

PSYCHODALEK

written by

JAMES RAY

The corridor drifted in and out of focus as James paused to regain his balance. The pools of piss lay stagnant on the concrete floor, aiding the concrete rot, which was ripping through this labyrinth of once luxury apartments. His whole body was achingly stiff as he lifted his head up and tried to focus on the graffiti which lined the corridor, the lettering was almost indistinguishable as the reds, blues and yellows had bled down the walls by the rising ammonia.

His physical balance had almost returned but his body was not yet ready to move on command. He turned his head to the left and stared at the plastic numbers which were mounted on a wooden block and fixed to the metal cell like door, 2001. Two, zero, zero, one. James could see the numbers clearly and he knew what they were for, only they didn't make any sense. He knew his number was 2012 and he knew he had to get there as soon as he could.

He felt his body lurch forward and James followed it further down the endless corridor - a cold, lichen enshrouded, subterranean world, shaded and damp, the ceiling so low you could almost run your fingers through the moss which thrived in the darkness above the low sodium lights caged to the walls. Silent but for the echo of James' own footsteps.

Two zero zero six, two zero zero eight MAN'S ETERNAL QUEST FOR KNOWLEDGE SHALL BE LEAD BY THE BLIND STUMBLING THROUGH THE CHAOS OF THEIR OWN IGNORANCE, FOR ONLY THE WISE SHALL KNOW OF THE REAL HORROR THAT LIES WITH THE ULTIMATE TRUTH, AND THAT TRUTH SHALL BE two zero one two. James had never read the rest of this prophetic statement which was daubed down the left hand side of the corridor for it stretched beyond his door, and he had never been past his door nor had ever turned left when leaving. Right was the way out, left could only lead to more confusion. It wasn't the fear of the truth that stopped him from turning left, it was the fear that he may not be able to find his way back along the corridor.

James put his right hand into his jeans' pocket and pulled out two keys held together by a piece of twisted copper wire. He opened the low lock and brought his hand up to the eye level lock. His hands were yellowed, almost jaundiced. As he clenched the key the creases of his knuckles opened to reveal lines of a brown flaky substance. He held up his left hand and opened his palm, it felt as dry and delicate as papyrus, brown smears ran across the inside of his hand and up between his fingers. James stared into his stained skin and tried to find a memory, anything, a start or an end. There was nothing. He had no recollection of anything beyond his now, where ever his now was.

He opened the second lock and pushed the door open, closing it immediately behind himself. He flicked the light switch on the wall. Nothing. A flashing pink neon Elvis figure hanging outside the window opposite, lit the room enough for James to make his way to a table lamp lying on the floor under the window. It was night. He stood it upright and switched it on. The lamp shade was punctured and torn casting strange shadows across the room. He picked up the blinds from the floor and rearranged them on the window .

The room was short and narrow with two doors on one side with room for an armchair between, a sofa opposite and a coffee table in the centre. The whole place was trashed and littered with broken glass, bottles and overflowing ashtrays. James looked around at the carnage, still trying to grasp at any memory that might surface. A strange acrid air filled the room. James concentrated, trying to breath in as much as he could until the memory of the smell rose to become a stomach wrenching stench, which doubled him up and sent him crippled to the floor.

Lying face down on the worn carpet James could feel his pulse racing in his hot, dry throat. Excruciating pains ripped through his chest and down his legs sending spasms through his spine, he pulled himself into the foetal position trying desperately to hold his body together. The convulsions would come next, he knew

that, followed by an almighty rush of energy like a spiritual orgasm. He lay in agony waiting, his whole body contorting inside as he held it clamped together, hoping and praying that the haldo lithium would leave him in one piece one last time. The pain subsided with the movement, but James remained on the floor until he could smell the carpet under his face. Frankincense, the faint but unmistakable odour filled the pile. The memory had gone, but in it's place was a fear that he had never felt before, a fear so foreboding that James wanted to remain where he was forever.

After a few moments the fear faded into a memory until even the memory had gone. He released himself from his grip and stood up carefully, still clutching at his stomach he sat down on the sofa. With his right forearm he cleared the table in front of him and started to empty the pockets of his battered leather coat - two opened packs of Marlboro, three half used packs of rizlas, a Zippo, one McDonalds kids club take away bag stuffed with cannabis heads, two shotgun cartridges, a plastic bank bag containing a dozen various pills and a paper wrap.

James looked into the remains of the glass table top. His reflection was as yellow as his hands, his eyes red and sunken, his shoulder length hair unkempt and dirty. He resembled a man of sixty rather than his own thirty six years. He thought of what his father might have looked like lying on his death bed riddled with cancer and remorse.

James stared at the display in front of him. What the fuck had happened. A year, twelve whole months of hospitals, secure wings, psychiatrists, therapists and fucking councillors. Now this.'

What was the last thing he could remember, he had to remember something, anything, for Christ sake he knew where he was so he must be able to remember the last time he was here, even if it wasn't the last time, anytime.

He buried his face in his hands, pressing the heels of his palms into his eyes, creating a myriad of colours and shapes to dance beneath his eye lids.

Moving his hands away he watched the colours dissolve around Moses standing on Mount Sinai clutching his staff, as the sky behind blazed in a radiant light emitting from the ark of the covenant. The last pharaoh king, a true prophet warrior and guardian of the truth. The picture hanging between the bathroom and kitchen doors was the only personal possession that James had been allowed during his internment, a small postcard from his childhood that he'd had enlarged and framed. Doctor Roberts!' She had had the picture enlarged, he remembered he was due a home visit. Yesterday, today, tomorrow, shit! when was it. Calm down have a drink.' His throat was still burning. At least he'd remembered something.

James picked himself up from the sofa and walked to the kitchen door. He stopped before sliding it open. A low electric tone seemed to be swimming around the floor, rising up through his feet and numbing the lower part of his legs, disabling his movement. As he quickly turned his head to look back into the room the intensity of the feeling disappeared immediately, just leaving the almost inaudibly low hum.

James walked across to the corner of the room between the sofa and the window and bent down to the old mono record player which lay on the floor. The turntable was still spinning with the needle stuck on the play out grooves of a record he couldn't quite see and the centre pole was loaded with two seven inch singles ready to be played. James flicked the needle into action and walked back to the kitchen door.

He slid it open and stepped into the tiny room, a bench cooker, a fridge, a sink and two small cupboards left James with just enough space to turn. He took a cup from the sink and turned on the cold tap, clinging onto it as it started to shake violently as the hammering on the pipes grew from a distant reverb into a deafening cacophony.

Please allow me to introduce myself, I'm a man of wealth and taste". Mick Jagger sounded like an angel through the noise as 'Sympathy for the Devil' kicked

in. Orange water started to spurt from the taps until the noise came to an abrupt end and the spurts became a slow dirty trickle. James left the tap on and turned to open the fridge.

The inside was immaculately clean and the glare from the light shining on the white plastic was almost blinding. Twelve bottles of Czechoslovakian beer stood on the floor of the fridge, four upon four upon four. He stared into the whiteness, bent down and reached in.

James flew over the hot, white desert sands towards the ancient monolith which sat on the horizon in front of him. The stone stele stood more than a hundred feet high and was painstakingly hewn to mimic a high, slender building of thirteen storeys - each storey complete with elaborate representations of windows and other details. At the base could be discerned a false door complete with a knocker and lock, all perfectly carved in stone. It looked like it had just been risen from the white sand below, it was new and beautiful, untouched, he could feel the heat rising from the sand as he descended at speed towards its base. The sky and the sand became as one, the tower transformed into a huge shimmering rectangle of black liquid still perfectly edged against the white backdrop. James hit the surface of the structure where the door had been, "Please to meet youshshshsh", he felt himself dissolve through the outer skin, each molecule of his entire body separating and reuniting on the other side.

Still being propelled at speed he flew through the labyrinth of corridors, the liquid floor and walls throwing up reflections of James' past life - his dreams, his nightmares and his desires, all in nanosecond timing. At every corner James could see a dark figure disappearing around the next, but never long enough to look at. "Pleased to meet you, hoped you guessed my name". As his speed increased through the labyrinth the images on the walls dissolved into an array of stars, leaving

him hurtling at high speed through the depths of space with an unprecedented feeling of emptiness. Pleased to meet you, hoped you guessed my name". He felt a sharp pain between his eyes followed by total darkness. Pleased to meet you, hoped you guessed my name".

James lifted his head off the fridge floor and rose to his knees, blood dripping from a gash across the bridge of his nose down onto the bottles which lay scattered around him. He picked up a bottle and stood up, kicking the fridge door closed. Pleased to meet you" click "Pleased to meet you" click. In one movement he grabbed a cloth from the sink, pressed it against his nose and turned, throwing the bottle towards the record player.

James watched as it twisted gracefully through the air, upending itself in slow motion and sending the bubbles of gas into a tight spinning froth. The bottle stopped dead in mid flight, caught by a black gloved hand.

Attached to the glove was a large man of African origin, dressed in a black leather trench coat and trousers, sitting at the end of the sofa. Joe Menelik. James could see his name as if it was etched into the inside of his skull. A black leather fedora hung down over his eyes allowing James to see only his grinning mouth in the strange light. Pleased to meet you" click. Joe lifted up his right leg a long twelve inches before crashing his studded black foundry boot down into the ashtray on the carpet. The music stopped instantly and James watched the beautiful display of dust shining in the shards of light as his body was momentarily soothed by the silence.

The virtual landscape rushed past as James nose dived down towards the open country road beneath him, levelling out just above the surface. He flew at high speed along the dead straight road which disappeared into the horizontal skyline, electric blue to the emerald green of the fields surrounding the road. A figure rushed

past on the left hand side, and again, and again, at one second intervals, too fast for James to see who or what it was. He felt himself slow down unnaturally. He could still feel himself being propelled at the same rate, but everything around him had somehow slowed down. He could see the figures clearly now as they glided by in slow motion, every one exactly the same as the next.

Young schoolboys dressed in a grey blazer, cap, shorts, socks, shirt, red tie and black shoes, waving and smiling at him as he past. James followed them with his eyes until they were past, then he'd find himself watching the next and then the next and then the next until between each boy the figure of Joe appeared, each one also the same as the next, except he wasn't waving, Joe was laughing uncontrollably. James was rising into the air above but still following the road, the school boy and Joe growing in size the higher he flew. The countryside below twisted into a huge computer generated grid system with the road becoming the two central red lines, never losing their perfect perspective until their point of collision with the now brilliant white sky. The figures came rushing out of the horizon head-on towards him, the waving schoolboy followed by Joe laughing again and again. James could feel huge rushes of adrenaline each time he passed through the figures until his whole body was immersed in a sense of rebirth. His inner eyes closed and he relaxed into the stillness.

And David danced before the Lord." The deep, southern American voice shook the very core of James' mind, springing his eyes open into the surrounding reality.

Jesus Christ!" James was staring straight into his own reflection, silhouetted in Joe's mirrored glasses.

Almost Jim, almost, but not quite."

What the fuck do you want?" Joe could see the fear in James' words as they stuttered across the room towards him. He tilted his glasses forward down his nose and raised his right eyebrow, milky cataracts veiled his eyes and deep lines furrowed his black skin. Smoke from the joint in his hand drifted up into the light in front of his face as his grin slid away.

I think you know exactly what I want Mister fucking Ray." Joe lifted up the shotgun from his lap and pointed it at the armchair, silently ordering James to sit. And I know this time, I shall not be disappointed" He relaxed back into the sofa and took a long toke on the joint as James nervously sat in the chair opposite.

Did you miss me Jim?" Smoke rose out of Joe's mouth as he spoke and James slowly ran his hands along the arms of the chair. He remembered the stains and pushed his hands in harder. Joe took a pull from the bottle, finishing it with a loud sigh.

A screaming, fat contorted face of a man hurtled out of the darkness towards James, smashing into a kaleidoscopic display on impact with his own face. He clenched his fists and dug his nails into his palms.

You ain't saying much Jim. You still in a state of complete joy at my return? Or is that horror! You know I ain't never been any good at defining the difference between those two outer signs of emotion. I've always found it to be more of an inward kinda thing. What d'you think Jim?"

Fuck offjust . . .fuck off." James clenched his eyes shut and held his fists up off the arms of the chair. You're not here, you do not exist, my life is mine, I exist because I am me, I live because I love and I shall love because I have the will to live . . ." James' ramblings went on beneath Joe's words.

Is that a fact. Then you just tell me how come I'm sitting here smoking this shit uh! Answer me that, James I am me Ray."

. . . . of my desire, through the path of existence"

You ain't got any answers have you Jim, you ain't got nothing left, they have seriously fucked with you this time man."

. . . . and my ultimate destination"

Shut the fuck up!"

. . . . shall be at one with myself for the love of mankind is a righteous way " Joe crashed the shotgun down onto the table sending the drugs and shards of glass up into the air as the glass top shattered under the force. James pulled himself into the chair and buried his head under his arms. His chanting ceased as Joe leapt to his feet and stubbed the barrel of the shotgun into James' head.

Now you better fucking listen 'cause this time I ain't fucking around. This is the real world and your existence within it has reached termination point, do you understand me!" Joe pressed the end of the barrel harder into James' skull until his arms dropped and he looked up. Do you fucking understand me?" Joe's face was twisted in anger as he spat his words into James' face.

James filled his head with No, N, O, no, no no fucking no.'

Yes!" He felt his head split straight through the middle as his skull cracked open under the sheer weight of the word.

Who am I?" Joe's voice was deafening but extremely clear.

Menelik."

I can't hear you!"

Joe Menelik."

Spell it! Spell my fucking name!"

J . O . E . M . E . N . E . L . I . K . "

Correct! And which motherfucker taught you that selfish bullshit chant?"

Doctor Prester."

Again!"

Doctor Prester." A grin spread across Joe's face and his whole body eased as if listening to some inaudible beauty.

Justice," whispered from Joe's lips. He relaxed the shotgun from James' head and sat back down on the sofa. Dropping his head back and still grinning, he re-lit the joint and relaxed into a long drawn toke. James uncurled himself within the chair and waited.

Joe's skin was shining in the light and James could see that the lines on his face were cut into his skin like tribal markings, some form of Hebrew script mapped his face, even his lips bore the warrior scars. James had never felt this kind of reality before, he wanted to run his hands over Joe's cheeks, if not to comfort, then to feel the pain that must be locked within them.

James felt a sudden urge to say something, anything, he could feel the words moving inside his mouth. This was it, this was the moment, his turn to take control.

Doctor Roberts . . ." James hadn't a clue what was coming next, the name just rolled out, but without the confidence to back it up. Joe's head sprang forward and James' hands turned to ice.

