

The following is a work of short fiction. It's not meant to impress, teach, or even entertain, really. It's just a bunch of words strung together in a way that, hopefully, makes sense. It was written several years ago, and I've thought about taking it to a "real" publisher. But, I'd rather make it available for nothing, since there aren't many places to get fiction for nothing anymore. (And this way, I have control over it.)

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If you like it, let me know. If you don't like it, let me know. Either way, I'd appreciate more than, "You suck." A sentence or two would suffice after, "You suck," as long as there are specific reasons given.

(I will make a shameless plug here. If you play pen-and-paper role playing games, check out <http://www.sacredwolf.com>. If you see something you like, buy it. I need the money.)

I hope you enjoy this.

William A. Rae

24 June 2004

**Going Home**  
**(In the Wake of Archangels)**

William A. Rae

The phone rang as Jude Macalister sat down for his coffee after dinner. He had just opened Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus*. Somewhere in that volume, he was sure, was the key to the united soul. He wondered if the other half of his soul was reading the *Sonnets*, trying to decipher the secret language.

He sighed heavily, and picked up the receiver. "This is Jude."

"So anyway, I turned off of Bourbon Street," the voice on the other end replied. They kept walking, and I thought, 'Cool. They weren't following me.' Then it hit me. A billy club to the gut. Not hard, but hard enough to stop me.

"So I says, 'Is there a problem officer?' And he says, 'Yeah. You.' So I says, 'That's right, blueballs, you've got a buck-seventy-five worth of problem now.'

"Anyway, could you spot me a couple of hundred for bail?"

"Gabriel, bro," Jude almost shouted into the phone. "How're you getting' along in the Big Easy?"

"I didn't have you going?"

"Cops only let you call collect."

"Really? Well, you should know," Gabriel answered. "Anyway, how's Mom? I haven't been able to get ahold of her."

"You know, still blind, still half-deaf. The nurse that we hired is doing good. Keeping everything in check. Nothing to worry about, so just enjoy yourself."

"Yeah, it's great down here. Too bad I missed Mardi Gras, though. Maybe next time. When you can make it, too." Gabriel paused, then added, "How's your brother?"

"Hey, Michael's your brother too. You should talk to him. He'd be happy to hear from you."

"Yeah. Maybe I'll give him a call tomorrow. Or send him a postcard. Anyway, I just wanted to touch base. Everything's alright?"

"Sure," Jude said emphatically. "Just fine. I'll give you a call if anything changes. Relax, enjoy yourself. You need a break."

"Thanks, man. So, maybe I'll call before I head back. A few days, maybe."

"Give Michael a call, okay?"

"Sure. Talk to you in a few days."

"See you, Gabe."

"See you."

He didn't want to tell Gabriel that their mother had been hospitalized. No need to worry him, there was nothing that he could do. He'd call Gabriel from the hospital in the evening, just in case.

Jude turned back to Rilke. The coffee wasn't enough. He opened a bottle of Glenfiddich, made the ritual toast to his father's soul, and tried to unlock the door to the Universe.

Jude rose before his alarm clock began screeching. He had wanted to try and sleep in, but his body was too used to his routine. The sun had just begun to bleed its first red rays into the eastern clouds; he lit a cigarette and watched the sunrise from his bed. It was always a little colder after the sun rose, but he enjoyed this part of the day. There was a peaceful solitude about the early morning which he felt belonged to him alone. The rest of the world still slept, and so he owned the sunrise.

A slight breeze picked up as the earth began to warm. Jude watched a small spider outside the window retreat from its web when the wind sent a shiver through it. A few drops of dew were shaken off, little garnets falling to the ground. Jude sighed heavily and began to dress; the breeze signaled the end of the night for him, and he had to begin the day.

The sheep trotted out of the shelter of the small sheds as Jude pitched hay into the wooden troughs. Out of habit, he called them to the food with a throaty “Brrrt.” He watched the ewes nudging their lambs as the knelt at their mothers’ teats for morning milk. A few of the older lambs were running and bouncing toward the trough, kicking their hind legs into the air, in no hurry to feed. A couple of young bucks butted heads with each other in play, unconsciously preparing for the mating rituals.

A few light clouds were gathering in the west, which told Jude that there would be rain before the afternoon. After feeding the livestock, he pulled a tarp over the exposed hay stack. He wondered how many arrows he’d find between the tight bales. His nephews had been there that weekend, and their father, Michael, had talked Jude into letting them use the stacked bales for archery practice. Jude couldn’t say no. He treated his nieces and nephews as his own, since he’d lost faith in having his own family.

However, his younger brother seemed effortless when it came to meeting women. He was still young enough to enjoy each moment for its own worth. Jude admired that in a way. He had been feeling the pressure for several years. The worry that weighed on his mind was that if he had to wait too long, his children would end up in a situation like Gabriel’s. Their father had died three years before, when Gabe was just nineteen. The duty of keeping their mother out of the nursing home had fallen mainly on him. Every other weekend, Michael arranged to stay with her, and give Gabe a break. Jude tried to go at least one night a week, trading the light chores of the ranch so that Gabe had a place to himself. The system seemed to work out well; they each got an opportunity to spend time with the old woman that they hadn’t had with their father.

Jude missed the old man. They had been very much alike, although their opinions varied greatly. The Macalister patriarch had worked hard to build a life for his family, but didn’t really know how to deal with his sons. He’d encouraged them to become men of education and standing. He didn’t want them to work as hard to build their names as he had. Michael earned a degree in computer programming; he was making a decent living as a programmer and web-page developer. He had met his wife at college, which encouraged Jude. Jude was drawn to the arts (after he’d seen some of the female art students), but nothing had worked out. He left the university with a degree, and thought that he’d eventually return. But five, six,

then seven years passed, and he hadn't found the time. He was proud of the fact that his father had seen him graduate. That was enough for him.

Gabriel, he knew, was waiting for the chance to live away from home. He and Jude had talked frequently about it; with the responsibilities that their mother's condition demanded, there was no time for him. Gabriel wanted to travel, to see America while he was still young. He'd saved a little money, he'd told Jude, and would have enough for college after taking the journey.

The storm rolled in early in the afternoon. It brought a gentle rain; the clouds were almost directly overhead, and the sun shone through the mist. This gave the southernmost threads of the clouds a reddish tinge. Jude stood on his porch and sipped coffee as he watched the storm. He could hear the excited bleating of the lambs at play in the field.

His back was to the driveway, so he didn't see the lights of the deputy Sheriff's car. He turned when the car door slammed, and saw the young officer in his yellow rain poncho walking toward him. The deputy waved, and asked, "Jude Macalister?"

A stony feeling grew in the pit of his stomach. "Yes, that's me."

The deputy reached the porch, took off his hat, and said with a shaky voice, "I've got bad news."

Jude poured two cups of coffee with a shaky hand. As he carried them to the table where Deputy Sangrillo sat, a few drops fell onto the dust of his boots. The deputy turned his eyes away in consideration.

"You're a hard man to get a hold of," Sangrillo said with a wan smile.

"I've been meanin' to get an answerin' machine," Jude replied weakly. "Just haven't had the time."

"Well, it's probably easier this way, face-to-face. I don't have to do this often, but..."

"Yeah. And I appreciate this." He paused for a moment, and sighed. "I know it can't be easy for you, having to bring bad news to a stranger."

The deputy shrugged. "Just part of the job, sir."

They sat for a moment in silence. Sangrillo saw Jude's hands shaking as he held the cup, which sent concentric rings flowing over the surface of the coffee. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah, I will be," Jude muttered. "This is always the hardest time. It'll be easier once the funeral's over."

"Okay, I just need to make sure. But there's one more thing, Mr. Macalister."

"What's that?"

"Someone has to go down and identify the body, just to make sure. Arrangements need to be made to bring it back, too. I've talked to Michael, and he can't go. So, if you'd be willing..."

"Sure," Jude answered, sounding defeated. "Sure, I'll go."

"Alright, sir. I'll let them know you'll be there." Deputy Sangrillo began to stand.

"Tell them to expect me within two days. I'll need to find someone to take care of things here, and get Michael to get the funeral ready."

“I’ll tell them.” He took a notepad from his pocket, and wrote an address on one of the pages. “Here’s the address of the morgue, and the phone number. You shouldn’t have a problem.”

“Thanks. And thanks for coming out here. I really do appreciate it.”

They shook hands, and Sangrillo began to walk back to his car. He paused, turned back, and asked, “By the way—the airline will give you a bereavement discount. Just call that number I gave you, and they’ll help you out.”

Jude looked at him, surprised. “I’m not gonna fly,” he stated. “Them things are coffins with wings. No way you’ll get me up there.”

Sangrillo chuckled. “Well, it’s your call.”

Jude looked at his watch after he tossed his duffel bag into the passenger’s seat of the truck. It was 5:45, and the sun had begun to set. He paused for a moment behind the steering wheel, and allowed himself to cry as he watched the last rays of the sun bleed onto the clouds over the mountains. He pounded on the steering wheel, and choked back a scream. “Why?” he kept whispering. “Why?”

He gathered his composure as the evening star appeared. It would take thirty six hours to make the trip, he thought, plus six for stops, and two for the time zones. The truck purred to life when he turned the key in the ignition. Danny O’Keefe sang “Goodtime Charlie’s Got the Blues” on the radio, and Jude laughed.

“God, I don’t want to do this,” he whispered.

The truck eased onto the road, its headlights illuminating the pavement as though the vehicle were searching the ground. Two miles to the interstate, the nation’s aorta. Jude thought about this, looking at the traffic like corpuscles being pushed through veins, against their will. He thought about this for awhile, because he didn’t want to think but he couldn’t help it.

He guided the vehicle through the night with mechanical precision. He didn’t try to find other lone travelers to pair up with, to follow or lead through the asphalt corridors looking for cops. He didn’t try to drive in the wake of semis with trailers. He didn’t look at the roadside billboards that rose from the fields like wooden tumors. He simply drove. The cab of the truck and the few square yards that the headlights illuminated became the world. To keep his world sane, he played Vivaldi’s “Four Seasons” in the tape player. His world was a blur of strings and the lights of other lost souls passing through the dark, solemn universe.

It was shortly after midnight when Vivaldi began to get on his nerves. He felt for the cassette case with his right hand while he watched the road ahead. He placed it in his lap, and replaced the tape. Almost instinctively, he touched the dial of the radio. A voice announced that whoever was sending the signal was proud to have him along for “After Midnite with Blair Garner,” on a station out of Albuquerque. Somewhere, out in the universe beyond Jude’s personal world, someone had called Blair Garner and wanted to hear, “On the Road” by Leroy Parnell. Jude fell in behind a semi with yellow New Mexico plates. The red taillights were easy to follow.

He stopped in Santa Fe for gas, about two in the morning. He hadn't realized how low the gas gauge was until the truck was stopped beside the pump. It shuddered with a little death rattle before he reached to turn the key off.

His limbs were stiff as he stepped from the cab; he felt numb from the waist down from sitting for so long. As the gas poured into the tank, he walked around a little and stretched. He noticed a small service road behind the station. It was red, iron-rich soil under the gray-tan topsoil, where ruts had been worn into the earth. He wondered what life would have been like for him, had he decided to live here.

The attendant was an eager young man, probably half-Mexican, half-Indian. He smiled broadly, just happy to see another soul alive at this time of night. "How are you tonight, sir? Traveling alone? You've come a long way. I can tell by your plates. If you need a place to stay, there's a Days Inn just down Carillons Road. Free breakfast. You look like you need it."

"I'm on my way somewhere," Jude said dryly. "I can't stop. I'm on a schedule." His drawl became thicker with each word.

"Maybe on your way back?" the boy said anxiously. "You'd like it here. There's a lot to see. Hey, I could even get you into the strip club free. When you come back, just ask for Miguel."

"I will," Jude replied as he paid. He meant it. Perhaps under better circumstances. He thought that he might try to find the old route that his family took on vacations when he was young. Maybe even make it down to Spring Training next year. Or go to California during the season to see the Dodgers, Giants, Angels and A's.

He thought about Gabriel's plans to travel as he started the truck again. He started thinking about the nation's aorta, and how bloodless it was at two in the morning.

Albuquerque surprised him. The city was lit up like a Christmas tree, even this late. The city droned like some living machine, with its own heart, and filled with thousands of souls. It was a modern Wicker Man, already burning with electric fire. He'd caught up with his friend, the trucker, a few miles outside of the city. The taillights had begun to fascinate him, and he had started to follow them onto an off ramp.

By this time, sleep had become a memory, a far-away fantasy. Like Viet Nam or the Cold War. It began to threaten him, and began to speak to him from deep in his brain. It was as soft, seductive, and treacherous as a woman. Sleep tried to pull him down into himself, waiting for the moment of surrender. Jude fought it like a sin. Two hours to Tucumcari, he thought. A rest stop near the Texas border. Not long at all, not long.

You can sleep with your eyes open, just set the cruise control and let your hands drive, the idea purred. It's easy. Just let go, relax, you're safe. You need the relief. Jude began to go under.

He was jarred to alertness in time to swerve around a slow moving Hertz personnel carrier. He glanced at his watch. Five minutes were suddenly missing from his life. He watched with wide eyes for the exit that he needed, I-40. What used to be Route-66, or near it.

The exit was camouflaged. He was on top of it before he realized, a hideous cloverleaf that squatted in the middle of the city like a giant gray spider, waiting for flies to eviscerate. Jude almost passed it, in the hope of finding another route. But here it was, the heart of the city, throbbing and humming with a psychotic joy. He was caught, the madness of the flood of souls carried him through it and dropped him unceremoniously into the Pullman artery with the other cells.

There was no silent meditation in the hours before dawn. Today, it had to be shared with the other hapless wanderers, the pilgrims, and the brokers of life.

“You can never be alone in Hell,” he thought.

*“So anyway,” his brother said as he walked closer, “there I was, drivin’ down the road. I just talked the guy into lowerin’ his gun. Turns out, he just needed a ride, and was usin’ the direct approach. So, everything was cool. Then, I get the idea to ask him a question.*

*“‘So,’ I says, ‘what’s with the fish?’*

*“He points the gun at me and says, ‘I blew a seal. Now stop askin’ questions.’”*

*He started to laugh. It wasn’t until then that Jude realized what was wrong. His brother’s eyeballs had popped, like little balloons full of blood pudding. His brother didn’t seem to notice. He just laughed, like nothing was wrong; the leaking sockets laughed with him.*

*Jude began to scream.*

Which drew the attention of a nice family from Texas, who had stopped at the same rest area. There they stood, halfway between Albuquerque and Tucumcari, staring open-mouthed at the spectacle. Jude knew that he’d probably convulsed violently in the dream before he cried out. He smiled as friendly as he could, and waved to the family. He lit a cigarette to relax himself after his nap, and smoked as he watched the horizon ahead of him.

The sun had begun to rise, a huge, bloody wound across the sky. The fiery eye of God. He wondered how the spider fared this morning without him.

Jude turned the key so that the radio would come on. He dug his road atlas from the glovebox, and opened it to the continental map. The lines looked like varicose veins on the earth’s skin, black and blue and red all over. He tried to rub the sleep from his eyes. The lines focused into a quantum map of the Universe, an immense web connecting Everything with Everything. This web was composed of smaller ones, with a black hole at the center of each, sucking everything into oblivion. Little black widows with names like “Denver,” “Cheyenne,” “Philadelphia,” “Dallas,” and “New Orleans.” There was no spider where he was born, or where he lived. They had no apparent connection to the rest of the Universe.

He stubbed out the glowing cherry, and started the truck. He noticed that the family from Texas had fled, and left their car behind. The rear view mirror held his attention for a moment; when he looked into it, a red-eyed ghoul started back.

