

HOLIER THAN THOU

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*The Star People,
The Witch &
The Forest King*

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For your early support and improving input I hereby award you 5% of the net proceeds from this project, and an open invitation to join forces in the future.

Please support her through “FirstLadyReads” on YouTube.



SWORDS. TEN.

I was weak. They were treacherous. Thus was I vilified and burned at the stake whilst the coven concealed itself behind perceptions of purity and visages of victimization. Beware the snake, sir, for, to their conspiring slew, you're either the gopher or the hawk, the superior predator to parry or the pathetic prey born to be of their bloody bounty. And know that I speak not of the woman whom has seen her ego and recoiled, but of the witch whom has made of it her egg-laying den.

Introduction

The Witches' Brew

Political correctness is conformity and censorship, plain and simple; it's the mob mentality, the self-righteous bullies getting together and deciding what's permissible to think and say and what's not, thereby enforcing their narrow sense of propriety upon the world by pretending to stand upon the moral high ground. In the modern 'woke' era, little is more destructive of free thought, constraining of the intellect and limiting to the majority mind, dictating what's allowed to be thought and felt, written and spoken. And this evil rules over the corporations and religious institutions whose absolute pursuit of profit and power includes the need to appear set within the boundary lines of moral and religious propriety (which, in the worst organizations, are one in the same), so as not to offend and to maintain the appearance of purity in the eyes of their patrons, compelling them to do whatever is necessary to avoid liability for running aground of the 'woke' monster and those it identifies as needing to be burned at the stake ('cancelled'). When wielded by people in positions of power and privilege, the figurative burning of books and their writers follows. Furthermore, the investors in this evil are often the seemingly innocent whom wield popular perception and political correctness as weapons.

Those that wield these weapons are, to the moral and progressive, the ugliest people in the world. And in my experience, the most hideous version of the wielder of such concealed, self-righteous weaponry sharpened by politically-correct perception has been the clever, beautiful young woman. I now tend to think that telling them they're pretty is the worst thing that you can do to them. It erodes their character and brings out the ego-monster. It's apparent that the more often that they hear that they're beautiful, and the more they believe it and gain the attraction of others through nothing but their appearances, with the deceiving allure of their primped, polished and painted shell, ready to recoil or venomously attack those that they attract, as if offended by that purposefully-promoted attraction and its power, the greater the entitlement they feel, and the more rotten and hollowed-out they become inside, especially equipped with cleverness and other privileges, and, characteristic of youth, unequipped with moral, spiritual and intellectual development.

If you run afoul of such a creature for any reason whatsoever, regardless of right and wrong, and whether you're an attracted man, a competing woman, a fake 'friend' that'll be cast off as soon as you fail to serve their egos, or an actor in some other version of the tenuous social situations in which they tend to place people, pure Hell shall rain down upon you. Trust me, I know. I've experienced it more times than I can count. If you fawn over them, or show any combination of interest and vulnerability, you might as well hand them a knife and turn around, exposing your backside. For it may be true that Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned, but it's truer still that the Devil hath no agency like a gorgeous ego-maniac, especially if she's clever and/or privileged, exacerbating her sense of entitlement and egomania, growing the cold-blooded creature.

You can label this statement misogynistic if it makes you feel better, as many will, to be sure, but that's just politically correct nonsense; the same nonsense such monsters love to employ in order to alter the narrative of their depredations in their favor. Like my relationship with people in general, my regard for women is love-hate, albeit magnified, for passion enhances and exacerbates equally. This is experience and psychological trauma talking; *lots of it*. So I refuse to be bullied by 'woke' bullshit any longer. I won't be 'brought in line' with false piety. If it's true, it's true, self-righteousness be damned, and my God is there a whole hell of a lot of that, being a go-to ingredient in the witches' brew. And I'm tired of pretending otherwise, folding to unwise conventional wisdom; to peer pressure parading as moral purity. No more. I'm here to tell you the truth, whether you like it or not, regardless of any reprisals, with several such insipid salvos having already been launched at me. For I'd argue that the purpose of the rare few free thinkers like me is to take issue with all that prevents progress; to unsettle the status quo where it gives way to evils disguised as goods. And this book, whatever its flaws, does that. I'm not claiming to be faultless, but I know for certain that I didn't deserve what happened herein, wherein those playing victims were beautiful villains.

"You can't say that Nick!," proceeded by turned up noses, and the silent treatment, all those supporting evil pretending to be fighting for God. Welcome to your mirror, ye thorned roses, ye snakes concealing your fangs, ye litany of lustrous liars, ye perpetrators of false piety.

This antivenom is for all those who might be protected from your poison.

Dedicated to the 2022 employee roster of a certain bookstore in Bend, OR, those comprising the emotional and psychological heart of this book, where not only did deceit and prejudicial collusion lead to my traumatic wrongful termination, but where misled management thereafter reneged on its promise to sell my books.

The incident gave me chest pains for a week of sleepless days and nights, to such an extent that I almost checked myself into a hospital.

This novella represents the self-therapeutic processing of trauma, as well as transcending treachery and finding freedom from the mental enslavement of traditional, oppressive institutions. Where the narrative feels rushed or incongruous, I blame not just my impatience, but my need to cathartically release my pain upon the page.

Oh, and, by the way, if we truly *do* reap what we sow, some of you may want to stay out of your fields for a while.

"The books that the world calls immoral are
books that show the world its own shame."

- Oscar Wilde

"And thus I clothe my naked villainy with old
odd ends stolen forth from holy writ,
and seem a saint when most I play the devil."

- Shakespeare, from *Richard III*

"You render the priesthood superfluous if
you can talk to God on your own."

- Michael Pollan, from "How to Change Your Mind" on *Netflix*

"I am ashamed to think how easily we
capitulate to badges and names, to large
societies and dead institutions."

- Ralph Waldo Emerson, from his essay "Self-Reliance"

To purge one's pains upon the page is to pass some stain to the parchment, and thereby be cleansed.

WARNING

This book is intended for mature readers.

And I'm not referring to your AGE.

What This Book Has Become Subsequent to the First Printing:

I now consider *Holier Than Thou* to be a personal representation of the general truths that: (1) When a good, principled person enters into a toxic, unprincipled environment, what invariably happens is that they expose, absorb and become targets for and victims of that toxicity, ideally for the cleansing and good of that environment, and the protection of all those who'll be impacted by that environment. Typically, however, more of their like are made into scapegoats of that toxicity until the evil reaches a critical mass and progress is forced. And: (2) That big-hearted, emotionally-vulnerable, lonely men make irresistible targets for certain devious, beautiful young women who can't help but manipulate their power over those men, for the sake of ego-gratification and personal and professional power, often causing irreparable damage to those men. And I'd rather be honest about possessing this vulnerability, and expose and explore the manifold connected social injustices, than pretend like I'm invulnerable, or try to conceal what happened as though *I'm* the one who should be ashamed just because the official, corporate-hand-washing version of the event falsified the facts and motives, washing justice down the drain in the process. As further forthrightness, in the year following the first publication of this project it's become less about fantasy fiction and more about trying to heal the psychological wounds truly tied to that fiction, and the related reproach of false forms of social and professional justice based upon political correctness and its authoritarian command of contemporary culture. While the two reviews in the appendix came shortly on the heels of this book's initial publication, the heart of the appendix, "Critical Failure," has been an ongoing repository of reflections upon the social issues and attempt at personal healing that I now regard as the heart of this book, granting it much greater meaning. Ultimately, I believe that this novella tests for false piety, is at least as factual as it is fictional, and demonstrates two powerful forces:

- (1) The good of self-therapeutic art
- (2) The evil of self-righteous political correctness



**THE BLACK SHEEP
&
THE SHEPHERD'S DAUGHTER**

As if locked in time pre-Industrial-Revolution, the noble Barnes Clan lives to preserve a simple, righteous way of life. Considering most technological 'advancement' to actually be a regression constituting a distraction from worship at best, an invitation to evil at worst, their small, albeit fast-growing community looks much as an American frontier settlement might have in the eighteenth century. Rather than lionizing the titans of industry, or the insights and innovations of the scholastic and scientific communities, they prize their artisans, engineers, builders, farmers, and especially their episcopal teachers and preachers.

Guilds supporting these spiritual and practical pursuits have sprung up throughout their hidden tract of forest-shrouded woodland tucked into the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia, with the focus on religious studies and the leadership of Church elders guiding the projects of community specialists in disciplines long taken for granted by the machine-and-computer-dependent, unholy nation they've left behind.

It's been almost two generations since The Barnes Clan decided that American Society was headed for a fall, and that the only thing to do was not to fall along with it. Just over a century ago, it was declared by the leader of the small town congregation of Salem, VA, that the wrath of God was imminent, and shall consume the iniquitous spreading the seeds of Satanism throughout the lustful land harboring the progeny and purveyors of every manner of sin.

"We must make the boldest move that we can," declared their leader, Pastor Elliott Barnes, in a sermon rallying his flock a week before their flight. "It is incumbent upon us to make the clearest declaration of righteous intention of which we're capable, and assure God through our decisive action that we want nothing more to do with this iniquity."

Destined to become one of the inspirations for the film *The Village*,

the entire congregation took up, cut ties and disappeared into the Blue Ridge Mountains, a part of the Appalachian Mountain chain, leaving nary a clue in their wake. It became quite the scandal in their little mountain town.

Where did Elliott Barnes lead his flock? How did he convince them to uproot and leave everything behind, including dismayed family and employers scrambling to fill the void? Stories were rampant; everything from the congregation, known to be particularly fervent in their zeal for Christ, being called up to Heaven by some supernatural means, to a story of mass suicide spread by one furious, abandoned family member who regarded Elliott as an egomaniacal cult leader. Their departure, however, was peaceful. And that peace would prevail. For a while, at least.

The happy harmony sitting on the surface of their little wooded slice of heaven hidden in the mountains belied the coming conflict. Schisms within insular religious societies are inevitable, for not everyone can be convinced that doubting scripture is the same as doubting God, and inviting of the Devil. Alex started developing suspicions regarding such myopic prejudices at an earlier age than most.

He suspected the Bible *not* to be the irreproachable word of God, but the word of powerful men seeking to gain power over other men through the pretense of divine authority, the Good Book being a combination of propaganda and the remnants of a spiritual philosopher that had survived imperial edits, for imperial purposes. He loved his adopted family, and the members of his community at large, and yet he realized that their perspective on right and wrong, and on the nature of spirituality, was too narrow in scope to capture the truth, and that he wouldn't be able to follow Father Andrew, the current leader and onetime protégé of Elliott Barnes, forever.

The conflict started innocently enough. Alex became an avid

reader by the age of fifteen, and was soon dissatisfied with what most of the other villagers and the elders handed him to read. He entertained himself by becoming a sort of investigator, doing everything he could to provoke those around him to reveal truths which might not be acceptable to the flock as a whole. This search soon led to the seeking of 'unorthodox' books, with the few he found becoming his most prized possessions, spurring within him not only a desire for more secular knowledge and works of literature, but a desire to write as well.

For nearly a decade-and-a-half now he's written compulsively, having consumed every page of countless journals. And it is God Itself that moves him to write, he believes, passing truths to his mind through his heart, the throne of The Lord within each of us, with those truths often conflicting with biblical dictates. What he communes with is *far* bigger and more inclusive than the God described in the Bible.

One higher up within The Barnes Clan, Father Jacob, encourages his search and development as a reader, writer, theologian and open-minded scholar. Where other members of the community will simply condemn his interests as being that which invites moral impurity at best, seduction by demonic forces at worst, he gradually teased out of Jacob the shared propensity to dive deeper, and often into waters which most of those others would consider dark and filled with danger.

Encouraging Alex's quest for knowledge, within limits, Jacob is one of the few that Alex approaches with honesty, having developed a protective guise he feels compelled to wear around most of the villagers. Jacob shares some of the books that he smuggles in from Salem with Alex, being the procurer of supplies for the community, a man who's garnered the requisite level of trust and respect to handle the trip without being tempted into the sin prevalent within western society, or to tactlessly reveal their location. He also facilitates long discourses on all matter of subjects whenever the two of them are left 'unsupervised.' At the same time,

however, he consistently admonishes Alex as to the danger of his path. He won't be accepted by most of The Barnes Clan if he stays this course of intellectual curiosity and spiritual doubt; of the fervent quest for knowledge and the divine essence, rather than being completely satisfied by the love of Christ.

"Why not both?," Alex would ask. "And what if the Bible got Christ wrong? How many testaments to his teachings *didn't* make it in?"

Jacob would smile at such remarks, sensing truth in them and yet remaining unable to endorse them, for many an example has been made during Father Andrew's sermons of the evil begot by exposing oneself to 'the wrong ideas,' especially when lacking the maturity to healthfully process and place them within a proper Christian context.

"One day you'll be forced to make a decision, Alex," Jacob had recently told him. "Either you'll have to keep this search of yours to yourself, and make it a quiet passion indulged in the candlelit dark, else you'll be forced to flee this place, and return to a world forever in jeopardy of consuming itself, for your quest shall never be endorsed by the community elders. I don't envy your position."

Jacob had, in fact, been the one to discover Alex, who was born an outsider under mysterious circumstances which much of the village looked upon with suspicion, as if being born outside of their sanctified ground was akin to being born outside of God's grace.

"There's no such thing as *outside* of God," Alex journaled in retort to overhearing such suggestions. "God is everything, and there's no such thing as being outside of everything."

The story was that Jacob and his wife, Evangeline, had found him

while out gathering berries in the forest not far from the village. An infant, he'd been swaddled in a blanket with a gold cross sewn into it, then set upon a large stump. Both Jacob and Evangeline attest that the stump upon which he'd been placed had been repeatedly marked along all sides by a bluntly-pointed instrument of some kind, such as a roughly-carved spear, or the antlers of a stag or bull elk, crisscrossing and circling to the extent where it seemed as if the person or animal responsible had been attempting to carve patterns into the wood. Some in the community joke, others half-joke, that it had actually been the horns of the Devil or his demonic minions that had made the marks.

The discovery of infant Alex created quite the commotion for a time, with a mix of intrigue and suspicion eventually giving way to his official, ceremonially-celebrated acceptance, and being passed around as a sort of communally-adopted son until he was twenty five, and thereby old enough to secure his own lodging. Certainly the cross sewn into the blanket was a sign that he was born of a 'God-fearing woman,' went one popular thought. He'd quickly come to hate that expression, 'God-fearing,' as soon as his developing critical thinking capacity paired with a greater openness to his spiritual instincts. The idea of God wanting to strike fear into our hearts was the opposite of the God that *his* heart told him of.

"God isn't about fear. On the contrary, to truly know God is to gain the *true* faith that, held closely enough, eradicates fear," he'd written. "For it's about an untouchable, all-encompassing core identity."

Yet, despite knowing this in the deepest depths of his being, that his essence is not only invulnerably eternal but also the same as everything and everyone else's, he's afraid all of the time. For that of him which *is* vulnerable feels that sense of vulnerability *constantly*. And living in a community which judges goodness based largely upon family relations, the fact that he doesn't have anything but a mystery in the place of his family links makes the cross sewn onto his infant blanket act as a kind of insurance policy.

But the questions persisted: if he *had* been born of a Christian mother, why had he been given up, and from where? The closest known outsiders lived in Salem, miles away. For a time a rumor ran that someone had recognized the blanket as having come from the community itself, creating more of the gossip upon which the community seemed to thrive, or to degenerate, at least from the perspective of the few like Alex whom tended to regularly find themselves in the crosshairs of those rumors.

If he *had* come from someone in the community, who, and why? Who had been pregnant, and done such a good job of concealing it? And why conceal it in the first place? Something scandalous, no doubt, like an out-of-wedlock affair. The notion that this should be considered scandalous offended Alex as well; the idea that God would be so small-minded and prideful as to retract his grace from those born outside of *anything*. It's *love* that sanctifies, regardless of person, place or circumstance. Yet, he also thought: if, indeed, this *is* the case, that he came from an 'iniquitous union,' and considering the manner in which such 'offenses' are spoken, no wonder it was hidden.

While growing up and trying to 'find himself,' a mission which was more challenging for him than for most, Alex had bounced from station to station, as if sampling the community sects, never feeling a true fit, as though he'd be forced to stuff himself into a mold that would cut away the truest part of himself. Pushed to make a decision on his dedicated specialty in life as he approached his thirtieth birthday, he believed that his knowledge of his heart, of his truest self, came through his pen, and so he dared to dream of penning his own literature. Perhaps he could serve the community in this manner, perhaps not.

Feeling the pressure, it seemed ever more unlikely that he could fit a niche that the Church elders would endorse, especially considering his own spiritual thoughts and experiences were diverging from the dominant

orthodox beliefs more and more. He imagined that, through his journals, he was engaged in a conversation with God by which, should he be worthy and hear with his heart, he might purify the Bible, distilling it down to its truth while burning away all the corruptive mind-controlling elements he read within it. Such an exercise, of course, could only incite outrage, provoking accusations of 'arrogance' and 'blasphemy.' Thus, because of this mounting sense that a 'proper fit' could never be found, he feared that Jacob was right, and that he'd soon have to make that most difficult decision: to leave the only world he's ever known behind, fleeing for 'the heathenland.'

As he aged, he was accosted more and more by the sense of being an out of place outlier. His dreams consistently consisted of fleeing from a pitch-forked mob, or being encircled by a murder of crows awaiting his defenselessness before dive-bombing him to bits. Yet, having planned to depart and bringing himself to the brink countless times, he could never quite summon the strength to go through with it.

On innumerable occasions he'd followed his compass towards civilization, it and a crude map having been reluctantly gifted by Jacob, only to turn around. For despite the overwhelming sense that he doesn't belong, and that the community might, upon further investigation, be comprised more of enemies than of friends, something keeps him here, in the pious Barnes Clan. He senses that he has a mission here; a role to play that's not *supposed* to be immediately accepted. Moreover, and more importantly, he's falling in love.

Nineteen-year-old Miranda does something to him that none of the other young women working for Father Andrew do. Jacob, wanting to protect him and being a well-respected Church elder, finally convinced Alex to take an active role in supporting Father Andrew and the congregation for the sake of 'saving face.' This drew him into proximity with the mostly young, attractive women whom Andrew seemed to

favor when calling upon community members to serve the congregation. They are, by and large, a very good-looking lot. But Miranda feels like much more than that, her appeal going well beyond the physical in his eyes, to an invocation of his aching heart, she being so naturally endowed to tug at its overly-taught strings.

Their flirtatious fun has come naturally for some time, and he's now finding himself seeking her attention, sneaking into the church at all hours despite his growing aversion to the sense of its mind-narrowing misleading of its susceptible flock. Alex finds Miranda's presence exciting, she being that rarest of entities that makes him happy to be alive. He wants to be near her as much as possible, his love for her growing side by side with his distrust of the Church and his developing resistance to its pretense of authority. As a further element of attraction, Miranda, like her friend Sophie, possesses an interest in becoming a writer as well, and through the motive of developing their skills the three of them have become secret pen pals, exchanging a series of letters and often discussing the content of their literary creations during those times in the church when they're not under a watchful eye. This bodes well for Alex, making him appear far more committed to The Church than he actually is, affording him an added layer of protection against a communal ethos predicated upon piety and condemnatory judgment.

Father Andrew is pleased by Alex's emerging presence in the church, believing that Jacob and the others have finally worn down his unholy resistance to the word of God. Jacob and several others are pleased with this as well, and though, unlike Andrew, Jacob knows of Alex's distaste for Church doctrine and suspects that it's the beautiful young women serving the Church that have Alex constantly coming back for more, he yet regards this draw as a necessary evil. Anything that may eventually lead to Alex's acceptance by the Church and its leadership is an ends justifying such means.

Thus, while he maintains serious reservations, Jacob yet hopes that Alex can find a way to coexist with the community; that he might yet grow into a role which balances the growing taste for 'secular diversions' demonstrated by many a member of the congregation, especially amongst the younger members, with the Christian teachings at the foundation of The Barnes Clan. Being one of the few open to such an adaptation, believing that the community can't survive if remaining stagnant and entirely closed off to 'outside influences,' and that young men like Alex thus have a valuable role to play in the growth of their church, Jacob allows himself to believe that a peaceful balancing point might be reached, even as doom draws towards the doorstep.

For, in every den, as goodness grows, a commensurate evil tends to emerge, like an equal and opposite reaction, as if evil is a force naturally fomented by goodness, in the need for a relative response; as if goodness *requires* evil to act as the catalyst for its own growth and fulfillment. For if there were no evil to overcome, goodness couldn't be spurred to reach its realization. This, Alex finds, is one of *many* critical lessons lost to the Christian mindset; lost to the belief in absolutely separated, dichotomously black-and-white good and evil.

He'd recently written in his journal:

Unlike how it's portrayed in overly simplistic works of art and literature, and even in 'the words of God' I've been raised never to question, for they're 'infallible,' most evil isn't an innate, fixed, absolute quality, but, rather, a result, or effect, of people's ongoing reaction to a typically gradual, insidious corruption of their body and mind. It's the following of our incorruptible hearts, and the understanding and fighting of the sources of corruption, which makes us good, and enables us to overcome evil.

In truth, good and evil aren't only inseparable, they *rely* upon one

another. Their potential always exists within every human form, rather than being the absolute of any person per the false lesson embedded in Disney films, implicitly telling children to identify and cast out, kill or lock up those *born* evil. He's read book versions of all the Disney classics, thinking them charming, if ultimately encouraging of the wrong, divisive beliefs.

For, when this black-and-white, absolutist, perfectly separated good and evil paradigm is believed, it creates its own evil in the world through the actions of its believers, with the impressionable youth raised *not* to be compassionate, come together and look for ways to overcome the corruptions of the world and find the deeper shared essence of *everyone*, but to identify the 'enemy' as being *inherent to people*, rather than the enemy being what it *really* is: *never people, but contents of mind*; certain oppressive beliefs built around a celebration of ignorance, around supremacist pride and its perpetuated prejudices, and around the insufficiently developed ability to resist the temptations that lead to evil action and effect. Not only this but, in the end, evil *is* good, as not only does it reveal good in contrast, but it awards good its very value and purpose. Without the villain, there's no need for the hero. And as much as he believes in this inseparability between good and evil, and that people become corrupted *towards* evil rather than being born as its absolute embodiment, such absolute evil seems to be embedded in the Barnes den, where the villain has been secretly mounting in malevolence for a long time, for Miranda isn't the only one with eyes for Alex.

Andrew's daughter, Libby, is coiling around Alex's feet, having already taken possession of Andrew himself. Andrew's only child, Libby realized at a young age that she could easily sway her father, whom possesses many a blind spot, none of them greater than for Libby herself. A darkness has long been brewing within her which she's always found all too easy to conceal, and which she's only now beginning to truly explore, the power and off-limits nature of it being too seductive for her to resist.

There's something so splendidly satisfying about secretly cultivating the very force which her father claims to fight.

Being the crafty child of the head of the community, and thus readily able to appear angelic when covered by the concealing cloak which that relationship lends, she's adept at making light appear dark, and dark appear light. This makes her naturally skilled in the political art of duplicity; of shrouding her own darkness in the face of those whom she regards as being incapable of seeing beneath any surface which she chooses to present. Having become an attractive young woman with a cleverness exceeding all others, and taking full advantage of the wing under which her fledgling capacities developed, Libby's in a prime position to wield great authority within the Church community, especially after the death of her mother, shortly following Libby's sixteenth birthday.

It was rumored at that time, now near a decade past, that though she put on a happy face in public, Libby's mother, Natalie, was severely depressed, and that most of her depression was due to constantly being at odds with her daughter. As yet another rumor said to have come from some unnamed source in whom she'd once confided, it was said that Natalie believed that Libby wasn't her *actual* daughter, but had been taken over by some sinister spirit whilst still in the womb. For this unholy possession, Natalie had blamed herself.

She'd reported to her husband that she'd had a dream in which she'd been commanded to name her daughter Emily, but had refused, having distrusted the power which had levied the command. In subsequent dreams she saw a darkness long embedded in Salem come to call upon her unborn child, an unnatural river of blood flowing uphill, following a black-hooded figure. It climbed up into the mountains, seeking her out, snakes acting as its sentries, slithering through the grass, into the village and up the stairs of her front porch. There they gathered, interweaving and mating, hissing that they were waiting for her, and would soon pass her their venom, making her one of

their own. As these nightmares reached the height of their intensity, Libby was born.

Sixteen years later Libby found her mother hanging from an oddly shaped, twisted tree a mile or so from the community. Father Andrew kept this horrible discovery to himself, having convinced the doctor at the time to proclaim his wife's death an accident so as to avoid communal disruption, including being forced to deal with the common Christian belief that suicide is an unpardonable sin condemning those committing it to the eternal flames of damnation. So crestfallen was he by his wife's succumbing to her sorrows that he hasn't pursued any woman since, despite continuous communal encouragement. This leaves Libby as the only woman, and most important person, in Andrew's life.

Gently stroking her father's ego and able to play any role which might enable her to more tightly constrict herself around his heart and mind, Libby employs her considerable intelligence in subtly exposing and manipulating every chink in his armor, turning him towards the service of her whims. She believes men to be her playthings, and that all it takes is a little flirtation, flattery and trickery, and she can possess them as easily as the preacher possesses the God-fearing flock. Amongst the resultant tactics is her encouragement of her father's taste for the young, attractive women of the growing community, knowing the power that they have over him, and over men in general, and that she can easily turn them into allies, those whom she euphemistically refers to as 'friends' with whom she will, as their leader, cement her control of The Barnes Clan; a clan in which the men only *appear* to be in control, blindly becoming her entourage of duped and deployed 'useful idiots.'

Amongst her congregational friends, Libby's playthings, are Miranda, whom has become her 'best friend,' some years younger and someone that looks up to Libby, both seeing the other as a powerful ally going forward; Sophie, the precocious seventeen-year-old who, though

intelligent, suffers from serious insecurities that Alex believes are responsible for their recent falling-out, and that make her easy for Libby to control, as she so badly needs acceptance; Morgaine, an efficient, beautiful young woman who sets herself apart with her slightly masculine attire, and who is secretly only interested in the other young women working in the church, making her a more zealous 'friend' to Libby and all the other pretty young women than most, her taboo secret also making her easier to coerce and control; Elizabeth, arguably the most striking of them all, also seventeen and already engaged to a rising star in the Engineering and Construction Guild; and, finally, Taylor and Nathan, the two young men active in the commanding Church Guild, both of whom follow the young women around like lost puppies.

Both Taylor and Nathan are in love with Miranda, and while Taylor is kind and generous, Nathan, with his violently intense stare and capricious mindset, is more of a loose cannon. He once slandered Miranda for her rejections of him, complaining to Church elders that she spends too much time in the church flirting with the guys; not spending enough time flirting with *him*, in other, unspoken words. Miranda's gentle rebuffing of Taylor's entreaties and platonically telling him that she loves him, on the other hand, has resulted in Taylor consistently claiming, achingly, that she's "like a sister to me." But of all the younger members of the clan, Alex is most impressed by, and very much interested in, Delaney.

In her mid-twenties like Libby, Delaney's not only beautiful and sultrily curvaceous, but may be the most capable of all the young women, qualities which have captured the eye of all the men, granting her the power to match. And yet, unlike Libby, she's reluctant to employ that power. She and Libby maintain a type of mutual respect permitting their coexistence and sometime collaboration, even as it's clear from the perspective of the more observant that they're essentially incompatible, potentially endangering Delaney.

Whereas both she and Libby are sly, Delaney has long distrusted Libby, suspecting in her a deep-seated deviousness. Yet she stays out of Libby's way, believing the conflict that would arise, should she speak of her suspicions, to be too costly to their respective pursuits. For Delaney cultivates interests that aren't exactly conventional by Barnes Clan standards, and knows that challenging Libby would only turn her into a nemesis who'd inevitably fight to expose those interests. Thus, despite their young ages, their abilities and commanding presence has made them the unofficial heads of the 'community youth.' Libby, however, is ultimately unwilling to share leadership.

Many an older woman near the same age as Andrew considers herself a maven; a leading female member of their religious society. Jennifer and Anita are two such individuals. Jennifer is quietly competent; the unflappable one, as Alex considers her. She often says that having survived breast cancer put everything into perspective, having been accompanied into Salem for treatments by Jacob, her right to travel into 'the land of evil' not coming without a fight which anyone less persuasive and respected may well have lost. Jennifer insinuates that her stoicism is based upon the fact that such a life-threatening ordeal makes all other challenges seem innocuous and unimportant by comparison, including heartbreak. She'd divorced a man, Jonathan, a carpenter, years ago, owing to the ambiguous reasoning of 'irreconcilable differences.' This was quite the controversy in and of itself, as everything is done to prevent divorce in the 'family is next to God' community.

Post-split Jonathan left the village, promising to safeguard its location, an act which was itself accompanied by a deluge of gossip and controversy. At one point an embarrassing rumor circulated that their split was based upon Jonathan wanting to become a woman, and that Jennifer's repeated response to a certain unnamed confidant was: "That's *not* what I signed up for."

Jennifer spent most of the subsequent year to herself, wrestling with low spirits and other afflictions which many believed to be psychosomatic in nature. Since then it's been whispered that she shows signs of being involved with someone else, but no one knows who this might be. Yet, despite these relatively minor communal concerns, and the slight sully that came from the suspicion that it might have been her *own* affair that led to the divorce, most treat her as if she's beyond reproach, considering her to be integral to the elders; the cool, calm, compassionate one often sought out for guidance, being the one most likely to lend levelheaded advice. Anita is much the opposite.

Loud and opinionated, many refer to Anita, semi-affectionately, semi-critically, as 'the bulldog,' as her rather aggressive demeanor has been harnessed by Church leadership. She's often 'let off the leash' by Andrew to 'bird dog' the younger women when their frequent gossiping gets out of hand, or whenever it seems as though they aren't giving their Church duties the attention which God demands. 'The wayward won't stray far when she's got their scent,' it's said.

Anita was once considered Father Andrew's 'number two,' but rumor has it that the stress had gotten to her, as wrangling the brash youth back onto the godly track is demanding, especially when combined with the other requisites of the co-commander position, and that she'd thereby 'settled' for a less strenuous post. She suffers from depression paired with some sort of mystery ailment afflicting her with constant gastrointestinal distress; an ailment that has left the village doctor, Mr. Merk, scratching his head. Alex fantasizes that he'll someday find a cure for both the depression and the mystery affliction, suspecting that the two are linked, the gastrointestinal disorder being, likely in parallel to Jennifer's ailments, a somatic manifestation of the depression, itself inseparable from being inundated with self-spurred, internalized stress. Healing Anita would be a boon for Alex, for not only have the healing arts always been an interest of his (he considering this artform to be a sacred

application of the power of God embedded in nature), but she's taken a liking to him, and he can use all the goodwill that he can get.

Then there's Janessa, longtime leader of the Church community and mother to Zander, the young man who, in his mid-twenties like Libby and Delaney, has become Father Andrew's protégé, and the man most likely to take his place upon his retirement or death. More of a hands-off leader, Janessa's influence is nevertheless potent whenever she chooses to wield it, which tends to be when someone has violated a vow or covenant considered sacrosanct. To most of the adult women of the clan, Jennifer, Anita and Janessa appear almost matriarchal. Libby, ever the cunning strategist, permits these delusions, knowing, like a plutocrat, that power best persists when sufficiently shrouded, and that she can turn her father and the rest of the male population on a whim, and thereby win whichever contest she chooses to engage in, even whilst typically concealing that engagement.

Perhaps the only elder to be largely invulnerable to Libby's manipulations is David, the man whom many say would have been a philosophy professor 'back in the world.' Fond of Alex, he indulges his curiosities more than most, being similar to Jacob in this way, though he's far more reserved, content to live a peaceful, churchgoing life with his wife, Claire, and keep most of his qualms with Church doctrine to himself. He's convinced of the virtues of the village's 'throwback existence,' even as he holds some serious reservations as to many of their 'less than rational beliefs.' There are also a number of young women on the periphery of Libby's little power cluster, standing at arms' length, resistant to her machinations, yet generally not to the point of provoking her ire, excepting, perhaps, the latest addition to The Barnes Clan.

Caitlin, of whom Alex is fond for her kindness and willingness to entertain his rants and tongue-in-cheek facetiousness, is the only other member of the village *not* to have been born on community grounds,

having escaped an abusive relationship in Arizona that landed her in the hospital a number of times. Pregnant by the same abuser, she lives in fear that, despite the remoteness of their community, and its geographical distance from her past, her dangerously obsessive ex might yet find her. Determined to live without fear, the first thing she does upon waking every morning is to pray for the strength *not* to spend the day imagining that he could stroll into the village at any moment. Yet, even during this prayer she tries to block him from entering her mind, as if he might psychically hone in on her position.

His threats of killing her if she tried to leave him kept her trapped for a long time. She's ashamed to admit *how* long. But when she found out that she was pregnant, she knew that she had to escape, as it was no longer her own life that mattered. If he did it again, *when* he did it again, he could kill her baby. Besides, she'd thought at the time, there was no way that he was going to change and become the type of father that her baby, *that any and every baby*, deserves. He'd ruin the child one way or another, even if she and the unborn baby survived the next assault. Yet Caitlin was so afraid that he'd find her, that some of his typically empty bravado related to 'friends that know things' and would track her down no matter where she went might actually be true, that instead of going west to California as they'd often discussed early in their relationship, she fled the opposite way.

A former friend from high school that she'd kept in contact with on *Facebook* seemed to understand her situation, and invited her to stay with her and her boyfriend in their little Virginia mountain town. She spent most of what little means she'd squirreled away just getting to Salem. But less than a week later she realized that she'd stepped into a situation that was equally as risky as the one from which she'd ran.

Over the course of several sleepless nights she found out that her so-called friend and her boyfriend were addicts, and that their environment was anything *but* conducive to supporting the health of a mother-to-be.

Fond of seemingly all substances, including speed and heroin, they also attracted the wrong, ongoing throng of 'party people.' Again, her hopes for safety and a secure place to build a future were dashed.

It felt like a fatal blow at the time. Why was God punishing her yet again, and now victimizing her unborn baby as well, sending them to live with these animals? Her 'friend' had misrepresented her situation and brought her there on false pretenses, for they'd pushed her to find a job almost as soon as she'd passed through the front door, and it was soon apparent that it was help with the overdue rent and bills that was the true, hidden motive behind her friends' invitation to add her to their broken household; an invitation that had only *appeared* to be motivated by amity and a compassionate understanding of her circumstances.