Fuck Doctor Roberts, and you did, good. Now do you have any idea what that woman's professional opinion of you is. Do you? Well let me tell you she ain't interested in your fucking welfare or whether you go to church on Sunday, your family history or your social aspirations. She ain't interested in shit about you. Y'see there ain't no care, just curiosity, and there ain't no fucking community out there or in here. They have finished with you, this is your end. I had a chat with your Doctor Roberts, bitch! She demanded to know why I wanted to kill so many people. ME! She demanded of ME. As one would not explain the beauty of a symphony to someone who has heard but three separate musical notes, then I shall not explain to such a

philistine as Doctor Roberts the splendour in the slaughter. You see Jim It's ME!" Joe leapt back to his feet, becoming more theatrical with every word. The REAL ME, the I of the Id, Medhane Alem. It's me they want, not you. But I do not! Owe these people an explanation, I am beyond their futile fucking laws and their childish psychodynamic bullshit and through the law of return I DEMAND MY FREEDOM TO ROAM! Do you understand me now ?"

James crashed onto the hard bathroom floor, he could feel the cold concrete under his right palm and the split linoleum digging into the back of his hand. He opened his eyes and watched his left hand flash into view momentarily under a slow white strobe. The light grew in speed and intensity as the deep throb of a kebero broke the silence, joined as the rhythm grew by the mystic jingle of sistra. James lifted himself off the floor to find himself in a bathroom, larger than, but identical to his own. As if in an extension, it enabled him to see his whole room whilst still feeling part of it. The white walls, the black tiles, the chessboard linoleum flooring and the Victorian bath and basin, all identical. Except for one thing. This bathroom was new, unused, almost virginal. Both taps were on full and the steam rising from the bath was filling the whole room, thicker and thicker, until James could barely make out the white walls from the black tiles. The rhythmic fervour was accompanied by an antiphonal chant as flesh ripped in front of him, followed by a hacking slice of silver, The wound opened explosively, a blurred naked torso spun from right to left, the torso became two, the slashing motion more frantic and destructive as a crimson spray showered out across James' face. Glimpses of a naked female rushed in and out of the swirling steam - breast, buttocks, arm, legs, each one being stabbed at or sliced by a large metal blade. There were no voices or movement to be heard from the assailant or victim, just the sound of skin tearing and bone splitting above the percussive chant.

The steam suddenly cleared. The bathroom was drenched. Blood running down the smeared walls into the inch deep red water covering the floor.

James stared across the room. Standing in the overflowing bath was Joe, naked, proud and triumphant. His left arm slightly forward and gripping onto a black matted mess, he lifted it, straight and in one movement, level with his shoulder. The body that hung from beneath the hair was limp and running red, her left arm severed at the shoulder, her right hand removed clean across the wrist. The upper part of her body was cut into ribbons and her belly had been sliced almost through to the spine, causing her to flip open as she was lifted from the water. Doctor Roberts stared back across the bathroom, her eyes only open due to the dead weight hanging beneath them, her mouth frozen into the shape of her last silent scream. James watched as Joe's right arm swung down behind her, shining as it swept through the air. Her body heaved forward arching at the neck as her head jolted backwards and the silver cleaver blade cracked through her throat, dropping the rest of her body over the side of the bath as her head swung from his hand.

BLACKOUT! James could hear nothing but the sound of an engine as it circled him, spraying what felt like mud and water across his body.

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Joe ran his hand across the bathroom mirror, clearing the condensation he looked at his reflection. This was the last time he'd have to look at this face from the inside, his warrior soul trapped within the frail inadequate body in which he stood.

He pulled his wet hair back from his fresh, clean face and tied it into a tail with a short strip of black muslin, a short neat beard had been shaved out of the stubble with the cut throat razor in his hand. Joe cleared the rest of the condensation from the mirror to reveal his bare white chest.

He lifted up the razor and carefully cut into the skin of his right pectoral. Red, half inch lettering followed the razor from nipple to nipple - MEDHANE ALEM - small trickles of blood ran down his stomach, collecting around the waistband of his black jeans. He put the razor down in the sink and placed his hands across the words. The bleeding stopped and James' youthful face smiled back at him.

Joe wrapped his chest in crepe bandages and put on his black shirt, buttoning it up to the neck.

He looked around the now surgically clean bathroom one last time before switching off the light and leaving the room.

Joe unzipped the black canvas holdall and lined the bottom with a plastic bin liner. He placed it on the floor to the left of the fridge and knelt down to open the door. The interior light screamed out, lighting the four packages stuffed into the small fridge - all wrapped in black plastic and strapped together with tape and each one with it's own indistinguishable shape and size.

He took out one of the packages and placed it into the bag, making sure there was enough room he reached into the fridge and removed another, pushing it tight into the hold-all. The zip stuck as he pulled it across, a piece of plastic caught in the teeth. He tugged at it, and again, the plastic tore and Joe pulled the zip back to it's open position as he stared down at the swollen and bloodied eye looking back up from the hole in the plastic. Joe carefully moved his head across the bag until his mouth was directly above the hole. He pursed his lips and waited as a line of spit ran from his mouth and into the hole. The blood washed from the eye, and an emerald green iris shone like a jewel in the night.

He rezipped the hold-all and picked up his leather coat from the armchair, putting it on before slinging the bag over his right shoulder.

The corridor was warm and sunny, flowering laburnum, acacia and firetrees lined the way across the high ground, the lower branches of the acacia were adorned with colourful ribbons and trinkets. Beyond the grove, across a hundred descending miles, the land sloped steeply away into the distance. A soft breeze, laden with the fragrance of distant deserts and burning sandalwood, blew through the tawny canyons beneath him, circled amongst the ravines and foothills, and soared on eagle's wings across the escarpment.

Joe put his hand into his inside pocket and brought out a pair of sunglasses, round, wire rimmed, with purple mirrors.

The rain was hitting the street hard, the hailstones bouncing back from the tarmac, finally coming to rest in one of the potholes which decorated The Hill. All the wet edges of the holes shining in the light of the full moon, casting night shadows across the road. Joe strode through the downpour, almost languishing in the pain as the wind twisted the rain into his face.

Rip from the spirit rip from the soul rip from the body at the bottom of the hole.

A cab pulled up intuitively as Joe reached the edge of the kerb, a black Lincoln Continental, he stooped down and looked in. The driver was in his mid fifties and dressed as if he was the mid fifties. His black, greased hair quiffed up from his narrow white face. Cheekbones protruding beneath the surface of the skin by means of amphetamine addiction rather than Adonis' chisel. The open neck white bowling shirt with it's collar flipped over the black suede lapels.

Cab drivers in this part of town, meant anyone who might be going your way, for a price, and the price was never to much from a Kerb Cowboy. These fifties throwbacks who pay for their speed habits by picking up fares whenever necessary

so they can cruise the streets twenty four hours a day, living in their car, their own private Idaho listening to rock & roll radio stations.

You getting in mate?"

Joe opened the back door and got into the cab, throwing the hold-all across the back seat and sitting himself almost central in the rear. Gene Vincent looked into his mirror awaiting further instructions.

Just drive," pitched Joe. I'll tell you went to stop." Gene accelerated away from the kerb and started down The Hill.

Oi, you'n American mate?" Joe looked out of the window as if oblivious to Gene's existence. Wer'bouts you from man?"

Disneyland." Joe's rich tones became almost royal as they sounded his American vowels.

Yeah," Gene started to rock in his seat even more ALLROIT!". Joe slid across the seat for a closer look at the scene which had been the Eastside neighbourhoods.

The police barricades had just been removed that morning since the Riots, an almost ritualistic annual event in every major city, but never on the same night. That would cease being riotous and become rebellious, and that was still not an English thing.

The church of Saint Mary The Virgin was still in one piece, even the stained glass windows remained intact, but the town hall had been totally destroyed by fire, leaving only the blackened clock tower standing amongst the rubble and smouldering rafters. Whole areas of the high street had been replaced by piles of brick as the ash was washed into the gutters by the evening's heavy rain. Television camera crews and freelance photographers were still swarming over the carnage and it's inhabitants as they had done last year and would do again.

Here y'go man," Gene held back his left hand towards Joe. They're our new cards, in case you can't get a cab back from where y'goin' man." Joe reached forward and took the two cards. They've got some poetry or something on the back." The cards were mat black with fine pink lettering on either side, They're kinda cool don't ya think?" One side read -

KERB COWBOYS

DON'T CALL US WE'LL FIND YOU

The reverse read -

The whole conviction of my life now rests upon the belief that loneliness, far from being a rare and curious phenomenon, is the central and inevitable fact of human existence.'

"Turn left after the bridge." Joe put the cards in his top pocket and looked back out of the window. Thomas Wolfe stood at the pedestrian crossing carrying a placard with the words ELVIS WAS JESUS written across it.

The cab swung a left.

Where now ?"

Keep going, I'll let you know."

The brick arches of the railway bridge ran along the left side, breaker's shops, printers, vehicle repairs and other small businesses occupied the spaces beneath the tracks.

Just pull in here."

Ere? You sure man." Gene pulled the car to one side and stopped.

How much?"

That's a tenner mate." Joe held his left fist through the gap between the two front seats and Gene placed his open palm beneath it. Joe placed one of the cards into Gene's hand, pulled his arm back and waited for Gene's head to appear from the other side of the seat.

What's this?" As Gene swung his body around, stooping his head forwards, Joe flicked his right wrist upwards and a shining lead ball left his hand at high speed. Attached to a short length of wire, and anchored in Joe's fist, it shot under Gene's throat and flicked itself back over his neck and back into Joe's hand. Joe pulled the wire garrotte tight towards himself, putting up his feet against Gene's back to stop him coming in the rear of the car. Gene's whole body was flipping around uncontrollably, one arm hooked back over his head trying to grab at Joe and the other reaching for the glove compartment.

Gene's face turned from white to purple as Joe lifted one foot from his back and started kicking the back of his head and pulling tighter on the wire. Foam was running from his mouth and nose and a yellow waxy liquid oozed from his ears through the pressure building up in his head.

Joe felt himself drop back slightly as Gene's throat split under the tension of the wire and a shower of blood sprayed across the windscreen, his face turned from purple to ashen as the blood drained from his head. His body gave up it's uncontrollable fight and slumped down over the gear column, still, except for his twitching feet which had been caught up in the steering wheel on his final surge of life.

Joe let go of the garrotte and stepped out of the car, closing the door behind him he walked around to the front passenger door, opened it and stooped in. He opened the glove compartment and reached in. A silver, Walther .38 automatic, the Kerb Cowboy's ultimate pose.

He checked the clip on the pistol - dumb dumbs, cool, tucked it into the waistband under his coat and leaned further into the car, over Gene's body lying face up between the seats, and reached under the dashboard. From amongst the electric's he removed a cylindrical chrome tin, Joe took the lid off and checked the contents - a tightly rolled stash of ten and twenty pound notes.

He closed the front and opened the rear door, Gene's bulging eyes stared straight up at the roof from their small pools of black blood welled within the sockets. Joe took out the hold-all and headed back down past the arches.

The heavy police presence wasn't too obvious for this part of the city, in the wake of the recent riots it certainly could have been worse. The burnt out buildings and boarded windows had a certain beauty about them, a romantic beauty of an ancient civilisation destroyed by it's own hand. A civilisation so divided by social intolerance that it had given rise to a new kind of assassin, hell-bent on sealing it's own fate through cultural implosion.

Joe rounded the charcoaled Burger Palace, shuttering running from the main door down to the counter, 'takeaway only!' He entered The Lane and made his way past the pushers and pimps who stood on each corner, a bewildering maze of narrow streets paved with ancient cobbles lay on either side, each one filled to the brim with it's own unhappiness, racial frustration and restless despair.

Entrance into Templars was gained through one of the advertising hoardings which ran across the lower half of all the buildings. The shops and bars which lay behind the fascias all made commercial use of the riot proof shields protecting their property by renting out their given space to various companies. Templars had a permanent contract with a national organic pest control company who paid thousands a month to use the whole building for various campaigns. The vast hoarding was covered with giant cockroaches and bared the logo - MUTATION

THROUGH CHEMICAL CONTROL ERADICATE THE CONTROL NOT THE CONTROLLED.'

Joe pushed on the eye of a roach and stepped through the door which led into Templars. This was by far the largest bar in the whole district, one room like a medium sized ballroom spanned out in front of him with a huge circular bar right in the centre. The place was packed, overflowing with it's usual clientele of cyber-punks, electro-goths, bikers and various other subterranean types who refused to be labelled. A loud and heavy industrial throb was being forced through the 40k sound system almost to the limit, sending the blue hued smoky air into a dancing sea over the heads of the punters.

Joe made his way through the misshapes and mishaps to the far side of the bar and up a spiral staircase to the balcony. Two green baize doors, numbered one and two, stood about twenty feet apart on either side of him. He walked across the balcony and pressed the buzzer attached to the oak frame of number two. Not being able to hear anything other than the crashing rhythmic samples emitting from the speakers he pressed again. The six inch thick door clicked open and swung slightly inwards, Joe waited for a second before pushing the door further open and stepping in.

The large living room resembled a Bedouin tent, sparsely furnished with two large sofas and numerous floor cushions, the walls were adorned with large drapes depicting various mythological Asian scenes. Plenty of red's, purples and gold.

Joe closed the door, shutting out the noise from the bar almost immediately. Two teenage retro chicks, seventies style, were curled up on one of the sofas with a biker chic male in his late twenties crashed across the cushions on the floor. All three were glued to the wide screen t.v. watching some eighties American sitcom on satellite.

Take a seat Joe." Glancey didn't look up from the VDU in the far corner of the room where he sat engrossed in an array of flashing colours and words. His long dark curls hung down over his shoulders, half revealing the computer generated imagery tattooed across his naked back. "I'll be with you in five man."

Joe sat down on the end of the free sofa, ignored by the other three he surveyed the room.

A three foot high wooden statue of Ganesh, holding a brass incense box sat in one corner of the room. His trunk seemed to inhale the smoke as it rose up to fill the room with the smell of sandalwood. A small, hand carved, round table stood as a plinth for an eighteen inch high glass pyramid, housing a golden hologram of Tutankhamun's head. Standing in the open Victorian fireplace to the left of the t.v. was a large set of ornate scales, each dish being held up by gold leafed cherubs. The scales were perfectly balanced with a silver marijuana leaf in one dish and a brass Eagle of Justice in the other.

Above, on the mantelpiece, stood a two foot chrome crucifix, supporting an imitation of Christ sculpted out of various small computer components.