The sun was above the horizon, glaring fiercely into his face. Jude took a pair of sunglasses from the glovebox as he replaced the map. He wouldn't need it again until after he crossed Texas, to find his turnoff in Louisiana.

Hours passed, and Jude began to wonder if he'd been moving. The only change in the world outside of his box was the numbers on the exits. He could have been on Mars, and found better landscape. Here and there, he could see cactus or scrub brush, sometimes even little patches of grass. He began to wonder if the Red and Rio Grande were forks of the River Styx.

Amarillo proved more lively. He read billboards for various nightclubs and gentlemen's clubs which fought for business. Almost all of them carried the acronym, "BYOB." He wondered if the liquor stores were the same.

The city itself was spread out flat, like a squashed bug. There were no tall buildings, and the interstate rose only once, to allow traffic to scuttle by underneath. The buildings were as monotonous as the landscape; gray, tan, and brown being the predominant shades. A few trees, no doubt dragged in by the city council, struggled between the life of spring and the death of Texas.

Jude thought about trying to find "The Premere Gentlemans' Club (BYOB)," then thought better of it. If he stopped here, the locals might try to keep him. He didn't want to end up like the trees.

A local radio station told him that Spring Training had begun for their minor league baseball team, the Amarillo 'Dillos. They were holding open tryouts that weekend, and everybody has an equal shot. BYOB, no aluminum.

Maybe next year.

There might not *be* a next year.

His nerves were raw and exposed. He wanted desperately to cry out, curse God, or wake up from this nightmare.

Gabriel had been the pillar of the family. Everyone turned to him in grief, they placed their pain on him, made them see their pain as though it was him that hurt. The unspoken reality was that he was strong, although they had to see him as weak. When their father died, he stood solemn, like a carved idol, while his brothers piled their anger and hurt on his shoulders. "You're the one who'll take this the hardest," they'd said. "You must be terribly hurt." Who would they use now? Jude was too independent, too proud. Michael had his own family, and they were good at funerals. Their mother...

What would happen to her now? Jude suddenly asked himself. She wasn't going into a home. She *has* a home. Michael can't. Besides, those kids of his would drive her nuts. I can't. But she needs someone there. She needs help. Maybe hire someone. Insurance covers that sort of thing. And the rest? Me and Michael will have to make sacrifices. She and Pop gave up a lot for us. If Michael will let go of a couple of bucks a month. The only other option is shoot her. A dog in that shape would be shot. Why not? Next month, after this one's over.



But it's never over. You can't live with a guy for twenty-two years and not form some kind of attachment. Like Dad. It might get easier, but it never goes away. Like losing an arm or a leg. You learn to live without it, but you always think your life would be better if it was still there.

Jude pulled to the shoulder of the road and threw up.

More empty miles. The sun was severe, and the heat gripped him like a vise. The road turned against the tires, a constant hum just beneath his awareness. He wondered how the over-the-road truckers could stand it. The highway wasn't as desolate as the interstate, though. There were flyspeck towns trapped in the cross-country web, which slowed his progress. He watched them rise and fall along the highway, posted between ranches full of giant black cattle. Occasionally, a horseman on a pale horse would stare at him as he passed, as though admonishing Jude to stay away. "You don't belong here," the shadow across the flatland and the rancher's eyes seemed to say. "Leave this place. Don't come back."

The towns themselves were worn. The ancient wood and brick buildings were cracked with veins and dotted with abandoned spider webs. Here and there, gang-style graffiti stained alleyways. The store fronts along the highway were kept neat and clean, and shining new cars and trucks were lined along the streets. They have priorities, Jude thought.

He stopped for lunch in one of these nameless, faceless towns. Hard-faced farmers and ranchers glared at him when he walked in. They made disparaging remarks about him, under their breaths and over their coffee. It was clear to him that they didn't know him, and never wanted to. He sat at a table in the center of the restaurant, within view of everyone. A few cowboys and ranch hands cracked jokes over beers at the bar counter.

A young waitress walked over to the table. She smiled sweetly, and asked, "How're you doin' today, hon?"

"Can't complain. I'd be doin' better if y'all have coffee, though," Jude smiled back.

"Sure. Just made it for you." She turned away to retrieve a pot.

Jude realized that he still wore his sunglasses and hat. He placed them in a chair beside him, rubbed his eyes and yawned.

"You look tired," she said, pouring the dark coffee. "On your way somewhere?"

"Yeah, I'm headed for New Orleans. To pick up my brother. I've been on the road since yesterday."

"I've never been to New Orleans. I'd sure like to go."

"I've got room in the truck," Jude offered with a grin.

She laughed easily. "I can't. There's too much to do here."

An old woman's voice cut through the conversation. "Kat."

"Well," she sighed, "were you gonna have lunch?" She leaned forward, conspiratorially. She smelled faintly of honeysuckle. "My folks don't like me talkin' to customers."

"Sure. How 'bout a hamburger."

“You want cheese on that. It’s better that way.”

“Sounds good.”

She walked away, and Jude sank into his thoughts. The coffee was strong, and gave him a little relief from the lack of sleep. For a moment, he forgot about his brothers, his father, his mother. He wanted to stop, stay here, and leave his life behind. His town was growing with the refugees from the cities; they didn’t understand that by moving to the country, a new city was growing around them. The county had forced three of the old-time farmers to sell their land to developers. He’d wanted to terrorize the builders, pull out the stakes for the new roads, dump sand in the oil pans of their equipment, pour sugar into their gas tanks. But the old tenants would be charged for the crimes.

“Here’s some more coffee,” Kat said, and derailed his train of thought.

“Could I get a book of matches?” he asked as he pulled a cigarette from his pack. He hoped that there would be an address, or at least the name of the café printed on it. He hadn’t noticed that his lighter was on the table next to his cigarettes.

“Sure.”

She came back with a book of matches. It read, “Thank you for your patronage. Have a nice day. Close cover before striking.” Jude was visibly disappointed.

“Lighter out of gas?” Kat asked with a coy smile.

“Oh, uh, it hasn’t been workin’ right.” He could feel the fire of embarrassment creeping up his face. He managed an awkward smile. “Thanks.”

“Anytime,” she said. “By the way—your burger’s almost done.”

Jude ate in silence. When he’d finished, he lit his cigarette with a match pulled from the side of the book. He put his money on the table with the bill for the food, and stood to leave.

“Need change?” Kat asked as she took the bill.

“No, that’s alright. It’s all there.”

“Thanks. I hope you have a good trip, and say hi to your brother for me.”

“Will do.”

He slipped the cigarettes, lighter, and matches into his pocket. As he left, he made it a point to commit the café’s name and address to memory.

“Kat,” he sighed as he slipped into the truck, then started it. He laughed to himself, feeling stupid and alone.

The sun began to set around 5:30, and cast a straw-colored glow into the sky. Jude watched it in the rear view mirror as he drove through the barren ranchland. Again, he saw the rider on the pale horse. Their eyes met, and he felt the icy stare penetrate him. A small herd of cattle grazed nearby, willfully ignoring him. He began to wonder if the sun ever set, or if Texas would now be in perpetual twilight. He wanted to be away from there as much as the rider wanted him to be gone.

Shortly after 6, the fire in the rear view mirror began to fade. So Texas was a land of darkness after all. An orange glow in the east told him that he was nearing Longview. Another hour of empty land, broken up by the occasional car. He noticed that a large number of them wore bumper stickers bearing the phrase, "The only mad cow in Texas is Oprah." He sympathized with this. He had seen part of the episode about mad cow disease; the ranchers were there merely as props. They weren't given the opportunity to speak. The vegetarian (whom Jude was convinced would die of a heart attack within five years) made wild, unfounded accusations. He had cost some men their livelihoods, as people believed what he'd said.

He found a radio station out of Longview, to check the traffic reports, if they were still going. The station played Don Henley's "New York Minute," and for the first time Jude heard the lyrics. He swallowed back his tears. "The Living Years," by Mike and the Mechanics made his eyes leak in streams. There were so many people that he'd never see again. He wanted to talk to his father, just to hear his voice. He knew that the old man would have just said, "That's life. Now get back in the game." But the game wasn't fun anymore. He just wanted to take his ball and go home.

Jude pulled himself together. He could see the urban sprawl ahead, filled with lights. "A little travelin' music, Elroy," he said in his best blues voice. He slid CCR's "Chronicle" into the tape player, and sang along to "Long As I Can See the Light." The tape had been a gift from Gabriel. Another reminder that he was slowly losing everyone that he cared about. He wondered if the Universe was intentionally singling him out, or punishing him for some forgotten sin.

He thought about skirting Longview, but he and the truck needed fuel. The city was filled with people. He'd forgotten that the rest of the world was still working, that they believed that life was still full, still going. Chasing time, he thought, running after money.

The attendant at the gas station confessed to Jude, "Yeah, I used to drive over-the-road. Decided I had to get out when they started cracking down on log books. Well, mine were rigged so's I wouldn't have to pay so much. That's why I'm here. It's a good job, get to meet all kinds of people, pays well enough. Anyway, you got any weed?"

"Nope. Don't smoke the stuff," Jude replied. "If I can't get it out of my system quickly, I don't like it."

"Oh," the attendant said, a little disappointed. "You look like the type. Sorry."

"Don't worry about it. We all got our vices. Need a pack of Camel filters, though. Box, if you got it."

The attendant came back a minute later with the cigarettes. "Twenty five for the gas. The smokes are on me."

"I appreciate it," Jude said, smiling. "Here's thirty. Have a good one." He wanted to make sure that he held no grudge, and that no offense was taken. As he drove away, he shook his head, and laughed to himself.

He turned back into the stream of lights. A billion souls in the world; some dying, some being born, most of them blissfully ignorant of mortality. He began to envy the dead. As he pulled into a Denny's parking lot, he saw a truck wearing a bumper sticker that read, "The Race Is Over... The Rats Won." Everyone loses everyone.

"One. Smoking, please," Jude said to the hostess.

She sneered at him, and picked up a menu. "This way." She led Jude to a small table, and set the menu down. He waited for five minutes for a waitress to bring water.

"What d'you want?" she asked sharply. She glared at him over her notepad.

"Coffee, scrambled eggs, bacon, and white toast, please." He tried to be pleasant, but he couldn't help but condescend.

"What's the matter? You drunk or stoned?"

"I've been driving since yesterday. I'm tired. Please bring some coffee."

"Okay, whatever." She walked away, and Jude lit a cigarette.

She came back, and poured him a cup of coffee. "Those'll kill you, y'know."

"So will a bad attitude. It causes high blood pressure."

"That's not an attractive habit," she snipped back.

"Neither is making wild accusations about a stranger's character. How much for the coffee?"

"I put your order in already," she said defensively.

"I'm not hungry anymore." Jude stood, and threw two dollars on the table. "I hope your night goes better."

As he walked away, Jude thought that courtesy is lost with age, and her lack of it is well-practiced.

He wanted to be away. Before he started his truck, he searched for another radio station. He found a country station that was playing a set of Dwight Yoakum. He hit the interstate with "Nothing," and passed the last Texas exit of the spider's thread as "A Thousand Miles From Nowhere" began. He'd be in New Orleans by noon, he figured, even if he stopped for a few hours' sleep.

Shreveport seemed small for the attention that it drew on the map. It moved slowly and deliberately, like an old man. Jude thought that it looked more like a gold-crowned farming community than than a breathless metropolis. Corn and rice grew side-by-side on the outskirts of town, the young stalks silver in the pale moonlight. They were fields of life; night sounds filtered in through his open window. Owls, bats, and barking and baying dogs provided the overt harmonies, while frogs and insects accompanied with subversive counter-melodies. The air was thick and heavy, and clung to his skin like a security blanket or a mother's touch. He felt safe in this humid night.

Grasslands, fed by little streams and sedate marshes, spread across the land. Small copses gathered near the little marshes, sentries guarding the sacred water against Man. Graceful cranes floated into these, unmindful of the few fellow travelers. The world was at peace again, and Jude felt close to it again.

He stopped for a snack in a flyspeck town. Inside the convenience store, he noticed a few tourist offerings, bribes for the people left behind at home. He bought a soda pop and a candy bar, and paused in front of the sandwich case. Inside were huge sandwiches made from baguette bread, and filled with seafood, like crawdad and fake crab, or other inexpensive meats. These wore wrappers which read, "Po' Boy's. \$1.99." He purchased one, harboring the belief that Scotsmen were behind this. He'd let the Frogs believe what they wanted.

The attendants and the other customers were polite, but kept to themselves. Jude noticed that they only spoke, at any length, to those that they knew. There was no suspicion, nor eager friendliness. But their kindness, it seemed, was directed at him going.

As he drove further south, the grasslands and fields gave way to more rice fields and swamp. There were many miles of road which were elevated a few feet over the swamps, which was unnerving for Jude. He was unused to seeing two sides of the road dropping into water. One side, in his experience, rose with hundreds of feet of rock. The other dropped into valleys, or to rivers. Not water on each side. The landscape here was as desolate as Texas, but water had replaced the barren earth. There would be no cattle; waterfowl had taken their place, engaging in the nighttime rituals of spring of their own accord.

He was lost in his nighttime reverie. It wasn't until he saw the crimson and orange fires from a refinery that he realized that he had found Baton Rouge. He crossed over a river, large to his ken, and looked out, to his left, to the sprawl of dim lights that formed the city proper. A few trails of smoke rose into the night, signals of inhabitation. It appeared to him that the city was rusted, old and worn. The stripped tread of tires, and an occasional disgarded muffler littered the side of the interstate.

He thought of trying to find a room there, but he was close to the end of his journey. Besides, the city smelled of rotting fish and kerosene. He pushed himself on for the last hour. His dedication to his goal overcame his will and his need for sleep.

The bayou spread out before New Orleans like the skirt of a Christmas tree. It was darker than midnight within the net of trees, open and claustrophobic. He wondered what secrets had been forgotten by God within the tangle.

New Orleans exploded out of this, the surge of electricity merged with his own heartbeat. Jude began to understand why the belief in the devil persisted.

He lit a cigarette with a match, and began to watch for an exit advertising a Days Inn. He was glad to be off of the interstate, which had imperceptibly become crowded with souls. The light of the city had started to burn his eyes.

He stopped at the hotel, and checked in. The clerk seemed bored and tired. He charged Jude for double occupancy, as the only room available, he claimed, was one with two beds. Jude was too tired to argue, but noticed that the clerk pocketed the difference as Jude walked away.

The hotel room was clean and efficient. Little light found its way in w/ the curtains drawn, but there was enough to see the outlines of the furnishings. Jude fell asleep easily; the sounds of the world outside were distant and muffled, like a waterfall. He was awakened by the presence of someone else in the room.

He felt the pressure of another body crawling onto the bed, and the smell of flower-scented perfume reached his nostrils. A woman, he thought. This idea kept away any nasty questions from his mind. He didn't bother himself with nuisances like maybe she's in the wrong room. He didn't care. She was here, and he was not alone. That is what mattered.

Jude opened his eyes to see her. He tried to scream, jump away, anything to make the vision go away. It took him a few confused seconds to realize who was lying beside him. It was his brother, lying in state. He couldn't tell if Gabriel's eyes were open or closed. They looked like hollow sockets where the night had broken through like a pair of springs flowing into a lake.

White noise filled his ears. He rose and spread so that his body was shimmering with it. It flowed out of his feet, and reluctantly and tenaciously clung to him like pond scum being cleared from the water's surface. He fought to keep his senses, but could not stay out of oblivion.

He awoke, paralyzed with fear. After his body calmed, he slowly reached out for the television remote. The fear was still strong, and he was ready to withdraw his hand at the first sign of attack.