She was crying in their shambles of a garage a mere five days after arriving, having hidden there to avoid the aggression of one of their druggie acquaintances. Reduced to cowering in the shadows, she brewed in a sense of betrayal, furious at having been forsaken by God, family and friends alike. Through her tears, there huddled and shaking in the corner of the garage, she noticed a large box labeled 'camping gear' and, in her anger and frustration, an impulse seized her. She grabbed the box of gear, snuck out the side door of the garage, stuffed the box into the trunk of her little Honda Civic and drove off, having only the vaguest and most desperate of notions to camp in the woods until she figured out what to do next.

After a few days of sleeping in her car and visiting Walmart once a day to use the facilities and buy the cheapest food that she could find, worrying about the nutritional needs of her unborn child throughout, she parked her car down a National Forest road one night and fell asleep. The next morning, the glare from the rising sun shining through her windshield waking her up, she got out, shivering, and mindlessly began walking towards the warmth of the sun, as if in a trance.

A mile later something took hold of her, like her walk was being propelled by all of the heartache and rage that she was carrying around inside of her. Striding deliriously from spot to spot, from the tallest, awe-inspiring trees to the following of morning birdsongs to any other curiosity set before her, when she finally stopped moving and actually thought about where she was, she found herself lost, miles from her car, unable to conceive of any reliable line back. But just as fear started to overtake her, thinking this may well be the end, the two of them doomed to die in the wilderness, she heard the sound of children laughing and, following the sound, soon ran into the village. The playing children were “like angels that pulled me from Satan’s grip,” she’d later say.

Hearing her tell her heart-rending tale, the elders decided that it had, in fact, been God himself who’d led her to them, and that He wanted her and her baby protected, and for her to give birth on holy ground. So they took her in. Despite being angry at God, she was already rather devoutly Christian, having been “raised more by The Church than by my parents,” as she’d say. This facilitated her community ingratiation, and she fast fit in. She knew scripture, had a strong creative streak and was good with her hands, finding a niche amongst the artisans of the village within days. That was six months ago. She and Alex have become quite close since then.

Being attracted to Alex, receiving premonitions that he’s a natural protector that’s as far removed from her abusive ex as it’s possible to be, it’s he whom she confides in the most. She’s opened up to him about the struggles and pains of her past, leaving little out. Through their conversations Alex has decided that perhaps the elders *aren’t* exaggerating the evil endemic to the world that they’ve abandoned; a world that has ‘forgotten God,’ as Father Andrew and many of the others like to say. This realization has provided him with some comfort. Maybe the village is the place to be after all, despite all of his ongoing doubts and trepidations.

Over the months Alex's liking for Caitlin has grown quickly, owing not only to her above average ability to handle, and sometimes even encourage, the 'unorthodox thoughts' that he shares with her, but also to the vulnerability that *she's* shared with *him*. He also admires the fact that she had the courage to flee the only life that she's ever known, when she realized that it was the only right thing to do, and that her survivalism, her will to live and find refuge for her coming child, remains ironclad. This, in addition to the fact that she seems more apt to detect and reject Libby's plots than most, makes it impossible for Alex *not* to respect her. Yet, he fears that any defiance of Libby may ultimately represent a greater danger to her than her ex, for Libby's already on site. Is not the demon that lurks around the corner more dangerous than the one that chases us in our nightmares? Thankfully, there may be others that will fight those demonic forces if and when they're revealed.

Amongst those few seeming to always be subtly struggling to avoid Libby's scheming, Alex has also developed a liking for Madilyn, the gifted young artist whose portraits of every member of the community are displayed in the Community Hall where the group meals are served. Much like Morgaine, Madilyn expresses herself through her attire, to an extent that rubs much of the village the wrong way, many labeling her dark clothes and constantly changing style and color of caps as 'rebellious,' even 'unchristian,' her dress being the sometime catalyst for arguments about self-expression in a community that believes in its restriction, thinking it a form of defiance. Father Andrew permits it from her to a point, believing it a part of her 'artistic personality.' Alex, however, sees it more as a stress-coping mechanism.

Madilyn had once confided in him that she suffered from sometime crippling anxiety, and that drawing had saved her, giving her an outlet and something else to focus on during those times when it seemed her skin may well crawl off of her body. Alex strongly identifies with this sentiment, seeing writing as his primary mode of self-therapy; the 'pressure release valve' by

which he keeps his often overactive mind from cracking. Alex likes to imagine that he'll be able to convince her to illustrate his writing projects someday. Finally, there's Bella, a jovial young woman who describes herself as being 'easily amused,' her gregarious nature and infectious laugh bringing oft-needed levity to their gravely serious community.

Like Caitlin, Alex appreciates the fact that Bella encourages his budding relationship with Miranda, teasing them both by saying things like "Watch these two when they're together" to Caitlin when the four of them are in the same vicinity. Caitlin makes similar contributions to their potential union, teasing them both frequently, saying things like "I'm going to make you two hug," and "You two love each other," a statement to which neither Alex nor Miranda had objected. Like Caitlin and Madilyn, Bella tends to steer clear of any and all drama which arises, for which Libby's gossiping group is notorious for fomenting; always, of course, in a manner conducive to Libby's power-consolidating aims, assuring that no rumor may lead to a disparaging light being shown upon her or her coterie of 'friends,' including her 'bestie.'

Of all her amiable qualities, it's Miranda's indulgence of gossip, and being its sometimes source and the prime promoter of its perpetuation and amplification, that irritates Alex. He senses danger there, though this danger isn't nearly enough to dissuade him from avoiding her manifold charms, especially considering his loneliness and need for an outlet for his often overpowering romanticism. Miranda was targeted by Libby as the best option to cultivate as a 'best friend' for those same charms, for Miranda is boisterous and playful by nature, and is thus one of the few individuals whom Libby can actually stand to be around without being compelled to seek out and exploit some vulnerability. Like most of Andrew's assistants, Miranda is beautiful, with stunning eyes of swirling emerald, hazel and azure blue, and a big, bold, beguiling smile, making her accomplished at garnering the attention of the men around her, young and old alike, which only grants more power to her and the secret cult of young women whom

really run The Barnes Clan. Father Andrew and most of the other Church elders, including Father Jacob, remain mostly ignorant of this fact.

Despite being more intelligent than most, Jacob is under Libby's thumb. The two of them are regularly engaged in a type of subtle, almost subversive flirtation beneath her father's nose. Libby knows that Jacob requires more attention to keep in line than most of the men. They constantly chide one another whilst reading scripture, and she'll often linger about, allowing the others engaged in these Bible reading sessions to disperse in order to grant her one-on-one time with him, so as to better sink in her fangs. And yet it's Zander, the most likely candidate to take over the leadership of their society upon the retirement or death of her father, whom has become Libby's primary tool in the fine-tuning of her power position.

As soon as she identified Zander as being a rising star, Libby targeted him for acquisition and control. Here was someone steady, reliable and hardworking, with an unblemished reputation, and clearly on the track towards possessing considerable control over The Barnes Clan. While she gained a liking for him, or at least an appreciation for what he granted her in terms of the broader acceptability and command of the congregation, if she were being honest she isn't sure that she's truly *capable* of love, only that she wants things, *badly*, and feels no compunction about doing what's necessary in order to attain them.

Libby conquered Zander easily, whilst he, of course, remains exceedingly jealous of the time and attention Libby spends with, and heaps upon, Miranda. Based upon this jealousy, Zander treats Miranda with an ongoing level of inconsideration and sometimes even borderline cruelty, like a child on the playground targeting those he envies. This only makes it all the more easy for both Libby and, with Libby's tutelage, Miranda, to manipulate him, turning their subtle confrontations into a tool to guilt and trick him into unwitting obedience.

To Libby's father, Andrew, it appears that Zander is courting his daughter, and Zander does everything to follow the proper protocol in doing so, playing deferential future-son-in-law to Andrew, bringing them both great satisfaction in the perceived honorability of the exchange. In truth, however, *Libby* is courting Zander, mostly out of a type of Machiavellian practicality. Her actual desires are pointed elsewhere, towards her best friend, Miranda's, crush, as Alex is the one seeming to see all the way through the propaganda peddled by her father and his self-righteous minions. To Libby, this grants him an air of attraction which no other man can touch, both owing to the attraction of intelligence *and* the fact that, because of his relationship with her best friend and the general regard of his being a less-than-pious clan member, he's off-limits by orthodox ethical standards, engendering in her a type of irresistible challenge to obtain the brainy black sheep representing the forbidden fruit that would be oh so sweetly savored.

Like Alex, Libby knows that not only does the Church *not* have all the answers, but that the *actual* answers are often the *opposite* of what's being peddled, and notices through Alex's reactions to her father's preachings, the bits of conversations that she overhears him have with Jacob and David, and other little tells, that he possesses a latent force which no level of Christian zeal can forever contain. It's a power that she soon hopes to harvest.

Gradually, Alex has been spending more and more time with Miranda, which means spending more and more time with Libby, of whom he's *always* suspicious. There's something inside of her that frightens him, yet he can't identify it with any clarity. On the surface, he sees in Libby a beautiful, intelligent young woman and future leader of society. But there's something more, something dark and shifty, and it makes him uneasy in her presence, to say the least.

He sees how easily she can get others to do her bidding, and the cold, callous nature of her response to the success of these subtle manipulations. And though she's good at hiding it, when she doesn't get her way he feels a type of mounting menace emanating from her, as though there's no way she can do anything but *pretend* to accept being thwarted for only as long as necessary before turning the tide. These observations in and of themselves, however, aren't enough for him to enact any resistance towards her, as communal control is of little interest to him. But when he starts to sense the ease and extent of Libby's control over the young woman he's falling in love with, this begins to change.

Alex starts having nightmares centered around the young women in the congregation, sometimes filled with Satanic imagery, with Libby always right in the middle of it all. In his fiendish dreams he sees her use every manner of maneuvering to grow her power over the community, coercing, lying, spreading rumors and, finally, casting dark spells. It's as though she's being led by an evil, unseen force. Many a terrifyingly-palpable nightmare ends with Libby handing Miranda a knife, and forcing her to choose between Alex and herself, with Miranda almost always ending up attacking Alex, often joined in doing so by the other young women held under Libby's spell. He fears that he's receiving visions of impending doom at the hands of Miranda. Yet his huge soft spot for her keeps him coming back for more, even when, out of self-defensive fear, he sometimes tries to avoid her, mostly unsuccessfully. It's in this ongoing internal strife that Alex discovers what will become core to the community's collective transformation.

He's gathered a number of books from Jacob, including Thoreau's *Walden*, the collected works of Oscar Wilde, the poems of Rumi, the *Tao Te Ching*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, Plato's *Republic*, Orwell's *1984* and a book on healing plants, and has taken to sneaking into the woods whenever the completion of his chores permits him time to himself. The forest calling to him, as if he's specially privy to its secret language spoken

through all of its manifestations, he finds himself wandering deeper and deeper into the mountainous wilds, moving in concentric rings around their community, during which he's discovered various locales well suited to absorbing nature's resplendency and reading in peace. Expanding his mind with these great, albeit forbidden works, and pondering his inability to leave Miranda and the community despite the sense of danger, he has a thought one night while tossing and turning in bed:

'What if someone were compelled to search my place, and uncovered these books, and my notebooks, my whole collection of blasphemous thoughts? Why not find a place to hide them out there, in the forest, where no one can find them, and make a secret sanctuary for myself?'

The next morning, after the community meal and having rushed through his wood-chopping chores, Alex sneaks into his cabin, grabs his journals and literary treasure trove and the letters that he's been exchanging with Miranda and Sophie, wraps them all in a large red cloth, tied into a bag, and, taking every precaution, slips into the woods. As soon as he crosses into the untamed territory he hears a hawk screeching high overhead and decides to follow its trajectory, feeling its presence to be auspicious. He's long developed a sense of receiving messages from God, with the movements of the creatures of the wild being one of the manifold mechanisms by which these messages are conveyed. On this particular morning the hawk, followed by a pair of Steller's Jays, lead him deep in a direction he's yet to explore. The community elders have always warned against wandering too far from the village, as many a peril might be accidentally stumbled upon.

Approximately a mile or so from the rim of the community Alex uncovers a brook bubbling up from beneath the ground, flowing further away from the direction in which he'd come, having taken a course thickly concealed by vibrantly overgrowing brush that's taking advantage of the copious, perfectly clean water exiting the earth. Ever

so gradually broadening itself into a small stream, it soon takes a rather sharp downhill turn, through a forest of overgrown ferns. Passing through the ferns, something comes over him, evoking an inner force.

The forest feels more alive here than ever, and the sounds he hears are not only greater in number and variety, the land laden with life, but are more mellifluously pleasing to his ears than anything that he's ever before heard. It's as if the forest creatures are singing in collaborative tune, with a backdrop of the most subtle chiming sound that fades away as soon as he stops walking and attempts to focus on it. But it's not only this; he also feels as though his truest, innermost being is now pulling him along, and that, furthermore, someone, or *something*, is observing him from the concealment of the forest. And it's not a malevolent being. Rather, he feels like an ancient friend is whispering its invitation, drawing him deeper into the ever more ethereal realm.

It isn't long before he finds himself walking briskly, almost jogging, propelled by the deep sense of being welcomed by the forest and pulled along by its great, invisible guardian. A good two miles from the community he left behind, the stream continuing its gradual expanse, he hears it, quiet at first, then ever louder. *Crashing water*. A waterfall! He's never actually seen one before, only read and seen pictures of them. A few minutes later, he's standing above it, though it remains hidden by the most magnificent tree that he's ever seen, and it's standing on stilts.

More water bubbling up to meet the now fast-coursing creek, the splendid old growth fir straddles it at the pinnacle of a cliff, having grown up and around the creek right at the point where it spills over the edge, falling nearly thirty feet into a perfectly circular crystal blue pool below. The gnarled roots of the giant are impressively broad, thick and tall, a gap of nearly six feet set between the creek and the underside of the lowest-lying roots. It's as if the tree is the Sacred Mother of this magical realm, having given birth to the falls Herself.

It's in this moment that Alex recalls reading about how, especially in forests receiving a large amount of annual rainfall, fallen trees will sprout new saplings out of their upwards-facing side. And as the new sprouts are fed by the decomposing parent the base of the root system will develop *above* the surface of the earth, as if set upon stilts, the space once occupied by the old parental tree remaining, becoming a hollow gap making the descendant appear raised. This particular parental tree must have been both ancient and majestic in order to have given birth to such an otherworldly offspring, itself soaring hundreds of feet into the air. Standing proudly at the head of the falls, the fir overlooks the pool and canyon below, the fast-coursing creek gradually becoming a river whilst running down its heavily forested center towards the horizon.

Making his way around the tree, stepping carefully from raised root to raised root while clinging to the trunk for support, Alex peers over the edge for a better look. The pool below isn't just gorgeously crystalline, he now sees, but has a gentle luminescent glow to it, as if the water is enchanted. Clamoring carefully down one side of the rocky cliff, the rich, biodiverse magnificence of this slice of the forest subsumes him. *He feels at one with it.* It's as if it's a part of him, that it's already in his blood, and that he was always destined to discover it, or to *rediscover* it, and to thereby pay homage to an ancient, unknown familial link.

The rock walls are, thanks to the mist given off by the constant fall of water, carpeted with living green; with moss, lichen and fern species beyond counting. But it isn't just the mist from the falls supplying them with more water than they can drink. The walls themselves trickle, exuding water through manifold crevices seemingly sourced from a network of underground springs connected to the creek passing over them. This place is more alive than anything he's ever had the privilege to experience. Of course, this isn't necessarily difficult, considering that he's essentially prohibited from seeing anything outside the bubble

which the elders of the church blew around them.

Standing at the base of the pool, books, journals and letters in hand, absorbing the mystical power of the place, he knows:

'This is God! I feel more lifeforce, more Spirit, here, than in any place I've ever before been. This shall be my Church. For where life and love are most present, so is God, and I shall cultivate a love equal to this life!' He thinks of Miranda swimming in the pool here with him, far from prying eyes and the controls of her 'best friend' and her clucking crew of obsequious cronies. *'Here, in this natural wealth, I'll transform my infatuation with her into an all-consuming adoration.'* Then he sees it: behind the waterfall is a cave carved into the rock, a soft, eerie blue glow emanating from within, beckoning him to enter.

2

**THE BLUE POOL
&
THE REVIVAL**

Despite the rainforest-esque surroundings of the cave, the interior is surprisingly dry and hospitable, and extends deep into the rock that forms the head of a canyon reaching out from the bottom of the falls. Pulled in by the subtly warming, soft blue glow, as if by a force of magic of which Alex curiously finds he has no fear, the cave seems as if carved by the hand of God for the purpose of hosting human life. What appears as ancient fire pits cut into the floor are sporadically littered throughout his inward traverse, with numerous niches of various size and shape cut into the sidewalls, reminiscent of bunks surrounded by bookshelves and storage nooks, some of which are dusted with disintegrated plant fiber, as if once having held mattresses made from natural materials.

Alex can't help but wonder whether he's witnessing natural formations or the work of some prehistoric people. Were these fire pits, niches and sleeping spaces hand-carved? Or were they, somehow, the work of divine providence? As he moves inward, twenty yards, forty yards, the glow from within grows ever brighter, with a commensurate increase in warmth. There's a heat source somewhere within. Is it the same as the light source? What could possibly create such a phenomenon?

About fifty yards inside the cave, the passageway, which had been no more than twenty feet wide at its broadest point, suddenly opens up into a brightly-lit cavern, about half the size of the village's banquet hall, yet spherical rather than rectangular in shape. Set in the dead center of the cavern is a gently bubbling pool of water glowing with an almost fluorescent, brilliantly-bright-blue. Immediately he thinks of Miranda and the enchantment of her eyes, and the poem that he once wrote about how, as his favorite embodiment of the ancient oculus, of a primordial force of gravitational attraction and seizure, her eyes had captured him those many years ago, when she was yet becoming a woman.

He thinks of how those eyes had seemed to follow him all over the community since then, gradually being paired with the beautiful, immensely charming young woman that she's become. 'She has to see this place,' comes the thought, striking him in the deepest hollow of his heart. 'If only I can get her away from that... *friend* of hers.' And if the warmly enticing, glowing pool weren't enough to evoke a profound sense of wonder, the stones of the cavern are covered in a boldly-colored lichen that he's never before seen.

Naturopathy has become an interest of his the last few years, despite admonishments from several elders that 'only God has the power to truly heal,' to which he'd inwardly shake his head in frustration. 'What makes you think that God doesn't heal *through* Mother Nature?,' he'd think. 'How can you not see that the seed and the womb are *both* divine? That they're inseparable, and *equally* indispensable?' He'd read of and even began cataloging the lichen, moss and ferns of the area, of which there's a great multitude. This particular, rather spectacular species of lichen, however, is entirely unrecognizable to him.

In contrast to the glowing blue pool, the lichen is a deep crimson red, and, holding his face close, exudes a sickly-sweet scent that is equally alien to its appearance. He places his books, journals and Miranda's letters, plus a couple of letters from Sophie from when he was still playing mentor to the adolescent writer, in a corner of the cavern and, carefully removing a large piece of the lichen from the rock near the pool, inwardly thanking it for allowing his trespass upon it, wraps it in the red cloth that he'd brought along to protect his literary treasures.

'Perhaps I'll work up the courage to ask Delaney about it.' Remembering her interest in medicinal plants, he's kindled by the thought, considering it an opportunity to speak to the woman that he may, in fact,

be the most drawn to in the community, yet finds too intimidating to flirt with. It's not just her sultry beauty, but her perfectly poised, quietly dignified demeanor. In fact, he finds her effortless efficacy and iron-clad confidence somewhat emasculating, as if her very presence is challenging him to overcome his insecurities, silently confronting him with the fact that he doesn't have a chance at a woman like her until he's entirely certain of himself. 'Only a perfectly self-secure man has a shot at her. And that's *not* me; not yet, at least.'

Peering into the pool at the nucleus of the cavern, it, like the rest of the cave, seems as though it was made, else somehow naturally evolved, for human use. While he's never sat in one, he recalls how Jacob had once told him of how parties back in society were sometimes held in and around something called a 'hot tub,' which he now imagines to be very much like this pool. Bubbles rise up from small holes that appear to have been punched into the bottom of the concave space holding the radiant water. A perfect circular bench surrounds the deeper center of the pool, which is no more than seven feet across. Again, it looks as though it was designed for humans. Then he notices, on one side of the submerged bench, another oddity. It looks like a small handcraft of some sort.

Cautiously, he reaches his left arm into the warm water and extracts it, and as he does so the warmth of the water gives way to a tingling sensation that grows in intensity, fast turning into an itching sensation as he removes his arm with the object in hand. His arm now subtly glowing, he momentarily panics, fearing that he's made a critical mistake plunging it into the glowing water, exposing himself to a potentially dangerous radioactive element or alien force.

The itching grows in intensity, nearing to becoming painful, when, suddenly, the intensity subsides and, in its place, a subtle, fast-fleeting

pleasure spreads across his arm before all sensation other than wetness fades away along with the glow. In his hand he holds a figurine. It looks to have been woven together using a tough, flexible vine or root. About a foot tall, the figurine depicts what appears to be a cross between a man and a buck or an elk, complete with a large set of antlers, holding a spear in one hand and a rolled up scroll in the other.

Circling the pool, shaking the remaining radiant droplets from his hand and arm, he has the urge to remove his clothes and get in, but decides not to, thinking that bathing in the pool for the first time would be an amazing thing to experience with Miranda. Besides, he should make sure that there's no residual damage to his arm before inviting his love interest to share the experience with him. 'What *wouldn't* I share with that girl?'

In this realization of being compelled to share as much as possible with her, his heart pangs with the possibility that it's too late, and he drifts into a restless reverie, his mind leaving the mystical place. He remembers, with a sudden rush of dread, the poem that he'd recently shared with both her and Sophie, whom, like him, fancies herself a writer and once looked up to him for his 'gift of gab.' Sophie and Miranda seemed to be best friends before Libby imposed her own brand of 'friendship,' deciding to displace Sophie, which she accomplished with ease, and without resistance from her underling.

He thinks of the relationship he's developed with Miranda, Sophie and gorgeous young Elizabeth, built around the sharing of their respective writing, especially his own. And while all three of them made it clear that this was something that they wanted, and while the young women were actually more active in fostering this pen-pal-esque relationship than he was, he'd recently began to fear how their group association might be misconstrued, either by these three young women or by the more self-

righteously judgmental within the congregation.

Alex's greatest fear in this regard is that he'd made a mistake by sharing some of his more intimate thoughts of Miranda with Sophie in particular. For, while they all acted as if friends, he's concerned that Sophie may not possess the maturity to healthfully handle the last poem he'd shared with them both, and that any amongst the three of them might, at any time, be cajoled into thinking that he'd somehow crossed the line with his desire to share certain thoughts. While he knows within himself that he has only the best of intentions, including his desire to be read and recognized for his abilities, and to develop a fraternity of creatives, this could, in the wrong light, be mistaken for something else entirely.

He reproaches himself for being too trusting, too romantically inclined and needing of love, too desperate for an outlet and a subject for the channeling of the overflow from his heart, and has, perhaps, channeled it towards the wrong recipients. In the course of these developments he fears that he's allowed the flirtation passed between them all to go too far, and that seventeen-year-olds Sophie and Elizabeth might lack the maturity to comprehend his intent, to consider the possibility that something *other* than lust might be driving him, especially if they come to be influenced by anyone motivated by jealousy and/or an overly narrow sense of propriety.

In his more paranoid moments he fears that Miranda, too, might use his writing against him. For although he's shared many a poem with her and made it clear that she's become his muse, and while she's encouraged the continuation of that practice at every turn, he can see how this might turn into a weapon, were Miranda to suddenly find him in disfavor. This is especially true considering how much he's shared *in writing*, whilst Miranda is more the verbal communicator, as if aware

that she can deny what she's *said*, whilst the former is set in stone; or ink. He's now being haunted by hints of this danger at every turn, and they're starting to eat away at him. Noticing how much Miranda tends to hang with the guys in the community, he'd teased her about it recently:

"Do you mostly hang with guys because you're looking for a boyfriend?"

"No. Guys are just nicer," she'd replied. "Girls are... *mean*. Vicious. They're always angling for advantage over one another, and are cutthroat about it. They're... sweet and complimentary to your face, cruel and insulting to your back. Besides, those guys you see me hanging with are really just boys. I like *older* guys. I like *men*," she'd added with a grin and an alluringly-suggestive stare.

Outside the obvious insinuation of that 'men vs. boys' line, the statement came to bother him later. 'Was her comment about the nature of girls exclusively based upon bad experiences involving other young women in the community, or was she speaking of herself as well?', he'd wondered. 'Is she *warning* me? Is she telling me that flirting with her is risky? I should've asked her to expand upon that. Perhaps I will soon. Hopefully she's not talking about Sophie... she *seems* trustworthy.'

'Yet, considering their oft-displayed immaturity, there may be fallout from trusting the three of them with my more intimate thoughts,' he thinks, especially after having recently told Sophie that she'd appeared in one of his dreams, which she may well have misinterpreted. It wasn't until afterward that he'd chastised himself for making that admission to her, thinking of the connotations of 'I had a dream about you.' Though that dream had been innocent enough, after sharing a recent poem with her and Miranda Alex had been offended and acted defensively when Sophie told him that the

poem had made her uncomfortable.

“It’s simply an expression of the desire for intimate connection,” he’d argued in self-defense. “But if such expressions are offensive to your sensibilities, I’ll stop sharing.”

Shortly thereafter, Miranda informed him that Sophie hadn’t taken that comment well, which her recent actions well-demonstrated. Rather than simply discussing the issue with him like an adult, Sophie had begun avoiding him and, when they *did* cross paths, she was giving him the silent treatment, fleet-footedly fleeing his presence in an insulting manner the first time he’d approached her after the misunderstanding, in his failed attempt at reconciliation. He’d been prideful in his self-defense, and was prepared to admit this, but she wasn’t big enough to permit him the opportunity to do so. Paranoid, he now imagines that her immaturity could, if he’s overestimated her character, have led to her reporting him to Father Andrew, or to one of the other elders. The thought infuriates him, provoking a potent sense of indignation.

‘To condemn someone who you said was your friend after a single misunderstanding would be ridiculous,’ he thinks. What kind of a basis of friendship, or anything even *approaching* integrity, or even just social functionality, would that be, to run and tattle to his ‘superior’ after such a minor disagreement? A disagreement based upon her own sensitivity and presumption? Ah, the unstable ego; especially the adolescent ego.

Exacerbating his fears, he’s now under the impression that Sophie is gossiping about him when he sees her interact with others from afar. Worst of all, he frets that she may have not only lodged a complaint, but actually handed her copy of the shared poem to Father Andrew or another elder, who, with political and religious correctness dictating it to be outside

of acceptable lines, especially considering Sophie's age, could lead to his being suspected, and hastily condemned, of impropriety. The provoking poem:

Urges

*Every time I'm next to you, I have the urge to
wrap my arm around your waist*

*Every time I can see you, I have the urge to
close all the distance between us*

*Every time I smell you, I have the urge
to drop my face into your neck and inhale*

*Every time you touch me, I have the urge to
grab and embrace you completely*

*Every time you smile at me, I have the urge to
pull you in and kiss you deeply*

*Every time you laugh with someone else, I have the urge to
scare them away*

*Every time you write to me, I have the urge to
describe love with every word*

*Every day without you, I have the urge
to come to you and show you why it's wrong*

*Every little lack of you, I have the urge
to demonstrate what completeness contains*

Miranda, the *actual* inspiration of the poem, had seemed a bit embarrassed when Alex spoke of it with her. Yet she made it clear that she liked the attention, and continued to encourage his writing whenever they discussed it, loving the fact that she was playing his muse. She was, in fact, now practically throwing herself at him on a regular basis. Almost every time he saw her she alluded to having sex with him, raising her shirt to show him her flat stomach, and the tattoos which she'd kept concealed all over her body, placed there in secret by one of the other girls, likely artistically-inclined Madilyn, even as tattoos had been openly judged as 'desecrations of the flesh' by many elders.

She had, in fact, often bragged to Alex about how her ass was her best feature, and chided him for being a 'bitch' when he said he felt the gentlemanly need to look away whenever, working in the same vicinity, she bent over in his field of vision. He again thinks of how many times he's wished to God that he had the strength to avoid her, especially when she leveled such enticements too near to prying eyes always seeming to project contempt. His mounting fear is that she's stringing him along, luring him towards a trap; perhaps not purposefully, but subconsciously, as a means of capturing and controlling him. Yet, even sensing this, she's bewitched him, and he finds himself powerless to resist her lures.

He spoke with her at length about the book of poems that he was putting together, how he wanted to dedicate it to her, and how Jennifer, the Church elder, whom played the part of writing tutor in association with the village school, was helping him edit it. Both Jennifer and Anita consistently demonstrated a liking for Alex, with Jennifer actively assisting him in his writing endeavors, and calling him her friend, and Anita often telling him that he's 'the best,' wondering suggestively at his yet being single, despite his attractions and the community strongly encouraging men to marry by twenty-five in order to 'stave off

temptation.’ She’d consistently touch his arm during their interactions, and invited him over for post-communal-dinner dessert on occasion.

Alex had even made inroads with Miranda’s mother, who spoke appreciatively of his being a positive presence in her daughter’s life, as he consistently encouraged her to believe in herself and her own abilities as a writer, attempting to instill in her the sense that she had to stop denigrating herself when it came to her self-perceived inability to, for example, “write anything as beautiful as what you and Sophie write.” Miranda’s mother had gone on at length about how glowingly Miranda spoke of him, telling her on several occasions that he was ‘her favorite.’

He’d had a similar run-in with Sophie’s father, and Sophie herself had interviewed him for a school assignment related to finding and writing about a positive personal inspiration, thinking him a potential mentor in the quest to become a sermon writer for the community. Alex, Sophie and Miranda had even spoken of starting a Writers Guild, thinking it would make a positive, constructive addition to the village by, as but one benefit, encouraging the communicative capacity of the community youth. Sophie’s school assignment now feels darkly ironic. Nevertheless, on the surface of things, he feels as though he remains relatively popular with the Church Guild. And yet a warning continues to sound within him. An insidiousness is being brewed somewhere. He can feel it. *Treachery is closing in.*

The restless night before finding this cave he’d felt panicky in bed thinking about the risks surrounding him on all sides; not just in terms of his reading and hiding of these forbidden books, and in terms of how his beliefs would, if publicly revealed, likely lead to him being condemned as a heretic and maybe even being outcast, but also in connection to a forewarning from Jennifer, his sometime confidant and

writing teacher. She'd warned him against entertaining the young women in the congregation, implying it to be too high in the risk-to-reward ratio. 'Stick to women your own age,' came the implication.

Such insinuations only serve to grow the heavy sense that it's most likely *he* who will be considered at fault if any of the relations with Libby's crew go awry. Jennifer's forewarning mixes in his worried mind with his recent troubles with Sophie, and with the memory of a pair of editorials he'd read in a Salem newspaper Jacob recently smuggled into the community; editorials that so troubled him and glared so unsettlingly with ominous forewarning that he'd held onto them. They're from a section of the paper provocatively entitled: "The Politically-Incorrect Truth: The Poison Lining of the Me Too Movement."

The first editorial, by 'Never a Victim,' is called "A Step Too Far:"

Let us not forget that anything can go too far, including progress, tipping towards a form of regression before being counter-balanced by the pressures produced by its injustices, and hopefully, finally, settling upon justice. This is true of all progression, including in gender roles and the connected contemporary power dynamics beholden to a belief in 'progress.'

Condemned as misogynists, many a so-called 'cynical' commentator on modern society has noted that, though everyone knows the word 'misogyny,' and is quick to condemn a man who says anything critical of women as a misogynist, few seem to realize that 'misandry,' the hatred of men, is equally prevalent. It's simply not socially acceptable to shine any light upon this truth, thereby defining the issue with political correctness: in the effort to recognize one form of injustice, it tends to go too far, veering away from reason, logic and evidence in the creation of a type of, ironically, reflexive incorrectness, especially amongst abiding liberals and the falsely pious,

thereby producing injustice from the desire to be progressive.

Hatred of men, in fact, runs rampant within certain sectors of society, especially in the more liberal, urban areas of America possessing a strong contingent of self-proclaimed 'feminists,' both men and women, some of whom hypocritically create and perpetuate the same unjust prejudices towards men that they act to protect women from, unwittingly promoting a double standard that effectively undermines their moral correctness.

Furthermore, many of these 'cynics' argue, the 'Me Too,' 'Cancel Culture,' 'Woke Movement' and other 'progressively-minded' modern reactions to the historical injustices of patriarchal power have combined to create an increasingly common type of overreaction amongst the politically correct whereby any contention of impropriety in sexual relations results in the woman being assumed innocent, the man assumed guilty, especially if the man is older. It's not but a few clever, unscrupulous women who've taken advantage of this fact. How many 'me too's' are simply slanderers that saw and took advantage of an opportunity to gain power and attention while getting revenge upon a man for something entirely unrelated, like denying their advances or otherwise running afoul of their pride? How many men were falsely targeted through this movement, and secretly made into martyrs? That's a particularly sweet carrot to hold out in front of the dishonest type always seeking to add girth to their egos, especially when it's strung during the contemporary dominance of political correctness that effectively acts to coat the carrot with honey, the self-righteous hive buzzing with excitement over the prospect of stinging anyone. When a man harasses or forces himself upon a woman, excoriate him! Hammer him to the cross! When a woman puts him on the cross based upon exaggerations or outright fabrications, take him down, heal him and hammer her up in his place!

Men who commit unwelcomed advances against women or, worse, force themselves upon women, commit obvious evils well-recognized by modern society. But women who falsely accuse men of such actions commit equal, albeit less obvious, largely unrecognized evils; evils that're absolutely devastating to the falsely accused on every level. And these evils have unfortunately become more prevalent since the 'Me Too Movement,' as unscrupulous women recognize the power-grab opportunity presented by the resultant ethos of kowtowing to political correctness, which includes the propensity to assume wrongdoing on the part of the man, especially, again, if he's older, and even, arguably, the popular 'lynch-mob-esque' desire to condemn men for such accusations, even in the absence of evidence. Indeed, some amongst those labeled politically incorrect believe that, though understandable as part of the progression of the history of prejudice and inequality experienced by women, as a result of the power dynamic tilting towards equality, the phenomenon has nevertheless created a neo witch hunt especially attractive to certain sub-sectors of society, especially the self-congratulatory 'Christian' and 'feminist.'