From the centre to the four corners of the high ceiling hung a white, fine silk parachute, billowing down into the room to about three feet above head height. Painted to the ceiling behind, and lit from within the parachute, was a beautifully airbrushed image of the Eagle Nebula, in the constellation Serpens. An interstellar hurricane raging through a vast cloud more than forty two million billion miles away and a trillion miles in length, all in perfect detail.

Glancey span around in his chair and smiled across at Joe, his lips tight shut to keep the thick joint from falling from his mouth. His upper body was covered with tattoos, making one huge sci-fi scene wrapped around his torso and arms - a bizarre quasi-religious war scene featuring humans, androids, and strange robotic animals

all fighting each other against a desolated lunar backdrop. He dropped into the sofa and flicked his bare feet under his loose fitting leggings.

Joe, how you doin' man?" Glancey's eye's darted from side to side as he spoke, never actually looking at Joe for more than a second at a time.

His problem, and the origin of his name, had come about after being subjected to the optical security system surrounding top secret web sites within the American Pentagon. Whilst trying to hack the site, Glancey had triggered an image alarm to be displayed on the screen which had had a serious effect on the optic nerve between his retina and his brain, causing him to suffer momentary blindness if he keeps his eyes still for two seconds or more.

I heard you've been away awhile"

Business, y'know. Outta town business."

That's cool man, that's cool." Glancey knowingly asked no more. You just calling by or you looking to score? 'Cause I've got to tell you the floor's been risen to two ounce minimum, so it's either that or more. You know the police man they're getting really scary, so like wholesale or no sale. Nothing personal."

No problem, two ounces is fine."

Two fifty." Joe nodded in agreement and Glancey lifted up the middle cushion of the sofa between Joe and himself, revealing two one kilo bricks of compressed Red Beard skunk and a dozen two ounce bags.

You still deal adrenaphials?"

Shit Joe you have been away a while. This isn't a convenience store man, I am the Bushman! I don't deal in synthetics no more. It's an ethos thing. Sal's your man he's got no morals." Glancey dropped the cushion and handed Joe one of the bags. You paying now?"

Sure." Joe reached into his pocket and brought out the tin of notes, removing the lid and dropping the roll out into his hand.

What the fuck you been doing? Driving cabs!" Joe counted out the two hundred and fifty and handed it to Glancey, throwing a look that caught Glancey for three seconds.

See you later Glancey." Joe left the room and descended the spiral staircase.

At the foot of the stairs he slipped into the toilets situated under the balcony. The piss was overflowing from the urinals and onto the floor, enough to cause a slight wave to rush past Joe's feet as he opened the second door. The smell of glue hit him like a brick wall, instant inhalation. The tiled room vibrated rapidly, fast enough to allow Joe just enough controlled motion to transcend the space between himself and the row of cubicle doors across the back of the room.

A small boy dressed in pyjamas stood in the hallway watching the naked bodies in the bedroom, hammering into each other like sweating dogs. The whole house was full of naked and semi-clothed adults in mid orgy - dancing, smoking, drinking and fucking. He sat on the stairs and watched through the rails. A circle of people sat around a bong in the middle of the room, talking and laughing, whilst surrounded by the writhing bodies of random gendered couples, threesomes and foursomes covering the furniture and available floor space. The face of an angel turned towards him from a threesome on the sofa. Smiling, she waved and blew him a kiss.

Joe slammed the door behind him and all was still. He took the bag from his shoulder and rested it on the seat of the toilet, turning and bolting the door before unzipping the hold-all and removing one of the packages. He zipped up the bag and climbed onto the seat. As the package slid into the cistern, Joe jumped back off the

seat and snatched up the bag, just missing a soaking from the excess water as it showered from above the toilet.

He pushed his way back through the leather and hair that overflowed throughout the bar, never focusing anywhere except the main door.

The door in the hoarding burst open just as Joe reached for the handle, giving him just enough time to kick the door back closed in defence. Joe stepped back as the door was kicked open again, this time with enough force to rip out the bottom hinge from the woodwork. A black Rasta with enough attitude for a whole nation bounded through, diving straight for Joe and pinning him to the beer crates stacked against the wall.

What you fuckin doin boy? Do I look like I'm fuckin invisible."

Get your hands off me!" Joe's head was sandwiched between the wall and the Rasta's face.

Get my hands off you! I'll put the fuckers inside of you in a minute. You better learn some fuckin respect White motherfucker cause shit like you always learn to pay the motherfuckin price in the end, you understand!"

The sound of the bottle breaking was muted by the noise from the bar and The Lane. Joe swung his left arm from full stretch, bending at forty five degrees, his hand clutching the long neck of the broken bottle, he pulled the halo of sharp glass towards his own face. Protected by the Rasta's neck and head, Joe clenched his teeth and dropped his head forward to act as an anvil as he hammered the broken bottle through the ebony skin, again and again. On the third and final blow Joe felt the glass lodge within the Rasta's ivory spinal column, his body stiffening with paralysis then falling in a heap at Joe's feet.

He stepped over the body and dragged it further into the darkness, between the hoarding and the wall of the building. A matt black stiletto knife dropped from the Rasta's boot, shining momentarily as it fell. Joe folded him between the crates then

bent down among the barrels for the knife. He picked it up and stashed it in his inside pocket. Taking out Gene's tin, he emptied the roll of notes into his pocket and threw the empty cylinder down next to the Rasta.

3

About half a mile further down The Lane the advertising hoardings eventually gave way to the naked stone buildings. Restaurants and slightly up-market wine bars, interrupted only by late night grocers and off-licences made up the usually riot free zone. There were even cars parked at the roadside, mostly German sports models and mostly convertable.

Sal's was a brightly lit wine bar on The Southside of The Lane which backed onto the Cuban estates, a huge part of the district which was once entirely populated by Cubans. Most of the old families had moved out, leaving the place to turn into one of the most violent city districts in the country, not only Cubans lived there anymore, anyone who ever thought they were crazy enough had had their spell in the estates.

The music throbbing in and around Sal's was a real heavy soul, too souled out to be sold out kind of jazz. Twenties speak-easy was the theme, red velvet, dark wood, stained glass booths, brass and mirrors. Well dressed Cubans and Puerto-Ricans filled the room, single males in various sized groups filled the bar area leaving the booths and tables for the females and mixed couples. Joe hovered on the steps for a few moments, quickly scouting out his direction of travel. Among the faces suspiciously eyeballing him, Joe spotted Sal.

Sal was a fat man, five foot six and just as round, the kind of person you'd expect to see before being allowed into a bar or whilst being removed, not owning one. His black three piece suit was tailored perfectly to house his ample frame, a red silk ribbon tied his greased black hair into a small pony tail, matching his red tie.

Joe made his way through Sal's customers, dodging the Ethiopian eunuchs dressed in white Tuxedos and red fezzes who waited the tables and booths with silver trays. Sal looked up as Joe approached him, smiling, he held out his arms to greet Joe like a long lost brother, singing

Hey Joe, where you goin' with that gun in your hand." Sal's Transatlantic accent was definitely more Miami than first born Cuban. Joe held out his hand and smiled wryly at Sal's flankers, a couple of Dominicans with a penchant for body building. Joe Menelik, ma dancin' man." Sal grabbed him and pulled him into a tight hug whispering in his ear. What the fuck you want comin in here man?" Sal pulled back from Joe, smiling, and still clutching his hand. Come on through to the back man. Fuckin' A, Joe's back." Sal and Joe left the two stooges at the bar and went through to the office at the back of the room.

Shut the fucking door." Joe turned to close the door and Sal sat down behind a large oak writing desk, his face fired. What the fuck you think you doin' strolling into my place like some mother fucking badass."

It's cool man."

No it ain't fucking cool man, it ain't fucking cool at all, you hearing me. You escape from whatever fucking hole they put you in and you jive your fucking ass straight into here. This is way from fucking cool Joe, you can just get the fuck out the back door now man. And take that fucking smile off your face Joe cause this ain't fucking funny."

They let me out."

Fuck you, after what you did to that kid! Don't give me that shit."

Supposition Sal, they locked me up through supposition. There was no body."

They arrested you through superstition, fuck you man not even in this country would they let you go."

Believe it Sal. They got me on this community care programe."

Community care? What the fuck's that?"

Community care Sal. They let you out of the hospital, give you some money and somewhere to live." Joe's grin became even wider. Then you gotta look after me. But don't tell the nieghbours."

So what you fucking sayin', I gotta give you a job or something?" Joe started laughing and sat down in the studded leather sofa opposite Sal.

No you don't have to give me a job, you just do what you always do and take care of my needs."

If you're fucking me around Joe I'll kill ya, 'cause the last thing I need right now is an army of fucking storm troopers bursting through the back door, not now, not tonight, you getting me?"

Kinda keen on the back door aren't you Sal"

What you fuckin trying to say."

Relax man."

Relax! Why, have they got this community shit for drug dealers as well as murderers."

Just the special ones Sal. You gotta know how to speak their language. . . . Fluent."

Fuckin weird." Sal poured himself a whiskey from the decanter on his desk while Joe lay back into the sofa and opened a pack of Malboro. He slid out a cigarette and put it in his mouth, cracked the zippo open and ignited the petrol. The blue and yellow flame rose immediately. Joe still had all his fingers. Giving it a moment to burn, through respect, he lit and inhaled.

Sal leaned across the desk towards Joe.

So is this a social, community visit, or what. You just calling by to tell me you okay, 'cause don't expect any special kinda treatment just because you're a bit

fucking nuts man, I gotta bar full of payed up certified motherfuckers out there who could cut more than a piece of your ass. Shit."

You up for business Sal?"

Did you see a closed sign when you came in?" A smile breaks across Sal's face. Get your ass over here you crazy fucker."

Joe threw himself off the sofa and strode towards Sal, perching himself on the edge of the desk as Sal bent down and unlocked the bottom drawer of the desk.

Get off the desk man. This is business, so show some fucking respect." Joe swung round and dropped into the swivel chair as Sal placed a slimline suitcase on the oak surface and flicked the locks open.

The inside of the case was lined with foam and split into twelve small compartments, each housing a three inch square plastic box with a clear lid and containing a colour coded selection of pills. Reds, blues, greens, yellows, multi-coloured, all sporting small logos or letters. Sal clapped his hands and rubbed them together.

Let's see now." Sal's eyes flicked around the inside of the case before looking up at Joe. What's on your mind Joe, dancing? Fucking? Fighting. What you after?"

I'll take a Sal Selection and a treat to go."

Alright!" Sal took a self sealing plastic bag from the top draw and opened the boxes in turn, taking two pills from each and putting them in the bag.

I got some real special treats, just came in this morning, Cuban Spice, interested?"

Does it smell?"

Like fucking gasoline man."

Hey! Victory." Sal shook his head laughing and produced two paper wraps from underneath one of the small boxes. He dropped them in the bag with the pills

and handed it to Joe, closed the case and placed it back in the bottom draw. Joe put his hand in the bag and pulled out four of the pills and dropped them straight into his mouth.

Crazy fucker. Are you payin'."

I'll be back later Sal."

You said that over a fucking year ago."

I promise you Sal, I will be back." Joe spun around in the chair, picked up his bag and walked towards the door chewing on the Sal Selection.

Back door Joe! I ain't taking any fucking chances." Joe strolled back across to the corner of the room, grinning as Sal watched him suspiciously from under the low desk lamp. He pushed the bar across the emergency exit and swung the door out into the night.

The walled back yard was full of stacked crates and industrial waste bins, leaving just enough space for a gangway to the double gates in the far wall. Joe kicked the emergency door closed and waited for a short while, listening to the junked up junction music mixed with the screams and noises from the Estates which lay beyond the wall. He put the bag down on the concrete ground, unzipped it and took out the second parcel. Kicking it between the bins, concealed but easily visible by daylight, he stood up and swung the bag back onto his shoulder.

The double gates led out onto the back lane which ran parallel to the Seven Hills Of Cuba. Seven landscaped hillocks intercut with a network of concrete paths and dotted with dismembered trees and burnt out cars which seperated The Lane from the Estates. Joe crossed the lane and joined one path of the web leading into the black hills which were silhouetted against the high sodium glow radiating from the street lamps on the other side.

The darkness moved around Joe in whirls, lashing up from his feet, engulfing him for a second before releasing it's grip and relaxing into the cold night air. The

coldness ran darker in the night. He ran his right hand thumb across the tip of his index finger and felt a damp gluey substance between the skin, cold, but with a knowledge of warmth. Blood red and darker than black, he smiled at his thoughts as the darkness ripped through his body and into his head, penetrating every bone in search of warmth or compassion.

The moonlight gave way to the concrete sprawl which lay before him as he entered the orange glow. Highrise and lowrise housing devoid of character or passion, where the concrete fatigue had spread like a virus among it's inhabitants. The stench of hopelessness and despair hung in the air with the all engulfing smell of decay. Joe felt at ease in the sanctity of the squalor. The acoustically surreal design of the buildings gave rise to endless echoes from the voices and screeching cars racing through the maze of pedestrian walkways.

A huge rush shot up Joe's neck, his knees bent as he stooped to relieve the impact on his brain. Head up and neck arched he turned into one of the sewer infested tunnels connecting the blocks. Broken bottles, pieces of wood and bricks lay strewn around in the pools of water and shit. Muffled sobs and grunts echoed down the tube, becoming louder as Joe approached the dark shapes that moved awkwardly up against the wet walls. Two Puerto Rican teenagers, one pinned face to the wall with his jeans half way round his thighs, while the other banged away at him from behind. Sex, rape and love were actions without clear definition in the Danger Zones, young men and women took what they could without conscience from an early age.

The central area of the quadrangle which lay at the other end of the tunnel was fenced off with twelve foot high wire mesh to house the tarmac playing area. Twelve, thirteen or more mixed race youths dressed in their various colours, battled for possession of a ball beneath the solitary floodlight perched high above the far

corner. Huge multicoloured halos spiralled down from the bright white halogen, illuminating the steam as it rose from the tarmac.

Joe rounded the bottom of the Estate entrance and turned right onto Railtown, a parade of shops which ran alongside the main intercity track. The whole length of the parade was covered in metal shutters, each one of them dressed in a psychedelic collage of gloss. Joe watched as the waves of vermillion were sucked into a vortex of green, before reappearing in an oceanic mosaic of blues. The sound of the colours pulled him further along the walkway, each tone spectrally tuned to every part of his body.

The ground beneath his feet vibrated into a steady rumble, the movement of the colours became more erratic, violent, their music steadily drowned beneath the approaching roar.

