

***A JOURNEY
TO THE TRUTH***

Forward

Perhaps if the children are brought up with religious tolerance and taught that the common ground of all religions is to make them better people, the world could be more peaceful.

This book is the story of a man who has the assets of natural intelligence, the love and guidance of parents whom he lost early in life, good friends and teachers and a diligence to help him along a very bumpy journey of life. He also has a deep need to satisfy his spiritual questions and follows an equally bumpy journey of faith. Eventually, he closes the circle around his beliefs and at the center of that circle finds the shining light of the Truth.

This story really begins thousands of years ago.

In the millennia before Messengers and Prophets brought the Word of God, mankind had the desire to accept a supernatural power, which governs the universe. Lacking enlightenment, this journey would end in idol worshiping.

It was perhaps almost 4000 years ago when Abraham was born seven generations after Noah in the most fertile land on earth where mountains, desert and two big rivers meet. He was the Abraham who would become the father of three major religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. A few hundred miles to the northeast, at almost the same century, came a Messenger of Zoroastrian. Also about this time, hundreds miles eastward in the Indian subcontinent, the Vedic Aryan people started singing the song of Brahma.

During the next five hundred years, while the Three Commandments of Zoroastrian were spreading eastward, the children of Abraham brought the Ten Commandments and the Vedic developed teaching about the duties of life as well as spiritual obligations. The Vedic teachings of dharma (moral law) would give rise to Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism.

A thousand years of human suffering passed until Gautama Buddha showed the way to eternal enlightenment with the Four Noble Truths of Wisdom, Virtue, Concentration and the Noble Eightfold Path. Yet few were able to end their suffering as had Buddha. Far to the west, Greek civilization was flourishing where Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and other great thinkers would soon develop lasting contributions to mankind's journey. Five hundred years later, God in the person of the Savior came with a message of love. Still, the suffering of the Christ did not end human suffering. After another 500 years, the last prophet of the children of Abraham brought Islam.

At the crossroads of commerce and goods and concepts stands Iran. It is here that the Sufi faith developed, influenced by and influencing these eternal teachings. Here too, in the latter half of the twelfth century, Rumi, a teenager running away from Genghis Kahn's army of Mongols, meets Attar and receives from Attar, "The Book of the Divine". This meeting and Attar's writings inspire Rumi to his own poetic career. Attar,

in turn, perhaps inspired by many Sufis before him wrote "The Conference of the Birds" in which 30 birds seek the truth and, after much tribulation, find it in a surprising way.

The Truth they find is all the more remarkable since, at the time of the writings, that Truth had led to the torture and death of those who spoke it. Sufi writings had, of necessity, taken to hide their true religious meetings in seemingly innocuous metaphors. These writings and the lives of their authors have largely inspired this story of Sam.

Fifteen hundred years have now passed since the birth of Islam and mankind still seems unable to progress spiritually despite great advances in other facets of human life. It is into this world that Sam is born.

Sam studies, believes and even converts into those religions, but his appetite for searching the truth is not fulfilled with the simple knowledge of those religions.

Sam begins to understand the goal of his quest in an unpretentious fable about an angel coming from heaven looking for fire to smoke a pipe. His knowledge of all religions, a heart full of love and inspirations drawn from the mystic language of Attar and Rumi help him to reach the truth.

It is only with a clear conscience that one can see Heaven

– and Peace.

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FACES OF GOD

CHAPTER 1

THE ACHING ACOLYTE

Poppa nearly tripped over his own feet as Sam walked with him back home from their South Chicago Baptist Church. Sam knew poppa's 'walkin shoes blues' wasn't on account of Reverend Brown having told poppa that they won the church raffle for a much-needed new table. "God works in mysterious ways" poppa advised his son with a smile. "Or mebbe yo grinnin when God walks in Miss Terrie's ways?" Sam retorted referring to the shapely woman strolling ahead of them. Sam prepared himself for *Whack* what quickly followed his sass talk. He couldn't help himself. Even knowing mamma or poppa would always be swift with a lesson to his behind, words would tumble out leaving him barely time to prepare himself. It never really hurt bad. Sam suspected they enjoyed his quick wit even as they scolded the form it always took.

Life had certain regularity to it. Irregularities, like Rosa Parks refusing to give up her bus seat to a white man down in Alabama a few months ago, came and went barely ruffling the flow of their lives.

Attending their Baptist church was part of the regularity in their lives. Even though he pretended to hate it, Sam enjoyed getting dressed up in his Sunday bests - putting on the brilliant white stiffly starched shirt smelling slightly of bleach which his mother so carefully saved for him all week long. Sam's mother looks as pretty as an angel in her colorful Sunday dress. His father and mother walk just a bit more slowly and regally on their way to church, heartily greeting fellow parishioners. No matter the weather, it was always good weather. "This rain'll bless our flowers wid brighter blooms, won' it" or "This here cold spell sho do make the church feel warm 'n' 'vitn', don't it now?"

At church, Sam's attention would wander during the readings and sermons, but he thoroughly enjoyed the singing. Before long, his shirt is well wrinkled for all the clapping and dancing that accompanies each gospel song. In unison, spirits are raised to the heavens on the joy of song. The troubles of the week are left far below in the earthly realm as the whole church brushes heaven. When Sam closes his eyes and simply feels the thunderous energy within the chapel, he can almost see God smiling brighter than lightning upon him and his family.

For the rest of the Lord's day, the warmth lingers as mamma prepares the meal - humming her favorite hymns while delicious breezes escape from the kitchen to tickle Sam's increasingly empty belly.

By Monday morning, the realities of a hard life are still intruding on the simmering Sabbath pleasures only with difficulty. Mamma is a bit gentler in waking him for school than she is the rest of the week. Poppa has a fresh energy in his step as he heads off to his shoe repair storefront. Sam knows that by Friday, poppas shoulders will be stooped with the weight of collecting payments from friends who can ill afford his leatherwork.

Still, they can less afford want of his talent for pulling another few months of life from overworn soles. Poppa seems able to do the same for their owners with a joke or a kind word. He claims this is his secret for managing to pay their bills each month - so long as his customers outlive their shoes, he will have a mighty fine business. If Mr. Daniel, as Sam's mother calls his father when she is feigning displeasure at him, has a weakness, it is for jazz. "Woman," poppa announces as he does every Thursday about this time. "if ah don' stretch my legs ah'll be needin' shoes to fit mah hands, n den hows ah gonna sew mo leather tamarah?"

"Mr. Daniel" - the twinkle in her eye betrayed the pleasure they had in this weekly game - "Ah knows yall headin down to that jazz club. You don' be foolin' this mother's chile wid yo crazy talk. Jes' 'member Sam's birthday's comin' up so don' go tossing all yo money at that nogood barkeep" she called as poppa hopped down the wooden back stairs, making just a bit more noise than he would normally.

Mary smiled after him. If sneaking out to that Jazz club once a week was the worst of the man, she had done well to marry him. She could hardly believe that Sam was almost 10 now. Born right after the war, the years had flown by. She put Sam to bed and closed the curtain that separated his bed from the dining area in their small apartment.

It was almost midnight when that hard knock on the door awakened her from her slumber. Her knitting fell to the floor as she startled from the chair. Cautiously, she whispered at the door "Who dat rappin so late? Yo forget yo key Mr Daniel?"

"Miss Mary? I'ze sorry, but I gots terrible news " She recognized the voice as Mr Tom, Daniel's good friend from down the street. Shaking, she opened the door to him. "Miss Mary, Daniel done got hissself kilt. Hank n Bo got into a terrible fight n Daniel tried to stop em n it come to a terrible end. I'ze sorry, Miss Mary ,,,," Tom began to sob as she felt her knees turn liquid and a bone chilling haze fill the room.

It was now three weeks since that terrible night; two weeks since the confusing procession of somber men dressed in black, dead to the strains of Jazz music which filled the street as they made their way to the gravesite; one week since the last neighbor had come by with a casserole to sit a spell with Mary and Sam. Three weeks of dread shadows creeping silently through the holes in their drawn curtains, causing Mary to shiver as though an evil spirit laughed maniacally across her stony weeping soul. Mamma let Reverend Brown slip quietly in. He whispered of a family in need of a cleaning woman and how he could use Sam's help a bit around the church after school. Sam couldn't make out all of what was said, but didn't much care in any event. He felt he should somehow become the man of the house and take care of his mamma as poppa would have wanted, but he was too young to do more than daydream of how he might be his mamma's hero. His imaginative plans were as substantive as the dust balls that now collected under the furniture in the apartment. They seemed big as they rolled here and there with the slightest air, but disappeared into small dark warts when he would grab one in his hand.

On moving day, Sam struggled with the heavy box of pots and pans clanking within. He tried not to show how his arms trembled with the weight as the muscles of the neighbor men swelled and glistened in time with a drum beat of grunts as they maneuvered the dresser down the stairs. Sam knew it would be even harder getting things up the five flight walkup to their new roost. Sam wondered how the sun could become so much dimmer just eight blocks from the lively home he had enjoyed since the beginning of time.

After a while, the memory of those sparkling days became just vague imaginations. With the only slightly crackled and oversized jacket Reverend Brown stuck under his arm still securely in place, Sam let himself in amid the sounds of radios wrapped in heavy silences that exhaled from adjacent doors. It was dark inside, though hardly darker than it was in daylight. Mamma would be getting off the bus soon, wearily making her way up flight after flight. Sam thought to start some supper fixins for them, but the tired odor of mildew as he opened the cooler door matched the desolation of the shelves within. He trimmed the spots off a few slices of bread, buttered them, spread some sugar atop and placed them on the upper shelf of the oven, ready to be heated when mamma finally, tiredly managed to open the door. She would probably hand him a brown bag of tidbits and drips of fatty gravy straining to leech out through the creases in the wax as she kissed his forehead. Tonight she would eat just a bit less herself. Sam hadn't noticed it at first, or thought perhaps she was making sure her son had a full belly for his schoolwork, or maybe even was well enough fed at her job that she needed no more at home. Sam could sense now it was none of those. It was like some terrible invisible tendrils within her were choking off her life just as the vines outside the window kept choking out the light. He hoped tonight he might come up with some remark to earn him a spank and a smile from her thin lips, but they barely spoke enough now to lubricate his sassy word plays. Soon enough, he would cover her with a shawl as she dozed in the armchair. He would lay himself down on the sofa to ready himself for another day at school.

Sam was almost in high school when she finally passed. In a way, it brought peace to Sam as well. Her frail body was not that of his mother. Sam's mamma jiggled when giggled and swayed elusively as she hummed her hymns. Mamma had made the kitchen knife sound like a snare drum, the table shake like a leaf and her smooth dark skin blur as she cut the greens for supper. Today, Sam got his parents back as he had loved them. While white wooden crosses rooted where they rested, they lived again within Sam. As he sat there on the damp grass, her quiet voice spoke to him with certainty for a last time: "Yo a fine young man n yo made you mamma happy. Yo allays be havin a fine joke wid words, n jokes be fine for a ray o sunlight twixt dark clouds, but God dun give you a sharp mind fo better callins. Yo got to make it on yo own now boy, n God he ha a plan fo yo. Yo gots to seek the trud o dat plan wid dat mind o yors - yo hear me? Yo promise yo poor mamma to make poppa n me proud o yo as we look down on yo from hebben. Be a good man like yo poppa."

After a bit, Uncle George came and put his hand on Sam's shoulder. "We gots to go now, boy. Yo aunt Sally be getting supper ready for us 'n' you know how wimmins get ifn yo make dem vittles dry out in de obben - *hooooeee!* I don wanna be lissnin t dat muttrin all night. You?" Sam got himself to his feet. After six months, he knew it

couldn't last much longer. Aunt Sally and uncle George tried to be quiet enough in their urgent whispers after he had gone to bed, but he knew nonetheless. They couldn't afford this. They tried cutting back and pretending not to eagerly accept what money he could bring them from odd jobs stocking shelves or sweeping barbershop floors or running down the streets delivering flowers while trying not to break the stems or let petals or leaves fall into the cracks and holes of the hot tar beneath his bare feet. At 14, his body was growing fast. His belly demanded more sustenance than Sam tried to limit himself to. Trying to keep his limbs from protruding so far from his clothes just wasn't working any more. Sam's high school expenses, added to George's costs of keeping that brown paper bag he carried about well weighted with the oil that kept him moving through his days, were more than the small family could manage. Worse, the strain was beginning to boil out of George's mouth and erupt from fists into walls and furniture. The strain had also made Sally's tongue too heavy to lift calming words from her throat.

Financial strains and unrest were not limited to that household. In recent years, the sidewalks of the neighborhood had been growing thick with people hoping to escape from those same pressures elsewhere. Sam noticed the changes. The streets he walked sounded and smelled much like uncle George. On the other hand, Reverend Brown's flock had grown as well. Enough that he decided it was high time to have a full time acolyte; one who would take room and board at the church and tend to things. Sam wasted no time moving his few possessions into the basement next to the furnace where a cot was set up for him.

Sam took to his job seriously and began to devour the books scattered about the church as he did his schoolbooks. Alone at night in the building, privacy was a novel experience for Sam. Often enough he would be unable to read because his salty eyes burned and watered from the heat of the furnace or his gut wrenched at the rumblings of rusty fluids flowing through the iron veins of the church. As he learned more of the world beyond the few blocks he called home, those same feelings could find root in him even far from his cot by the furnace. With a genetic talent, Sam became adept at clipping the sprouts of those soul-scarring seedlings where they showed themselves, but the roots refused to die. In remembrances of his father's hearty good humor, Sam sought means to kill those stubborn bitterweeds with the salvation promised each Sunday. He had but to bring Christ into his heart.

Sam just couldn't quite figure out what that meant. He tried to open his inner feelings enough that Christ would magically appear within him and take over to spread warming sunlight that would radiate from his eyes with solemn love for everyone about him. Try as he might, the emptiness within him remained stubbornly unlit. He needed a better sense of just who it was he was supposed to invite in. As he read the gospels of the New Testament, he tried to sense the nature of this Christ who would save him. He figured his boyhood image of a kind of superman blithely performing miracles, raising the dead and feeding the throng with less than would feed a single hungry man, wasn't the Christ who would come a calling. Yet he found more contradictions than he expected. If Christ could do so much so easily, why was He so skimpy with His miracles? Christ could single-handedly defeat the devil in the desert, but resigned himself to the fate of a horrible death at the hands of a small time governor. The Christ who turned out the

money changers from His "Father's House" would but call Himself the "Son of Man." Sam got the idea of tolerance and loving your neighbor, but knew he still had to let Christ into himself to really do it right. For all the advice within the Epistles, it just refused to all come together for him.

Sam thought back to the days when God seemed so close as the church rocked with Gospel songs. Was it the song of God he was seeking? Sam skimmed through Psalms, but the fog hardly parted. These were songs to God, but not God's song.

Just as Sam was his father's son, perhaps he needed to know God the Father to get a handle on God the Son. If his understanding of God seemed foggy before, as he read the Old Testament the light almost scattered like embers on a windy night to leave him in total darkness. God the Genius who created the Heavens and the Earth, tenderly creating a beautiful garden for His most loved creations, tyrannically evicts them for being tricked in their innocence. When brother kills brother, He merely sends the murderer away. He almost casually destroys all life on earth but those creatures on Noah's ark to start over. Yet He talks with everyone just like a next-door neighbor. He seems kind of mean when He toys with Abraham convincing him to kill a son just to test his faith. Then He seems pretty much a regular guy to spend a few hours wrestling with Jacob. By Exodus, He seems to have changed some. He is a shy magician appearing to Moses only as a burning bush. He can be a pretty tough Lord - not real quick with the blessings but swift as his mother's swats when He gets mad.

When Sam reached Leviticus, he was excited that he would here learn the secret laws needed to see God's light. Offerings? Rules about crazy things? What's worth what? God is some kind of storekeep of blessings? Deuteronomy sort of got Sam back to thinking about obeying the Commandments and keeping with God's rules, but didn't really help him figure God out. Then God becomes a vengeful warrior, or maybe a warrior spirit leading his chosen tribes to slaughter their enemies.

Sam finally got back to Psalms and Proverbs where his interest picked up. Sam liked that they seemed to contain hints of how to be a Godly person, but no brilliant flashes of sudden understanding went off in his mind. Ecclesiastes at first sends him into a funk seeming to tell him everything he was trying to do was futile and he shouldn't be doing it, but he tried to understand the distinctions it spoke of. Sam thought this book was what he was really looking for and resolved to study it hard and figure it all out. Before he did, though, he became entranced with the Song of Solomon as love was very much on his mind at his age, not that he understood what that had to do with God. Sam neglected to return to Ecclesiastes and sort of skimmed through the rest of the Old Testament. God's treatment of the Israelites seems often capricious or manipulative having them wander about various lands, falling into captivity for spells, building and destroying their cities and Temples all the while not bothering any more to appear in person to them as He did in the beginning. Yet eventually, He Himself sacrifices a Son to save a wicked world of its sins against Him and His will.

Maybe it was the tension of the missile crisis spilling onto the sidewalks the hushed urgent whispers he recognized as those of his aunt and uncle. Whatever the trigger, Sam

despaired of figuring this all out. Sam, in turn, suddenly spilled all his confusion out to Reverend Brown in such a babel, Sam half expected God to send a lightning bolt between their chairs. Reverend Brown listened quietly for nearly two hours until Sam took a breath, unable to even frame a sensible question. "My, my, my. Jes 15 years old and a head full o more jumbles, rebuses an' questions than I thought could fit in there. I have jes one question for you, though. Why is it you 'spectin to be able to wrap your arms around God an hug Im as though He were jes a man?" With that, Reverend Brown arose stiffly from his seat, and grabbing his coat, said "Ah can smell Mrs. Browns dumplins all the way here. I'll bring you some later. De Lord, he dun gib us many a blessin all 'round us ebbry day."

Sam sat exhausted. All he thought he had learned in his studies began to melt from his mind. Two years of studies and accumulated knowledge of the Bible pooled back into his subconscious. He wasn't sure it brought him any closer to salvation, but at least he didn't feel trapped in an alley surrounded by brick walls taller than he could perceive and nary a star above him twinkling through the gloom. Sam went for a stroll that evening; a first for him. When he returned, a plate with three dumplings awaited him.

During the next few weeks, Sam spent time enjoying his neighborhood. He knew most everyone he passed on the streets, but he started to get to know the trees, flower boxes hanging outside windows, colorful displays beckoning passersby from storefronts, the sounds of life as though each half block had its own melody and rhythm assigned to it. Every now and then, Sam almost felt a click somewhere deep - so indistinct it might be coming from some other world, which occasionally opened a tiny doorway behind his ears.

Sam looked up at poppa as he finished chalking five lines and a circle on the sidewalk. "Thas you, poppa" he proudly announced. "Well, well," poppa replied, "It surely do look like me, tho Ah'm thinkin Ah don look much like it." Sam looked down at his creation for a second and retorted: "imagin not, Ah forgot the big tummy" - Whack!!

Sam was approaching that part of the street that he first thought reminded him of the school marching band - though that wasn't quite right. It had a sharper tone to it. It was June and the windows were open. Smoke wafted out on an insistant voice made a little shrill by the small speaker of the radio. It wasn't Dr. King, but some new voice he had not heard before. Other noises intruded to make it hard to follow listening from the sidewalk: Sam could catch only parts

"... These ... some quick questions ... provoke some thoughts ... so-called Negroes ... enlightened leaders expect the poor black sheep to integrate into a society of bloodthirsty white wolves, ... sucking on our blood for over four hundred years here in America? Or will these black sheep also revolt ... another question: When the "good shepherd" comes will he integrate his long-lost sheep with white wolves? According to the Bible when God comes he won't even let his sheep integrate with goats. ...

The Honorable Elijah Muhammad teaches us that no people on earth fit the Bible's symbolic picture about the Lost Sheep more so than America's twenty million so-called Negroes ... Elijah Muhammad, a godsent shepherd, has opened the eyes of our people. ... The black masses don't want segregation nor do we want integration. ... we are a religious group, and as a religious group we can in no way be equated or compared to the nonreligious civil rights groups.

We are Muslims because we believe in Allah. We are Muslims because we practice the religion of Islam. The Honorable Elijah Muhammad teaches us that there is but one God, the creator and sustainer of the entire universe, the all-wise, all-powerful Supreme Being. The great God whose proper name is Allah. ... Islam is an Arabic word that means "complete submission to the will of Allah, or obedience to the God of truth, God of peace, the God of righteousness, ... Muslim is used to describe one who submits to God, one who obeys God. ... what does the religion of Islam have to do with American so-called Negro's changing attitude toward himself, toward the white man, toward segregation, toward integration, and toward separation, and what part will this religion of Islam play in the current black revolution that is sweeping the American continent today? ... religion of naked truth, undressed truth, truth that is not dressed up, and he says that truth is the only thing that will truly set our people free.

... Why, Jesus himself prophesied: You shall know the truth and it shall make you free. Beloved brothers and sisters, Jesus never said that Abraham Lincoln would make us free. He never said that the Congress would make us free. He never said that the Senate or Supreme Court or John Kennedy would make us free. ...

. ... The black revolution against the injustices of the white world is all part of God's divine plan. God must destroy the world of slavery and evil in order to establish a world based upon freedom, justice, and equality. ...

The Honorable Elijah Muhammad teaches us that the symbolic stories in all religious scriptures paint a prophetic picture of today. He says that the Egyptian House of Bondage was only a prophetic picture of America. Mighty Babylon was only a prophetic picture of America. the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah painted only a prophetic picture of America. No one here in this church tonight can deny that America is the mightiest government on earth today, the mightiest, the richest, and the wickedest. And no one in this church tonight dare deny that

America's wealth and power stemmed from 310 years of slave labor contributed from the American so-called Negro. ...

Beloved brothers and sisters here, a beautiful here at the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, because of America's evil deeds against the so-called Negroes, like Egypt and Babylon before her, America herself now stands before the bar of justice. America herself is now facing her day of judgement, and she can't escape because God Himself is the judge. ..."

Sam had been becoming aware of the civil rights movement. Reverend Brown more and more often referred to Dr. King's words of awakening dreams in his Sunday sermons, though the church seemed to be splitting apart despite the messages of progress. The troubles in Birmingham a few months prior were still being discussed here and there. The killing of Medgar Evers just days ago had brought more impatient voices to the arguments. There was tension on the street Sam had never felt before. He asked the man sitting on the stoop beside him who was speaking on the radio. Malcolm X - what an odd name. Sam wondered about a Baptist Church in Harlem so different from his own here in Chicago. Sam had no idea what Islam or Muslim or Allah meant, but from the biblical references, he figured it couldn't be all that different. That Egypt or Babylon or Sodom could mean anything about his current life, intrigued him. Too, this Islam seemed to promise some answers he had not found himself in the Bible. Maybe he would see what it was all about.

CHAPTER 2

THE DISSIDENT DISCIPLE

There was occasional news about the arrest and trial of Evers' killer that summer. Overall, though, it was a quiet summer despite the undercurrent of increasing hostility and anger whispered in bars, pool halls, and even barbershops up and down the streets Sam was exploring. Sam explored ever further from the few square blocks familiar to him from his entire life. Little changed from block to block except when he got to the lake. His mind reeled ... and tumbled ... like a coin dropped to the street before it left the world down a black drain at the curb. There life was ... life was ... not anything he knew. The ground beneath his feet was squishy! It was a world of uncountable children screeching in and out of the water. Fishiness chased the smell of roasted chicken from his nose. His eyes saw infinity for the first time. As he looked far up and down the pickled white sands, it dawned on Sam that except for some policemen in their squad cars, faces he might see from the bus and faces on the televisions he would watch in front of a few stores or inside some gathering place, he had never seen a white person. Not up close. Not in person. There was his science and math teacher - Mr Allee - who certainly wasn't a Negro, but he certainly wasn't white either.

Allee. Aley? ... Sam wondered why he had not realized it was a name different from any he had ever heard of. He had seen it written on the chalkboard: Ali! Alla?? Was it possible? Sam's lungs begged for him to stop by the time he was running up the steps of his high school. Sam was off for the summer, but he knew many of his classmates were stuck inside trying to avoid being held back a year. The closed classroom door gave him a chance to wheeze his way back to a standing position. After a few minutes, he was finally able to lean his back against the wall and close his eyes against the salty trickles running down his face. He felt a dark moist heat forming on the whitewashed brick behind his shoulders. His nostrils flared to gather more oxygen from the heavy wet stillness of the hallway. He almost burst his lungs when the bell claxoned above his head. In seconds, the stampede of escaping hostages subsided. He went in, uncertain now that he confronted the unknown. "Mr. Ali ... do you ... ah ... what's iss ... um ... is you maybe a mussim?"