The second editorial, from a man calling himself 'Falsely-Accused Frank,' uses much of the same language, leading Alex to believe the two may've been penned by the same psychologically-scarred writer. It reads:

The man is ruined by the mere insinuation of 'impropriety,' much less anything at the level of formal accusation and the use of the term 'misconduct.' This is especially true if he's older and/or in any way considered to have an advantage over the woman. When faced with this all too common modern horror the man isn't even permitted a defense. The truth is that he's condemned by the mere hint of having 'behaved inappropriately,' truth and justice be damned. I would say that he's guilty until proven innocent, but not even that is true. No, it's more like he's burned at the stake

as soon as the horrible thoughts enter her hideous head. I know from both my own experience and from conversations with other male victims how risky it is for a man to enter into any relationship with a woman, even outside any type of professional or academic environment. If anything goes wrong in the relationship, which happens with most relationships, the man immediately faces the risk of the emotionally and psychologically wounded woman using this modern weapon against him (whenever she lacks moral development, which is true of most people). Why do the Political Correction Police make no allowance for this form of public protection? Simply because it's fashionable to follow Me Too, neo-feminist, anti-patriarchal mores that preach on and on about past injustices and seek out as many contemporary proofs as possible, ignoring all contradictory cases? When her accusations are found to be baseless, she should suffer the same level of consequence as he would have should her lies have been believed. How else to disincentivize her duplicity? And so it is that until all the relevant considerations are even, until as many people know the word misandry as misogyny, until the past immorality plays no part in perpetuating an equal and opposite modern immorality, this will remain a great evil of unequal contemporary treatment; a true and commonplace miscarriage of justice. And nothing that was done in the past justifies this or any modern injustice. The correction of past injustice will not and cannot be an equal and opposite injustice, but can only ever come through a universality of applied standards of justice. This is true of all forms of true justice, regardless of the particularity of the application.

Having been lost in his pensive reflection upon this alarming reading, Alex forces himself back into the present. Now focusing on the warmth of The Blue Pool calmly bubbling in front of him, assumingly from its geothermal energy supply buried deep within the earth's crust, the heat and hypnotically-radiating blue begin to impart a listless trance. This

warm, natural embrace combined with the mental stress sucking down his energy soon overtakes him, inundating him with a hazy lethargy.

Taking a few full, deep breaths of the vapors rising up from the pool, he attempts to refocus himself; to fortify his mind against the worries rattling it, telling himself that it's all likely in his head. Surely he has enough allies amongst the congregation willing to back him should any accusations arise. But will they have the chance to do so? Those holding court may not permit a just defense. Attempting to reassure himself, a vision of Libby whispering into her father's ear flashes into his mind, halting the reassurance, provoking an involuntary spasm.

Placing the wrapped-up crimson lichen in his pocket before slowly leaving the cave, Alex again wondrously admires the impression that the cave seems to have been carved by nature, by prehistoric man, or by some divine force granting special advantage to its human discoverers. At the same time, he's aware of the fact that his community would consider such a perspective 'paganist.' Imagining it to be his sanctuary and future home, he finds a carved bunk space and accompanying nook, places his collection of journals and sacred texts in the space, then continues his egress. Upon exiting, he stands at the mouth of the cave, closes his eyes and leans his head up towards the sky.

The mist from the waterfall not six feet in front of him blankets his face, neck and arms, imparting an invigorating sense of refreshment, the sun sporadically passing through the streams of falling water with little shots of warmth collected by the droplets gathering upon his skin. Skirting around the falls, he examines the crystal blue water of the pool below, shimmering with a subtler, yet no less lovely, show of color than that of the inner pool. He then gazes out at the river canyon stretching out in front of him. Its beauty is astounding, engrossing him in a way that almost purges

his mind of its worries. This place is magical, and he knows deep down in his heart that it was his destiny to discover and make use of it, even as the foreboding voice whispers up from within him once again: *that destiny shall be painful.*

Having forgotten the time, Alex suddenly realizes how much the sun has passed through its arc since he snuck away from the community, and that he'd agreed to help with the dinner preparations this evening. Considering the extent to which the community often seems comprised of snoops, his absence might trigger more attention than he wants. Climbing back atop the falls, he takes one more glance down the canyon, wondering what other hidden treasures it has to bestow upon him, and where the river might lead. 'Adventures for another day,' he thinks. Closing his eyes, he opens his arms wide in front of him, as if beckoning the lifeforce of this resplendent, richly vital place to enter into and merge with him. A few seconds later a tickle on his left arm below the elbow, the area he'd submerged in the pool, jolts him out of his meditation.

Glancing down at the spot, he notices a big, beautiful white butterfly alighted on his arm. It calmly, methodically raises and lowers its wings. Then another flies in from somewhere down the canyon, and another, and another. Soon his arm is covered by the angelic, white-winged creatures, all of them slowly waving their wings in an entrancingly rhythmic pattern. He realizes that they've covered his arm exactly to the extent which he'd submerged it in the pool. Then, no room remaining, they all suddenly rise and cyclonically circle up into the air before dispersing in all directions. 'What was the meaning of that?,' he wonders, his heart aglow. Minutes later he's heading back towards the village.

Not a quarter mile from the boundaries of the community Alex hears a

crow cawing nearby. Glancing in its direction, he notices something odd: the crow is hopping up and down what appears to be a branch lodged in the ground with something atop it, which the crow is attempting to get at. Moving to investigate, the crow, no doubt irritated at the interruption, flies up to a nearby tree to watch and caw in complaint. Drawing near, Alex sees that there's some part of an animal impaled on the top of the sharpened limb; a bloody, furry mess, perhaps a piece of a dead squirrel. The crow flies off, in the direction of Salem, Alex following it with his eyes until the crow lands at the base of what appears to be another such impaled piece of animal in the distance. It's as if the dismembered creature is being used to mark a trail.

The curious, gruesome sight sends a shiver up his spine, followed by the sound of a commotion coming from the other direction. A sea of voices sound out in distress. Freezing, this sound is followed by a crashing in the woods, and the voice of a man and a woman. *They're headed straight at him*, on a line between the village and the impaling limbs. The next second, the cries of concern growing in number and volume coming from the village, the man and woman spill through the brush and almost knock him over. It's Caitlin, pregnant to the point of being on the verge of giving birth, being pulled violently along by a wiry man covered in tattoos and wielding a large knife pointed at Caitlin's midsection.

Upon seeing Alex, the man pulls Caitlin in front of him, as if to use her as a human shield, placing the edge of the blade to her throat. Unsure how to react, Alex finds himself locked in place by fear and adrenaline. Staring at Alex with wildly violent eyes, the unknown intruder forces the issue, pushing Caitlin forward, towards Alex, Caitlin crying "no... no... no...," first as a loud whisper, then progressively louder, the man becoming ever more agitated.

Terror in her eyes, the slightest stream of blood trickling down her throat from the knifed chokehold, Caitlin stares deep into Alex's eyes. Then, in one rapid movement, she attempts to dislodge herself from the vice of her assailant. Only partially freeing herself, the attacker's knife cuts across her throat, nicking her artery. The assailant then attempts to pull Caitlin back into a bind while stabbing with his knife, Alex reacting a fraction of a second too late to keep the blade from plunging into her upper stomach, just below her sternum.

As Caitlin falls backward, spouting blood from her two wounds, Alex tackles the man to the ground. As they struggle for the knife, Alex hears someone closing in on their position. Alex's combatant is strong, much stronger than he appears, and is close to overcoming Alex and regaining control of the weapon when something strikes him on the back of the head, producing the grisly sound of bone giving way to rock. Looking up, Alex sees Taylor, his brawny young friend, holding a large stone in one hand, stained with the attacker's blood, who now lies beside him unconscious, perhaps dead.

Members of the community make their way to the spot as Taylor and Alex attempt to stem Caitlin's blood loss. They each press their hands to one of the two gushing wounds whilst she writhes in agony, soon appearing to be on the verge of losing consciousness, all whilst crying for her unborn child. A few of the other men from the village check on the intruder, mostly to assure that he's no longer a threat. One of them shakes his head. *He's dead.* Through communal wailing the village doctor, Fyzer Merk, makes his way to Caitlin just in time to embrace her in her dying torment, Father Andrew beginning the last rites.

Watching the scene unfold in dismay, a white butterfly passes across Alex's face as he remains seated in the dirt near his dying friend. It's the

same species that had covered his arm back near the waterfall. Like a divine messenger, this shoots The Blue Pool into Alex's mind's eye, and he remembers the lichen sample he has wrapped up in his pocket, extracted from the stones near the pool. Something says: *Use it!*

Alex takes out and begins tearing the large lichen sample into pieces and, despite the protests of much of the community, moves towards Caitlin, intending to administer it somehow. Many, including the doctor and Father Andrew, try to stop him, but with the backing of Miranda and Taylor, along with elders Jacob, Jennifer, David and Anita, who have a belief in Alex unshared by the others, they let him push forward. Alex leans over Caitlin, now on death's doorstep, delirious, with shock-white skin and eyes rolling into the back of her head. Chewing on the lichen for a moment to soften it, his mouth tingling, and believing he sees an aura surrounding Caitlin's body and an eye circumscribed with a triangle hovering over her, he inserts the lichen into both wounds, several members of the community crying out in outrage at his encroachment. *Then, nothing.* The group is near to silent, many praying, a few chastising Alex under their breath.

Caitlin's body goes limp. As she's unable to speak and make any final confessions, Father Andrew leans over and quietly whispers to her: "By the authority which the Lord has given me, I grant you a full pardon and the remission of all your sins, in the name of the Father, and of the Son..."

Surrounding her, Andrew's congregants quietly echo the last rites, with Alex leaning back in the dirt, tears welling up in his eyes. Miranda puts her hand on his shoulder, many amongst those gathered around looking at the two of them with a mix of anger and suspicion. The doctor, feeling for a pulse on her uncut carotid, lowers his head in defeat. It takes a full minute after the implicit pronouncement of death, everyone silent, *then it happens.*

At the very moment that the group finishes repeating Father Andrew's words for the third time, Caitlin gasps loudly and sits straight up. She takes a full, dramatic breath, looking around as if she's on another planet. Pandemonium ensues, with many shouting, some screaming, the atmosphere thick with fear and confusion, elation and consternation.

Through the cacophony, Libby senses an opportunity and begins to sing aloud, her eyes on Alex the entire time, telegraphing desire and the attempt to discern the significance of what's just transpired before everyone's eyes. One by one, the community joins in Libby's song:

*Glory, glory Hallelujah
Glory, glory Hallelujah
Glory, glory Hallelujah
His truth is marching on*

*I have seen him in the watchfires
Of a hundred circling camps
They have built Him an altar
In the evening dews and damps
I can read his righteous sentence
By the dim and flaring lamps
His day is marching on*

*Glory, glory Hallelujah
Glory, glory Hallelujah
Glory, glory Hallelujah
His truth is marching on*



**THE VISION
&
THE VISIONARY**

“I died,” Caitlin reports. “I was dead. I don’t know how, but Alex... brought me back from the other side.”

Gently rubbing her wrapped wounds, which have miraculously scarred over already, most of the village surrounds Caitlin in the communal dining hall, rapt by the tale of her dancing on the line between life and death. Their emotions are palpable, and highly varied. Fear, even dread, dominate some, while suspicion and confusion are common amongst them, and a few look upon Alex almost reverentially, one of whom whispers:

“Is he The Messiah? The Second Coming? Who else could do that?”

Alex sits next to Caitlin as she relates the experience, with Miranda beside him, furtively pressing her knee against his under the massive dining table stretching fifty feet long and six feet wide, centrally placed in the hall, the second largest structure in the community after the church set at it’s very center, around which all community activity circles. Only Libby remains quiet, her steely, piercing gaze passing between Alex, Caitlin and Miranda.

“I felt my heart slowing, and knew it was about to stop beating...” Caitlin continues. “The blackness enveloped me, all sight and sensation falling away. It grew darker and darker and I felt desperate, like I wanted to shout: Save her! Save my baby! But I couldn’t say anything. I’d lost track of my body and my ability to feel or speak or... do *anything*. Then, just as it became as dark as can be, like a starless, moonless night, I saw a tiny dot in the very center of my perception.”

“Greyish at first, as if color was being reconceived and pulled from the blackness, it grew ever and ever lighter, and larger and brighter, until it was a perfectly white, glowing heavenly light filling my full field of vision. The light then split into innumerable twinkling pieces, as if made of the souls of life.

They swirled around before coming together in every conceivable pattern of blinking brilliance. But it wasn't just their color, it was their *feeling*. I can't describe it... It was like... like God embracing me, telling me that it was okay; telling me that this wasn't the end, but the beginning of something *much* bigger. It's like He was absorbing me into the Heavenly Kingdom. I've never felt... *fuller*, or more at peace, in my life. Then, something changed..."

"The white started to fill itself with strange shapes, which I gradually recognized, soon realizing that they were butterflies. And as they hovered about I saw that they were in a field of green. Then they flew off, leaving only the green... a green that grew darker and darker, richer and more lush, becoming like a *forest green*. Deep and bursting with life. Then the green started to shoot white roots downwards just before innumerable sprouts shot upwards, growing into every type of tree and plant and budding flower imaginable... plants I've never seen before, all of them sopping wet, full of vitality. They grew and grew and, like the white moments before, they soon overgrew my field of vision. It was so, *so* beautiful... like I was in The Garden of Eden itself..."

Many amongst the community murmur approvingly at her references to God and Heaven, and especially to The Garden of Eden. Much of their former fear and confusion is replaced with joy and excitement.

"Then the green began to part straight down the middle, like an aisleway was being formed. That's when I saw him. The largest, most majestic animal I've ever seen. It was an enormous elk. Its antlers were massive, with winged creatures of every order set upon them. It's eyes were... *mesmerizing*... like staring into an endless, swirling depth... like looking into eternity. He slowly approached until I could see nothing but his face, then he exhaled powerfully through his nostrils. That's when I woke up; or was *reborn*. I think it... I think it breathed life back into me!

It saved me and my baby! I feel like Alex... *called it to me.*"

This final revelation is met with mixed reactions. The village elders begin to congregate to one side to discuss the significance of this vision and potential rebirth, shooting occasional glances at Alex and Caitlin. It's clear that many amongst the others disapprove, with whispers of 'blasphemy,' 'heresy' and 'pagan' arising, and gossip brewing all around the hall. Alex even thinks he hears the word 'demonic' a couple of times following the repeat mention of the dark eyes of eternity of the 'horned creature.' Then he catches Libby's eyes.

The intensity of her stare frightens him. He can see through it to some design beneath, the hatching of a plan, and *not* an innocuous one. Looking away, he meets eyes with Delaney, the gorgeous, voluptuous young woman he's always been too intimidated by to try to get to know. Suddenly, there's a receptivity in those eyes that he's never seen before. He feels the same from Elizabeth, who gives him a slight smile. Miranda seems to notice all of this, as she follows his gaze around the room and soon gives him a playful little pinch of the thigh, reminding him that the girl he wants is seated beside him.

He looks at her and smiles. *God, those eyes of her.* Glistening streaks of emerald and hazel bound by blue. Getting lost in them would be a delight, even if he were never to find his way back to this reality. A stanza from another poem she'd recently inspired flashes into his mind:

*Eyes keep coursing blue, lustily laced with mossy green
as rivers rushing through soppy verdant overgrowth
fertilizing dreamy desires dripping with impassioned promise*

He has a vision of the two of them bathing beneath the falls, and can almost feel the water washing over their nude forms, both of them having

been stripped of everything artificial and separating of their bodies, hearts and minds. The reverie is interrupted by Father Andrew:

“Where did you get that... *plant* that you stuffed into Caitlin’s wounds, Alex?”

The community hangs upon his response, especially the elders, most of whom bore lasers into him with their eyes. ‘This is the quietest they’ve ever been while fully gathered,’ Alex thinks. Luckily, he foresaw the question to be inevitable, and had time to consider how he’d respond prior to this inquiry, knowing full well that he’d have to be very careful, and, unfortunately, untruthful, for his own self-protection.

“I was taking a walk in the woods to... clear my head... to ponder God... when I heard singing. It was the same song that all of you sung over Caitlin while she was fighting for her life: *Glory, Glory Hallelujah*. But it was soft, like it was being hummed. I followed the sound to a large tree in the forest. It had this red, mossy stuff growing on the side of it. Something told me that it was important. I think God knew what was coming, and wanted me to save Caitlin and her baby. So I placed my hand upon the moss and said The Lord’s Prayer. Then I peeled some of it off of the bark of the tree and stuffed it into my pocket. Caitlin’s blood was like the color of the moss, which is what reminded me that I had it. And when I heard Libby and you all start to sing that song I knew for sure: God was commanding Caitlin and her baby to live!”

“Hallelujah!” come the shouts. “It’s a miracle! Praise be to Jesus, to God the Father!”

Father Andrew and several elders smile broadly at this tale, a few of them appearing almost giddy. Several amongst the more clever community members display a very different affect, however. Elders Jacob, David and

Jennifer look incredulous, Jacob attempting to conceal a wry, knowing smile, as if certain that Alex's story is invented, at least in part. Nathan stands outside the group next to Sophie, his fierce stare hammering holes in the side of Alex's head, a look of pure contempt upon Sophie's face. They whisper together, never taking their eyes off of Alex.

Zander, standing beside Libby, looks back and forth between her and Alex, sensing Libby's interest, telegraphing a mix of suspicion, jealousy and irritation, whilst Libby herself spins her wheels with a meticulous intricacy of intention, like a spider spinning its web. She looks over at her father and the other village elders and, seeing their eager gullibility, has to hold back a chortle. 'How easy it is to gain their interest and approval,' she thinks, 'especially when you pander to them, playing them, knowing, as Alex obviously does, what they want to hear. With proper training, he could become a most powerful ally.'

A spur of the moment celebratory feast is set in motion, with several goats slaughtered and set upon the fire pits. Corn and potatoes are roasted in the coals beneath the racks. Festivities fast underway, Alex is the talk of the mostly exuberant community, with many suggesting that this sign from God means that he should be fast-tracked to become a preacher, immediately taken under Andrew's wing. Alex, however, wants nothing to do with this, and had underestimated the effect of his yarn. He meant to avoid suspicion and condemnation, not provoke admiration and the pressure to follow a track that he sees not as godly and ascendant, but narrow and descending.

Miranda is glued to Alex's hip most of the remainder of the evening. At one point, when they have a bit of distance from the others, he whispers into her ear:

"I want to take you to see something. Something... *magical*. Will you

come with me tomorrow evening?"

She smiles broadly and nods her consent, at which point Libby bears down upon them, having been watching from across the hall, where she's been playing 'fly on the wall,' taking in the talk of the village, translating its meaning, considering how to play it to her advantage.

"What are you two whispering about over here?," she asks with an odd little grin, staring into Alex's eyes.

'She's equally beautiful,' Alex thinks, 'but only on the outside. If I could see behind those teeth, I may well see a forked tongue.' He returns her smile with a forced smile of his own. Libby then pulls Miranda away, towards her cultish clan of cohorts gathered nearby, turning around to give Alex another big grin paired with a suggestive gaze before joining the circle of girls, all of whom begin to giggle and gossip amongst themselves. The sight of them gathered, speaking under their breath whilst looking around the central space at their fellow villagers, strikes Alex with a sudden sense of nausea, as if he might lose his dinner.

He steps away, seeking solitude, soon leaning against a tree on the periphery of village central. A minute later he's approached by Caitlin. Libby and Miranda watch them from afar.

"Thank you," Caitlin heartily offers.

"You're welcome. I'm so glad that you survived, and that your recovery is so... miraculous. But it wasn't me. Not *really*."

"I know."

"You know? What do you mean?"

"I didn't tell them everything, Alex. I saw... *more.*"

"Saw what?"

"Before the approach of that splendid creature in my vision, I saw... well... *you.* I didn't just see The Garden of Eden, I saw the snake as well. I saw you and Miranda... at least, I *think* it was Miranda. You were walking side-by-side through the forest, with you holding a spear in one hand and a rolled up scroll in the other. You were wearing, like, an animal suit... it looked like the fur of the elk that would enter my vision afterwards. And you had his antlers on top of your head, like they were your crown. The sun shone down on you intensely as you walked. You were almost... *glowing.* Animals followed you. And as you passed by my field of vision I noticed that Miranda was holding a knife behind her back. I remember shaking in fear. I could feel the very essence of, well, of *treachery*, like she was its purest possible embodiment."

"Then, my vision panned well out in front of you, where I saw a massive snake up in an odd, twisted tree. It slithered down the tree and dropped into some sort of hole, or pit, in the ground. And the two of you were walking right at it. I tried to scream to warn you, but I was mute. I couldn't scream. You saw the pit in time to avoid it, but just as you were about to side-step it, Miranda stabbed you in the back... not enough to kill you, but enough to disable you. Then she pushed you in."

"The pit was filled with poisonous snakes. They surrounded you; closed in on you. You tried to climb out, but it was too steep, and you were wounded... you weren't strong enough to get out. You were fighting them off with your spear, but then one snuck up behind you and bit you on the back of your leg, and you faltered, falling to your knees. Then another bit you, and another. *They killed you, Alex.* Then the scroll that you'd been

carrying, now lying in the pit, spontaneously combusted and began burning. And just as the large snake, the big one that had been in the tree, was about to swallow you whole, the flame from the scroll spread to your body, and you too caught fire, and exploded into an inferno, consuming you and all the snakes with you.”

“And you’d think that would be the end of it, but it wasn’t. The billowing blaze in the snake pit eventually died down. Then, from the smoldering, ash-spewing embers, a winged creature arose, like the reborn Phoenix, except it had the wings of a butterfly and the antlers of an elk. And, with one great flap of its massive wings, it bounded out of the pit and landed next to Miranda, who’d been standing above, watching the whole thing. She ran away, and it looked like the creature would give chase, but instead, it began to transform, and in front of him, like Mother Nature was laying out a welcome, every manner of plant life, every variety of life, sprung into existence, and the creature became a massive elk, and calmly strolled through it... that’s the part of the vision that I related to the others.”

“Hmmm...”

It’s all that Alex can muster, even as there’s something about Caitlin’s vision that provokes a deep sense of dread. His nausea worsens, becoming heavier, like he’s holding an anvil in his gut. That’s when Elder Jacob approaches, yanking Alex and Caitlin out of the ominous prophecy.

“Pardon me, Caitlin. I hope you’re recovering from the... *excitement* earlier.”

“I am, Elder Jacob, thank you.”

“The elders have decided that they’d like to take you under their

wing, Alex. They want to see some of your writing, which I've told them a bit about... I hope you don't mind... Jennifer thinks that some of it would make great material for the community... for facilitating group prayer and discussion, and maybe even lead to some sermons from Fathers Zander and Andrew."

"That's... *great*, Jacob. Thank you," Alex feigns, the anvil in his gut gaining girth.

He can think of nothing but the burdening, sickening sense of disease growing within, and how good it would feel to run into the woods and puke it up. And yet, he senses that there's no deliverance in store. The sickness is stuck there, too heavy and well-lodged to purge.



**THE PRAISED
&
THE SCORNED**

“I have to say, Alex, I’m very impressed.” It’s the first time that he’s ever been complimented by the head of The Barnes Clan. “You’re a good writer. It’s nice to have a writer in the clan, I have to admit. Where did you get the material? It almost sounds as though it came from the Bible, but not quite.”

Andrew had been given some of Alex’s more acceptable writing the night before, that which can at least be construed in a manner gratifying the Christian perspective. Now surrounded by the Church elders, plus Libby and Zander, those considered the future of the Church, with the meaning of his role in the recent resurrection still under contentious interpretation, the leaders of the community are attempting to discern Alex’s proper place. What righteous role might this outlier, this potential future apostate, play? Would it offend God to grant an important post to someone they all suspect to be a non-believer?

Considering Andrew’s question, Alex thinks of all the influences that have informed his spiritual philosophy over the years. The Gnostic Gospels cast out of the conventional Christian Canon, the pure spiritual poems of Rumi, Plato’s theory of forms and his allegory of the cave, the *Tao Te Ching*, the counter-cultural, nature-revering conceptions of Thoreau and, perhaps most especially, his recent skimming of *The Vedas* and *The Bhagavat Gita*, the sacred Indian texts that most perfectly parallel his own spiritual instincts and long-developed theories. He thinks of how all of these sources wrapped around and commingled and mated with the messages conveyed through his heart to coalesce and become almost inseparable from one another, as if all indistinct relatives, before finally gelling to become the ink set upon the pages now clutched by Father Andrew.

‘How much can they handle?’ Alex wonders before replying:

“I think my writing constitutes my own form of divine inspiration; what I hear in my mind after it translates what God passes to me through my heart, the source of all spiritual wisdom.”

This is acceptable to most, though a few scowl, including Andrew. It just doesn't *quite* fit. It's too open to interpretation; not well enough grounded in the scripture that's beyond reproach as 'The Word.' Jacob, Jennifer and David all lend Alex their support, doing their best to quell the fears of the more suspicious and orthodox amongst them. Libby, however, is the most supportive, smiling at Alex while saying:

“I always knew that Alex had a gift; a special role to play.” Zander does his best not to grimace at this remark.

“I've read some of his other work, Father Andrew,” Jacob chimes in, attempting to push Alex across the threshold of acceptance. “I think that we should support it. I think that, with your permission and guidance, we should foster his talent, for we've clearly seen that God has gifted him, and seeded him with the ability to bring the divine light of the Lord into our humble community.”

“What exactly are you suggesting, Jacob?,” Andrew asks.

“Well, I say we gather his work and have it printed and distributed amongst the community, after you've read and edited it, of course. Also, I think that you should allow me to take him into Salem, both because I could use an assistant on the supply runs, and because I know a pious man at a bookstore there that I think can help him further develop his writing, and help us have it printed; have it *self-published*, as they say.”

There's debate amongst the elders as to the propriety of this suggestion. Is Alex ready? Can he handle the temptations of town, being as

he seems more inclined to give into earthly forces than most? Yes, he's been into Salem before, but that's when he was younger, and demonstrated less... *inquisitiveness*, and was under group supervision.

As much as his writing means to him, as large as it looms in his heart as the purpose and promise of his future, all he can think about is escaping with Miranda into the woods. Versions of the fantasy have possessed his mind ever since finding the falls. He imagines leading her to the stilted tree and the pool, and mutually breaking their binds with this community and its narrowing, controlling expectations and values, if only for a day. Something potent is being cultivated between the two of them, and as much as the community would condemn their union, he being the 'older male' and she seen by most as the innocent young ingenue that she's actually *far* from being, he can't help it.

Whenever she's around, he wants her closer. Whenever his duties pull him away from her, he feels the space between them. The gap aches more the more it grows in time and space. Like a gravitational force, a black hole that merely *seems* as though it's the epitome of nothing, the space between them is dense with the expectation and hope of *everything*. Plus, as much as he's always wanted to be recognized for his abilities, this isn't necessarily how or *where* he imagined that recognition to come. What must he pay, how much truth of himself must he cast off, to gain any type of sustained support from a majority of the elders? The thought of making his words fit into a predesigned mold made to constrict his naturally expansive heart and mind feels oppressive, as if he'll be forced to play the very *opposite* role that he senses that he was born to play. He gasps at the thought, the very idea of it pressing in on his ribcage, restricting his ability to breathe.

In the end Father Andrew gives Jacob the go ahead to act as Alex's mentor in the process of writing and assisting with supplies, emphasizing

that there's still a great deal of work to be done if they're to successfully transform Alex into what God commands him to become. As this message is being quietly delivered to Jacob, Alex spills out of the church with the greatest of gratitude for the open air.

Miranda is waiting for him. Coming close, she slips a letter into his pocket. They've been exchanging them for some time now; this little game of wordplay and secret romance, he continuing to up the ante, and her breathing oxygen onto the flames at every turn, assuring that their fire continues to burn, and to build in its consuming intensity. The only question is whether or not that fire can be beneficially harnessed before burning one or both of them alive, or at least singing some flesh. Is this the source of the future conflagration, the prophecy glimpsed by Caitlin in her travels to the other side of existence?

Looking into Miranda's eyes, he has the same thought that he's had a hundred times before: if only he could drop into and swim in them, in that unspeakable beauty that seems to simultaneously scream 'innocence!' and 'naughtiness!' Spellbound once more by this perfectly alluring combination of color and emotive effusion, he thinks of recent flirtations, and how he's developed the habit of sneaking from one side of the church to the other just for the chance to peer into those eyes. She once expressed the fear that his attention might get her into trouble with the elders, with his response being:

"I'll take any chance just to look into those eyes of yours for even a second."

He remembers her sigh of longing upon his saying this, and how his reflection upon the interaction led to the composition of the poem that he'd written her that night:

Oculus

Pinpoint plunge
Emerald-swirling ascension

Flashing focus
Dreamy disorientation

Naughtily knowing
Innocent enchantment

Wildly wonderful
Waxing wistfulness

Towering togetherness
Descendent departure

Seized by the ancient oculus
When your eyes capture mine

Alex wants to pull Miranda in close, the gravitational force beseeching him to eliminate the painfully tiny gap now separating them. But, of course, he can't. Not with the eyes of the elders pointed through the stained glass windows, and especially not *now*, with all the extra attention and the community-wide judgments as to who he should be.

He looks around, wondering who's watching at this very moment, and whether or not he can get away with touching her without being instantly condemned. Again he thinks of her showing him her flat stomach, with her secretly pierced belly button; he can see it so clearly in his mind; and of her sexy little ass that she pretends not to be putting on display; of her gradually revealing her clandestine set of body tattoos, each one of

them creeping closer to the promised land that both want to mutually explore, but which the act of pretending *isn't* there can only amplify the excitement and anticipation of eventually exploring.

Scanning the vicinity, he makes eye contact with Sophie, standing outside the textile station dying a recently woven garment. She immediately looks away, feigning disinterest. Nathan stands nearby, unloading a box from the most recent supply run. Momentarily meeting his ever intense eyes, they appear more menacing than usual. Is it malice? A jealousy of his spending time with Miranda?

Alex again recalls how Miranda had told him of Nathan making advances at her, and how, after she'd rebuffed them, he'd called her a 'bitch' and complained to Janessa, his go-to amongst the elders, that Miranda was spending too much time flirting with the guys at the church, all before attempting to laugh it off as if he'd been joking. As far as Alex knew, he'd leveled the offense without consequence.

'If *I'd* said that to Miranda or any of the other young women, the ramifications would have been *far* more severe,' Alex thinks. 'Nathan is protected by his show of dedication and obedience to the Church and its commanders, even though he secretly complains about being the most undervalued of its members.' Back when they called one another friends, Sophie had told him of Nathan's constant whining about being underappreciated.

"Sophie and Nathan are watching us," Alex whispers to Miranda.

"Yea, like I said, I think that last poem you shared freaked Sophie out. She used to say that she missed you when you weren't around for a while, like she had a crush on you. We both did," she adds with a big grin. "Now she scowls and goes silent whenever you're mentioned."

"It's too bad. I really liked her. It's shitty how one misunderstanding can completely flip the table on a supposed friendship."

"Well, she's young."

"*You're* young. I've been warned that I shouldn't get involved with you *because* of your age, in fact." He remembers half-jokingly telling her on numerous occasions how he sensed that she'd eventually break his heart.

"Who warned you?"

"Don't worry about it."

It had been Jennifer. Alex wasn't sure if it was because Jennifer was actually concerned about his getting mixed up with someone young and immature, like he was taking a risk and might even be perceived as a sexual predator by some of the more prudish ladies in the community, or if Jennifer herself might have more interest in him than merely helping develop his capacity as a writer. Oftentimes he imagines most of the women of the community possessing some level of attraction for him, reading their body language and little tells, yet he's uncertain how much of this is true, and how much of it represents an egotistical delusion. What *is* clear to him is that Jennifer has an interest in him that goes beyond helping him become a better writer. He just isn't certain as to the exact nature of that interest. Attraction, or something... *else?*

"And Nathan... I have no love for that guy, but I feel bad for him," Alex adds. "It's obvious how into you he is... Are you torturing him with that?"

"What do you mean?"

Alex thinks about it for a moment before responding:

“I just know how beautiful women, especially beautiful *young* women, tend to be the ruin of those guys whom they believe just don’t quite measure up to a level deserving of interest, and how painful unrequited affection can be in general. It makes the possessor of the unfulfilled desire hang on absolutely everything seen, done and felt that has anything whatsoever to do with the object of their affection. It’s like, whenever the one desired is around, the one holding the burning desire turns into one big nerve of super-sensitive, quivering feeling. And I’m also aware how, in uncompassionate hands, that can turn into a crushing, ego-infused power trip for the non-reciprocator.”

“I can’t *pretend* to like him, Alex. Besides, he said something to me recently that made me think he was okay with just being friends. And rumor has it that he’s moved on. He likes *Elizabeth* now... he’s been telling everyone how beautiful he thinks she is.”

“Yea, she’s definitely nice to look at.”

This comment clearly ruffles Miranda’s feathers. Eyes narrowing, she shakes her head no. “Don’t do that,” she says, half-playfully, half-hurt.

“What, seriously? I can’t say things like that? Even after all that talk of yours about your guy friend, the one that secretly wants to leave the community to become a boxer... the one whose identity you’re hiding, who you’re always torturing me about, saying you spend all that time alone with him?”

“That’s true.” She grins broadly, a gorgeous flash of mischief pouring from her captivating gaze. “He was sitting on my front step yesterday when

I got home, waiting for me.”

A pang of jealousy momentarily racks Alex’s heart, and he shakes his head, turning to walk away, at which point Miranda lets out a little giggle and reaches out, grabbing him by the upper arm with both of her hands, pulling him to a stop. The way she does it feels so nice and natural; this wonderful little game of veiled ardor that he simultaneously wants to continue, and to end with their merging. The *way* she grabs him, both hands upon his biceps, the soft, playful little pull... *It’s a girlfriend move, for certain.* He turns back and smiles at her. He wants to kiss her, and almost asks her to sneak away with him to the falls then and there, imagining their nude forms intertwining under the mystically glowing, falling waters. Unable to help himself, he says:

“You know I love you, right?”

“I know,” she says with a satisfied little smile, looking a bit embarrassed.