A screaming, rectangular slice of hard bright light cut across his path, blinding him to the beauty of the surrounding destruction. Joe stepped into the doorway of the narrow shop as the noise from the tracks became a deafening riot of metal shearing metal. The white light stripped Joe of his technicoloured vision, leaving the cold sharp edged monochrome interior lined from ceiling to floor in canned foodstuffs, spirits and tobacco. The fat face glared from behind the counter, his skin bloated and stained from years of self-abuse. Red Indian, Pakistani, Eskimo, his physical identity had forsaken him years ago, leaving an odour of isolation throughout the store.

The horsemen raged behind Joe, mercilessly slashing at the chained phantoms that rose at the hooves of their steeds. Their screams and the harrowing metallic feedback left the tracks and encompassed Joe in the doorway. The fat man's jowels dropped further, his eyes narrowed as he tried to anticipate Joe's intentions. He dropped one hand below the counter whilst keeping his eyes fixed on the doorway. Joe's movements were fluid, each action executed perfectly to achieve

precise co-ordination of mind and body. The Walther was in his hand in a second, BANG! Fat yellow cheeks flared out before splitting under the velocity of the exploding bullet, BANG! The temple shot was beyond compare, pinpoint accuracy as the target reeled into the cigarette kiosk, the dumb dumb destroying his skull from the inside. The fat man slid down behind the counter as Joe reached the other side. He held the gun over the top and lent back, using the counter to shield his face from the inevitable backspray. BANG! The horsemen raced into the distance trailed by the dissolving spirits.

Joe leapt behind the till, crashing down on the twisted legs floundering in the stream of blood flowing from the folds of glistening red flesh and bone. The fat man's right hand still clutching the sawn-off shotgun which he never managed to raise above his waist. Joe emptied the register of its cash and two spare cartridges. He prised the gun from the stubby fingers and slid the short weapon into the holdall along with three four packs of Budweiser, a litre bottle of Irish and a few packs of Malboro.

The snow had begun to fall and Joe watched the flakes as he walked, trying to follow them as they drifted past. Individually formed and contoured in precise detail, to remain unique during their short existence as they fell randomly, colliding and linking for fleeting moments before melting back into their original form and flowing forever downwards in their masses. Nothing lasted, and nothing remained.

JOE!" The voice was unmistakable but the direction blurred by the echoes. Up here, come up round the back." Carston's thick northern accent descended from an unlit window above the chemist shop on the corner. Joe slipped through the iron gates at the end of the parade and into a narrow alley leading onto the access stairway for the flats above.

James had met Carston whilst in hospital, but Carston had known Joe since childhood. His father had been the local parish preacher and Carsten had been the

local dwarf. Every village seemed to have one at that time, and every village seemed to fear them. Carston was no exception, except he wasn't actually a dwarf, he was just really small. James had admired him as a boy, his attitude towards authority and his distaste for anything righteous had become of great curiosity to him. Carsten had met Joe while they were younger, unknown to James, and had formed quite a friendship until their mid twenties, before James moved to London. Joe loved Carsten's anger and enthusiasm, and admired him for his eternal search for IT and his vehement hatred of THEM.

At the age of thirteen Carsten had discovered a skull and some bones of long dead children beneath the mud flats just outside the village. The area was mostly covered by large, shallow ponds hiding the treacherously deep mud beds beneath; many children had died there, mostly through misadventure, some through other means. There had been petitions to have the area drained, but due to it being a 'site of special scientific interest' to the local wildlife trust, it had remained. Carsten loved to swim there at night, he used to tell the villagers that the children used to rise to the surface at midnight and swim with him.

He had grown out of his macabre swimming sessions by the age of sixteen when Joe introduced him to drugs - magic mushrooms first followed by fly agarics which grew at the edge of the woods surrounding the ponds. Being one of life's natural obsessives, Carsten was forever grateful to Joe for the introduction of hallucinogens into his life and had gone to great lengths since then to take anything that may enlighten him further than any of his so called peers in society. He eventually took a train from the village and never returned.

The door was open at the top of the stairs and uncannily quiet. An ultra-violet glow emitted from a slightly open door within the flat. Joe reached the entrance to the flat just as the inner door swung open. The black alien silhouette stood in the

blue haze, four foot eight, naked and shaved, his form was almost anorexic, sacrificed to the methamphetamine.

Come and see this man, it's fuckin' mental." Joe moved into the ultra-violet room.

The small room was full of glass tanks mounted to the walls from ceiling to floor. Each one housing various exotic reptiles in their endemically reproduced environments. Carsten was sitting cross legged and naked, staring into one particular tank from where the ultra-violet light hung. His pale skin awash in the electric blue hue, highlighting the delicate ink drawing stretching from his right wrist to his shoulder. Fine ink lined human figures transforming into dolphins, twisting into mermaids and, in turn, into angels as they rose up his arm into the skyscape across his shoulder and chest.

Sit down and watch this, she's laying her eggs it's fuckin' amazin'."

How did you know it was me?"

Carsten turned and looked up. His dilated, pale blue eyes shone in the light from the bulb.

I heard the train." His grin felt warm. He turned his gaze back towards the tank, inhaling deeply from a bottle of amyl nitrate.

Now!" A ripple ran down the spine of the Penang pit viper lying in the tank, ending with a small, soft ovate egg being excreted from under the base of it's tail. Sniff." Carsten pushed the bottle of amyl under Joe's nose. There's another one comin." Joe inhaled and lay down next to the tank, feeling it's inner warmth through the glass and awaited the explosion in his brain. In perfect unison with appearance of another egg Joe's mind was lifted beyond the room and into the night sky colliding with Carsten's among a multitude of tiny serpents.

Fuckin' beautiful." The moment passed as quick as it arrived and Carsten lent back from the glass in relief.

Got any drugs Joe?"

Yeh. . . .Fucking loads."

Excellent, what y'got?"

Two ounces of red beard, PCP, MDMA, LSD, Cocaine, Heroin, Valium, uppers, downers and a treat to go."

What's the treat?"

Cuban spice."

That bastard wouldn't sell me anything last night."

Why, what did you do?"

I stabbed one of his fuckin bouncers up the arse." Carsten reached behind the tank and picked up a flask. Tip some in there man."

What's in it?"

Just tea, the gas has been turned off so the old woman next door fills it up twice a day." Joe pulled out the bag of pills and handed Carsten one of the wraps. He emptied the whole lot into the flask and shook it vigorously before pouring out two mugs of the warm black liquid. Drink it quick I wanna show y'something."

Joe emptied the mug in one and followed Carsten out of the door and onto the short balcony which ran along the outside of the building. A metal fire escape led them up onto the flat roof where a six foot red brick wall ran across the width of the building for no obvious reason. Carsten ran at the wall, reaching and almost clearing the top without the use of his hands. Squatting on the top, naked to the wind and snow, he slowly rose to his feet.

Get up here Joe, it's fuckin' awesome man." Joe grabbed the top of the wall and clambered up, flicking one leg over and pulling himself up into a sitting position.

The whole skyline of the city was visible, awash in orange and reds like glowing hot coals. Joe could feel the heat rising through his feet, growing steadily, warming him from the inside. Carsten lifted his arms out level from his side.

Cruciformed and naked, the snow bleached against his back while his face and chest reflected the fire as it rose from the city. The flames licked up into the heavens, releasing a flock of phoenix to rise beyond the imagination. Joe turned and looked at Carsten, still rigid in his formation his feet burst into flames. The fire swirled up his legs and engulfed his entire body turning him into a human torch, at one with the element.

Carsten's voice sounded from within the flames. "It's the gasoline Joe. Smell the gasoline." Joe took a deep breath, closing his eyes and pulling back as hard as he could until maximum capacity. The smell filled his senses as it rushed through his veins with a tumultuous flow of blood. He opened his eyes to see himself wrapped in the flames, his bones feeling the warmth as his skin was stripped from him, layer by layer until his bones ignited from within.

Joe burned for his given time until the flames subsided around him. Carsten was sitting next to him, still looking across the city.

"Can you remember when the fells were set on fire?" Joe was still experiencing the embers around his feet. "I done that. I think that was the start of the trouble." Joe looked at Carsten for a while and thought about trouble.

"The start of the trouble was when you asked yourself. . . . Why am I me?" Carsten turned his head and looked at Joe.

"That's always been the difference between me and you Joe. I know why I'm me!"

"I've got to go." Joe stood up and smiled down at Carsten.

"Y'comin back?" A five second silence answered the question. "Fuck Them Joe."

4

Joe picked up the hammer from the floor and drove it hard down onto the cast iron radiator, removing more of the flakey white paint from its surface. The cumbersome heater shook and gurgled as the air lock moved through the system allowing the hot water to flow into the metal carcass.

He stepped into the kitchen and brought down an old stone pestle and mortar and a pewter goblet containing a narrow four inch brass tube from above the cupboards. Running his fingers through the bowl to check for any residue from its last use, he placed it down on the coffee table next to goblet and tube, as if preparing an altar before mass. He opened the bag on the floor and removed the bottle of whiskey and the shotgun and positioned them ceremoniously across the glass surface.

He held up his hands and the last of the gasoline ignited across his palms, releasing two small blue dragons up into the room. The fiery reptiles glided around the ceiling leaving trails of colours to dissolve into a pink haze until they disappeared into the thick cloud which they formed.

Sitting on the sofa Joe opened the bag of pills and took out a random selection. He split the capsules and emptied their contents into the pestle with the other tablets, crushing them down with the mortar into the required compound. He tipped the powder onto the table between the shotgun and the whiskey and slid the cab card through the middle, pulling one side out into a long thick line across the

glass and pushed the other into a neat mound. The metal cap of the whiskey bottle cracked open and he poured half of the bottle into the goblet. With the brass tube pressed into his right nostril, he breathed out heavily to empty his lungs and waited until the white cloak of asphyxia was nearly upon him before lowering his head to the table and snorting the whole line in one go. Joe sat back into the sofa and drank thirstily from the goblet then closed his eyes.

The school yard was full of uniformed children of varying ages all heading towards the main gates situated in the middle of the large red brick perimeter wall. Joe was walking with a group of seven boys, listening as they chatted about anything and everything - football, girls, music, where they were going to meet that evening, their backlog of homework and what was for tea. They passed through the gates where they separated into two groups of four and three, exchanging their final instructions about the night's activities as they drifted their separate ways. Joe joined the group of three as they marched through the heavy throng of children who lined the main road and followed them along past the high, school wall.

The conversations petered out and Joe gazed around at the familiar scenery of the council houses as they walked, with their trimmed hedges and vegetable plots backing onto the barley fields nestled below the depleting fells. The large manor house, the gardens of which, would have once encompassed the estate, stood back from the road behind an old stone wall. Its ageing gothic facade still visible through the small Beech wood planted between the two gates on either end of the sweeping gravel drive.

Suddenly, all movement stopped for an instant. A blinding white flash turned the whole scene into a negative image, captured in a twist of time. Joe turned around instinctively and watched as an atomic mushroom grew above the city, ten miles down the valley. The children ran for cover, screaming with fear and uncertainty they

huddled up against the stone wall, clinging to something solid and real. A hurricane of dust and debris powered its way from the base of the explosion, ripping through the houses and gardens it was upon them in a second, muting the cries for help under its deafening roar. Joe witnessed the carnage unfold before him, skin melted like plastic under the heat, stone burst into flames, and metal dripped like wax. Uninvolved and unscathed Joe lent back against the wall and waited for the tempest to subside.

The mushroom swirled within itself, slowly changing form until the animated face and upper torso of Adolf Hitler appeared from the atomic cloud. His Germanic tones rolled out behind the dying wind as he read from the large black book in his hand. The sound of marching feet on gravel swept down the driveway behind Joe, followed by a legion of blonde children dressed in para-military khaki uniforms. Flanked on either side by the marching Youth was an old man, bearded and frail with age. Joe stared into his face. His silver, shoulder length hair swept across his ashen face in the remaining breeze as the formation left the drive and wheeled onto the road. The old man turned his gaze towards Joe as they passed, his eyes spoke of the despair, defeat and futility which raged inside his soul.

Bored with the images that the drugs had offered Joe crashed his foot down onto the floor, jump starting the record player into life he downed the rest of the whiskey.

Click You gotta speak Spanish, You gotta speak Spanish." Joe leapt to his feet pulling the muslin from his hair and threw himself across the room, his arms outstretched with the demonic rush. You burn my body you take me down, I should know by now." He crashed into the wall, forehead and fist first, then pulled himself around to fight the good fight. Head kicks, chest kicks, body form, an orgy of devils danced at his feet. The world is mine, mine mine mine and what I want I get." The

dense pink cloud above his head whipped up into a raging whirl-pool sucking the colour from the walls. Joe turned to the blinds across the window, raised his hands high and ripped them down from the wall. Elvis was alive! Memphis 73, down on one knee with the tassles from his right arm flailing the air, his head bowed. Rev Rev Lowrider, Rev Rev Lowrider, Rev Rev Lowrider, Rev Rev." Joe pulled the Walther from his waistband and twisted around spinning the pistol on his fingers, cowboy style, a joker's smile twisting his face as Elvis' frenzy grew to fever pitch. I have only my time now since you tore my vision down, I'm gonna tear your body limb from limb till there's nothing left but sound." Joe knelt down to the table, scraped up the powder onto the cab card and tipped it into the goblet before topping it up with the rest of the whiskey. Rev Rev Lowrider, Rev Rev Lowrider, Rev Rev Lowrider, Rev Rev." He tore a piece of paper from the party bag, placed it in the bottom of the pestle and crumbled half of the bud over the top. The Zippo clicked open, Joe waited and then lit the paper. Picking up the shotgun he broke it open and removed the cartridges, placed the end of the barrel over the smouldering bush and awoke the genie. Ride my dream till thye end of time, ashes over ground." Joe saluted Elvis with the goblet and poured the potion down his throat. My silver and gold, my passion told, nothing can drag me down." The devils had mutiplied up the walls. Penis headed serpents spreading like wildfire entered the mouths and left through the anuses and vagina's of the cloven hooved demons. Rev Rev Lowrider, Rev Rev Lowrider, Rev Rev Lowrider, Rev Rev." The floor started to swirl releasing a crimson mist from its centre, mirroring the whirl-pool on the ceiling until the whole room became a vortex of red cloud. From the centre of the floor arose Asmodeus, demon king, formed of dark matter and dressed in slaughter rags he transgressed through the ever enlarging black hole above.