Sam excitedly opened the book. What he saw amazed him. This wasn't anything like the Bible he knew. This Koran got right into things. Like putting Proverbs right up front instead of having to go through a whole history of the world. But it was different from Proverbs. It had a flavor like the Song of Solomon even though it wasn't about loving a beautiful woman.

Ali was pleased with the way Sam so eagerly started to read through the Qur'an, and realized that Sam's was no idle interest. Ali gently closed the book as it rested in Sam's open hands, leaving the young man posed in supplication. As Sam's questioning eyes rose to meet his own. Ali looked deeply into the teen's spark of life. Ali's voice was almost like mamma's humming, not boisterous like those of poppa and Reverend Brown.

"Sam, if I blindfolded you in the middle of the street, spun you around a few times and removed your blindfold, how would you know which way to go?"

It took Sam a moment to envision the scenario. "Wel-l-l-l, I guess once I saw the doors I had just passed, I would turn around and go the other way."

"So tell me, Sam, tell me how you came to be here today."

Mr. Ali's quiet ways did not invite the quick-witted response that would normally pop into Sam's thoughts. Ali went about doing some paperwork at his desk. It was curious to Sam that he felt no expectations from Mr. Ali - neither to leave nor to stay, neither to speak nor remain silent. How was it that such peace was at the same time slightly discomfoting to him? The next day and the day after that, Sam returned. Not a word was spoken between them, neither in greeting nor in parting. Sam would arrive, sit down and sort the words tossing about in his head. Mr. Ali would sit at his desk marking, writing, and occasionally leaving the room to return a while later with a pile of paper whose sharp tangy odor would focus Sam's mind on his current musings. When their eyes met it was as though a human voice would be like a tipped baseball shattering the window of their communication.

KKRRRKLKKK! HBOOOMM! *The bare light bulb flickered briefly before allowing a black void to flood the room. The yelp in Sam's mind hit a brownstone wall on its way out to slice through the emptiness. On the other side of that wall the last moisture from Sam's mouth stuck on its way into his throat. His ears unplugged to mamma's serene humming, giving shape to the room again. No light even glittered through the window from the street below. The song of rain drops punctuated mamma's lazy tune and poppas deep voice displayed the familiar cheerful smile always gracing his rugged face. "mm mmm mm. De light o de Lord allus do delights de faiful!" Sam's arms finally let slip their tense grip on his ribcage. "We be de-lighted arright! I otta see if ole blind Mr. Jack wanna play some ball wid me. He sholy will be battin better n me now." Whack! ... even in the dark the aim was accurate. The night couldn't hide the suppressed grins of a familiar family ritual.*

Sam's mind cleared enough to put to words the scenes of the street his life walk had written into his memories. "It was like I bin ... - was - standing at the tabernacle doors. Inside was - were - the happy lights and scented candles and smiling faces like a garden I dun ... - had grown up in. Outside it was dark - but it just dark, not nasty dark - just dark like a night with stars n moon n crickets n birds cooing on their roosts. When mamma passed, it was like the doors slammed shut behind me. I walked down the steps and tumbled into some briars, getting thorns stuck all in me. Reverend Brown came upon me. He had a lamp held high so I could see a bit around me. He helped me up, and gave me some paper, but I couldn't make out what it was and stuck it in my pocket. Reverend Brown started walking off holding his lamp so I could see a path to follow. I was going along, but it seemed dat - that Reverend Brown was walkin - walking too fast and I couldn't keep up wid - with him. When mornin come - came, I was in the middle o - of some town market. I didn't know the faces I saw there. They were different from my friends in the tabernacle. Arguing, shouting, I didn't know what to make of all dat - that

commotion. I got to picken dem - them thorns outta - out of my skin, but some were deep. I could feel them festering and wanted to get back to the tabernacle to get some help. I pulled out the paper Reverend Brown had given me and saw it was a map. Right smack in the middle was the tabernacle. I looked and looked at that map and tried to figure out how to get back to the tabernacle. But the streets were all mixed up. Some should take me direct back to the tabernacle, but ended up in alleys with walls all around. Some streets on the map had simple names, but the street signs were all washed out and I couldn't make them out. Some streets on the map had the letters all crazy and didn't make no - didn't make sense to me. The more I wandered around, the more those angry voices about me seemed to make those thorns stuck deep in me fester and poison my blood. I keep seeing Reverend Brown, and he keeps telling me to get back to the tabernacle, and tries to give me directions on how, but mebbe - maybe that poison is clogging my ears and his words just don't set my mind right. I heard that there was another map - maybe one drawn special for me and my folk. So here Ah is - I am, hoping this Koran book is the map I needs - need". Sam felt a bit of pride at his imaginary description of his life and quest, and immediately a bit shamed that he was too prideful.

Mr. Ali paused and let the silence restore tranquility to Sam. "I too have a map for you to follow. However, I think you need to consider that it is by 'setting your mind right' that will first clear the poison of those thorns."

"Let us begin by understanding what this tabernacle, or what I call a 'Masjid', looks like from the outside in the daylight. To find it, you must be able to recognize it when you see it. It has five pillars. The first one soars high into the heavens and is called 'Shahadah'. Shahadah is a knowing of something - a something without which there is nothing else. That something is called Allah. Or rather knowing what the word Allah means. The important thing is that this knowing is of Allah. No matter if you see it from afar or peer at it with the strongest magnifying glass, walk all around it and look at it from every side, what you see is oneness - no cracks, no splits, no pieces that comprise it stacked upon each other nor tied together nor made of atoms nor showing different colors if you look at it through a prism. You must know as surely as you breathe that this pillar is not like anything else you could ever experience in its oneness. The pillar is not made of stone or light, it is made of the knowing, the most real thing there is. The whole universe testifies to its reality and permanence. To even imagine that this pillar lacks substance would be to say the universe is not. One other thing about this pillar is that there is one who will tell you everything you want to know about this pillar. His name is Muhammad"

Ali was afraid he might have lost Sam by not expressing well what he wanted to describe. "So ... this pillar .. Shahadah ... it's like a word. The word means something, but isn't factually the thing it means. Still, it is the onliest .. only way to get that thing into your head. And that thing is what the world is all about. And what the world is all about is that it's about - being itself - one world of everything. And this Muhammad is the guy who really unnerstands the everything and will teach me about it." Sam wasn't quite sure he fully understood himself what he just said, but the big smile on Mr. Ali's face told him he was on the right track. To Ali, the smile also expressed the pleasure of knowing that the excellent grades Sam received from him and his other teachers were

fully merited. Neither needed to mention that the second pillar had best wait until tomorrow.

Sam's studies and discussions were a source of great happiness for Ali. He was thinking about what they would be discussing tomorrow when he looked up to see an elderly gentleman coming into the classroom. The white collar confused him momentarily. "Welcome. Come in. Please, have a seat. How may I be of service to you?" Reverend Brown did so comfortably, remembering his own youth in these same rooms so many years ago.

"Ize be needin to talk to you bout Sam ..." he began. He noticed an instant of concern sweep over Ali's otherwise calm demeanor. "No, no no" he chortled. "ebbun ifn yu n me come to blows wedder Jesus be de Son o de Good Lord o a mighty wunnerful gift from God sendown t' help spread His Word, o wedder babies be born a' sinful o innocent as a lamb, dat boy be fine'n his own way regarrless. 'Sides, fax is Sam be seein mo light now frum de Bible dan all my po preachin dese years cud shine ponnim. No madder, cuz Ah knows fer sure, we bott togedder be chilluns o de Lord - o de Allah. Noooo, I be here cuz dere be anudder madder dat bin weighin' mighty hebby on me o late."

Shortly, two brown hands were clasped in friendship. Between their eyes formed a solid bond of common purpose.

The next day, Sam's lesson awaited while Mr. Ali had him help fix a small transistor radio. Sam enjoyed it so much; he began to look forward to the lessons on the inner workings of radios and forgot to ask why they started every day like this. By the time they were taking televisions apart and fixing them, he didn't care why.

Inside "Eddie's Radio and TV Emporium", Sam looked around as Eddie searched the shelves for the parts Mr. Ali had asked him to pick up. Counter upon counter were covered with half dissected carcasses of electronic contraptions. Most had a layer of thick brown dust obscuring the letters and numbers on the silver topped glass tubes. Eddie seemed impatient as he returned to the front. "Here you go, Sam. Say ... I'm just runnin' round like a chicken widdout a head wid all my work. Ah gots a customer commin' back in hap an hour wantin dis here radio fixed. Ahll gib yo fo' dollar ifn yo get it workin agin afore den."

Sam was still at an age that Eddie addressing him by name and presuming he knew how to make such repairs didn't register as strange. Sam found the broken wire, soldered it, changed out a tube, fixed the tear in the speaker and had it back together again in 20 minutes. He had never imagined how giddy having his very own four dollar bills carefully folded in his pocket would make him feel. And those were to be joined with more every week, now that he would be working here every day. Even more amazing was that Eddie wanted him to live in the small apartment above the shop so as to help dissuade any thoughts of break-ins in the wee hours. If, as Eddie slyly suggested maybe Sam could work some at night, Eddie thought he was tricking Sam into extra work, Sam decided to let him think that. Sam knew he would probably sneak those extra repairs on his own just because he liked it so much. Before three weeks had passed, the carcasses

were gone. The counters were still covered with plastic, metal and glass wonders of every description, but they were in and out of the shop before they could collect much dust.

His time spent examining the complex innards of wires and tubes and, increasingly, transistors had two side benefits. He was becoming more aware of the world beyond his neighborhood, and when he turned off the "squawk boxes," as he now thought of them, and enjoyed the pungent smell of resin vaporizing beneath the dabs of solder, he had time to reflect upon the recent lessons. He was getting used to praying five times each and every day. At first he recoiled at the idea wondering why once a week wasn't enough; but then he thought about his nightly prayers before bed, and saying grace at every meal and realized it really wasn't so different. Besides, he had gained a better understanding of prayer that even Reverend Brown fully approved of. No longer did he ask Allah for things he wanted, or even thank Him for things he had, but prayed to serve Him as He wanted. Many detailed stories in the Bible made more sense to Sam now; what they had to say about Allah's plan was starting to be easier to recognize. Sam often enough found himself imitating Mr. Ali's melodious incantations of the Qur'an verses, although the language was well beyond Sam's understanding. He imagined Arabic letters among the squiggly traces of solder upon the boards he repaired.

That year was one of increasing tension for Sam. His senior year in high school introduced him to American History. The happy tunes of the Beatles made no impression on the streets of South Chicago. Malcolm X did. Mutterings reinforced his history lessons; and those lessons reinforced his own mutterings. That was one direction. The other was the message of inner peace he sought in the Qur'an. It wasn't going well. Malcolm X's curious references to Islam only muddled his thoughts and increased his own turmoil. Mr. Ali's Islam didn't fit with what he heard from Nation of Islam speeches. Who was right? That question seemed of more immediate importance to Sam than whether Jesus was the Christ or a Prophet like Muhammad. At first, when President Kennedy was shot, he felt it was a horrible tragedy, as all the newscasts indicated. Not a month later he listened as Malcolm X spoke about how the assassination was a matter of 'the chickens coming home to roost,' and he thought maybe that was true.

Sam looked up from his work to see the two boys entering the shop. They were about his age, but ... their round helmets of black frizz above solid black tee shirts were an unnerving contrast to Sam's almost shaven head and clean white shirt. Still, they listened to Malcolm X over the radio together like brothers. That they themselves had just come all the way from New York fascinated Sam, and he wanted to know all about the distant world. Their plans to continue to California fascinated him even more, though he wasn't sure he believed the excited tales they told him about that latter land, as they had not yet been there.

It did make Sam a little uneasy that they seemed to avoid answering what they intended to do with the alarm clock hooked to a switch that would open some undefined electrical circuit. He felt it would be rude to his 'brothers' to push the matter too hard.

Eddie looked just as scared as Sam when the police roughly pushed Sam, hands cuffed behind him, out of the shop into the waiting squad car a few weeks later.

Judge Thomas issued warrants for the other two, although he suspected they had given false names and would never be found in Illinois again. Then he called the matter of Sam's arraignment. Reverend Brown, Mr. Ali, Mr. Eddie and Aunt Sally all testified to Sam's good character, carefully, nervously, avoiding mention of his school record. Sam's lawyer argued how Sam was just stupid and had been taken in by a pair of grifters and didn't know any better. Sam felt himself getting angry, but maintained his silence. Judge Thomas reluctantly decided there was no case here, although, noticing Sam's unmistakable rage, silently decided the records would be staying on the books.

The five of them had just reached the bottom of the court steps, when Reverend Brown turned to Sam. **THUMPP!** Reverend Brown's stiff finger on Sam's breastbone had made him fall backwards a step. "Yo lissen here, BOY! Yo lissen good." Sam had never seen such stern fire in those eyes. "Times be changin fass, now - too fass. Dere's a hard rain a comin', lahk dat Mr. Dylan sung, n Lawdy knows ders gonna be killins alon' de way. Ah seen it! Yo folks, dey seen it. Yo be puttin dis behine yo, n don nebber be lookin back! Yo keep yoself outta dis mess. Yo get yoself sum learnin n git yoseff a good life 'way frum dese streets - **lon'** way frum dese streets. I dasn wan ebber be seein yo coffin at mah altar. Yo unnerstan me, boy!" Reverend Brown's rage had the effect of displacing his own with a fear. The troupe stood silently watching Reverend Brown's back disappear towards the El station.

After sharing noon prayers together, Mr. Ali explained to Sam how the move from Navy Pier to the new campus at Chicago Circle was a blessing for Sam. The University needed to keep its enrollment up during the transition, and while many people shied away from such turmoil, it should be seen as an opportunity for those who embraced it. Sam needed to get an application in quickly. Mr. Ali would work on getting letters of recommendation for Sam to include.

Mr. Ali also made sure Sam understood how to apply for a student deferment the following year when he turned 18. This being a matter that Mr. Ali, Malcolm X, Reverend Brown and aunt Sally all agreed upon, even if for different reasons, Sam paid close attention. He respected their intuition that winds of trouble were gathering force.

CHAPTER 3

THE SEEKING SCHOLAR

Mr. Ali waved proudly as Sam boarded the El. Sam fingered the piece of paper with the address written upon it, sticking it deep in his pocket so as not to lose it. Despite his firm intention to visit the address that first day, he found the long lines of enrollment, going over schedules, trying to figure out how he could possibly unscramble the conflicting times of the classes he wanted, finding his way around the unfamiliar campus and general excitement of his new life, kept him from his plan. It was almost a week before he passed through its doors. Since he ended up with a class schedule spanning from early morning to late evening interspersed with big gaps of time, he realized he might want to spend a good amount of time here, if he could.

It turned into something of a haven for Sam. There he could make his devotional prayers without attracting curious looks. Between his studies and homework, he enjoyed his discussions with the few other students who frequented the peaceful atmosphere as they debated passages of the Qur'an. Sam's confidence grew as he was able to hold his own in those wide ranging talks. It wasn't long before he was joining in lively debates on matters of all variety in the common rooms on campus. Sam heartily defended Malcolm X's conversion after his return from overseas travels to Mecca and elsewhere. On February 22nd, Sam spent the day in solitude upon learning of his assassination the night before. The following day, he merely listened as the role the Muslim world had played preserving and advancing the sciences and mathematics during the dark centuries of Europe was the topic of discussion among several of his new friends.

His physics class that evening proved a most pleasant distraction from the growing whirlwind of events reported from the world beyond. Sam had a sudden insight about the oneness of physics and mathematics. He even began to perceive a certain poetry in mathematics, wondering if there was a oneness with the poetries of the Qur'an. Rather, he thought, since all is oneness, he wanted to discern the oneness that must surely exist.

Sam devoured the theories of relativity. That space and time are inseparable and even exerted strange effects upon each other struck Sam as a religious awakening. He swam deeply into the curious tossing seas of Quantum Mechanics. The dualities - or apparent dual natures - or dual appearances of quantum particles fascinated him. The oneness of two entirely different - even opposite - experiences felt like a revelation even if he could not realize the concept within his mind - or perhaps because he could not do so. The flickering realities of quarks existing mere instants apart from their two brethren before becoming unable to avoid re-wedding were the images that lulled him into deep contemplation. The concept that two opposite particles - anti-twins - could appear from nothingness, and every so often fly sufficiently far from one another to avoid their mutual return to nothingness was an entrancing glimpse of the Creation. That a bit of matter could magically appear on the far side of an impenetrable wall simply because there was a most improbable bare possibility of such at a tail end of its wave function, felt like a

seed of hope the Most Beneficent, Most Merciful Allah bestowed upon and infused throughout His Dominion.

During his fanciful musings, Sam barely noticed that chinos were giving way to jeans; hair was growing longer, white shirts were becoming more colorful attire, and happy love songs spilling from ever present radios were being supplanted with energetic prophecies of magical transformations to the world. Still, these subconscious cues enlivened Sam in ways he had not before felt. All about him were infinities - the impossibly large and impossibly infinitesimal. Certainties beyond question produced questions spreading to beyond any certainty. It was all one. Knowledge and mystery are inseparable dualities of creation. Each more clever untangling of the nature of the cosmos only revealed a more wondrous unknowable beauty beneath.

So it was that Sam, amidst sweet pungent aromas of incense sticks and other sources of smoke, brought popular approval to the points of view he espoused when fellow students would gather to speak of new ways the world could work - should work. He felt more mature in many ways when he argued against what struck him as irresponsible excesses. Avoiding hints of his own background, and certainly not attributing such views to his parents' lessons in life, perhaps because his adversaries seemed too often to merely rebel against their living parents' admonishments, Sam felt a need to counterbalance these new concepts in thoughtful humorous ways. Still, he could not deny a certain attraction to ideas and camaraderie so contrary to the sources of anger that had once almost sent him down a far bleaker path in life as he had seen exhibited in the Watts riot. Sam had become comfortable with the intriguing diversity of the University setting.

Sam glanced at her face as he made his way out of the commons. He recognized it now, having seen it several times during his heated philosophical 'discussions' in the room. If he hadn't been strolling just a little bit slower than he normally did, he would have tripped over the book that had just slipped from her lap at his feet. Without a thought, he picked it up and handed it back to her. When her fingers touched the book, a tingle snaked up his arm, through his neck and into his brain completely short circuiting it. His body suddenly felt feverish, but her glance turned that into a cold sweat. His mouth opened, but not so much as a vowel formed between the slight trembles of his lips. He stood there dumbly as the chimes of a carillon lazily drifted over the air between them, settling into his ears and resting there comfortably. When his mind finally gleaned that their source were those beautiful lips, it acquiesced to translate them for him: "Thank you, kind sir. Should I reward my gallant gentleman with a soda?" Sam, with immense difficulty, managed a nod, inanely somber against the sparkling lights, which had emerged from her brown eyes to surround him like a swarm of riotous giggling fireflies.

Eventually, Sam trained himself to speak semi-intelligibly while drowning in the wells of infinite mystery that lived somewhat above that magical musical instrument which sang the most beautiful melodies his ears had ever heard. That most perfectly shaped face filled his world. It had the property of clearing his mind of any worldly concepts, for surely the slow smooth curves of warm brown skin, eventually dipping shyly beneath multicolored fabrics to hint at undulations too beautiful for his mortal mind to conceive could not be of this world.

Sarena was to him a bird that visited lands beyond sight, then returned to him with stories and wonders and exotic dreams. To her, Sam was a flowering tree on the shore of a lake always with a steady bough on which she would perch and rest and dream of nesting. She was light and airy but substantial and real. He was shade in the summer and embracing warmth in the winter.

In the shoe repair shop, poppa is displeased that Sam has let the pot of glue cool too much. "Ifn it get cole lahk dis, caint spread it none on de sole. Iffin yo let it git too hot, itll boil n burn n be no good fer hollin de ledder togedder. Gots to be jes right. Unnerstan, boy?" "Not too cole, not too hot. I mus be jes de baby bear" giggled Sam as he presented a bare baby bottom to poppa for the expected WHACK!

Just right! Sam thought to himself. As did Sarena.

Sam knew now why he had been saving everything he could out of his earnings from Eddie. He carefully assessed that there would be enough to get them through the next year and a half. With the faith of the young that the world would somehow provide, he asked Reverend Brown to perform the service - with certain modifications in acknowledgment of his Muslim faith.

Eddie continued to pay Sam his usual wages, even though it was several months before certain other distractions which diverted Sam's attention when he should have been doing repairs, subsided a little. Eddie just smiled and told the somewhat abashed young groom to look at it as a wedding gift. Besides, Sarena now helped some around the shop too. Sam and Sarena rode the El together to and from the University, holding hands the entire way.

Sam certainly surprised all of his friends and even himself a little when, instead of Electrical Engineering, he declared his major as Industrial Engineering. It was the larger workings that had always interested him. He had long ago lost any real interest in overly detailed investigations of specialized subjects, even as he still enjoyed dabbling in certain specifics on occasion, as they seemed to apply to a fuller understanding of some overarching purpose.

If the sciences seemed to Sam to reveal the thoughts of God, mathematics must be His language as poetry is His song and the Prophets His words. Sam wanted to read and speak the language of Allah so as to better know Him. He studied calculus, differential equations and non-Euclidean geometries and manifolds and tensors and statistics. He reveled in the flow of symbols not unlike the Arabic script of the Qur'an. With certain equations he experienced rapture in their breathtaking elegance and concise eloquence. When he had thoughts that he must be approaching a true knowing of God, he would pray again to cleanse himself of such pride. Many were the days he prayed six or seven or eight times. And when he realized that, he returned himself to the five daily prayers for the same reason. Sam seriously considered spending Ramadan deliberately learning nothing, or at least doing the minimal amount of work required for his classes.

Sarena, for her part, filled their lives with flowers and incense and vibrant posters of flowing colors and tie-dyed clothing and intoxicating music and friends relaxing all about on stuffed pillows and eagerly shared stories of love-ins and be-ins from New York and San Francisco. They shared a love of Oneness seen from different vantages. The One revealed many faces, Sam decided.

The excitement of their changing lives was punctuated with a good job offer from US Steel in Gary - close enough that the lifestyle with their friends would certainly continue in happiness. Sarena quickly forgot her disappointment that he would start immediately after graduation and they would not be able to travel to Haight Asbury for the concert they wanted to attend. Loving him as she did, she never mentioned it.

WORD MADE MANIFEST

CHAPTER 4

THE WANDERING VASSAL

Moving their few furnishings took just one trip shared in whoops and laughs and loud music with friends piled into the back of Mr. Eddie's truck. Within a day, Sarena had their new apartment looking little different from the one they had left behind them. Sunday was spent lounging lazily, and more than once not so lazily, in bed, giggling about what the future held for them. That night, Sarena carefully laid out the new suit Mr. Ali and Reverend Brown had given Sam as a graduation present. In the morning, Sarena kissed him with serpentine undulations at the door, sorely tempting him to skip his first day at work.

Sam had not been too sure what to expect, but after 2 months of reading about his employer, occasionally being given guided tours into the heat and smoke and din of steel making coupled with yelled explanations of process and the intricate dance of too many variables, Sam began to get itchy to prove himself and feel like he was earning his weekly paycheck. He now had two suits he would trade off on alternate weeks.

Actually, as interesting as he found the workings of a steel plant, what truly unnerved him was the pyramid of dominions he had to navigate. All his life he had known but the simple child-parent and student-teacher dealings of the world. The workings of a corporation were a maze to him and amazed him that anyone understood it.

He and Sarena puzzled through it together in the evenings before she would share with him the latest hippie newspaper she had picked up during the day.

When his boss described his first real assignment to him, Sam excitedly called Sarena and babbled at her all about it and how he intended to attack the problem and what it would mean for their future. He knew Sarena didn't really understand what he was talking about, but was cheerfully attentive and asked a few questions, somewhat off the subject, to indicate her support for him. He felt guilty that he didn't really know what to ask her about to let her feel his love for her in turn.

Late one, yet another, night, as he hungrily partook of his re-warmed supper, Sarena told him of her frustration that other hippies just didn't seem to exist in Gary and how difficult it was to find even a decent poster. Sam tried to think of some way to ease her distress and bring that beautiful smile back to her face, but his tired mind couldn't handle thinking of that and the puzzle of his analysis at the same time. He knew the silence was dragging too long, but he desperately wanted to say something useful. Eventually, when the new china plates were drying in the dish rack and their old plastic ones overfilled the trash can, they quietly got into bed together and hugged each other as they slid into slumber.

