down, take a load off, there's nothin' to find? C'mon, c'mon, Kim... wha'...?”

Levine nodded at the waitress standing over him, as she nodded at the barely touched plate of food and said, “Should I take that Mr. Levine?”

Levine, never one to waste anything, shook his head. “Naw-aw, that's alright, I'll eat it.”

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THE TRIAL

When justice on offenders is not done,
Law, government, and commerce are o'er thrown.—Sir John Denham, *Of Justice*, 1. 85.

Judge Lamar Ward glared at Jack Levine and then at Kimberly Carson.

“I thought we had this one settled?”

“I did too Judge?”

“Well, Ms. Carson, what say you?”

“Judge, the State feels that Miz Williams’ character has been compromised.”

“Miz Carson—you can’t mean the civil settlement—it hasn’t been settled yet anyway?”

“Your Honor the State offers three years in jail and we think it’s still her best offer.”

The judge scowled and growled, “Fine, it’s a trial you want, it’s a trial you’ll get.”

They filed out into the courtroom and the judge called the court to order and the fireworks began.

Levine put Lisa Williams on the stand and got her to say that she didn’t hold anything against Jennifer Fernandez and she didn’t have any animosity in her heart against her. When asked if she had forgiven her she looked out into the crowd and spied the Reverend Michele Mahoney and nodded. “Yes, I forgive her.”

Kimberly Carson fumed in her chair and when called on for cross, jumped up and shrieked, “Miz Williams has any money been promised you through any settlement of—”

“... Objection Your Honor,” Levine barked and was on his feet along with Stanley Shineberg who also shouted his objection, while the judge pounded his gavel and turned towards Carson.

“Miz Carson, you know that is confidential and I’ll call you in chambers if you say one more sentence that I anticipate may be going in that direction.”

Kimberly Carson nodded and walked to within inches of Lisa Williams and said, “Miz Williams, did you not wish to see Miz Fernandez be punished for this crime?”

“But it says in the bible that—”

“—Miz Williams, did you not state to the prosecutor’s office that you wanted to see Miz Fernandez do jail-time?”

“Ah-er, yeah, yes-yes, I did. She killed two of my babies; she, she **SHOULD** be punished. She should do jail-time, she ... oh ... oh—”

Lisa Williams broke into tears and was excused from the witness chair and the judge shook his head forlornly, as the trial began, in earnest now, as both sides began the battle for the Honorable Lamar Justin Ward the III’s, mind-set.

John ‘Fast Jack’ Levine lived up to his name. He called expert witness after expert witness and he took his case straight to sentencing and under Florida law he did not have to submit his client, Jennifer Fernandez, to any state examinations or give his list of expert witnesses who would testify to the prosecution until the first day of trial, this day, and Kimberly Carson had no choice but to let their testimony stand.

In the nearly sixteen straight hours that the judge kept the court in session, it became obvious that Levine was piling up points and if an appeal was filed he would have a better than average chance to win it. Levine knew it, the prosecutor’s office knew it and the judge knew it. He adjourned to his chambers to consider his decision. It was past midnight and a new day had come upon the world.

It was almost two hours later, at just past two a.m. in the morning that the judge returned to the bench. The courtroom was still packed. He read his sentence dispassionately and informed all that he gave great weight to the fact that Jennifer Fernandez had no criminal record, was an upstanding member of the community and would not be a danger to society. He also gave great

weight to the many expert witnesses that had testified and concluded that Jennifer Fernandez had acted under extreme duress and ordered her to serve one year of community control—being under house arrest as it were—followed by three years of probation and to perform a thousand hours of community service work. He banged his gavel and Lisa Williams, no longer in tears, ran from the courtroom. Kimberly Carson was livid and Jack Levine and Stanley Shineberg shook hands, both grinning like two kids in a candy store.

EPILOGUE

ADAM

Thou hast made him a little lower than the angels.
—*Old Testament: Isaiah, ii, 22.*

Adam—she would name him Adam—just like her first-born son, just like the first man who God made because she knew God made her children for her. It was her eighth child for she had given birth to another child and she had named it Adam, sixteen long years ago, just before she had put it up for adoption. She regretted that now but her parents and guidance counselor and the Reverend Michele Mahoney had influenced her, telling her it would be best, after all the man *had* raped her.

She held the nine-pound three-ounce boy and kissed him lightly on his forehead; the father was in jail again, but Lisa Williams had it all figured out now because even though this baby—Baby Adam Williams—was the first child to be born in the year 2006, it would also be Lisa Williams' last for even though they were her whole life, all her joy and happiness, she knew she couldn't bear the pain of another death, another accident. As she looked into the infant's face, she saw the very face of God but then a cloud appeared and she had feelings of wanting to hurt the little one but only in order to save him from the future that the world surely held for him, the future she knew all too well, but then she remembered the money, the house, a mansion really, and she smiled, even as the tears streaked down her cheeks and she pulled the bundle that had surely come from above closer to her bosom.