As a child, when he woke like this, his mother said he was just "playing opossum." This was, to a large extent, true: he was playing dead, hoping that whatever was out there in the night would get bored and leave. Now, it was an absolute terror that held him.

The TV clicked on to an infomercial. It displayed the time, 11:54 p.m. He'd been asleep for one hour. Eight to go before the meeting with the coroner. Jude decided he would never sleep again.

After carefully scanning the room, he rose from the bed and turned on the light. Everything was normal, just as it should be. He checked the phone book, found a late night club on Bourbon Street then called for a taxi. He knew that he was in no condition to drive.

The gentlemen's club was shadowy, but not as dark as he'd expected. It was populated with a variety of clientele, white, brown, and black, from all walks of life. Jude noticed that there were no others like him there. Those who wore boots and belts were concrete cowboys, dressed in expensive Western-style clothes made by New York designers. The situation, and his mood, demanded tequila.

He sat at a side table, where he could enjoy a view of most of the bar. He'd attracted a few looks, mainly from the dancers on stage, and some who sat with clients. They smell money, he thought, fresh money.

Between shots of tequila, Jude sipped coffee. He could not shake the dream, if that's what it was. Too real, too many details. The stench of death played at his nostrils, and the booze didn't help.

"Something's on your mind." A husky woman's voice drew his eyes from the table in front of him. "Buy me a drink, and I'll listen."

She was of average height, and could have lost a few pounds. But, she was attractive. She was sympathetic.

“Alright. Sure.” He motioned to the empty seat beside him.

“So what’s on your mind, hon?”

“Nothing, really. I just had a bad dream is all. I just didn’t want to be alone.”

“ Want to tell me about it?”

“Not really.”

“You’re not from here, are you?” she asked, trying to draw him out.

“No, actually. I’m down here for my brother.”

“So your brother lives here?”

“He was just on vacation down here. Wanted to find a place to live. I guess he didn’t like the life of a rancher anymore, since we sold the farm where he was raised. He always liked it better in the big cities, anyway.

Jude caught the waitress’ attention, and ordered another round.

“Thanks. My name’s Sheba. My stage name, anyway. Y’know, like Bethsheba?”

“Most people here wouldn’t make the connection.”

“It sounds more exotic, that’s why I chose it. There are too many ‘Starrs’ and ‘Kats’ and ‘Angels’. Sheba stands out.

“I like it. And you dance very well. I caught part of your act earlier. Impressive.”

“Thanks, ah…”

“Oh. Sorry. Jude. I forgot my manners.”

“That’s alright. Are you married?”

“No, I’m unattached. No strings to tie me down.”

“Have you thought about it?”

“Every day. I’m starting to think it’s too late.”

“Why? Ho old are you, anyway?”

“I’ll be thirty-two, come July.”

“Listen to me. I’m being so nosy. Just tell me to butt out.”

“That’s alright. I ain’t got much to hide.”

“How come a guy like you isn’t married yet? I know quite a few women who’d love to meet you.”

“I guess I just haven’t found the right one, yet. I’ve tried to find ‘em, but they’re too good at hidin’. I didn’t plan on being alone this long, it just happened.”

“It sounds like your dream’s as bad as mine. I think it’s time to get new dreams. I’m married and have two kids. It was great in the beginning, but now… I’m paying \$800 a week to keep this one going, but I don’t like it anymore. My husband’s changed, and I feel alone.”

“Is that why you’re here?”

“Yeah, it’s the only thing that pays the bills.” She paused, then looked back to Jude and smiled.  
“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t be unloading my problems on you.”

“That’s alright. People find it easy to talk to me. I don’t know why, but they do.”

“You’re sweet,” she said as she touched his hand. “Do you want to get out of here? I’m done for the night. I just stayed around to find some company, and maybe pick up a few bucks doing table dances. Come on.”

“You drivin?” I took a cab here.”

“Let me get my things. I’ll meet you in the parking lot.”

Six hours to go, he thought.

The parking lot was bathed in light. A soft mist of rain had started to fall, which created halos around the fluorescent street lamps. Sheba appeared from the shadow of the building, holding an umbrella that encircled her head. She wore a tight white dress that accentuated her dark features. She smiled, and led him to her car. Jude noticed that she wore little make-up, simply lipstick and sky blue eyeshadow. He’d seen other black dancers who wore too much make-up. They looked like whores, not women. The white women who wore too much make-up were clownish, not sexy.

They rode in silence to Jude’s hotel room. There was nothing more to say.

It was just before dawn when Jude woke. He was hazy with dreams, and unsure of the events of the day that had passed. He started the day with the time-honored ritual of lighting a cigarette and reviewing the previous night. The matchbook was beginning to empty; he saw the message that had been written inside. “I’ve got your number. Kat.”

This spooked him a little. He hadn’t thought about the waitress since he’d left the small town, had he? Number... What number? Strange.

Soft breathing turned his attention to the dark figure on his right. Fear shot through him like electricity. A dream... No, a nightmare. I’m dreaming, he thought, and my brotherfatherfriendanyotherdeadperson is there. Got to get away.

His blood rose to fill his throat. He stopped breathing. His heart pounded with the rising city. He had become frozen in time, turned away from the source of his fear.

“Hey, you awake?”

Jude desperately wanted to scream, to wake up, to get out of this nightmare. He could not.

“Are you okay?” A pause. “Babe, it’s alright. You’re safe.”

Not a nightmare or a dream. Real. Something to touch, to hold onto.

“Where am I,” he said thickly.

“In a hotel, in New Orleans. Remember?”

“Not at home,” he forced himself to say. It was almost a question now.

“No. Unless you live in Louisiana.”



It began to make sense, to clarify itself into a shape. “You’re still here?” It came out of his mouth sharply, although he didn’t mean it that way.

“Are you sorry I am?” There was an edge of hurt in her voice.

“No. I’m sorry. It’s just... I’m used to waking alone,” his voice trailed off. In his mind, he completed, “In the hour when I’m trembling with tenderness.”

“I’ll go.”

“No. Please. Stay with me.” The haze lifted higher, and he added, “If you can. Stay with me.” The haze lifted higher, and he added, “If you can. Stay with me.”

“You don’t want me here.”

“Where’s your family? Your kids?”

“My husband’s out of town,” she replied, rising to gather her things, “and my kids are with Grandma.”

Jude turned over and reached out. “Then you can stay. Right? Come back. I need you, babe, Bathsheba.”

She turned back to him, naked and vulnerable. He crushed out his cigarette. The room was still dark, and he could only see her silhouette. She took his hand in hers, and held it to her chest. “Well?”

Sheba laid down beside him. She brushed her fingertips (and incidentally, the back of his own hand) across his chest. “Did it mean anything?”

Jude wrapped his arm around her and drew her closer. “It meant that we can dream. It meant that maybe we can be happy, and that maybe we can find love in this world. It meant that...” His voice trailed off again. He almost said, “...all mistakes aren’t bad.” He thought twice, knowing that this moment might end too soon.

“Meant what?”

“Nothing. I just... I could love you.”

“You mean that?”

“Yes,” he said, somewhat offended. “I’m not a liar.”

She kissed his neck. “So, we’ll see each other again?”

“Probably not,” he answered. “I leave tomorrow. Let’s make the most of this.”

She sighed. “In my dreams, I see a hero on a white horse who takes me away. He’s from the good side, like in *Romeo and Juliet*, or Paul Simon’s *Diamonds on the Soles of her Shoes...*”

He interrupted. “The girl was rich in that one.”

“You know what I mean. Anyway, there’s a poem called ‘Lucifer’ by some Eastern Bloc poet who tells the same story...”

Again, he interrupted. “A rich girl in that one, too.”

“Listen. I haven’t told anyone my dream. Are you listening?” His silence told her yes. “So, in my dream, this good guy rescues me and my kids from this life. I don’t have to dance anymore. We – my

knight and I – can give my kids the life they deserve. No more late nights, no more pushing them off on Grandma. We can be happy.”

Jude listened behind half-closed eyes. He was lost in the same dream. He was the knight.

“Yeah. Maybe it *is* time we both get a new dream,” he said. He knew that something like this wouldn’t work out. She couldn’t survive in the country, and he would die in the city. The two were separate, spiritually barred from each other.

“What?”

“Like you said last night,” he reminded her.

“Oh. So, you’re... going to leave me alone.”

“You have your children. I don’t have that. You have your marriage. I don’t have that either. I’m leaving *me* alone.”

“One night, and it’s *over*?”

“It’s never over. Hold onto the dream. Things change.”

She tried to turn away, but he held her back with a whisper. “I need you. Stay with me.”

Sheba knew there was no point. But she stayed, not wanting to be alone. She put her head on his shoulder and he kissed her temple. He noticed the sun was beginning to rise. Scarlet clouds streamed across the morning sky. Jude looked at his watch, and said, “I need to see my brother in two hours. We’ve only got one, I guess.”

“Don’t I get to meet him?” she asked petulantly.

“Can you tell me where the city morgue is?”

Jude stepped from the shower drying his hair. Sheba was smoking one of his cigarettes; he believed he was dreaming again, a vision of beauty.

“Who is she?”

“Who?”

“The girl. ‘I’ve got your number.’ You know, Kat.” She held up the matchbook.

“Oh. That.” He snickered. “I stole it. Someone at the bar, I think. Didn’t realize I’d taken it, I guess.”

“Oh.” She let the matchbook drop from her elegant fingers to the floor.

“I’m checking out as soon as I get back. That gives you time to shower, and...” his voice trailed off.

“...Leave,” she finished.

“I... I won’t forget you. This meant...” he raised a finger to silence her while he constructed the words. “This meant everything.”

“Look me up when you’re down here again,” she stormed into the bathroom.

“I will,” he whispered to the closed door. “I will...”

“...multiple lacerations, internal bleeding, cracked ribs, the nasal ridge broken – probably some kind of metal bar or tire iron...”

Jude stared at the body as the coroner read the report, unable to hear the monotone words. He looks stuffed, like a scarecrow, the voice in his head observed, and with the bruising, he looks like an eyeless raccoon.

“Because of the extent of the injuries, we were unable to harvest any organs. Too bad, too. We needed the heart and the eyes. Mr. Macalister?”

“Harvest? This is my brother.” Jude felt like the coroner had a soul like a stone.

“I’m sorry. I wouldn’t be able to do this job if I thought of them as human. Did you bring a photo?”

Jude handed a photo of Gabriel, and said, “This is the only one I’ve got. It’s his high school graduation picture.”

“That’s fine. We can get on with the reconstruction, then, while we’re waiting for the toxicology report.”

“How much longer?”

“Probably first thing in the morning. You’ll be able to pick up the death certificate then.”

“And the body?”

“We’ll have the body shipped then, as well.”

“I’m taking him back,” Jude said flatly.

The coroner sighed. “That’s not possible.”

“Why not? You freeze him, throw him in a box with some dry ice, and I take him from there.”

“But procedure...”

“Screw procedure. That’s my brother. I’m taking him back.”

“We can discuss that tomorrow. On your way out, you can sign for his possessions and the release form. The hotel is holding his room.”

“Thanks,” Jude said as he slipped out of the room.

Jude drove back to the hotel in silence. His eyes kept returning to the manila envelope in the passenger’s seat. His brother’s life, neatly packaged in a 9½ x 11” space. This is what remains of a man’s life, a few small trinkets to explain who he was. Jude slid an obscure Billy Joel tape into the player, and fast forwarded to “Souvenirs”. Your memories, he thought, French root. Sou- isn’t that French coin? rambling in thought. Crap. Rambling in thought isn’t good. Focus. Call Michael. The police. The hotel. Rambling again. Go back. Focus. Stay clear.

He broke down and cried in the hotel parking lot. Too many mistakes had been made. Including last night, married with children. No time to think of that. Make the necessary calls, do what needs to be done. One step at a time.

After he paid for another night, Jude went to the room. It had been cleaned already, even though it was still early in the day. He broke the seal on the envelope, and poured its small contents on the table. In silence, he sorted through them, checking against the inventory supplied by the police.

A cheap wristwatch. A graduation ring. A hotel key. A used ticket stub for The Preservation Hall. A wallet, containing a driver's license, various business cards, two hundred dollars in traveler's cheques, and photos. These captured staged moments in time; their parents, the family, Michael's family, recent images of his nieces and nephews, and one unidentifiable woman. The back of the photo held the message, "Gabe. My forever love. Sarah."

Jude wondered how long the information had been withheld, and why. Something to puzzle out later. There were more important things to do.

He called the number on the hotel key, and arranged to meet the manager that afternoon. Then, he called his brother.

"Michael. This is Jude, and I just ID'd the body. He was in bad shape.

"So, how're you holding up?

"Fine. Just fine."

"You don't sound so good."

"I've got about three hours of sleep in three days. Go figure." He waited in silence for a response. When none came, he asked, "How's mom?"

Stable. Out of Intensive Care. Doing better, but she's not handling this well."

"You think?"

Michael sighed heavily in an attempt to control himself. "So, anyway. When will you be back?

"I've got to wait until tomorrow. They're going to begin reconstruction while they finish the autopsy. So, two days or so. If you schedule the funeral for the day after tomorrow, in the afternoon, we should be alright."

"If I what?"

"Look. I can't do it from here, and Mom's in no shape, right? So guess what. You're volunteered. We need everything, from a casket to a plot and four other guys to carry him. Oh, and find out what you can about a pretty blonde girl named Sarah. Have you got the obit ready?"

"I'll... get going on this stuff. See you in a couple of days."

"Alright. One other thing. Could you stop by my farm and check on things? I'm worried about that kid I hired. If you get time. I'll call before I leave here. Thanks." Jude hung up the phone before anything else could be said. He was on a schedule now, and needed sleep.

Jude turned the television on. One of the premium channels was showing *Eight Men Out*. It was good background noise; he needed something to keep the dreams at bay. He slept heavily, with visions of baseball dancing through his head. He was back on the field; the sharp smell of a well-oiled, sweaty leather glove filled the dream. The sharp crack of the bat connecting with the ball, the sting in his palm as the ball

struck the glove. He was in the eternal game of his childhood, his brothers and father playing on the rough diamond that his father had built.

The long trips to watch the Bears play. He couldn't remember if they were AAA or AA, but they were *baseball*. In his dream, he met Jim Tatum (best damn utility player in the League, his father had said, and we've got 'im) after his two-run pop in the first game between the expansion teams. He'd been there, with his father, brothers, and nephews. The last game they'd ever seen together, live. His father died later that season. Michael, Gabe and he had planned to go again. They never did. Never will.

He couldn't go back to sleep. Too many thoughts ran through his mind. He rose, and decided to call the police, to find any more information.

"We were going to call you Mr. Macalister. We have the suspected assailants in custody."

"Can you tell me who they are?"

"I'm sorry sir, but I can't release that information. I can tell you that two of the three were apprehended at the scene."

"Really? How?"

"They were out cold. Your brother put up quite a fight." The officer paused. "One other thing, sir. Were there any valuables missing? We need to know what was stolen from him."

"I couldn't tell for sure. It looked like everything was there. Just maybe some cash, that's all."

"Alright sir. If there's anything else that you can tell us, please call. And we'll let you know what develops."

"Thanks, officer. By the way – I'll be picking up his stuff from his hotel this afternoon. Do I need to fill anything out?"

"They'll sign you out at the hotel. It's not a crime scene, so there shouldn't be a problem. Take care."

The meeting with the manager went well. He filled out the forms, then went to the room. The manager stayed respectfully behind three paces.

"Want me to go in with you?"

The room was tidy, and Jude nodded.

He looked around for any item left behind. Jude noticed that the towels were missing, so he opened the one suitcase. With a sheepish grin, he handed the small stack of white towels and washcloths to the manager. "I'm sorry," he said.