Sam's boss nodded approvingly as Sam explained how, making use of weather forecasts to proactively alter process to account for expected humidity changes, instead of reactively by experienced foremen and plant process engineers, they would decrease hardness variability by 18%. Well, it wasn't exactly in the language of Allah, but Sam was glad his abilities in statistical analysis had served him well. Maybe now he would have more time to devote to the pillars of his faith - and of course spend more time with Sarena, he remembered ruefully.

Across from Sam sat the man whose name he had discovered was Jerry. Sam nodded pleasantly and returned to his current reading in the Qur'an - the Sura Al-Anbiya - Prophets, while toying with the fork on his now empty lunch tray. "Ah! Solomon and David. Does it describe their wisdom?" Sam's head snapped up in amazement. "You can read Arabic?" "Not really, it's similar enough, though, to Hebrew that I can get the gist of it."

The two men reached across the table to introduce themselves formally to each other. Sam's attempt to hide the loose threads hanging from his cuff was too obvious. "So, Sam, my friend," Jerry said, scanning the room of co-workers, "is it not curious that we all of us wear the same dark suits and white shirts every day? Do we imagine ourselves smarter or more efficient in our suits? No, certainly not. Perhaps, like a ball club, we feel a little more like a team. Do you think? But smarter? No. Of that I am thankful because if a suit made me smarter, then a thread hanging from a suit could make me less smart. I, for one, would not wish to be diminished by a such a rule." After a moment of shared relaxation, Jerry continued in a quieter voice: "A sin on your soul it is not. In truth, a little imperfection here and there, it can remind us to be humble in other ways." Sam quietly remembered the parades to and from church so many years ago. There had been a joy in wearing one's best and no one thought to compare one dress to another. He missed those days.

Sam and Jerry shared many a pleasant midday hour bantering about their differing readings of the same events. Sam recognized many of Jerry's interpretations as close relatives of those he learned in the church basement late at night and further discussions with Reverend Brown, but Jerry provided far greater depth and color to the passages than he found even in the Qur'an. It was as though the words came to life as full stories instead of dry history or poetic flights. Sam asked if he could borrow some of Jerry's books, but Jerry just smiled and answered cryptically "All ought not be found in Script." before he rose to return to his accounting.

Sam enjoyed trying to puzzle out the riddle, happy the solution did not come easily to him. He resolved not to ask the answer but to learn enough of this other reverence of Allah to find the answer on his own.

It was as Sam had predicted. The company's profits ticked just noticeably upward when his recommendations were tested - other variables having been accounted for. Jerry had been involved in analyzing the effects and congratulated Sam for his first success. Jerry listened attentively as Sam described his next assignment. "The reverent man will not use past good deeds to pay for future sins. Don't promise yourself or

others too much out of pride for your insights on your last adventure." Sam decided that was good advice and tempered what he realized might be an over-confidence based on the praise his boss had showered him with, not to mention the raise.

The twinkle ever in Jerry's eye Sam found somewhat curious in an accountant. It invited Sam to air his current concerns on how best to quantify certain economic decisions that customers made and in turn affected US Steel's production outlook.

"Have you ever met a customer?" asked Jerry, already knowing the answer. "Well then, why don't you and - Sarena is her name? - come by for supper tomorrow night with Sarah and me. I have a friend, Howard who is a customer. He buys steel plate from us for his drum business. A very good businessman, he is, with a good sense of mathematics like you. You can ask him directly all your questions. Agreed?" Sam was awarded a slap on the back for his positive reply.

Sarena positively shone that evening. Sam caught one interesting exchange when Sarena learned that Temple was a strictly male affair. Sarah laughed gently at Sarena's incomprehension and remark that it seemed yet another example of male dominance. "You see, the men must carry on in the world to put food on the table, so they have no time but once a week to truly give their thanks to Jehovah. Whereas, we women get to show our devotion and practice our faith every day in every way. It is we women who make the most of every moment. So it is that our faith is passed to our children through the mother, not the father. Thus it has been since the first covenant with Avram." That gave Sarena pause, but there was also another aspect of those comments that echoed in her mind. Sarah thought of another way to explain it. "Sarena, who dominates the house? The cat who is completely a cat all day long every day or the owner who must work to fill the bowl and replace the litter and pay the veterinarian?"

As Sam and Howard sat next to each other deeply involved in discussions, little distracted owing to Sarah's efficient hospitality. Howard impressed Sam as a decisive businessman who knew what he was doing. Just the type Sam needed to capture the reasoning process. Sam began to count all the 'Not necessarily's and 'Could be yes and could be no's and 'it would depend's and realized he would need many more hours with Howard than the evening permitted. They arranged times they could spend together to delve more deeply into the questions Sam posed. Sam thanked Howard profusely that he would make so much available time in his schedule to help Sam in his assignment. Howard looked directly into Sam's eyes as he solemnly declared, "It is our duty to spread enlightenment." Sam would later come to realize that this was not an off the cuff clever way of saying "You're welcome." Later still, Sam thought perhaps it did mean just that.

At lunch one day, several months later, Sam stared at his thick sheaf of notes and multi page equations and shook his head. "Sam," Jerry began, "One day, in a small town high in the hills many, many miles from Jerusalem, the old rabbi, much beloved and respected by the townspeople, died. The people mourned and when they turned their attention to the matter that they needed another rabbi to lead them, they realized their poor economy could support only an energetic young rabbi who could provide for himself as some kind of artisan. One newly ordained rabbi agreed to come to their

Temple, and although the town was poor and far off from his own home and family, there was one thing that swayed him to accept the position - a most beautiful young woman by the name of Rebecca had caught his eye. For a year, whenever a problem arose in the town, the rabbi would dutifully study the Torah and the Talmud seeking just the right situation to cover the question and thereupon proclaim the answer like a commandment to resolve the issue. Meanwhile he and Rebecca had wed and lived a happy life. Eventually, the number of issues brought to him dwindled and he could spend more time in the hills chopping wood for his growing trade in furnishings. He congratulated himself in his apparent success since the problems people faced in the town were now so few. One day, he hewed a particularly beautiful piece of wood that he rushed home early to show his wife and tell her how it would become a most prized table for her to prepare their meals on. When he arrived home, a throng of people scattered from his yard. He went in and questioned Rebecca why she had so many visitors at this time of day. She explained that many people seemed to enjoy and respect her advice on resolving issues amongst them. The rabbi could not understand how this could be. "How is it so? I have dutifully and reverently found all the answers for each of their complaints in the Torah and the Talmud which I study thoroughly." "As you know, dear husband." Rebecca replied, "I know nothing of those holy books. Perhaps it is that Jehovah writes His Word also on our hearts."

Sam contemplated the story for a while. "You're right, Jerry. I can't capture this in an equation. What I need is to write a fuzzy logic program." In his rush to get back to his desk, Sam missed Jerry's bemused head shaking slightly.

Jerry always left work right on time. "There's another life out there" he called to Sam as he left. Sam waved and smiled. Just a few more minutes, making good use of the quiet permeating the now almost empty offices, and he would be off. He wanted to get home before the snow got too bad.

There was just one light on in the living room. It shone upon a note carefully written in a sad script. The room went black and in the blackness questions and memories and words and images and fears exploded in his mind like a Fourth of July fireworks grand finale. A great void was sucking at his consciousness while his mind flailed insanely to maintain relevance. Eventually, exhaustedly, the bursts of mental activity subsided to a twinkling of incoherent sparks, artificial lights in the dark.

"Merry Christmas, son." Poppa proudly handed the big bulky present to Sam. Sam opened the package to find just what he had asked for: a black leather-look jacket. The trouble was, today he wished he had asked for something more colorful. "Hee hee hah! Now boy, you should hab mo fate in your poppa dat he knows yo lahk his own selb. Turn it inside out n see yo seccun presen". As he pulled the sleeves through themselves, the jacket transformed into a beautiful red and white jacket with blue striping. "Poppa, seein as how you sees me insides out, Ah best eat dis jacket sos you kin see hows it looks on me" WHACK! Sam liked this jacket even better since it covered his bottom.

Sam struggled to understand why that memory came to him now. It came on Sam like a bolt - The Bible and the Qur'an were transforms of one another. The inspiration was

blinding. And the blackness swooped back in even more suddenly. So what? Other than his own agony of having been turned inside out, what did it have to do with losing Sarena? His mind lost this final battle to be a meaningful part of his existence right now. Sam fell to his knees, hands on his thighs with palms open to the sky unable to even close into angry fists.

Tears refused to come. Instead his body shook. And shook. And shook dryly for hours until his body slipped into an exhausted coma. It took only a few minutes after he opened his eyes to gaze upon the bottom of the sofa before the tears finally flowed. Eventually he willed his body to rise and robotically perform his morning activities in deadly silence. "Oh God! Why?" were the only words that bounced around in the void behind his empty eyes.

When Jerry asked after Sarena, Sam told him she had gone to California to visit some friends and get over a cold by doing some serious sunbathing. Eventually Jerry realized what Sam had not told him and stopped asking about her. He tried to spend more time with Sam just talking about nothing much.

Jerry had managed to piece together a sense of Sam's youth from rare asides. Now even his college years could not be spoken of. They found philosophy a safe topic. Jerry delighted in Sam's insights, while he returned the favors with parables relating to goings on in the world at large and filled Sam in with historical perspectives.

He was now comfortable in his job. His earnings afforded him a small ability to pursue some much needed leisurely escapes as week after week of analyses slipped into months. Jerry seemed to approve that Sam wanted to try investing some of the money that now filled his bank account. He told Sam of the crab that ran sideways back and forth as each new wave crashed on the beach. Being a clever crab, he felt that if he watched the waves long enough, he might be able to predict how far each new wave might run up the beach, and thereby not have to run back and forth so much. He watched and watched - slowly moving inland as the tide rose. Finally, the crab could sit and watch the waves and try still to predict them in comfort because the water no longer washed over him every few waves. By the time the tide had gone out, and the waves were very distant, the crab realized the sun was baking him into a crisp and he was now too far from the sea to be saved by the needed bit of water he had learned to avoid. Sam made good use of the advice, deciding to buy certain airline stocks and rounding out the rest of his investments in some industrial and some financial companies. Having no feel for utilities, he avoided those.

Sam became a fairly regular guest for supper at Jerry and Sarah's small home, filled with curious decorations. Howard and Miriam occasionally joined the trio, to the delight of Sam who felt he was at last coming to understand how successful businesses are run. He still felt the sting of having, at last, admitted that some financial projections would be subject to unknowable factors. He felt somewhat tarnished by his failure to translate rational decisions into rational mathematics. Sam recalled Jerry's tale of the rabbi and finally understood what he had been told. He wondered at his own blind failure to grasp

its meaning at the time. His discussions with Rabbi Abe, another frequent guest of Jerry and Sarah, put a shine back into his life.

The simple joy that was ever present in that small house caused Sam to comment once with a laugh that he would much enjoy being one of God's chosen people. Rabbi Abe looked upon Sam with a look that reminded him of Mr. Ali. "Many are those who misunderstand the word. Would it be enjoyable to be chosen by an Aztec for sacrifice? No, we were not promised a rose garden, Sam, unless it was one filled mostly with thorns. Do you not remember that God promised Abraham that his children would live in slavery and so it came to pass? You see, Sam, Israel was not chosen to be a favored people, but to carry an important and heavy load. The burden of Israel through the ages, through the storms of history, is to carry forth the Word no matter what, and to speak it to the people of the earth. Today, Christians and Muslims are great in number throughout the world, and we are few and scattered and usually despised in the lands we live and often slaughtered by the thousands and millions simply for bearing our burden. Do you truly wish to be chosen thus?"

What truly astounded Sam was the total lack of bitterness or anger at such a fate. He knew of his people's slavery, but had never really equated that with the bondage into which the Israelites had fallen. A sense of bonding grew within him. Yet the distinction between fiery anger and the firm faith in God's plan struck Sam deeply, even more deeply than those thorns which he once felt had reached the very center of his soul. His hosts left him comfortably in his thoughts for the rest of the evening as they chatted amiably on other matters.

Not many weeks after that, Sam and Howard were deeply entangled in an issue now lost to his memory. He remembered starting his thoughts with "Ah! But has not Allah taught ...". He stopped himself abruptly; embarrassed that he might have offended his most gracious hosts.

"How many are the names of God?" asked Howard. Sam paused, thinking of the half a dozen he knew of off the top of his head. Then he realized there must be many, many languages of the world, each with their own name. He shook his head a little. "How many names have you? Would you not answer 'Just one' - yet you are called 'Sam' - short for Samuel, yes? 'my friend,' 'the industrial engineer,' 'brother'. Still, you know you have but one true name."

Sam saw the truth of that. "So which is the true name? I have heard him called by many names, even by the Rabbi."

"Sam, if I were to tell you that I read in the paper yesterday your name in connection with a store robbery, you would be angry, yes? Would you not demand to know how this had come to be so that you might punish the evildoer who had falsely accused you of thievery? And should I answer that I had written your name and number on a piece of paper that a mutual friend might call you later, which I gave to that friend. On his way to work he witnessed the robbery and quickly scribbled what he witnessed on the other side of that paper that he might help the police catch the criminals. After doing so, he

inadvertently put the paper in the trash and a reporter, seeing this, picked up the paper and apparently thought the name must belong to one of the criminals our friend recognized. Whom would you blame for the transgression against your name? Would it not seem that everyone involved was innocent, and yet here your name appears as a thief. Imagine the wrath of the Lord should something similar happen to His name. Would it suffice to say no one meant for such blasphemy to occur? Such is the argument of a child - 'I didn't mean to break the vase, mamma!' As responsible adults, we know lack of intent doesn't repair the vase. Indeed, we teach the child they must instead INTEND to NOT break the vase to be held innocent. God does have one true name, but we must take great care to prevent blasphemy upon that name. When we do write His true name, when we scribe our copy of the Torah scroll in Hebrew, we protect that scroll, with His true name written within it, as a most sacred trust that it never be misused."

It was many months before Sam sensed there was a specific reason he so enjoyed his talks with these new friends, and more months before he was able to put words to it. With them, the sense of oneness was so natural, so inborn, it was all too easy to miss. It was the faith, the devotion that lay beneath the stories they spun as answers to his queries, timeless stories, universal stories, simple tales that anyone could feel themselves a part of, yet so telling, so instructive in their simplicity. He felt ... how else could he express it except as a kind of love for this way of living God's plan. Sam began to see these parables as poetry of the soul. Sam remembered Reverend Brown's sermons and the stories that illuminated them. He remembered the tales told in the stores and streets of his youth. It was another bond they shared, this natural facility with, and respect for words and tales. It felt like home to him - a feeling he had not felt in too many years.

In the solitude of his apartment, Sam had time to reflect on the path taken by the Jews these many millennia. With so many experiences in common with his own ancestry, he was certain he should choose this as his natural faith. Where had he once heard that blacks are the lost tribe of Israel?

Sam was at first hurt that Rabbi Abe spent several of their talks on the matter trying to talk him out of this decision. Mr. Ali, after all, had quickly accepted him as a brother Muslim as soon as he had repeated two sentences. Reverend Brown was always welcoming converts into the church. It was later he discovered that the Rabbi was obliged to try to dissuade him. When he understood why, the hurt transformed itself into a more robust appreciation for this faith. In truth, realizing what would be required of him when he did convert was more than a little daunting and made him reconsider the whole thing with newfound seriousness.

His secret hope that one day he would return home to see her smiling face had flickered and died long ago. He could not remember if he had perhaps sensed some wisp of stinging smoke at its passing. No, it had just died unnoticed, as he had gone about his life. As he packed up the few remnants of that previous life, to begin anew in a nicer apartment, within easy walking distance of the Synagogue, he felt a fresh breeze rustle through the open window. He took a moment for a short prayer asking blessings upon those who had given of themselves to help him on his voyage. He realized that they, too, were messengers of God, each in their own way.

On their six hundred and thirteen commandments discovered within the first five books of the Bible, the Torah, he thought he had so read carefully, somehow missing all but the ten given to Moses, Jerry explained: "As a simple accountant, I have but a few rules I must follow; but how many do you imagine the chief accountant must follow as he will be held responsible for the numbers presented to the big wigs? And when half the plant carouses on Friday night, to celebrate the week now past, should anyone grumble at the sight? Yet if you saw the company treasurer carousing and spending money in that manner, would you not feel concerned? Better he should abide with more restrictions on his ways, yes?"

Sam came to love the oral traditions of Judaism - passing down over the ages from mouth to ear to mouth to ear. Generation after generation, teaching and learning truths dating back to when God Himself spoke one to one with His creations. The long lists of descendants stemming from Adam and Eve, enumerated in the Bible, finally made some sense to him. There was a practicality in not relying on the latest technology, so many of which had come and gone over time. How much knowledge had been lost to the world forever when the library at Alexandria had burned? Too, Sam felt the connection, or rather a growing sense of being within, part of something much greater - a family, a tribe, a nation all united, bonded, made one in a common purpose, a common burden. The oneness with God's plan he had sought so long seemed closer to reality.

When the time approached for him to truly commit himself to this faith, it was not without some pride that he agreed to Rabbi Abe's request. Indeed, he could perhaps serve others who might also want to join the tribe by putting to paper his own thoughts and journeys from Christianity to Islam to Judaism. He wanted to do so in a way that honored those faiths for their teachings of the Word, just as this family did. Just as each, he realized, did one another if one truly understood their teachings, even as they differed fundamentally from each other in their beliefs. He tried, in his head, various approaches to telling his story. He reviewed all he had learned over the previous year. One question Rabbi Abe had put to him several months ago returned to his thoughts. "Tell me Sam, is being true to oneself found within the 613 commandments?" Sam reviewed each commandment in his mind, curious that such a basic edict seemed not to be among them - nor even in an acceptable reading of any of them. It baffled Sam for a day or two, as he tried to mold the more obvious candidates into a form, which might say such, yet being careful neither to add to nor subtract from the commandments as they appeared in the text. He remembered the joy he had felt when the answer came to him. "Yes, Rabbi, being true to oneself is found within the 613 commandments." "And which one is that?" Rabbi Abe asked. "In no one of them."

Sam smiled to himself, marveling at just how wise Rabbi Abe was. He knew the good Rabbi would welcome Sam's comfort in deciding not to convert to Judaism, as he had welcomed Sam in everything.

He still shared meals with his friends, now as often treating them, but with more time on his hands, his thoughts returned to how he might best serve God. He certainly had no truths of his own to teach and spread. But the Lord had blessed him with other talents. It was more than clear his mathematical abilities, coupled with his expanding knowledge

concerning the reasons some businesses were successful and others failures and others seemingly stuck idling in the ebbs and flows of a changing world, had yielded him a very healthy bank account from his investments.

He tugged at poppa's sleeve and whispered: "Poppa, mamma said we cain't go nudder day widdout new drapes. Howz cum yo put dat two dollar in de box at church?" "De good Lord allus be probiden fer us, son. Leas' we kin do is gib back when we kin. Is calt 'Alms fer de po'" "Ahmz po, where kin Ah git me som dat?" The whack Sam expected didn't come, although he was sure he felt the sting anyway. "Ah noze it, poppa. We not dat po." "Yes we are son, n dats de trute. But weze not so po we cain't share when we kin. Tis de sin o pride to gib when you cain't affod it. Tis sin o stealin ta takes wha yo don need. De res o us, we share wha we kin in de spirit o de Lord.

He also thought more about Reverend Brown, Mr. Ali, Mr. Eddie and even aunt Sally and uncle George, ashamed he had neglected, of late, even calling them to say hello. He drove up to visit them all the following weekend. Sam truly wanted to share some of his new wealth with them, but knew all too well, they would have none of it. Instead, Sam slipped a rather large number of bills into the offering box at the Church. He arranged to have a new oscilloscope delivered, anonymously, to the school. He spent a full day painting Eddie's repair shop, organizing shelves, clearing out the dusty carcasses which had risen from the grave to fill the shop anew and helped Eddie create a new eye-catching sign to hang above the door - a long threatened project to bring in new business. For his aunt and uncle, he stood firm until they accepted the new bed and dining room table he insisted they would have. With the rest of the money he had set aside to share with his old benefactors, Sam decided to set up investment accounts in their names, which, when the time was right, he would inform them about. Yet something bothered him about the changes his friends told him of life in South Chicago. Although it was not so apparent elsewhere, too many people were out of work. Now that he thought of it, the same was happening in the poorer neighborhoods of Gary. He decided to sell off most his stock portfolio for a while and see what happened.

What a strange truth finally gleaned from so many messengers. When he had so desperately sought salvation during the nights he slept by the furnace in the basement, it ran from him like a ghost. When he relaxed from that earnest trek, there it was within him where it must always have been. The good feelings the weekend trip brought him clarified the next step of his journey to him. His investment acumen could help many more people caught up in these difficult circumstances. He thought of the comfort and peace he might help so many souls find. Money was not itself evil so long as it is used with wisdom and towards helping neighbors and brethren struggling along the way, he repeated to himself.

Sam wasn't sure why he decided to take up this new calling in Los Angeles, particularly, but part of it was that he found the winter months around Chicago and Gary depressing in ways the blowing snows alone could not account for.

CHAPTER 5

THE COMMISSIONED COLLECTOR

The luxury of planning was another first for Sam.

It was while he was sitting in his doctor's waiting room, thumbing through a stack of old magazines that it struck him. How completely oblivious to the world around him he had spent the last few years. The Black Panthers had flashed and burned - he wondered if those two boys had been caught up in those troubling reports. A heart transplant - imagine that! At least he had heard of King's and RFK's assassinations, the Chicago Democratic convention, Armstrong's walk on the moon, Woodstock, the Kent State shootings and Watergate, though he really had not paid much attention to those events. Sam was more than a little surprised that so many had occurred over those years gaining only a moment of his attention. There were many more he found among those pages that interested or even shocked him. Sam realized he would need to pay far more attention to the world around him if was to remain a successful investor. Scanning the charts of the stock market, he realized how lucky he had been in his timing both getting into the market and, by the grace of taking heed of the bad omen, getting out at just the right times. He now enjoyed savings of almost two full years salary.

He would be able to take a pay cut to get a job with a brokerage firm. He would need to get a license to become a broker. Too, he needed to learn much, much more about different kinds of investment, how to limit losses, how to better research which stocks or bonds or currencies or precious metals to buy when. It was a new world he was jumping into, and it excited him to be, in effect, going back to college.

Shortly he was reading the Wall Street Journal with greater diligence than he had ever given the engineering journals that once weighed upon his desk and previously empty corners of his office. As much as he had enjoyed reading of new analytical methods in those technical publications, the diversity of fortunes predicted by equally learned writers fascinated him. Some were messengers of doom, others of boom, each basing their firm beliefs on the same set of facts.

In not many months, that excitement turned to worry. It was now obvious to him that being a stockbroker was no way to get rich. First he had little control over selecting which stocks to buy or sell when. More importantly, he could not follow his own instincts for his own gain. There was some information he was privy to which he was prevented from using, or even appear to use, if he might wish to buy or sell a certain stock for entirely independent reasons. Worse, even if he had no privileged information, he had to be very careful to not be too successful in his own accounts. Success would raise suspicions that he was doing something wrong.

Timing, timing, timing! It was very good timing, indeed, for Sam that the rumors proved true. The Chicago Board of Trade would be the first in the nation to open an

options trading market. When he first heard the rumor, Sam realized he understood how money would be made in that market. Whether the stock would rise or fall over time was not a consideration, rather the important concern would be how volatile it was. Sam's understanding of statistics let him see what no one else in the office did. By the time the market opened, Sam had analyzed which stocks were most likely to jump and dump on a daily basis more so than others. He had also invested in an expensive pocket calculator, which allowed him to figure the most profitable puts and calls. His new boss and fellow brokers were shocked by his sudden departure so soon after joining the firm, especially when he promised them he had not been stolen away to some other brokerage. Although it was a very competitive business in which many came and left in short order, Sam was recognized as a rising star.

With calculator in hand and a rare insight into the workings of this new market, Sam was very soon a very wealthy man. His account seemed to be rising as fast and as high as the Sears Tower that year. News that the Pacific Coast Exchange would shortly be joining the now newly minted Chicago Board Options Exchange seemed to Sam almost like a blessing on this enterprise from God Himself.