The armchair slid up gently behind Joe's legs, caressing him to drop back silently into it's comforting embrace. As the needle washed in and out of the playout

grooves the seventh wave crashed onto the rocks below him. The sea breeze running across his face, he looked across the sandy cove, full of sun worshippers and summer types playing their beach sports. Everything was mixed up, out of sync, yet fully connected and operational.

As the volleyball was hit over the net it would become a football in an adjoining game whose ball had become a base ball in another adjoining game when kicked into the air. As a sunbather stood up she or he would immediately become an intrinsic player in another activity leaving a vacancy to be filled by someone else, never returning to their original position. When a certain pattern of movement could be defined a total switch of direction would be employed.

Joe turned his attention from the game to the cloud movement which had begun to shift into a predetermined formation. The clouds danced as flames dance, flocks of white doves flew out of its source, over the cove and out into the surrounding fields, landing like snow across the horizon. As the multitude of birds flew overhead, the movement of the beach people changed instinctively, forming long straight lines across the sand - knelt and heads bowed, row behind row behind row.

From among the emerging doves stepped the image of Christ, high in the sky, naked but for a loin cloth of white muslin he watched over his flock, before outstretching his arms and falling into a perfect swallow dive. He walked from the still ocean with ease. As he passed between the worshippers he laid his hands upon their hidden faces, touching their eyes with the tips of his fingers.

Reaching the back of the beach he looked out over the land drenched with doves and lifted his hands towards the heavens. The doves lifted at once on a crest of fire which engulfed each one as they searched for sanctuary in the darkening sky. Jesus turned and retraced his walk back to the ocean, never looking back at the

raging inferno burning across the land. His rise from the water was an exact reversal of his entry, throwing time and motion into an allotted backward step.

The clouds regained their former movements above the crashing waves and the heads of the masses were lifted in unison. Their eyes burnt from their skulls, they looked up in a desperate search for vision and light before being enshrouded by the rolling inferno.

Joe lifted the shotgun up above the flames and inhaled one last time before the burning bush collapsed into ash.

The time was upon him. He took the holdall into the kitchen and opened the fridge once again, removed the black plastic parcels, layed them on the floor and stacked the four packs of beer on top of each other. Not being large enough to accomodate everything, Joe discarded the holdall in favour of an old suitcase that was wedged behind the sofa. He placed the packages neatly in the case then covered them with a bin liner before tying down the two inner straps. A six by twelve inch butcher's cleaver with a stained willow handle from the kitchen drawer was then slid beneath the straps. Joe had always wondered about the purpose of such an implement within a domestic situation, had he ever been in a domestic situation, then who knows! He closed the case and secured the two outer buckles.

Joe took out the stiletto knife and cut out the lining of his inside coat pocket, opening up enough room in which to holster the shotgun. He picked the Walther up from the arm of the chair and checked the clip, three rounds remained. The cartridges on the table were returned to the barrel and the shotgun slid into his coat - enough to warrant an air strike. He switched off the lamp and walked out of the bedsit. Elvis shimmied. Real cool.

The cab pulled up alongside the entrance to The Lane which emptied out onto The Delta, the centre of the web of pedestrianised streets which spanned out in a hundred and eighty degree angle beyond the traffic zone. The place was packed with punters for everyone - the whores, the pimps, the pushers and the perverse.

Ten quid." The driver was a thickset forty something, cleanly shaven and dressed smart casual. Joe handed over the cash.

How much to deliver this case for me?"

Where to?"

All Souls Avenue, number sixty two." The driver stared into the rear view mirror but not at Joe's reflection.

Twenty five." Joe pulled out fifty from his roll and handed it over to the waiting hand.

Just leave it on his door step and don't ring the bell or knock on the door. I'll phone and tell them after you get it there." The driver's eyes focused in on Joe. They don't like answering the door at night. Too much house mugging. Keep the change." The driver nodded in approval and Joe climbed out of the cab leaving the suitcase on the back seat.

He chose his route through the crowd, carefully avoiding the various vendors who tacked across The Lane in their random search for prey. The access into Templar's was wedged open allowing an almost constant stream of customers who were now coming and going. Joe slipped through between the change of tides and into the crammed bar, weaving his way towards the stairs which led up to the rooms above.

Joe stopped for a second and looked down at his feet. The carpet was moving around his boots, huge cock-roaches casually went about their business unaffected by his presence. He pressed the buzzer and waited for the door to open.

Glancey was lost in cyberspace beneath his V.R. headset as Joe was welcomed in by Cody, the fat Scottish biker. The whole room was thick with blue smoke and the smell of skunk.

Wanna drink Joe?" Joe sat down on the sofa and looked across at the two girls deep in conversation and Mescal.

Sure." Cody poured Joe a large tumbler of the golden liquid and sat down on the other end of the sofa to finish rolling a large joint which was halfway through construction.

That's Chelsea and Jules. Chelsea's the pretty quiet one." Joe took a drink and focused in on the girl's conversation.

I saw Jodie last week with her daughter."

Wow! How's she doing"

She looks like shit."

Really! God I haven't seen her for ages."

Yeh, she looks really washed out. She's trying to clean up, like, total de-tox."

I heard she was still feeding Annie her daughter, you know like, from her tits and she's like nearly four."

God I know she was telling me, she said her nipples were like leather. My God could you imagine that!" Cody looked up from his job in hand.

She could turn them inside out and have suede nipples, that would be cool." Chelsea turned towards Cody, catching Joe's cold stare as she looked up from the floor cushions.

Don't be perverse."

Plastic dicks for chicks, that's perverse Chelsea. Know what I mean? Suede nipples are another step up the evolutionary ladder."

Fuck you Cody." Jules was in no mood for Cody.

Why? It's perfectly fucking logical that in this age of rapid technological advancement the body will be forced to evolve at a faster rate so as not to become obsolete within the environment of its own creation." Cody lit the joint and sat back, pleased with his employed hypothesis.

Bullshit! You're just full of crap Cody." Jules went straight for the cat fight. How can suede nipples be of any evolutionary advantage?"

Chelsea sat captivated by Joe's silent stare - Voodoo queens danced around a ring of fire which circled Chelsea as she writhed in the pleasures of her own sexual excitement. Look," Cody pointed over at Glancey, he could easily be talking to someone in Japan or fucking Bolivia right now, which means in a few years time he could be talking to aliens in a bar on Mars without even moving from here."

So why do we need suede fucking nipples!"

Because with that kind of capability sex will become purely pro-creative and not a leisure activity. So in order for women to achieve any kind of extra-curricular sex they're gonna have to adapt accordingly y'know, there's got to be more on offer." Cody passed the half smoked joint to Joe, who hadn't taken his eyes off Chelsea during the conversation.

Looks like you and your mates are gonna turn into even bigger wankers in the future then doesn't it!"

Chelsea floated on her back, headwards across the still water towards the giant crystal tower. Natural and uncarved it rose from its own reflection into the pale blue sky. She tilted her head back into the water, her eyes wide open, and appeared to rise into the same environment that she had just submerged from. Fish flew overhead as she drifted in the tranquility.

You must believe in the convictions of your environment, you must want to be a part of the world you have created or has been created for you." Glancey stepped into the argument with his quiet voice. You can't change your appearance at will, it is an ongoing process where you and your world must become one or face possible extinction." Glancey took off the headset and spun around to face the room, awaiting a response.

You haven't been in the Mars Bar talking to aliens have you?" Jule's turned from anger to humour.

Afraid not, I've been playing chess with Pedro."

Where does he live? Japan by any chance?" Glancey's eyes appeared to slow down when hit by confusion.

Sorry Jules I thought you and Cody had actually engaged yourselves in a meaningful conversation, I'll go back to my game. You okay Joe?" Joe lifted up his near empty glass in reply and finished off the joint with one last toke, keeping his eyes fixed firmly on Chelsea.

It's like d.j... fucking vu everytime I talk to you Cody, the same bullshit everytime."

Glancey's got a smart theory about d.j... fuckin vu, haven't ya Glancey." Cody was not to be put off in his search for theoretical conversation.

What's that, that we all have to meet you one day, which will remind us of the last dumb fat bastard we knew."

Pockets of anti-matter! Or mini time-warps if you like." Glancey obviously had time to kill before his next move. They're everywhere, continually moving through space and time, and when you hit one, a molecular reversal occurs which causes every particle in your body to become anti-particles, therefore you cease to exist in your positive form before you're thrown forward in time and back again faster than the speed of light. So when you think you've been or done something before, in the

case of dej... vu, you've actually been there before you've been there. Which also accounts for most cases of spectral sightings, which are actually people from the past thrown forward into a random time zone."

But if this happens faster than the speed of light then we wouldn't see ghosts at all." No matter what, Jules would always listen to Glancey.

No, y'see this is where the properties of anti-matter reverse the time scale. It's like coming out of a black hole as opposed to entering one. If you could watch something entering a black hole it would appear to take a long time to disappear, but to the object itself it would be through in a split second. The white hole hypothesis.

What the fuck's a white hole?" Confusion and anger were merely a kiss away for Jules.

Well it's purely hypothetical at the moment, but basically it's an astrophysical object formed by the emergence of matter and energy from a space-time singularity through the event horizon. Which could possibly account for extra-terrestrial sightings, many of which are preceded by a blinding white flash. In which case what is being witnessed is in fact the emergence of beings who are inhabiting this planet in the future and have harnessed the physics of time travel."

You just said that these time-warps took us forward in time."

Yeh, in the case of dj... vu. But there have been many reported cases of people, say, out for a walk around somewhere they know and all of a sudden it's like a hundred years ago with horse drawn carriages and buildings that aren't there anymore."

So how come you can spend some time in the past but only a split second in the future?"

Because the past has happened and can't be changed no matter what, but the future is governed entirely by the present and to know one's own future would be catastrophic for your very existence."

Why?" Jules was still unconvinced by anything Glancey had put forward.

Why what?"

Why would it be catastrophic?"

Because to know the outcome of anything significant deems the very act of actually doing it totally pointless."

Life is fucking pointless, I thought everyone knew that." Cody lit up a cigar sized joint.

It probably is being you, y'fat bastard." Jules leaned across and snatched the joint from Cody's mouth. So how would it be catastrophic? There's loads of people reckon they know why we're here, but it hasn't changed anything."

No, there's loads of people with theories about how we exist on this planet but there is no one who knows why anything exists at all, that's the big question and the reason that we can not find a meaning is because we are still not consciously advanced enough to comprehend it even if when we do find it, it turns out to be the most obvious face staring fact ever seen. It's like anything in life, take physics, chemistry or any science which is constantly pushing the boundaries of knowledge, what is hi-tech or chemically astounding today is only state of the art. It could quite easily look like total ignorance tomorrow, but the only reason we'd know that is by what was learnt yesterday. Seemingly solid theories are changed or disproved regularly and at an alarming rate compared to just a hundred years ago, we haven't the fucking faintest idea what's going on and as far as I can see the further we travel down the same path of ignorance and destruction that we have been travelling on the sooner we'll all find out what the reason was." Jules handed what was left of the joint to Glancey. Technological and spiritual enlightenment have become too removed from each other, and everyone who I think should be benefitting."

What's technology and spiritualism got to do with each other, I thought one was opposed to the other."

Spirituality."

What?"

Spirituality, not spiritualism." Jules looked at Glancey with a don't patronise me look.

Whatever! I just don't see the connection."

The Atlanteans could, that's how they built the great pyramids and stonehenge and the Mayan and the Inca temples."

How?"

Psychokinesis combined with the technology to control natural forces, collective consciousness, perhaps even knowledge of the superforce itself, that's what made these great races so superior and the sad thing is, they were our ancestors."

There was a guy in my class at school had webbed feet like Bobby Ewing in The Man from Atlantis." Cody's observation slipped between his ears and only just managed to leave his lips, unheard.

There's no proof that Atlantis even existed so who said they were our ancestors." Glancey was relishing Jules' contrary attitude.

Plato, Moses, Edgar Cayce, all great philosophers and prophets of the ages have written accounts of Atlantis, no-one more I suppose than Moses when he wrote Genesis. That was a romanticised version of the Atlanteans arriving in the middle east, probably the Egyptian version."

Oh yeh, then one man and his wife repopulated the world."

Metaphorically they did. What was more likely is that their supposed sons, Shem, Ham and Japeth were representative of the three nations coming together under the rule of the first Pharaoh king, Osiris, who was probably Noah. Shem was the Atlanteans, Japeth was the Aryans from Ararat, where Noah landed, and Ham was the blacks who lived in the Nile valley at the time. If you look at the pictographs

from the pyramids you'll see there's three different coloured races, red are the Atlanteans, white are the Aryans and black are the Egyptians. Then there's Moses, who was raised to be a Pharaoh king or priest, so at the time he would have been taught the knowledge that was passed down from the Atlanteans and look what he could do, turn staves into serpents, part the Red sea, create plagues of locust all sorts of crazy stuff. He was a true magician not just a common illusionist, I'm telling you he had more than a couple of stone tablets in the arc of the covenant, and Jesus knew it!"

So who's Edgar Cayce?"

He was around at the end of the eighteen hundreds and beginning of this century, he was like a clairvoyant come prophet. What happened was he started losing his voice, the doctors couldn't find a cure, until eventually all he could manage was a whisper. So one of his family suggested he tried auto-hypnotism, which he did, and to everybody's amazement, when he was asleep, not only could he talk normally again but he could also explain his ailment and what was needed for a cure. His voice got better and he started helping other people."

While he was asleep?"

Yeh, what he had done was somehow managed to tap into the collective unconscious, and not only could he tell what was wrong physically with someone, he could also diagnose psychological and spiritual problems as well, which turned out to be caused by conditions from past lives. It seems that he discovered through the collective unconscious that each of us has an eternal soul and has lived many many times before on Earth, which according to him is like a school where the imprint of past lessons and lives are left forever in the unconscious mind."

So did he discover what it's all about?"

Not really, but he did discover that out of all the past lives that he traced many had lived in ancient Rome, Greece and even Atlantis."

If you're so sure this place existed then where was it and where's it gone?"

Well there is possible geographic evidence that the Earth was hit by a large meteor, smack in the middle of the Atlantic, about eleven to twelve thousand years ago so any land mass that was there at the time would be wiped out of physical history entirely."

I thought they were supposed to be really excellent astronomers and shit, how come they didn't know it was coming?"

They were and some of them would have known, but they wouldn't have told everyone. Do you think the government would give us any advance warning if it happened today? I don't think so, there would be hell on, the country would just panic."

Cody lent into the conversation. So what is the reason for our existence then Glancey?"

Fuck off Cody! You never listen do you, you've sat there and smoked my drugs for years but you never fucking listen to anything anyone ever says, they're only theories, ideas, I don't know the fucking answer."