"It's just one of the hazards of not chaining them down."

"How much do I owe you? For the room."

"All things considered, nothing. You should've come here. I'd have given you a room half-price." There was a short, nervous silence as Jude gathered the suitcase and backpack together. The manager added, "It's a shame this stuff happens. He was a nice guy. Real friendly."

"Yeah, he was. Anyway," Jude said as he extended a hand, "I appreciate it. I won't forget."

The manager smiled and shook his hand. Next time you're down here, come see me. I'll cut you a good deal."

More stuff to go through, Jude thought. It's a lot like Christmas. Black Christmas.

He'd hauled the luggage back to his hotel, and gone through the suitcase. Clothes, mostly. T-shirts, a dress shirt, and three books: the *Tao Te Ching*, Turgnev's *Fathers and Sons*, and Yogi Berra's *It Ain't Over...* The backpack held one change of clothes, toiletries, a camera, five hundred dollars in cash and another two thousand in traveler's cheques. He was prepared. There was a Day Timer which held schedules for the Astros, Rangers, Royals, Cardinals, and Rockies. The calendar had been carefully filled out with the dates of their home games, and which ones would be televised on cable. The dates of his trip were denoted with "Freedom!" across the day he left, "Gone" on each of the days he would have been on the road, and "Back to Hell" on the return date. A little earlier than planned, he thought.

The address book in the back was more fruitful. Between the addresses and phone numbers of the ballparks were those of his friends. Jude called Michael's wife and dictated a list of people to call. He skipped Sarah's entry, and resolved to call her himself later.

"Sarah Fitzsimmons, please," Jude asked with a shaky voice. "This is Jude. Ah, Jude Macalister."

"Well, you *do* exist. Gabe's told me a lot about you." Her voice was soft and sweet. Like butter, Jude thought. He got himself mixed up with a damn mick with a voice like butter. "So he... finally told you about us."

Jude thought he heard fear edging her voice. He sighed, and watched a long-limbed spider scurry across the table. "In a way. Um, listen..."

"Something's happened," she broke in. "Something bad."

"I'm... I'm sorry, but..."

She began to cry and apologize. She wept for fifteen minutes while Jude fought to stay strong. When the sobbing stopped, he said, "You alright?"

"I'm sorry. I'm okay now. What...?"

"He was jumped. Robbed. They... The funeral's in a couple of days. I'll let you know for sure. It'll be in the paper. Are you going to be okay?"

"Sure. I'll be fine." She sniffed back a tear. I'll see you at the funeral."

He hung up the phone. The spider had begun to weave its thread in a corner of the window. Jude turned away from it and stared at the photo of Sarah. He took a deep drink of his Glenfiddich in a silent toast.

He found himself giving directions to a taxi driver, back to the gentleman's club. This is stupid, he thought, a bad idea.

"What's that?" the cabbie asked.

"What?"

“You said something, didn’t you?”

“Oh, no. Just... thinking out loud, I guess.”

“Whatever. You been here before?”

“First time I been outside my home country.”

The cabbie chuckled. No, son. To this club.”

“Oh, right. Sorry. I was here last night.”

“Well, tell you what. Since this is your big adventure, I’ll get you in.

The driver walked in with Jude, and flashed the doorman a laminated card. “Okay, that’s still five bucks.”

“No, no. That’s for him. I’m not staying.”

“Alright. G’wan in.”

“Thank you, sir. Awful nice of you.”

“Don’t mention it,” the cabbie waved as he left. “Dumb hick.”

Jude willed ignorance to this remark. He sat where he’d been the night before, and ordered a beer. He watched for Sheba as he polluted himself.

A few dancers stopped by his toxic waste site to ask if he’d like a private table dance. He managed to be polite, waving them away with, “No, thanks,” or, “Perhaps later.”

He looked at a clock hanging above the bar, then checked it against his watch. Both told him it was 10:38. This meant he’d been sitting for only 12 minutes. He ordered another beer.

Then something intruded on his twisted world. He ordered a shot of scotch, and turned toward the stage. Hank Williams, Jr. was violently beating out “A Country Boy Can Survive” over the stereo system. She walked out of the artificial fog of a dry ice machine, and Jude lost himself. His mind demanded that this scene was not happening, that it was too beautiful and surreal to be true. He allowed the dream to play itself out, to shape itself in this moment, this eternity. This was to be a souvenir, unless the nightmare, that he knew would follow, rode into his eyes.

He removed a bill from his pocket when the song ended, and strode to the stage with a calm resolve. He gave her the bill, and said, “You know where I’ll be.”

She smiled sadly, and said, “Thanks,” as the DJ cued Lynard Skynard’s “Freebird.” He finished his beer, then walked away from the vision to steal someone else’s cab.

The spider had finished its work, and was patiently waiting for vibration on its threads.

“Hello, friend,” Jude said hazily. “A toast to you, and to the Fates.” He found the small bottle of Glenfiddich, raised it to the spider, and drank. “Only thing that gets me through this... life.”

He fell asleep without dreams.

A persistent knocking on the door penetrated his sleep. His head was thick as he slurred, “Hang on. I’m coming.”

He opened the door and found Sheba on the other side. “Hi. I had to ask which room you were in downstairs. I hoped you hadn’t used a fake name.”

“Who’d lie about a name like Jude?”

“Everyone I know of.” She looked past him, and said, “Someone else here? You’ve got more stuff now.”

He stepped aside, and gestured a welcome with his arm. “Oh, no. That’s…”

She smiled. “I know. Your brother’s. He’s the boy who was…”

“Yeah. Killed a couple days ago. How’d you know?”

“Did the math. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. Unless you did it.”

“Y’all were close?”

“As close as any brothers *can* be. It’s a different set of rules.”

“So you have sisters?”

“No, but my brother has a couple of kids. Two boys, two girls. I spend time with ‘em. I’ve seen how it is.”

“Is their mother still alive?”

Jude laughed. “Oh yeah. They’re my older brother’s. Gabe was the youngest.”

“Oh.”

“Listen, I’m here another night. I’m sorry about this morning, but…”

“I know. After I figured it out, I understood. I looked at your wallet, and recognized the name from the paper.”

“It’s just that I can’t be alone right now. I’m sorry, this is selfish, I leave in the morning, but I don’t want to be alone.”

Sheba touched a finger to his lips. Her dark eyes fixed him to silence. “Shh…”

He inhaled deeply. Her scent filled him, and wrapped around him like a shadow. The soft touch on his skin, the gentle breath on his chest, and suddenly he was alone again. The dream was over, the curtain had drawn on the fantasia. He leaned over with a spider’s kiss; she stirred, and freed his arm from her neck. He silently pulled his pants on, and went to sit at the small table. The light over it was tricky to turn on, but he triumphed after a moment’s fumbling. She turned from the light. He struck a match and touched the flame to the tip of a cigarette.

Jude stared at the collection of useless trinkets in front of him. Everything important and meaningful, scattered across a small table. He looked at his watch, and stared at its face as the seconds ticked by in little static gestures of conformity. Tick. Tick. Tick. Four-thirty. Somewhere, the sun rose; somewhere the sun set. Four-thirty-one. A beginning and an end. Somewhere, someone was looking forward to a ball game they’ll never see. Somewhere, this women’s husband was working hard to support a family.



He looked to where the spider had constructed its complex spiral web. The little beast still waited patiently for life to come its way, for the sole purpose of destroying it. One dies, one lives. Knowing life, the master does not fear death. Knowing death, the master does not fear life. The sage keeps to the center.

He picked up the ticket stub. He'd always wondered if the legendary Preservation Hall existed. He wondered what Gabe had seen there. Or anywhere. He thought about calling Sarah, but it was late, and he had a guest. The rules of decorum.

It was impossible, the thought, to reconstruct Gabriel's life from this little collection of his reminders. He felt his own memories begin to fade. The harder he fought to hold them, the faster they slipped from his grasp.

Why did you leave us? Nothing made sense anymore. His nice, orderly concept of a clockwork universe with a watchmaker God fell apart. He slumped in his chair and cried himself to sleep.

He was in a church. The funeral. That's the only other reason that he set foot on Christian ground. He looked above the altar to the cross. It was lit from behind, and backdropped by crimson curtains trimmed in yellow. The shadows danced, as though one of the fluorescent bulbs was burning out. The shadows melted together on the cross. A figure could be seen, hanging there at a neat forty-five degree angle. Those crucified suffocated, he thought, and gasped and suffered for nine hours.

The light righted itself, and illuminated the figure. The face was bruised across the visage, the pulp of the eyes slid down the cheeks like viscous tears. Jude noticed that the body, at least the clothes, had been stuffed with straw. The head lifted, and the figure screamed, sputtering blood like a lawn sprinkler, "Eli, Eli, lama sabach thani?"

Jude convulsed violently in the chair. He awoke as someone screamed, "Gabriel!"

"Jude, shh... Jude," Sheba was slowly approaching him, holding one hand out to him. "It's alright, Jude. It was just a dream."

He reeled back. "Where am I?" he demanded.

"You're here, with me, in New Orleans."

"Where's here?"

"You're hotel room. It's okay. Calm down."

He relaxed, and looked at his watch. The dream had started to fade. The watch told him that it was 5:53. He took Sheba's hand.

"Do you want to tell me about it?" she asked soothingly.

"No. I, ah... no." He stood, and walked to the bed, where he fell into it and rubbed his eyes. "God, what does it mean? It makes no sense. I need something that... something that won't go away."

She smiled and slid her fingertips over his chest. "Honey, if life made sense to me, I'd be a millionaire. So, I just try to go on, and try to keep everything together. I don't want my kids to ask those questions."

“You’re lucky,” he said dreamily. “You’ve got kids. Someone to live for. Yeah, you’re lucky.”

“Thanks, Jude,” she said as she laid her head on his shoulder again.

“For what?”

“For putting thing back into perspective for me.”

“She fell asleep as he watched the sun rise.

Jude was staring at the ceiling when the phone rang for his wake-up call. He reached over to it , and hung up without looking. Sheba rose, and walked to the bathroom without a word or glance. He heard the water running in the shower, and began packing. He’d finished when she came out, and he sat on the bed smoking.

“Well,” she said as she started to dress. “I guess this is goodbye.”

“Yeah. It meant a lot to me. It was special. I..”

“Hey. I’m not good at goodbyes. But thank you for giving me back my dream.”

Jude smiled. “Thanks for chasing mine away.”

“I just want to let you know: This is the first time I’ve done this sort of thing. Anyone else, and I’d probably left him.”

“So you’re going back? Good. I wish you happiness,” he said sincerely.

“Thanks. Take good care.” She turned to leave, then as an afterthought, “You want your Franklin back? You must have mistaken it for a Washington.”

“No. It’s yours. Keep it.”

He watched as she walked out of his life, then picked up the phone to call his brother.

Jude stared at the toxicology report, trying to make sense of the numbers.

“We got this one done early,” the coroner said, “put a few others aside.” This is, after all, an... unusual situation.”

Jude took the death certificate that the coroner offered. He looked up at the man in shock.

“What’s this cause of death? He was...”

“...dead when he was jumped. The assailants simply made him realized he was. I’m sorry, but the blood alcohol level was over .4. I’m surprised he made it that far.” He glanced at the truck. The box had been loaded and covered by a tarp. “Well, it looks like you’re all set. Good luck, Mr. Macalister.

“Thanks.”

Jude turned on the radio, and found one of the country stations in New Orleans. Don Williams crooned “Good Ol’ Boys Like Me,” and Jude sank into the music.

“Goodbye. Goodbye. Goodbye.”

He drove into the rat race, back onto the interstate. In the morning light, the mausoleums of the cemetery to his left seemed ancient, foreign against the backdrop of the city of glass. He began to dread the city, and he fled the monolithic beast. He felt that he could not drive fast enough to escape it.

The air at the edge of the city was worse. It was heavy with moisture and the vulgar stench of rats. The deejay introduced “one of the greatest Southern bands, with ‘Heard It In A Love Song.’ Marshall Tucker on your New Orleans country...” He tried to sing along, but the metallic atmosphere caught in his throat.

He thought he’d made a mistake, consigning the car instead of bringing it back. But Michael had agreed. The owner of the lot seemed honest enough, and he’d made sure that he had a copy of the contract and the lowest price acceptable. Everything was in order.

The bayou opened like a canopy just outside of the concrete and glass. Dark. Humid and oily. He licked his lips, and he could taste Sheba.

Was the car a mistake? Getting involved, even temporarily, with a married woman, was a mistake. The car wasn’t. A nice memory. A lonesome heart’s mistake. Stuffed w/ straw, bloated like a dead cow. Focus. The car was good. The woman was bad. A moment of weakness. A way to forget the pain, the fear, the... the fact that he’d been completely alone for the last thirty years. Thirty-two. Christ, what a mess.

Everything he’d done, all that he’d built, was for someone else. A figure of his imagination. A nyad. A fiction that he’d been living since childhood. The ranch was his father’s nightmare; no money to be made in it anymore. The investments kept him afloat. Money was the focal point of the world, love was a distant second.

A hard rain began to fall as he passed through Alexandria. It had started slowly, and he’d been able to drive through the town without stopping. A decision he regretted when he came to the cornfields north of town. The rain was stronger there, and drove into the windshield ferociously. He had to stop and wait for the deluge to pass. He wearily slid CCR into the tape machine, and searched in desperate frustration for “Have You Ever Seen The Rain.” He closed his eyes and listened to the water beating the hood, windshield, and tarp.

His meditation was broken by a knocking at the passenger side window. He opened the door for a young Mexican (he assumed), who stepped in and sat down.

“Good song,” the young man said. Can I get a ride?”

“Where you going?”

“Home,” he said flatly.

“Okay, where’s ‘home’?”

“The Crystal Falls Res, in Wyoming.”

“Indian?”

“Yes. I wanted to see the rest of your country, so I walked. Now, I’m tired. Can I get a ride?”

“Sure. Buckle up.”

“Tommy, of the Red Dog clan.”

“Jude Macalister,” he extended his hand in friendship. “Nice to meet you, Tommy. I can get you most of the way. Know how to drive?”

“I don’t have a license.”

“Can you drive at night?”

“Yes, but…”

“Fine. When I get tired, you take over. I’ve been… I haven’t slept much, the last few days.”

The rain eased enough for Jude to drive again. He let *Chronicle* run its course until they reached Shreveport. Neither man seemed to want to talk.

“I’ll need to fill up in Dallas, I figure we’ll eat then. If you need to stop, let me know. I’d stop more often, but I need to be back home tomorrow morning.”

“Okay,” Tommy replied passively. “Don’t worry. You’ll be there in time.”

Jude laughed sarcastically. “In time for what?”

“For the funeral preparation,” he answered matter-of-factly.

“How…?”

“I’m a shaman.”

They fell back to silence. Jude could not react; he felt numb. When did my life become so strange? he thought.

“The city did not agree with him. He did not live… his own life. He tried to live someone else’s.”

“What’re you talking about?”

“He did not belong there, at that time. He’d been called earlier, but he did not want to hear. The spirits fled him, as he had,” Tommy said. “It was no one’s fault. Wake me, please, when we stop.”

Tommy fell asleep quickly and quickly. Jude envied this, as he envied the dead. He examined the statement, and became more muddled in his thoughts.

The radio station had failed into white static. He tuned in the nearest one. The harsh melancholy of Bob Seger’s “Main Street” greeted him. For a few minutes, he was rolled back into the club. He smiled, half lost in his dream.

Somewhere, out in the world, was the woman that he needed, and who needed him. Perhaps he *would* take up the gas station attendant’s offer. Maybe she was holed up in Santa Fe, waiting for him.