Sam's move to Los Angeles was sooner and easier than he could have imagined just a year ago. And made considerably smoother with the grease of money, Sam discovered. He was considered wealthy even by Hollywood standards, although by no means near the richest of the rich who lived there. Having sold his seat on the Chicago exchange at a tidy profit, and bought one on the Pacific exchange, he also expected to profit when the options market got underway out here. Meanwhile, he was able to continue his trading from afar, even if the rise in his worth was somewhat less steep than it had been.

The new apartment fit both him and his sense of this ever sunny, ever warm climate blessed with glittering sunsets over an infinite ocean of possibilities. It did not lack for light, warmth and glittering glass, metal and rarely used, never needed, gas fireplaces.

True to his promise to himself, he rented a small office in Watts that he visited on weekends. A gray sadness fell on Sam that he seemed able to explain to so few how investing even small amounts of money could shortly lift them from this depressing world. Of those few who took his advice, even fewer avoided squandering the extra money as soon as they could see how it grew. Many were the afternoons Sam spent in that small office pondering the hell of various addictions that needlessly trapped so many people in continued slavery, merely exchanging one vile master for another. True, he reminded himself, he had in a sense been equally addicted. But that was not so destructive an addiction; and ... he was no longer so addicted, was he? Each Sunday evening, he withdrew from the heat and shadows of Watts much as the last American troops had recently withdrawn from Vietnam - telling himself it was neither in defeat nor from want of will.

His spirits would be improved by the time he passed through the shining brass gates of his apartment complex, as though he was returning to a long promised land of comfort and serenity.

How strange, Sam mused, that spending and living so generously, while at first discomforting, was so soon becoming so natural to him. He thought little of satisfying any whim as soon as it occurred to him.

Weeknights were occupied with pleasant companions. He had met many a new friend in his downtown office and around the pool. And soon met their friends. The circle expanded quickly like the waves in the pool as a particularly lovely young lady dove beneath the surface. During the day, the pace of his activities was like none he had ever known. The time difference between his home and the eastern markets did not help, although he found he could put it to his advantage. After they closed, he had time to carefully analyze the movements of the day and prepare instructions for the following morning. By the time he got to the office in the morning, they had been open for a few hours, but he was rarely surprised by the transactions of those early trades. Too little fresh economic news had been published and digested to get ahead his sharp intuition for the markets.

He made it a point to be home every evening in time for another glorious sunset and to welcome his guests for another evening relaxing in so many ways or as often charging the night Los Angeles airs with high spirits, sparkling laughter and excited music and dance. In greetings, shared moments of mirth and farewells as the clock spun ever later into the night, their voices confirmed his own sense of living well.

How he wished he would hear similar messages from those on whom he spent so much of his earnest desire to help, yet understood their suspicions at his regular but brief appearances amongst them. It was not a matter of forgiveness. It was a bittersweet acceptance of the gulf widening between him and people so familiar to his memories despite the changes wrought by the intervening years of turmoil.

"Poppa," Sam scowled, "Whyz de lanlord allus gots to come by in iz fancy clothes n fancy car to take yo rent money? Ain't it enuffff dat he take de money widdout habbin to show us how he spenz it?" "Nuddin wrong wid bein rich, boy. Fax iz, po folk jes gots to praise de Lord fer de blessins He probide. Rich folks, dey need our prayers more dan mos. Takes a strong man ter be rich. Heze gotsta be fightin debbils ahhhhhl de time. Mosly, heze gonna lose" "Well den, seems ter me, wha de Good Lawd probide, it enz up in de hanz of de debil anywayz. Seems like sinnin to be helping it on de way der." Sam's anger had choked off his wit and he knew he deserved the more serious WHACK he received.

Sam only wanted to reverse the flow of money, he reasoned.

They could not comprehend that the mirrors and crystal and gold that filled his new world did not really separate them from his thoughts, his intent, his promise to lift as many faces to the bright possibilities of a better life as would allow him. He thought of the messengers who had guided his life and wondered how he could be a more effective messenger and guide in theirs. Times were changing, could change for them. It didn't help that the only opportunity he found to exemplify it was Ashe's win at Wimbledon.

As telling an achievement as it was, tennis didn't find root in consciousness of the Watts neighborhood.

As he lazily thumbed through the news, he pondered how he might be a better servant of God. A small article caught his attention. He asked Tom, who was surely the most knowledgeable among all his acquaintances when it came to the world of computers, about this new company. Tom filled him in, although he wasn't all that praising of this man Gates. Sam merely nodded, wise enough not to argue with emotions. Sam saw instead a very clever businessman. He tucked the knowledge away, resolving to buy the stock if and when it went public.

Messengers were to be found in the most curious guises. It was not lost on Sam that often a would-be messenger might not pass on the true meaning of a message. What pride had led him to think he could be some kind of prophet to the residents of Watts? No. He must find a different way to serve. It was true that many found his investment advice well worth the fees he charged, but they were already wealthy before they came to him. Those whom he would charge nothing valued his advice equal to their fees. That was if he could even get them to enter the small office space set between the steel bars on a paint shop window and the painted windows of a bar. One of these few clients would eagerly await his arrival on Saturday morning. Sam could not understand the implications that he should give even more than free advice. Sam ought, he was told, simply put his own money into the account to make it grow even faster, as though that might show appreciation for the man's attentions. When Sam had to inform him that the stock had suffered a setback and realized only 5 cents on the dollar, Sam suffered the abuse when the man stormed out cursing him.

Sam examined the face peering back at him from the mirror. It wouldn't answer his question. Why was it that for some, more was never enough? In silence he finished his nightly rituals and lay down on his bed, turning off the small lamp beside him. It was an early night for him. He rarely awoke in the night, at least he didn't remember many times. He rolled over to see the clock showed 3:28 am through one barely open eye. It was not even a decision, just a fact that would soon come to be. He would make changes in his life. Unfortunately, that truth slipped into his subconscious just as he slipped back into his unconscious state. In the morning, he did not remember waking hours before.

The next weekend, he did not open the doors of that office, but spent the time visiting local ministers seeking their advice on how he might better help those who would help themselves. Together, they would ponder why so many now chose doorways that offered loud music hiding the gloom within over those doorways to quieter places shining forth a glimmer of light. By the time he got home, he didn't think he had found an answer. It was all so reminiscent of a gloomy basement next to a furnace. Perhaps the path would be as long. Or perhaps the answers would be as obvious if he stopped looking so hard for them.

Meanwhile, his other life beckoned seductively. There was a certain truth to wealth. It was, after all, something of a tribute to worth. The greater the worth your neighbors found in you, the greater your wealth. The better, more efficiently and effectively he

served them the more they rewarded him for his value to them. He repeated the mantra to himself almost every day now. Money was but tangible witness to his goodness in the eyes of his neighbors. The pleasing siren songs he heard today happily replaced the blaring sirens of his distant memories.

Of course, Sam religiously kept the cycle turning. He witnessed the worth of great tradesmen, wine makers, gem cutters, furniture builders and all variety of occupations with his own tangible appreciation.

For the fourth night in a row, Sam opened his door to his friends and they filled his life with happy familiar banter. Before an hour had passed, Sam felt the warm haze fold around him. He was developing a taste for scotch, although he was careful not to over indulge, as it would leave him with a hangover the next morning when he would need his wits clear and quick. Sam was at the bar cutting limes into fragrant wedges, when Francine, Fannie as this band of friends jokingly called her for one of her more attractive attributes, asked for a refill. Sam almost lost his balance as he turned to do so, but he covered it well. He turned around to replace the glass back into Jackie's outstretched hand. ... He shook his head trying to clear the disjointed image. How long had it been since he had last seen Fannie? Months? A year? Was it really two years? He couldn't quite measure the distance of time. He tried to recollect milestones of time to fix the separation, but none came to mind. The party going on in his living room was the same one that started .. when? Many faces were the same, some new, some missing, but definitely the same party. Sam explained to his guests that he felt queasy as he bid them good night. Sam didn't go to his office the next day, not sure himself when he would return, although he didn't tell anyone that.

He spent a full day trying desperately to catalog events of the last few years to give them shape. There was the new car and less than a handful of notable purchases. Faces and names had wandered in and out of his life in a blur - most he could not connect with each other. What else? News? Successes? Failures? Nothing of note. At least nothing that connected the many shards of broken glass laying about into a coherent window on his life.

That the sands along the beach at Santa Monica were softer than he remembered, making it more difficult to walk, was not a distraction he appreciated. He did, however, appreciate the sight of a very healthy looking young lady practicing what he recognized as yoga. Feeling his belly jiggle slightly beneath his shirt, he felt he should probably take up the practice himself. Besides, he truly felt a need to devote some time to contemplation in his life. It was not just that he had passed thirty by a year or so, a fact that had escaped him until this moment. He missed the days and ways spent so long ago in reflective discussions on passages of the Bible, the Qur'an, the Talmud.

That night, the television miniseries 'Roots' started. By the end of it, what lifted the heavy weight of loss that had rooted him to his sofa these last few evenings was the amazing coincidence of timing in his life.

Something in his subconscious clicked.

It was time to give the wheel of life a little push.

CHAPTER 6

THE WEALTHY WATERMAN

The city and sounds of traffic disappeared from his senses. His entire life, he had lived in and enjoyed the crowds, the bustle, the liveliness of the city. Here, now, he was awakening to a new experience. In the silence, he rolled over in his bed to gaze out of the broad window. From this hillside, he overlooked the expanse of the Pacific Ocean. His new house, perched - so precariously - on that hillside was very much a part of it. From the coastal road below, looking up, you couldn't see the house even if you knew exactly where to look. Wood, stone, vegetation and even a personal pond replaced the obvious efforts of human engineering he had become accustomed to, if a bit tired of. He could not decide at first if it represented a peace he wanted to introduce into his life, or an exciting danger of tumbling down the steep hillside, as he was sure would happen at any moment.

His body was not yet so limber as to easily attain the postures of yoga, so there remained some discomfort as he meditated. Life is suffering, he chuckled to himself, repeating the words of his yoga instructor. He envied her inner serenity.

During his meditations he would watch the tides ebb and flow. The ocean was too far below to discern the waves except as bits of sparkle highlighting a beautiful expanse like diamonds about the neck of a beautiful woman. Yes Jerry, I remember the tale of the crab, he thought. And thank you. The tides of the economy have lifted this boat as waves never could.

She was not, contrary to his expectation, a Buddhist - his instructor Rosalie. At least that was the Americanization of her name that she, so very fittingly he thought when her presence made the space around her all the more beautiful, had adopted. She explained to him that Yoga is instead associated with Hinduism. However, if his interest lay in that direction, she knew enough of Buddhism to show him the paths he might take. Sam thought the word 'path' somehow inappropriate. 'Sea lane' was somewhat closer, but still not right. Her flow in and out of his home reminded him of the tide: the tides of the sea - the tides of life. Buddha, meaning one who has become awake, felt very appropriate to Sam in his approximation of the lotus position. In the waves he imagined, appearing and disappearing at random on the surface of his mental ocean, he saw the faces of his recent friends. Why some had disappeared from his life so soon after his move, and others had grown in friendship he could not fathom. As he watched those waves in his mind, the images of a wave equation played across his inner eye. There was a natural phenomenon of interference that would cancel some waves and enhance others depending on their phases. The concept seemed to bring peace to the confusion of emotions at the changes in his life. Although she did not know about wave equations, Rosalie reinforced his perception. So began their discussions on Buddhism.

Sam examined the globe set atilt in the corner of his study. He had never realized that Jerusalem, Mecca, Constantinople and even Rome among the other alien locales and homes of prophets he remembered from years gone by, were all so close to one another. The flowering of the religions of Abraham had not sprung far from their source. Buddhism, on the other hand, seemed all the more exotic with its relatively distant roots.

Were it not that so much of what Rosalie told him resonated clearly within him at this point in his life, he might have felt less comfortable as he began to investigate this new view of life. Much of it was very familiar to him. It was the concept of training the mind to see the world in truth, to lift the veils that tend to blind each of us to a more objective reality that really intrigued Sam. The Buddha Gautama was a most refreshing teacher in that he rejected any notion that he could be some kind of personal savior. No. He was merely a guide to a destination anyone could reach as he had, if one should so desire. Sam particularly identified with the story that Gautama was, at first, uncertain whether to teach others his path given their questionable abilities to understand. It was only at the request of the god Indra that his compassion over-rule his judgement that he decided to teach the way. Instinct told Sam that here he might find a path to return to the promise he had let slip a few years ago. The second of the four noble truths - the Samudaya - also resonated with Sam. Sam had no argument with the first, that all life is suffering and suspected more truth in this second than he had wanted to admit: that the source of the suffering stems from a tree of desires whose roots are ignorance. The Noble Eightfold Path, by which the fourth truth promises a path from suffering, was both very familiar to Sam and at the same time of much greater depth than any of his previous studies had intimated. Sam was very much relieved that, unlike Judaism, he could rely largely on writings in his explorations of Buddhism.

Rosalie was not the first to suggest it, but her timing was better. Sam would at last, tonight, see the desert at night - or rather see the night in the desert. He had driven out that day, finding a spot as far from any outposts of civilization as he could. What first amazed him was the life so abundant in this arid environment. Everywhere he looked, life clung to existence like his home to the hill. He thought back to thin green leaves sprouting from cement and tar outside his childhood home. Life was such an incredible force. It would not be intimidated by harsh realities.

He spent the last few hours of daylight basking in the warmth of the sun and warmer sand beneath him. He had, in fact, dozed off cozily as the skies became a familiar red to match his sense of coals buried somewhere not too deep in the solid waves supporting him. He awoke with a shiver, unable to guess the hour except that the air above him could not have cooled so much in a short time. What disoriented him, astounded him, made his mind gape in disbelief, was that he had obviously traveled to some distant center of some galaxy. The sky above him was bright in the sea of darkness about him. The stars seen from this world were not so sparsely scattered as on his home world. Here, every smidgen of sky was filled with more points of light than he had ever counted in the entire sky of his home. It glowed with life, with clarity. It cleared his mind of all he had known, this close up view of the cosmos. How many heavens and hells must exist among those stars, many of which he knew were not stars but galaxies of uncountable

stars or even clusters of uncountable galaxies. For the second time in his life, his mind short-circuited.

The truths filling his spirit coalesced and focused on a small tickle signaled from the back of his hand. His head gradually turned down and sideways to see the dark shadow finding his warmth an inviting place to stop. For that, he felt a bit of camaraderie with this creature, one he slowly realized was a tarantula. At any other encounter with the oversized arachnid, he might have reacted as his species normally did. But tonight, he was too much at peace. Its touch was gentle and tentative as it cuddled into his hand. To Sam, the feel of it was curiously comforting. Soft, fuzzy, not unlike a childhood snuggle toy. They enjoyed each other's company for a while until the tarantula decided to continue on its nocturnal journey.

The wonderment of that night remained with Sam for a long, long time.

No one family could afford a pet, so he belonged to the neighborhood. Everyone loved that three legged cat. Sam called him 'Coal,' but his names were as numerous as the number of families he visited up and down the street. He would come to the calling of any of them. Lore was that he had been raised by a dog after he had been found behind the church with no mother to care for him. That was before even Sam had arrived in his mamma's arms. "Sam," mamma called. Sam knew it was a bad omen when she called him by name. She cried as she told him why Reverend Brown had to take Coal to the vet. That cat had loved life out of all proportion to his small size. "Leasewize, he gots hisself a leg up on hebbin" Sam managed to get out before his round cheeks were soaking wet. Mamma held him, squeezing out sadness as much as she could. He felt a little love tap on his rear end. It served its purpose to stir a small amount of cheer into the mix of lemony juices stinging his heart.

It seemed such a contrast to the desert. In the climate around his home, differing only by the intervention of a little more moisture, everything grew. And grew. And grew. Sam contemplated the deeper meanings of that truth as he went about the property caring for the plants. It was he who added the life fostering fountains, yet the act required him to arbitrate the resulting confusion and competition for the sustenance of sunlight. Sam spent his time with these plants contemplating the first precept to refrain from harming living creatures. Yet he was equally bound to its converse to seek to aid living creatures. Where would he find the perfected path?

Sam surprised himself. He actually enjoyed the peace and communion of working with these living creatures. They seemed to speak to him as they together sought a happy balance between unrestrained growth and cooperative sharing of water, light and space. As he worked, he got to know the insects that cohabited with his leafy blooming friends. Their differences exacerbated the competition of life even as these mobile creations often cooperated among themselves. There was so much to learn from so many sources. Once he had thought of insects and spiders as lowlier in the scheme of things. Now, considering their numbers and much, much longer success on this planet, were humans not exhibiting a very foolish and unfounded pride to think themselves a dominant species? This was a question upon which he meditated as he watched a colony of ants

return the carcass of some small mammal to the earth within a matter of hours. Would we appear much different as viewed from some spaceship by aliens with a life span measured in centuries?

What seemed to make humans unique was suffering. He saw many an ant missing a limb. Still, they went about their work just like their brethren. Their different fates made no impression on them. They were like children who simply accepted whatever fate they were born into, having no comparison, no conception that life could be other than it was for them. How curious, that pure ignorance contradicted suffering. And that seemed to contradict the second noble truth. A moment later, he was pleased at his insight. The difference was whether a tree of desires had sprung from the roots of ignorance. The small creatures had needs, not desires. A connection gelled in his head. No, money was not evil; it was the love of money ...And so arose another topic for contemplation in Sam's journey. He returned to his pruning with a curious care.

By his third call to his friends and relatives in Chicago, he realized they had compared notes. Their descriptions of being blessed by a mysterious benefactor shared certain words. They had each given up pressing their banks to determine the source of those erroneous deposits. It had to be some mix-up in account numbers, but if the bank wasn't concerned despite their repeated attempts to rectify the problem, well, they had long stopped worrying about it. That his friends chose not to question the anonymity of their good Samaritan, while sharing with him the happy results that spread through the community, warmed Sam like the sun of this distant land. Reverend Brown was the most descriptive of the changes he saw over the last few years. The smells of burnt sacrifices which lingered to this day in Watts were slowly sinking over South Chicago. The time was approaching that they would need to be informed of their investment accounts. As much as they each loved the neighborhood, it was crumbling beneath their aging feet. Sam wished they would sometimes venture forth to share for a time his Shangri-la in the Golden State.

It turned out that the hellish fires that swept the hills near his own home that year brought with them their own truths. The image of a burning bush took on a much deeper meaning for Sam. His house was spared, although the random destruction might have as easily descended on him. The odors of charred plants would remain even after the winter rains, although they transformed from fearful reminders into almost pleasant perfumes in the cycle of life. The barren scars would soon recreate themselves into lush gardens of the most colorful blooms. His hillside neighbors would, for a year or two, devote their weekends to clearing the oily brush around them. Not yet pacified fear energized them to try to avoid a repeat performance when next the scorching Santa Ana winds blew in from their winter sanctuaries. Even in the clearing of tangled bushes and hearty grasses, most knew they had to avoid pulling them out by the roots, for it was the living roots that would hold back an equally destructive mudslide. It fascinated Sam how fear sharpened the senses; how it slowed the passage of time to a crawl and how it so effectively cleared the mind of trivia. Fear, like the fire that inspired it, could be a numbing mind killer. It could also finally release the seeds of the Jack Pine to begin a new spurt of life and growth. Sam took the opportunity to practice his developing mental discipline. He

needed to ensure that these insights would not be crowded into oblivion by their tangled rush to captivate his conscious meditations.

The growing number of Indian and Tibetan statues, meditation aids, incense holders, rugs and other accessories had begun to crowd his rooms. They no longer seemed so foreign to him in their intricate designs and more intricate fragrances. Among the books that were scattered about, each with several bookmarks sprouting from cracks between the pages, were a few describing the lands of their origins. More often now, he felt a tug at his toes. It would be a fascinating experience to travel to such exotic locales, to inhale first hand the scents that had opened the sleepy lid of his inner eye.

Sam imagined performing this ritual in India as he did here tonight - the lighting of one scented candle with the flame of another - the Buddhist concept of rebirth. It was not the same flame, but it could pass from body to body like the spark of consciousness. This matter escaped him still in the stillness of the night.

In his readings, the distinction between Buddhism and Hinduism reminded him of distinctions between religions of Abraham. Rosalie explained to him the analogous branches of Dharmic faiths: Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. Sam felt a blossoming flower within as he considered the equally tasty and nourishing fruits he might find as he scanned the broader vistas appearing before him.

LIFE AFTER DEATH

CHAPTER 7

THE PACIFIC PAGAN

Arm in arm they finally emerged from the theater. They were not alone, having quietly sat through the credits and sat even after the bright lights had broken the mood. She was right of course. Rosalie had told him that this movie would give him a sense of India second only to going there in person. Sam rarely went to the movies and had not seen it when first released last year. He was glad now for the many Oscar awards it had received prompting its re-release. He was prepared to be awed with the sights and sounds of this land that now fascinated him. He had not been prepared for just how deeply the story of this man, Gandhi, would touch him. He felt a closer connection to the Passion having witnessed a more recent incarnation of passive suffering. He heard again the words of Martin Luther King, curious what differences had prevented the same inspiration from capturing a similar devotion in these recent years. Moreover, it was the journey portrayed in the movie that bubbled in his thoughts. Step by step by step, the march of world events had created the ageless Gandhi from the dandy, almost dainty young self absorbed lawyer, as much as his own faith had permitted him to influence the direction his life would turn at the intersections of fateful forces.

Rosalie was not surprised that his first question was about the caste system of India. He did expect her to explain it to him in a way that it would feel less like home. In that he was disappointed. Although, it was changing, very slowly just as the realities here in America were slowly changing, she did not deny that it had been, still was in many ways, just as bad. The saving grace was that its origins had a graceful concept: four duties necessary for society and valued equally, working for a common purpose. Sam wondered if people had to create artificial reasons to discriminate against one another when success in gaining a comfortable accommodation within a competitive natural world denied them any more rational pretext. Did the balance of the universe require that human compassion have the counterweight of favoritism?

Much of Hinduism was by now nothing new to Sam. Sam told Rosalie of the same truth all religions seemed to share when she recited that beautiful line from the Rig Veda: 'Truth is One, though the sages know it as many.'

The morning newspaper mentioned again the settlement paid by Union Carbide resulting from the Bhopal toxic gas leak. The news from India over the last year had dampened his intention to travel there. The massacre at the Sikh Golden Temple, Indira Gandhi's assassination, Sikh riots and more killings had tarnished his imagined pilgrimage. He may yet go someday, but a whole other set of events kept seeking his attention. As an engineer, an investor and perhaps, also in part due to his developing ability to see patterns in bits and pieces of the world, there was apparent to him a snarl in the fabric of history that chafed at his senses as they traced the flows and eddies of unfolding time. The number of terrorist acts were accumulating

Bip .. bip .. bip ... bip .. the sound of perfect rhythm as his feet ran upon the pavement lulled him into the familiar meditative trance. It came upon him quickly now. A few months ago he would not have imagined it possible. The molten lava burning his legs from the inside out, the air composed of invisible iron needles pricking his lungs with each breath had prevented him from any but the most essential thoughts - don't trip, maintain fluids, watch the time. Now his mind quietly halved itself. One half did those duties expertly on its own. The other took to perceiving the world around and the world within with a pure focus and concentration as eye-squintingly bright, crisp dry air that flowed in and out of his lungs like a tide. In many ways it was the anti-world from the one with a suffocating humid mass of air weighing heavily in the dim corridor of the high school. In his mind, he saw them as one - two manifestations of the same unity sprung from the void. It was but a second face of the one world currently revealed to him. It passed him by in a steady flow powered by the ticking pulses of his legs. He felt the consuming serenity, running neither to nor from, just running along.

He might once have thought it an act of isolation to pace along these empty roads in the desert wilderness. Sam felt less alone than he ever had in his life. He had come to love this desert to the east, beyond the mountains. Those were young mountains, there in the shimmering distance. Reborn from the earth as it folded beneath itself to rise again. The same substances re-melted and re-annealed and re-thrust into the skies how many times? Each gloriously sharp and strong in a new form, even if they were now but a fraction of their original size. They still soared thousands of feet high above this desert. Eons from now, they would be tired rounded hills whose cells littered the desert as many thousands of feet deep. Their creator was most certainly beyond any human comprehension. The distance of billions of light years is to that creator no different than the distance between subatomic particles or galaxies or houses or planets or blades of grass. It was all the same. Time too must have as little distinction to the creator of all - trillions of years or nanoseconds - where was the distinction? To the creator, the forces of nature that humbled Sam in his insignificance were merely a passing whim, if even that. .. bip .. bip .. bip .. bip .. bip .. Such whims, Sam reflected, that which created the universe, was in itself but one face, one facet of a God whose mystery dwarfed even all of creation. Hindus accepted that God could appear in any form imaginable, and innumerable more not imaginable. Some forms could be a personal God - a personal sense of the one God. Christianity holds Jesus as a personal God - a personal savior, a manifestation on Earth of the one God. It might be said that the personal God of Moses was the burning bush; to Jacob, the wrestler in the night. God could manifest in any form .. bip .. bip .. bip .. bip .. bip .. bip ..