At this moment Libby exits through the church doors nearby, and walks straight at them, followed close behind by Zander.

“What are you two up to?,” Libby asks, looking more concerned than curious. She positions herself between Alex and Miranda, taking each by the arm.

“Your ‘favorite’ here has quite a bright future with the Church,” Libby says, addressing her ‘bestie.’ “My dad has agreed to support his writing efforts, and Jennifer and Jacob have been tasked with collecting and curating his work, and turning it into a book. My dad said that, if it’s popular here, in *this* Church community, it could be popular *everywhere*, and he’ll help bring it to other churches, so long as it can be done in a

way that doesn't reveal our Eden here."

"Wow, that's really cool," Miranda offers. "Congratulations," she adds, sending a mischievous little glance and grin Alex's way, as if they're sharing an inside joke they're both reticent to share with Libby.

Soon they're making the rounds amongst the constituents of the community, Libby acting as Alex's publicist, announcing his newly appointed position as 'Church Scribe.' From station to station, person to person they go, Alex reluctantly dragged along. As egotistically gratifying as it is for him, he's uncomfortable with the level of attention that he's receiving, knowing how egotistic investment tends to corrupt and lead one away from the deeper truth of themselves, and also sensing that the whole situation could go awry if and when his newfound status were to run aground of *other* egos. The only bright spot in the proceedings is Miranda, with whom flirtation feels so natural it's almost compulsory.

It becomes a game. Alex waits for Libby to look away before sending Miranda a wink, making the kissing shape with his lips, reaching out like he's going to tickle her, then quickly retracting his hands. Miranda plays along to a point, fearing Libby will see, and a couple times looking embarrassed. Alex can't help but wonder exactly *what* she's afraid of, other than the general sense that Libby isn't to be trifled with.

And what's the nature of this particular trifle, exactly? Simply that she'd disapprove of their courtship, maybe because he's older, or perhaps for some other reason, based upon some kernel of information to which he isn't privy, not being one of the gossiping girls? He continually has the sense that, regardless of his fledgling notoriety, and the high regard in which several of the elders seem to hold him, he's outside the club, and lacks any *true* understanding of what the women of the community, especially the young women in Libby's circle, *really* think; how they *really*

feel; what their *true* intentions are.

And with the attention that he's suddenly garnered, this particular form of ignorance now feels dangerous, like the camouflaged covering for a deadfall that he'll be forced to circumnavigate. This feeling heightens when they make their way into Libby's little power cluster, making Alex anxious, especially considering Delaney's presence, briefly coming into the cluster to lend her approval of Alex's new station, casting her kryptonotic spell that's part beauty, part the exuding of infallibility.

"I can't wait to read what you've written," she says with her bewildering flash of exquisiteness and directness.

"Rumor has it that you're thinking of leaving the community and becoming an emergency medical technician," Alex summons the courage to say. "I hope that doesn't happen anytime soon," he adds, unable to help himself. He would say a whole hell of a lot more to her if he could. Miranda's presence is joyful, and sparking of his heart. Delaney's presence is discombobulating, and almost emasculating, making him feel feeble and foolish, like a boy.

"I'm still studying for it," Delaney replies. "The elders are trying to convince me to stay but, as I've heard of you, I feel like the world has a place for me that this community might not be able to match."

"I understand, trust me."

"I know you do."

Libby and company scowl disapprovingly at their brief exchange. As with most every interaction in The Barnes Clan, Alex is aware of the risks of opening up too much, or showing too much interest in any of

the attractive young women whom Andrew and his scion have surrounded themselves with. There's an ever-present, artificial self-righteousness breaking-up and burying everything heartfelt and genuine, and it's *always* watching, *always* whispering: *stay within the boundary lines*. At the moment, however, it's *Libby* who seems fixed on building and enforcing boundaries.

Much to Alex's chagrin, she steps in to get his attention after he's been speaking with Delaney for a few minutes. She does the same with Elizabeth, with whom he not only shares a fondness for literature, which she's proclaimed a desire to study, should her father and fiancé permit it, but with whom he's also shared some of his writing, with her shyly giving him a thumbs-up. But it's Miranda who Libby seems particularly keen to keep at bay, seeing how easy the flirtatious rapport is between her and Alex. Frustrated by Libby's interceding, Miranda eventually leaves the group, walking towards the church, telling them that she has a job to do. Soon enough Libby peels Alex away from the young women, as if leading him to the next stop in the community publicity tour. Except that she unexpectedly leads him into the dining hall, which is currently empty.

"I'd like to talk to you about something," she opens, seating herself atop the dining table. He suddenly notices that she looks more attractive than usual today, as if she's put in extra effort. Her earrings look new, her makeup, which is generally discouraged in the community, is more apparent, her blouse lower cut. She leans forward as she speaks, enhancing the effect.

"Okay..." Alex emits, suddenly feeling both excited and endangered.

"Did you know that I write too, Alex?"

"Really... no, I wasn't aware of that. What do you write?"

“Oh, lots of stuff. I especially like to write short stories about the women in the Bible who I think deserve more attention. But reading your work the last couple of days has me inspired in a new way. The profound... *philosophical* insights. I want to write more like you do, I think... like, new age scripture, but maybe more from the female perspective. Something imparting biblical lessons, of course, but written for a younger generation like mine... like *ours*, I mean.”

“That’s interesting. I like that idea.”

“Yea? Can you help me?”

“Help you?”

“Yea, you know... mentor me. *Teach* me,” she adds with a big smile. “I was thinking that we’d make a good team. I could focus on messages written for the women. And you could do your thing, which you seem so naturally predisposed to do... And I could help spread your work in the community, and maybe outside of it as well, if my dad will let me... We could, like, go on assignments outside the village, and spread The Word in our own special way.”

As she says this she leans in close to him, grabs him by the shirt and pulls him slowly towards her. His heart jumps into his throat as she plants a kiss on his lips, soft at first, but fast growing in intensity. Soon their mouths are open, tongues intertwined, when Alex is suddenly struck by an overwhelming sense of distress and the mental image of Miranda, followed by a furious Father Andrew.

“Wow...” he says, pulling away. “I... you’re *very* attractive, Libby. But, we can’t. I mean... your father already distrusts me, which I’m just now

starting to fix, and Miranda...”

“Let me worry about them,” she says with the big, confident smirk of someone in complete command, pulling him towards her once again. But he stops her, breaking her command. The spell didn’t work.

“I can’t. I’m sorry.”

Stumbling backwards, he almost tumbles over sideways as he flees the hall. Libby looks bewildered, as if entirely disbelieving his refusal. And as he removes himself from the area, he knows the die has been cast. *This won’t end well*. But even as his heart wrenches, and he has to take a series of deep breaths to prevent the anxiety from becoming a full-blown panic attack, he lies to himself, telling himself that everything is okay.

Despite being unwelcomed, Libby’s advance has him physically excited, a reflexive biological reaction. And even as that advance likely means the end of things, or perhaps because of it, his own desires having just been rendered unobtainable owing to the likely fallout, and thus *more* desirable, his excitement spills over in his mind in the direction of his desired target. He fantasizes about spending the night with Miranda; of all the sexually-tinged, erotic letters and flirtatious games, and of the chance to *finally* be able to act them out for real.

Those fantasies spill out of and run quickly away from him, he giving chase whilst they mock him with the unlikelihood of their realization, making them all the clearer in his mind. Still he wonders, his emotions running wild: ‘Maybe it’s only ever been a game for her, nothing more. Maybe Miranda never intended on *actually* doing anything, but has been leading me on for the fun and power trip of it all. Maybe she just wants control of me... maybe it’s mostly ego mixed with horniness, and I just *want* it to be heart; to be equal to my own intention.’

Sneaking to the fringe of the community, he sits in a large gap in the exposed roots of the ancient elm, his favorite place to meditate, at least before discovering the stilted Holy Mother Tree and The Blue Pool. Pulling Miranda's recently gifted letter from his pocket, the one she'd slipped into his pocket upon his exiting from the church, he dives in:

Thank you for being my favorite. I feel the same way that you do when I haven't seen you for a while. I imagine that it's like I'm withdrawing from a drug, like you hear the elders talk about with the drug addictions of the youth of the world our society left behind. I miss you when you're not here, helping us at the church. And I really want to read some of these books that you talk about, like Lady Chatterley's Lover.

I love how you talk about it, like it pushed the boundaries and was banned for suggesting that the body isn't just this lower form of the self to be ashamed of, but is the very vehicle conveying us towards the greatest gifts of God that can ever be known; that to disregard the body is to do a disservice to God by denying and taking for granted his greatest gift; a gift which the Church wishes us to regard with guilt so that we're easier to control through their endorsement of what constitutes 'acceptable relations.'

I asked a couple of the girls if they have it, and they looked either confused or offended. I'm pretty sure that Sophie has a copy, and that she got it from Elder Jacob. I happen to know that she's really into that stuff, even though she pretends like she isn't. But she's mad at me for not hating you, so she won't let me borrow it. May I borrow your copy? And will you please make me a copy of that poem you wrote about it? I love that poem.

Lastly, let me add that I, too, want to spend some time alone with you. More than anything, I want to see this magical place of yours. If it makes me feel any of the magic that you make me feel, I know it'll be

unforgettable. You're showing it to me tonight, right? After dinner, just before sunset, I'll meet you by the ancient elm.

- Miranda

As he finishes the letter, flush with excitement, trying to clear his mind and allow the blood that's rushed into his genitals to subside, he recalls the poem to which Miranda is referring, inspired by D.H. Lawrence's classic. He'd found the book to be brilliant, and not just because it was ahead of its time and because, like all great literature, it wrestled with complex social issues of class, control and unwise conventional wisdom, but because its rebelliousness sprung from a realization that the romantics and the religious were wrong; that they'd discarded the highest levels of romance and the quest for God, respectively, by misunderstanding, underestimating and taking for granted the greatest gifts of life.

Lawrence flipped the paradigm of the pinnacle of human existence on its head, grounding it in what we overlook when our own heads are stuck in the clouds or wedged between the pages of 'The Good Book.' His paradoxical form of sophistication, in which what the prudish condemn as licentious is held up to be the very best and most divine of what life has to offer, his belief that 'worship happens in the bedroom,' led him to write one of the many poems that he's now shared with Miranda:

Love of Lawrence

*Stripped-down bare-boned permeating press
Endings exhilarating warmly entering ecstasy
Eagerly expectant tantalizing torment of touch
Inch by every generous, curvaceous inch*

*Curves of every kind, small to the sweeping
Intertwining tonguing entwapping embrace
Tracing, interlacing, lines line every sultry side
Fingertips down sides turning full of form*

*Hugging whole of each bursting heartbeat
Breath on breath, hot heaving down between
Delirium in half-moments of untouched agony
Down all the way between each of us the same*

*The deeper, the more embracing and needing
Kissing becoming craving, resistance caving*

*Pretense passed aside to bestride our animal
God giving the greatest pleasing paradise here
Freely, wildly, not by the guards of your gates
At the bodily base are the heavens breached*

*Who are you, really?
Only what your body shows
Your bursting, bewitching, bounteous body*

As he finishes reciting the poem in his head, he hears something in the forest behind him. Turning around, he thinks he sees a stag, but the animal bounds away with ease as soon as it's glimpsed, as if carried away by the brush. A moment later a pair of Steller's Jays fly out from the very spot in which he lost sight of the stag. 'The same pair that led me towards The Blue Pool?'

The beautiful birds, with their deep blue giving way to starkly black, mohawked heads, appear to be at odds, fighting over a scrap of food pulled from the forest floor. Bounding up the ancient elm above him,

they soon fly off to another tree beside the church. As before, something tells Alex to follow them. Walking in their direction, he peers up into the canopy of the tree, but as soon as he does so he loses sight of them, as if they've just disappeared into thin air. Looking around for them, something inside the church catches his eye instead.

Through the stained glass window depicting Judas betraying Jesus to the Roman authorities, he sees Miranda seated on one of the benches, Libby standing over her. They appear to be arguing, and Libby is waving the forefinger of her left hand back and forth, as if gesturing 'no,' except she isn't using her wrist, but is moving her entire arm back and forth, rhythmically and methodically, Miranda following the movement. Seconds later Miranda lowers her head, looking to be on the verge of tears, at which point Libby places her right hand on Miranda's head, as if to console her, but then immediately turns her waving left hand into the number three, flipping those middle three fingers upside down while, Alex thinks he sees, plucking a hair from her head. Miranda doesn't seem to feel it, and when she looks back up, she nods slowly and sadly at Libby, as if reluctantly giving in to a demand. A pall is upon them both, the dark force creeping out like a shadow threatening to pass through the window and consume him.

That's when they sense him. And as they turn towards the window Alex ducks, then disappears into the forest, running as if being chased by an evil entity, in the opposite direction of the recently discovered spring leading to his falls. Sprinting as fast and as far as his breath will take him, as if fleeing the Devil himself, he hits the brakes minutes later, kicking up dust and almost falling face first into a large snake slithering out from a hole burrowed beneath the base of a tree.

Jumping backwards, his adrenaline surges as he notices that the tree from under which the snake slithered is gnarled, with bark so dark that

it's borderline black. Circling the strange, twisted tree with a mix of fear and curiosity, attempting to discern its nature, for he's never seen such a specimen, he comes upon a symbol carved into its backside: the same symbol that he saw hovering over Caitlin's dying body, the eye with the triangle circumscribing it, except it's upside down, the top pointed downwards. A chill creeps up his spine, followed by a familiar bird call.

A squawking crow lands upon a limb of the twisted tree, just out of his reach, staring at him menacingly. Soon another arrives and alights upon a different limb, then another, and another, fast filling the tree with murderous malice. This triggers his memory of the crow picking at the pieces of animal flesh set atop the limbs from the day before, just before his accidental rescue of Caitlin, as well as a recollection of what he saw once on one of his walks through the forest. A bone chilling memory...

The most awful cry had called him further out into the woods than he'd intended. There he witnessed a murder of crows descending upon a baby raccoon that was crawling to its death, its final moments filled with agony. He had the impulse to run to its defense, but it was too late. Upon relinquishing its life the murder picked it apart, piece by gory piece.

Alex now creeps away, thinking that, were this particular murder to grow, they may do the same to him. Moving slowly back towards the village, they keep cawing, as if warning him to steer clear of their domain in the future.

At dinner the shadow cast from the church a few hours before, and from the sickening sentiment embedded in him by Libby's spurned advance, hangs direly over the proceedings. Alex feels as though the goat carcass being torn into pieces center-table is a representation of his future self. He watches Libby make the rounds, talking to everyone whilst tearing the flesh from a goat leg with her teeth, eroding the very ground upon

which he walks with every step, chewing him up with each bite, reducing him with every savored swallow. She leaves no one out of her gossiping.

Miranda stands on the periphery of Libby's crew, her face red, her eyes affixed to the floor as if she's transfixed by something. She refuses to look at him. A few of the girls, Madilyn, Bella and especially Caitlin, shake their heads and walk away from Libby, resisting her spell. Caitlin comes over and sits next to Alex. He smiles and nods, thankful for any support he can get, acknowledging to himself the level of courage required for her to openly defy Libby. Delaney seems divided, as if somewhat incredulous and uncertain how to process what she's being told, glancing over at Alex, then looking away uneasily. Elizabeth looks embarrassed. Zander nods reflexively, as if there's no choice but to agree. Sophie and Nathan lap it up with relish, as if embodying two of the former crows now set upon their master's shoulders, awaiting the next bloody morsel. Morgaine and Taylor stand beside them, she with narrowing eyes, zeroing in on Alex as if trying to determine the extent to which he's a threat, Taylor looking uneasy, as if forced to make a decision he couldn't be less willing to make.

'I always liked Taylor,' Alex thinks through his sorrow. 'It's unfortunate that he's being drawn into this... *travesty*... by that witch.'

Even Elder Janessa takes part in the toxic discourse, lending credence to the shameful display. At one point she passes by Alex and says hello, but her face is beet red. *She's no poker player*. Alex knows in this instant that she's against him, maybe actively, and yet she's embarrassed by her role. Is she embarrassed for him, or because she senses Libby's deception, or both? Whatever the case, she's involved in something, perhaps even plotting with Libby for Alex's demise.

The ill sentiment now having spread to the elders, Alex knows that he's done for. It's only a matter of time now. He was on the fence, but it looks

like he's going to have to leave The Barnes Clan one way or another, either through official ostracization or by his own will, even as he knows no other way of life and would be cast into the cruel, predatorial concrete jungle of civilization to fend for himself. He wonders if he'd survive the transition, and if the monsters that enslave by financial means are any different than those that enslave here, by duplicity and the pretense of piety and divine authority. 'I'll figure it out,' he tells himself, his heart breaking. Fighting back tears, he tries not to stare at Miranda, the one whose opinion he cares about the most, hoping against all hope that he'll still be able to pull her out of the descending darkness, and that together they may wash away Libby's pestilence in the cleansing falls a couple miles away.

Eventually, Alex using up the remainder of his willpower in not fleeing, Libby isolates Miranda in the corner. Miranda nods, then walks away from her, straight at Alex. She removes a letter from her pocket and hands it to Alex before bolting herself, running out the back of the dining hall. Dumbfounded for a moment, Alex soon stands and follows. Jennifer, having watched the drama unfold from her seat at the table, attempts to intervene. He thinks he hears "don't follow her, it'll only make things worse..." But it's too late, he's out the door.

The sun is starting to set, a full moon unveiling itself, replacing some of the fleeting illumination. In the eerie twilight, Miranda is nowhere to be seen. 'Is she still planning on meeting me at the ancient elm?,' he wonders, deluding himself that it might yet be possible.

Walking to the tree, there's no one there. Alex sits in his usual spot, comforted by the partially exposed roots of the elm pressing against his hips, as if being consoled by an ancient friend. He unfolds the letter from Miranda, half crumpled in his sweaty palm, and struggles to read it in the waning light, his heart heaving with his final gasp of hope:

I'm not sure that I can come tonight. I haven't made up my mind. I don't want anything serious right now. I just want to have fun. I've been a bit depressed, and I need to work on myself before getting into anything serious. I almost didn't tell you this, because I'm afraid it means that you'll stop talking to me. I really hope not!

- Miranda

5 THE SPELLCAST & THE HEALER

Alex starts to sob. His whole world has come crashing down upon him. Finding it hard to breathe, his heart lurches, then seizes up. He fears he's on the verge of a heart attack. Then, the pain reversing so fast he almost chokes, he sees her. Miranda is approaching from the far side of the church, emerging from the area on the periphery of the village where he'd fled into the forest only hours before, just after he'd seen what he assumes was Libby convincing her of *his* wickedness. Dressed in all black form-fitting attire leaving little to his imagination, wearing a silver necklace set with a red jeweled pendant that he's never seen her wear before, she has a big, alluring smile on her face, her eyes dripping with lust.

'What? Why the sudden change?,' he wonders through his exhilaration. But the question fast fades from his mind as, taking him by the hand, she pulls him up into a standing position, rips the letter from his hand, tosses it aside and, placing her face against his, whispers into his ear:

"Take me there. *Now.*"

Cheek to cheek, she presses her body against his before running her lips down the length of his neck, grabbing his hands and putting them on her firm ass as she does so, squeezing his hands with hers. *She feels perfect. And my God, the smell of her.* Burying his face in her luscious chestnut curls, he inhales her, becoming completely transfixed by her scent, almost forgetting that, should anyone be watching, even in the low light, they're still visible on the edge of the village. He feels her hard nipples pressed against his chest, and it takes everything he has not to place his mouth on them then and there. 'We need the protection of the forest.'

"Which way?," she whispers, as if having heard his thought.

Luckily, with the full moon set against the stars in age-old patterns of

illumination, replacing the garish display of the sun, their escape from everything he now finds sickening is lustrously lighted. He can think of little beyond her body and making a new home with her deep in the renewing fecundity of his wooded oasis.

It doesn't take Alex long to rediscover the brook leading to the falls, and they arrive with ease, Alex propelled forward by a level of anticipation that he's never before felt, adrenaline surging with every stride. A couple of times he thinks he hears something behind them, as though they're being followed, but recalls the sense of being watched the first time he'd made the trek, and so dismisses the feeling.

They make their way around the stilted, towering tree set in its guardian position atop the falls, then down the steep embankment, pausing for a minute to admire the softly sparkling pool collecting the falling water, the silver sheen cast by the moon intermingling with the pool's gentle phosphorescent blue. Sources of illumination combined, the silvery blue glow of the moon-swept scene casts an ethereal radiance across the surrounding plant life. The effect is enhanced by little white lights that stream down from the softly luminous sky above, like gently falling stars, skipping across the ferns before coming together to dance over the shimmering surface of the calmly waving waters. Fireflies? Fairies?

So enrapt is Alex by the proceedings that he fails to notice the figure now looming over them, leaning against the stilted tree above, watching them move towards the cave. 'I was right,' their observer thinks. 'Men... so easily controlled by their egos and their sexual impulses. All it took was a little... *encouragement*, and she's compelled him to lead me straight to this... *place*, whatever it is.' As she watches them enter the cave she pulls out the crooked dagger she keeps in a black leather sheath always wrapped around her upper thigh and begins carving a symbol into the the Great Mother Tree.

“Might as well make it good for him, my dear,” their watcher whispers. “It’s the last time that he’ll feel *anything* good.”

Making their way into the cave, Miranda softly brushes the books set in their niche with her fingertips upon passing, and the journals stuffed with her letters, undressing while following the glow of The Blue Pool emanating from within, leaving each article of clothing like a breadcrumb leading Alex to the coming feast. By the time they reach the pool she’s entirely unclothed, with nothing left on but the red jeweled pendant hanging in the center of her chest, between her shapely little breasts. The crimson lichen in the cave seems to absorb the magic emitted by the pool, waving in subtle little whirls under its power, or under Miranda’s power, or under the power of the red jewel on her chest, which also appears to be glowing... Alex can’t be sure. All he’s certain of is that the sacred space seems to be feeding off of his excitement, and that this is the most erotic moment of his life. He didn’t know he could be so erect.

‘My God she’s beautiful,’ Alex thinks. *‘That body.’*

She’d purposefully shown him little flashes of it over time, bending over in front of him, baring her perfectly flat stomach with its sexy naval piercing, wearing form-fitting attire and inviting him over a couple of times when her father was away to ‘discuss poetry’ and to ‘pet her pussycat,’ all while talking about how sexually pent up she was, and how much she wishes she could get one of her guy friends, like boxer boy, to go down on her. She was merciless with her titillating torments. But now, seeing that body in person... all the teasing was *well* worth it.

Recently she’d told him that her depression had made her lose much of her appetite, and that she’d lost a lot of weight in the past year, and feared

that this would make her body look emaciated, insinuating that he might not want her once he actually saw it. *But it's perfect.*

Soft, alabaster skin sprinkled with freckles and the occasional tattoo, breasts so perky the nipples want to point upwards, all wrapped around a gaze that could command even a Greek god to do its bidding. 'Were Zeus here in my place,' Alex thinks, 'I'm convinced that she could convince him to conceive a new demi-god on the spot, here and now.' She leans over the edge of the glowing pool ever so slightly, inviting him with her wonderfully-beckoning backside. Oddly, she seems unsurprised by everything that she's experiencing. It's as if she expected all of it, or is tuned out of everything *except for him.*

"It's tingly" she says as she steps in, turning around, smiling slyly, making it impossible for him to resist any longer.

In moments he's disrobed and has joined her in the pool, the odd sensations from his first touch now magnified, spreading from the crown of his head to the tips of his toes and fingers and back, enlivening every nerve, penetrating every crevice. She rounds the small circle of the stone-encased pool, staring into his eyes before pushing him gently back into the mysteriously-formed seating surrounding and set a few feet below the surface of the bubbling water. Wrapping her legs around him, she kisses him, softly at first, then with such passion that he feels she may engulf him entirely.

The sensations from the glowing waters mount, uncomfortably at first, distracting him slightly from Miranda's envelopment, then giving way to a pleasing enervation that pervades the full of his physique, the intensity of it rising to match the sexually-heightened moment. For whatever reason Miranda remains unconcerned with those

sensations, seeming to feel no discomfort or trepidation, not even stopping to question the strangely invigorating, full body feeling, as if she's under some sort of sensual spell, or locked into a trance of some kind.

"I remember my favorite letter of yours, from a while back," she says to him between heavy breaths, "about how you woke up with morning glory thinking about me. Do you remember?"

Her voice is soft yet full, her mouth hovering over and around his, maintaining mere centimeters of separation, ever so slightly brushing his facial hair, playing with the torturous ecstasy at the edge of touch.

"How can I forget? I could picture you in my mind's eye so easily that morning."

Ever so gradually, she slides him partway into herself. The water, rather than putting up the typical aqueous friction of resistance, seems as though it's inviting the act, like whatever magic makes it glow is working to gratify their desire for one another. Gyrating slightly, guiding him further and further into her tight, warm temple, she whispers:

"I memorized that letter."

"Reall... really," he half-grunts, half-whispers in response.

"Would you like to hear it again?" she asks, nibbling on his lower lip while raising and lowering her hips in perfect little micromovements.

"Please."

"I woke up with a massive hard-on thinking about what I'd do to that

tight young body of yours," she begins the recitation, speaking slowly. Pulling him out of her, she gradually rubs his erection up her side and across her body, shoulder to shoulder, nipple to nipple, then between her breasts and around the red stone that seems to shine relative to their shared excitement, pulsating softly as she pulls him across her, giving off little flashes when she strokes, its rich red flares rendering the crimson lichen in a depth of color matching the bottomless passion pumping through and passing between them.

As she rubs his penis over the pendant he feels a sensation that he's never felt before, immediately imagining it to be like the 'high' from the drugs that the elders warn them about. She runs him slowly down her midline, to her naval piercing and back, then up into her mouth for a moment, then back to her breasts, across the stone and down her other side, moving from point to point without the slightest sense of urgency, as if they've all the time in the world.

"How I'd examine every one of your tattoos in detail," she murmurs, continuing her recital, "especially the ones that you tease me about not being able to see, scouring them with my eyes before tracing them with my fingertips, then my lips, then the tip of my cock..."

Touching the tip of his pulsating penis to each tattoo, she encircles them one by one before tracing their lines in intricate detail. In the mesmeric rapture of the moment he imagines that she's using him to draw every inch of each prohibited piece of body art all over again, as if he's emitting a special substance that's adding a new layer to the art, making their lines deeper and darker, producing as bold a contrast to her soft white skin as possible.

While raising her erect nipples up to his lips, she grabs his hand and

plunges it into the warm water, between her legs, using his fingers to stimulate and penetrate her, uttering and enacting the next lines from the letter:

“How I’d roll my tongue around your nipples, then bite them lightly while rubbing your clit with my thumb, my middle and forefinger exploring your wet, warm entryway...”

Raising her body up, she turns around and slowly bends over, dropping her gorgeous ass into his face while continuing the recitation...

“How I’d roll you over and dive face first into your ass, licking from your clit up your ass and back, pushing my tongue all the way in, then stop, waiting for you to moan for more, then just leaving my nose in the middle of it all while caressing that perfect ass, inhaling the pungently sweet scent of you.”

Turning back around, she kisses him softly, then lightly bites his lower lip again, whispering to him between methodical kisses while sliding him back inside herself, her appetite unwavering:

“I’d kiss you passionately while inserting my seven inches into you, and just leave it there, throbbing, deep inside your wet warm embrace, kissing and caressing, exploring you thoroughly, as if time had ceased. That was my awakening this morning. I might be hard all day.”

“Wow... wow... you *did* memorize it,” Alex manages.

“It made me wet reading it... I masturbated to it *so* many times.”

Alex starts to lose control, the pot beginning to boil over.

"I remember how you told me that if I ever wrote anything sexually explicit to you, *for* you, like something in one of those YA books that Jacob sneaks into the village for you, that you'd lose your mind."

"Yes... I've lost my mind," she says softly. "You've cast your erotic spell, dousing me with desire."

Her controlled rhythms begin to accelerate. She raises her breasts back up to his face, passing them back and forth across his lips, a bit faster than before, pulling away gently with every suckle, all while undulating at the hips, dropping down on him with perfect cadence, as if composing a beat. The red pendant flashes with her methodic movements, deepening and brightening. 'She's *always* been sexual,' he thinks, 'but this is something... *else*. What's come over her? And this... necklace... What is it?'

The pleasure of the moment is so intense, however, that his concern at her potentially not being in her right mind, and his unease over the radiant red stone, can't match it. It's just too... *good*. And she's obviously enjoying herself, so he stays right there, with her, telling himself that everything is okay; that she's been hinting at this for as long as he can remember, and that her absorption in the moment is simply a mirroring of that pent-up anticipation, the same as his.

Alex's back to the entryway of the cave some fifty yards off, the red stone suddenly deepens in color to the extent where it appears almost black for a few seconds. Looking up at Miranda, he notices that she appears to be looking over his shoulder, an odd grin on her face. He has the distinct sense that they're not alone. But when he attempts to turn around to look, she grabs him forcefully by the face and prevents it, pulling his mouth to hers

and riding him harder.

Panting and moaning, Alex matches her. The climax fast overtaking him, she claws him down his chest as he releases, creating little red streaks that instantly dissolve when immersed in the water. Some of Alex's seed seeps into the pool, which froths and foams in response, as if beginning to brew a primordial stew. Behind him, Alex thinks he hears the sound of pattering steps near the mouth of the cave, yet he feels so triumphantly satisfied in this moment that he can't bring himself to try to turn around again, much less leave Miranda's embrace to go investigate.

Catching their collective breath, she lowers her bodyweight onto him, embracing him in a full body hug while he's still inside of her. Enwrapping him entirely, her warm breath on his neck, her cheek pressed to his, it's the absolute embrace that he's always dreamed of.

'This is what I wanted,' he thinks. 'This is Heaven. Who the hell cares who's behind me. Take me now, for all I care, Great Satan. I'm staying right here, in this bliss, until you rip me out of it.'

Moments later Miranda leads him from the pool and, Alex dripping wet yet warm in revitalized body and full heart, she takes him to his chosen alcove near his book niche. Laying him down, she kisses him, then passes her hand over his face, once, twice, three times, and he falls fast asleep. So consumed is he by the immensity of the moment that there's no way that he could've noticed that the letters from her, and the few from Sophie, that had been stuffed into one of his journals, are now gone.

Upon waking the next morning, Alex is alone in body, but not in heart; the same heart that sank so low and ascended so extremely, and so swiftly, he's surprised that it didn't collapse from the stress of the opposing

forces placed upon it. He can still feel Miranda there, with him, the memory of the previous night so powerful that his mind's eye comes near to manifesting the lovemaking all over again.

'Yes, it would be better if she were still here, with me, but she probably returned to the village because she feared her absence would draw attention to us, and to this place,' he consoles himself, thinking the best of her. 'She's protecting me; us; *this*.'

He walks the length of the cave, reliving the previous night, remembering how perfectly the intermingling glow of the moon, the starlight and The Blue Pool played off of each other, casting their magic throughout the sanctum. He can still feel the sensations; the tingling tied to the pleasure of her. Never before has he known anything near to such a sensual ecstasy, to the point where he almost refuses to put his clothes back on, so open is his every pore, so begging is his every neuron for a reenactment. Admiring the crimson lichen covering the stones of the innermost cave once more, he thinks of the episode with Caitlin, and of Delaney and her love of naturopathy, and of how this love isn't something that she feels free to speak of in a community ever judging everything based upon whether or not it affirms the assertions of its one inviolable book.

'Witchcraft' is a commonly uttered suspicion, sometimes bordering upon an incrimination, amongst some community members. There are even occasional whispers that there's at least one practicing witch in the community, based upon sporadic incidents of 'unholy discoveries,' including one occult text, a carving in a stone, and a suggestive sculpture of a winged creature with, as one elder said, 'the face of a demon.' Of course, no one knows who the witch might be, yet Delaney's 'interests' often seem to make her a prime suspect. Alex thinks of what he

found the day before, on his flight from the church, the twisted tree etched with the upturned triangle harboring the snake, guarded by the murder of crows, and knows who his *own* prime suspect is. He gathers more of the crimson lichen and stuffs it into his pants pockets, thinking 'any excuse to talk to that gorgeous woman. I'll bring her some samples.'

On the way out of the cave, he thinks of his sacred morning practice of written reflection. Grabbing his most recent hand-written volume beside several more fully-filled notebooks, he notices that the treasured letters he'd stuffed inside are missing. His heart sinks, his skin crawling.

'Why? Miranda... *took them*? Or perhaps I'd been right about having heard someone else in here last night? Who would have the motive to take them..? Well, maybe Miranda is just embarrassed about them for some reason,' he thinks, attempting to stuff the rising sense of panic down deep, hoping for the best. 'She's trustworthy.'

Heading outside, he dunks his head in the falling water, regaining complete consciousness. Looking down the canyon formed by the creek carving its downhill track over countless millennia, it's as though he sees it all for the first time. It's overwhelmingly beautiful, almost on par with how Miranda looked last night. *Almost*.

There's so much life here, and it feels as though that lifeforce is rooting into his heart with every moment that he spends immersed in it, tethering to his heart and promising to stretch it even beyond the size that it reached only hours before, when time seemed to stand still. The variety of life in this little tucked away heavenly kingdom is immense, and in this moment he feels that, were he to define ecological beauty, *biodiversity* would be central to said definition; the openness to and natural capacity for cultivating as rich and varied a quality and quantity of life as possible.

‘Spiritual awareness makes this quality resonate in the heart and mind,’ he senses, ‘which is why geniuses are attracted to green: it’s an extension of spiritual intelligence.’

Scanning the vicinity, he soon notices one particularly resplendent plant, a large, lushly green bush composed of long, sword-like leaves, bursting with big, plump berries so rich in purplish-blue they remind him of the color of the tanzanite stone that he’d seen in a magazine once, and had been so taken by. Approaching the bush, he examines the berries up close. Their skin shines, and not just from reflecting the morning sun. They seem almost... *bioluminescent*. ‘Everything here is magic,’ he thinks as he runs his hands through the bush. Parting a few of its branches, he catches sight of something buried at its base.

Near the center of the bush, half-covered in soil, he sees something that looks manmade; something carved out of wood. Reaching in, he extracts it. It’s a large spherical container, the size of a small bucket, without a lid, made of a dark wood so deeply rich in brown that, absent direct sunlight, it verges upon black, like his eyes. Turning it around to admire the craftsmanship, he sees that it contains three carvings along its side: a large set of antlers, a rolled up scroll, and a spear, all about the same size, spaced equally along it. Turning it over, the underside is filled with what appears to be a series of constellation etchings, circling around and partially overlapping one another, almost like the imbricated petals of a flower.