It was good to have company, even if his guest was asleep. Jude found his universe more comfortable now that it was inhabited. He began to feel sorry for the other lone souls on the road. It freed him from thinking about himself; he had a passenger to think about.

This was the first road trip that he and Gabe had been on together. It struck him sadly that this was the only trip that he’d taken with his brother. They had been close, as brothers go, but it hadn’t occurred to Jude to go anywhere with either of his brothers. Their family hadn’t really vacationed. The responsibilities of the ranch had kept them close to home. Weekend trips for camping or fishing, when they could find a hand to watch the livestock, were the closest thing to a vacation they’d had.

Their father had taught them the values of honesty, integrity, and the other Depression-Era values that he'd been taught. He had raised the three boys on the land, but he tried to groom them for life in the city. "Go into an honest, money-making business," he'd say, "don't make the mistake of trying to make a ranch work. This life's too hard. Don't break your back when you can use your mind."

Jude heard his father's voice, and smelled the taint of scotch on his breath. He remembered hearing "That's my job by Conway Twitty after the funeral. He had to laugh at the irony, although it tore him apart. He missed the old man, he missed his brother, he wished he could talk *with* those he'd lost before, instead of talking at them. The one-sided conversations were getting old.

They passed into Texas in the early afternoon. On a desolate range, Jude saw the rider on a pale horse passed beside a carcass. He tapped Tommy's shoulder with the back of his hand until he woke. "Look – there," he pointed. The rider had the same hard look.

"What?"

"Do you see him? That cowboy."

"No. I only see a dead bull. What do you see?"

"A cowboy, dressed in black. He's on a pale horse. An' he don't look happy. You don't see him?"

"No." Tommy yawned. "That's a vision. Maybe a warning. How far to Dallas?"

"Half-hour, maybe. What d'you mean, 'a vision'? He's right there."

"No, he's not. But he is real to you. What does he mean?"

"You're the shaman. You tell me."

"That's not my job." Tommy leaned his head back, and closed his eyes.

Jude sighed, annoyed. "He seems to be saying, 'You don't belong here.' That's the impression that I get."

"Oh."

"I don't know what that's about. I don't want to be here, but I didn't have much choice." Jude tried to gather his thoughts. "I was raised in the foothills, near rivers and lakes and grass and trees. My father raised me to believe in that. He taught me the same values that these ol' boys have – family, honesty, honor, hard work and fairness. If anything, I belong here more'n I do back home. It's all industry and horse breeders. I want to be near people with the same values and beliefs. I could make a go of it here."

Tommy listened, and remained quiet for a moment. "I had a dream. I stood on a mountain, and below me there was a ranch. It was made from the earth, and it was cared for. Then, someone came along and set fire to it so that room could be made for new growth.

Thunderbird had made the fire. He needed to renew himself.

"Maybe when we leave Dallas I can drive, so you can sleep."

Jude sank into his thoughts, while Tommy dozed off again.

“You awake? There’s Dallas,” Jude said as he pointed to the shining city. A haze clung to it like a shroud.

“Mm.” Tommy nodded tiredly. Smells like death, even from here.”

Jude thought about Gabriel. Better check that when we stop, he thought. He lit a cigarette, and silently offered one to Tommy.

“Thanks.” He took a light, and took a long drag on the smoke. “Maybe if you went home and set your life on fire. Make room. Let go.”

Jude furrowed his eyebrows. He turned up the radio a little. The deejay introduced Paul Simon, with “Crazy Love, vol. II.” Jude mulled over the quantum theory of the universe. Could it have a sense of the ironic? Or was it mere chaos, loosed upon the world (as Yeats might have said in a strange string of circumstances?)

“There’s a Denny’s,” Tommy said with a smile. “Let’s try that.”

“Had a bad experience there a couple days ago.”

“Even better.”

Jude eased the truck off the interstate and into the parking lot. He noticed the car wearing the bumper sticker, “The Race Is Over... The Rats Won,” again, and smiled. Something familiar.

They went in, and were seated by a pleasant middle-aged woman. She brought water, and made sure the waitress was prompt.

“So, what do y’all want?” she asked impatiently.

“Coffee, please. Black.”

“Herbal tea, if you have it.”

She looked at Tommy in disgusted surprise. “Yer kind drinks tea?”

“Yes, many of ‘my kind’ drink tea. Isn’t it the national drink of England. I know it’s popular in Asia, too. Here, in America, it is beginning to catch on,” Tommy replied calmly.

“That ain’t what I meant.”

“What did you mean, then?”

“You know... wetbacks – Mexicans.”

“I’m not Mexican. I’m a Redskin.”

She turned away sharply. and stormed back behind the counter.

Jude leaned towards Tommy, a little upset. “You knew this would happen”

“I only knew someone needed help.”

The waitress returned with two cups. “Y’all gonna order?”

“A hamburger please, with a plain side salad,” Tommy said, well-rehearsed.

“How about a French dip and fries,” Jude said. He handed her the menus with, “Thanks.”

Tommy sipped his tea. “My sister worked in a coffee shop, as a waitress, on the Res. There, when a Washishu came in, he was served last. That’s the way it is. Here, it is up to the waitress’ whims. I guess equal is in the eye of the beholder.”

Jude looked at him evenly. "I'm wondering something. You're pretty well-spoken. Where were you educated?"

"At home, by my grandfather. He found ways to keep me out of school. Tradition was important to him.

"It makes us what we are. It forms our place in the world."

"It gives us a sense of continuity. Grandfather made sure I understood that." Tommy nodded.

"Tradition is something to build from, not something to chain yourself to."

The waitress brought Tommy the salad. He smiled, and nodded, "Thank you."

"The rest'll be done shortly."

Tommy caught her eyes. "There's no hurry. Please, take your time."

She gave him a strange look, curious and confused. "More... tea? coffee?"

Jude slid his cup toward the edge of the table. "Please. When you get the chance."

She filled both cups as she made her rounds past the table.

"Patience," Tommy said when she was gone. "She just needs to see that some people still have patience."

The food was delivered to the table quickly. The waitress sneered slightly when she asked, "Anything else?"

Jude looked at Tommy, who shook his head. "No, ma'am, looks like we're set. Looks good, too."

She sighed. "I'll check back in a few minutes."

"I'm glad you chose to stop," Tommy said. "The spirits weren't sure."

"Well, I needed the company. Besides, I know what it's like to walk. Not across the country, mind you."

"There aren't many people who would stop, though."

"It's fear. The way things are today," Jude thought for a moment. "The way things are today should give even more reason for people to help each other out. Crime's just a symptom. Desperation's the disease."

"That may change soon," Tommy whispered, almost to himself.

The waitress came by the table and silently filled their cups.

"So. I'll fill up the tank, and get us on 287. Once we're out of town, I'll turn it over to you, alright?"

"Fine."

"Well, I need to hit the head. I'll take care of the bill when I get back.," Jude said as he stood.

He washed his hands and face, and rubbed water on the back of his neck. He began to feel clean again. The face that looked back at him from the mirror was a shock. He realized that he really hadn't seen his own reflection in almost four days. His beard was growing in, dark against his pale skin. The eyes were unfamiliar, sunken and red-rimmed like a heroin addict's. "Jesus, Jude. You need rest."

Tommy was finishing his tea when he returned. Jude took the ticket from the table, and replaced it with a ten-dollar bill.

As they waited at the cash register, the waitress came up to them. “Y’all, I’m sorry about that back there. I thought...”

“That I was strung-out and broke?”

“Well...”

“Well, next time you’ll know different. But, thanks. I hope you have a great day, ma’am.”

Jude paid the bill and walked into the parking lot, followed by Tommy. He unlocked the passenger’s door, half-ignoring the sound of someone yelling, “Hey, hey!” He turned to look at who it was, and saw a man in his fifties, jogging toward them. He wore a light suit, which didn’t quite cover the sweat stains on his shirt as he waved to Jude.

“Can I help you?”

“You’re one of the Macalister boys, ain’t you?” the man asked, panting. Jude eyed him suspiciously, “Who’re you?”

The man extended a hand. “Jack Shepherd. You don’t remember me do you?”

Jude smiled, and shook Jack’s hand vigorously. “You tried to sucker Dad into an oil deal.”

“Your old man was the sucker. We made a lot of money on that.” His smile faded. “Sure am sorry about your dad. I made it for the funeral, but I couldn’t stay around. How’s your mom?”

“Oh, you know. She’s getting along.” Jude turned his eyes toward the ground. He didn’t want to lie, but there was enough bad news.

“Good, good. And the other boys?”

“Well, Michael’s doing well. He’s got a good wife and a few kids.” Jude felt himself choking up at the thought of Gabriel. “And... uh... Gabe was... killed a few days ago. I’m on my way back home, to the...”

“Oh Jude. I’m sorry. If I’d known...”

“You couldn’t have.” He choked back a flood, and tried to put on his brave face. “Anyway, how’ve you been?”

“Oh, I’m doing fine. Just keeping busy with business. Kids are all out of the house, and the wife has her things. So, I keep myself occupied. I should retire, but... Jack leaned on his hand against the tailgate. “When’s the service?”

“Tomorrow at four.”

“I’ll try to fly up. I’ll cal you when I get in, so I can get the details.”

“Alright. I’m the only Jude Macalister in the book. If I’m not there, try Michael.” He smiled wanly, and added, “We didn’t fall far from the tree.”

Jude’s eyes were dry as they left Dallas. He found a convenient place to stop, and switched places with Tommy. In the corner of the windshield, he saw the long-limbed glass spider, carefully constructing its web. Tommy found the cassettes, and took out the Beethoven with “Ode to Joy.” Jude drifted into sleep



with the graceful movements of the spider playing behind his eyes. The calm intensity of the music and the warmth of the afternoon sun lulled him into a deep, relaxed sleep without memorable dreams. He gave control of his universe completely away.

He awoke slowly; something had changed, he wasn't sure what. He looked around. They were still moving, which confused him, until he remembered having a co-pilot. The sun in front of him was large and red, moving slowly into the plains. His eyes focused and found the spider. It waited patiently on the dashboard for its evening meal. They passed by a set of railroad tracks which slanted toward the sun, and for a moment, the spider's web seemed connected to that shining red infinity.

"You look better," Tommy said as Jude stretched. That nap did some good," he replied.

"You were gone for almost four hours. You need to get some Indian drumming for your collection. Or at least some more classical.

Jude realized that Brahms was playing. He looked at the seat beside him, and saw his four classical tapes lined up neatly. "You don't like rock or country?"

"I never really understood it. There's no real emotion in the music."

Jude stared out the window, and listened. He heard pain, fear, and grief. No, modern music didn't have that level of emotion, he thought. Except maybe jazz.

"Does the sun ever set in Texas?" He asked, annoyed.

"It has to, I suppose. Texas just has its own cycle of life."

Jude saw a road sign, which told him, "Amarillo 74."

"There's a café in the next town. I need to stop there," Jude said.

"Okay," Tommy said. I looked at the map. I'm going to stop in Amarillo, and go to the Palo Duro Canyon. Do you still want to stop?"

"I need to."

The sky burned with the last of the sunlight. A few miles ahead, they could see the lights of the town begin to shine. The night's souls were awakening.

"Memphis."

Jude stirred from his light sleep. "What?"

"Memphis," Tommy said, pointing at the town. "Is this it?"

"Yeah. Couple blocks in. I was about out of town, I think.."

"Does this place have a name?"

"Why are you going?"

Jude sighed. "To be honest," he said with a laugh, "I don't know. I don't know. A feeling, I guess."

He took the matchbook from his pocket and showed it to Tommy.

"What's it mean?"

"That's what I want to find out."

Jude sat up and pointed. "There. On the left, that little hole in the wall."

Tommy cut through the light traffic and drew a few shouts and honking horns. He grinned as he parked the truck. "I tried to warn you."

"Come on. I'll buy you a cup of coff... well, tea."

Jude walked ahead, and held the door for Tommy. There were no other customers inside. Jude looked at the hours on the door, and saw that the café was, in fact, open. They sat at a table near the door.

"Hi, Jude," Kat greeted him as she walked to the table. "This your brother?"

"Hello, Kat. This is Tommy. He's headed to Amarillo."

She smiled politely. "Nice to meet you. So, where's your brother?"

Jude blushed, unsure of how to broach the subject.

"Dead," Tommy said flatly.

Kat looked at them in confusion. "I'm sorry... I didn't know."

"It ain't your fault. I should've said something sooner. But I didn't think I'd be back."

"Well, I'm glad you did. Coffee?"

Jude sat back, and leaned his arm on the back of the chair beside him. He glanced over to Kat, who was reaching for cups. He smiled.

"You ever see how deliberate," he stressed the word, "all of our actions are?"

Tommy blinked, then followed Jude's gaze with his eyes. "I have. Every day."

Jude took a deep breath. "According to the string theory of quantum physics, if I was to flick my thumb right now, it'd have a different effect than if I did something else. Or nothing." He flicked his thumb.

"How?"

"The movement of atoms. Neutrons. Protons. Quarks. A thought could destroy the world."

"It was instinct that destroyed your brother's."

"Here you are," Kat broke in.

"Jude cast a dark look at Tommy. "I've got a question," he said as he turned, "for you, Kat."

She eyed him with a coy look. "Alright, what?"

"How do you know my name? I don't believe we were properly introduced."

"Nope, wrong question."

Tommy sipped his tea, nonplussed.

"Okay," Jude lit a cigarette with a match. "What's this mean?"

"*That's* the question. She leaned closer to Jude's ear. "Your license plate. My brother's in the academy in Greeley. He got your file for me."

"Why? Why me?"

"Because," Tommy interrupted, "she wants out. And you are alone."

"More coffee?" she asked.

“Well, you’ve got my number,” Jude said with a half-grin. “Give me a couple of days. See your brother when you’ve got a vacation. I’ll…”

She waited a moment. “What?”

“I’ll go ahead and settle up.”

“It’s on me today.” She touched his arm. “Sorry about your brother.”

“It happens.” Jude stood. “Anyway, Kat, the offer’s good. I’ll buy you a cup if you get to town.”

“That went well,” Jude said darkly as he climbed into the driver’s seat. He rapped his knuckles on the back window. “How’re you doing back there, bro?”

“She would have found out, anyway.”

“Yeah.” He sighed heavily, and leaned his head against the wheel. “I’ll never see her again. A once-in-a-lifetime chance, and it’s gone.”

“Everything moves in circles. Nothing is really gone.”

Jude started the truck, and began backing up. He glanced at the tarp. “Right. Tell that to him.”

Tommy sat in silence until they were back on the highway. Johnny Lee was playing “Cherokee Fiddle” over the radio.

“You should understand the cycle of life,” Tommy said in encouragement.

“Yeah. I know you’re born, you breed, you live, you die. It’s all a part of life.” He became agitated. “But he didn’t have a chance to live. Christ, he was just a kid. He’s gone. He’s dead. He’s not coming back. Now I have to find a way to deal with that. ‘Everything moves in cycles.’ Crap. It’s a straight goddam line.”

“He’ll begin a new life, he’ll be reborn.”

“In Christ?” Jude became sour. “Yeah. He’s dancing with angels. Sure.”

“No, he’ll be back on this earth. His time here was over.”

“But it’s not fair. He didn’t deserve to die. He,” Jude paused and wiped the tears from his eyes. “Why do people leave me? Why do I have to go on without *them*?”

Tommy patted him heavily on the shoulder. “Because,” he said, “life is the same for everyone. We lose, we lose, we win. We go on. It’s alright. Just let go.”

Jude slammed his hand on the wheel, as “A Million Miles From Nowhere” by Dwight Yokam started. He sobbed lightly, trying to keep his composure.