It occurred to Sam, bringing a chuckle out of him, that his spiritual quest and his experience learning the sciences shared a particular similarity. Each new level of understanding merely revealed an infinity of new wondrous questions beneath. Like Judaism, these Eastern religions took a long view of God's work.

Back at home; with sea breezes cooling the room, that refreshing run was losing ground to this soul-less creature. Sam was feeling a rising temptation to spank the plastic and glass manifestation of those electronic blips and voids jumping along their silver and silicon paths within. He felt like a teenager again, frustrated at his inability to tame the

words of the Bible into a sensible Word. He calmed himself with only half convincing thoughts that as he learned more about the workings of those inscrutable codes, he might attain a peaceful co-existence and ability to elicit the answers he sought. He hoped it would not take as long. It was not that he was unfamiliar with computers. It was that a "personal computer" was more like a personal infection - one you tailored to your own body and thereby one your usual team of doctors could not help you with. He closed his eyes to reassert his composure. He realized he was but a child cursing the stone for existing where his toe intended to go. On the other hand, directing the blame where it belonged would not stop the throbbing pain he felt. There was a certain logic to avoiding the additional pain of self abuse, at least until the immediate focus of suffering subsided. It all reminded him of something he had long been meaning to do. Despite his growing hatred for the product, one shared by everyone he knew, even as they kept buying its upgrades hoping against hope the latest version would cure their despair, Microsoft was a moneymaker. He knew it was still privately held, but someday

The ringing phone focussed his mind like the smell of alcohol wafting from those stacks of mimeographed papers in Mr. Ali's classroom. Aunt Sally told him of the inevitable.

"May God bless his soul." The church was mostly filled, mostly with faces he did not recognize; but the ones Sam most wanted to see were all there. Mr. Ali, his wife Houri, whom he didn't know all that well but the others seemed to, Eddie, Jerry and Sarah, Howard and Miriam, Rabbi Abe and even Rosalie, who somehow knew to join him on the plane without being asked, sat beside Aunt Sally. After the service, Sam was busy shaking hands, hugging, and receiving words of condolence from those who feared Aunt Sally, sitting beside him, was too frail in body and spirit at the moment to bear the full power of the sympathies which threatened to burst from their own mortal shells. As he glanced past one well-wisher, there was something vaguely familiar about the walk of one of the two shapes slipping out the rear of the church. It was but a fleeting sensation, interrupted as a large man he didn't know quickly embraced him.

The dampness soaked through the knees of his good slacks. He knew mamma would have been sent into fit at the sight of grass stains, but it didn't matter now. Sam imagined mamma and poppa and Coal together, finally providing a loving family for the wayward cat. He could not decide if Coal now had all four legs again, or if he preferred just the three, which defined his life on earth.

The rhythms of chatter in the room and warm blanket of love were like a run in the desert. Happy stories recorded a valued life; the repeating of George's favorite jokes did not dispel the somber grief of loss, but the mixture managed to make it tolerable. Rosalie was a blessing, a God sent spring day. Not knowing these people, she busied herself serving them with cheerful dishes and glasses. At just the right times, she would ask for help to put hands on the brink of shaking with despair to work with busy purpose. Off in another room, she turned aside each creeping gloom with exotic tales of other lands and times. By evening, the numbers had dwindled to a closer band. They were a flower tightly knit in the tapestry of lives that had gathered and passed by that day. Shared sufferings, shared joys united them and in them.

The other half of Sam's mind had spent the day pondering the soul. He experienced another of those pleasing flashes of insight, although he had not yet concluded his internal dialog. While the faiths of the Middle East taught that there is a soul, as did Hinduism, the distinction is whether that soul has but one chance at life on earth, or many. Did He favor the stick of a ticking clock, whose alarm might go off at any moment, to get it right or the carrot letting you try again and again until the enlightenment of heaven would finally be obtained? Of course, the concept of reincarnation would mean that life on earth is hell, even if an escapable hell rather than an eternal damnation. Actually, Sam realized, the religions of Abraham did not deny previous incarnations, just that your current incarnation would be the last before judgement. The flash of inspiration struck again. The human concept of time was meaningless to the One. First, last, many, one - it mattered not how humans perceived of lives or a life, it was all one to the One.

For all their surface differences, Sam saw more unity in the beliefs given different names than disparities. They must be evidence of Universal truths, the universal truth of the Word. But he was suddenly shaken as this second half of his mind listened in on the tales shared among the friends and relatives populating Sally's small living room that day. As true as the bonds of love and family, was the truth of commerce in human affairs. Surely, as people traveled in long caravans between the Middle East and India since time immemorial, they had traded stories and ideas and beliefs. As intermarriage spread genes throughout the world, so too, would faiths be blended among distant peoples. Perhaps the Universality of certain truths was a human construct, not the One Word spoken by the One to the many peoples of the world. On this distressing thought, Sam turned all of his attention back to the interactions of the gathering. Several of the stories of George's life, Sam had not heard before. But they rang true with the spirit of the man. The new stories brought Uncle George back to life within him in a larger, more robust incarnation stitched together by those who had experienced the one man differently as their lives had intersected his at different points along his thread.

There was a cool breeze that night which made the sleeping pleasant. As his legs once ached from overexertion, in the morning his legs ached from inactivity. It was still quiet in the apartment as he slipped out for a morning walk around the neighborhood. Some of the changes were distressing, others amusing. 'Eddie's Electronic Emporium' made him smile. The iron ivies that now crisscrossed and clogged so many windows and doors did not. He saw they were squeezing out the light of unity, community for which windows were intended.

His friends from Gary had left late last night. The remaining souls gathered for breakfast at the church before their separate lives would pull them apart again. Sam let the good cheer produced by a shared meal of sweets and meats and hot rousing cups of coffee work its magic before raising the subject. He knew there would be a sense of relief in some ways until the realization struck them that it would probably mean their closeness might suffer the scattering of autumn leaves blown about the streets. He handed them each a package that detailed amounts they had unknowingly owned for many years. No, he reassured the one or two hints of concern, this was most definitely not a form of farewell. A reluctant consensus understood that if there was hope to hold

the community together much longer, it would have to be left to younger, more energetic successors.

Ah yes. There was that matter to attend to. He knew Pete as the most trustworthy broker he had ever run across. He made the call, explained his intentions and dropped a written version of them in the mail to Pete along with the check.

Before their departure, Rosalie joined him for a walk along the lakefront. They walked hand in hand, even though the intimacy of their relationship was not a physical one. They shared a love for one another which had never been a desire for union. She seemed to enjoy, revere, as he did, the connection between their spirits and perhaps felt, as he did, that unraveling the stitches which separated them ought not be risked. They didn't speak of such matters; they didn't need to.

Reverend Brown drove them to O'Hare. "Have a good flight, my pagan son" he chuckled to Sam while he hugged him tightly. Sam laughed, too. Yes, he was in a sense a pagan to them, but he knew they loved him and rejoiced with him and respected the good he had made of his life and within him. As they flew high over the world of cornfields smaller than a postage stamp, dots of towns, magnificent clouds blowing off the Rocky Mountains, Sam let his thoughts idle.

He settled on considering the four goals of life and four stages of life they had been discussing before the call. Of the purushartha, the goals, he had (as all people did), sought kama - physical and emotional pleasure, and he had sought artha - wealth, but perhaps not fame and power so much. Both were legitimate goals to the animal and the man, states that are undeniable aspects of life. He had by now, he thought, gone some distance toward the goal of dharma - the pragmatic moral harmony by which was learning to govern the first two. Moksha was the most elusive. That would probably take him the rest of this life, and maybe several more.

The four Ashramas, stages of life, did not fit life in America at all, and certainly not his life except in the loosest sense. He couldn't say he had ever really experienced the supposed first phase, Brahmacharya, of celibate, sober and pure contemplation of life's secrets under the tutelage of a Guru, building body and mind, at least not in that form. He had surely never spent time in the phase of Grihasthya - a married householder satisfying kama and artha, unless several girlfriends of his days of partying could be considered some sort of wedded state, but he thought not. Nor did he seem close to Vanasprastha, a gradual detachment from the material world. Perhaps he was still stuck in the first - or rather had finally gotten to the first stage of life. His ears popping put an end to such musings.

They had chased the sun in a losing race. It was late when they landed. Rosalie slept that night in his guest room. In the quiet of the morning, they prepared breakfast together and ate it on the patio, their eyes reflecting the distant reaches of the ocean beyond, disturbed only by the chirps of birds finding their own morning meals and the tinkles of chimes dancing in the breezes. They shared a peace they knew so well. Sam especially was grateful for the bit of continuity she blessed him with as he transitioned back from

his life in South Chicago. Tomorrow he would go running again. He missed heat baking away the troubles of the world. The desert would not come to him, even if he opened himself to its enveloping love. He had to go to it. The heat of the desert and the heat of the furnace in the basement were worlds apart, and yet the same.

bip .. He wondered why he somehow associated Reverend Brown's parting joke with the pattern of terrorist acts. He knew the good minister didn't really see him following a false prophet. But how was anyone to really know what was a faulty reading of the Word or a true reading of the Word? bip .. bip .. bip .. bip .. bip .. bip .. He thought of political campaigns, fitting given the year. Both parties fervently believed their positions; both based on the same set of historic facts and the same intent to better society, and probably the same goals of pleasures and power and fame and wealth as welcome byproducts. Was one right and the other wrong; both right, or both wrong, both a bit of each, or neither? As he considered the movements and tides of history, he saw the larger fit. Rightness or wrongness of such positions had more to do with their timing in relation to the tapestry of world events. It was unknowable until history was written and the new present assessed. That was the Hindu concept that the path to enlightenment required conscious introspection. .. bip .. bip .. bip .. bip .. and still that was not the whole of it. Hinduism, as with other faiths recognized that the truth, the Holy Spirit, is ever present within. It need not be sought so much as freed from the veils of experience and intellect; yet another layer of mystery. Struggles of political will were one thing; death struggles seemed another. Yet death was inevitable while political ends were not. Which, then, if either ought be engaged with the greater vigor? And by what means would one do so while keeping to the path of God. .. bip .. bip .. bip .. bip

When he arrived home, Sam started on the biography of Gandhi that had been collecting dust on his bookshelf. That led him to read of Tolstoy whom Gandhi had considered a mentor although they had never met. How fortunate it was that they did manage to exchange letters just before the Russian's death.

As appealing as he found the concepts of non-violence and passive resistance, Sam also realized that their success was questionable. Gandhi's way had not avoided bloodshed, just made it one-sided. Ultimately, though, his example is credited with freeing India from the British yoke, so strong was the power of his example. Tolstoy had tried to practice what he preached as well. He did attain a moral authority that rivaled the Tsar's, yet it was all swept away on the tide of communist rule. In a strange way, Sam saw the entire cold war as a kind of manifestation of these ideas writ large. There had been plenty of saber rattling, but both countries refrained from open hostilities, choosing instead to pressure each other in any other way. It appeared to be the only example to have worked thus far. Sam realized he was probably alone in seeing it as a Gandhi like struggle.

Tolstoy, Sam discovered, had founded his beliefs in passive resistance and non-violence upon the teachings of Jesus - the Sermon on the Mount in particular. It was as though the circle had finally completed itself. Sam's long journey was back at the beginning.

Sam dreamed fitfully of circles and cycles and tapestries that night. At first he thought he had just tumbled out of bed somehow, when he hit the floor. It was October the 1st 1987, 7:42 in the morning when the nightmare began.

CHAPTER 8

THE MISGIVEN MYSTIC

The dresser fell next, causing Sam to scream in agony an instant after he heard the bone snap. The shaking of the hillside would have frozen him in fear if he were not already pinned beneath the heavy dresser.

For an hour or so, he struggled to free himself. It was a fruitless effort, exacerbated by the thought that he might make his injuries worse in the process. There was no pain after that first wrenching bolt. His clammy body was exhausted by it anyway.

Late afternoon, Rosalie found him. She gently shook him, fearing he may not respond. Tears flooded his eyes as he opened them. He couldn't see who had awakened him, but the adrenaline that had saved his sanity no longer blocked the pain. With the freeway closed, it was night again by the time he was wheeled into the emergency room, Rosalie holding his hand. The doctors and nurses were themselves exhausted from a very long day of treating the injured.

On noon the following day, he again awoke. The doctor assured him he would be walking again in no time. He also assured Sam that running again was not in his future.

The television hung from the hospital wall like some mounted trophy from a safari to a west coast equivalent of Eddies Electronic Emporium. It had been the biggest quake to hit the area since 1971. The epicenter was but a few miles from his home. Well, it was certainly the biggest and only quake of note in Sam's experience. He watched drowsily as the urgent, earnest newscasters detailed the destruction. He was almost asleep when Rosalie returned, telling him she had called everyone in Chicago to let them know he was OK. His nod and slim smile were his last conscious acts for another 10 hours.

On the third of October, a pleasant Saturday afternoon, he was released from the hospital. Rosalie put him up in her apartment not only because he needed help getting around. His house was still standing, barely. The damage to it meant rebuilding. The office building he owned was worse. His car, too, would need to be replaced. It was almost 4 am when the second quake hit.

Like the rest of Los Angeles, neither slept another wink that night. They were lucky. Some more broken glass to be cleaned up, but no serious damage was apparent.

It wasn't until the following Monday that Rosalie began driving him around as they looked for a nice place he could live until his house was rebuilt. Sam was only one of thousands in the same position, and scarcity put market forces to work. It would be an expensive year. He could still afford whatever he wanted even though he had lost some in the Savings and Loan failures of the past several years. Fortunately, Sam had self insured much of the worth of his property which had saved him a lot of money in

insurance premiums over the years. He could afford the risk more than he could afford the premiums. Overall, it was a setback for Sam, but a manageable one. They spent the week looking, devoting all of their attention to the matter.

On Sunday, the 18th they rested. Rosalie carefully wrapped Sam's cast in a big plastic bag so sand wouldn't get trapped inside it. If anything could drive a person insane, it was an unscratchable itch. She helped him hobble down a little way onto the beach and they watched the sun set the ocean aflame as it sunk into a watery grave.

On Monday they awoke late. It was midday before Sam turned on the news, and long after the market closed that Sam finally got through the clogged phone lines to reach his broker. It was, of course too late. What would come to be called 'Black Monday' had wiped out almost all of Sam's worth.

It was then that the black fog began thickening about him. Either setback alone, he might have gotten through with a light heart.

Another week passed before Sam was able to calculate what he had left. It was maybe enough to get him by. He just wasn't sure how he could face a long uphill battle at age 41. So much of what he had acquired had come to him fairly easily. He had mostly benefited from lucky timing. Others who loved him and who helped set him off in the right direction had really fought his earlier battles. He had been too young to do much more than apply his abilities in ways they told him to. Now Now ... he didn't even know where to begin.

Rosalie tried once or twice to restore some hope by reading some Hindu verses to him. Sam really wasn't in the mood for that. He wasn't sure any more what any of it meant.

In February, the cast finally came off. Rosalie had driven him from his small apartment. It wasn't much. Weeds grew in the fenced back yard. Someday, maybe, the landlord would repaint the outside, probably without scraping off the peeling paint that now graced it like an oak in the winters of Chicago. There was a pool. All apartment complexes in LA seemed to have a pool. Sam suspected it wasn't used much even in the summer, except by a few children for whom the heat of the day overcame their reluctance to coat themselves in green globs - or maybe to do just that. It suited him. His apartment windows faced north into the windows of a duplicate building. Everybody kept their shades drawn. Various books and magazines littered all the horizontal surfaces within. Not one had been read past a dozen pages. The TV had been on for months, and Sam didn't even notice it anymore as he shuffled about. Rosalie rarely came to visit him anymore, and that too suited Sam fine, just like the cold winter rains. They still cared about each other, but they were living in different worlds now.

Two weeks later, Sam decided he needed to get out. He began taking long road trips over barely paved back roads in the desert. Sometimes he would limp into a run down motel well beyond the outskirts of nowhere. The rooms usually had plastic covering the hole in the wall where an air conditioner had once offered a little relief from the sweltering dead airs. In Arizona he drove through some Indian reservations. He and the

inmates exchanged blank stares as he drove past them. He saw places their culture had once lived, even thrived in an arid world. - ruins now. He thought of the Spanish missionaries who had brought the Word of God to those people. He drove on.

Sam tried to think of examples where religion, faith had changed the world for the better.

Perhaps Christian beliefs had played some part in stoking the fires that eventually led to ending outright slavery in this country; but it wasn't much more than a minor role. Besides, we're talking about many life spans, both before and after the civil war. It might be all well and good for God to see changes taking hundreds or even thousands of years to effect, but poor mortals like Sam didn't have that luxury. Sam might not have more than a few decades left to regain some sort of a satisfactory life. One thing was certain. All the religion in the world wasn't going to help him get back what he had lost.

Retreating again into the bowels of his apartment, Sam must have toyed with a hundred ways he could get back on his feet. After five weeks, he opened the door and squinted into the too bright light. He seriously considered going back in, his eyes hurt so much. He walked down past the graffiti covered walls of the outside stairway and emerged into the parking lot where glints of reflected sunlight made him squint again, even behind his sunglasses.

"Iz arright, is arright. Der, der, son, mamma n poppa b'here. Izza jes a nasty ole nigh'mare. Der, der." Mamma cooed as she rocked him in the darkness. Her body warmed him from the cold sweat now evaporating in the hot humid airs of August. She began to hum a gospel song, softly in the night as they swayed back and forth in a languid rhythm. Soon he was drowsy again an lay down on the damp sheet. "Ah dunno, mamma. Dem nighty mares sometimes dey seem mighty near,"he mumbled. Just before he again drifted off into that land of crazy visions, he felt the loving pats which made them more curious than terrifying.

Yeah, all life is suffering all right. So, was this hell, or was hell yet awaiting him after he died? He drove aimlessly through the streets of LA, sometimes hitting the drainage dips that crossed the roadways irregularly a little too hard, to the crunching complaints of his car and back. Sam was growing accustomed to his fate. He could only do what he could do, he concluded. If this was to be his fate on earth, this life, then the best he could hope for would be a better afterlife or next life or whatever. At least he wouldn't go the way of the terrorist, or religious fanatic, or misguided Irish fighter or any of the other hundreds of reasons some people killed and harmed others, whether of their own religion or sharing the same God or worshipping the wrong God.

At the stoplight, Sam stared idly at the computer repair shop window. He vaguely noticed the help wanted sign, but paid it no attention. When the light turned green, on a whim he pulled over, parked the car and went inside. Why the man would want to hire him, he had no idea; but it would get him out of the apartment every day, busy his hands and give him something useful to occupy his mind. A week later, Sam got the call.

Could he start the following Monday? Sam shook his head in disbelief. He imagined Eddie had given him a glowing reference.

At 5:30, Rosalie picked him up in front of the shop as he locked the door behind him. They went to eat some tacos beneath the Christmas tree lights that must have adorned the outside table area for the last 17 years. The music seemed to make the refried beans taste a little better - especially needed as their color under those lights was not an appetizing one. It was a rare and pleasant treat for Sam to have some company every now and then. They got caught up on each other's lives since they had last seen each other. Sam, as usual, had almost nothing to report other than a few stories about odd customers or amusing incidents which revealed the strange ways people would try to make sense of or humanize those all too mystifying contraptions.

Afterwards, they walked along the sidewalk together for a few blocks, digesting the food and suppressing loud burps of hot salsa that roiled up with some regularity. He felt happy having a friend like her. It reminded him of their walk along the lakefront - happier, more carefree times. Rosalie didn't quite believe he actually wanted to browse inside the bookstore. Maybe the Sam she had known was still in there somewhere.

CHAPTER 9

THE PROVIDENT PATRIARCH

Sam glanced over the stacks of new publications on the front tables. It was a way of reconnecting with the world, one he had shunned for a long while now. He had no intentions other than a brief communion with symbols of a bygone life. This title, however, compelled him to pick up the slender book: "These Branching Moments." It spoke to his sense of his life having changed tracks from one rutted way through a golden prairie onto one that took him through mud pits and snowy drifts and impassable mountains looming ahead.

He flipped through the pages, seeing it was a book of poetry. Beyond that, his eyes didn't really focus on the words. On one page, a stanza managed to grab his attention. The poem was entitled "How did you get away?" He thought it applied to him in some way:

*From the quiver of space and the bow of time
You flew straight and true to the center of truth
And there in the graveyard, pointing the way,
Stood the figure of fate you chose to ignore.
In a bursting of light, you gave up your form
You shed deep desires and hungers for food.
What use can you have for
the fine sash you then bought?*

As he read on, he wanted to share some of it with Rosalie. He found her among the aisles, among the shelves, among the books with one in hand. "I wanted to share this with you." He read in a quiet voice the next two stanzas:

*As a bolt through the center you plunged
From the ruled world you once knew
Into another where gratitude sprouts
Where you would be what you will, a leaf or a frill.
I saw you swoop low with one wing made of hope,
The other of fear as you rose to the sun.
I saw you in fall as a cool breeze passed me by,
As pretty a bloom tumbling along down the path.
I saw you in spring racing your friends down the spouts
a sparkle of dew having jumped from the sky.
Poor words cannot say what I need to convey,
Rest in me now, my beautiful friend.*

She smiled her eternal smile, lifting the book from his hands to glance at the cover. "I thought it might be Rumi. He did have a most wonderful way with words."

Sam was at the counter, paying for the book when a voice behind him interrupted. "An excellent choice - very good translation, I heard." Sam turned to acknowledge the man, and saw Rosalie coming toward him. Before he had a chance to speak, an unfamiliar startled look molded her features, confusing Sam.

"Sohrab, it is you? What are you doing here? Don't tell me you and Sam know each other! No? What a happy coincidence. Sam, this is Sohrab. Sohrab, meet Sam." They exchanged pleasantries until it became apparent that they were lingering too long blocking the counter from another customer. Sohrab invited them to join him for a cup of coffee. Sam tried to politely decline. The two obviously had much to catch up on, but Rosalie would not hear of it. Taking one on each wing, she directed them out the doors.

The trio thought for a minute which direction to head. It was Sohrab who suggested what they agreed would be the best option at that hour, especially in honor of the author of the book Sam had just purchased.

After all, Sohrab explained, Rumi was a Sufi and where better than a Sufi khaneghah to sit and relax and share a far better cup of coffee than they could find at any of the nearby restaurants. Off they went, arm in arm in arm, Rosalie's voice, that of a songbird joyful that these two friends should meet each other, bound them together like a silken sari.

The prospect of never returning to the familiar elementary school, where he knew everyone in his class, to instead fall into the depths of the much bigger Junior High School both terrified and excited Sam. Poppa noticed his fidgeting as they shopped the aisles of the budget department store, picking out a new lunchbox, pens, pencil and other sundries he would need next week. It was always an adventure for Sam to ride the bus to these faraway places. He spent both the going and returning peering out the windows at all the sights. He was old enough now that they stood, trying to keep their balance as the bus continuously stopped and started. On the way back, poppa used his curiosity to explain "Boy, yo 'member firs' dime Ah dun took you on de bus? 'Member how scairt you were at all de new faces 'n' places. Lookitjeh now! Ahll 'cited tah see de sights. Where be dat boy now?" Sam made the connection. "Soun' lahk yo missin dat boy, poppa. Tellz you what - Ah'm tinkin he be comin' back come Monday morn'n. Ah tinks you otta takes im on nudder bus ride - jes two o yo - ebbry day. Dat way, yo don' be missin' what' yo be missin 'n' dat boy kin miss wha' he don be missin'." He was safe for now, on this overcrowded bus, but Sam knew somewhere on the walk home, he would feel a delayed rebuke.