“What does it mean?” he whispers to himself under his breath.

He does his best to copy the image in his notebook, compelled to be as comprehensive and detailed as possible, wondering if the imagery has anything to do with the purpose of the container. An odd sensation comes

over him as he performs the act; *déjà vu*. He has the distinct sense that he's done this before, that he was meant to find this, and that it means something; that it goes beyond artistic expression.

'Does it have something to do with this plant?,' he wonders. 'It's almost as if it was left here, next to these berries, for a reason. Or, like it was buried here for me to, what, use to collect the berries? Perhaps that's what whomever used it last was doing with it.'

Alex knows nothing of the plant, and whether or not the berries are toxic, or even edible. Yet something compels him to pick one and recklessly place it in his mouth. He takes the smallest, most cautious bite that he can muster, trying to contain the crack he makes in its skin. But to no avail. The firm, plump berry explodes in his mouth, the juice coating his tongue and inner cheeks. It's incredibly sweet, but with a kind of spicy, earthy undertone. 'My God this would make a great juice,' he thinks, beginning to gather the berries. A moment later he's struck by a sensation of warmth that rises up from his heart and wraps itself around his mind, evoking a sense of perfect presence intermingled with thoughts of peace, gratitude, forgiveness and acceptance, as if every positively-pervasive feeling enfolds him at once.

He's now more connected to this place than ever; to every plant, every stone, every droplet misting off of the falling waters. This sense makes him feel thankful for being here, for being himself, and for having faced every hardship and doubt that has made him a stronger person. In this moment he knows for certain that *none* of what he experiences is *ever* experienced in vain. He thinks of the pain from the day before, of Libby running around trying to cut him off at the knees with the whole community, and he's now okay with it. 'It was *meant* to happen,' he thinks. As cliché as that sounds in his head, his heart acknowledges the

truth of it. He's here, now, *precisely* where he's meant to be, having experienced everything that he has so as to be in the only possible position to do what must be done. *What must be done...*

Compulsively, he begins gathering the berries, placing them in the carved container, eating one every now and then, the sense of serenity rising with each bite. Within minutes he's near delirious, giddily laughing to himself, looking around at all the beauty whilst recalling the nirvana from the night before and feeling overwhelmed by how suddenly clear it is that *life is the greatest of gifts*. Tears come to his eyes and he chuckles aloud. He then gleefully recalls how he'd thought that the taste of this berry would make for a splendid juice.

Scrambling around the vicinity, he finds a large, oblong stone half-buried in the ground. Extracting it while thinking of his book on medicinal plants, he notices that the broader side is darkly stained. Imagining it once having been used as a pestle, he employs it the same way, grinding the berries in the container, taking little sips of the sweet, spicy nectar as he goes, then refilling the container, then continuing the mortaring process. He wonders if it's just his imagination that the world around him seems excited by his activity, as if taking part, and he pretends that he's paying homage to the goddess of the forest as he grinds, the calls of the birds growing and becoming more joyful, the angelic white butterflies from his first visit hovering around him, as if admiring his work.

Shortly thereafter the container is filled with a half-liquid mash of the mystery berry, and his state of love for life reaches an acme, giving way to a sudden soporific quality. He just wants to lie down and give into slumber, letting the goddess visit and transform him in his sleep. With a big grin on his face, with the rest of the world and all sense of obligation forgotten, he's

soon fast asleep with his journal on his chest, not more than fifty feet from the falls, the pestle set upon a large stone, a sweet stream of tanzanite dripping down its side, glistening in the sunshine.

When he awakens once more, he feels a slight tug of panic. Looking up at the sun, he finds that it's near to its zenith, making it near noon. Forgetting about the container and the berries, he jolts himself awake with the thought of the community wondering where he is, and how they're only likely to use his absence against him in one way or another, knowing them and their narrow, self-serving judgments. Standing, he stuffs the journal into his pants, climbs the embankment up towards the great stilted fir tree, and, as he moves past it, beginning to formulate an excuse in his mind for why he's been gone for so long, he sees it. Something has been carved into the side of the glorious giant.

Approaching, his heart skips a beat. *It's an upside down cross.* Who carved it? Why? And what's this..? It's dripping with sap. And though he can't be sure if it's the residual effects of the berries or not, he swears that the sap isn't just dripping, it's *crying*. He feels as though the tree is emotive; that it's saddened by the nature of the wound, seeping sorrowfully from the malevolent mar, as if having been not just physically but *metaphysically* assaulted. But in its sorrow, the tree is also talking to him, trying to tell him something. But what?

As with the berries, he's overtaken by a need to *taste* the truth of it. Placing his forefinger at the base of the most recent stream of sap, he runs it up the corrugated bark while rolling his finger, collecting the thick, sticky stream and immediately placing it in his mouth. Within moments he's transported *into* the tree. He feels it breathing, his lungs becoming one with the microscopic stomata covering each of its thousands of inhaling, exhaling leaves. For a split second it seems as though his hair follicles are

doing the same. Then his legs become firmer, stouter, and seem to extend deep down into the earth, as if only his uppermost thighs protrude above the surface. Overcome by a need to stretch, he reaches out with his arms and legs, imagining he has the reach of the tree towering over him, silently conducting its truth through him. Despite the recent attack, it's happy, full of secret purpose and ancient wisdom, out of which comes a vision.

The bark of the tree begins to grow fur, with the lower limbs gradually resembling the antlers of the continually reemerging elk. Then the fur and antlers coalesce, coming together to reveal a figure: a person wearing a suit made of the hide of the elk, a spear in one hand, a rolled-up scroll in the other, a magnificent set of antlers set atop his head. It's he whom Caitlin described from her vision of resurrection, except now he's not certain that it *is* a he. In fact, he has a distinct impression from the being's eyes, dark as the bark of the tree, yet warm and sensuous, that it's a *she*. Those eyes, in fact, seem almost familiar... She hands him the scroll and spear, then speaks softly into his ear:

"Those who whisper cast lies. Flee before the whispers turn to stone."

Then she's gone, along with the scroll and spear he thought he'd been holding. Taking a big, full breath, he presses his palms against the tree, thanking it for guarding over this enchanted domain, and for warning him of the witch-crafted treachery he's now more certain than ever is coming his way; a treachery which he allowed himself to forget for a time, lost in Miranda and the ecstatic gateway to which their brief union had led them the night before. Their last union? Miranda!

'I need to get back... hopefully she didn't get lost.' Walking briskly, he's back on the fringes of the community within half an hour, his worry mounting with every step towards the place that he now associates

with distress, and away from the pacifying serenity of the realm that he's left behind, which now feels like it is, and has always *secretly* been, his true, hidden home.

By the time he reaches the village Alex feels like a foreigner. 'It wasn't my choice to be as I was born to be, following a force which you all only *pretend* to follow,' he thinks in preemptive self-defense, circling around the outskirts of the village that he's starting to loathe. He catches sight of Libby speaking to Janessa and her father from a distance, imagining them to be a trio of crows encircling their next victim. Luckily they don't see him. Remembering what he has in his pockets, he sneaks towards Delaney's little cabin, hoping she's home, perhaps having a late lunch.

Alex lucks out. By the light of an open window he sees her in the back, writing, or perhaps drawing, in a large sketchbook. She's surrounded by plants, dozens of which are potted, making use of every square inch of daylight streaming through the windows, with several dozen more hanging from the low ceiling beams, drying, on the way to becoming the plant medicine that she secretly shares with any villager openminded enough *not* to reflexively equate 'plant healing' with 'paganism,' and paganism with 'the unholy.' He recalls having once read of the overlapping history of plants being harnessed for their medicinal powers and the 'witchcraft' condemnations of The Church, its rulers fearing that its followers might find out that plants are more powerful than prayers, and that it's not the anointed father, but the Holy Mother, whom truly heals. Summoning his courage, he knocks.

When Delaney opens the door, something crosses her typically gorgeous countenance that almost compels him to flee. She looks at him almost with pity, or sadness, mixed with a dash of anger, and a deep

undercurrent that feels like love, though he can't be sure, as there seems so much there, her emotions apparently waging a war within her. He is sure, however, that it's not the face of someone at peace.

"Hey," she manages. "What's up?"

"Well... I know how much you love plant medicine, so I brought you this," Alex responds, unloading the crimson-colored lichen from his pockets. "It's what I used to help Caitlin the other day. I thought that you might be interested in studying it somehow."

"Thank you," she smiles brightly, then hesitates, as if not sure what to do next. Indecision is definitely not something that he's used to seeing from her. "I was wondering about that," she finally says. "I almost asked you about it, but things have been so... *odd* around here lately... Would you like to come in for a minute?"

"Sure. Thanks."

"Mind giving me a second to finish something?"

"Of course."

As if he has a choice. These alluring young women. They own him so easily. 'They'll be the death of me,' he thinks. 'But she seems... *different*, for some reason... I'm probably just fooling myself.'

Delaney quickly binds the fresh lichen to some loose thread hanging near the other drying plants, then returns to her work on the large table bookended by candles in the back of the cabin. She shares the space with her father, Charlie, one of the head craftsmen of the village. Regardless of

perceived importance and power, modesty is mandated, especially in living arrangements. They possess only the space that they require.

'No kings and peasants here, only community,' goes one of Alex's favorite lines commonly uttered amongst the villagers. The fact that Charlie's such a reliable community member and one of the most valuable contributors to so many village projects had once helped to assuage communal concerns regarding Delaney's fallen mother, Claire. Remembering her tragic tale, Alex suddenly wonders if Claire has any connection to his recently discovered hallowed ground.

Once one of the village doctors, she'd given up the practice of 'conventional medicine' "upon the advice of God," as she'd informed everyone. "It shouldn't *be* the convention!," she'd sometimes scream. She was having dreams that, despite being labeled as a Caucasian, she was actually a descendant of the local Native American tribe, a small band which she claimed once held and protected magical healing powers, and whose medicine women were visiting her in her dreams, telling her to renounce both Christianity and pharmacology, and to return to the realm of true, natural medicine, her inherited right and calling.

Claire became convinced that healing is actually *nature's* providence, and that the 'medicine' that the village occasionally secured from a pharmacy in Salem was tantamount to poison, weakening those dependent upon it and making them more susceptible to the influences of the power hiding in the shadows of the forest; the clandestine force of corruption that had once seduced some of the weaker-minded medicine women, misleading them into witchcraft. She further claimed that this power was as old as Salem itself, and likely much older, and had been a part of Salem since even before its founding, and that only the power of good embedded in nature could keep it at bay. This history, of course, now lent

her daughter's fascination with plant medicine an air of risk, and even danger. But Claire's sad story didn't end there.

She spent less and less time in the church and amongst its congregants, and more and more time going on long walks in the woods. Increasingly alienated by this eccentric behavior, with Charlie incessantly seeking the counsel of Father Andrew and the other elders, she was eventually said to be hearing voices. Declared to be 'possessed,' she'd sometimes wander the village at night warning everyone that didn't run away from her that they were living in the land of The Second Coming; in the very place where the Lord would be resurrected, and command nature to consume the iniquitous: "Which will be most of you!"

Embarrassed, he and his wife and young daughter the subject of ceaseless, merciless ridicule, Charlie eventually took to locking her inside their cabin. Her instability escalating, a great many villagers pressing the elders to take action, she died during a tragic attempt at exorcism, which the attempted exorcisers, Fathers Andrew and Zander, thereafter refused to discuss, as if having taken a vow of secrecy.

The loss of his wife has made Charlie especially vulnerable to any possibility of risk faced by his talented, beautiful daughter. Alex recalls hearing of how hard she'd fought him on the right to grow her medicinal plants in a portion of their allotted agricultural space within the community garden, eventually threatening to move out, or leave the village entirely, if she was prohibited from doing so. Needing her as he does, he ultimately gave into this demand.

"Do you mind if I see what you're working on?," Alex sheepishly asks, moving into Delaney's space.

“No, not at all. Come see,” she responds with a slight smile. “I’m always pleased at the rare demonstration of interest in my work.”

“Trust me, I know what that’s like. I often wish I’d been born when people were taught to revere nature and the philosophers that pondered it, rather than revering those that plunder nature and exploit every lack of wisdom possessed by and encouraged in the so-called ‘pious people.’”

She smiles knowingly at the comment before turning back towards her work, Alex eagerly following. The space is intoxicating. Despite the immensity of the previous nights’ experience, Delaney still makes him doubt what, and *who*, he really wants. Not only is she stunning, but her confidence, and her easy efficacy at seemingly every task she takes up, and now, looking at the sketchbook, her clear talent... It’s as if she’s been specially endowed; like she’s naturally tapping into ancient wisdom and abilities crafted over eons. The intermingling aroma of the natural medicine drying around her only adds to her mystique-laden allure. Examining her work, she’s finishing a sketch of, he presumes, one such medicinal plant, working from a sample set in a pot in front of her. “*Scutellaria lateriflora* – Blue Skullcap,” is inked in calligraphy beneath the incredibly life-like drawing.

“Blue Skullcap,” she says. “Great for anxiety, depression, and basically anything pertaining to the nervous system. And great for steeping into tea to briefly pacify nagging fathers that say things like ‘why can’t you spend more time studying scripture and less time studying those silly plants?’”

“Is it good for ameliorating the stress of being the subject of constant suspicion and narrow-minded judgment?,” Alex half-jokes. He’s not sure if he’s speaking of how he, or she, or they *both* might thereby benefit.

She scowls at the remark. "For any type of stress, really..."

Her sketch is being completed on the right side of the large pad. On the left are a few handwritten lists of herbs. Drawing near, Delaney giving off a sweetly-earthly scent blending with her surrounding, aromatic plants, Alex imagining it to be reminiscent of roses blooming in a conifer forest, he reads the list written at the top of the page:

The Fingers of God – Ten Points of Massage from Her Healing Hands

- *Bacopa monnieri* ("Brahmi")
- *Avena sativa* ("Oat Straw/Milky Seed")
- *Scutellaria lateriflora* ("Blue Skullcap")
- *Passiflora incarnata* ("Passionflower")
- *Boswellia serrata* ("Indian Frankincense")
- *Ginkgo biloba* ("Ginkgo")
- *Crataegus monogyna* ("Hawthorn")
- *Centellica asiatica* ("Gotu Kola")
- *Lavandula angustifolia* ("English Lavender")
- *Heridium erinaceus* ("Lion's Mane")

"Is that your panacea?," Alex kids her after reading the list, resisting the urge to point out that such a title, 'The Fingers of God,' isn't likely to engender a sense of appreciation from most of the community.

"Maybe..." she says with a playful little smirk. "Thanks to Jacob being willing to procure me some ground-up powders in town, I'm at least able to pretend to be on a quest for a cure-all. Or maybe your red lichen is all I need... What are you calling *that* one? 'The Blood of Christ,' perhaps?" Her smirk broadens.

Alex laughs. "I actually just discovered two more natural medicines, earlier today, but in my rush to get back here and avoid the suspicion and rebuke of our... *authorities*, I forgot to grab you samples."

"Excuses excuses," she says with a big, bright, stupefying smile. "It's okay. I'm sure they're still there, and time tends to improve nature's gifts through the ripening." He swears he's staring into the face of a goddess. The soft glow of that face suddenly stiffens into solemnity.

"I know you're not a bad guy, *at all*, Alex. But... I wonder if this place is right for you. People around here are starting to... speak unkindly of you. I'm sure most, maybe all, of what's being said is untrue, or at least exaggerated, but..."

"You think I should run away?," he asks, heart panging at another potential love lost before it has the opportunity to emerge.

"No. I just... fear the price that people like you pay so that others can maintain their... *worldview*. And I wish I could do more. It's not that I want you to leave, it's that I'm frustrated by my inability to protect you or anyone else from certain... narrow perspectives. Speaking of which, I heard that Father Andrew has been looking for you, and that you were supposed to go into town with Jacob..."

"*Shit*. Yea. I better get going, while they're distracted building their pyre."

He's not sure why he says it.

A large, bold, grey number '6' is centered on the page. The text of the title is overlaid on this number.

**THE STAR PEOPLE
&
THE FOREST KING**

Minutes after leaving Delaney, Alex approaches Father Andrew, who's preparing a sermon near the back of the church, practicing what to say in his head, gesturing as if there's an audience in front of him. He appears embarrassed when he notices Alex coming, but quickly regains his composure and proudly raises his head, as if remembering his supremacy. With a thinly veiled look of contempt, he says:

"I have an idea for you, Alex."

"Oh yea, what's that?"

"I was wondering if you'd be interested in... changing your role here. We'd considered putting you on track to become an elder, but now I'm thinking another role would suit your... *nature* better."

The comment is laden with condescension. It stinks so bad that Alex almost gags in response.

"My *nature*?"

"You're a good writer, Alex, but I'm not sure spending so much time here, amongst our... *younger* congregants, is the best place for you. So I was wondering if you'd be interested in my enlisting the Engineering and Construction Guild to build you a type of... *writer's retreat*, out in the woods? You seem to love it out there. I think it might be a better fit for you; a better way for you to serve The Lord. Eventually we could send some of our young men out to gain from your tutelage... anyone, any guy, expressing an interest in developing his writing abilities."

"I don't know, Father. I like the socialization of being here in the church. I like the *people*."

Father Andrew frowns. He's holding something back; not being entirely frank. 'Perhaps he's trying to banish me,' Alex thinks, 'because of these rumor mongers, but doesn't have the courage to actually say it? I wonder what he's been told, exactly? Does he believe all of it, failing to consider that some of it might be exaggerated, or taken entirely out of context, or have been outright invented by the Gossip Guild whose fictions spread like root rot beneath the visible surface of this 'holy land?' Does he not realize, or not care, that there are *always at least* two sides to every story, and that Libby and her crew are always peddling half-truths at best?'

"Well, something to think about, Alex. I think it might be best. In the meantime, you better get on over to the wagon and horses. You and Father Jacob may need to spend the night in Salem as it is. On the way there, and while in town, I encourage you to think about it... about your future here, or wherever."

'*Wherever,*' Alex thinks on the way to the other side of the village, heart fissuring. 'Quite the fall from proudly proclaiming to the elders his delight at finally having a writer in the clan. Such fickle judgment! Such lack of consideration and independent thought! So easily yanked around by those *pretending* purity! He's trying to get rid of me, but doesn't have the balls to say it, much less give me the chance to address his... *concerns.*'

On the way to Jacob, he looks for Miranda, but she's nowhere to be found. Passing by the communal hall, he's told that she was supposed to help with breakfast, but switched her schedule. She's not working until this evening, at the church. 'That can't be good,' he thinks. There's no sight of Libby either, nor any of the girls in her usual accompaniment, which makes him incredibly nervous.

‘Those girls, hanging out, under Libby’s direction... it can only lead to ugliness. One poisonous tongue hissing into the ears of the impressionable youth, coercing them to bear their fangs along with her, under the false façade of righteousness, as if they’re concerned with anything *other* than ego and power, deception and perception, popularity and the appearance of piety. Should I run?’ he worries, sensing some cunning beast stalking him from the shadows, preparing to pounce.

‘Once they fully embed their claws in Andrew, it’s inevitable that I’ll be booted. Maybe they’ll do it while I’m in town... when I’m not here to defend myself... when I’m most vulnerable. They’ll set up the scaffolding when I’m away and then just wait for me to walk right up the stairs to the hangman. There’ll be no notice. No warning. No sorting of fact from fiction. I’ll be made to feel like it’s business as usual right up until the cowardly coup de grace they’re plotting behind my back. I’m guessing I won’t even be permitted a self-defense. A one-sided set of stories supported with one-sided evidence and lots of coaching by the insidious insider, and it’ll be over. Right and wrong, truth and justice be damned. All that’ll matter is the *pretense*; maintaining the communal control that comes from *appearing* to represent God.’

Alex feels his heart race, and a panic creep in, his breaths quickening and shallowing. His heart pain grows, aching not in the melancholy, longing, needing-to-be-filled manner in which it often aches, but in the literal on-the-verge-of-a-cardiovascular-event manner.

‘They’re going to gang up on me. They’re going to convince the elders that I’m some sort of pervert or something... Maybe they’ll lynch me right here in the center of town, hanging me from the ancient elm. *No*... Miranda wouldn’t do that to me... not after last night. Not after all the talk of being her favorite and her friend both inside and outside the church,

and her telling me how lonely she's been feeling, and her innumerable suggestions at the desire for shared intimacy...'

Soon he's side by side with Jacob, riding the village wagon towards civilization. The path into town is purposefully undeveloped, so as not to attract unwanted attention, yet the ground moving towards the masses of civilization has been selected as the most conducive to the supply runs which only Jacob, and now, likely for the shortest of stints, Alex, have been empowered to conduct. A century ago the founders of the village set up an account from their collective means, having sold all of their property and other investments in their run up to departing Salem for good. Jacob taps into that communal, interest-accruing account, bringing reports back for the examination of Father Andrew.

Between this account and the occasional sale of handmade crafts and sometime excess produce, the villagers have everything that they need to fill the gaps in whatever they can't produce, which, as the community has gained in experience, has become less and less. That said, with The Barnes Clan now verging upon its third generation since the great exodus, the growth of the village is straining their means, with one result being that the elders have suddenly become far more open to allowing, and in some cases *encouraging*, the departure of those who don't quite fit the mold of the 'pious follower of Christ.'

There's no way Alex will ever fit, no matter how hard he tries. His heart and mind are *far* too big. Yet, he also fears that Miranda won't fit the mold that *he* imagines for *her*. He hopes beyond hope that he hasn't grossly over-made that mold, and worries *what*, in such a case, might creep in to fill the negative space between such overestimation and an accurate estimation.

"It's nice to have someone with me," Jacob breaks the heavy, pensive

silence. "What are you brooding over? I hope you're not paying too much attention to the rumors spread by those silly girls, my friend."

"Unfortunately those *silly girls* are more dangerous than you might think, especially when they get together, and especially when a few of them, one in particular, can so easily sway those in charge."

Jacob knows that Alex is referring to Libby. But even as he realizes that there's truth to what Alex says, she remains a blind spot for him. He's simply unwilling to entertain any negative sense of her. And Alex thinks he knows why, getting the ongoing impression that Jacob, his only real friend amongst the elders, is unhappily married, even to the extent of regretting his nuptials. Likely feeling the same ache of unfulfillment plaguing him, Alex frequently sees Libby and Jacob engaged in subtle little flirtations. While he believes that it's by design on *her* part, he thinks it's based upon the desire to fill the unappeasable emptiness that's motivating Jacob.

"Well, since you ask, Elder Jacob..."

"C'mon Alex, there's no need for titles here... there's no 'elder' amongst those who secretly discuss the likes of Rumi and Plato," he adds with a wink. "We have a mutual respect and discretion, do we not?"

"Of course... Well, since you ask, *Jacob*... My heart feels like it's under siege, and that I'm powerless to stop it. It's as though I have no control over it. The unspecified, aching immensity lodged within my chest often seems so expansive, so endless in the agonizing void futilely crying out to be filled, it's like I'm being accosted by a cosmic force; like my heart is holding the whole of spacetime in its endless, unfulfilled emptiness. It plagues and pounds, leaving me in this constant state of enfeebled helplessness. But

at the same time I'm not sure that I *want* control of it, for why exist if we could control our most ardent selves, our deepest drives and passions, with mere thoughts..."

"Take a breath, Alex..."

"Anyway... since you asked about those thoughts... I feel like I'm right there, right on the precipice of cultivating the type of relationship I've longed for for as long as I can remember, but that, at the same time, I'm on the precipice of calamity; of some grave travesty. It's like I'm creeping across a razor thin edge that slices me with every step that I take trying to cross it, and that I could either end up plummeting to my doom, else complete the crossing, with the other side now finally in sight, and there be raised above the clouds, into the heavenly firmament. And I wonder if *both* could happen somehow... creation *through* destruction."

Alex tries to take a deep breath and calm himself per Jacob's suggestion, but it's futile. "My heart is a fucking foghorn!" he suddenly half-shouts. "I've never had it want something so badly before that it's prepared to leap out of my chest to grab it!"

"I wouldn't put that much pressure on yourself, my friend. I know that, especially when you're young and haven't had many relationships, that they can *seem* like life or death; like everything that will save or damn you. But take it from a married man: that's definitely *not* the case. Oftentimes the very thing that we believe will save us comes to ensnare us, thereby becoming the very trap that we thought we were escaping."

"Hmmm..." Alex musters, momentarily appeased.

"*Especially* when the object of our affections isn't on our level, and may

not be ready for what we have to give them... may not be able to come anywhere close to reciprocating our desire, passion and intellect. Be careful which basket you put your eggs in, my friend. Especially when the basket is small, and incomplete, still being put together, and thereby bound to tear open under the least bit of pressure... And when you have so *very* many eggs, overflowing and falling from that still-being-woven basket, breaking open on the ground, each break likely feeling like a crack in the heart to a passionate person like yourself," he adds with another wink.

'At least *somebody* sees me,' Alex thinks, momentarily pacified by Jacob's mollification. This makes him think of something else Miranda had once told him. He remembers it so clearly, for the emotion it evoked was so pure. Standing at the front of the church, they'd been discussing how one may best know one's true self when she turned to him and, beaming with that radiant smile of hers, had confidently proclaimed:

"I know who you are."

How badly he'd wanted that to be true when she'd said it, recognizing it as an innate, universal desire: to feel as though someone *truly* sees us; *truly* knows us. Is that not what we *all* want, really, in the end? To be recognized for who and what we *actually* are, and for that knowledge to bring an ardent desire, evoking the interconnectedness felt as love?

But as badly as he still wants this to be true, at the same time he knows that it's near impossible, for it would require her to *understand* him. And, not fully understanding himself, and doubting she even possesses such a capacity in the first place, this is a fantasy, and a risky one at that. For it's far more likely that, when she'd said this to him, she'd simply been playing off of that universal desire which she herself shares. Now this line, and the attached desire, has likely become but a thread in the web in which

he's ensnared, the spider closing in.

'She likely has no intention of *really* trying to understand me. It's just a part of her game. And losing that game to her, and to her whole team, me versus her many, may well have consequences that I'm not ready to deal with.'

A couple of hours later they're in Salem, their horse-drawn wagon garnering the curious, often condescending gawking and snickering of the 'more advanced' locals. They might as well be aliens, he and Jacob; transients from another spacetime. He'd only been 'back to Babylon' a few times in his life, finding it overwhelming.

The sheer level of activity, and its pace, and the noise, and its constancy, and the volume of information thrown at you while in Salem, which isn't even a particularly populated town by Babylonian standards, from what he understands... 'How can anyone even hear themselves *think* in this environment, under this relentless tide of input?', he wonders, recalling feeling the same way the last time he was here. They'd gone in small groups, so as not to draw attention to themselves, slipping into the back of the local church in order to hear a world-renowned theologian speak on the need for a simpler way of life as the cure for the modern contagion by which the spirit of humankind is gradually being extinguished. Jacob had heard about the lecture during a previous supply run.

The famous guest speaker had advocated for more generosity, less covetousness; more prayer, less consumption. He spoke of the American as being overfed and undernourished; of the 'civilized man' being digitally connected whilst ever more humanly *disconnected*. He taught that the majority of what makes us believe that we're 'advanced' is akin to walls being built up between us, dividing us not only from one another, but

from the divine. The sermon had resonated with him at the time, spurring a desire to read more extensively on such subjects.

After selling their bundle of handmade wares, including the wool textiles for which the community has gained a reputation for high-quality production, and after procuring some staples from the grocers and farm supply stores, Jacob and Alex head to Jacob's favorite bookstore, called Dudley's. A charming little place that specializes in the work of local writers, and is thereby well-positioned to permit Alex to offer his work for the first time outside of the village, it's like a candy store to Jacob, and even more so for Alex.

The realm of ideas and language, of reason and creation, of the raconteur and the romantic, holds an attraction for him that little else can touch, excepting, perhaps, the wonder of the woods and the enchantment of women like Miranda and Delaney. He dreams of escaping his current confines and developing his own green space, writing and cultivating every manner of plant, especially medicinal plants, a gorgeous, intelligent, creative woman at his side, equally engrossed in their shared passions. 'Delaney would certainly appreciate co-lording over such a realm, would she not?' His heart expands at the thought.

As Jacob converses with the owner of the store, having recently gone to great lengths to explain to Alex how critical it is that owners actually *run* the enterprises that they own, how this makes all the difference between disingenuous, pandering salesmanship and impassioned authenticity, Alex admires the staircase leading to the top level space. The vertical boards separating every step of the stairs are painted in textual artistry depicting some of the owners' favorite works, including the novels of Steinbeck and Kerouac.

Dharma Bums had been a favorite of Alex's for a time, though its allusions, like all the best writing, steer a course that doesn't exactly overlap with the course recommended by Father Andrew. Seeking the spiritual truth without the guidance of the Church is always 'heretical.' 'Outside the fabricated lines by which religion confines,' Alex thinks, entering the small upstairs space filled with tables and chairs for the reading of prospective purchases.

'You have to *maim* the truth, cutting it down to a fraction of itself, in order to force it into any of their boxes, thereby losing everything *bigger*. And the Spirit is the biggest of them all; the fundamental-most, indispensable constituent of all things. That which we all are, and forever exist within. I wonder what would happen if I walked into the middle of the village and screamed: *Spirit will never fit into religion!*'

The pure, taboo nature of the idea pleases him, as he knows it to be as true as it is unspeakable. What was it that Orwell said? Something like: *In a realm ruled by lies, truth is treason*. How true that is of their own religious realm, and likely *this* realm as well, where God has been dethroned by profit. 'Perhaps secularism and religiosity are little more than skins to be stretched over any and every tyrant,' he thinks, walking through the small second story space.

The less popular genres most likely to reflect his way of thinking are up here, in the harder to reach area of the store, including Dudley's selection of poetry, philosophy and unorthodox theology; those works requiring more of the reader than most are willing to expend in order to fathom the fuller, more beautiful, entirely interconnected picture of existence. The complete canvas is painted with a universally-applicative set of truths from which most remain intellectually divided, only sensing it in their hearts, seldom, if ever, coming to hold them in mind.

Soon he's called downstairs by Jacob. Heeding his call, he descends the staircase with a copy of *Letters to a Young Poet* by Rainer Maria Rilke, it having been recommended to him by precocious Sophie back before she'd condemned and tattled on him for writing "Urges," no doubt believing it had been about her. 'You could have simply talked to me about it like an adult, Sophie,' he thinks again, recalling his one-time fondness for her, loathing the fact that relationships are so easy to destroy, relative to the insecurity of the weakest link in the relational chain. 'Clearly precociousness doesn't cover maturity. And with the self-righteousness of our community, you'll likely win out, Sophie, for the narrative of the older, inappropriate, seducing male is too good a fit for the false piety of religiously-correct, uncritical thinkers.'

Nearing the front counter, Jacob makes the introduction:

"Alex, this is Tom, the owner of Dudley's. He's agreed to take a look at your work. After we gather it back up from Father Andrew and Elder Jennifer we can bring it here and he'll have it professionally bound and printed. He'll even let you keep a handful of them here on consignment."

"Thank you, sir," Alex abashedly offers, feeling odd about the prospect; about the whole 'look at my work and how brilliant I am' mindset that seems to be required of the successful self-promoter. The ego is the nemesis of the spiritual philosopher, yet the champion of the successful. How to reconcile these two apparently mutually exclusive mentalities that seem to suggest selling-out the grander quest?

"You're very welcome. Jacob here has a good head on him, so if he says that your work is worth reading, I have no doubt that it's true."

"Thank you. I hope you still believe that *after* you read it, of course," Alex adds with an embarrassed little grin.

"I'm sure I will."

"Tom is an expert on local authors, and local lore... It seems only fitting that your writing end up here eventually."

Local lore... an image of the constellation-esque patterns etched into the bottom of the berry-gathering container from this morning passes into Alex's mind.

"Might I show you something, sir, and you can tell me if you recognize it?"

"Of course."

Alex pulls his little notebook from his pants and presents the most recently scribed page to Tom, whose face turns near to white in response, eyes so broad they look like they may pop out of his head.

"What, what is it?" Jacob asks in response to this palpably emotional reaction.

"Where... where did you... what did you copy this from?"

"I copied it from something that I found in the woods... from a container."

"Where in the woods?"

Alex suddenly feels the need to put up a defense, as if required to protect the sanctity of the recently discovered paradise, sensing that it may well become his only refuge from the gathering storm.

"What is it?," Alex asks, hoping to divert attention away from the location that the bookseller seeks.

"They call this 'Star Speak,'" Tom replies. "My father... the one who started this bookshop nearly eighty years ago now... he was obsessed with local legends. Especially the ones connected to Star Speak. See that quote on the wall..?"

Tom gestures over his shoulder to a small print set in a black, star-speckled frame placed on the wall behind him, in a conspicuous place of honor, as if on a pulpit, preaching its wisdom to every patron:

*Your sight is a single star in an infinite cosmos,
a special shine of the One Illustrious Light.*

- *Saying of The Star People*

"That's a translation of Star Speak... of what you have copied here," he adds, gesturing to Alex's notebook entry. "It's said to have been the language of The Star People, who are central to one of our town's greatest legends; a legend set during pre-Salem, back when the natives still roamed the surrounding woods and this town was little more than a small fort surrounded by roughly-hewn shelters supplied by subsistence farms. My own family's history has been to scour the records, searching for and preserving stories such as theirs. That's kind of how we gained our reputation for being specialists in local writers, and books on local history."

“The Star People were the first to develop any type of language in this area,” Tom continues; “any type of language *anywhere*, if you believe the legends. They formed their words and the relationship between those words using the constellations that they religiously studied, including how those star clusters shifted in relationship to each other through the seasons. They even attempted to divine the meaning of the stars’ frequency of flashes and the interrelationship of those flashes, believing that interrelationship to indicate a type of dialogue between divine beings. Their holy men worked with their holy women to develop concoctions sourced from Mother Nature to enhance their ability to decipher this divine messaging system before sharing the translations. Then there’s Jedidiah...”

Looking up, his eyes move to a front corner of the store, near to the display windows. “There’s a book over there called ‘Salem, Virginia, Past and Present,’ would you go and grab it, please?,” he requests of Alex. “And turn to page... thirty-three, if I remember correctly.”