Jude drove to Amarillo under a full moon. The landscape had taken on a ghostlike quality, a brooding reminder of Homer’s Underworld. He wondered what it would have been like to grow up in Hell. She wanted out, that was the only interest she had in him. Chasing a dream, he thought bitterly. That’s all. Just a dream, a reason to believe.

He needed something to believe in, now that his world had fallen into disrepair; God and the Universe had failed him. Nothing made sense. Jude tried to make himself believe that it was simply an alcohol-induced nightmare, the tarp only covered a stack of boxes, or a load of garbage.

But it didn't, and he could not convince himself otherwise. "This is the first time me and Gabriel took a road trip," he said to the spider. Tommy had been fast asleep. "We always meant to go somewhere, do something as brothers. At Pop's funeral, we were sincere. The Macalister boys, terrorizing America, one town at a time. At least – at the very least – we were supposed to keep in touch. Talk once or twice a week, keep up with each others' lives. Act like a family."

He laughed to himself. "That's a good one," he sneered. "Even when we was under one roof, we couldn't act like a family. Couldn't even pretend. I ain't that we hated each other. If either of 'em needed anything, we were there. It's just that once we were there, things turned ugly. Life wasn't exactly kind to us, growing up, but we learnt how to live. We didn't know any better; everyone was poor, and we had to be hard with each other to get tough.

"Now look where that got Gabe. If he hadn't been so tough, he'd have never got mixed up in that brawl. He'd still be here, an' I wouldn't have to think about this stuff. Christ."

He turned up the radio a little, and sang along softly with Waylon Jennings and Willie Nelson to "The Ballad of Poncho and Lefty."

"We're about a mile out of Amarillo," Jude said to Tommy.

He stirred in his sleep, and looked through the spider web to the orange haze of the city. "How far?"

"'Bout a mile, or so."

"Okay. If you can, let me off at the bus terminal."

Jude smiled. "If I can find it." They rode in silence to the city limits. "Say, you need a couple bucks?"

"No, that's okay. You've done enough. I can make it from here."

Jude shrugged. He'd been glad for the company; it was a relief from the solitude, and saved him two or three hours of travel time. He knew that the last long stretch home would be lonely, but he had his brother. And they'd be home by 9 am.

"You're a good man, Jude." There aren't many people who would do this much for another. There aren't many who would do anything for another. You'll be rewarded."

Jude grinned. "I'm not in it for rewards. I'm just trying to get by, and maybe help someone else, if I can."

"Thank you. The world could use a few more like you." He looked out the window. "There's the terminal. You can drop me off here, I'll walk the rest of the way."

Jude pulled to the side of the road, and held out his hand as Tommy got out. "Take care of yourself, sir. I hope you find what you need. And thanks."

Tommy shook his hand. "Don't give up."

"Well, Gabe, it's just me and you and the spider again. Peace, bro."

Jude shifted the truck into first gear, and drove into the dusky Amarillo night. He laughed to himself as he passed a sign which said, "Jesus Saves!" Beneath, in large yellow letters, someone had spray-painted, "BYOB". Don't be that way (he said to himself), unless you intend to stay that way.

He had lost himself in that small Texas town. She had given him a sense of hope that he'd imagined was long, long passed. In his mind, he re-created his Ideal of Perfection; tall, dark-haired, Celtic. With a pride equaled only by his own. His only equal would be one of Highland blood. Everything else would fall into place, according to his dream.

Through the plains, he chased that vision like a donkey would chase a carrot on a stick. The vision had Kat's face and Sarah's voice. It danced like Sheba. Jude was bothered by the idea of pursuing his dead brother's girlfriend; it was almost like betrayal. But life goes on, he thought. Someone has to pick up the pieces. Carry on the...

How would his mother react?

He wondered about his father's... inconsistency. That was one of the virtues the old man had taught him. And honesty, speak your mind and treat others as you want to be treated. Don't tell people what they want to hear. Integrity: Stand behind every word. Give a fair treatment, and follow through. Like baseball. Like baseball. Keep your eye on the ball, until it leaves the park. Loyalty. A man does right by you, make sure you do more for him. Give everyone the respect that they deserve, until that trust is broken. No one is above reproach, including you. Ensure you're never in that position.

And life moved on, past his father and past him. The old school values were gone in all but a handful of people. They were lost on his brother Michael, but not on Gabriel. He alone could instill the virtues in another generation. He needed to raise children, he needed to discover the part of himself that he'd lost.

Jude tried to make Kat fit his ideal; he tried, in his mind, to make her the One. But his mind wandered to Sarah. He thrilled at the memory of her voice.

A soft rain began to fall, streaking his windshield with the tears of heaven. He turned on the defroster to stop his breath from clouding his vision. The spider scurried to the warmth, and fell asleep beside the forced heat. Jude pondered the spider's dreams, if it dreamt at all.

The rain had pounded at the cab of the truck for hours. Jude kept an eye on his cargo, checking to see if the tarp had come loose. The cover was secure, it hadn't moved since he tied it down. The rain beat the pavement, until the painted lines could not be seen. Jude felt secure, except the flyspeck towns that he'd had to drive through.

Familiar sights began to emerge through the haze. After ten hours alone, he felt a connection to his childhood that brought him full circle; he was no longer by himself. He was with friends and family,

just beyond the reach of his headlights. “After Midnite (with Blair Garner)” played a request from Sarah Conway Twitty with “That’s My Job” burrowed into Jude’s mind. There were drops that the windshield wipers could not carry away, a haze that the defroster could not melt.

“Why did you leave me,” he screamed. His father and his brother were the objects of his anger. “Why am I left alone?”

A sense of dread filled Jude as he drove through the empty Colorado plains. This is almost as bad as Texas, he thought, but greener. At least that could be said. Spring bred a little life here. The rain seemed to wash green into the soil, where he could see it along the ditches and the shoulder, pounding the earth, until it release its captive life. He recalled a line from Pablo Meruda, which he read years before. “Give me silence, water, hope / Give me struggle, iron, volcanoes.” He wanted the first, but could only seem to find the last.

It was the struggle that kept him awake at night, and that gave him a reason to wake up in the morning. It was almost a symbiotic relationship, a catch-22. He lived for the day-to-day battles, and life obliged. Neither seemed to ask or give a quarter. It would end, he thought, in deadlock.

Everything he had, he’d had to work for. Like his father did. The virtue of an honest days work for an honest days pay had only become important after he left home. But the world had changed without warning since he was a child; there was little pay in hard work, especially for someone else. The farm was harder and earned less money than a corporate job, but it was his. The bank still owned half of it, but the payments were on time, and they were earned honestly. He began to understand his father’s sense of honor; it was bound with the life of the land. There were many lessons that Jude had learned the hard way, including the value of a name.

As a young man, he had, like many teenagers, raised a little hell. Now he was trying to rebuild his name, and repair the damage that he’d done. He’d paid his debt to society, as they say, but he felt a larger obligation to himself and his remaining family. He felt the need to make himself larger than his past, to swallow it and bury it in his future.

This thought only intensified the feeling of dread. He was unsure of his ability to re-create himself. He was worried that he would fall back into his old habits, make the same mistakes as when his father died.

He prayed that his home was still standing. He hoped that the dead man had come to recover the carcasses. He wondered if there were more.

The night grew colder, more empty. He drove on, hoping to find some small town with a 24-hr gas station. The road had begun to ice over in places; he hoped that he wouldn’t encounter any drivers from warmer climates. Only four or five more hours of solitude.

An overpriced Conoco gave him peace of mind. A sleepy cashier tried to overcharge him for the gas, and claimed that they hadn’t changed the sign yet. He gave up quickly, not wanting conflict.

“Well, they raised the prices this evening. The numbers are locked in the office and I don’t have a key.”

“Listen,” Jude said with cold passion, “the price is advertised on the sign. If you charge me more, that is false advertising. This town doesn’t look like it has a high demand for unskilled labor. Which is more important to you – your job or the buck that you’re trying to cheat me out of?”

“Alright, alright. You win. Anything else?”

“No. Thank you.”

“Have a nice night.” The clerk added under his breath. “Jerk.”

Jude didn’t know why that dollar made any difference to him. It was the principle of the thing. He realized his father had viciously defended such matters of principle, no matter how trivial. He felt his father within him, good and bad.

Jude swore between his teeth, and walked back into the store.

“Look. I’m sorry about that,” Jude said as he took a dollar from his pocket. He handed the bill to the clerk. “It was uncalled for. Here. Just make sure the sign gets changed.”

The clerk gave him a funny look. “Whatever, man.” He thought Jude was an idiot.

Jude returned to the truck, as the rain softened to snow. “I’m not going to take your place, Dad. I’ll try to live up to your ideals, but I’m not going to fight your fights. I refuse to become you.”

As he drove into the falling snow, he trembled with emotion.

He turned over his conversation with Michael, trying to remember. He’d called before he left; Michael had said the arrangements had been made (except? was there an except?), and that the business end was to wait until Jude returned, after the funeral calmed down. The message on the answering machines gave the details of the funeral. An old machine of Michael’s had been taken to the ranch. Everything seemed fine, couldn’t stay long. The pallbearers (an emotional dead zone – what had he said?)... Minister... plot... will. At least he had the foresight to leave one. Basic stuff, split fifty-fifty, after expenses.

The car? Oh, fine, fine. That makes things easier. Hire someone to clear out his things, clothes to charity, mementoes divided – the kids should get something – and... Who? No kidding. And she... you? tactful? Right. Well, I look forward to meeting... Sarah. Right. Nothing to worry about. You should say something, if you’re up to it. Mom’s... as well as can be expected. Yeah, probably another one this year. I just hope she waits a few months. Too many, too close together. No, she won’t be leaving the house. We can get her to the funeral, the reception, then... we need to talk about the house.

Oh, yeah. The funeral director will be there at six a.m. No, I didn’t talk to him. Said goodbye when he left. He was headstrong, didn’t forgive easily. But I still say he shouldn’t have left. Look what happened.

I should have said something, Jude thought, instead of hanging up. Another trait of his father’s. They were all bull-headed, unwilling to admit that they were wrong. That sense of righteousness had made

life very difficult. It kept Gabe and Michael in eternal silence. Jude didn't want that to happen to him. He'd call Michael when he reached town. Keep communication open. There were too many people that he could never talk to again.

"We have a special request tonight," the voice on the radio said, "A man called, who lost his brother a few days ago. Our hearts and prayers go out to him, and everyone who has suffered the loss of someone close. This is for Gabriel, from your brother. Conway Twitty, with 'That's My Job,' here on After Midnite."

Jude turned up the radio, and looked at the tarp behind him. Light snow dusted it, dancing and swirling in the wind. "He cared, bro, even though he didn't show it much. We all appreciate what you did for Mom."

His voice trailed off, and he fought to see through the tears in his eyes.

Denver was a brightly-lit cesspool. He crossed over to I-25 on I-70, and began to regret his decision. A steel refinery crouched ahead of him, the lights that were trapped in its metal web created a hellish twilight. Two and three story pillars of flame defied God to extinguish them with the snow.

Semi trucks and trailers, and early morning commuters roared past like angry predators. Their exhaust made the pre-dawn city stink of decay.

Jude drove faster, hoping to escape the grasp of this black hole. In the strange reflected light of the clouds and snow, the city appeared to be a huge graveyard. His sense of dread rose into a terrible panic.

As he drove deeper into the maze of concrete, steel and glass, he began to see visions of his own death. Not the final scene itself, but of the reality beyond the veil. It was filled with white noise and stark whiteness. He returned to the real world among lights and horns and middle fingers extended in the universal sign of "Help."

Refocus. Find something to use as a distraction.

He lit a cigarette with a match. He glanced at the cover, and the message. "I've got your number." He placed it on the dashboard before him, like a bobbing-headed Jesus. He removed the photo of Sarah from his shirt pocket, and slid it over the rpm gauge. The glow of the control panel lights gave it an eerie feel, with the words written on its back bleeding through. The radio played the strained emotion of "A Country Boy Can Survive."

Everything was in place. The funeral, the will, and the icons. Something to focus on.

He began to hope that their wouldn't be another long, lonely night. He prayed that the screams wouldn't echo through an empty house. The reality that he had no real, visceral support system sank in. Michael had his wife, his mother was nearly gone, and the cheese stands alone. If only, if only... but he knew that they were merely pleasant diversions. Kat would be serving coffee to some lonesome ranch hand, Sheba would be comforting her husband after his journey, and he would walk his brother down the aisle.



Even *he* had a support system, someone young and beautiful to grieve for him.

It struck Jude, then. A pocket full of singles, Bourbon Street, polluted into toxic waste. He wondered if Gabe would have told her, if he would confess the sin of loneliness. The most terrible and most deadly.

No need to say anything. Keep the scene civil, let his memory rest in peace. He could use that information to his advantage, but it would only dishonor him. No, there must be another way to end the long night, to give himself, and Sarah, solace and consolation.

He no longer felt in control of the truck. He was terrified that someone would end his journey, or that he would spook and hit a lamppost.

The stories that he'd heard of people shooting into traffic, or lunatics leading high-speed chases, were working on his imagination. It convinced him that he was going to die in this city. Another reason to hate it. The only thing to like about it was baseball. It was, eighty-some-odd days a year, the one small island of decency in this pit.

Jim Tatum, number 20, the best damn utility player in the league, is gone from my baseball, he thought. Where have you gone, Jim Tatum?

He'd left the organization quietly. Jude found something else to hate.

He drove past the glass towers of downtown, and looked into their reflected darkness. This, he thought, is the Valley of the Shadow of Death. The black heart of the industrial machine, the mind of the monster. The air around him was heavy with smog, and filled with a decaying stench. He knew that if he stopped, he could never be clean again. Even if he survived.

The mineral skin from the South still encased him like armor. He felt glad for it; this city's filth could not reach him. It was no protection against the other poisons of this machine, the destructive intent of acres of paved earth, left barren and useless.

Jude passed through the city, unnoticed by a million souls. The lights threw their surreal glow across the sky, the motionless chaos of Hell bleeding into the morning. He would not have been surprised to see demon shadows in his headlights; he had anticipated this. The worst of the scene was waiting. Waiting for the bad to happen, waiting for the city's edge. The sense of dread grew like a cancer within him. The report of gunfire would have been welcome.

Thank God for the nap, he thought, now I'm at least ready. I must make it HOME, and complete this duty. Less than 10 hours until the funeral. Then, at least the body can rest.

He could feel himself sinking into the darkness, even as the eye of God began to rise in the east. The red leeches into the clouds like an open wound. Rain fell from the black and red towers above him, a marriage of wolves. It was not a soft, cleansing rain; it was an oppressive force, at war with the asphalt and concrete. Jude was simply an innocent bystander, caught in the assault. He knew which side he would have been on, had he been given a choice. No one had any real choice. It was all just a matter of consequence.

The northbound traffic thinned more. The ants were rushing toward the center of the hive, ready to lay down their lives for their queen. He pitied this swarm of humanity. They were disconnected from life, they lived to serve and conquer the earth. Mastery of it's creatures was a sad, misbegotten myth. Most men could hardly master themselves.

He sped past the Mile High Stadium, built for the gentlemanly pursuit of baseball. He tipped his hat in reverence, and prayed for a good season.

The sun spread surreal twilight over apartment complexes, churches, and bars. Eighty years ago, men drove livestock across this land. Two hundred years ago, Native Americans hunted buffalo here, Jude thought. How much changes, even in a minute.

Gabriel had become the man that he was in twenty-three years. All that he had done was undone in three minutes. Another sunrise had passed that he would not see, rain still fell on the tarp. Rain that he would never feel.