Hours later, when Rosalie dropped him off, Sam scolded her with an unhidden grin for talking him into tutoring Sohrab in the English literature. She had known very well that Sam could hardly have refused their host under the circumstances. Secretly, or probably not so secretly since she sometimes seemed to know him better than he knew himself, he looked forward to spending time in the comfortable environment. He had no interest in traveling yet another religious path, but the khaneghah had a familiar feel, one that gently connected him to times when he used to gather with friends. Too, he had discovered that he and Sohrab had a fair amount in common besides the light soul who teased him pleasantly before he wished her good night. They both were engineers and both enjoyed poetry. There were differences as well, judging by Sohrab's well tailored clothes.

Sam and Sohrab often used translations of Rumi in their lessons - a most enjoyable exercise for both of them, especially as the newer translations exhibited a more beautiful feel for language reflecting, Sohrab told Sam, the original verses. There were many other Sufi poets they might have chosen, some very well known in the west simply for their poetry. Rumi just felt right for them.

Despite Sohrab's difficulties with this new vocabulary and grammar, he had no difficulty recognizing the spark for life rekindling within Sam. A thought occurred to Sohrab, and it pleased him. His wife, Minoos was even more enthusiastic about it. He

knew he would have to use all of his powers of persuasion, a real trial of his ability to express himself well in English, but he convinced himself it would be worth the effort. It took Sohrab four attempts before he obtained from Sam an OK to go ahead and set it up.

A blind date, Sam thought to himself, shaking his head. He had never been on a blind date, but had of course heard of all the tales of disastrous, embarrassing, awkward evenings spent with both parties trying desperately to bring a close to their mutual suffering without hurting the other. Well, if she had a sense of humor, they could at least revel in adding a tale they would each write into the book of amusing 'blind date' stories - amusing to others anyway. Sohrab seemed to have put so much of himself into making this evening come to pass. Sam resolved, more out of respect for his new friend, to make the best of it.

They stood with their mouths hanging open as they faced each other. They might have been taking a last breath for the visions of their lives reeling through their heads. "Sar .. Sam ..ena ... ????" the simultaneous words crashed into each other midway between them.

The confusion of impossibilities lasted for at least 15 minutes. No, neither of them had known. In fact, Sohrab could not have known. Minoo only knew Sarena as a co-worker at the up-scale department store where they both worked, but thought highly of her and liked her. The restaurant finally kicked them out, and they continued their reacquaintance, legs hanging over the edge of the pier until light seeped again into the world. They had sadly admitted their own roles in the pain of that day still real in the mists of their memories despite the many lives that had interceded. They had happily remembered the love they had before that day. They had each been silent in their recognition that that love was still alive within them, not imagining it could be true of the other. The most difficult two hours was Sarena telling him that he had a daughter; She was 20 now. Sarena blamed herself that Samantha had not yet gone on to college. Perhaps it was a good thing that Sam's heart was hardened against the feelings of loss he realized might have otherwise ruined this reunion. He wanted to know all about her, their lives, what Samantha was like. Sarena was relieved to at last be able to tell him everything. A memory flashed upon Sam as he gazed at the stars. Yes, Sarena told him, she and Samantha had been at George's funeral. She had hoped they would slip in and out unnoticed behind their black veils. It amazed her that Sam had recognized her from the back, from that distance silhouetted against the brightness of the open doors. She admitted that Eddie had known where to reach her over the years, just in case. He had kept the confidence well. Sarena admitted to herself the reason she had maintained that tenuous link.

Around 10 o'clock, they dozed beside each other on the beach. Each felt an inner warmth greater than that of the sun heated air under the rented umbrella.

Their lives, their three lives soon became a single braid. The love poems of Rumi became a strong thread in that braid as the new love eclipsed a younger less successful trial.

His heart was pounding and his hands trembling as he knelt in front of her. He mistook the big silly grin on her face for amusement that he should feel so nervous the second time. After he had gotten the words out and opened the small box to her, she couldn't hold it in any longer. She laughed so hard, it infected him without his understanding the joke, only the feeling of shared joy. "You silly man! Did it never occur to you that you never had to sign any divorce papers?" They finally managed to wipe the tears from the outer corners of their eyes, still overcome with shaking bellies interrupting any attempt to conclude a coherent thought. Eventually, she stood up again, faced him, urged him to get back on one knee, and accepted the ring. "Yes, my beloved husband. I will marry you again. I think it fitting we renew our vows properly, so you are not excused from going through with another wedding."

He was a little sorry she had not been able to partake of the years when he could afford more for them. She merely stroked his cheek. With a tenderness equal to its firmness, Sarena's explanation made sense to Sam. She had been aware of his success and it was that success which had contributed to her not contacting him. She had no wish for him to ever imagine she wanted him in any part for his money. She had wanted to make sure he was OK after the quakes and market crash in '87, but nobody seemed to know what had become of him after that. Everyone had worried about him, and even checked to make sure he was not among the few who had been killed in the quake. Knowing he must still be alive, they trusted that he would reach out to those who loved him when he was ready.

It felt good to Sam to at last bring that family back into his life.

They selected a poem from a new Rumi translation: "A Garden Beyond Paradise" to grace their wedding announcement.

*In the peace of the moment, we sit side by side
Two bodies, two faces of one joyous soul
Into the garden we pass, one heart hand in hand
Neither blooms ever perish nor songs of the birds
We live there forever as one joyous soul
To the stars of the night we are the light of the moon
As we lay side by side just one joyous soul
No you, no I, no concept of space
between us there is not a self serving thought
Only loving and living as one joyous soul
White doves on bright wings from heaven above
Come to taste the thick nectar from our fountain of love
Made sweet by the laughter of one joyous soul.
Joined in the blessing of wondrous bliss
If even you find us in lands far apart
We remain only one, one joyous soul
Bound in two bodies on this earthly realm
Both here and in heaven of mystical peace,
we are one joyful soul.*

There was also, with Rumi, the religious aspects to which Sam tended to pay little attention. As comfortable as he felt in the khanegah as he and Sohrab continued their lessons, religion did not hold his interest as it once had. He was amused that Rumi should be called a mystic, Sufism a form of mysticism, as though any religion was other than that. From what he had learned, Sufism was no less universal than each faith he had explored, probably more so than many. Buddhism, for example, was almost unique in that it did not recognize a permanent self in the form of a soul. Sam had decided there was a soul, or wanted to believe it. He especially wanted to believe that the united soul shared between his and Sarena's bodies had permanence. It was more than mere desire. His heart told him it was absolutely true. In this, he instructed the rabbi of his intellect that it would accept the heart as the objective messenger of Truth. Its obedience, it would turn out, was eternal. That lesson was the first step towards the fourth goal, even as he was only now preparing to enter the second stage of life. It did not matter that those thoughts never entered his conscious musings.

As far as spiritual matters were concerned, Sam's soul was more consumed with the romantic face than the religious face of the topic. It also did not matter that he never really thought about Rumi's many verses, which denied distinction in Hinduistic fashion, nor finally realized why the Song of Solomon held its place in the Bible. What was important was that he did not, in fact, think about it. He was learning. Sarena and

Samantha were both making his life brighter and lighter in ways that had no comparison to the first time it had happened.

Had he looked, Sam would have found it all recorded centuries ago. If he had been so inspired, he would have been luckier to first find the verse that read:

*You seek knowledge from books. What a shame! ...
You are an ocean of knowledge hidden in a dew drop...*

Sam was most fortunate that such hypothetical tracks in his life remained just that.

Even the actual twists in his life, as wondrous as they sometimes were, had almost no relevance to him in comparison to the love in his heart. It was even so when he answered the phone to relieve it of its needy pleadings to be paid some attention.

"Sam, Sam Sam - is that you? I couldn't find you all these years - where have you been? I'm sorry ... it's me, Pete - Pete your old broker from Chicago. Yes, Yes. I've been fine. What happened to you? After the crash in '87 I tried to reach you, but your phone was dead. Mail came back - no forwarding address. Guess it was those quakes you had. Must have been terrible! Anyway, oh thank God I finally found you again - It was Howard - I ran across him and through a couple of friends tracked you down. Anyway, how's it going for you? Never mind, I shouldn't be so coy with you. Do you remember that check you sent me to squirrel away until Microsoft went public? Well of course I did just what you said. Remember, it was 200 grand - chump change to you then I guess. So guess what you're worth today - go ahead - take a guess. Ha ha - not even close my good man - not even close. Are you sitting down? Try over 6 mill. Yep, .. no! I'm not kidding you.. Yes ... really. So tell me, what do you want me to do with this elephant?"

The news pleased Sam. He and Sarena could look for a nicer house. He would be able to afford plane fare and lodging for any of their Chicago family who wanted to attend the second wedding. Even better, perhaps Samantha would get to college now. She had set her sights on one and only one, unwilling to consider any alternative. No matter how long it took her, she had been saving towards being able to afford it. After that, ... after that ... all that, fulfilling his every desire, he would still be left with almost as much - the elephant would have shed but a few pounds. Of what possible use could he have for the rest of the elephant?

Sam remembered his long dismissed intention to find some way to make a difference in the lives of too many who despaired of seeing significant change to their lives. The thought grew to a yearning. It was apparent that the love he felt for Sarena, and she for him could not be contained within the small boundaries of their family. It naturally spilled forth to everyone they touched; but, like the elephant, was not in the least diminished by the outflow. Together they tried to imagine some way to convert the currency of wealth into a currency of peace in the hearts of many. It did not seem that it had ever been achieved before. Despite a growing suspicion that it might well be a fruitless tree to explore, Sam recalled the inspiration of Indra upon the Buddha Gautama and resolved not to give up on the quest, no matter the difficulties.

They spoke of it with Samantha, and Rosalie too. In fact they enlisted thoughts from everyone in their lives to little avail. Aunt Sally, Reverend Brown, Mr. Ali, Rabbi Abe, and all the others had long talks with Sam over the phone. Each promised to think on the matter, but the many suggestions offered, they agreed, were mere repackaging of things that had been tried before without lasting effect.

Sam brought his question to Sohrab one afternoon. After considering the matter some, Sohrab turned to two Rumi's verses. In the first, Moses is rebuked by God for rebuking a ragged shepherd who, to the eyes of Moses, did not display proper reverence when praying to the One. God tells Moses:

*Is prayer, am I, to be
A field fenced off from life
And furrowed in straight lines?
Let every heart fly free
In joy above your strife
To pray for what it pines.*

And the second verse read:

*Welcome, O Muslim, Jew and Christian too!
Be you infidel or pagan or kneel to the flame, Come!
Of despair, within our bonds, Trust God you'll find not a hair.
Leave such cares beyond our stairs! Come All! Come!
Have you broken your vows a hundred times?
Come, weary souls, here you are Welcome! Come!*

Sam was not at all sure he knew what Sohrab was trying to convey with these verses; or how they related at all to his question. But, having been more right than he could have imagined in his insistence on that blind date, Sam decided to try to make sense of it.

IN THE BEGINNING THE IN

CHAPTER 10

THE FALLACY OF THE FALL

Within the refuge of the khanegah, they were discussing the question again. Sam had already thanked Sohrab for the insight that whatever form the project might take, it ought encourage freedom rather than seek to guide or instruct. The concept helped Sam eliminate many of suggestions that swirled within his head. Still, half a maelstrom was yet a maelstrom. They were trying to better define the question. Sohrab asked Sam to tell him more of his life, especially as it related to the formulation of this question within Sam. Sam smiled with the memory of his first meeting with Mr. Ali.

Sohrab nodded. It was much as he had expected. He explained that it was a common tale in outline if not specifics. "My friend Sam, we start as children knowing nothing but the religion of our parents. We learn of God and are instructed we ought to seek to become a part of God's plan. When we start to learn on our own, we read of this prophet or that, depending on the religion, and try to follow the messenger as a way to become a part of God's Plan. And when we think about our readings, we become concerned with Heaven and Hell and how to apply the teachings of the Prophet, or Prophets or Holy Writings of faith so as to avoid Hell and attain Heaven. Would you agree that roughly describes your journey?" Sam nodded in agreement. "Let me offer you an alternative, one that I found useful in my own Journey. Consider if you start with Heaven and Hell, then consider the Messenger, and that way, find the path of God."

Sam considered the idea through another cup of coffee. "You know, Sohrab, that might really get to the center of my question. I'm not sure I really understand this heaven and hell stuff. I mean, hell is suffering and heaven is joy, but ... well ... maybe if I got a better handle on the source of suffering, the real source of suffering that seems to keep some people from letting themselves be free to find joy ... maybe if I got a handle on that, I would have a better idea on how to realize my dream."

"I have an idea, Sam. But it is late. When I need to think on such matters, or feel very happy or very sad, you might think it a bit strange, but I find the cemetery is a good place to sort things out." The suggestion did indeed strike Sam as a bit unusual, until he thought of the times he had kneeled at the graves of his parents and the peace he had felt there. They agreed to meet early and share a journey into a cemetery for more reflection on the matter.

In the morning, they met at the appointed hour. Dawn had barely broken the dark. It was a chilly morning, made more so by the fog that had slithered in from the shore. They found, deep among the gravesites, a place of quiet. They sat for a while in silence as the fog began to dissipate. Sam liked this idea. Where better to consider the continuity of life? Where better to consider the impermanence of this life? Where better to consider the fabric of souls who populated the ground around them?

Sohrab cleared his throat. "There is a story, an ancient Persian story that I think may help you. I will try to translate as best I can for you."

One afternoon, an old man sat enjoying the afternoon sun, smoking his pipe, letting the oil of warmth soak into his rusty joints. Suddenly, a blinding light came before him, and when his eyes adjusted to the light, he saw an angel. It saddened him thinking he would not get to finish his pipe and had so many other things to take care of before the angel took him away.

But the angel calmed his fears. The angel was not here to take him away, but only to borrow a bit of flame for his own pipe. The angel explained that there was no fire in heaven to light a pipe, and he had taken such a fancy to the thought of enjoying his pipe once again, he came here to share an afternoon with his old friend.

The man, at last, recognized the friend who had passed several years ago. They sat, smoking and talking. The angel wanted to know of the weddings and births and festivities that had occurred since he had gone to heaven. After that, the man asked his angel friend about heaven, was it true - was heaven as wonderful as promised.

Oh, indeed yes, said the angel, even better. The air is warm, and the breezes just cooling enough. The most beautiful flowers were always in bloom. Soft music, whatever you wanted, always pleased your ears. Food was more delicious than anything you had ever tasted. Animals frolicked happily, amusing your spirit, and friends were ever available for a chat and a cup of tea. Except of, course, no one had ever lit a fire in heaven, so there was no way to relax with your pipe. Other than that, everyone in heaven is happy. You know how your memory is starting to fade, now that you are getting old? Well in Heaven, you remember everything with perfect clarity.

The man then asked if the angel knew anything about hell, perhaps he had heard tales or caught a glimpse of it? Oh of course, said the angel. That's where I went first when I went looking for fire - where else? You know, hell is just next door - an easy stroll. It is most curious. Well maybe not, when you think of God's mercy and love, but Hell is nothing at all as you have heard. Hell is just exactly like Heaven, beautiful weather, beautiful lakes and streams, everything just like heaven except that I saw that the people there are in agony.

I asked one sufferer how he could be in agony amidst such beauty and the love of God shining here just as it does in Heaven but a few

steps away. He only answered that he had sinned, he had sinned. And I thought that I too regretted some deeds I had done in life, and remembering them in such perfect clarity, they hurt me when I thought of them. But I was in Heaven, where joy overwhelmed those dark sufferings. I asked him if he had never helped another, done a good turn in his life? 'I might have; I tried to. But it matters not! I have caused pain to others and I remember those sins so clearly. I feel the pain I caused. I feel the hatred for that pain and I hate it'.

Since there was no fire there, I kept walking thinking I would find it deeper within Hell. I soon came upon another soul in agony but also weeping and sobbing. I asked him the same questions I had asked the first tormented soul. 'No, I didn't'. Well, I asked, what sin did you commit? 'None, I committed no sin.'

Sohrab paused, noting that Sam was shielding his eyes against the solar reflection from a polished marble headstone. They took moment to rearrange themselves on the white stone bench. Sohrab continued.

Why, then, I wondered, are you also in agony, and weeping as well? 'Because I did nothing with my life. It was a waste. I harmed no one, nor did I help anyone. My life mattered not at all. I feel the loss. I feel the emptiness and I cannot lose that feeling!' Hearing these words, I thought that I too might have done more, but was joyful I had at least done some small things.

I continued walking and soon came across a soul also in agony and also weeping and sobbing and moreover raging in anger. Again I asked had he never done a good deed? 'Yes, many!' and I asked what horrible sin might have been so much worse as to cause such agony? He answered 'I might have sinned. I tried not to.' This confused me because he answered much as my friends in Heaven would answer. So I asked, why then are you in agony? 'It matters not,' he wailed. 'Look! Look! Do you see the world below? What do you see! It is just as it was when I passed so long ago. For all my good deeds, What did they matter? Nothing changed! I feel the senselessness of it all and cannot understand why it should be so.'

Well. I could not understand why some souls were happy in heaven and these others so pained in Hell. So I decided to just find some fire for my pipe and asked if anyone in Hell knew where I could find some.

No, they had never seen or heard of fire in Hell except for burning agonies within them.

They begged me, if I should find any to bring it to them that they might use it to burn themselves and so distract them from their sufferings.

Before I knew it, I was back in Heaven, with no fire for my pipe. So here I am, old friend. You know, at least here the sufferings and joys of people make some sense.

And so the two old friends passed the afternoon. At dusk, the angel returned to heaven and the old man pulled his blanket up to his neck and slept soundly.

The two earthbound friends also passed the afternoon together in wordless friendship.

Sam wondered if despair was a self-fulfilling prophecy, or might be broken as the Dharmic faiths teach.

Night had fallen and the air was chilled again. Sam wrapped the sweater which Sarena had knit him about his body and enjoyed its soft warmth. He looked up to the sky, marveling once more at the majesty of creation. The moon, rising over the eastern hills looked close enough for him to reach out and touch. The stars were closer still and tickled him with their twinkling. They came to a streetlight, a-flitter with moths and insects of the night. One moth, dancing crazily in and out of the shadows, collided with him and fell to the ground. It lay there flopping, trying to right itself and take to the air again. From the trashcan beside him, Sam took a piece of waste paper and managed to turn the moth over, he hoped without damaging those delicate wings. He thanked Sohrab for his help and said he was sure the answer would come to him when it was ready. He bade his friend good night and the moth a good life. And when it did, Sam thought to himself, he would just have to be ready for it.

DEATH AFTER LIFE

CHAPTER 11

THE DILIGENT DIVESTOR

Now this was perhaps their best idea yet. For each of the three of them, more than a little cramped in Samantha's small car, this was the first time any of them had seen the country from the road. They had decided to take the northern route from coast to coast. They had so many planned stops and an unknown number of unplanned stops to go, it was a good thing that Samantha wouldn't need to arrive at college for another month and a half. They sang the songs and played the travel games they might have a decade or more ago had they had the chance. Doubtless, this was a great deal more fun for them. Samantha would often enough, especially when she was at the wheel, ask in a plaintive voice if they 'were there yet?' Sarena or Sam would answer that 'there' was just over the next hill or around the next corner. And on they drove. They enjoyed the amazing sights and chatting with fellow diners in whatever town restaurant seemed most likely to be a favorite for the local population. This was a trip for the memories, to be entered into the repertoire of family lore.

On the flight back, Sam and Sarena held hands all the way.

In January, when the San Fernando Valley quake hit, they simply got in their car and went to help in whatever way they could. It never seemed curious to them that they never discussed what should have been viewed as a fairly major decision. For that matter, it was never a decision at all. It just was. Maybe they were just too busy to ever think back on that day. There were clinics that needed volunteers; weeks spent building habitat-for-humanity homes, neighborhood cleanups, and the list kept growing. The hours, days, weeks and months gurgled by like a mountain stream bejeweled with glinting smiles. Many a night, with muscles aching, they would manage to cuddle into a single cot, grateful for the comfort and chance to recreate in a satisfied slumber.

Jackson had become a familiar face, appearing at many of the same activities that filled their time. At fifteen, he teased Sam and Sarena about his relatively inexhaustible supply of energy. They, in turn, teased him that their years of wisdom allowed them to accomplish as much without wasting the same energy. He would share lunchtimes with them and compare notes on the swirls of history that would occasionally catch their attention from the faraway planet earth. Before long, Jackson had revealed his interest in computers. Sam could not resist a little private tutoring for this irrepressible spirit who had entered their lives.

Sarena awakened to the vigorous shake of her shoulder. "I have it! -How about this: 'Eddies Educational Emporium'". Sarena's laughter dispelled the small annoyance at being awakened so. With her agreement, Sam was instantly on the phone to the namesake of this tutoring center, inviting him to the ribbon cutting of this wonderful institution that had nothing but a name at this point. It was to be a place where students could get private tutoring in whatever subject they wished. A place where aspiring

entrepreneurs could consult with small business mentors and learn how to navigate the whitewater eddies of arranging for loans, financing, paying taxes, employment forms and the like. There would be classes for would-be tradesmen with fully equipped wood shops, machine shops and the like to give them hands on experience - why the classes and workshops could even provide materials for local charity building projects. If Jackson wanted, he could be in charge of a computer lab, complete with rows of computers connected to the Internet for anyone who wished to access the world beyond. Sam and Eddie imagined all kinds of things that could be offered at the emporium. When the bill came, Sam and Sarena agreed that the five hour and thirty-six minute phone charge was worth every penny of it. The clock of their ages had been turned back 30 years by that call and the subsequent activity.

On breaks from college, except for the first Spring break, Samantha would come out to volunteer at this or that clinic. Usually, Sohrab's and Minoo's daughter Shabnam, who attended the same college, joined her. At the end of their days, with nothing but hamburgers and fries ready to greedily fill their stomachs, life was good as they sat at their usual booth. Hearing of each other's activities eased the troubles they had dealt with during the day. Samantha had become a born-again Christian. Sarena and Sam rejoiced in whatever brought joy to the beautiful daughter. As they held hands across the plastic and metal surface, she would lead them in saying Grace over packets of ketchup, a small pile of straws and napkins. After the 'Amen', three pickles would be pulled from a bun and laid on the thin wrapper that served as a place mat. Samantha rejoiced that, at least while she was with them, they would share the small prayer. She knew full well that when she returned to college, they would spend the time instead making googoo eyes at each other.

Sam watched as mamma gingerly transplanted the plants into the window box. "Mamma, howzacom yo allus hang de box out de winnow where we caint see it oursefs?" "Com obber here, boy. Put yo' nose close n see how good it smellz? When de neighborz see de flowerz, dey tink o' dat smell n be tinkin happy tauts n ebbrybody a mite happier seein doze smilez." Sam looked over to the yellowing painting of a daisy he had brought home from school for mamma last January, hanging ever since on the refrigerator door by even yellower pieces of tape. "Soz, when yo see dat pichur in de winner, yo smelz dat smell?" "Dat sholy be sumovit, boy, it sholly do be a part o' why Iz be smilin' at dat pichur." "Well, den, seemz all Ah gots to do iz keep me a piece o' paper n a crayon 'stead o goin to all de trubble o' drawin'." "No, boy, allz Ah gotz to do iz tink o' yo' sassy mouth to smell dem flowerz any timez Ah wan'," she whispered with a WHACK! as she hugged him.

The Emporium had become, as Sam had hoped, something of a beacon in the community. Its lights shone brightly beckoning to recluses populating the area, afraid to enter into the night. Sam got it into his mind to convert the empty lots next door into a safe playground including, most importantly, a sparkling clear swimming pool. Perhaps that would bring forth more than the few dozens of faces who passed through the doors every day.

Sam was amused that for all the expenses of the 'Emporium,' not to mention all the other worthy causes to which they contributed generously, their worth was still growing. The most amusing part was that he paid no attention whatsoever to investments. He figured that the money was an almost accidental godsend, one which did better than all his clever buying and selling. Why not just let the account composed of a single stock do what it would, while he busied himself finding good ways to put it to use. Jackson came in just then, and sat himself down across from Sam without a word, grinning at this little ritual of theirs. Sam took his time looking up, pretending surprise at seeing the boy when he did. This time, the book Jackson had brought in caught his attention, it having an intricate geometric design on the cover. He thought it might be a Buddhist mandala, and asked if it was so. Nope, Jackson said, this was a Zoroastrian Holy Book. Sam was curious enough to ask about it, to Jackson's surprise since he thought Sam knew everything there was to know about religion. Jackson told Sam of this pre-Moses religion, of its rejection of evil, its prayers and liturgies, code of purification, the daily Kusti ritual to be performed every time the hands have been washed, whether for the sake of cleanliness, or in preparation for prayer; which included the three key pledges: "*I pledge myself to the well-thought thought, I pledge myself to the well-spoken word, I pledge myself to the well-done action.*" He quickly realized that Sam's pleasant nods did not display any real interest. Jackson changed the subject to one that engaged Sam in a more lively discussion.