As Alex begins turning to the directed page, Tom continues:

“My father’s favorite local legend, mine too, I must admit, goes back to those days, to before the official founding of the town, to a story of the first settlers who were wiped out, leaving only traces of their presence behind, including the journal of a young woman, saying that she was twenty-five when she wrote it, who signed her entries simply ‘D.’ D wrote of a romance between herself and a man named Jedidiah.”

“The couple was highly dissatisfied with the town’s development, especially with the focus on building up defenses and antagonizing the natives, looking for any excuse to expand their territory, often with religiously-sourced justifications that D wrote of as being “unholy mistranslations of the Holy Word.” A common, tragic misuse of the Bible

to enslave minds and eradicate any resistance during those times; during *most* human history using *most* holy texts, actually. They pushed the natives further and further from this land, land that the townspeople were determined to claim for themselves. Eventually D and Jedidiah couldn't take it anymore, deciding to leave their fellow frontiersmen behind and build their own place up in the mountains. They hoped to live in peace with the natives, a number of whom had already been killed by the frontiersmen. But that's when the story becomes... *fantastical.*"

Alex's heart skips a beat when, examining page thirty-three as directed, he sees the very image that he'd seen in his vision this morning, after consuming the sap dripping from the tree lording over the falls: the man, or woman, in the elk fur suit, complete with the same antlers, holding the scroll and spear. It's a rough sketch, presumably from this recovered eighteenth century notebook, but that's definitely him, or her.

Flipping through the pages, there are several sketches of these same types of astrological symbols that he'd copied, followed by numerous other sketches confirming that this 'D' had seen what he's seen. The waterfall, the great guardian fir tree with the water flowing beneath it, granting him the vision, the entrance to the cave and... he almost drops the book when he sees the final sketch in the set: a man and woman entering what he's been calling The Blue Pool in his own mind, with many others, presumably these 'Star People,' standing in witness. Beneath D's sketch of The Blue Pool is her own description: "The Spring of Everlasting Life."

"D and Jedidiah wandered into this magical realm," Tom continues, "which she eventually claims contains the pool of everlasting life; a place promising immortality... Thinking that they're invaders, possessing the intent of the other settlers, some of the natives attack them, gravely wounding him in the process, and taking her hostage."

“They take him into this cave behind these falls, the place that contains this sacred pool of theirs, said to bubble up from the very heart of The Great Mother herself, and to possess all of Her life-giving energy. The elders amongst the natives surround and touch him, and perform some sort of ceremony, blowing smoke into his face, painting his body in a dark rich red derived from some plant in the cave... At some point they become ecstatic, screaming and chanting, and a figure of a man wearing an elk fur suit, holding a spear and scroll, is formed from the smoke they blow from their pipes.

They dunk Jedidiah in the water, and cover his wounds with this same red paint, then lay him to rest. To D’s astonishment, he eventually fully recovers from what she’d thought were mortal wounds. And as he convalesces, D learns their ways, and falls in love with the place and the people, and becomes accepted by them as one of the tribe, and claims to learn of the many magical powers that they possess.”

“She says that these natives, these ‘Star People,’ got to be so good at using nature to heal, and to commune with one another on a psychic level, and to connect with and harness the forces and creatures of nature, that many of them lived several hundred years, and actually *chose* when it was time for them to pass on to become whatever the forest called upon them to recycle themselves as. She further claims that they were entirely free of illness, and that their community experienced no war, or violence of any kind, for all anxiety and covetousness and petty differences had been overcome. She writes of how they believed that they were conversing with the gods not only through the plants and creatures, and by the voices and visions passed to them through the rejuvenating power of the waters which their people drank and bathed in, but through the stars as well. They didn’t conceive of them as *stars*, of course, as gaseous giants lightyears away, but,

again, as messengers flashing the Holy Word... as the language of the gods, punched into the heavenly veil by the point of 'The Spear of the Forest Deity,' almost like an ancient, celestial form of Morse Code."

Gesturing for him to hand him the book he's holding, Alex complies. Tom places the large gold-trimmed book on the counter and flips through to the final pages of the section, to a set of vertically-aligned images following the sketches that Alex had flipped through. The images are set under the heading "Decoding The Stars: Translating Star Speak." He places Alex's sketch beside it, and begins comparing them, assiduously analyzing every detail.

"I remember trying to learn their language before, when I was younger, humoring my dad's obsession with these local legends, this one in particular... It's definitely not the easiest language to learn. In writing it's a very nuanced version of what's called a 'logogram,' language represented through symbols, like hieroglyphics. The slightest alteration in the organization of these dots and swoops, and the lines between the dots, and even the way they overlap and interplay with one another... which, again, the elders of the natives are said to have seen and interpreted while on some sort of local hallucinogen, and the fact that this interpretation can change through the seasons... *all of it* can alter the specific way in which the recorded Star Speak ends up being read."

Tom takes out a sketch pad and begins working on the translation, Alex and Jacob hanging over him, Jacob eyeing Alex with intrigue, wondering at his level of knowledge and involvement in this mystery, knowing that, despite the wonderment and intrigue they're being immersed in, it can only invite more risk into Alex's already perilous existence. Tom diligently traces over Alex's sketch with his mechanical pencil, not quite touching the graphite to the page, then moving over to

the book to do the same, then cautiously writing the results on his pad, bouncing back and forth to recheck everything. The three of them scarcely notice a customer come in, ringing the welcome bell hung inside the front door, the reverberation seeming to run on endlessly, hanging mystically over the bookseller's translation.

"What happened to them?," Alex breaks the momentous silence. "To D and Jedidiah?"

Intently focused, the bookseller replies without looking up:

"Well, D claims that Jedidiah was eventually, through months of learning their language, followed by extensive discourse with the elders upon his recovery, considered to be the arrival of the reborn Forest Deity. For he picks up on their beliefs and lessons naturally, as if they're already in him, and writes of them fervently on his rolled up parchment, and begins to show signs spoken of in their prophecies. Eventually, through their communal visions, he's revealed to be the reborn king. And they live with the natives for almost a year, setting their beds inside the cave behind the falls, becoming one with the tribe. At some point, however, Jedidiah becomes convinced that he has to return to the frontiersmen and share the news, believing it his mission to unite the two peoples. He felt that if he couldn't foster peace between them then his new family would inevitably be wiped out by the wave of incoming white men that he said would "mount into a tsunami.""

"Let me guess," Jacob deadpans, "that didn't go so well."

"No. They killed Jedidiah, tying him to a pole in the center of town before stoning him to death. D writes that as they killed him he was looking up to the sky and screaming throughout, as if to the

birds, to forgive and spare his manifold murderers. As he was dying one of the villagers nailed a set of antlers to his head, mocking his story. Then they strung him from the flagpole of the settlement and hung a sign from his neck saying: 'Here Hangs The Forest King.' But all we have is D's testament, for the town itself was raised to the ground, its remains discovered just before the official founding of Salem, in the early nineteenth century. D herself disappeared, apparently fleeing from danger. Her journal was discovered later, tucked into the hollow of a tree on the outskirts of the settlement."

"What of the natives?," Alex asks.

"No one knows. But it's likely they faced the same destiny as their Native American brethren, every natural resource stolen and turned into a profit for the conquerors. All the wealth of this nation can be traced back to theft and enslavement, after all. It's assumed that The Star People remained on their sacred lands through the Civil War, but were eventually wiped out by Union soldiers. And no one has been able to find these falls and cave and pool, of course," he adds while eyeing Alex, looking for a tell. "D has her own testament to this. She says that the sacred grounds only reveal themselves to the worthy, or to those led there by the worthy, with the unworthy fated to walk right past it absent the right guide. As D put it, The Star People partnered with nature to assure that only 'Those whose hearts are one with their minds' will find it."

"Furthermore, D claims that The Star People had long known they'd be overrun; that it had been a prophesy of theirs for centuries, and that they'd been preparing for it for just as long. They communed with The Forest Deity, and made a sacred pact. The plan was, when the time came, to collectively transform into the creatures of the forest, and live under the protection of The Forest Deity until such time as it was

safe for them to retake human form. In the meantime they'd earn their rebirth by serving the forest, assuring its survival and prosperity... Perhaps D joined them," he adds with a wry, incredulous little grin.

"Well, that's as close as I'm going to get," Tom finishes his regalement, having completed his translation. He tears the sheet from his sketchbook and hands it to Alex, who reads it along with Jacob:

*There is no death in the green.
All life is remade by decadent decay.
Each of its fallen forms forever reformed.
The woodland wonders never ceasing to be.*

*Here is The King of the Forest eternally kept.
He made of the endlessly remade he protects.
He that sees and lives as if the leaves of trees.
Fall one, fall countless many, yet ever shall he reign.*

"Of course, 'King' is more like 'Monarch,' this being a unisexual term in Star Speak," Tom continues. "They weren't concerned with gender assignment in the same rigid manner which we are, in terms of their communication and thought patterns, and the entirely concrete way in which we affix gender to words. They leave more room for identity in general. Even 'he' is more like 'it' in the context of these lines... But we haven't an accurate representation for this pronoun in English; a pronoun unconcerned with gender excepting those cases where the distinction is absolutely necessary, like '*she* gave birth.'"

"Also, 'it' sounds too diminutive, almost like an insult, especially when speaking of a god or a demigod, wouldn't you agree? I'm just not sure what else to put there... I also added in words, like prepositions, to match our

sentence structure. It may not be precise. Actually, it's said that The Star People believed the act of reading to be an inseparable part of *creating* meaning; that meaning doesn't belong to the writer his or herself, but is an exchange between writer and reader, as if they're having a conversation. And, therefore, every translation will be different, reflecting the dynamic that exists between the wielder of the pen and the interpreter of its markings."

"So 'King of the Forest' could just as easily be, what, 'Woman of the Wood?'" Alex inquires. For some reason, Delaney's exquisite face flashes into his mind's eye as he says it.

"Indeed. *Woman of the Wood*... you *are* a writer. A potential English translation, for sure."

"Well, it's quite the story. It lends itself well to inspiration, the force of creation," Alex replies, ever uncomfortable with compliments.

"Inspiration, the force of creation," Tom half-whispers, turning the idea over in his head. A good line for a bookseller, no doubt.

Jacob buys Alex the copy of *Letters to a Young Poet* for his cave wall collection, then they thank Tom for the translation and the trip down Salem's fabled past, heading for the door. Passing through the threshold of Dudley's Bookshop, Tom shares a final thought:

"I look forward to your return with your work, Alex... Maybe then you'll tell me where you found what you made that sketch from. Something tells me that your writing, and your personal story, has its star-crossed alignment with that of D, Jedidiah and The Star People."



**THE FORGERY
&
THE ELIXIR**

The bookseller's words haunt Alex, resounding ominously in his mind as he and Jacob prepare to return to the village. How clearly Tom must have seen the disquiet in his eyes; the frightening extent of the lore of Jedidiah and the Star People resonate hauntingly within him. Could he also see that Alex was holding his cards to his chest, protecting the very locale of that lore, and now, it seems, the legacy of this lost native tribe, from the impending invasion of more white men hailing from their own legacy of the mentally-and-physically-conquering Church and State? What else did Tom see in Alex? His impending doom, perhaps?

The feeling fills him with dread. And as he and Jacob make their final preparations for their evening return to The Barnes Clan, Alex sees Jacob turn his attention away from him, and in this unobserved second is struck by a strong urge to make a run for it, then and there. 'Save yourself,' comes a voice from somewhere within. 'Disappear into the shadows, and leave the narrowly-judgmental zealots to their own devices, trapped in their self-deceptions, destined to devolve into the backwardness of bygone eras that they're bent on repeating, replaying the past of this place.' Yet he can't quite summon the strength, or is it the *selfishness*, to pull himself from the fire, thinking of Miranda, and of Delaney, and of The Forest King, or is it The Woman of the Wood?

The ride back up into those woods is quiet, both Alex and Jacob lost in thought, with little said between them. Jacob looks at him worrisomely, but doesn't share his worries with his weary companion, seeing that Alex is already weighed down by a considerable heaviness of his own. And upon arriving back at the village in the waning light, stopping behind the storage barn backing the banquet hall, Andrew greets them, a grave look upon his face, torch in hand.

"Alex, come with me please. I need to speak with you."

“Am I in trouble?,” Alex asks, already knowing the answer. ‘*The evil is upon you,*’ he hears within. ‘*Run!*’

“Come with me, let’s talk about it...”

As they head towards the church, likely towards Andrew’s office in the back, Alex’s heart starts to seize once more, hitting him with a painfully-pounding pulse; a psychosomatic reaction to emotional violence. Becoming dizzy, he scans for Miranda. As it was earlier, she’s nowhere in sight. ‘That’s right,’ he remembers, ‘she’s working the late shift at the church. I’ll see her there.’ But when they arrive, she’s absent.

Libby is in the center aisle near the rear of the church, talking to Morgaine. Libby gives Alex a knowing little grin before departing through a side door, as if sparing herself whatever she’s set in motion, unwilling to face the coming horrors to which she herself gave birth. Morgaine scurries out of their way as they approach, distributing leaflets into the holders set in the back of the paralleling rows of pews. As they pass by her, she looks Alex in the face, and it’s filled with contempt. She quickly looks away.

“Morgaine, where’s Miranda?,” Alex demands, angered by her insulting affect.

“She doesn’t want to talk to you,” she says without looking back at him, hurrying through her task, as if she, too, wishes to avoid what’s coming. ‘*She’s been informed of steps being taken against me, and her judgment is clear, written upon her face.*’ He knows in this instant that Miranda has betrayed him, and he wishes he’d ran when he’d had the chance, back in Salem. His heart shatters, his pain pairing with equal rage.

‘Who is this little girl that looks at me with such disdain, as if she understands the situation and is in any kind of position to judge me?’ Alex thinks, watching Morgaine hurry away from him as if he has the plague. ‘As if whatever she’s been told constitutes the truth? As if I’m deserving of such condemnation?’ It takes everything he has not to scream: ‘Keep your dirty looks to yourself, you presumptuous, self-righteous little twat! You judge absent understanding, and so, ironically, are an agent of the very evil that you’ve deluded yourself into thinking that you see in me!’

Reluctantly following Andrew into his office, who gestures for him to take a seat, the onslaught begins.

“Do you know why you’re here, Alex?”

“I imagine that Miranda has lodged a complaint against me.”

Tapping a folder on his desk, Father Andrew confidently proclaims:

“Not just Miranda.”

“What, that thing with Sophie? She misunderstood that poem...”

“I think that she set a clear boundary with you.”

“But it wasn’t even *about* her. Her *boundaries*, as you call them, are actually *encroachments*, boxing me into a falsified identity made of character indictments based upon lies. Those aren’t boundaries, they’re *crimes!*”

“There are others as well, Alex. Unfortunately you seem set on creating a type of environment here that I simply can’t tolerate.”

“Are you sure *I’m* the one ruining the environment? Who else has brought complaints against me?”

“I can’t say. But do you recall that talk I give all young men when they first enter The Church, about proper relations with women, and how harassment won’t be tolerated? I remember you agreeing to it.”

“Of course I agreed. Who wouldn’t? But I didn’t *harass* anyone!”

“Unfortunately I have a lot of evidence here that you did precisely that,” he says, opening and flipping through the pages of the folder in such a way where Alex can’t see their contents, yet making it plain by his show that there’s a *ton* of proof of his wrongdoing. More than enough.

‘*My letters to Miranda and Sophie,*’ Alex thinks, his assaulted heart continuing to crumble. ‘And likely some testimony from their friends. Not only have they all entirely misrepresented what happened between us, but they’ve furnished him with one-sided, misleading evidence of our exchanges, backed by hyperbole, if not outright lies.’ He can barely breathe, as if the blood from his fractured heart is leaking into and coating his lungs.

“But... what about what *they* wrote to *me*? What about what they *said* to me? Miranda encouraged me the entire time. Accusing me of harassing her is like... like accusing shit of harassing the fly!”

“And one of our elders overheard you harassing Miranda, saying that she’s... *promiscuous,*” Andrew states, entirely unmoved by Alex’s self-defense.

‘He’s playing boss. As if he’s above the fray. Talking down to the problem, as if I’m a tumor to be coldly excised before I can metastasize into the rest of his congregation. The pretension is astounding.’

“You called her a slut, which was confirmed by another member of the community.”

“What? That’s nonsense! If that word *was* used, it was used in jest, and she laughed at it. It’s so ludicrous to accuse me of being a sexual aggressor towards *her*. She talked about sex with me *constantly*, always overtly suggesting that we should have sex with one another.”

“And apparently you took a picture of her against her wishes.”

Alex recalls the incident. They’d been joking around, as usual. She was sticking her ass out to him, and he quickly snapped a picture with a disposable camera that he’d had Jacob pick up for him for the purpose of documenting the wild plants of the area. She’d expressed no objections at the time. But now it was evidence against him, used in demonstration of her complete unscrupulousness, entirely free of the context that’s *always* necessary for the telling of *any* truth.

Anything taken out of context, presented through the bias of one side of the event, paints a falsely prejudicial picture. Miranda likely knew that he wouldn’t deny having took the picture, knowing that he’s beholden to a level of honor of which she clearly knows nothing. Yet *he’s* the problem. Not her, nor overly-sensitive, tattling Sophie, nor Father Andrew’s own Machiavellian daughter, or any of those pulled into their cowardly, colluding deceit, tied together into this disgraceful snare they’ve set at his feet, knowing that he’d walk right into it, for where else could he walk?

“What about *my* evidence? *My* self-defense?”

He can barely summon the words, his heart and mind reeling from the emotional and psychological violence being committed against him.

“Well, you can give me evidence of what they wrote to you as well, if you wish. In the meantime I’m going to have to ask you not to come into the church. Until I have a chance to consult with God and the elders about what to do, I’m suspending your church privileges. I’ll talk to you again in a few days and let you know my final decision.”

‘That’s the end of it,’ Alex thinks while leaving Father Andrew’s office. ‘He’s already made up his mind. They’ve painted him a forgery, and he’s already bought it, and just showed me the receipt, and the falsified proof of its authentication. He just doesn’t want me to make a scene in his church, and hasn’t the courage, the *integrity*, to be honest, despite his pretense of piety, so he’s cravenly calling it a *suspension*.’

That’s when Alex remembers that the letters that Miranda and Sophie wrote to him are missing, rendering any self-defense he might be able to mount as hearsay at best, and from one whose credibility has now been completely destroyed. This realization further deflates him to the point where he feels like it would be impossible to feel any smaller.

‘I wonder who else Libby and Miranda got in on this... *witch hunt*? What a horror these people are producing, to commit such a sin against such a big-hearted guy that sought nothing more than the love which that backstabber strung in front of me for months.’

As he flees the scene, Andrew follows him, making sure he isn’t permitted a chance to speak with any of the villagers making their way into the church for evening services. Damage control. *‘The coward. The fake. The institutional phony loyal but to power, popularity and perceived piety.’*

Weak in the knees, Alex runs awkwardly from the village, feeling as

though he's just been sliced from stem to sternum and is now forced to hold in his guts until he can find a peaceful place to die, like a mortally wounded animal seeking with his final act to deny his murderers the satisfaction of hearing his death knell. Time seeming suspended, he's pulled through the darkness, barely able to see, yet on a certain path.

Tripping and falling several times along the stream, tears streaming from his flush face, he soon finds himself in a dead sprint despite barely being able to see in the blackness of night, and the overhead canopy's obscurement of all the celestial light. Woozy, yet filled with the energy of rage, he reaches the holy ground in record time, running headlong into The Elder Fir looming over the falls, knocking himself unconscious. Momentarily caught in its exposed, stiling roots, the current keeps inching him forward, pushing him gradually between and through the rooted platform at the base of the mighty fir until he finally passes all the way through it, spilling over the falls.

In his unconscious state he has a vision. He's lying face first in the water, on the verge of drowning. The great elk, with antlers as proud and expansive as the ancient, towering guardian hanging above the scene, enters the water, swimming to him, catching him in his antlers and pushing him up onto the opposite shore, beside the falls. Leaning down, the great forest creature blows air from his nostrils into Alex's face, and Alex immediately coughs up the water in his lungs, regaining his breath, yet remaining unconscious. The elk approaches the container in which the berry mash that Alex had recently plucked and pulverized has been set and forgotten.

The mash has been transformed by the ancient fermenting magic of Mother Nature, the forest enlisted to contribute to the brew. Birds, squirrels and other creatures of the realm, the critters wherein The Star

People have taken refuge, have been adding elements to the container, mixing bark, sap, herbs, and leaves with the berry mash in Mother Nature's alchemical enlistment of the Science of Spirit, brewing her magical spell. The great elk leans over, lets out an immense snort from his massive muzzle onto the brew, then disappears into the forest.

"Alex, wake up," he hears, slowly coming to.

Caitlin is hanging over him, smiling, the rising sun of the early morning showing off its color show behind her. He's relieved to see a friendly face, to hear a friendly voice, having feared all friends from the community to now be his enemies, converted by the deceit of the Devil.

"It looks like you had a visitor," she says, examining the dirt around him. Consciousness renewed, he rolls over, sits up and sees what she's referring to. The prints of a large prong-toed animal surround him, set in a path in which he appears to have been drug up from the pool at the base of the falls, then circled before his savior moved towards the boulder where he'd set the berry mash the day before.

'*It wasn't* a dream?'

"Caitlin... how, why are you here?"

"I heard what happened to you last night. I'm *so* sorry, Alex. It's fucked up, to say the least. I know as well as anyone that, if anything, *Miranda* was the aggressor, and now you've been outcast for harassing *her*, and Sophie, and, from what those girls say, practically every other girl in the village." She shakes her head with disgust and incredulity. "I imagine I may be the only person that you talked to about what *really* happened with Sophie and Miranda... Did you see this coming?"

"I suppose," he says, sitting up, rubbing his aching forehead. "But I guess I was in denial, foolishly giving them the benefit of the doubt."

"Wow, did Father Andrew hit you?," she half-jokes. "You've got quite the welt there."

"No, but he may as well have, at least *that* would've been honest... I hit *myself* on the head, actually. I ran into that tree up there," he adds, looking up.

She follows his gaze. "All the way up there? Then, *what*, fell over the falls! How on Earth did you survive?"

"I'm not sure..."

"*He* saved you, didn't he?," she says, looking lost in reverie.

"Who?"

"The Forest King."

"*Who*?"

"The elk. He was obviously here..."

"But how did you know? Why do you call him The Forest King?"

"I've been having dreams since that day you revived me. In one of them a tribe of Native Americans made his image from the smoke of the fire that they were all seated around, and they called him that... The Forest King.

They were speaking in another language, but I understood it perfectly. Those dreams have been so real... not like the dreams I had before. These feel... *visceral*. Very emotional. Last night I went to sleep, disturbed by what had happened to you... by what Libby and Miranda and Sophie and Elizabeth and the others were saying... Man, that Nathan is a piece of work. I think he'll do anything to get into the pants of any one of them, honestly... agree with anything if he thinks it will get him something... same with Morgaine... it's a wonder they don't join forces, Nathan and Morgain, because they want the same women; or *girls*, I should say."

"The natives called the elk The Forest King in one of your dreams?"

"Yes, in my dream last night, actually. Then the elk spoke to me. Without words he told me to go to you. To help you. That I needed to see this place, and to..." she pauses, as if afraid to say it.

"To what?"

"To have my baby here. To baptize her here. In this... *kingdom*. It won't be long now," she adds, rubbing her bulbous belly. "He told me there's a place here, beneath the earth, with magical waters that will grant my baby the power to come into her full potential. And that *you* should be the one to baptize her."

"Wow... I don't know what to say."

They sit there, beside the falls, falling into a silent reverence, both lost in the enchantment of the place. Alex doesn't need to point it out. Caitlin feels it the same as he does, which she soon confirms.

"This place really is magical."

“Yes... I’m glad you’re here, Caitlin. You were one of the few villagers that seemed like you actually *wanted* to listen to me.” He laughs.

“What’s funny?”

“Oh, I’m just recalling that little conversation we kept repeating when we had overlapping duties in the church. That whole ‘most people ask, how are you doing?’ not as an actual question, but as a rhetorical type of hello, and that if I were *actually* to answer as if it *were* a genuine question, they’d run away in terror from what I had to say... I think you’re the only person I know who actually *is* asking.”

“How *are* you doing, Alex?,” she says with a smile.

He laughs again, then immediately comes to tears. She embraces him, he sitting on his backside, her in the squat position. And they stay that way for a minute, she lending him the consoling love he so desperately needs.

“Thank you, Caitlin,” he finally says. She pulls away a bit. He stands and then helps her to her feet. “Let me show you around the kingdom.”

They do a lap around the pool beneath the falls, and it feels like he’s seeing it differently, positively affected by her energy, thinking of how experiences change even when they’re of the precise same place one has been many times before. He thinks of how sharing it with a new person makes it *feel* new, as if he’s now partially seeing it through her eyes, the location transformed by her energy and perspective. They then clamor behind the falls, he supporting her weight in the slipperiest spots. ‘No trauma triggering premature labor on my watch,’ he thinks. As they slowly traverse the gently blue glowing cave, Caitlin’s face is equally aglow.

"I've seen this place," she whispers. "In one of my dreams... or maybe they're closer to *visions*, I don't know. But at the same time it wasn't *really* this place... It was like, like I was seeing this place as a representation of my own birth canal, and..." They arrive at The Blue Pool. She gasps, then moves towards it. "And this pool was like my baby, or the source of its birth, and this..." she touches the lichen on the surrounding stones, "this blood red plant was like my birthing blood."

Caitlin reaches towards the warm, slowly bubbling, radiant blue water, upon which Alex warns her:

"Just so you know, while I think it's safe, it produces an effect on the skin that can be a bit... *odd*, even uncomfortable at first."

She barely pauses. Placing her palm on the surface of the slowly waving, softly steaming water, she giggles with glee. Then she turns over her hand, forming a cup, and scoops some up before letting it gradually seep through the small gaps she makes between her fingers, creating a series of streams. Giggling again, she raises her shirt, exposing her bare, protruding belly, scoops up another handful and pours it on her belly before rubbing it in, a huge smile on her face. Scooping up a third handful, she raises her hand high up and lets the water fall through her fingers once more, this time showering down upon her head.

"Wow," she manages, entirely in tune with the magic of the moment, the tingling coursing down her neck, around her ears, dripping onto her shoulders.

They spend some time there, in the cave she's cast as womb. She walks around it, her fingers tracing the stones. Alex watches with a smile on his face,

thrilled to have someone to share the magic with who he's *not* trying to seduce, and who *doesn't* project warning signs triggering him to keep up his defenses. He can just be here, with her, with a friend, and feel the truth of this ethereal realm. At the same time he feels as though they're not alone, as he has many times before in this place. This time it's as if the stones, or perhaps the microbes crawling infinitesimally across them, or all of it, watches them, but not in a threatening manner. They're *welcome* here. The cave *wants* them here. They're *meant* to be here; to become a part of it all.

Eventually emerging from the cave, the sun strikes Alex's face, and he suddenly recalls his dream; being saved by The Forest King, just before he added the final touch to the berry juice elixir. Moving towards the berry bush, Alex leans over the boulder upon which he'd placed the carved wooden container and examines its contents. Just as in the dream, it now contains *far* more than the original berry mash. He smells it. It's an intoxicatingly rich aroma, and smells as if it's generating some alcohol as well. Sitting on the boulder, he hands it to Caitlin, saying:

"From my berry gathering yesterday morning."

"It looks like half of the forest has fallen into it since then," she observes.

He smiles. "Yes, it all just fell right in. Let's try it," he says, motioning for her to take a seat on the boulder beside him.

"Are you sure it's safe?," she asks with concern, her hand reflexively drawn to her belly.

"I'm sure. Watch."

Taking it from her, he smells it again, then takes a sip, followed by a slight swig. It tastes of the forest, as if the now brownish tanzanite color was derived from the very heart of the Earth. As Caitlin takes it from him, reading his facial expression as he looks into her eyes, watching the sense of warmth and peace overtake him, she smiles slightly and takes a little sip. Sensing the approaching harmony, she takes another sip, then sets it down. And as she looks back at Alex, the spell is cast.

For a moment it appears as if the image of Caitlin is peeling away from her towards him, like his mind is pulling her into himself. Then she's pulled free. He absorbs her. Then he *is* her. He's looking at himself, *as* her. She's looking at herself, *as* him. The fright of it lasts only for an instant, then passes. *Perfect empathy*. For they not only look upon themselves as the other, but *are* the other, *and* themselves, at the same time. He can feel her emotions, can sense her thoughts, just as she can of him. They know one another, *really* know one another, like nothing they've known before. They love one another. To know something, to truly know it, is to love it. They know that now. It's a truth made unequivocal in the magic of the moment. And so they sit, sensing one another, as intermeshed as the most intertwined of lovers. Minutes later the unified sense starts to pass, and both of them wonder if they want it to, as comforting as it is to return home, to the illusion of independence at the root of human discord.

Not long thereafter Alex assists Caitlin up the bank to the side of the falls, as she must return to the village before she's too long missed. They embrace before she departs. It's an easy hug, with none of the usual tension, for they are a part of one another now. He helps her over the stream beside the great fir, upon which she notices the upside down cross carved into the trunk, still sappily-weeping from its wound.

"What's this?" she asks, her face telegraphing terror.

"I don't know who did that. I found it yesterday, after spending the night with Miranda. I'd assume that *she* did it for some reason, even though she expressed no negative emotions while here, so I don't know why she'd do that on her way out. Or else, someone followed us here and did it. It was dark. I didn't see anything..."


Caitlin stares at the gash that seems to be struggling to scar over, as if the injury was inflicted so as *not* to be able to heal. She seems as though she's being drawn into it, a sense of horror gradually gripping her. Alex puts his hand on her shoulder, snapping her out of it.

"I better get going," she says, her face now solemn, as if the fear, whatever she saw and sensed in the sap-seeping, sliced wood, has spoiled the bliss that had commanded her countenance moments before.

"Should I help you back to the village?"

"No, I can figure it out. You should stay away, for your own good. But I'll be back soon."

"Good."



**THE SCHISM
&
THE BAPTISM**

The next day Caitlin returns with Madilyn and Bella, two of the few compatriots of theirs whom *haven't* declared Alex to be the spawn of Satan. The day after they come with Taylor, who seems highly conflicted, wanting to bridge the two suddenly emerging sides of the schism, desiring to keep everyone together and be the promoter of peace and reunification, like the boy watching his family dissolve during a divorce, fighting with everything in his power to prevent it.

Taylor has always had a thing for Miranda, and likely feels that his presence in this place represents a betrayal of her. He may even be Miranda's spy, though it doesn't seem so, as he proclaims the judgment brought against Alex to be unjust, and seems sincere in this proclamation. They bring supplies with them; some basic tools and building materials. With these Taylor, being the hands-on type, has the notion of starting the construction of a shelter, but soon gives in to Alex's belief that the cave provides all the sanctuary and security that they need.

"Gather something to lay on, inside one of the niches. But I'd rather you not chop down any of these trees... nothing in this immediate area, at least. I can't imagine any such falling being worth it, considering the magnificence of this place. It wouldn't be worth the cost."

The first few days everyone returns to the village by nightfall, having reluctantly come to temporary terms with Father Andrew. But that changes when Madilyn announces that she wants to stay to work on her project "under the glowing blue light of the cave." Alex hadn't even noticed her work, so busy has he been with his writing and the exploration of their bounteous environment.

The natural fecundity and providence of the place is astounding. Where the village he's left behind toils in compact clay interspersed with stone day in and day out to feed their many, tapping into an underground

water table via a well that sometimes goes dry in the summer, *their* oasis is sopping with clean water and overloaded with wild vegetables, berries by the branch and so many trout that it reminds Alex of reading about salmon spawning season in Alaska, when you can actually *see* them swimming upriver, their protruding fins inviting bears and bald eagles to the feast.

During the course of his exploration he's been focusing on the gathering of one fruit in particular, what he's come to call 'The Bonding Berry' that he's experienced the power of twice now, and which he plans to make central to a group cohesion ceremony as soon as that group is fully gathered and sufficiently settled into their new domain. He's recently discovered two more containers of the same size and general design as that from which he'd copied the first 'Star Speak' that he'd come across. The new containers have noticeably different sets of Star Speak etched into their undersides. He's also been engaged in a writing project pertaining to holding out an olive branch to the community that he's left behind, usually worked on while sitting at the far end of the pool, across from the falls. There he brushed aside some decomposing foliage to reveal yet another carved-in seat, this one on a petrified log perfectly positioned to take in the group's activity.

Again, it's not clear if the seat was carved by the natives or by Nature Herself, or, he likes to imagine, by the natives having commanded nature, or requested the assistance of The Forest King and his multitudinous furry and winged minions. What *is* clear to him is that, from an inspirational viewpoint, this particular log chair provides a perspective that's hard to beat. The view of the falls and the energetic comings and goings and commingling's of the incipient little community add energy and enthusiasm to his efforts, he scribing away on his peace treaty, hoping to avail himself of the best possible opportunity to present it to Father Andrew.

Entering the cave, he sees what Madilyn has been working on. In the space between the niches carved into the walls, about halfway between the mouth of the cave and the cavern containing The Blue Pool, she's crouched with a brush in her hand, though he sees no paint or other medium by which to actually mark the rock. On the wall in front of her he sees the same image he's now seen many times, of the man, or woman, clad in the elk suit, antler-crowned, spear and scroll in opposing hands. Above 'The Forest Deity' are several constellations. The Star Speak. Alex is flabbergasted.

"How did you know to paint that, Madilyn? And... what are you painting *with*?"

"I'm not..." she whispers, as if afraid to disturb the *actual* painter.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that something told me to come here and set my brush to the wall, dry, and as I began to brush it across the wall, this was gradually... *revealed*. I have no idea what it is. Do you?"

He tells her what he knows. And instead of being stunned as one might expect, she seems to accept it as if she already knew it, somewhere in the depths of her being. Alex has always felt like Madilyn is a bit of a mystic, and that she can't forever be trapped by The Barnes Clan and its mind-narrowing Christian dogma. She's a free, creative spirit, not one to simply do as she's told, remaining inside boxes built for control. But this contest between expectation and the following of her heart has caused her some considerable suffering, as it does for most creative people.

She'd once confided in him the extent to which she used to experience anxiety, and admitted upon arrival that his banishment and the arguments that had ensued upon his flight from the village, and

the sneaking off of Caitlin, one of her few friends, had caused a series of anxiety attacks reminiscent of the worst days of her past, during which she'd wrestled with biblical teachings, never being able to fully accept them, but feeling it was her duty, as a daughter and disciple, to accede to the wishes of her parents, and to Father Andrew and The Church.