The isolation of death must be absolute. Jude was glad, at that moment, to be able to feel the pain of loss.

Trapped or released, Jude wondered. He felt as cold and gray as the world outside. Cold and gray like the concrete vault of the grave.

Life is just one long funeral procession. Parents carry you at birth, and you spend the rest of your life trying to find pall bearers and mourners, to carry you again. His parents had made half of the pall bearers for their funerals, but someone took one away from his mother.

Gabriel should never have fought back. But that is a rightful end to an honorable life, Jude hissed bitterly. As his father had told them as children, "Life without honor is meaningless. Honor in death is glory." The old bastard was probably drunk.

Jude drove over the crest of a hill, and the world spilled out before him. The rain had died, and left life in its wake. This was the world his father had taught him to love, the world that he left for Jude. He'd given Michael a different one, that of commerce and concrete. He went away before he could give one to Gabriel. The youngest was left to fend for himself.

"Won't be long, Gabe." Jude said to the air, "then we'll be home."

In the hours after sunrise, the road began to show signs of life again. Jude escaped the race for a few moments at a truck stop. He filled his gas tank, paid, and called the mortician.

The mortician sounded tired when he answered the phone.

"I'm about half-hour, forty-five minutes away. I didn't wake you, did I?"

"No, you didn't. Who is this?"

"Sorry. Jude Macalister. I'm bringing my brother Gabriel in for the funeral this afternoon."

"Ah. Yes. Michael said you would call. I'll meet you at the funeral home, in back. Do you know how to get there?"

“Unless you moved. I’ll see you there.”

He rejoined the stream of travelers, and desperately wanted to be home, in bed. He wanted this to be over. But he knew from experience that the details would drag on for months. The wound would never really heal, but the pain would ease.

He should have called Michael, at least to touch base. Find out how Mother’s doing. The house would be filled, and there would be little time. Sleep before the funeral. Don’t drop the casket. And for the love of God, don’t cry.

The town that Jude grew up in did not seem the same upon his return. He saw it through new eyes, the eyes of a stranger. It was ethereal, blank, and non-descript. The town was like every other gathering of civilization: proper, whitewashed, and dirty. It stank like every other town, exhaust, decay, and the perfume of defiant flowers. He found that he had no feelings about this place that he’d once loved; it was just another small spider on the map of the universe.

Over there, on that street, he’d earned his first speeding ticket. A few blocks from there was the home of a girl that he once thought he loved. Here, the prize rose garden that he’d stolen flowers from. The restaurant where his family had gone for special occasions. His old high school.

Finally, the funeral home where another defining moment was to occur. It was as drab and gray as the rest of the town, although its walls were beginning to house some stubborn ivy that refused to let go.

The mortician was waiting solemnly in the back, standing with his two assistants. He guided Jude to the casket gurney by hand signals. His assistants began to remove the tarp before Jude could unfold himself from the cab.

“If you would help us with the casket,” the mortician said, “just take it to the end there.”

When it was unloaded, Jude extended a hand, and introduced himself.

“Howard Phillips,” he shook Jude’s hand, and guided Jude into the parlor. “This way, please.”

They walked into Phillips’ office. “Mr. Macalister,” he began as Jude removed his hat and took a seat. “I do not approve of you delivering the body. That is best left to professionals.”

“Well, sir, it just don’t make sense to me to pay someone to do a job that I can take care of. I was down there, the body was down there. I came back, and it came with me.”

“Be that as it may, there are health considerations. And laws.”

“He’s frozen solid. Besides, no one came in contact with the body.”

“I can appreciate that this is a difficult time for you, and you may not have fully thought this out. But I cannot condone your actions.”

“Okay. Fine. So you don’t like how it got here. You’ve been paid, right? Just do your job, and let me get home. I need sleep and a shower before we bury my little brother. So, if you’ll excuse me,” Jude said as he rose and donned his hat. He did not like Phillip’s condescension, or the attitude that he’d displayed. Jude turned as he reached the door. “Have you, Mr. Phillips, ever lost a younger brother? Have

you ever been poor? I'm sorry, but I have, and I am poor. If I can get around spending eight or nine hundred dollars, I will."

"I hope Michael got a nice box. Hell, we've got the extra money to spend now."

Phillips stared after Jude, stunned.

Jude fled the town by the way of the back roads. Few souls witnessed his violent display as he drove. No one heard him curse God and Mankind and Fate, his plea for an answer went unheard. No one saw him crack his steering wheel and bruise the palm of his hand. Only his companion, the glass spider, watched as he cursed himself and his foolishness.

He bit into his lip until he tasted the blood. He dried his eyes on his shirt sleeves as he turned onto the county road by which he lived. No smoke, no fires. A good sign. He lit a cigarette to calm his nerves.

One car in the driveway, the neighbor's. He parked his truck, took out his own luggage, then gently guided the spider onto his hand. "Come on, little guy. I'll find you a good place."

He knocked heavily as he opened his door, then placed his baggage on the couch.

"Hello? I'm back," he yelled.

"Mr. Macalister?" a young voice replied.

"Yeah. Any problems?"

A young man of nineteen walked into the room. Jude noticed fresh mud on his shoes, bits of hay stuck to the front of his shirt and pants. "None that I couldn't handle. Two new lambs, twins. Two dead ewes. Guess it all evens out."

"There's a bunch of messages for you. Michael left a machine with the, ah, info. I hope you don't mind, but I wrote down who called and for what. Want 'em now?"

"No, thanks. Right now, I just want a scotch and sleep. I'll get 'em later. Stick around, though. Wake me around 2. If anyone calls or stops by, take a message. If it's an emergency, let me know at 2. Unless the house is on fire. I'll pay you after the funeral reception, about 6:30 or 7. You'll have to take care of things this evening, if that's not a problem."

"No problem at all," he replied bitterly.

"Don't worry. You'll get extra for the trouble." Jude reached into his cabinet for the scotch. The spider scurried across his hand, into the cool darkness.

Jude found himself standing by a country road. A parade began to appear; he felt compelled to watch. His father led it, followed by his brother Gabriel. Hundreds of faces passed before him, each belonging to a friend or relative who had died. Acquaintances, people he'd hardly known, looked at him in pity. He felt ashamed to be alive.

Failed relationships formed a small contingent behind the dead. Accusations flared behind blind, staring eyes.

"Thou art judged."

Jude felt his mouth form the words, he heard his own voice speaking them. "Thou art judged and known."

Guilt and shame washed through him. Nothing could be done for the dead; the living had passed from his life. He was helpless in the face of the past.

He turned away from the road. Behind him was the hill of Cavalry, Christ hanging from the cross, between the shadowed figures of the thieves. The thief on Christ's left jeered.

"Behold the King of the Jews. Some king, eh? Crucified like a common criminal. Ha! Death is the Great Leveler. It makes kings and beggars alike. It comes to us all, my friend. Me, you, him. Some savior," he spat.

Jude went to the other thief, hoping for consolation. Instead, he stared into his own face.

The alarm woke him before the crucified man could speak. He showered, dressed himself with a black suit, and walked down to the kitchen to deal with the afternoon.

He glanced at the sheets of paper where the messages had been written. Nothing important, most of them condolences. The mail contained a few bills (which would go unpaid), cards from relatives who wouldn't be able to attend the funeral, and a sampling of junk mail. He arranged them in piles, and walked away.

The neighbor's boy was walking back from the corrals. Jude lit a cigarette, and walked to meet him.

"I really appreciate you staying around. Looks like you've done a good job here, which gives me one less thing to worry about."

"Thanks. And you want me to stay here this evening?"

"Tell you what. Why don't we go ahead and settle up now, that way you can cut out after feeding this evening." He took out a handful of bills from his pocket, counted out one hundred dollars, and handed it to the boy. "Hope this'll cover it."

"That's too much, sir. I can't..."

"Take it," Jude said, pushing the money back into his hand. "Before I change my mind."

"Thanks, Mr. Macalister."

"Look. If you need a job this summer, I'm sure we can work something out. Okay?"

"Alright. I'll talk to Dad."

"Alright. Thanks again. Don't forget to give the beasts fresh water before you finish."

Jude left for town. He took the long way, and drove beside the river to the house where he was born.

His father had built the structure, the barn and corrals were raised with help from neighbors and family. It had taken his father request for their help to begin the long process of turning neighbors into friends. The fences that had stood just four years ago represented a link to the community. They were the keys to the doors, and with twenty years of effort, his family became a necessary part of the life of the area. His father gave advice, most of which was unpopular but later proved sound. He helped to keep the small stockyard alive, he did his best to strengthen the community.

Jude's mother stayed active in the women's groups; she used a needle and thread to quietly weave her way into the society. She was the first to arrive at the home of a sick friend, or to the survivors of the recently deceased, with a hot meal and a comforting ear. She kept her own family fed and clean, no matter what. Their father provided the means, she provided their home.

He wanted to cry as he looked at the dilapidated fences and the broken windows in the barn. The pasture was overgrown with weeds. The paint was peeling from the windowsills.

Jude cursed and drove on.

He drove through the backroads of his memory, replaying the Sunday afternoon drives that his father had enjoyed. He could hear the old man's voice despairing over Anderson's bad luck with his corn during the last hailstorm, of offering unheard advice for Peterson's cattle. He caught himself chiding a tenant farmer for overwatering the spring wheat. The words of his father had come out of his mouth; rather than exorcizing the spirit, he felt himself becoming possessed.

He drove past the irrigation canals where Michael, Gabriel, and he would fish for the carp, sunfish, and bluegill that would wash through. They went to those places frequently as children, but after Michael started high school, there didn't seem to be enough time. But even then, he and Gabriel would walk by the culverts and ditches to the canals and the reservoir. Gabriel had been filled with dreams and plans; Jude wondered how much would have changed, had they known what would happen.

Only bits and pieces of their talks came to him; already, he could feel his brother leaving. He could recall the voice, his brother's easy laugh; but Gabriel's face was gone. At least the living, animated features. He could conjure up the memory of his sight, although he could not lose the crust of blood or the empty sockets. Someone had broken his windows.

Jude poured his rage, pain, and frustration into driving. He wove his way into town, unsure if he was in control, indifferent to the answer. He screamed at God (or Kali, or Ahura Mazda, or whoever) in his rage. He cursed the cruelty of life, and begged for an answer.

There were cars parked on the street two and three blocks from the church. Some he recognized as friends and family, most of them were unfamiliar. The world seemed to be washed in twilight as Jude turned the truck into the church parking lot. The parking lot had been reserved for immediate family (was Michael supposed to pick Mom up? was I?), and a few men in suits lingered by a side door. The funeral director's assistant; Michael, in a black suit and sunglasses to hide his bloodshot eyes; Uncle Roy, his father's youngest brother; and three young men whom he didn't recognize. Friends of Gabriel's, no doubt. The three remaining male heirs of the Macalister chieftain, come to bear their own to the grave.

He wondered how late he was.

He took a deep breath after he parked, checked himself in the mirror, and lit a cigarette. Settling into his best effort of composure, he walked up to the group. The only one in boots, a hat, and a bolo tie, he thought. Hard to believe I'm related to these jokers.

Michael walked over to the truck as Jude stepped out. They embraced warmly, both of them struggling not to cry.

“You don’t look half bad when you dress up,” Michael said as they started toward the church.

“Well, you know what they say,” Jude answered, “you can wash a pig and put it in a suit, but it’s still a pig.”

Michael chuckled. “How are you doing?”

“Top of the world, all things considered. How ‘bout you?”

“It’s tough. I watched both of you grow up.”

“Hope you’ll be around when I get old.” Jude looked at the church, studying the stained glass depictions of the Ten Commandments. His eyes fell on “Thou shalt not kill.” After a moment, he said, “How’s Mom? Will she be here?”

“Yeah. She’ll be here later on.” Michael grinned, and added, “You should meet the nurse she’s been assigned. I found out she’s single.”

Jude returned the smile. “We’d better go in. I just seen the funeral director. Looks like he’s lookin’ for us.”

The haze in Jude’s mind grew as they walked into the church. He began to feel like a sleepwalker; his actions were someone else’s, his thoughts were roaming the ranch where he’d been raised.

He wandered through the pasture, looking for stranded sheep. A pair of gloves and wire cutters were stuck in his back pocket. He hated the job, and resented having to fight the animals he was trying to help. It had started to rain. Dad was right, he thought, I should have brought a jacket.

“You say something, Jude?”

He looked around him. The funeral director, the two assistants, Michael, and four others were gathered in a corner.

“Are you okay?” Michael said?

“Oh, yeah. Fine, fine. I guess I should’ve gotten a little more sleep, is all.”

The funeral director glared at him. “As I was saying. We’ll help you bring the casket in. Then, you will walk with it to the altar. From there, you may sit with your families. Any questions?”

Michael leaned to Jude and whispered, “We’re in the back, with Mom. Just follow me.”

“Alright, so we’ll give everyone about five minutes. And be careful. It might be a little slippery in the rain.”

“Enough time for another smoke,” Jude said as he turned to his brother. “Care to join me?”

“Sure.”

Michael declined an offered cigarette, and they walked in silence toward Jude’s truck.

“Looks like it might rain some,” Jude said, looking west. “We could probably use a little.”

“Yeah.” Michael raised his eyes to the dark, heavy clouds. “I’m sorry about that earlier.”

“Me too.”

“It’s just stressful. Between Mom, the life, and this...”

“I know. How’s Mom been doing? With this.”

“Michael exhaled a hard, fast breath, then turned to Jude. “Not good. I think... it’s time.”

“Have you talked to her about it?”

“No. I’ve made arrangements for live-in care for the next week. And I’ve talked to the nursing home.”

“Well, when d’you want to sit down with her? Just give me a time.”

“I don’t think that’s...” he held back the statement. “Let’s let things settle down a little, okay?”

“So the papers are already signed. I suppose it’s for the best.”

“Nothing’s in stone yet.”

Jude stabbed out the cigarette with the heel of his boot. “Did Gabriel talk to you?”

“Not since...” Michael let the thought go.

“Well, I’ve got something for you at home.”

Warren waived them back. The instructions were given, but Jude was lost in his own thoughts.

“I don’t want to do this,” he said, giving voice to everyone’s thoughts.

The service was conducted over an open casket. Gabriel’s body was on display; it seemed to be a solo freakshow. The mortician had tried to cake makeup around the sunken eye sockets, which had been sewn shut, but it could not hide the heavy bruises. The hands, crossed neatly on the chest, were pale red and hollow. Gabriel’s torso and abdomen had swollen considerably, as though he’d been stuffed with straw. It did not appear to be Gabriel at all, but a scarecrow stolen from a field of corn.

Jude had no respect for the dead when they had no respect for themselves. The open casket served to rob the last of Gabriel’s dignity.

He wanted to scream, shout out to his younger brother that he should present himself better in public, or close the door, or run from the crowd. He wished to shake Gabriel awake, retrieve him from the dream, take his brother’s place... But he was as helpless as his brother. He and Gabriel were trapped within the nightmare. No one could wake them.

Jude felt like iron. He couldn’t move, not even to raise his hand to wipe a tear from his eye.

The service began with a benediction; Latin would have been more fitting, Jude thought. The pastor spoke of Gabriel as though they were old friends, as he had with their father, hanging such qualities as openness, honesty, benevolence, and a deep love of ranching on the body. Jude wanted to laugh, or lash out at the man, trapping him within his own words. Jude had almost written “pedophile” under Gabe’s “enjoyed activities,” but thought better of it. The clergyman seemed to lack a sense of humor.

“I believe Gabriel’s brothers wish to say a few words. Michael?”