Perhaps the greatest frustration of charity work for Sam and Sarena, as it was for any dedicated volunteer, is the realization that just because a disaster isn't splashing across the headlines doesn't mean needs have been washed away. They spent much of their time these days, nights actually, doing fund raising among the usual targets - those who had more wealth than they could sensibly put to productive use. Sam tried to show that even the biggest, most infamous and deadliest of disasters which had intruded on their awareness did not create even the smallest tic in the annual death rate for the afflicted country. The Grim Reaper's profits neither rose nor fell with big headlines. They only fell with a long-term commitment to see unsteady progress no matter how slow. All in all, Sam and Sarena found far more satisfaction going where in the world four extra hands could make a small difference.

The second greatest frustration was that it had to be an exceptionally slow news day to get a story of success into the lineup of any news medium. The smallest disaster, failure, squabble or difference in wording which could be construed into a brewing fight would take precedence over the most inspiring miracle of hope made real. Sam, Sarena and Jackson created something of a neighborhood news service. When any level of success could be claimed in the daily battle against despair permeating the community, they would create a flyer, a 'press' release, videotape, a poster, any way to tell the tale. To Churches and stores and bars and schools and establishments of every description they would take copies, cajoling whomever to share the tale, to advertise the possibilities, to counter sour words they may hear with this latest example of an alternative. They were never sure if their efforts paid off. They could only hope so. They made it a ritual of sorts. Whenever someone would wander in to the 'Emporium' and recognize a face on one of their posters, they would gather for milkshakes. They weren't gaining weight, but it did lighten their hearts.

Sam and Sarena awaited Jackson's return from delivering the latest batch of flyers. Another round of milkshakes would be dedicated and sacrificed tonight. The light rain muffled the five pops, but they recognized the sound anyway. It was a stupid, thoughtless thing, to run towards the echoes. No matter. They would have run even if they had thought. Sarena already had her cell phone out, calling 911. Their minds refused to believe it. It had to be the tiny raindrops playing tricks. All too soon, they were peculiarly salty raindrops. Their knees and backs were thoroughly soaked by the time the ambulance arrived. They hadn't even heard the siren.

It was a small gathering with Jackson's parents. There were no words. Nothing could turn this inside out world back from the black crackled lumps of hot tar stuck behind their tongues. No one was ready for this violent return to times when parents too often outlived their offspring. There was no longer the balm that it was somehow part of God's plan; such amoral acts of a natural world. These were amoral acts, to be sure, but not natural, certainly not natural. It only made understanding more impossible.

Sam was astounded to see the reporter there. He had requested she come. She had known Jackson slightly. He spoke with her a while, hoping some quotes concerning the value and worth of this young life lost might make it into an obituary or short article to remember him by. Sam had to cut it a little short, but appreciated her snapping a picture of the casket whose handle he held with other men as the parents walked, stumbled, behind.

They closed the Emporium for three days. When it reopened, it was smaller, less lively.

A month later, Sam toddled out in his robe and slippers to bring in the Sunday paper. Back in bed, the ritual continued as he pulled out the weekend magazine section, which they would always read together, still snuggling, before sitting up to delve into separate sections of the paper. They only half recognized their own faces staring back at them. The blurb said it all. It was nothing about the tragedy, nothing about the disaster that had befallen yet another family caught up in an evil web. It was something about the wonders of their good works and spirit. Sarena threw the entire paper away. They dialed the travel agent and they left for Africa that afternoon. It would probably take them a month or two working in the small villages to get over their disgust - and their embarrassment. The irony completely escaped them.

Samantha's graduation that year brought a welcome vacation to them. They made a week of it with Samantha as she showed them all the places she had spoken of these last few years, making it all much more real to them than their imaginations had allowed. She was rightfully proud of her degree, if a little fuzzy on her immediate plans, other than to take the job offer she had recently received. Both Sam and Sarena took turns taking pictures of the event, and once in a while traded picture taking duties with some other family so the whole families could be remembered together. Samantha declined to join them on the return drive, this time taking the southern route across the states, even if the rental car would be considerably more comfortable. That was a good thing, because summer in the south was already hot and humid. Sam especially looked forward to the

searing cleansing heat of the desert. Sarena thought he was crazy. Outside of Tucson, it was she who pointed out to Sam the small item in the paper that Betty Shabazz, Malcolm X's widow had died from a fire apparently set by her troubled 12-year-old grandson. Sam read it without comment. He turned to look out the window at the wheels of a bicycle rolling past. He didn't even look up to see the face of the rider. By the time they pulled into their driveway, they did feel more exhausted than they remembered being from the earlier trip in the other direction.

Spending an evening with Jackson's parents renewed their energy. They might well have avoided each other to avoid their shared pain, but his spirit seemed to unite and enliven them. The eternal faith of hope that eases the miseries of the world caused his parents to imply with a glow that they might have another child.

In September, Mother Teresa died.

Sam and Sarena needed another vacation. In Acapulco, they lay on the beach together and danced together at night. After dancing they would go and lay on the beach together again, letting the rhythm of the waves, visible only by their wooly white hats, substitute for the motions of their bodies. They still loved holding each other close. They had two days of their vacation already massaging their inner selves when it turned into a busman's holiday. Hurricane Pauline struck. They were back at work amid the wreckage of the beach. It was all so tiring.

CHAPTER 12

THE PRACTICAL PHOENIX

It turned out to be their last disaster relief work. At their ages, Sam and Sarena agreed their energies would have to focus on matters closer to home. On their return, they were swept into the obligatory holiday parties, hoping to convince yet another benefactor for their charities, or, if they were really lucky, a volunteer or two who would commit to the real work of charity. The tables were turned on them when a prominent, behind-the-scenes, political advisor started to talk to Sam about a run for office. Sam was immune to the ego stroking which usually got candidates interested. Realizing that, the message shifted subtly to explaining that it would give Sam a platform to further his goals for the downtrodden. Why, he might even attract busloads of volunteers.

It took a week of discussing the pros and cons, before Sam made the call. He assured the man on the other end that he would be happy to actively seek the office he had in mind. Sarena gave Sam a big hug, their private dreams bonding them even closer.

Before he knew it, he was meeting with a small staff who explained to him how it all worked. How money would be raised, volunteers for the cause attracted, polls conducted, position papers published, how to avoid controversy-creating comments during interviews, and on and on it went. He soon discovered why it is called 'running' for office. The stopwatch never stopped ticking.

Sam couldn't stop giggling at the images still reeling through his mind. "Dat roadrunner ... heee heee ... he sholly do oudsmard dat coyode ebbry time, don' he, poppa?" "Ah don' know 'bout dat, boy. Zeemz t' me dat Mr. Coyode, he be ousmardin' hissownselb mor'n bein' foo'd by dat roarunner. Dat roa'runner, hez jes happy runnin' 'long down dat road 'n' don' be tinkin' too much 'bout coyode. Jes lahk Mr. Coyode, he don fall s'long az he be tinkin' 'bout cachin' de roa'runner 'stead o' de fack dat dey don' be no groun' unner hiz feet." Sam pondered that for about half a block. "Ah, seez. Den Ah dazn' need be lissnin' Rebberen' Brownz sermons ebbry Sunnay. Ah jes gotzta keep mah eyez on hebben 'n' not be tinkin' 'bout hell 'n' Ah sholly git me t' hebben?" "Boy, yo mo' right dan yo know, yo sholly iz." Poppa answered. The taps to his bottom felt more like those mamma bestowed on him after a nightmare. They propelled Sam running off down the sidewalk with a "Beep! Beep!"

Tick .. tick .. tick .. time to run to another meeting .. tick .. tick .. time to run to give a luncheon speech ... time to have make-up applied , time to pose for the photograph, time to sign a position paper .. tick .. tick ..tick. Sam was being run ragged in the sweltering caverns of the city, barely time to glance at the low buildings he was being driven past, dwarfed by the tall downtown buildings shimmering in the distance. Sam was running again. In the beginning, most of his talks were scripted for him. They were mostly innocuous, coyly claiming not to have decided whether or not to seek the office until the polls came in. The formal announcement came couched in terms of wanting to help the

people of the district. The district had the typical meandering boundaries including disparate populations of those who rented decaying buildings situated within barren specks of sandy soil within sagging wire fences, and those who owned freshly built testaments to bank accounts within plush jungles within high rise iron gates and sturdy walls hidden beneath twining vines.

Days filled to the brim with appointments detailed weeks in advance came to include nights filled with fund raising events. There was not a minute to spare. He had to obtain promises of support, to make promises of support for all variety of pet interests. Promises were sealed with handshakes heartily made and firm eye contact.

One of the advantages of being a candidate was the ready excuse he and Sarena had for leaving the meet-and-greet cocktail parties early claiming an early morning interview he had to be well rested for. Sam understood he needed to stay a step ahead and spent his tired evenings with Sarena creating the substantive messages that would soon be carried in print and over the airs. They were realists. What took them the most time was to tailor the messages in ways that would pass the censorship of party consultants and advisors. It did, in fact, take those creatures of habit some time to realize what Sam was saying about working together for a brighter future. He wasn't talking about working together in the way they meant - trading votes for the promise of money being poured back from Washington to one audience, or trading votes for promises of positions of power or internships for the children of another audience. No, Sam was really talking about physically working together. He was talking about communities joining in common purpose being able to move mountains, mountains of rubble to make way for a new building. They started to whisper to Sam after some speeches that he had to give his audience a sense that he would provide for them. Then they started to whisper to him before he started a speech. And, of course, he had to realize that this was a political contest. Working at cross-purposes was the nature of the beast. The voter had to be given a clear choice between Sam and his opponents. The whispers soon turned into to party workshops Sam must attend to understand better how to win. He had to understand that leaving time to take questions from the audience after the speech was too dangerous. No one could predict if some embarrassing question might arise for which he was unprepared. Tick .. tick .. tick

Sam's advisors were probably more relieved than Sam when he told them he would need to take a little time off from the campaign because his daughter was going to get married. The two proud parents flew out to meet the future in-laws before submerging themselves into planning the wedding on all too short a schedule. Their own two weddings, together with their organizing and scheduling abilities, well learned over the past few years, brought it all together in a glorious celebration of life and love. It was a simple event. The traditions handed down from generation to generation over millennia of similar celebrations blessed this new union of souls with eternal promise. The tears of emotion that tracked down their cheeks fell into the infinite ocean that had been shed by every forebear and would be joined in due time by those of every future loving parent. The first dances at the reception added to the steps that had and would keep the universe turning. The small death of watching and waving as the child disappears into the distance to begin life anew was as satisfying a confirmation of the proper course of creation as

ever. All in all, Samantha and Jonathan were a good match whose obvious love, respect and friendship for each other ought carry them through the struggles of life.

When it was over, as the caterers cleared and cleaned the room, Sam and Sarena concurred, with no more than the look that passed between them, to delay allowing the stark contrast of campaigning to reassert itself in their lives. Instead, they started to help the helpers.

After their honeymoon, Samantha answered the door to a deliveryman carrying a rather large box that appeared to be wiggling a little. The smile gave him away - it was Sam in a clever disguise. With his eyes hidden beneath the brim of a cap, he had succeeded in fooling his daughter for the precious moments needed to make the surprise a most happy one. As they hugged, the yap coming from the box gave away the second part of the surprise and sharply ended the hug as she grabbed the box from her father. Sammy was the cutest puppy she had ever laid eyes upon, and he in turn gave her the wettest, sloppiest face she had ever experienced. Sammy made her new abode a home and the new couple a family.

All too soon, Sam was back within the complex machinations of a political machine. The media, of course, fell in love with the story of an orphan from the ghetto. At long last, there was a full weekend magazine spread on 'Eddie's Educational Emporium' and a 10 minute prime time piece on it aired a week and half later. Around the newsrooms, there was one aspect of the man which would regularly arise among somewhat befuddled reporters and editors, spawning inconclusive debates on just how, or if, to cover it. It was that he was recognized and welcomed as a brother whenever he visited a church, whenever he visited a synagogue, a mosque, a temple, or any of the myriad places of worship dotting the diverse community. Asked about it, Sam would just laugh it off with a cryptic remark about the brotherhood of man.

At first, the crowds he drew both in front of taco stands and fried chicken huts as well as the new mall filled with famous name stores buoyed Sam's inner circle. They loved his message, except for the last two words, of helping people help themselves. It was not long, however, before his advisors started hearing the hushed voices over cocktails in quiet back corners of expensive restaurants from party regulars of concerns expressed by more venerable, more worried office holders, that perhaps Sam was a little too popular. The speeches that were written for him never seemed to be delivered in quite they way they intended. Sam would bring the growing crowds and audiences to their feet in applause nonetheless.

The staff also basked in mutual acknowledgments of importance with the many stars, neither seen nor heard from in too many years, nor even the object of a gossip column in too many months, who made it a mission to be photographed with the candidate and sign copies for those who would display the pictures as resumes on their walls.

When Sarena got the call, she relayed the news to Sam. Events were cancelled for the rest of the day and the next. The press was not informed of his whereabouts, raising futile speculation that was soon forgotten. No reporter suspected where they would be found

and the nurses enjoyed the conspiracy too much to let slip a hint to any loose lips. The baby gave a healthy cry, and continued for four straight hours. Jackson's parents named him George and asked Sam and Sarena to be his godparents.

So many volunteers crowded into the small campaign offices, that Sam would have to ask a large number of them if they would mind spending some time over at the legal aid center or health clinic, or perhaps tutoring a young girl struggling in math class. He set up a rotating system so everyone could get time learning how grass roots politics worked while also learning its purpose. His chief advisor knew it was already too late when he "worried" to Sam that the central committee might cut off his funding if certain changes weren't made. They had underestimated how good he was at fundraising. They could not understand how declining any contributions exceeding one day of a supporter's annual salary could bankroll a candidacy so well. There just weren't that many wealthy people in the district. Sam was hearing regularly now how he was underfunding the small but vital so called 'opposition research group.' They tried to explain to him how secret guilt would broker more deals for him than any oath of mutual good will. His front-runner status only made him a target. For the most part, all it would take was for them to know that he knew. And if they refused to play along, well that was politics, wasn't it. The primaries were almost upon them, and they should expect the natural path that political discourse would take at this point.

They were such predictable soul-less creatures. In bed at night, Sarena, raised on one elbow, kept speculating when they would catch on that their concept was disintegrating beneath their feet. Every time they managed to fall through one level of confusion over the candidate's methods, they found another seemingly familiar floor beneath them, one almost imperceptibly not quite right.

Reporters and staff trailed the happy couple as they walked the streets, he with that slight limp that made him a recognizable figure. They naturally saw the usual political activities: the firm handshakes, the words of encouragement, the babies kissed, the request for a vote. They were proud of this couple. They seemed better than most at keeping a genuine looking smile on their faces. The couple didn't even turn their noses away from the smell of fertilizer as a gang of people labored to turn a fallow empty lot into a neighborhood vegetable garden. Fortunately for them, the retinue didn't have to keep up appearances like that and often commented to each other with some disdain on what they had to put up with on the campaign trail. Occasionally Sarena or Sam would point to something and whisper something to their mate. The gaggle would look in the direction wondering what had attracted the attention of the candidate and his wife. It seemed it must have been something fleeting, because by the time they looked, whatever it was had disappeared. The fresh coat of paint, the new window box of flowers, and the no-longer broken window never registered with them as anything noteworthy.

The campaign opened a long sought door for Sam. He was able to arrange a face-to-face private meeting with the president of the desperate railroad that owned the wasteland of an abandoned rail yard behind the Emporium. After the meeting, he called a reporter - who it happened had been a regular face at the Emporium not so long ago, to offer an exclusive interview the following morning. This time he wouldn't need to be pre-

coached on the planted questions he would be asked. He called his committee and told them to clear his morning schedule without telling them why.

It was all caught on tape. Sam, Sarena at his side, stood in the elegant lobby in front of the big plate glass window, framed with chrome, showing the less attractive street beyond. Sam was more animated than anyone could remember seeing. Gone was the somewhat stiff appearance of a man not quite comfortable in the mantle of a political candidate. He spoke of how he envisioned a park - a grand park built by the people of the community with their own hands and skills. Just as he raised his arms in a grand gesture, the plate glass window shattered behind him. The camera showed the floor for a moment zooming in, and then shakily panned to show Sarena lying on the floor hands covering her head. The camera panned upward to show a calm, larger than life man reach down to pick up the wayward baseball. After looking at it for about two or three seconds, he used it to explain that this was why the park was needed. Not a few people were sure it must have been staged, but most believed the young teenagers, eventually tracked down, that they had no idea anything was going on inside or who was in there.

That afternoon, the staff was frantic. They were trying desperately to spin the story in altogether a different direction from the vision of a park in the middle of a poverty stricken area. A park? A park? Did he think he was running for a city councilor position? What he meant to say, what he would have gone on to explain if the terrifying image of an attempt on his life had not interrupted him, was that a park was but a symbol of how he would improve the lives of his constituents. That afternoon, the candidate and his wife lost the small hope that they might find one, just one, among the professional political creatures now encircling them who might actually care about a park, a place where everyday life could be celebrated.

Sam and Sarena were beginning to worry.

The story broke just before the primaries. When an underling was volunteered to tell Sam to turn on Channel 6, nobody in the office could comprehend Sam's laughter, which evoked a depiction of Santa Claus in their minds. Sarena could only vaguely remember Sam once having mentioned it. Sam had long since forgotten it. As was protocol in such situations, the senior aide somberly walked into the room and put his arm around Sam's shoulder. He shouldn't worry. The response attacks were ready to go. Non-denial denials were already being composed. Sam just shook his head. Why? The story was essentially true, even if a little embellished by the supposition that he might actually have been a member of the Black Panthers. 'But the people will judge you!' the aide tried to bring him back to reality. He was obviously in shock.

Sam's response only confirmed that fear in them. "Yes, yes they will. That's their job." When Sam went on television and explained, with what certainly appeared to be a clear conscience, what had happened that led to his arrest, the rumors started. If he was willing to admit that, how much worse must the real truth be? It was never clear to Sam that any of his opponents had come up with the records or fueled the subsequent rumors. Everyone he met on the street seemed just as happy to meet him and talk with him.

Neither he nor Sarena harbored any illusions that the many oaths of support given just months ago would now move those allies to pick up the phone in person, or return a call.

They sat on their couch, arms about each other until the returns were announced in the small hours. They were much relieved with the results. After the phone calls, they slept soundly until late in the morning, nevermore a political couple. Their consciences were clear. They had kept their promise to actively campaign.

Over brunch, they played a game of who would be the first to name a truly happy politician they had met. It went on for a long time. The result was a tie.

MANIFEST MADE WORD

CHAPTER 13

THE VANISHING VIEWER

Sam had been keeping mental notes during the campaign. The battles between Serbs and Albanians had made the news a lot. The Good Friday Accord in Ireland was barely noticed. The sentencings of the Unabomber and the Oklahoma City bomber, Nichols, brought forth the now familiar recollections and archived photos. After the primaries, the simultaneous truck bombings in Kenya and Tanzania killing 224 and injuring 4,500 came and went as a minor note in world events. He discussed his idea with Sarena. She liked it.

The owner and manager of the tiny AM radio station was a harder sell. Even if the range of this minor station reached little further than 5 miles from the hub of an antenna spiking not very high above the roof of the building. Having schooled himself in the lessons of the larger, more successful enterprises, he couldn't really understand how this man, given this concept, expected to keep an audience, or worse, attract advertisers and their much needed inputs of money every month. Still, talk shows were becoming the reason AM stations were no longer dropping like flies unnoticed as the FM band drowned them out. He had to admit that Sam was a well-known and popular figure to the people his airwaves could reach. Mostly, he could hardly refuse the promise that the station would lose no money. Sam had promised to, if necessary, pay out of his own pocket, the cost of any lost revenues for twice as long as the show lasted. There was nothing to lose and, who knows, maybe, just maybe the Sam had an idea that would catch on.

Sam had even asked for the deadly 5 p.m. to 7 p.m. time slot. The man was either delusional or some kind of visionary. Time would tell.

The show made its debut on a Saturday - September the 14th, not two weeks after the election. Sam began by describing what he had in mind for this period of time, six days a week. Sam did not expect any callers that first day and was ready to carry the two hours on his own. He didn't have to. While the callers were not all that numerous, they were sufficient to keep a dialog going. Apparently, the few posters he had put up advertising his show had been seen by enough people.

Some people noticed it after a few days, others not for a week and still others only realized it when mentioned by someone else. The most unusual aspect of this new show was that it was not interrupted by advertisers. Instead, Sam would simple recite a list of the sponsors at the end of the show. They included stores and enterprises they passed every day. For some, and it varied from evening to evening, Sam would spend a minute describing some good work that store had contributed to, or help they had given one of their neighbors. After a week, the list started growing longer.

Sam would begin each broadcast with a word picture or a fantasy story. Within a minute or so, someone would make a connection between the picture and some event of

the day, in the papers or only of local interest. Occasionally, if discussion among the callers seemed to lose its energy, Sam would paint another word picture, and the calls would pick up again, revitalized on the same subject or off on some new subject. After a month, a caller finally asked about these parables and if they were somehow intended to explain Sam's views on the topic of discussion, because if so, he, the caller, didn't get it. Sam laughed and explained that this show was their book. He, as host, was just an illuminator - the unknown painter who would only add colorful paintings or drawings to a book to illustrate the words. Other than that, he was just a scribe recording the book they, the listeners and callers, were writing. Every now and again, as the audience grew, he would have to explain it again for the newcomers to the show.

Another curiosity which caught the attention of many a new listener as they might skip around the dial, was that Sam introduced callers as 'the messenger Robert' or 'the messenger Janet' or whatever their given name. A few were even called 'the Prophet ...' giving the broadcast a kind of religious flavor that was not matched by the discussions. It would take these new listeners a week or two to hear some caller nominate another to be elevated from messenger to prophet. For the remainder of the program, if no one called to indicate how the points recently made by the nominated messenger were not worthy of a prophet, they would thereafter be so called. It all added to the fun of the show and the feeling that the whole audience was one family. Somehow, Sam managed to avoid the tone of too many talk shows. Discussions could be heated, but at the first indication of attack on the person of a messenger, Sam would interject a comment to redirect the speaker back to the topic itself. As the audience grew, there would always be some who thought it would be a good way to reach a large number with their pet hatred or claim of injustice. Most were immediately silenced since Sam could quote Malcolm X, or Dr. King, or the Bible or Qur'an better than these would-be rabble-rousers. Some tried to speak over the host in an ever-louder voice. To those, Sam would quote George Santayana that "A fanatic is one who redoubles his effort when he has forgotten his aim." It was an inside joke among the now rather large audience. Sponsors had to be rotated to give everyone who found it worthwhile to be listed at the end of the show.

The pew felt uncomfortably warm this Sunday, and his Mamma and Poppa unfortunately small as he tried to disappear in the withering gaze of Reverend Brown. Reverend Brown hadn't mentioned him by name, but he squirmed knowing for certain that every parishioner understood the sermon was directed at him like an arrow through his soul. "Sit up straight, boy! N stop yo' wrigglin' now" Mamma might as well have added " ... and take your penance like a man!" One thing he knew, he would never forget this particular passage of the bible, tied as it was to his own life. More than forty years later, he chuckled to himself, he could in fact recite the verses verbatim.

There were many changes occurring within the sound of the station, if one took care to look for them. There seemed no particular relationship between them. Televisions were more and more turned off in homes around the dinner hour, in favor of participating in and listening to community discussions. Here and there, a bubble of light would appear on a block, and soon people were sitting out on their stoops late into the evening, talking to each other and witnessing the world pass by. These bubbles grew to encompass more and more blocks. Evening walks became a pleasant way to help the digestion of suppers.

Eventually, a bubble would contact another and the two would pop into a single larger bubble. Police cruisers, sirens screaming in the night, were heard less often in most of the area. It sure made it easier to sleep and wake better rested. It probably even made the residents better able to improve at their jobs. During the day, at workplaces throughout the community, there was strange unanimity of what interested people and would be talked about. Small groups of people would more and more often be seen on a weekend painting a home together, or working in a community vegetable garden, or any number excuses to get together and get something done that just needed doing. Waiting times at clinics shortened as volunteers now almost outnumbered those in need of the services offered. Bars on windows and doors slowly began to disappear, as community watch groups took to patrolling commercial areas. Somehow, the spirit of the towns was changing.