Chelsea floated into the heart of the crystal, between its mass and its reflection she felt her her whole body slow down until she could feel each function of every organ as seperate motions. Like a butterfly preserved in amber she became part of the quartz monolith. Translucent colours swathed before her, every shade and hue from red to yellow to green and blue. Colours she had never seen or imagined before entered her soul, each one bringing with it such a wealth of knowledge that she could feel her mind expanding until her whole spirit entered a new dimension of existence in order to absorb the experience.

Joe rose to his feet. The whole room was still, frozen in time, the smoke from Cody's joint hung in the air motionless. He lifted the shotgun from the lining of his coat and pointed it towards the back of Cody's head, releasing both cartridges at once. Joe waited for a moment in the silence until hundreds of lead pellets slowly left the end of the barrel, spraying outwards in their almost dead slow motion approach, each tiny ball spinning through its selected trajectory. When both barrels had emptied Joe let go of the gun, leaving it suspended in mid air, he walked towards the door and turned to see the first wave of metal enter Cody's head. His scalp lifted as his head twisted and bent forwards, the multitude of shot slowly tore through his flesh, forcing their way through the bone beneath. A halo of blood rose from his head, showering the rest of the lead spray as it carried on past the side of his face towards Jules and Chelsea. Just as it reached them simultaneously, Chelsea's body exploded into billions of atomic particles which moved forward and out to allow the shot to pass between them unhindered. BANG! The particles remerged instantly, the shotgun dropped from the air, Cody fell to the floor his head almost removed from his shoulders, Jules' face spread across the back of the sofa and Glancey ducked behind his swivel chair.

Joe descended the stairway into a sea of seething bodies wrapped in leather and lace, each one appeared to vibrate and sweat uncontrollably as Lemmy, Fast Eddie and Philthy Animal Taylor shook the foundations of the building. He pushed and shoved his way through the oily ocean, moving like a parallelogram he swam through the swathing colours being emitted from the hot torsos.

Chelsea leapt to her feet screaming "DEJA VU!"

6

Joe hung around opposite Sal's watching the cars pulling up and leaving at random intervals. BMWs, Mercedes, Porsches, a Corvette and even a Jensen had

parked outside or around, with all of their drivers and occupants visiting Sal's for short and long whiles. None of the men and only two of the females had been white, poodles", as they were referred to inhouse. Better than a lapped dog' was the poodles well known retort.

He crossed The Lane just as a white limousine stopped at the entrance to the the Bar. Joe slowed in his walking so as not to pre-empt the passengers' grand arrival as they stepped out. The uniformed driver was the usual twenty stone and bald, looking fearsome just through mass alone. He opened the back door and stood back just as a hoard of photographers appeared from nowhere to gather round the emerging passengers . A yellow Armani stepped out from the car, adorned by the unmistakable figure of this week's heavyweight boxing champion of the world, smiling and saluting the press men amid the flashes. Joe stood and watched as the proud and athletic young man paraded his poodle in her new diamonds for the morning readers, before being ushered into Sal's awaiting den of iniquity. Joe slid in behind the party of three minders who followed the boxer from the car.

Some gangsta' rap thing rocked the whole inside of the bar as Sal's customers cheered the conquering hero into the building. Joe stayed with the party, passing through the onlookers with ease until they reached their reserved tables and he moved through towards Sal's office.

The door was unlocked and the office empty, forgotten about in the excitement of the evening, Joe closed the door behind him and sat down in Sal's chair. He took out a packet of cigarette papers and removed four sheets, cleared a small space among Sal's executive toys and put together a neat joint deck. The dry bud crushed into his palm instantly beneath his dry finger tips, rolling it across his skin until it became near powder he spread it across the deck. He picked up a business card from the desk Mobile Californian Health Spar - Executive stress relief

day or night.' Joe looked at the card for a short while before tearing off a strip for a roach and finishing the joint.

A white, thirties style, Bakelite telephone sat on the desk to Joe's right. He picked up the receiver and slowly dialled the number on the card and waited for an answer.

Hello Lulu speaking, can I help you?" Her voice was obviously working class with bags of expensive make-up and bleach to disguise her roots.

Is that the Californian health spar?"

It certainly is, and what would you like?"

I'd like a home visit please."

Sure, when were you thinking of?"

Tonight."

Any particular time?" Joe looked at the digital clock next to telephone.

Eleven thirty okay?"

That's no problem, if you could just give me your address."

Sal's wine bar, you know where it is?"

Of course I do. Do you want me to come through to the office?"

Perfect, see you later." Joe replaced the receiver and slid the card into the small drawer beneath the dial. Joe drew a long toke on the bush and thought of California, nineteen sixty nine and the long haul from Badhakhsahn.

James was nine years old when he trekked across former Persia with his parents on their way back to Europe and eventually on to California. His father's search for the ultimate high had taken them to Badhakhsahn where they had discovered the existence of a small nomadic tribe of Hashshashin, true blood line relatives of the notorious Ismaili sect of fanatical Muslim Shiite who still considered themselves loyal to their ancestors in their assassination of political christians.

They had employed the help of a dragoman, Hadane, an interpreter in Turkish, Arabic and various Persian dialects to help them contact and meet with the Hashshashin. After a long and arduous drive through the Zagros Mountains they eventually found their small encampment near Shiraz. It took a week of daily trips from Shiraz to the encampment by Hadane before James' father was allowed to visit their leader Imam Jafar.

For four days James and his mother stayed in their mobile home on the outskirts of Shiraz, concerned for the safety of their own patriarch, until the morning of the fifth day when Hadane returned alone. He had instructions from James' father to drive them back to Badhaksahn where he would be waiting for them. During their two day drive James and his mother learnt of the murder of a christian artifact hunter somewhere in the Zargos mountains.

His father met them as promised and drove them immediately to Baghdad from where they flew to Paris then straight on to San Fransisco.

This was the first and almost last memory he had ever had of his father, nine years missing and twenty two dead. James was sent to a boarding school in England whilst his mother watched over his father out in the Santa Susana hills during the next five, opium dazed years, before returning to England with the onset of cancer.

How the fuck did you get in here?"

You left the door open Sal."

Get outa my chair, and don't smoke that shit in here." Joe lifted his feet off the desk and vacated Sal's chair, stubbing the joint out in the ashtray. I hope you've got some money for me 'cause that big bastard out there cost a fucking fortune." Sal emptied the ashtray into the waste paper bin under the desk and sat down.

Don't pay him."

Yeh, smart idea Joe, what do you suggest I do offer him a bag of beads and wave some fire in his face, I don't think so."

What's his name?"

Vince Bullbar Thomas, twenty four years old and already spent five years for manslaughter. So fuck knows what kind of form his two gorillas have got."

Look like a couple of faggots t'me."

Really. Well you take them out back and tell them you ain't paying their boy and let me know what kind of arrangement you come to." Joe smiled across at Sal and slid his finger along the edge of the blade in his pocket.

So why invite him here."

Because it's good for fuckin' business that's why."

Business must be bad."

Business would be better if motherfuckers like you would pay their fucking debts!" Joe pulled out what was left of the roll of notes and threw it onto the desk.

There y'go Sal, a man of my word." Sal pulled the band off the roll and counted it.

You're a hundred and fifty five short." The office door opened and the head of one of Sal's bouncers appeared.

Sal, it's Vince's men."

Okay send them in." Sal threw the cash down on the desk and pointed at Joe as the door was closed for a second. Now you just keep your fuckin mouth shut and don't wind these boys up. You understand." Joe smiled at Sal and slumped into the leather couch.

Don't worry they'll get the respect they deserve." The door opened again and Vince's heavyweight security walked in.

Hey come on in fellas," Sal stood up and held out his hand, and shook hands with them both. Godse and Johnson right?" They both nodded in unison. Everything okay out there."

It's cool."

Sit down, you fellas wanna drink or something. Or perhaps something else?" They sat down in the two chairs opposite Sal and glanced across at Joe. That's Joe, he's okay." Godse and Johnson relaxed their suited bulk as best they could. So can I interest you guys in anything."

Just sort out the fee then we'll get the fuck outta here." Sal looked at the clock on the desk.

Well I think you'll find you got another hour left on the clock boys."

Yeh well you've got about two minutes to count the money before Vince leaves. He's got a busy schedule, don't like to be out to late."

The booking was for two hours including food and drinks, so this is gonna be a long two minutes. Unless you two wanna call back in a day or so." Sal's was very much his own castle.

Don't fuck around I ain't in the mood." Godse's shirt collar seemed to tighten even more around his fat neck.

I'm in the mood to fuck around." Johnson and Godse both turned stiffly towards Joe. You in the mood to fuck around Sal? I've got all night to fuck around." Joe grinned widely at the two stooges.

Shut it Joe I told you I'd handle it!" Joe burst into laughter.

You couldn't handle your own cock Sal." Johnson and Godse smiled at each other, as if amused by the side show.

Get the fuck otuta here. Now!" Joe felt a numb pain in the base of his left ear, a cracking sound ran through his head and his vision turned from colour to monochrome into negative. The skin of all three men infront of Joe had turned white, their eyes their teeth and their hair, black. Godse slid his hand across the desk towards the money Joe had given Sal.

We'll just take the cash and leave you two boys t'do y'bitchin alone." Godse's hand covered the cash just as Joe lunged out of the sofa. The stilleto knife raised

above his head, he plunged it down through the back of the white hand, through the wad of cash and into the table. Godse roared in pain, Sal recoiled from the desk and Johnson looked confused as Joe dropped Godse from his chair with thudding right kick into the pit of his outstretched arm. Johnson stood up as fast as he could and Joe pulled out the pistol from his jeans.

OH BLACK FOLKS, BLACK FOLKS, WHY YOU GOT TO KILL EACH OTHER?" Joe yelled, firing a single shot straight into Johnson face knocking him off his feet and into the path of the bone and blood exploding from the back of his head. A kick into Godse face relieved him of any thoughts about rising to his feet before Joe leapt onto the desk and pointed the Walther down towards him. Godse tried to suppress his whimpers as Joe dug the heel of his boot into his wrist. I do not want to die of creeping paralysis of my faculties, a defeated man. An assassin's bullet may put an end to my life and I would welcome it." Joe squeezed the trigger and Godse dropped as the bullet shattered his spine between his shoulder blades, the shrapnel from the dumb-dumb ripping through his body and out through his chest.

Joe turned and looked at Sal, pinned back in his chair with horror, his patent leather shoes covered in blood flowing from Godse's body. I'm gonna leave by the back door Sal. There's too many people out front and I ain't too keen on crowds." Joe lifted his foot from the limp wrist and let Godse drop to the floor under his own weight, his dead hand splitting as it pulled against the knife buried in the table through the soaked wad. He lent down and removed the mobile phone from Sal's inside pocket before jumping off the desk and kicking the emergency exit open.

The backyard was darker than usual, and getting darker with each step Joe made towards the back gates until there was no light at all, not even from the night sky above. Joe stopped and smiled to himself.

James could feel himself rising from within, becoming more conscious of his body around him. The gates had gone from view along with everything else, the walls, the bins, the crates, there was nothing. He could sense someone or something behind him, a presence neither human nor inanimate. He turned around, but with nothing to judge his movements against he wasn't sure whether he had moved at all, perhaps he just thought he had turned, perhaps he was still turning because he had no idea in what direction he was now facing. He stopped thinking about turning and tried to concentrate on stopping, but the memory of standing still became a carousel itself. He could see Joe standing still from a circling view point surrounded by spinning fairground rides. Joe's long black leather coat of his rose from his sides to form huge, outstretched feathered wings, his face on each passing transfiguring into that of a Raven with a large blooded beak. The fairground rides stopped turning like some clockwork machine triggering the bird to spin in time with himself.

Face to face they turned. James could feel himself being drawn into the pivotal Raven until he was so close he could see its eyes were no more than black holes within the darkness of its form. Its bloody beak snapped open and closed in an instant, swallowing James down into its carcass. He slid blindly down the turgid gullet, falling deeper and deeper into the stomach of the winged beast.

James' face smashed into the hard dusty floor, followed by the rest of his body until he lay spread eagled, waiting for the moment to take him further. The glow from the open fire warmed his side, the dancing flames casting shadows across his face through the darkness that surrounded him. He lifted up his head and looked around, squinting as the sparks leapt up and out of the fire, he watched them being drawn up with the smoke into a narrow column of light which fell from the infinite heavens above him. Illuminated by the column, James could see the face of an old man, centuries old, his features sunken with age, his eyes deep with sorrow and his forehead furrowed with knowledge. Like a Sanskrit shaman he sat cross-legged,

wrapped in a white linen shroud onto which his silver hair fell at the shoulders. James felt a faint sense of recognition flow through him, a house, a draw, a pendulum, a strange organic wind instrument, the images disappeared.

James lay on the cool earth listening to the fire crackling and watching the flames dance their chaotic dance. The rhythms were indiscernible at first, nothing more than random pitches within each crack and hiss. Slowly they ordered themselves into a rhythmic pattern, each ethnic sounding beat momentarily choreographed with the images forming in the fire. The heavy rhythm pulled James back from the flames, deep into the shadows.

From either side of the fire filed an endless line of naked men and women, black, white, brown, yellow, old and young they approached the flames which had now risen into a large conical inferno. Each one followed the next as they dived into the flames with pleasurable ease. From the top of the pyre two cobalt blue dolphins emerged, crossing and entwining they rose, contained within the column of incandescent smoke. As another pair followed on their tails, they metamorphosed into shining blonde mermaids spiralling still higher until their arms rose to form the shimmering silver wings of ethereal angels. A constant stream of cherubim and seraphim overflowed from the top of the column, filling the sky in one horizontal plane until they formed a huge silver square lighting the vast empty room in which James sat. The walls were made from the same dusty baked earth under foot, perfect in their geometrical form. The final pair entered the fire and the dolphins ceased to rise. The flames died down and extinguished themselves into the brown floor. Overhead, the angels swam in the ether, casting their radiance down onto James and the old man sitting at either ends of the room. The rhythms had drifted away, leaving a warm air breezing in their wake into which the old man spoke.