As Michael stepped up to the podium, Jude felt reality slip a little farther from his tenuous grasp. “Friends, family,” Michael began, “thank you for coming. It means so much to us. Gabriel was one of the finest young men I’ve known. After Father passed on, he helped Mother. Whenever I needed something, I was there. He’d spend time with my children, and whenever they went fishing or to a ball game with Uncle



Gabe, they'd talk about it for days. He taught them more about baseball than I could, he provided a good example. We'll all miss him."

Jude watched himself walk to the podium, and hug his brother. He watched the embrace passively, he saw the weather-worn rancher start to cry. He listened to the words, and thought how pitiable they sounded with a drawl, but he listened unsympathetically.

"I'm sorry. This is hard for me. I don't have any amusing anecdotes, any recent ones anyway, since I didn't really get to know him. I do know that he loved life, and tried to live each day to the fullest.

"Even as a child, he had to push his limits. He'd jump from the hay loft to the barn floor, just to see if he could. He had to take things to the edge, so he could find out where it was. He followed his heart, and sometimes got lost. But he always found his way home. Welcome home, Gabe. Goodbye."

Jude watched himself return to his seat, alone in the back. No others came forward; they just stood up where they were, and said a few words. The service closed with a prayer.

He had seen no one at the funeral, only rows of faceless bodies in suits and dresses. Gabriel's face had haunted him like a specter, reaching out with the hollow gaze of his broken eyes, as if to say; "I'm at peace."

When the ceremony was over, the pallbearers escorted the casket down the aisle. The doors at the back were opened, and Jude walked in disbelief, an automaton.

A soft rain had begun to fall, while the clouds parted to let the sun shine a spotlight on the churchyard. An arc of mourners stood on either side of a bagpiper who stood solemnly in full Highland dress. He played a traditional dirge as the six men fought their emotions from the sanctuary to the Hearse. God Himself mourned Gabriel's passing. He had ignored Jude's condemnation; His capacity for forgiveness, to Jude at that moment, seemed infinite.

Jude drove around the town, past fields, farmhouses, and ranches. He didn't want to face the gathering that would invade his home, eat his food, drink his beer. He had announced the invitation at the graveside, although he'd had second thoughts about allowing anyone to enter his world. But he didn't want to be alone.

The old houses looked dead and empty. Their windows looked down on him, reflecting the crimson sunset. He drove through the gauntlet, fleeing the cold judgment of the ghosts behind the windows. He was caught by them, between the living and the dead. Soon, though, he would be surrounded by those who remained with choices, not yet paralyzed by Azrael.

Gabriel had left everything behind. His friends, family, hopes, possessions, his mortal shell. He had left the world with mere memories that would disappear with time and the departure of those minds.

Jude began to wonder what he would leave, what the earth would have other than his carcass. He became afraid of being forgotten, lost to the everyday tasks of waking, working, and dreaming. He found himself in mourning.

Later, family and friends gathered at the small house that Gabe had called “home.” Jude wondered what would happen now.

He was introduced to several people, Gabe’s friends who’d been able to make it. He forgot the names as they were spoken, if he’d heard them at all. The only one he knew was Sarah.

“Gabe spoke highly of you. You were special to him.”

“He was a good kid. He meant a lot to me,” Jude replied. “But this must be hard for you. How long had you two been...”

“Dating? About three years. I met him after your father died. Through your mother.” She smiled. “We were going to run away to Las Vegas. He said that it would be less complicated.”

Jude glanced around to find Michael. He was out of the room. “Yeah. Him and Michael didn’t get along too well. Michael called him a freeloader ‘bout a year ago. Gabe took offense to that.”

“So, have you decided what to do now? About your mother, I mean.”

Jude took a deep swallow from his bottle. “I’d like to keep her here as long as possible. You know, let her keep her freedom. She don’t belong in a nursing home.”

“Those places do get lonely, and,” she was interrupted. A friend of Gabe’s (David? Stephen? Paul? Jude couldn’t remember) had walked up to Sarah, and gave her a peck on the cheek.

“How are you holding up?”

“Fine. Just fine.”

“Fucked-up, insecure, neurotic, emotional?”

Sarah laughed. “Yep, fine.” She took the man’s hand, and introduced them again. “Jude, this is Peter, a mutual friend. He’s been my pillar.”

Jude wrestled with himself to be polite, after Peter’s offensive remark. “We’ve met. Excuse me, I need to find Michael.”

He watched them out of the corner of his eye. Sarah had been everything he’d imagined: sweet, caring, well-spoken, and very attractive. He hadn’t counted on her having a life outside of his family. The world he’d created in his mind began to collapse.

The incident had proved to him that hope was the most merciless of addictions. It offers only the promise of a high; even if fulfilled, the promise would be more than the reality. Hope disappoints, but it has made itself more important than any other emotion. The world is filled with possibility, and hope brings them closer to our reach. This is the cruelest form of self abuse, he thought, to hold hope for so long, only to see the object dissipate. There *is* hope in Hell. Hell is filled with hope. Dante’s famous line was the last bit of aid to the condemned. “Abandon all hope...” Let Hell do its own work.

Jude hid in Gabriel’s room. He didn’t want to face the world yet. Everyone worried about him, it seemed. It was clear to him that he was not taking Gabe’s death as well as the others. He always accepted the fact of death without anger or denial. He had trouble with accepting the loss, the devastating change that death brought.

Someone banged on the door. "Hey, Jude. Come out of there," Michael's voice boomed through the door. You need to at least say hello to these people."

"Give me a few minutes."

"No. Get out here." He paused, and sighed. "Look, I'm sorry if I pissed you off. But I hate to see someone with your potential just waste it. If you'd just see the community action of the church, well, maybe you'd get involved. You need that."

"I just need a couple of minutes to think." He lit a cigarette. "Just give me that."

"Hey, we're all sad. We're all down about this. If you'd come out, you'd see. Now get out here before I drag you out."

Jude flicked his ashes on the floor. They stood out in the immaculately clean room. He ground them into the carpet with the sole of his boot. He glared at the door, and said with quiet intensity, "Go ahead and try."

"Fine. When you're ready to quit acting like a child, you can come out."

Jude looked around the room. A few baseball trophies graced the chest of drawers, a large poster of George Brett was tacked over the bed. A few photos, family and some cityscapes were hung around the room. Something was missing, however. There was a complete absence of books.

Jude stood, and left the room. He walked to the bathroom, and threw his cigarette in the toilet. "How can anyone live without books?" he asked himself.

"What's that?" Jack Shepherd asked as he passed Jude in the hall.

"Hm? Oh, I guess I was just thinking out loud. I probably picked it up on the road."

"Well, you shouldn't pick up anything on the road. You don't know where it's been." He smiled. "Anyway, are you holding up okay?"

"Yeah, yeah. I'm fi... I'm doin' alright."

"Saw your Mom. She's not doing too good, is she?"

"Naw, this whole business hit her pretty hard. But she's strong. She'll be okay."

"Well, I hope so," Jack reached out his hand. "It's good to see y'all again. Just wish the circumstances were better."

"Thanks. Thanks for coming. It means a lot." Jude hated hollow compliments, but they had their place. This whole scene, the people in his home drinking and laughing, had to have been a hallucination. He wanted to wake up from that dream, to the crowd gone and his world would again be his to do with as he willed. But his brother would still be dead. He wanted to be home, back with the studied pain of Beethoven and Rilke's mournful *Sonnets*. He wanted to shed his skin, leave the world for awhile. But he knew that he'd never be able to leave himself behind.

## *Going Home*

### epilogue

He wandered through the streets like a fog, reaching into the bars and churches with his eyes, and embracing the dark corners and alleyways. Behind the smoky stained glass and between the dumpsters he saw home; this wasn't where he lived – that was a thousand miles away – but this is where he heard his own heart for the first time. The steady din of traffic a few blocks away, the music that seeped out of the cracks of doorways, the hushed conversations of friends and lovers, even the steady hum from the halos of streetlamps flowed into the rhythm of the city, and his heart slowed itself to match the beat.

The Grand Design of the French Quarter pulled at him like a lifeline. He moseyed toward the source, caught within a hazy dream. As he drifted into the grid of old Rues, he heard the source of the sound. It was a bluesy jazz, rolling into the night. An old black gentleman, whose dark hair was salted with gray, blew the delicate tune through a polished saxophone. Two young couples listened from a respectful distance, and a burly Irish gentleman passed by to drop a dollar into the man's hat.

Gabriel paused on the corner, and sat on his heels. He lit a cigarette, took a deep drag. He held the smoke, giving it time to steal the oxygen from his blood, then exhaled. The bluish-gray cloud dissipated into the night, entangling itself with the New Orleans air. The Irish dandy touched his hat in greeting as he passed by. Gabriel smiled his acceptance.

The two couples lingered until the song ended, then parted with the obligatory tips and “good evenings.” The bluesman smiled, and leaned against the wall. He rolled a cigarette, and lit it with a wooden kitchen match. He looked at Gabriel with tired, bloodshot eyes as the young man approached. “If you got a request, it'll have to wait. I need a break.”

“No, sir. I just wanted to let you know how much I enjoyed that,” Gabriel said in his easy, country drawl.

“Thanks.” He took another drag from the cigarette, and wiped the stray tobacco from his tongue. “First time alone in the Big Easy?”

“Yeah. Down here from Wyoming.”

“Awful long way to go, just to hear me play.”

“Well, it was worth it.” Gabriel wrenched his face in indecision. “How come you don't play in clubs?”

The man laughed. Better money here. Less hassle. I mean, I make my own hours, play what I want. Freedom's a pretty good gig, if you can pull it off.”

“I hear you, sir. I hope maybe someday I can find it.” Gabriel leaned against the wall beside the man, and lit a cigarette as he spoke. “I've got a brother back home who's looking for it on his ranch, following in Dad's footsteps. He says it don't mean much, 'less you've got someone to share it with. My other brother believes that politics are freedom. He's married, couple of tricycle motors – he knows a lot about politics.”

The older man laughed easily, baring immaculate white teeth in a broad smile. He relaxed, but kept an eye on his hat. "So, what about you? Schooled in politics yet?"

Gabriel reached into his back pocket and slid his wallet out. He opened it to a photo of a woman. She had a long, melancholy beauty like few the old bluesman had ever seen before. Her face was framed in long wheat-colored hair, her green eyes seeing God. She held all the hope and wonder of the world, even after everything that she'd seen. It was an innocence that refused to be jaded by the world.

"My fiancée," Gabriel explained, half drawn into the dream of the photograph.

"Looks like you're running for president."

Gabriel smiled, sinking into the dream. "Yeah, there ain't another one like Sarah in the world."

"Oh, I don't know about *that*," the older man said, "I've only seen her picture. But judging by that, there ain't many. She here?"

"Who, Sarah?" Gabriel grinned and shook his head. "No, no. This here's *my* trip. We agreed that I needed to see more of the world before we make it final. She knows where she wants to be, and she wants me to find out where I want to be."

"Where's she want to be?"

"She won't say. Doesn't want to bias my opinion or some such."

"What about you?"

"Here. I want to be here."

They smoked in silence, and watched the people stirring in the streets. Gabriel dropped the used butt and rubbed it out with his foot. "Sir, do you believe in destiny?"

"I believe every man's destined to be free," he said, taking up the saxophone. "Back to work. It was nice talking to you."

"The pleasure was all mine," Gabriel replied. He took a five dollar bill from his pocket, folded it in his palm, then knelt down to set it into the hat. He drifted away, toward Bourbon Street, with the sound of smoky jazz clinging to his heels.

As he flowed toward Bourbon Street, he paused occasionally to make wishes on streetlamps. He hoped that Sarah wanted to be here as much as he did, that this would finally be home. It would be several years (he prayed) until his obligations would let him leave. His mother's health required someone to be with her; his brother's were in no position. Thomas had his own family, Jude had his ranch. With their responsibilities, he didn't want to burden them with their mother's care, and a home was beyond consideration. Their father had died screaming at the night, safe and alone in a Medicare room. There was no other choice. The disease had robbed him of his mind.

He paused to wish for his mother's health, when he felt a tap on his shoulder. He turned, and found the Irish gentleman standing behind him. The man smiled gravely, and tipped his hat in greeting. A walking cane was crooked in his left elbow.

"Good evening," he said in a refined accent.

“Evening, sir.”

“I would caution you against Bourbon Street,” the fellow advised. “It has lost its charm since Mardi Gras has grown in popularity. Now, there remains the worst of humanity.”

Gabriel gave a respectful bow, and replied, “I appreciate your concern, sir, and I’ll be careful. I just need to see it once, otherwise it won’t feel like I’ve seen New Orleans.”

“I’d recommend Preservation Hall, instead.”

Gabriel’s eyes lit up, inspired by the landmark. “Yeah, I was there yesterday. One of the first places I’ve seen. A monument to the Southern tradition.”

“Yes. Well, I must be going.” The gentleman tipped his hat once again, and removed his cane from the crook of his arm. “Good evening.”

“Good evening, sir.” He felt a little disappointed that his dream had been interrupted. But he found himself anticipating the adventure of the neon darkness; it was something he lacked at home.

He caught himself stealing quickly through the streets, as though he were late for an illegal appointment. He took little notice of the French architecture and the intricate patterns of wrought iron; his eyes were dazzled by the dull neon lights inviting the voyeurs and drunks.

In an alleyway, someone had spray painted, “Ne pities pas les mortes – ils faut ton envies!” His eyes slid from this back to the street. It was dotted with garbage, and littered with addicts, dealers, ladies of the evening, and tourists of the night. He wandered through the web of humanity and peepshows, until he found a gentleman’s club tucked into the basement of a weekly motel.

A young Creole, built like a bull, demanded ten dollars from him before he could go in. Gabriel fumbled with a small wad of bills, desperate to convey confidence. The Creole took his money, snorted, and grunted, “Bon chance.”

“Merci,” Gabriel mumbled and hurried past.

Inside, he discovered a rather elegant club. Three stages in the center of the room provided the focus; three young women danced there to CCR’s “I Put a Spell on You.” Another half-dozen women were scattered around the room, selling private dances to various gentlemen. Hidden in the shadows were three (that Gabriel could discern) burly men who scanned the crowd.

Gabriel took careful inventory of the scene before he took his place at the bar.

“Honey Lager, please.”

The bartender, dressed in a cheap tuxedo, poured the brew into a glass. “Three dollars.”

Gabriel handed him a blank, unsigned traveler’s check. “Can I start a tab?”

The bartender took it, and wrote Gabriel’s order on a slip. “So, where’re you from?”

“Wyoming.”

“Awful long way to go just to come here,” he said with a smile.

“Well, I was told it’s worth it,” Gabriel replied. He turned toward the stage, and watched the dancers. He wondered if this was money ill-spent.

The story in the paper was brief. The only thing that had made this story different from so many others was the fact that the victim had fought back well enough to put two of his assailants in critical condition.

The saxophone player knew more of the story. He recognized the photograph. He knew the assailants. They made a living playing pool for money. When things got tight, they would find a lone mark, like Gabriel, and shadow him until they could corner him. Most of the people that they chose were out of their depth, middle class men who wanted a little excitement. People who wouldn't fight back.

Maybe they saw that in Gabriel. The look in his eyes that told that he didn't belong, that he was away from home, that he was doing something that he knew he shouldn't be.

They followed him down Bourbon Street. The sax player saw that much, he'd even tried to slow the gang down, and buy Gabriel some time to escape. Gabriel seemed to wait for them. He slowed his pace when they weren't behind him anymore. They would have pushed him into an alley, demanded money. They would have expected pleas for mercy, maybe a cry for help. Gabriel screamed, but it was primal. A lifetime of rage poured out in one yell.

He heard nothing more after that. He had been too far away. He saw the man who had shown him the photo stagger out of the alley several blocks away. He saw the man fall.