By 7:30 every evening, Sam would be home nearly drooling for the meal Sarena had been preparing and would shortly be ready. After dinner, they would take a walk, joining the increasing number of people with the same idea.

Sam and Sarena often compared thoughts on how the show went. Most evenings, they agreed there was a kind of poetry to it all. Each discussion had its own rhythm of points made and questions asked; rhymes as different callers saw similarities from different points of view, stanzas of subtopics explored. The mix of ideas coming from differing backgrounds, faiths, experiences was like an orchestra creating a new symphony every night to reverberate through the homes and minds of what could now be legitimately called a community.

Samantha called to excitedly give them the news that she was being transferred to the Los Angeles area. Jonathan had already been made several offers, so the decision was made. They wanted to come out in two weeks to start looking for a house, if it would be all right. She heard no objection from her parents. Sarena and Sam wasted no time going through the real estate ads.

Sam spent his mornings preparing for the show. It was a most pleasant duty that consisted stopping by here and there. He would see if one of the sponsors had something that ought be mentioned when he read their name at the end. More and more, there were. He would sit at a lunch counter, just listening to the patrons, engaging them in idle chatter about how their day was going, hearing any concerns they had, glancing at what story in the paper had their attention. In the afternoon, he would visit one of the several cemeteries to compose his word pictures of the day. Rarely, very rarely, he would get to the station a little early to ask for an unneeded raise, just because had he been earning his living that way, he would have and knew he would have deserved it for the profits the station was making due to his show.

Its success was being noticed beyond the broadcast range of the station. About once a month he would receive a letter or a call to see if he was ready to make his move to a larger station - a bigger audience - a bigger paycheck. The callers most often felt some frustration that their sales pitches seemed to fall on deaf ears. Sam always tried to patiently explain to them that the format would work only for small community stations.

And that no, he really had no interest in changing the format. His words also fell on deaf ears. There was no communication.

Sam would also take 'vacations' - partly because it's the way things would have been were he less unusually situated to be doing the work. Mostly, though, it was to see if some substitute host could be found who might understand the popularity of the show and find a way to make it his own. During those vacations, Sam would invariably head over to Samantha's and Jonathan's to do some promised repair or fixup. Happily, he usually convinced Sarena to join him, even if just to hand him tools or to hand her tools if it was a project she enjoyed doing. Those days went by all too fast. Working with his hands just cleansed the mind and spirit.

The gardens behind the emporium were coming along nicely. Hands were as many as the ideas on how it should look. By all rights, it should have looked like some hodgepodge of plants and walkways and play areas; but somehow it just had a certain indescribable dignity to it. Like the talk show, it had a poetry all its own.

That morning ... THE morning ... the morning on which all thoughts flew from a nation ... the morning when every eye from coast to coast was transfixed by the horror of it all ... the morning when hardly a word was spoken between any of almost 300 million people ... Sam and Sarena were exactly like everyone else. They neither spoke nor thought, just felt. It was a psychic message shared among every member of a people that linked them, bonded them as had never happened before. When Sam took his seat in front of the microphone, he did not expect any of the lights on the phone lines to light up, and really did not want any. Instead, he merely talked about a strange thought he had not an hour before the show started. As the events of the morning, culminating in the crashing dust storms as each tower, in its turn, disappeared from the scene; as he reviewed the scene in his mind, it has struck him that it reminded him of the movie of an earthquake played in reverse. He recalled his experiences with the earthquake, from the first huge shaking of reality, through the attempts to deal with the destruction through the fires he saw break out hours afterwards and the throngs of people delivered by vehicles crowding to get in and help. He wasn't sure what it meant. It was something about the difference between natural disasters and man intended disasters. Sam merely spoke for those two hours, perhaps not making much sense, but soothing nonetheless to the multitudes listening in silence to a single voice.

The next day, Sam, Sarena, and it seemed every soul for miles around gathered at the gardens. Their silence matched only by the serenity of the skies above them: blue, bright and devoid of human intent. They worked, planting, watering, replanting, but not pruning or clipping or weeding. It seemed those latter activities would be a sacrilege. One scene was captured in Sam's eye; one that he relayed to his listeners that evening. One gardener stood looking at a flowerbed, unable to decide what to do about the situation. A small group had gathered about him and understood his dilemma. Finally, one woman merely turned her head slightly aside and back again. It was decided. Here, the flowers, with their different shapes, their different colors, would be allowed to grow together, intermingling as they would.

On the following day, Sam described other scenes: how individual seeds, each from a bag of thousands, were carefully, lovingly covered by dirty hands with a blanket of soil as though it was a precious fragile jewel, and worth infinitely more; how watering felt like a prayer, each drop a gift from the heavens. Simple scenes: scenes which had been performed infinite times in every land in every age. No matter what happened in the world of man, such was the eternal path of the Creator.

On the third day, Sam told his audience his work was done, except for one final monologue. This time, he had a question for his audience. He asked them to consider for whom they were named and what they knew of their namesake. With that, Sam told them he wanted to speak of something different from the subjects of the last two days. He spoke about the passengers on flight 93, which had crashed in Pennsylvania. He spoke how he revered those people; how their story had already been written when they realized they could add but a final autobiographical word to it. These passengers were given but a few options as to how best to spend their final minutes in this realm. When they decided to spend those minutes to buy some unknown number of lives in return, lives of strangers, lives of people who if they ever met might be lovers, friends or rivals or even enemies, people who may be of different faiths or of no faith. It all mattered not at all to them. They bought those lives in exchange for perhaps another twenty minutes of their own lives. They transformed themselves from passengers into angels in that moment. Sam imagined the babies who would be named after these angels. He ended this final broadcast with the question he had opened it.

After 3 years on the air, Sam rose from the chair and left the studio, to be a talk show host nevermore.

In the following weeks, the station manager took Sam's advice to instead select a recording of services held that week in one of the houses of worship, airing a different one each evening. He never did understand why the sponsors continued unabated, happy to be mentioned at the end of those programs. He never understood why that time slot remained his most popular.

CHAPTER 14

THE FOSTERED FOUNDER

Sarena's suggestion was like his own mind speaking. They spent the day sketching out plans for a new house situated on a corner of the gardens. It would be a small, sunny, open and simple home where they could enjoy both the community of plants and creatures finding sanctuary therein and the community of people who daily came to work and meditate, each in their own fashion.

Their 35th anniversary was celebrated simply with a few friends and family including a visibly pregnant Samantha and a proud Jonathan. Happily, Sohrab, Minoo and Shabnam were able to join them once again. The evening was spent going over the plans for the new home, listening to Beatles songs, taking turns reading from Rumi and enjoying the Persian delicacies that Sarena, under the careful tutelage of Minoo, had prepared for the other guests. As Sam looked about the home he would soon be leaving, he pondered what he would do with his now extensive collection of religious items, artifacts and icons collected over many years, travels to distant lands and even given him by Jackson's parents. To the words of Lennon singing

*You, you may say I am a dreamer
But I'm not the only one
I hope someday you'll join us
And the world will be as one*

Sam recalled Sohrab's voice of many years ago " ... *Of despair, within our bonds, Trust God you'll find not a hair ...*". He could barely conceal his excitement as he described his epiphany to the gathered guests in flowery language. His description was so vivid, they could each see the circle of religious and cultural buildings they would discover at the center of the gardens as they strolled the walkways.

Sam used the excuse that he would be too busy building his own home and fixing up Sarena's and Jonathan's in preparation for their new arrival to convince those who had created the gardens to form a council to oversee the creation of the Pavilion. The council, they decided, would be elected on the basis of votes earned by working in the gardens. Sam and Sarena did help get the project off the ground by collecting the leaders of the various religions and cultures represented in the neighborhood, promising to underwrite most of the costs of the buildings they would design. Their enthusiasm seemed an auspicious beginning for the dream.

For the next several months, Sam and Sarena really were very busy working on the two homes. Although they could easily have hired others to do much of the work, they found the work too satisfying and their camaraderie, as though shared in a grotto, too precious to consider any alternatives.

The evening that the several designs were first put on display for the populace of the neighborhood to view and comment upon was a festive one. It seemed the whole area was eagerly anticipating the creation of the pavilion and the opportunity it would give them to share in one another's traditions and celebrations. Sam asked the council if he could design the centerpiece of the central courtyard, to which they readily agreed. At the next meeting of the council, the community leaders and their designers sat down together to fit their designs into an overall plan for the center. While they realized there would be many difficulties to overcome, the mutual goodwill gave them optimism that it would all be worked out.

Individually, they worried that their house of worship would face the needed direction; that the loud music of one would not upset their own prayer; that their structure would not be overshadowed by a neighbor; that their more zealous members would not be offended by some visual, auditory or olfactory encroachment upon their form of worship, among the many concerns that nagged them. They would each have to insist on certain aspects of the final plan, but certainly the spirit of unity in this endeavor would prevail to make it all possible.

During a break, the Rabbi, Imam, several Ministers and the Priest found themselves talking in a group and joked that together they formed the bloc of the religions of Abraham. It did strike them, however, that it might make sense to try to situate the Synagogue, Mosque, and Churches adjacent to one another. When the meeting reconvened, the idea was brought up and many thought the idea of arranging the structures in some sort of logical groupings might help sort out the competing needs. Others, however, silently wondered how their own structure would fit into such an arrangement, or was this perhaps a move to diminish their presence. Not unexpectedly, this first meeting ended with nothing decided, but at least some of the issues they would be facing were more clearly defined.

When Jonathan called from the hospital, they were ready. It took them no time to reach the hospital where they settled in for the long wait. It struck Sam curious that, barring any unusual developments, they were there for the sole purpose of waiting. Yet it seemed right. They fulfilled their function well. When it was over, before Samantha fell into a much needed sleep, as brief as such opportunities would be for the next many months, Sam and Sarena came in to see and hold and bond with the beautiful arrival and to smile upon their daughter and kiss her wet forehead. It was a most beautiful name they had chosen and it would take the grandparents no time to realize the wonderful aspect of the meaning, of 'Anahita'. The next day, Sam brought in a green sleeper for the child.

The birth of their grandchild was the focus of their lives for the next two months. Sam knew that if he were not careful, he would shortly wear out his welcome with his daughter and son-in-law, as he would have liked to make this newborn miracle his only purpose in the world. Sarena teased him that the small bundle of giggles and smiles was a substitute for the baby Samantha he never knew; they both knew there was more than a little truth to the thought. He tried to make his presence more welcome than intrusive. Both Samantha and Jonathan understood the situation and were more forgiving than they might otherwise have been. Occasionally, to give the new parents some time alone,

Sarena would make sure that Sam had other duties to attend to. It was a good thing that their own home was nearing completion and inspections to be arranged, many decorating choices to be made, fixtures to shop for, and the myriad details that accompany preparing a new residence to be occupied.

Sam puzzled over it for several hours before relenting and asking his father about this latest curiosity concerning the affairs of the adult world. Reverend Brown had always preached the meek shall inherit the earth, but the teacher who had today been elevated to the role of principal was not his favorite, and decidedly meek, home room teacher. Rather, it was the loud Mr. Jones who in his quick pronouncements was, Sam noted, more than rarely wrong. Worse, Mr. Jones was too often able to talk others into doing things they said they didn't want to, or disagreed with. "Son," poppa explained to him, "ifn Ah sat all de day long tryin' ter figger howz to fix a shoe jes' right, dat shoe, it nebber get fixed. But if'n Ah do it wrong, at leeze Ah lernt sumpin' and knows better how ta fix dat shoe. Bedder tah decide, eben decide wrong, dan not decide attall. An if dem folks really daznt wanna do whad Mr. Jones say, dey wouldn't do dat ting, now wud dey? See, boy, a leader gots tah be differn dan moz folks.. Sum folks iz an moz folks aint. Leaderz jes gots to get people movin' togedder n feelin' lahk dey kin do sumpin' special cus dey iz special. Now, ahll folks ain't no more special tah de Lawd dan any udder, but dey gots tah tink so ifn dey z gonna do sumpin' special." Although Sam could see there were many problems with that way of getting things done, he had to admit that there was some sense to it and he couldn't really think of a better way.

As any parent soon learns, it is the absence of noise that is more worrisome than the sounds of squabbling siblings. Sam heard that silence on the streets. People no longer discussed their ideas for the Pavilion. Tensions Sam had not felt in forty years seemed to quiver and spark along the streets. He sat in on the design meeting that evening. Knowing his presence probably altered what he was seeing, it was still all too clear to Sam what was going on. All chiefs of their own dominions, the planners could not relinquish their dominance. Each, of course, had their own valid reasons for standing firm and made a point of telling how they had each already been very agreeable and compromised much, but their constituents just could not possible bend any further on this matter or that. Occasionally, one participant would be shaken when another made some polite and veiled accusation of some discussion that had taken place in secrecy and in no way intended to reach other ears. Invariably, one participant or another would offer to pay for any solution to an impasse, noting that his group had raised a considerable amount of money to bring this project to fruition. Such offers had the intended effect of making the more poorly funded groups seethe at such audacity. There were power plays on how to assign parking spots when special events might arise. Sam had no trouble recognizing the silent signals that passed between several seemingly unassociated planning members. Nor did he miss the tones of voice that indicated offense taken when none was intended, offense intended but not taken, and offense both intended and taken. It was a sad realization for Sam. Although a good mediator might see them through these troubles, it would not be a lasting truce.

The council was not surprised by Sam's observations. They too had tried various methods to get the project back to it's original intent. Unfortunately, the struggles were

now infusing the followers of the various groups with a certain distrust and separation which the gardens had largely erased. The discussions went on long into the night. The council agreed to try an ecumenical approach where the planning sessions would be held in a round-robin fashion each group hosting a meeting with their own assemblies. Failing that, the council knew what they would have to do.

On their 36th anniversary, Sam suggested they take a stroll through the gardens. It was a pleasant day and they both enjoyed exploring the changes to the gardens and new growths. When they happened upon a path Sarena did not recognize, she eagerly insisted they explore it, as he knew she would. It was an unusual path with several twists and turns. A small hill that had not existed when the land was just a rail yard had to be climbed, which delighted her. On the far side of the hill, a small bridge crossed a new stream that now meandered throughout the gardens, a recently completed project that they had reveled in creating. One advantage of the artificial stream was that the water was kept clean and pure. Below the bridge was a pool filled with sizable goldfish. Sarena was so distracted by this unexpected discovery that she failed to notice the variety of chirps and trills coming from somewhere further along the path. When she did, her curiosity was piqued. Taking Sam's hand, she nearly dragged him along, climbing over seven more miniature hills until they came upon the large aviary, which brought her to sudden a puzzled stop. She had not known of this project or how Sam could have failed to mention it to her if he had known of it. The lettering was so ornate, it took her a few minutes to realize what words capped the entrance - 'Sarena's Conference'. The love that filled her eyes matched Sam's joy at pleasing her so. "and I suppose I'll find thirty birds within?" She asked. "Well, thirty species, anyway" Sam replied. Within, she found a bench on which rested a copy of "*The Conference of the Birds*." They spent a most wonderful anniversary reading the book to each other among winged friends. By nightfall, several other friends had found their way in and joined in the quiet celebration.

When the council called to invite them to their meeting, Sam and Sarena already knew what would transpire. His attendance was just to make it all official. Even though they were announcing an end to the Cultural Pavilion Project, it was pleasing that they had plans to repair the damage done to the community by the factions it had created.

The only thing that survived the cancellation, known only to Sam and Sarena, was what was to have been the centerpiece. On the way back from the meeting, they stopped in the aviary to enjoy the silence as the birds within slept, except for the owls. Sarena whispered that they were like the birds. Yes, he thought, fairly sure they did not dream.

GOD OF FACES

CHAPTER 15 - THE SATISFIED SERVANT

Sam mused, as he and Sohrab sat in the somewhat desolate clearing which was to have been an interfaith cultural center that it was not unlike a graveyard. There was a peaceful serenity in the void of current life. Sam was reflecting on the lessons his studies and life itself had awakened within him.

"Sohrab, do you think Heaven and Hell are found in an afterlife or in this life?"

"Does it matter?" Sohrab replied. Sam did not respond, but after a long time merely nodded to his good friend.

Sohrab continued, "My friend, do you recall my theory that people seeking enlightenment seem to go about it backwards? When you opened the Educational Emporium, people who partook of it were better able to fill the bellies. When you presented the idea for a botanical garden here, the people who created it moreover created fellowship out of a divided and suspicious set of cultural islands. I am curious why, with those lessons, you thought to promote interfaith understanding by creating an interfaith center."

Sam pondered that for a while. It had been a curious form of pride that he thought his dream could be consumed in that manner. At noontime, the two friends had a long walk among the well-populated gardens back to his home to share some lunch. "Well, if I cannot feed their spirits, I should like to feed their hungers." Perhaps he could interest some fast food chains or local restaurants to fill the empty grounds so that the visitors to the gardens could enjoy them longer. "We have not finished our work here, have we, my friend?" Sam almost whispered so as not to disturb the setting.

"We?" Sohrab raised an eyebrow.

Sam smiled. "Of course! Is not all one? Am I any more than what I have learned from others, from the teachings of my parents, from your words of inspiration, from the love of my family and friends? Are there any truer words than 'No man is an island'? I am but the servant of all your influences." This time, Sohrab was silent as he admired a most beautiful flower along the path.

For all his analyses of the business such a restaurant would enjoy, he could interest no one in opening one in such an out-of-the-way and isolated location. He understood that it did not fit their established models of where best to gain the traffic needed to turn a profit, but he thought they were wrong. In the end, it didn't matter. Sam decided to cash out his stock and build a food court himself. He was no restaurateur, but hoped that if he built it, he might then attract someone to manage it and at least break even. Besides, he still needed a place to display his extensive collection religious items. Too, he had that centerpiece sitting in a warehouse gathering dust and costing storage fees.

As it turned out, construction of the food court took twice as long as anticipated. It was not due to building problems, but because more and more buildings had to be added as more and more groups would approach him with ideas to share some authentic "old country" cookery with their neighbors. This was a far more diverse area than the houses of faith might indicate. In the end, it seemed quite a hodge-podge of structures intending to cater to the tastes of a world of cultures. Sam was sure there could not be nearly enough traffic to justify all the varieties of food being offered, but the local cooks seemed happy if they would even get two or three people a day sampling their creations. That they were willing to do this almost without pay and that they could share their supplies among themselves were the factors that made it all seem barely workable.

Huge. Opening day was huge. Sam and Sarena suspected that everyone within a ten-mile circle had a relative cooking up a storm in one of the kitchens. Within a half hour, food was running out and family members were dispatched to get more ingredients. The circle of groceries with empty shelves expanded quickly from the epicenter of the Botanical Gardens. By 3 o'clock, word had gotten out and the news crews arrived. It turned out to be the lead story on every local news program that evening. A week later, a few stories appeared indicating that the initial throngs had dropped off precipitously, and showed the far fewer people strolling the beautiful gardens with interviews of the chefs who invariably seemed happy in their broken English despite a lack of customers. That news actually brought in more people who had no wish to try to eat a meal among a throng of thousands of others. As word spread, Los Angeleans from distant areas made it a point to visit the gardens once a month, or once a week, or for a date with a special someone, or to impress a business client with a unique experience.

There were no menus. The "chefs" simple created whatever they felt like that day. The only thing one could be sure of was that whatever cuisine one chose, the serving would be delicious and authentic. If the line was too long at one enterprise, you could be sure that you would not be disappointed if you decided to try some other fare of the day. One day, an enterprising youth decided to act as a waiter, describing who was cooking what at the time, taking orders to the cooks and handling the exchange of monies. He earned enough that he decided this was an excellent way to earn extra money to help pay for his college expenses. It was not long before he had considerable company of such "independent" waiters scurrying about delivering food and drink, allowing the patrons to sit and enjoy the view instead of waiting in lines. Still, many diners decided they didn't mind the lines so much since the reward was a chance to talk to the cook for a few minutes and listen to their heavy accents, which seemed, somehow, to make the food even tastier.

Sam's centerpiece finally had a home. It was a large pool of placid water in the center of which arose a flaming metal sculpture of a bush. Surrounding the pool were all variety of stones polished to a mirror-like surface and set so that as one stood at the edge of the pool, one saw their own reflection in the stone in front of them. In the venue of a food court, no one seemed to understand the significance, but it was a popular aspect of the experience anyway. There seemed always to be a number of people standing around the pool simply gazing at it in silence. Perhaps it was the silence of those at the very center of the court which encouraged everyone to speak in quiet tones. There were of course

occasional loud laughter or whoops of surprise, but generally it was a place where people felt they could eat and commune in a calm and peaceful atmosphere.

Sam and Sarena spent many hours there just watching other people enjoying themselves. There were young lovers who could barely distract their eyes from one another and older couples holding hands recounting years of memories as they sampled foods that recalled times long gone by. There were groups of friends just enjoying each other's company, catching up on each other's lives, telling tales and laughing at familiar foibles. Business people would work out agreements that even one of the grandmotherly cooks would approve of. Even rivals, some in a variety of religious garb each praying over their meals in their own fashions, could be seen there enjoying a meal together, for a few minutes suspending their disagreements to share their common humanity. There were scenes of every aspect of life if one watched for a while. Sam and Sarena were amazed at the vitality they found there amid the graceful growths of the gardens. It was as though an ancient marketplace had been recreated about which life swirled in a dance of timeless rhythms.

Sohrab was once again sharing a seat beside him. He looked at Sam as he tried to phrase the question well in his mind. "Sam, you have spent many years learning of the three commandments of Zoroastra to think, speak and act in goodness, of the Ten commandments which Moses brought, of the Golden Rule, of the teachings of Eastern religions and the idea that only the clear or guilty conscience separates Heaven from Hell. As you look upon this food court surrounding that 'Fountain of the Burning Bush', and the many people here finding common ground, are you now happy?"

"Does it matter?" Sam replied. Sohrab did not respond. Sam continued, "My friend, do you recall that people seeking enlightenment seem to go about it backwards?"

Both smiled as they read between the lines of each other comments.

Anahita giggled as Sam bounced his knee to play "ride the horsy" one more time with the child. The little face fascinated Sam. Every fleeting emotion flowed across it in absolute truth. He wondered if he had modeled the pool of the burning bush after the purity of a child's face.

Sam watched the sea of faces, serious, smiling, grinning, laughing while snaking between and amongst them were sounds that connected otherwise separated pairs from groups of five - deals being made, jokes told, stories shared, plans made, proposals offered. He was certainly becoming an emotional old coot, he laughed at himself, as tears blurred his vision. They were tears of happiness, of emotion that came upon him for no apparent reason. The faces started to merge, to coalesce, into a singular visage. And then, Sam's vision took flight until that singular face of life grew to include all the faces of the world. He flew still further out into the stars and the face grew as large wherever life flourished like leafy sprouts taking hold in the coal black tar of the void. One body of far flung cells that swirled about the spaces yet still joined by tenuous tendons of light and matter slipping past masses of suns to deliver messages between the outposts of life, carefully weaving a fabric of beautiful colors - a multi-colored coat. Between the woven

fibers might be inky voids, but the cloth remains a comforting blanket against the evil of nothingness. And Sam saw the truth of it. A caring heart, a kind deed, a loving touch, a good Word, however small, however quiet, is the Whole.

In that one face, he saw an infinity of faces in infinite places in infinite times; and each face lived and worked and loved and cried and laughed and shared and cared. He looked into the deep brown eyes of his sleepy grandchild and he saw infinities. He looked up at the infinite skies and he saw the spark of the one small life sitting on his knee.

Sam felt serenity.

And Peace

Acknowledgement

For those who know me, my writing a book may come as a surprise *as writing is not my profession.*

However, based on my rough manuscript, thoughts and six months of communications, Douglas DeFoe rewrote this book to include historic facts. The English sublime belongs to Douglas with editing provided by Rosalie Seemann. I am very grateful for their contributions.

The Internet Encyclopedia WIKIPEDIA at <http://en.wikipedia.org> has been a great source of reference and many of their articles have been copied in our website <http://www.ajourneytothetruth.com> and I recommend to use this Internet Encyclopedia for clarification of any terms or names used in the book.

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Des Plaines, Illinois
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