Much as in the past, this latest internal wrestling match took *a lot* out of her. Debilitated to the extent of being bedridden for two days, Doctor Merk having been ineffective in his treatments, Delaney eventually snuck into her room in the evening and fed her some of the crimson lichen she'd been drying in her cabin. Twenty minutes later she was calm, and determined to join Caitlin on her next trip. She's been coming ever since, for almost a week now, and refuses to leave.

"You still feel okay, Madilyn?" Alex now speaks in a low voice as well, not wanting to interrupt the oddly uplifting artistic ritual.

"Yes. This place is curing me. It's the water bubbling up, from in there, that glowing pool, and even the water spilling over the falls. I've been drinking it. I've never felt this type of calm. This peaceful. I've never known that I could actually live *without* anxiety. I thought the anxiety was something that I simply had to accept, and learn to conceal and cope with. That's what Doctor Merk kept telling me. That it's all about symptom management. But now I know that he's wrong. Living this way is *so* much better. I was merely *existing* before. I can't go back."

Even with their little unorthodox community growing, what he's heard that many of their former brethren have labeled 'The Den of Iniquity,' it's the arrival of a handful of elders late the next day that *really* announces a break in the clan, including Jacob, Jennifer, David and Anita. Jacob and Jennifer appear instantly renewed by the shift in their environment, seeming the oldest of friends; as if they know one another

intimately, but haven't been able to show it within the community, what with Jacob's marriage and the scorn and ridicule that would accompany what they naturally display here, in the forest, free from such reflexive judgments.

'He must be the one that she was having the relationship with!,' Alex realizes. 'The rumors were true for once!'

He asks Jacob about it, who merely winks and puts his forefinger to his lips: 'shhhh.' Jennifer, responding to Alex's inquiry much the same, seems more relieved than the others that he not only survived his ordeal, but appears to be thriving.

"Is this your natural habitat?," she inquires.

"I think so. I mean, c'mon, look around you Jen, how could it *not* be? I think that's the point, in fact: this is *everyone's* natural environment. The wealth of life here fills any emptiness that it encounters, refilling spiritual coffers whose holy contents have been displaced by the unnatural contrivances sickeningly stuffed into us. It fills what's been hollowed with the hallowed, and provokes us to purge everything polluting our natural substance. Nature is divine; the great healer."

Both she and David assist him in his developing manuscript; Alex's peace offering. Even as he tells himself, silently, that it's futile. Judgment has been passed, truth and peace be damned. As the elder insiders, the latest arrivals have a keen sense of the type of ideas and strategies that might build a bridge of coexistence between them and the village that Alex, and now some of the others, seem to be leaving behind, what Jacob calls 'outgrowing,' as opposed to the type of ideas and strategies which merely *appear* to be propitious, but actually represent 'wishful thinking,' and would most likely only enflame matters. Jennifer is particularly critical,

advising him on proper wording, reminding him that the community is 'Christian first,' and that anything he presents that *doesn't* clearly respect that fact, better yet, *pay homage* to that fact, is doomed to fail; to fall upon deaf ears and be drowned in disdain.

"Some of these lines will only make them shut their ears and eyes altogether, Alex."

"But I can't just pretend that everything is okay, and just repeat everything I disagree with as if I agree with it... How can I do that?"

"How, indeed?," David chimes in, suggesting it's not possible. "Some stones just won't budge, no matter how badly we want them to. But you can build a new temple with the stones that you *do* have, I think."

Alex enjoys the philosophy and the metaphor, fondly recalling the brief chats he used to have with the man whom many within the community call 'The Professor.' David has been actively attempting to convince his wife to come with him to this place, for a day trip, if nothing else. As with this metaphorical reference to stones and temples, he has a knack for instruction, and has long been Father Andrew's go-to when it comes to creating lesson plans for the up-and-coming youth. Alex has come to call him 'Sir David' on account of the fact that he always seems to outdo anyone with whom he shares the same task, though with a quiet confidence, as if incapable of braggadocio. Mr. Humbly Reliable. He, too, seems to be benefitting greatly from the change in scenery. This, however, isn't something that can be said of *all* of the recent transplants.

The stress of the broadening village schism has affected their co-elder, Anita, rather gravely. Normally she's at least able to function despite her ongoing depression and chronic gastrointestinal distress, but

she's literally gripping her sides when she arrives, in clear pain. She's in such discomfort that she barely acknowledges Alex as he attempts to come to her aid, a major departure from her typical reaction to him.

Entering the cave and walking past Madilyn, who's now moved to the opposite wall to reveal... *what's this?* It looks like a tree with a stream flowing beneath it, and must be what he's recently come to call The Elder Fir, situated directly above them. Yet, glancing up at the limbs of the tree in the painting, he sees it for the first time, and even with Anita in pain, he slows to look. Wrapped around the image are tiny white roots poking through the rock, almost invisible, excepting a *very* close look.

Alex ushers Anita into The Cavern of The Blue Pool. Tearing a piece of the lichen from a stone, he can't help himself. His tongue literally in his cheek, he turns to her and says "Body of Christ." She gives him a pained, quizzical look, but eventually acquiesces, opening her mouth. Chewing on the lichen, he motions towards the pool, saying: "Blood of Christ." She gives a half-smile, half-grimace, starting to undress, looking at him embarrassingly.

"Take your time," he says. "I recommend sitting in there for a while. Don't worry, it won't hurt you. And the strange sensation you'll feel at first will pass. I'll be back to check on you in a while."

Returning to Madilyn and her magical brush show, he sees it now. The tiny little white roots are *everywhere*, wrapped around every stone, as if intermeshed with every crack and crevice of the cave. He walks slowly up to the tree image, seeing that this, too, has a subtle, almost hidden layer to it. Within the tree is a woman; a nude woman of beautiful form, reminding Alex of the images he's seen of Athena painted on frescoes and pottery pulled from the entombed reliquaries of Ancient Greece. But in certain places, interlaced in her hair, wrapped around her head and

breasts, and between her legs, slightly spread, the roots are denser, more tightly packed, as if they're attracted to the woman; as if she and the tree are feeding off of one another; as if they're inseparably bound, each giving birth to and living off of the other, in perfect symbiotic harmony.

As evening falls, Caitlin goes into labor. She'd been up on the ridge near The Elder Fir, sketching it into a notepad, being an artist herself. Alex's impulse is to move her down into the cave, but she resists. Walking over to the base of the tree, she lies in a gap between two of its largest roots, just above the waterline. The gap appears a perfect fit, as if, once more, designed to support a human form, this time stretched out on her back, in the supine position. Contractions increasing in force and frequency, everyone gathers around to lend their support, Jacob taking the most directly-supportive position, having assisted in the birth of his son. But it's not just the *people* who seek to assist.

Like something out of *Snow White*, it's as though the creatures of the forest are drawn to the impending birth. Birds land upon the branches above, singing more mellifluously than ever. Squirrels clamor up and down the surrounding trees and stones, entirely unconcerned with the human threat. A couple of them drop acorns and seeds from their observation posts, as if making an offering. A fox skims the periphery, eyeing the proceedings, as if slyly discerning their significance before disappearing as swiftly and soundlessly as it had arrived. The white butterflies are particularly prominent, hovering around the scene, gathering on The Elder Fir standing over them. More and more arrive, to the point where they almost cover the trunk of the tree, now filled with mini waves of rhythmic white magic. And just as Caitlin's contractions reach their zenith, the guest of honor arrives.

The great bull elk walks straight down the stream with calm, cool clarity of purpose, halting not more than thirty yards away. A few of Alex's

companions gasp in awe. Caitlin seems calmed by his presence. Alex looks upon the splendid creature as if looking upon an ancient relative. When he makes eye contact with him, he sees an eternity unfold, forever reforming, adapting, yet the same thing in its core, continually reinvented to best fit a symbiotic niche in whatever environment to which it's ideally suited. 'We serve one another. That's the way,' Alex hears inside his head. All the 'accidents' of evolution are projected through his gaze. 'Science is the *how*, not the *why*.'

Just as Caitlin's baby girl comes into the world, The Forest King looks to his right, and they hear someone approach, having come from the direction of the village. It's Delaney. She's holding a silver urn. Alex recognizes it from the mantle of the hearth in her cabin, having been set beside a drawing of her mother that Delaney made from memory. *Her mother's ashes*. She freezes upon seeing the elk. With the newborn infant wailing, their royal visitor looks back at the newborn, then approaches, drawing near ever so slowly, completely calm and confident, as if to assure everyone that he's not a threat. Taylor moves to protect Caitlin, but Alex holds him back.

"It's okay. Trust me," he assures him and the others.

The great guardian of the forest, the king set below his towering queen whose roots reach all the way down into the very heart of the forest kingdom, bends down and licks the afterbirth from the wailing child. The newborn is calmed by the act, as if comforted, momentarily ceasing her crying. Caitlin reaches out slowly, entirely unafraid, being visited by the messenger of her dreams. She gently brushes the muzzle of the king. Everyone else is frozen in place, the new-coming elders in particular stunned, as if disbelieving their own eyes, Jacob having handed Caitlin her baby just before falling backwards into the stream. He'd been immersed in his duty and noticed the elk last, when he was but feet from him. 'He *has*

to be the biggest elk on Earth,' Alex thinks. 'And look at those antlers... they must be ten feet across...'

Moving away from the child, who immediately begins to cry once more, the elk approaches Delaney, who stands apart from everyone else, on the opposite side of the stream. She looks frightened at first, but holds her ground in the face of the imposing yet curiously pacifying creature. As he draws within reach of her, the elk lowers his face towards the silver urn, taking a series of deep breaths through his nostrils, as if detecting and communing with its contents. He then stands there, an arm's length away, and waits as Delaney reaches out for him, ever so slowly. As soon as she rests her hand upon his head, at the base of the antlers, he lets out a little huff, then moves away, back upstream in the direction from which he came, very gradually at first, then trotting, then gracefully bounding into the absorbing brush.

As the small group relishes the magic of the visitation, now drawn in tightly around the baby girl, it's as if she's become a beacon, pulling them all together. In this moment Alex thinks of the most recent batch of 'Empathy Elixir,' what he's christened the brew of The Bonding Berry and other ingredients added to the fermenting batch of earthy, sweet solution, having waited for the right moment to introduce it to everyone. With the arrival of Delaney and the newborn, both honored by The Forest King, *now is the time*. Descending to the base of the falls, Anita is emerging from the cave, her face awash with wonder.

"I can't believe it..." she utters.

"I know." He hurries over and grabs the container. "Come back up with me, there's much more disbelief to be had."

Anita and Alex ascend back up to the group, all of whom surround the

baby, whom Caitlin has christened Hope. The newborn is quiet now, suckling softly, everyone watching with placid looks on their faces. The sun starting to set upstream, the soft levitating lights Alex has seen before, but has been unable to identify, unsure if they're fireflies or miniature fairies, or some other otherworldly phenomenon, begin displacing the butterflies, providing a soft, comforting illumination of the heartening scene. Alex takes a sip of the elixir, then starts to pass it around. Everyone partakes, so caught up in the feeling of the moment that few even question what it is that they're imbibing. Delaney, sitting next to Alex on one of the exposed roots of the tree, asks him:

"Is this the stuff that connects you to the forest, and to whomever you're drinking with?" Caitlin must have told her about the experience.

"Yes."

As the container is passed to her, she being the last to receive it, she removes a small metal cup from the backpack that she brought with her, filled with supplies, including containers for the gathering of the medicinal plants of the area, many of which Alex imagines can't be found anywhere else on Earth. To Alex's surprise, she then opens the silver urn and, turning it carefully on its side, pours a small amount of her mother's ashes into the cup. She then pours some of the elixir in with it, and begins to swirl it around. After a full minute of mixing them together in this manner, she downs the mixture with one big gulp. Soon thereafter the transcendence overtakes them all, paving the way for them to visit one another, *as* one another.

Alex is Bella, with her endearing sense of humor, tempered by her worrisome thoughts of her father, and of family members living in the New Orleans area whom she hasn't seen since she was a little kid, when she and her father were granted leave to assist them in the aftermath of Hurricane

Katrina. She lets go of her worry, accepting that it's *here* that she's meant to be, not there. She'll find a way to help them soon enough.

He's Madilyn, with her potent mind's eye, able to visualize and channel creation in the most magnificent, purest of manners. She thinks of a boy whom she met on her last visit to Salem, and how she wants to bring him here, to share this place with him, much as Alex thought of sharing it with Miranda, and how she can no longer be sated by the study of scripture, but wants to create, and to help others do the same.

Jennifer and Jacob think of one another. They're in love. And they both have a depth of feeling for Alex which surprises him, in the best of ways. There's something profound there, a strong sense of history and connection, that he can't quite comprehend. They're both now caught between worlds, frightened of what that means, yet, in this moment at least, confident that it'll resolve itself as it's meant to.

Taylor feels much the same way as they do about the widening schism in the community, and also feels much as Alex does. He *desperately* wants love. Miranda swims through his mind in a similar manner as she swims through Alex's, as if she's riding a rising tide that they're powerless to contain; like it's inevitable that she'll crash into and disintegrate them, taking their deconstructed selves out to sea, never to be whole or return to the safety of shore again.

David thinks of his wife, of sharing this place with her, and of how much he wants to write, especially after having reviewed Alex's work, knowing that he, too, has more to contribute, and shouldn't allow himself to be confined by his duties as an elder and a teacher. 'You can do more,' he hears. 'Don't *think* it. *Know* it.' But it's Delaney's passion that's been particularly stoked by the enchanted elixir.

She embraces a series of ghostly figures, likely her mother and other long lost relatives, and is more fixatedly introverted in her experience than the rest of them, all of whom sense her and the fervor unfolding in her heart and mind at this moment, and yet are entirely content to leave her to her inward travails, sensing that they're as powerfully transformative as they are painful, like the butterfly fighting to break through its chrysalis, finding its full form in the process. Then there's Caitlin.

Needing this place more than most, for her heart senses that the love to be lived here is more complete, more supportive, than anything she can find at the community she's leaving behind, her sense is of old, constricting walls being torn down, on the other side of which she'll finally be able to take full breaths, and to live a full life. She sees both herself and her daughter, Hope, and the rest of them, living as one. They walk amongst the creatures of the forest as one big, extended family, the creatures acting as her limitless protectors and guides, leading both her and Hope's growth towards the greatest version of themselves, like mythical Sherpas leading them up their own version of Everest. In Caitlin's heart and mind she flies away from past traumas, from Hope's abusive, deceased father, who can no longer plague her, and moves towards a bright future, like fleeing a nighttime frigidity towards the sublime warmth of the rising sun.

Each of them are now connected to Hope, who seems as a seed having just been planted in the most fertile of soil, forever to be watched over by the very real magicians of this land, living in league not only with The Great Mother under whose protection they sit, and The Forest King who just welcomed Hope into life, but with every creature of this realm, most of whom they can't see, yet all of whom they can *feel*. The sense of it goes on for almost half an hour, each of them swimming into and through the other, overlapping as if rivulets running between and binding together, coalescing as the confluence of streams unifying to create a river, with their combined Self set out before them, whispering to them

all: *I am as the ocean, the forever welcoming, receiving, remaking bay.*

Just as the group decides that it's time to go back down to the cave and retire for the night, they hear voices in the background. In the distance, coming from the direction of the village, the sound of crashing brush, then the sight of torches, burning closer, and closer.

"Shhhh," Alex says, realizing they're the target of pitchfork-wielding, angry villagers insulted by their departure, likely led by one or many enflaming the mob mentality. "They won't find us if we don't let them."

The torch-bearers fast draw near. Alex thinks he can make out some of their voices, including Libby and Nathan's. There are a dozen or so of them. At one point it appears that the invading force will run into the stream, no more than fifty yards from where Alex and his group are currently huddled together. Then someone, Libby, Alex believes, says:

"I swear it was around here somewhere..."

Seconds later Alex catches sight of a trio of elk cows running downhill through the brush in the distance, to which a man, Alex thinks it's Nathan, responds:

"I think I heard something over there..." and they veer off in the wrong direction, downhill, towards the trio, on a trajectory that will lead them away from the falls. The group sits there, silently, a mix of fear and the intertwined passion of the Empathy Elixir slowly passing from them. Taylor suddenly breaks the silence:

"I have something I have to do. I made a promise. But don't worry, I'll keep the secret. I'll lead them away, and I'll be back soon!"

With that, and with a few cries of concern from the others, Taylor runs not in the direction which the torch-bearers last took, but back in the direction from which they came, towards the village.

They all sit there for a good ten minutes after that, coming down off of their collective, interconnected high, wary of doing anything that might attract the attention of the intruders. Then they help Caitlin to her feet, and move back down to the base of the falls and into the cave. Once inside, everyone looks at one another, the queer smiles upon their faces seeming to say: *'Now I know you.'* Content and ready for rest, they move methodically about, exploring the niches, looking at Alex's books, admiring Madilyn's revelations on the walls, each ready to give bunk preference to the other.

Delaney appears different than the rest, as though she's been through an ordeal. Her face flush and full of tears, Alex almost asks her about it, but decides not to. *'She'll talk to me when she's ready,'* he decides. As he has the thought she looks at him and smiles through the pain, as if she heard him having it. *'The residuals from the elixir, no doubt,'* he thinks, returning the smile, wishing that he could embrace her.

Before heading to bed, Alex is beckoned to one final task for the day: the baptism. He and Caitlin carry Hope to The Blue Pool, where they wash and swaddle her. Though he's becoming uncomfortable with retracing old, stultifying steps, he knows what Caitlin wants, and so, after carefully pouring the warm water over the top of Hope's head using one of the other recently discovered wooden containers, he does the sign of the cross on her forehead with his wet forefinger.

"By these holy waters may you be mated with Spirit, and with every creation hatched from Its infinite intelligence. May It watch over you, and guide you to the greatest, fullest form you seek to find."

Early the next morning Alex is awakened by Taylor, who beckons him to rise and follow him out of the cave.

"I had a hard time finding my way back here," he tells Alex between heavy breaths, who immediately wonders at the meaning of this difficulty. "I'm not sure if you want this, but I have a letter from Miranda."

Alex's heart leaps as he receives and unfolds the letter, thinking:

'Has she had a change of heart?'

The letter, more a note, reads simply:

Please come back to the village. I'll meet you at the ancient elm. We have to talk.



**THE DAMNATION
&
THE CONFLAGRATION**

“Don’t go,” Jennifer warns, backed by Jacob. They’ve pulled Alex aside as he prepares to return to the village. “I doubt that Taylor is setting you up, but it’s still way too risky. Tensions were high when we decided to leave, and if the near invasion last night is any indication, the village must be on edge. Let Jacob and I go back and check things out first. We can try to pacify them; take some of the pressure off.”

He knows that they’re right. It’s simply too good to be true, that Miranda wants to engage him for any reason that he’d find favorable. It’s delusional to even entertain the *possibility* that she’s decided that she was wrong; that she regrets betraying him, tearing him apart and forcing him to flee. But just the *thought* of it, the idea that she’s put down her backstabbing blade and realized what he’s long known: *He loves her far more than any of them, and would instantly forgive her transgressions.*

Alex knows that this makes him weak; makes him needy. He doesn’t care. Besides, perhaps knowing, and being able to admit, that love is needed represents as much strength as weakness. And a part of him, a *big* part of him, still loves her; still remembers all the flirtation, the fun of being around her, the fun of being *with* her. He wants more, wants her to be at the heart of his everyday life, and he’s willing to risk whatever is left of himself to turn that desire into a reality, as much of an unrealizable fantasy as that likely is.

A number of the others want to go with him to lend their support, and to protect him from further persecution. He won’t have it.

“This is *my* fight. If it ends badly, so be it. Stay here and help Caitlin and Hope. Protect this place. If there’s even a chance of reconciliation with her and the rest of them, I have to take it. Miranda and I have too much left between us... she *must* know that. With any luck, such a realization has

compelled her to reach out to me. She's what I *really* want. She belongs here, with me. I'll never be complete without her."

He thinks of Delaney as he says this. But, looking at her, she's lost in her own ruminations, riven by some manner of internal strife. She's removed a large knife from her backpack and has begun whittling the end of a large, straight limb, as if sharpening it. Alex imagines that she's preparing to hunt, or perhaps attempt to spear a fish from the pool beneath the falls. He doesn't ask. Putting the final touches on his peace treaty, he rolls it up like a scroll, stuffs it into his shirt, and heads out. Twenty minutes later he's back where he never thought he'd be again.

Approaching the final stretch of his village encroachment as cautiously as possible, he sees Miranda leaning against the backside of the great elm, facing into the forest, awaiting his arrival at the very spot where they've met countless times before. She's still a good fifty yards off when, passing between two large, fallen trees, something suddenly catches his ankle, and before he knows it he's propelled up off his feet and flipped upside down. He sees Miranda in the distance. She's noticed him, and is moving in his direction, *slowly*. He's about to cry out for her assistance when something strikes his head, then blackness.

Gradually coming to, his first heart-rending thought is of Miranda. *That's it*. The icing on the cake. The treachery is complete. The deceit has reached its zenith. The Devil has won. So badly did he need the void to be filled, and so needily had he clung to the imagining of Miranda being the answer, that he'd blinded himself to her intent, to her immaturity, to her sheer *inability* to be the answer, like reaching for the rose only to be stabbed by its thorns, the nectar-laced scent and sight of its red, impassioned promise blinding him to the bloody price of deigning to seize it for himself.

There's no knowing how much time has passed. Judging by the sun, a couple of hours. Blood trickles from his brow, some of it stuck to his left temple. And something else is plastered to the rest of his face, caked and cracking. Mud? He's gagged, something stuffed down his throat, tied into place around his head. He knows *where* he is, but not how he got here, though the drag marks on the ground are a clue. His attackers, wearing hoodies and masks made from sheets, are wiping the drag marks away with limbs torn from trees, all the leaves attached, like natural brooms. *They moved him here. They're setting him up.*

He's where he was a week ago or so, after his flight from the church, having watched Libby bewitching Miranda, instinctively sensing that something sinister was afoot. This is the place he found himself after halting his flight, near to the upside down triangle with inner eye carved into the twisted tree, where he'd had the distinct impression that the crows bouncing between its limbs were contemplating tearing him apart.

Seated on hard, compact earth, he's bound to something extremely heavy, that he can't budge, set behind him. He's been tied to it by someone who knows their knots. Surrounding him is a circle formed by a shallow trench dug into the dirt, perhaps thirty feet in circumference, with black iron candle holders spaced equally along it, each of them plastered with cooled, dried, red wax drippings.

Set in the center of the circle, with a pentagram dug in at the same depth, he and whatever he's bound to are at the center of the star. Most disturbingly, there's a dead, desecrated squirrel set in front of him. The poor animal has been massacred. Guttled, its intestines have been wrapped around its neck. Its body has been disarticulated, all five of its limbs, including its tail, torn and spaced apart from its torso.

Moments later one of the hooded attackers approaches with an armful of tinder, and begins piling it up in front of him, preparing a small fire. Another of his attackers is placing stones in the surrounding circular trench. After starting the fire, its starter removes her mask. It's Libby.

"Poor Alex," she says with a self-satisfied smirk. "You could've become a leader of this place. The next head of the church. *Father Alex*. Instead, you're the antagonist in your own story. The corrupter. The deceiver. Just another man whose ego and sex drive has run away with him, pushing him to try to seduce young women, *long* after they've made it clear that they want nothing to do with him. A sex-craved, godless egomaniac."

The fire breathing to life, she holds the torso of the dead squirrel over the flames, as if she's torturing it, though, thankfully of course, it feels nothing. Dropping the singed, butchered creature to one side, she then pulls some papers from the large front pocket of her hoody, showing them to him. They're the letters that Miranda and Sophie had written to him. *She took them from the cave, or convinced Miranda to do so*. Smiling at his recognition of this fact patently displayed in his eyes, she lights them with the flames one by one, dropping them into the fire. Reaching back into her hoodie, she pulls out a separate set of papers, one of which she reads aloud:

"Those that listen to their hearts, and hear it clearly, and translate it accurately, are as The Prophet, speaking for God, conducting the divine language through the core of their shared being, the self heeding The Self. Thus, there can never be one prophet, one speaker for God, but countless many, embodying his emissaries to the extent which they clearly hear and accurately translate the voice of their hearts, renouncing their own egos, their small selves, thereby becoming one with The Self."

“Awwww, how sweet Alex,” she says, mocking him. “Not exactly the Christian perspective, though. I mean, c’mon, we can’t have everyone saving everyone else, now can we? That’s like, what, spiritual anarchy or something...” Libby lets out a little snort. “He’s a socialist too! I’m confused, are you aiming to be the next Christ, or the next Stalin? Perhaps you’d like to combine the two?,” she adds with a snicker.

Libby starts scanning him up and down with her eyes, and not because she’s checking him out. Through his muffled, furious cries, she approaches and pats him down, finding and removing the peace treaty. Not even bothering to unfold and examine it, she stares menacingly into his eyes while tossing it into the flames. As furious as he is deflated by her destruction of his work, a line from Plato enters his mind: “Those that destroy good writing destroy reason itself.”

She then shows him more of the papers that she brought with her, those which Jacob had given to Father Andrew and the other elders on the inner council back when he was, rather than being considered a blight to be burned away, considered a source of communal pride. Father Andrew made him feel like he was the missing link. How easily the tide may turn absent the bulwark of integrity. Once bound for print and distribution, his words are now more fuel for the fires of history, its smoke concealing the heretical truths buried beneath the ash.

“Still, I’m sure it would’ve made an interesting read,” Libby deadpans, “from the heathen standpoint, at least.”

Finishing the burn, the other three with her having completed the task of filling the semi-circle in front of him with stones, she mocks:

“What’s that you say? You’re planning your own holy war? You’re here to save us all? Well, let’s see what God’s people have to say about that. Let me go and gather them for your speech, okay?”

Then she and her co-conspirators depart, leaving him alone. Try as he does, he can’t even loosen his binds, much less free himself. They’re so tight, the coarse threads dug into his arms and bound so forcefully around his chest, that he can scarcely breathe.

Seeing one of his white butterflies, like a messenger of hope, descend into his vision, as if dropping down from Heaven, it’s snatched out of the air by a crow. The large black bird lands on the tree directly opposite him, soon joined by several others. They bounce about, eyeing him. He imagines that they’re working themselves up, stoking their appetites, preparing to peck him down to his bones.

Sometime later, it must’ve been at least half an hour of futile struggle and desperate thought, he hears footsteps approaching.

“My God, Libby, was binding and gagging him entirely necessary?”

Father Andrew and Libby reveal themselves, Andrew holding a stack of papers in his hands.

“I smelled smoke and I followed it,” she lies. “Then I stumbled upon this place and interrupted some sort of... ghastly ritual he was performing. He’d killed that poor creature there and spread its blood on his face, and was dropping it in and out of the fire, celebrating the smell of its burning flesh. When he noticed me, his... *ceremony* interrupted, he attacked me! Thankfully I was with Nathan, and together we were able to subdue him. While we were tying him up to that... hideously demonic sculpture

that he's bound to, he was yelling something about how I'd turned Miranda and Sophie against him, and made the village think awful things about him, and caused his expulsion from the church. Then he started chanting in some horrible language, staring at me the whole time! He was casting a spell on me, I know he was, so I gagged him too, so he couldn't hurt me with his black tongue! He's dangerous, Dad!"

Alex attempts to dispute the falsehoods, but is unable through the gag. Andrew approaches to remove the gag.

"Don't, Dad! He's a deceiver!"

With considerable effort, as it's tied so tightly around his mouth that it tears at his flesh, Father Andrew removes the gag, upon which Alex immediately begins to profess his innocence. But just as he begins formulating his response to Libby's falsehoods, Miranda, Nathan, Morgaine and Janessa approach, leading the rest of the villagers to the spot. As they slowly gather around, Andrew looking down at Alex with a mix of anger and confusion, Libby says softly:

"We *have* to follow the rules, Dad. When one has done the things that *he* has done, we *must* have justice! We must purify the community of his foulness! Read the list that we put together last night."

The villagers full of murmurs, everyone gathering around in a semi-circle facing Alex, as if reflexively following the circle as a guide to the proceedings, obediently assembling around their leader, Father Andrew scans the papers in his hands, then slowly turns to face them. Alex's head spins. He feels as though, after the knock on the head and his taxing struggle to free himself, he may soon lose consciousness. Instead his racing

heart begins to seize, coupled with tightness in the chest exacerbated by his forceful, unyielding bonds, reminding him of the recent cardiovascular pains that he's experienced.

"Sadly, we are here today to permanently banish one of the members of our community," begins Father Andrew. "We have done our best to prevent this, offering him other accommodations and many warnings, but he's refused our help. With egregious impiety he's harassed many young women in our community. He attempted to seduce my daughter, Libby, while they were alone together in the dining hall."

"Nonsense," Alex is barely able to utter. "All of it. No... warning."

"And age means nothing to him. He wrote a love poem to Sophie, and told her that he's been dreaming about her. And he told Elizabeth that she's nice to look at. Sophie and Elizabeth are only seventeen..."

The crowd gasps, as if on cue, a few nodding in recognition, the rumors having already seduced them.

"That's *not* what happened," Alex speaks back up, a bit louder now. "The poem wasn't even *about* Sophie, the dream *wasn't* sexual, and I didn't actually say that to Elizabeth, I said it to Miranda when she told me about what Nathan said... she must've told Elizabeth, who must've complained, thinking I was preparing to make a move on her or something..."

"And Miranda, who's only nineteen, has received the worst of it," Andrew continues, talking over him. Standing just in front of the others, Miranda lowers her head, playing victim. "He's been coming onto her for months. He's taken pictures of her without her consent, and called her

a slut, and talked about her birth control with other members of the community, violating her privacy, and written her *many*, many letters, even though she repeatedly asked him to stop...”

Father Andrew pulls the evidence from his stack of papers, passing them to Libby, who passes them to Janessa, who hands them to Nathan, at the end of the semi-circle. Soon they’re making their way around the community, everyone facing Alex, wearing the affect of indignation.

“That’s such bullshit!,” Alex half-cries. “She never *once* asked me to stop! It was the *opposite*, in fact! And what happened to my letters from *her*? What about the countless times she hit on me in church? What about the fact that she and Sophie were always around me, always flirting with me and encouraging my writing, especially when it was about them! An inconvenient truth? Where’s *my* defense? What’s the cost of your lies? Your treachery? You’ll take me down, you’ll tell yourselves that you overcame evil, but you’ll pay the price eventually, for God sees your injustices, and has a way of accounting for them...”

Andrew continues to speak over him, so that they speak simultaneously, Andrew raising his voice to compensate. No one is listening to Alex. *Groupthink*. This is all but a formality; a show to pander to the semblance of justice. They’ve already made up their minds.

“And here, in this place,” Andrew continues, “I fear he’s been brewing his dark powers. For Miranda tells a chilling tale of her time with him. Miranda, will you tell us what he did to you most recently?”

“I know nothing of this place!,” Alex’s defense falls on deaf ears. “This is *Libby’s* den! *Libby’s* doing!”

Miranda approaches, stepping between Alex and the villagers. Briefly looking Alex in the eyes, she quickly looks away. Softly at first, then with the volume of her voice rising in competition with Alex's futilely-wailing self-defense, she testifies:

"He drugged me, or cast a spell on me, or hypnotized me... I can't remember what happened, not clearly, at least. Who knows what foul things he did to me. I remember being there, but it wasn't *really* me. Like I wasn't in control of myself. There was a spell over me, controlling me. It made me think that he was the only thing that I wanted; like he was *everything*. He deceived me into having sex with him. And I felt weird the whole next day. My skin was tingling. And..." she pauses, building the dramatic effect... "I haven't had my period yet."

The villagers are horrified by this attestation, many speaking angrily amongst themselves. Libby further riles them up:

"He cast a demonic spell on you, because he's a Satanist!" She turns from Miranda to face the crowd. "He planted the seed of the Devil in her, to be born as the antichrist through some dark sexual ceremony! It's the work of the Devil! Just look at what he writes! He thinks he has the right to redefine God! He thinks he's a prophet, too, he told me so before you all got here! Oh, the foul, heathen arrogance of it!"

"You told me that you admired that writing, and that you wanted to write like me, and now you're concealing the truth and twisting the narrative to suit your self-righteous, egotistic agenda. You're the duplicitous, demonic one here." Head hanging, his voice has softened, for he's now certain that he's been speaking to himself the entire time.

"Like Satan, he believes that he *is* God," Libby continues, stealing

the pulpit from her father, Alex's words only further igniting her, "and that he should rule *as* God! He's struck a deal with the Devil! Just look at his match in scripture. He's been given the slippery tongue of the deceiver, and the need to conquer us, to take over our community, and to claim our women as his own! Look how he's tried to prey upon us all! So many have come to me, saying he's trying to seduce them! If we let him go he'll end up harassing every woman here, demanding sex!"

"Nonsense. You've coached them to believe they're victims of the older man. I've harassed no one. I can tell you exactly what happened in every case, and disprove every one of your empty accusations." Alex's voice is barely audible now, a whisper spoken to no one and everyone.

"The worst crime of all," Andrew attempts to regain control of the proceedings, "is that, by his writing, he means to corrupt our faith. He writes as though he *is* The Messiah, and acts to cut our community in two. I fear that if we don't banish him for good he'll continue to work from the shadows to cast doubt upon our church, and to destroy the godliness of our community!"

"I heard him say it!," Morgaine suddenly shouts. "I heard him proclaim himself The Second Coming! Trying to have sex with girls while committing the greatest blasphemy there is! He's a monster!"

The villagers now in a furor, Libby smelling blood, her egotistic conquest nearing completion, she finds more fuel for the fire:

"And he let Caitlin's abusive ex into our community! I know he did! He let him in, then intervened to make himself look like her savior, all to gain our trust and respect, so that he would be better positioned to poison us from within, and corrupt our wayward elders, and tear us apart! He's

the plotter! The great deceiver! If we let him go he'll come back to destroy us one way or another! He'll tell everyone in Babylon where we are! He must be stopped, *permanently!*"

At this moment Jacob and Jennifer enter the proceedings, having come from the falls into the emptied village, and then followed the trail of commotion. Attempting to squeeze their way through the crowd, they futilely try talking some sense into the frenzied mob. Nathan and a few of the others hold them back, blocking their intercession.