I am distressed. Cold. Cold. How. Did the warming of wool disintegrate at last? I am undressed. Between the iron and my naked skin, nothing is left. No more

protection left against my armour. I dare not move. Cold iron cuts my naked flesh. Cold pain. Sharp pain. Disarming pain. Armour protects. But now my arm can not wield arms. Frozen in pain. Slowly in hope or fear, my arm spreads out the gaudy surcoat, challenge or disguise. The tatters fly away. My armour is undressed. Steal, beg or borrow other guise, and play! Play the fool, the hero, play the lover, the monk, the peasant, play one and all! Play them, and let them play. Let hero play the fool and fool the hero, let peasant play the monk and monk the peasant, all play the lover, lover play them all. Play, guiser, endless permutations of disguise. Armour protects you still! And while you play in pain, protecting iron will scrape away your skin, your naked flesh and in the end will leave your bones undressed, your secret core disclosed and rest you truly, gentlemen."

The rhythms re-entered the room, rising as they had subsided, their breeze becoming a wind of growing speed. The dust from the walls and floor whipped up into a storm, obliterating the angelic light in which James' vision was held. A tornado developed from the tempest, sweeping him up from the ground and casting him down into its centre.

The snow fell around Joe, like white feathers they drifted down in the light of the full moon. He looked down at the black plastic parcel now visible between the bins, dragged it out and tore off the wrapping, letting the incarnadite head fall to the concrete ground. Her cadaver eyes sparkled in the moon light, Joe smiled and kicked her back between the bins. He left Sal's back yard and headed back towards the riot zone via The Back Lane.

There was no advertising boards in the back streets, no point, the only people who generally went there were the freelance hookers with no organised squat in which to entertain their clients. They would usually be there with the Joes - backed-up, bent over, on their knees, squatting or in the casual stance of the veteran who

played little part in her punter's fantasy other than the hire of her hand. Cheap fetishes were kept out of view in the back yards of the vacant premises which faced onto The Lane. Street fixers were the only others who used the shadows of The Back Lane, huddled alone half way into the darkness with enough light to operate their works, they'd convince themselves once again of their personal reason for their addiction before plunging the hyperdermic into their fragile bodies.

Tonight there was no one. Not even a pusher or a pimp hunting stray custom. Joe felt uncomfortable in the solitude and relative silence, this was James' environment, not his. He felt a hunger in his stomach like he had never felt before, his arms and legs grew heavy as his pace slowed down and his head echoed his inner thoughts. Joe stopped dead, without command, he couldn't move any further he was fixed to the spot. He tried to force his legs to move, forward, backwards, anyway was hopeless. This wasn't in the script, he could feel the plot slipping from his grasp as he struggled. James stepped forward out of Joe, he moved like liquid and appeared like a butterfly from it's pupa spreading his arms and fleeing as soon as he was free of his shell. Joe felt his lower jaw drop from his skull, slipping from it's skin it crashed to the floor and shattered into a million pieces of crystal. His rigid body cracked across it's surface and fell to the wet, cobbled ground.

James ran as fast he could towards the distant street lights of The Delta, never looking back in fear of slowing down he made the end of the first block and hung a right which led onto The Lane. The police were everywhere, the whole lane was chaotic with people forced to the ground, up against the walls or being ushered into large vans by the paramilitary law enforcers. In the moment it took James to choose his course of action he was hurled against the wall from behind. A kidney punch relieved him of his resistance and the baton across his neck, pinning his face into the wall, stopped him from slumping to his knees.

I.D. NOW!" The bellowing voice broke James' fear that Joe had caught him and he held up his open right hand slowly.

Back pocket." He felt the pressure on his neck ease as the officer removed one hand from the baton. Right hand side." His jacket was ripped from his shoulders and off his arms in a second. A hand gripped his right buttock followed by his left.

Motherfuckin shit!" Another kidney punch took the wind right out of him as he was dragged from the wall and across The Lane. Get in the fuckin van, NOW!" James was thrown towards the open back, cracking his shins on the edge of the raised floor he fell into the packed interior.

Even with the back doors wide open, the sheer weight of people crammed around James pushed him into a claustrophobic panic. His body started shaking uncontrollably as the tension inside him built up and up until he might have enough energy to burst through the enclosing sphere of darkness which surrounded him.

LET ME OUT!" His earthshaking cry was echoed with Joe's quiet response.

Let me in." James' anxiety attack subsided immediately as he turned his head and faced Joe head-on.

YOU! SHIT FACE!" The cop's voice boomed into the metal van and Joe filled himself once more.

Who me?" Joe smiled down at the square face in uniform.

YES YOU! OUT HERE NOW!"

Suck my dick pig fucker." The cop's face erupted with anger and Joe stepped forward to meet him as he entered the van. Still slightly stooped, Joe reached him before he could straighten up from the step in and caught him perfectly under his chin with his left toe cap. Four teeth fired from his mouth in a spray of vermillion as his broad body bent backwards and dropped out of the van. Joe leapt out after him and headed off at high speed through the confused mass arrest.

All Souls Avenue was luminated with street lamps, porch lights and wall lights, useless deterrents to the increasing street crime in suburbia. Four floored town houses ran along either side of the tree lined road, seperated from the pavement by small, neatly maintained gardens. Flights of five concrete steps ran up to the front door of each house, identical to the next bar the colour of their woodwork.

Joe walked up the avenue checking each doorway for it's number. Fifty six, fifty eight, sixty, sixty two. A mother of pearl rose shaped with copper wire hung in the window of the olive green door, it's reds and yellows lit from behind by the hallway light. The suitcase was still standing on the doorstep. Joe stood for a while in the cold night air, watching his breath rise into the frosted branches of the poplar.

He reached into his pocket and brought out Sal's mobile phone. Nine four one one four nine one. The phone took a short while to register the number, then it rang no more than four times.

Yes, hello." The female voice on the other end was soft and quiet, polite but unsure.

Can I speak to Doctor Prester?" Joe's telephone manner was fair to polite.

Yes, could you wait a moment please." The pause lasted longer than it usually takes to hand the phone to someone else.

I'm sorry he's busy, could you call back tomorrow please."

No I can't call back tomorrow put the fucker on the phone now! Do you hear me?" Again the same pause.

Who is this?" Joe smiled at Prester's annoyed tone, knowing that it belonged to the fact that he had been disturbed and not through any anxiety Joe may have caused his wife.

I said who is this?"

I am me, I am you, I am her, I am him." Joe's taunting chant caught Prester way off guard. There's a suitcase on your door step. Something I think belongs to you." Joe switched off the phone, moved into the shadow of the tree and waited.

The olive green door opened cautiously, shedding the light across the suitcase and down the steps. Prester appeared from the hallway dressed in his usual corduroy trousers and unfashionable jumper. He looked down at the case and then out into the street, checking for anything other than the obvious. He picked up the case and took it inside. Joe took the Walther out from under his coat, moved out from the shadow and headed straight for the front door.

Prester had just placed the suitcase on the dining table when the front door burst open, the locked catch ripping the wood away from the frame, the delicate rose decoration dropping to the floor and cracking under the weight of Joe's boots as he marched down the hallway; a vision of dire portent, his voice booming with savage ferocity.

Arise Yahweh, may your enemies be scattered and those who hate you run for their lives before you!"

Prester's wife screamed at the sight of Joe entering the dining room pointing the Walther straight towards her husband's head. Prester stood his ground, trying to hide his mortal fear under the guise of professional understanding. Joe had finally reached his destination, the warm end of the barrel rested against Prester's forehead, their eye's met in cold conflict.

Is that your wife?"

Yes it is." Prester's voice remained calm.

What's her name?"

Edie."

Pretty name, tell her to shut up!"

She doesn't understand what's going on Joe."

Just tell her to shut the fuck up!"

For Christ's sake she's scared." Joe kicked his right leg forward straight into Prester's balls. As he buckled under the pain Joe sent another kick into his face, forcing him up and back into the table. Edie screamed again and Joe pulled the pistol around towards her. Her scream dissolved into a wimper, leaving her whole body shaking violently. Her eyes flicked between Joe and her husband, still doubled up on the floor.

Sit down!" Edie stepped backwards towards the sofa. Not there. Here." Joe pointed the gun towards the table. She moved across the room nervously watching Joe's movements as he pulled out one of the chairs.

Get up Doc, you're embarrassing your wife. Prester lifted himself up onto the chair opposite his wife. The suitcase sat unopened on the table between them. His teeth red with blood he looked into her eyes in a vain attempt to reassure her that he was in control of the situation.

What do you want Joe?"

A very popular question Doc, and always from the people who should know better than to ask it." Joe pulled out another chair and placed it away from the table. He sat down and stretched out his legs, admiring his boots.

See these boots." Prester and his wife glanced down at Joe's feet, towards each other and then back to Joe. They were designed by a foundry worker in Detroit Michigan, and constructed using the hide of an African bull elephant. Do you know why he chose elephant hide?" Joe paused waiting for the answer he knew wasn't going to come. Then I'll tell you why. Because the skin of an African elephant is resistant to oil based solutions. Now isn't that something. Don't you think it's kinda odd that a foundry worker in Detroit should have any kind of knowledge concerning the dermatological properties of an African elephant. Do you know how he came by this knowledge? Any idea Doc?" Joe stood up from the chair and walked across to

the large bookcase behind Prester, containing psychology, sociology and psychoanalytic journals and books by Freud, Jung and other charlatans.

I don't know, perhaps he read about it." Prester was becoming annoyed again.

Correct! He read it in a book. And due to this amazing discovery, two hundred more elephants were added to the annual cull in game reserves in West Africa to supply his ambitious boot business. Do you like elephants Edie?" She looked at her husband for support.

Yes she does." Joe pushed the Walther into the back of Prester's head.

I didn't fuckin' ask you!" Joe looked over the top of his blue mirrors at Edie. Well." Her shaking became almost epileptic as she tried to hold back her tears.

Yes." Joe pulled back the pistol and started browsing through the books.

Well here's a sad thing. You see the book from where he acquired this information was full . . ." Joe pulled out one of the books and slung it over his shoulder . . . of . . ." followed by another . . shit!" Joe grabbed the sides of the bookcase and pulled it from the wall. Prester turned his head around quickly as his books crashed to the floor. Joe's face was right in front of him, nose to nose.

Recognise the scenario fuckhead." Joe moved like a coiled spring, his forehead cracked into the bridge of Prester's nose sending his head reeling back onto the suitcase, blood shot up from his face across the white washed walls, catching Edie on her cheek as she tried to turn away from the erupting violence. Joe stepped back and allowed Prester to regain his senses, a cue for Edie to lean across and comfort her husband. Prester pulled away from her as she tried to hold his head and nurse his wound. He looked towards Joe in submission.

What do you want Joe? Please. I'm tired. . ."

WHAT!" Joe stood straight up out of the chair. YOU'RE FUCKING TIRED! TIRED!" Joe's eyes narrowed. You ask me what I want because you're fucking tired!

Do you have any idea how busy I have been tonight? Do you have any idea? Fucking busy that's what. In fact I have been so fucking busy that no one should ever be tired again. So you, Doctor Prester, are lying. Again!" Joe pointed the pistol at Prester. Stand up." Prester placed his hand on the table to help himself up. Take your clothes off."

Joe this is madness let me talk to James."

Oh I'll tell you about fucking madness, now take your clothes off before I get crazy. BOOTS NOW!" Edie watched Joe circle her husband as he removed his boots and stripped down to his boxer shorts. And them." Joe pointed the Walther at his shorts. Prester slid them down his legs and stepped out into the middle of the room on Joe's direction. Sit down on the floor, you know the position Doc. Hands on shins, head between your legs." Joe pulled the chair away from the table and placed it six feet away from Prester.

Come and sit here Edie." Prester looked up as his wife left her chair and walked around the table. HEAD DOWN!" Edie jumped back a step at Joe's ferocity. Prester assumed his previous position and Edie sat down next to Joe, as if awaiting some one man performance.

For the last year Prester, you have lied to me, provoked me, insulted my intelligence, abused my trust and used me. All for your selfish, self gratifying, opinionated ends. You are a useless human being not worthy of my knowledge which you have tried to take and twist into your own experiences, of which you have none. You are pathetic to the core of your existence. The lost and lonely child which you insist is within all of us is of your own making, for I am neither a child, lost or lonely, but you. You! Are a disgrace to your mother's memory of her child. She must be turning in her grave at the very thought of what she has donated to this world. Your morals change from day to day, your reasons for being alter hourly but your knowledge of life, true knowledge, of self, and your part in the grand scheme

remains as it always has been. Nil!" Edie's attention was so firmly fixed on Joe that she had almost forgotten about her husband, naked and alone on the floor. You have trodden a well worn path through your life Prester, a path that leads into the endless labyrinth of ignorance with no way back. Theseus left himself a thread of hope along which he could return, but you have left nothing but locked doors, closed and bolted by the others whose friendships and loyalty you have have misused in your search for an answer to which there was never a question. See people like you, people in your profession, have no concern or compassion for others, you're just selfish fuckers who like to inflict their egotistical views on the weak willed who are able to pay for the shit that you spout. These patients of yours rely on you for help and guidance, not just to relieve them of what little monetary sustenance they have in order to enhance your material wealth you fuckin shit! We all have problems, we all have nightmares and we all put ourselves through needless torture during our lives. So what gives you, you of all people with your complexity of insecurities, the idea that all your unsolved problems can be of any help to anyone.

Life is to be lived, to be faced head on, if you can not handle the everyday pain of life then you must face the inevitable fact of defeat or else choose to survive, for he who makes a beast of himself gets rid of the pain of being a man.' Your suppression of anger is your defeat, an emotion so intense within you yet you choose to ignore it. Without anger and hatred you can not experience the true glory of love and compassion which is the essence of every soul. You know nothing and you will always know nothing until you choose to accept yourself for what you are. Nothing. But unlike nothing you shall not last forever, not even your past shall be remembered. Beyond this existence lies a reality in which you will be seen as less than a child because of the depth of your ignorance. And once again the perpetual cycle of rebirth shall cast you into the same, self-dug well of misery that you have mined for yourself time after time after time.

You will not allow yourself to face the error of your ways, you are truly bl-i-nd. To your own failings, you approach your misgivings like a l-e-a-sh-ed dog and your sense of righteousness is com-ple-t-ely misguided."

The floorboards beneath Prester cracked and gave way under the force that hit him across his shoulders and neck. Cocooning himself within the indian print wool, he plummeted down through the ground, naked but for the carpet which acted as his only protection. As he fell, the colourful fibres unravelled around him, leaving him suspended inside a transparent crystalidal membrane.

Prester lifted his head and his arms, pressing them against the thin film, trying to force his way out into the deepening unknown. The inside of his impermeable prison smelt of rotting flesh which filled his vegetarian throat with a choking heat beyond his wildest nightmares. He looked at the skin on his arms as it started to blister and burst before his eyes, leaving his flesh and muscle clinging bare to his bones, his whole outer layer peeled itself back rapidly. His limbs contorted, twisting and cracking his human frame until he could bear the pain no longer.

The large chrysalis smashed to the floor, shattering like glass across the frozen terrain. A huge water monitor sat at the point of impact, it's legs splayed and claws bared he moved his head in a balanced reaction to his tail. Seemingly unaware of its evolutionary past and unconcerned with its present environment, it casually flicked it's tongue into the air in search of prey as multiple dancing images of Doctor Roberts and Edie appeared across the aurora.

Both women, loosely dressed in chiffon and summer lace, glided through the sky, lightly brushed by the changing colours as they danced. The images slowly became one and the dancing slowed down into one long, sedate and sensual movement, their touching and holding more sexual with every brief, glancing kiss. They shed their translucent clothing and moved their hands over the other's body,

exploring every contour with flesh and breath they indulged in each other's pleasures with unbridled passion.

Prester sweated from within the scaled outer shell, almost asphyxiated, the reptile's cold blood brought rapidly to boiling point by the sexual display in front of him. His every reaction to his lust and disgust of the vision was mirrored in the actions of the lizard as it snapped its mouth and jerked at the knees, unable to relate human emotion through his reptilian physiology. As Edie and Dr. Roberts reached their climatic fanfare, beautiful in their ying and yang, the image almost paled into splendour, the ice cracked below the creature dropping Prester into the torturous cold water.

Down he sank, further and further beneath the fathoms, the icy water reducing his senses to none. Pure sensation. Faint recognition, like a passage through India, only quieter. His ignorance grew stronger. No longer the shrewd contender, a mere mortal loser had taken his place. The beautiful downblade.

The curtains opened up in front of him. His own living room, from the outside looking in. Joe sat at the dining table, reading the daily newspaper over the neat arrangement of cutlery and condiments as Edie entered the room carrying his dinner on a plate. She placed it in front of Joe, took his newspaper politely and returned to the kitchen. Prester watched as Joe spooned the food into his mouth - raw liver, kidney, heart, brain and intestine all slid from the plate with ease. The rain lashed against the window pane from behind and ran down the glass in front of Prester, separating him even further from his own sanctum. The rain became a million tears and Prester longed for the warmth and comfort of his house, someone to love him or someone who even cared.

He crashed his fists and forearms against the glass repeatedly, trying as he might to break through the barrier he faced. Joe lifted his blood-stained face from the plate, wiped his mouth and stared across at him, the glass shattered without a sound

and Prester crashed through the window face down into the floor. He lay still in the darkness and waited.

Prester lifted his face from between his knees, the rear of his head throbbed and vibrated simultaneously causing the effect of someone replacing his brain within his skull. Joe and Edie sat in front of him, silent, naked and unmoved. He looked at his wife and could tell her nakedness was not the result of force, he tried to speak her name. His efforts resulted in nothing, he couldn't feel his tongue, or his lungs as they tried to force the words out, or his heart pumping or the blood flowing to his lungs. He was completely empty inside.

Prester lent back away from his hunched up legs and looked down at the gaping wound running from his solar plexus down to his pubic bone. The folds of skin were held back with small chrome clips on either side of the hole to allow for easy surgical entry and exit. Prester felt his mind retch at the sight of the sickening void which once played host to his internal organs.

He looked back up at Edie, her face devoid of any emotion as she sat clutching Joe's Walther, her hands resting comfortably on her bare lap with the barrel pointing straight up. The suitcase was open on the dining table with the remaining body parts unwrapped and neatly arranged around the shining meat cleaver standing central within the case, like a travelling salesman exhibits his wares. Edie turned towards Joe and ran her tongue up his right cheek, removing a smear of blood left over from his dinner.

How was your inner child Prester? Still crying over spilt milk? Never mind, I brought a friend of yours along to give you a hand cleaning it up, in fact you can have both her hands cause we seem to be at a loss about what to do with them." Edie smiled at Joe then giggled a child's giggle. Don't try to get up either, you shouldn't exert yourself on an empty stomach." Joe burst into a deep laugh and

Edie's giggling became more excited as she watched Joe through the eyes of a mesmerised child.

Joe rose to his feet and the laughing stopped at once. He lifted his arms up to ninety degrees on his left and right, on doing so they left behind multiple images of his arms in regular fixed intervals, each one with it's palm facing towards Prester. He lifted his arms higher, again they left more images in their wake, except in movement they changed colour from flesh to gold and dripped feathers as they were lifted above his head causing multiple widespread wings to appear from his back. Joe's entire naked body, with it's many arms and wings shone as gold, emitting a brilliant radiance which washed over Prester's view of Edie.

Joe stood alone in his magnificence, and with his eyes fixed firmly on Prester he lifted slightly from the floor as his feet and lower limbs metamorphosed into that of a golden calf. Each facing palm of Joe's many hands mirrored his own image, as he was, but for his head. In every separate image he bore the head of a different animal - an eagle, a lion, a buffalo, a dolphin, a fox, a swan, a bird of paradise and so on, until in every image within every palm within every image were the heads of every earthly animal.

Joe was elated, he expressed the joys of the universe across his face for he had at last been truly born in the eyes of man. No more the subordinate, no more in the shadow. No more. Joe's voice filled the whole of creation.

Listen to the music Jim. Listen to the music."

The sound of the single gun shot was drowned beneath the symphony.

James lifted his heavy head from his chest and tried to focus on the figure opposite him. The confusion pained him, his whole body pained him. Within his head, the images he had witnessed remained lucid. He had no idea whether the experiences had been his, someone else's, or just a fantastic hoax created by Joe and his controlled substances. He didn't want to ask. He didn't even want to know. All he did know is that he didn't want to know anything anymore, enough was enough, Joe could have what he wanted and he would do his will, whatever.

Enough is never enough." The words penetrated James' mind as Joe's face focused in from the other side of the room. The question should always be. What next?" They were as they had been, directly opposite each other, James in the armchair and Joe on the sofa.

They're going to put me in prison for ever." James' Englishness wept pitifully from his lips.

PRISON! Jesus Christ you think they're gonna put you in prison for doing that. They're gonna make a fucking movie outta what you just did."

But I didn't do it." James broke down in tears, sobbing into his hands.

You fuckin better believe you did, 'cause your face is gonna be behind every closed door of every confused mind in this world, and you better be there to receive their sins as your burden, as those that have come before you have. Now you have become your own sacrificial lamb then so shall you die on the altar that has served you well."

I don't want to die." James pleading fell short.

You do not have a choice, you have relinquished your rights to decide the outcome of your own existence, it is now my time to dictate the left or right turns, it is now my turn to select in or out, up or down. The time is now, and the duration is permanence"

Something warm and viscose dripped onto James' forehead and slowly ran down to the bridge of his nose, slipping off to the right and running down the tear line of his cheek. He looked up, just as another drop was approaching him from above. Like a golden raindrop it plummeted straight into his left eye.

James looked down at his father as he lay enshrouded in white linen sheets with a pillow under his neck to ease the flow of oxygen to his lungs. His face was and drawn and sallow, his eyes lay deep within their red sockets, shadowing the faint flicker of life that was held within them. His muscles wasted, his thin skin could no longer disguise the shape and contours of his upper and lower jawbones, his teeth and gums protruded without the restraint of his lips which had receded from his mouth. Cancerous marks stained his entire body.

James held out his hand and touched the dry, cold skin across his father's head, as if somehow comforting them both in their own agonies. As he lent over the frail body of this once handsome man he heard the inhaled and exhaled wheezing form into the words.

"I'm sorry Jim." James removed his hand from his father's face and looked into his eyes as more words broke through the insufferable pain that surrounded each one. "I'm sorry I couldn't help you Jim." Long gaps of pain endurance separated each line. "Tell your mother I missed her." James wasn't sure if he himself was allowed to speak, so he chose not to mention that he hadn't seen his mother in years and had no idea where she was, knowledge of her wasn't going to help anyone. "When your brother died. I couldn't carry on. We weren't complete anymore. I didn't

want to see. . . . you or your mother. . . . in that much pain. I had to leave. I wanted to die. I wanted. . . . us all to die. But not. . . . together. I wanted us to. . . . find each other, again. When the pain had gone."

His father's eyes suddenly moved towards Jim and for one second appeared to focus, deep, deep inside James' own eyes as if he was staring at his soul.

There's nothing there." His pupils closed almost immediately, the lights gone. James moved his gaze from his father's face and lifted his own face up towards the ceiling. Another golden droplet fell into his eye.

James looked around at the beautiful coastal scene before him, the grassy hill tops formed the other half of the crumbling cliffs which looked down and protected the empty bay. The rocks multiplied around him like tiny islands relinquished by the ocean as it retreated from the shoreline, leaving the fresh uncharted rock pools to be explored and the smooth wet sand to be walked on.

He had seen this beach many times before, from afar, in dreams, but definitely the same beach. He even knew about the surrounding landscape, the small town just beyond the far cliffs which harboured the small ferry port and rail station, which backed onto the busy market square.

The outward tide's undercurrent reduced its pull on James' legs, the beach widened and the rocky arms of the cove stretched further out from the cliffs. Still there was no sign of movement or life other than the tide and the scavenging gull overhead. He looked down to where the cool blue sea lapping at his feet had turned into a cold red river of blood. The rags of a blue and white summer dress draped themselves across the emerging rocks, singing a quiet lullaby. A lonely, golden teardrop fell from James' eye and crashed onto the rocks below.

The tight walls of his mother's womb pulsed around him, ripples ran through and across his embryonic skin from his head to his tail. The sharp white light of the

conscious world permeated the outer sanctum walls, eventually reaching James as a diffused, warm, orange glow in which he felt reassuringly calm and at one with his being. The tranquility warmed him for a while as he lay comfortable in his sac, and although conscious of his state and aware of his position, no thoughts entered his mind.

The sound of tearing ripped through the serenity, the orange glow was carefully drawn back from in front of him to reveal the penetrating white light of its source. Like the heavens being unzipped between the northern and southern hemispheres, the hands of God reached into his rapidly evolving world, unaware of the silent opposition screaming from within. The two giant hands cupped his premature body and drew him into the fearful light. Within seconds he felt himself released from the grip and replaced within his host, the warm orange glow was drawn back again to shield him from the pain which he knew he would have to endure someday.

The choice of action is determined only at the moment of choice." Joe's quiet voice breathed a sense of relief and sadness through James. His eyes flickered open to see Joe standing over him. And the ultimate responsibility must lay with you at that moment. You chose your path through life from your given start to its predetermined end, only the constraints of your moral society has guided your decisions therefore destroying your own free will. The survival of the fittest is a universal evolutionary law and whilst you allow yourself to be programmed and judged by this hypocritical society then so shall you be relieved of choice. As a child is taught to dress himself, so has man learned to harness himself and your release has been my pleasure."

Joe lifted up the shotgun and placed the end of the barrel into James' waiting mouth. James raised his arms and held the cold metal in his left hand and placed his

right thumb across the trigger, taking the weight of the gun away from Joe. The fear of death had left him. He had faced the trauma of birth unprepared, but he faced death with acceptance through submission.

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James watched the clear fluids wash over his eyes beneath the lids, like a drowning man beneath an ocean guided by the involuntary spasms of his facial muscles. With his mouth open wide around the barrel of the gun, his whole body felt broken, every bone and sinew twisted under an avalanche of guilt. He could feel Joe's fingers pierce the skin across his chest, forcing his ribs apart and clutching his beating heart. His gasps echoed through his brain as Joe squeezed tighter and tighter until the fluids in his eyes turned red.

The waves subsided to reveal a huge prismatic shaft, black empty nothingness framed within an even greater expanse of nothingness, thousands of feet deep, the weight above him forcing him down at an ever increasing velocity. Tessellated images of Christ, Moses and Elijah appeared central to his field of vision, rapidly expanding and rushing towards him at an incredible speed, creating their own images within the walls of the shaft.

Tiny nodes of light, raced backwards towards the religious mosaic, along a geometric grid of interlocking perspectives on either side of him, returning at greater speed across the crystalline planes above and below. In a timeless instant the walls of the prism and the images held within them, folded inwards to create a pyramidal structure back-lit by an ocean of glowing gasses. The colourful mosaic moved across its surfaces as if seeking out their pre-destined position within an astronomical puzzle. The faces of Jesus, Moses and Elijah merged into a blinding golden glow encompassing the pyramid.

James bathed in its radiance as an overwhelming feeling of completion swept through his entire being. A higher self conscience had relieved him of his physical sensations, form, and feelings of guilt. A totally new spectrum of emotions held him suspended, in awe of his surroundings. The metempsychosis he was experiencing was beyond his base conscious knowledge of elation and equanimity. A spiritual pleasure beyond human compare.

This was the truth. The final, ultimate realisation of one's true being that he had searched for. There was nothing more beyond 2012, he knew that now. The truth had been here for eternity, inside, not written on a wall or hidden within the words of a song. The fear of death had been the only horror, not fear of the truth. James absorbed the symphony of rebirth, grandiose in its celestial silence and harmonies.

The serenity of his new environment was slowly broken by the quiet cry of a baby. Distant and almost unheard, it grew in volume until he could feel the voice within his own soul, internal and eternal. From the depths of the golden glow the outstretched arms and face of the angel Azrael emerged, heavenly in her boundless shades of silver. James could feel her warmth as he moved gradually towards her. Ushered by her unspoken guidance and propelled by his need for sanctity, he fell into her embrace.

Joe stepped back from the chair. James' body was locked in suspended animation, his mouth still wide open. He looked down at James' contorted face.

Amittitur Archa Cederis. Let go James."

He turned and walked across the narrow room towards the door, resting the shotgun across his right shoulder. The sun was beginning to rise, casting its early rays through the narrow slits of the barred window onto the fresh linen sheets of the hospital bed. He closed the door quietly and turned left.

The corridor was brightly lit, showing off the plush cream carpet which ran central along the marble floor. The walls were painted sepia and adorned with gold leaf picture frames, each one surrounding black and white photographs. The pictures where clear and sharp, almost like film stills in an action packed way. James' life was spread out across the walls like an exhibition. From the cradle to the grave in monochromic 2D.

Joe strode past the pictures towards the end of the corridor. There were no more doors other than the large, wooden door facing him. Set back into the bare sandstone wall and surrounded by an edifice of receding, concentricly carved arches, each one ornately decorated with individual cherubs and gargoyles. Joe turned the large ring handle and pushed the door open.

The brilliant white sunlight reflected up from the expansive desert sands causing an oceanic mirage of water. The horizon was lined with framed doorways, seperated only by time. Joe walked across the limitless sands towards the distant horizon.