"Please, let him go!," Jennifer shouts. "He's my son!"

"He's *our* son!," Jacob admits, finally moved to tell the truth in front of his wife and 'legitimate son.'

"See, he was conceived in sin, out of wedlock, destined to do evil!," Libby screams, gleefully breathing oxygen onto the pyre that she's built, her self-satisfaction rising with the fury of its flames.

"All in favor of permanently banishing Alex?," Andrew shouts, sensing he's soon to completely lose control of the trial, fearing that God is a fast fleeting presence in the proceedings.

The raising of hands from the community represents a near consensus.

"That's not good enough, Father Andrew!," Libby shouts in response. "He'll just come back with his traitorous friends, or with the Babylonians, to destroy us! He'll destroy everything we've built! Sometimes to protect his flock the shepherd must kill the wolf!"

With this, Libby looks over at Miranda in a startling manner, as if projecting something from her eyes, giving her a psychic command. Miranda's eyes glaze over. She steps slowly over from her position in front of the crowd towards the semi-circle, reaches for a stone, then turns to face Alex again. A few of the other community members, including Nathan, Sophie, Morgaine and Elizabeth, as well as many amongst the more zealous of the adults, led by Janessa, reach down to pluck their own projectiles from the shallow circular trench.

Making eye contact with Miranda, Alex says: "You never did anything but encourage me. Everything you ever said to me only strung me along, enflaming my desire. Then in one fell swoop you block my ability to talk to you and stab me in the back as deeply as you can. What does that make you? Anything *but* someone free from sin!" Sobbing, he looks up into the sky, his last words: "Forgive them Father, for they..."

Miranda casts the first stone. Alex's heart dies before it stops beating. Jennifer and Jacob screaming in terror, the stone is launched as if by a demonic force, with ruthless power and accuracy. Yet this is an accidental act of mercy, as it knocks him unconscious. A hail of stones follow from all around the witches' spell-casting circle, hurled viciously by those self-proclaiming to live by the ethics of the great, compassionate pacifist. Alex's body is grotesquely dented from every angle, blood and pus spewing forth as the rocks fall around him. His heart slows, then stops beating. As it gives out, nature descends.

Father Andrew falling to his knees, shocked at the outcome, his faith passing from him like the breath from his lungs, he's the first to hear the sound. It's the sound of a large cat, half-growl, half-screech, high in pitch, deeply resonant in tone. First one, then another, and another, the growls growing deeper, the screeches more piercing. Libby and Miranda are the

first to run.

Bounding from the brush behind Alex's pockmarked corpse, two of the three cougars fall upon the crowd with ferocious frenzy, biting and clawing, slashing with massive forearms punctuated by razor-sharp claws, finishing every assault with a crushing clench of the throat. As the screaming villagers disperse in all directions, the third cougar, the largest, walks calmly up to Alex's body, sniffing it, licking his bloodied arm. He then approaches Andrew, who's on his knees, uncaring of the outcome, knowing it's over. But the alpha cougar only looks at him, letting out a last growl before springing past him after the others.

Birds and bees, badgers and bears, swarms of wasps sweeping in as if every nest for miles has suddenly been stepped on at once, all fall upon the villagers, now running for their lives. As Jennifer and Jacob, left unharmed by nature's retribution, move towards the crumpled body of their son, near to a hundred villagers, all of whom had cast a stone, run back towards the sanctuary of their village, most praying desperately to be spared from the evil they believe is chasing them, entirely oblivious to the fact that evil is a beast that we feed or starve within ourselves, strengthening or weakening it, silencing or calling upon it to the extent which we feed and heed it. And they all just threw the insatiable beast a bevy of a feast.

As they converge upon their assumed sanctuary, the villagers are shocked to find it up in flames, with only the church itself yet left unscathed. And there stands Delaney, a torch in one hand, a self-carved spear in the other, standing in the center of town. She's been awaiting their arrival, relishing the chance to take from them, too, all that they hold dear, and believed to have been untouchable.

“You murdered my mother for having her own beliefs!” she screams, her hair a mess, her face covered in a mix of mud and the reddish hue of the lichen that she’s smashed and spread across her skin like the war paint of The Star People. “Just as your ilk murdered my great, great grandfather for believing in a divinity that *doesn’t* wear the cross!”

Her rage is such that she represents not only her mother, possessed of the spirit of the forest that couldn’t reconcile itself with the encroaching Christians, but also ‘D,’ the woman for whom she was named, based upon a dream her mother once had. She’d communed with them both through the Empathy Elixir the night before. In her vision she saw what they did to Jedidiah, and to the elder Delaney, her namesake, forced to flee into the woods, giving birth to she who would one day be stolen away by the *true* savages, the white invaders, taken back to Salem after The Star People were nearly wiped out, their remnants forced to cast their essence into the creatures of the forest for safe keeping.

“You’ve now murdered an apostle of the truer, fuller faith! You don’t deserve to live in these woods!”

Chaos ensues, most scattering into the surrounding forest, screaming in abject fear, their entire world burning to the ground, with no safety left, nature’s redemption hot on their heels. Seeing Zander, whom, along with Father Andrew, oversaw the fatal failed exorcism of her mother, the wild woman who’d refused to let go of the guiding influence that had planted itself within her, Delaney marches straight at him. He freezes, panicking, not knowing what to do. Slowly backing his way up the front steps of the church until he’s backed himself into the double doors, he has nowhere left to go.

“Delaney... *what the...* you are a sister of God, and He commands

you to...”

Dropping the torch on the front porch of the church, she thrusts the spear forward with both hands with such force that it passes all the way through the space between his chest and his stomach, lodging between the two wooden doors set behind him. Her target gurgling and spitting up blood, she twists and turns the spear, pushing it forward until it burrows a little hole between the doors. Leaning forward, she lets go of the spear and holds his head up with her hands, moving her face to within inches of his, accepting the blood and spittle coming from her victim as if it's an offering of rain to her parched piece of earth. She waits for the life to leave his eyes, its gradual drain filling her in turn, then lets go of his slumping head. Removing her spear, her victim crumples lifelessly to the wooden floor, fast consumed by fire.

Walking away as the church begins to burn from the porch up, Delaney heads towards the witches' circle set around Alex's body, determined to pay homage to he who has reminded her of herself, and of the *true* sanctity of life; of a spiritual magic which Christianity has forgotten, if ever it knew it, burying it beneath its manmade corruptions. Moving towards Alex, she passes by Father Andrew, saying nothing, giving him but a glance. For, although she blames him for the death of her mother even more than Zander, his protégé, she senses his anguish, and his impending demise, and decides that his suffering and looming fate shall be her retribution.

Arriving to see Jennifer and Jacob crying, devastated by the violent death of their son, Delaney stands there, her heart aching, filled with fury. She's soon joined by all those who'd taken refuge in the sanctuary of The Cave of The Blue Pool, called upon by The Wordless Voice, emerging from the forest, drawn to Alex for the final time. Back in the village Father Andrew walks into his burning church and locks the door behind him.

10

**THE SLIPPING OF THE SKIN
&
THE SCENT OF THE SNAKE**

Together, the survivors of the schism, The New Star People, untie Alex from the altar of the witch and carry him back along the brook toward the falls. While transporting him, they sense how light he feels, as if being supported by the energy of the forest, the ferns over which he's being carried casting waves of energy helping to hold him up. Upon arrival, a spawn of peculiar white moths hover around the falls, and are especially thick at the mouth of the cave. Adding to their effect, the curious white fairy fireflies are everywhere. A white barn owl hoots from high up in The Elder Fir. Inside, The Blue Pool glows brighter than ever, gently pulsating.

Placing Alex's body in the pool, Delaney speaks up:

"There is no death in the green.
All life is remade by decadent decay.
Each of its fallen forms forever reformed.
The woodland wonders never ceasing to be.

Here is The King of the Forest eternally kept.
He made of the endlessly remade he protects.
He that sees and lives as if the leaves of trees.
Fall one, fall countless many, yet ever shall he reign."

She doesn't know *how* she knows the words, only that she knows them, and is compelled to speak them, honoring the entreaty of a mysterious ancient ally. Everyone but Delaney, Jennifer and Jacob leave after a time, heading outside to light a fire and pay their respects through their remembrances. The three remaining New Star People clean Alex's body in the pool, Jennifer and Jacob trying not to give into the anguish of seeing him in this horrifying state, then set him upon the stones beside it. Delaney removes a cluster of the crimson lichen from the surrounding stones.

Wetting her hands in The Blue Pool, she rubs the lichen between her hands for a minute, creating a blood-colored poultice, which she refreshes as she conducts the sacred ceremony that she's being instinctively beckoned to perform. First she rubs the poultice in his hair, focusing on the crown of his head, whereupon she makes several circular motions. Proceeding down his center, she produces the same circular pattern at each point, first in the center of his forehead, creating a richly red circle, then doing the same on his throat, the center of his chest, the space between his stomach and his chest, a spot just below his waist, and finishing by rubbing beneath his loins, completing the sacred seven-fold circuit.

She, Jennifer and Jacob then kiss him softly on the circle in the center of his forehead before removing themselves to join in the remembrances, each now knowing that honor requires that they protect this sanctuary over which Alex was sent to preside. They walk out of the cave arm in arm, Alex's parents softly sobbing, Delaney filled with a measure of ferocity, hearing an inner voice tell her that it's not yet over.

Late that night it begins to rain. Slow and steady at first, then in a downpour, matched by thunder and lightning. In the smoldering village a couple miles away, the rain puts out the last remnants of the fire, as if called upon to protect the forest from its possible spread. The creatures of the forest had similarly been called upon to prevent the triumph and spread of those that so painfully reminded The Star People of past sins, waiting until The Barnes Clan proved itself to be the inheritor of just such a perpetuating force for unforgivable transgressions before delivering their own verdict. Everyone that cast a stone has perished, except Libby and Miranda, who've disappeared.

In the twilight hours, only Delaney witnesses the miracle, all others

remaining asleep. Dreaming, she consumes more of the Empathy Elixir before being roused from her dream while still *in* her dream, the elk breathing her awake. Immediately upon opening her eyes, she sees him: the human embodiment of The Forest King that she's heard the others speak of so many times now, and whom Madilyn's work revealed on the wall just down the passageway. He strides out of the innermost sanctum, coming from The Cavern of The Blue Pool, moving with purpose, one hand free, the other clutching a rolled-up scroll. Tucking the scroll into a leather belt around his waist tying his elk fur tunic together, he makes eye contact with her as he walks past. She can't be certain if it's Alex or not. It's like he's *in* there, his eyes a *part* of those eyes, but that others are as well. *Many others*. Waking and rising from her niche as he exits the cave, she runs into the cavern. *Alex's body is gone*.

She emerges from the cave just in time to see The Forest King effortlessly ascend the cliff, topping the falls. Hurrying to keep up, she's able to remain on his heels, barely keeping him in sight. He's zig-zagging a path down the stream leading from the falls, then cuts east, towards the smoking village. Closing her eyes, she sees what he sees.

The Forest King is having visions from the night before, and he's using them to track something. His sight is that of *all* The Star People, existing within the animals of the forest, and of The New Star People, his visionary powers bouncing from one perspective to the next, catching little glimpses of Miranda as each of them passed her during her flight from the village only hours before. Suddenly, The Forest King stops. Delaney, unafraid, comes near to him to see what he's looking at.

Crying and quivering with fear, her pretty face scratched from diving into and concealing herself behind branches, Miranda emerges from the brush, knowing she's been caught. Snatching the spear from Delaney, The

Forest King approaches Miranda slowly, backing her into a tree.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” Miranda cries. “I didn’t mean it! She must’ve cast a spell on me! I didn’t *want* to throw the stone! I swear it! I didn’t mean for this to happen... I *really* liked him; maybe even loved him!”

Her back against the trunk of the tree, The Forest King thrusts the spear forward, stopping the deadly point, still stained with Zander’s blood, but a few centimeters from Miranda’s throat, her head up and back, eyes closed. She opens her eyes, panting. Removing his right hand from the spear, The Forest King reaches out, placing it over her heart. In this instant feelings start pouring out of him and passing into her, one after the other. Elation and deflation, ecstasy and agony, heart pangs and heart break, destruction and resurrection. She’s overwhelmed by it, feeling everything that Alex had; any feeling that had anything to do with her; any and every convergence of their two hearts.

She knows his love. She knows his pain. And, from his final moments, she knows what it is to die of heartbreak before bodily death.

Communication complete, The Forest King steps back, retracting the spear. Turning, he steps back towards Delaney. Removing the rolled scroll from his belt, he hands it to her. Then he removes and places his antler crown upon her head, and hands her the spear, bowing ever so slightly as he does so. Finally, he removes his belt and the elk suit. It falls to the ground. Naked, they see him fully.

He’s Alex. But he’s also *all* The Star People, and The New Star People, and the next generation to come, starting with Hope. Delaney can feel them all. He smiles at her. A big, beaming smile of profound joy and sorrow, his tearful eyes taking on the interconnected totality of the

emotional spectrum, effortlessly pouring forth from his wise, wizened countenance. Then he walks past her. As Delaney turns to watch, he dissolves into the ferns, whereupon a cloud of white moths floats up and flies away in every direction, his spirit reabsorbed by the manifold wonders from which it came, and shall forever be renewed.

Delaney unfolds the scroll. She doesn't know how, but she can read it. It's a "Star Map for The Woman of the Wood." It tells the past of The Star People, of the natives to whom her mother's heart had belonged, and foretells their future, growing like a vast network of branching mycelium hidden in Mother Nature, expanding outwards beneath the surface from Her sacred heart to unite the holy, and to recycle all rot.

"Who... *what* was that?," Miranda gasps in the background.

Delaney turns to face her, filled with fury, yet a fury that's been tempered by the love and forgiveness demonstrated by Alex through The Forest King, of whom he's now an everlasting part.

"Can I... *May* I see Alex?," Miranda asks, sobbing.

"You just did."

Delaney turns and leaves, moving back towards the falls, leaving Miranda alone, in the dirt, to consider her role in ending the mortal aspect of such a good man, in what the survivors of the Barnes Clan will soon come to call 'The Miranda Act.'



Late that night, Libby having escaped to Salem and accessed the community funds, she checks into a cozy little bed and breakfast just down the street from Dudley's Bookshop. *Finally, she's where she belongs.* She can start over. She's rich, regardless of her complicity. With her wealth and cleverness, she's free from any possible responsibility for her actions. And, finally, she's free of all those who'd so long held her back.

In the middle of the night, fast asleep, with visions of her overgrown ego and its grasping, uncontainable covetousness coursing through her head, she releases her pheromones, her natural odor magnified by The Forest King, having commanded that her aroma be enhanced at the moment of Alex's death. As if summoned by a signal fire, a slew of male *Agkistrodon contortrix mokasen* slither up from their pits in the surrounding forest to find the source of the scent. A dozen make their way into town within the hour, and up, through and between the holes of the vined, wooden trellis set just below Libby's open window. Crazed with lust, they spill into her room one by one, ready to fight for their mate.

VULNERABILITY INVITES EVIL

To overcome evil you must fortify yourself against it, strengthening your weak points and eradicating as much of your sense of need and dependency as possible, sealing any of the soft spots in your armor which evil shall *always* seek to penetrate. For it's of the nature of evil to find and destroy weakness, such that, in MLK's long-bending arc of the moral universe, Life may become stronger, Satan ultimately serving God.

Thus, the war against evil always begins and ends with our battles with ourselves, such that our progress may prevent *everyone's* downfall.

APPENDIX: A TALE OF TWO CRITICS

Critic #1: *BookLife*, a subsidiary of *Publisher's Weekly*

Jameson's debut centers on a clash between ancient pagan ways and contemporary Christian society in the Blue Ridge Mountains, where the Barnes Clan, ruled by Father Andrew, eschews modern technology and enforces strict rules on relationships between men and women. The Clan seems not to know about the mysterious grotto that Alex, an almost-30-year-old writer and skeptical Clan member, discovers in the woods one day, as he's sulking about the Clan's young women, some almost half his age. Telling himself that he's simply their writing mentor, Alex shares with them his turned-on poetry, extols *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, and sends to Miranda, the oldest at 19, a letter about his morning erection. Meanwhile, Libby, Andrew's daughter, seeks to use the spell young women can cast over men like Andrew for her own purposes—and the woods whisper Alex a warning: "Beware...the...witch."

The material is incendiary, especially the themes of repression, erotic urges, young women's agency—and the protagonist's blaming them for his own lack of control. There's more to the story, including intimations of ancient pagan powers in the woods, but these relationships are its heart. Alex moans how he'd be judged for succumbing to the allurements of "the innocent young ingenue that she's actually *far* from being." Since Jameson often favors summary over scenecraft, readers don't see how Alex's relationships have developed; instead, *Holier Than Thou* offers Alex's conviction that he's been beset by temptresses, only fully dramatizing the moments when things finally get heated.

The mystery becomes not what Libby's up to but whether Alex understands that he's both creep and patsy. The novel, meanwhile, turns on visions, old-hat ones of snakes and female betrayal. The prose is appropriately archaic, sometimes lyric, sometimes strained. Highlights are weird rituals, a lost folk language, and a rousing burst of *Midsommer*-esque womanly power that can be read as horror—or as a wicked triumph.

Takeaway: Folk horror in a Christian village where a creepy writer blames young women for turning him on.

Critic #2: *Kirkus Reviews*

In this debut novel, a freethinker dredges up ancient magic in the woods outside his cultlike village. The Barnes Clan is a Christian sect that, like the Amish, eschews industrial technology. The Clan members embrace an 18th-century frontier settlement lifestyle in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia, led by their fire-and-brimstone pastor, Father Andrew. Alex was an orphan discovered in the nearby forest as a baby. Though he grew up as an adopted member of the Clan, he's always been a freethinker, reading as much as he could and scribbling his nonconformist ideas about God in his notebooks. This, coupled with his mysterious origins, makes him a figure of suspicion to many in the community. Alex has developed feelings for Miranda, one of the attractive young women who work for Father Andrew. But the pastor's daughter, Libby, has her eyes on Alex and is willing to exploit her connections to get her way. As Alex navigates the religious and romantic politics of the Clan, his investigations of a cave in the woods lead him to ancient Indigenous practices regarding the worship of a deity known as the Forest King. Will his search lead Alex to deeper knowledge, or has he unlocked something that will shatter his life forever?

Jameson's premise is a fun one, and it escalates to progressively weirder levels as things go along. Unfortunately, the author rarely writes scenes, preferring to tell the tale as present-tense exposition. The result reads like a TV series about Bible stories: "In her mid-twenties like Libby, Delaney's not only beautiful and sultrily curvaceous, but may be the most capable of all the young women, qualities which have captured the eye of all the men, granting her the power to match." The sedate prose undercuts the deeper philosophical ideas that Jameson is grappling with, and the story never becomes fully immersive. It's a shame since readers will easily imagine a more dynamic and dramatic version of the novel. An imaginative but uneven tale about a claustrophobic religious community.

My Takeaway: That's the second time that *Kirkus* has called my work "uneven," the first being with my poetry collection *Rosebud*. While I don't think this review gives due credit to the mythological, spiritual and philosophical wealth buried in this book, at least it lent some recognition of the book's value and potential, wasn't insultingly small-minded and prejudicial, and offered me some constructive criticism.

Critical Failure

Political Correctness Rules Contemporary Criticism

Part One: Progressive, True or False?

Modern Masculinism Counters False Feminism

I have a business idea for someone whom regards his or herself as politically correct and 'woke:' create an app powered by artificial intelligence that social media users can pass their potential posts through BEFORE posting them to social media; an app that judges whether or not the statement is politically correct, and is thus permissible for posting. The app can grade the political correctness of the post, and can judge the penalty to be assessed by the Political Correctness Police on a scale from, say, 'mildly insensitive' to 'worthy of cancellation.' The app can tell you which of the modern movements the statement violates, so you know which group you'd be in trouble with. You could even connect the app directly to social media sites so that the purity of the person can be continuously calculated as they continue with their righteous postings, that way we'll all know who the good, progressive, woke people are without actually having to think.

On the positive side of the two previous reviews, I have *BookLife* to thank for so clearly demonstrating how polarizing, and thereby revealing of sexism, political correctness, and other popular prejudices, *Holier Than Thou* is, likely in parallel with most of my work. Thank you for helping me realize that this attribute is core to the subconscious purpose of this provocative novella, a purpose which it possesses to a far greater degree than the vast majority of books, I'd estimate: to reveal the reader to his or her self and, in the aggregate process, to reveal the extent to which both narrow-minded

religiosity *and* narrow-minded 'wokeness' rules the moral and spiritual paradigms of not just this nation, but most globalized nations, being core to the overlap between conventional wisdom and self-righteousness, whether coming from the 'left' or the 'right.' For, from my observationally-and-contemplatively-considerate perspective, both sides are at war for the right to call themselves the rulers of false piety.

In the competition of pretend piousness between the politically correct 'woke' and the traditionally correct right-wing Christian, the problem isn't just that *neither* side is *rationally* correct (the limited capacity for reason and the manipulation of this limitation by the clever, greedy and unscrupulous is, of course, at the heart of conservatism, and most of the world's problems), and that both sides are easy to program and fail to think for themselves, and that both reflexively say what they're programmed by their respective purveyors of false piety to say, but that they force that unthinking, reflexive self-righteous standard of pre-programmed thought upon others. Both sides, in other words, are comprised of bullies and bigots forcing themselves upon others. *That's* what should be 'cancelled:' all forms of self-righteous, pre-programmed, conformity-conditioning, mentality 'thinking' that's inherently prejudiced towards, shaming and bullying of anyone else, including the minority like me who think for ourselves, rather than being told how to think and cravenly obeying the moronic mob, giving in for fear of 'cancellation,' as characteristic of today's common coward.

Hey Cancel Culture: you do realize that if we're to cancel the work of everyone who has ever done or said anything politically incorrect that it's all a matter of digging before *everyone* is cancelled and all the value of their work to humanity is discarded with the judgment against them, right? And while I'm on the 'fuck your irrational political correctness'

rant, you do realize that the inherent nature of history and causality is such that any culture that interacts with other cultures is constantly 'appropriating' from them, correct? It's one thing to appropriate and utilize inconsiderately, but to deem all appropriation as unjust is not only unjust and ludicrous in itself, but is entirely untenable and against the casual laws of history inseparable from sociology. Should every Greek like me be offended that the majority of the best of western culture was invented by us and appropriated by everyone else? Do the Italians owe us 'reparations' for the fact that Rome was built on our ideas, and that the rest of the world followed suit? To think in such a way can only encourage more hatred, division and misunderstanding. If we follow the 'woke' lead of you brain-dead, wind-up zombies, then everything and everyone is lost to judgment, and no truth can be 'appropriated' without a self-righteous assessment of its source – and this is *without* digging into the fact that the source attributed to anything is typically erroneous, for *everything* comes from the preceding. If Cancel Culture is to be just in its 'cancellation policy,' in other words, and apply its cancellations with uniformity and ubiquity, it'll ultimately lead to the cancellation of the whole of humanity.

Contained within this broad revelation of self-righteous false piety and its hidden costs, and the fact that these forces tend to compel much of our modern movements, is, relevant to the context of the subject novella, the extent to which feminism has descended into sexism amongst a large contingent of the population. This descension and mislabeling (labelling what's really a form of modernly-prevalent sexism as "feminism") blinds its possessors to the truth, and to their own prevailing prejudice; and, in the case of this book and *countless* other works, proving that such prejudice blinds its possessors to everything they might see and derive from someone's work were they *not* to possess that prejudice, as it's absurd how

much the *BookLife* critic who sparked this subsequently-expanding essay overlooked and dismissed. This project has, after all, been categorized as a work of ‘philosophical or spiritual fiction,’ and not a line in the referred review pertains to the spiritual or philosophical offerings of the novella.

The sad truth of this critique is that it’s too difficult to give those aspects of the book credit, or even due consideration, it seems, whilst minimizing and condemning the storyteller, in the same way that it’s far easier to condemn the protagonist and dismiss his story, and all the beauty and truth contained therein, than to consider his perspective within the context of that story that was thereby not *really* read. It’s far easier to avoid looking into the mirror and to reflexively condemn along popular lines, just as this writer was condemned and the looking glass was shattered and swept under the rug in the real life version of the events depicted herein.

Among ‘feminists’ like this critic, there seems to be an especially strong prejudice towards men who like young women, which, as hard as it is for them to accept, and which so many women associate with ‘creepiness,’ all ‘older’ men naturally do, by biological programming, whether admitted or not. One wonders as to the psychological causes of this particular prejudice, with many confluent contenders, including, again, a religiously-sourced, self-righteous prudery ingrained in the conventional value system and its judgment of sexual relations, a contemporarily-sourced mob mentality of reflexive judgment, a widespread jealousy amongst those erecting pyres and casting stones of those very same, *more desirable*, beautiful young women, even good ol’ misandry, which is, of course, wrapped up in the former causes, and is *far* more prevalent than the politically correct can admit.

A misandrist my own age whom I dated while I was writing

this book (she made blanket-statement condemnations of men as a sex on a regular basis) and who, don't get me wrong, I quite liked, for the most part, was painfully contemptuous of any interest men paid to young women, or vice versa. Her jealousy of the young women and disdain of the attracted men was palpable, triggering an immediate, reflexive animosity that attached itself like a target to both the man and the young woman. Her brand of feminism wasn't simply misguided, but because of her own animosity related to her insecurity and jealousy, felt borderline militant. In other words: She wasn't able to separate her self-esteem issues from what she considered her 'progressive ideals.' And I dare declare this malady to be a modern epidemic. It didn't work out between us, needless to say, though she accidentally taught me a great deal about many of the conventional values and beliefs which this book evidently forces to the surface.

There's also a large contingent of feminist-minded men who're compelled, or, perhaps more accurately, *coerced*, to reflexively condemn men who follow the same biologically-ingrained desires, largely for the same aforementioned reasons. I consider this to be a form of shame-based self-repression, whether by conforming to conventional standards out of fear of popular backlash and the need for acceptance, both personally and professionally, or by a false, religiously-based sense of righteousness, or because it's what their 'woke' wives/girlfriends expect, or because they subscribe to the notion that it's wrong for an 'adult' to be with someone who isn't yet mature enough to handle the situation and is thereby automatically being taken advantage of (which is a *long way* from my experience of *many* intelligent young women), all through an embarrassed concealment of their true desires, sometimes not admitting them to themselves, much less to others, for fear of falsely-pious backlash.

Ask any heterosexual 'adult' male (any heterosexual man with a sex drive): If you were single and a gorgeous eighteen-year-old woman came onto you, would you turn her away? Be *very* wary of trusting any man who answers in the affirmative. They're lying in order to avoid the trap you've set for them, which means, when pressed and their fear is activated, they'd rather lie than face that fear. It's a test of integrity, in other words, and, despite its shows, integrity doesn't come anywhere *near* to ruling this nation, popular perception does. The fact that women are only in their biological prime for a short time and are most physically desirable within that window shouldn't come as a shock to anyone, sorry. Nor should the possibility that many, even *most*, clever, beautiful young women use this to their advantage is less than scrupulous ways, including by coming onto older men, all while knowing that they can play this popular perception card to their advantage should they need to; that they can deal out the ten of swords, so to speak, and wield the prejudice crafted by politically correct, self-righteous conventional wisdom.

Were the roles reversed, were it an older woman engaging with a nineteen-year-old man, would the judgment be the same? *Of course not*. And why? The more developed mind still has the position of advantage that, lacking scruples, can be manipulated. Is it because conventional wisdom dictates that women are the weaker, more innocent gender? Or that men are more likely to abuse their power? Sorry, not in my experience, despite the number of times that I've heard self-righteous woman assert that the world would be a far better, more peaceful place today had more women been in charge throughout its history. Actually, almost every workplace conflict I've been involved in has a woman, or a group of women, abusing her/their power at the center of it, typically whilst subtly employing the protection of political correctness in concealment of their sins. This isn't to say that women are

innately *more* abusive, but that a thin slice of the population, including myself, have a natural capacity for both accidentally and, when desired, for intentionally provoking those whom are both politically correct and rationally incorrect, with these two characteristics containing considerable overlap.

It should go without saying that political correctness is *highly* attractive to those whom lack the capacity or inclination to think for themselves, because, by enlisting it, they can *seem* correct even without having any clue as to what critical thought dictates the truth to be. They don't actually have to think, in other words, but can *appear* as though they have, and have come to the 'right' conclusions. It's also true that any contingent of the population that tends to get away with abuses (with males, especially white males, leading this charge *historically*, yes) also tends to commit them *because of* this; because they learn that they can commit abuses with impunity. And in the 'Me Too' era in which the 'woke' ironically tend to be sleep-walking along an uncritical, predetermined line of false propriety, the abuses of women are *far* more likely to be overlooked (or remain unrecognized) than the abuses of men, especially, in overlap with BLM, with the abuses of *white* men, as are the abuses of anyone standing on the politically correct side of any such movement.

Political correction, in other words, conditions the public to associate certain types of wrongdoing with certain narrow categories of people, even when, as is usually the case, the wrongdoers are just as likely to be those typically seen, and reflexively regarded, as belonging to the category of 'victims.' My point? *Abusiveness knows no demographic.* Give more power, protection and privilege to *any* group, and it'll be used to abuse those with less power, protection or privilege. This has been proven in psychological experiments, though I'll refrain from providing citations at this juncture. And this is yet

another reason that a *universal* standard of social justice is the only *just* standard to be pursued. And when it comes to common trends, this is amongst the most common, so much so that it tends to be central to all politically correct injustice: the deluded development of various forms of ‘progressives’ who’re just as bad as those they think that they’re fighting, only in the opposite direction. They’re the *false progressives*.

If we’re to accurately consider the subject of social progressiveness, perhaps it’s best at this juncture to suggest that, as referenced in the previous paragraph, there’s a foundation for all *true* social justice. If so, what is it? I say that social justice is defined by the fight for equality of rights, protections, privileges and opportunities *regardless of anything*; regardless of demographics; regardless of gender, creed, skin color, sexual orientation and any other typically overly-narrowly-defined form of identity. It’s about *universal standards of justice*; about justice applicable to the *entire* population. Justice, in other words, is blind, or at least broad: it sees but *one* identity: *Human*. Yet, when it comes to the various forms of social justice/progress, to all the battles within the larger war, it’s common to find those who believe, and want others to believe, that they’re lined up on the ‘correct side’ as champions of the cause who, in *actuality*, are far less interested in equality and far more interested in finding a socially acceptable outlet for their frustrations in life, and for increasing the advantages of *their* identity, or the identity that it’s fashionable to support, leading them to attack those on the historically dominant side of their particular social injustice. Thus, their *true* interest is in finding any justification that they can for reducing, degrading and slandering those belonging to the historically oppressive ‘side,’ so as to grant as much power as possible to their camp while assuring themselves of their moral purity, even when their *specific* targets have nothing to do with that oppression.

This rather common contingent of false progressives is actually *far* larger than the that of true progressives, than the far thinner slice of true moral champions, and is largely driven by the desire to exact some form of vengeance against ‘the abusers’ and extract some form of increased advantage for ‘the abused’ that, upon critically-minded close inspection, actually has little to do with justice or equality of treatment, and much more to do with taking advantage of the contemporary trend towards politically correct popular perception in favor of their ‘cause.’ The false progressive is, in other words, attracted to the related movement not out of any grand idealistic desire for universal justice, as they would have as many people believe as possible, including themselves (their ego-based self-narrative), but, in secret truth, they’re attracted to specific movements because those movements present them with the opportunity to *appear* progressive, and to go on the offensive with impunity. All too often this is driven by anger and insecurities that they attach to the selected movement, rather than being driven by the movement itself, and by the original indignation and typically worthy intention of that movement: *justice*. It is, in other words, the progressive *persona* that the false progressive is after; the appearance of righteousness affixable to their egos; this along with whatever else they may gain for ‘their people’ if/when they gain traction, bullying resisters into submission.

True progressives, on the other hand, are about universal principles and standards of justice, so that everyone progresses equally, and, thus, so too does society as a whole. While *false* progressives, of which there are many forms, as many as there are ‘causes,’ righteous or otherwise, are bigoted in favor of and/or against one or more particular groups, or categorizations, of people. They’re myopic, biased, tribal and prejudicial about their ‘progress.’ If we examine

their thoughts, speech, action and especially their *motives* closely enough, we realize through that examination that, unless what the progressive seeks is the equalization of standards of rights, protections, privileges and opportunities, they're not entirely progressive, for the 'progress' that they seek is advantageous to those in their particular group (or the group that they're supporting), usually one regarded as a minority or an otherwise disadvantaged group, while also necessarily being disadvantageous to and unjust towards everyone outside of that group. It's the 'justice' of divided standards; a 'justice' which itself shall eventually require remedy; i.e. *injustice*. This form of 'progressivism' is thus undermined by a hypocritical support for the perpetuation of inequality created by the application of divided and unjust, rather than universal and just, principles and standards.

Personally, at least half of the 'feminists' whom I've interacted with are more accurately to be labeled *misandrists*. They're angry, often for various reasons, including feeling powerless (a common feeling amongst *all* people, and more likely rooted in *economic*, class-based inequality), and with many of these reasons having nothing to do with sociosexual inequality, and more to do with men in general being the embodiments of patriarchal abuses, and thus making for convenient targets. And they'll attack whenever they see an opportunity.

To cite another example from my own life, recent to this writing I had a date with a woman from a discussion group that I started here in Bend, Oregon. When we got into the subject of this book, in *every* example wherein I related what I experienced as a case of unjust treatment from a woman, both within and without the context of the book (admittedly I was playing devil's advocate, as I often do, in this case to see how far her hypocritical false progressivism went), her reflexive response was to excuse and defend the

woman/women, *every time*, regardless of the validity of my arguments, which she reflexively dismissed without due consideration, all whilst continually speciously twisting my words to suit her 'feminism,' as if women can do no wrong, or, when they do, it's only because they're balancing out the wrongs done to them by men, thus making their injustices justifiable, in her highly prejudicial perspective. She is, in other words, for the empowerment of women *regardless* of the disempowerment and impact upon men, including denying men the considerations and protections which feminism is said to fight for on behalf of women. Taken to its logical conclusion, were this type of 'feminism' successful, it would eventually result in men bemoaning 'the matriarchy' much the same as women bemoan 'the patriarchy.' It would, in other words, trade one form of inequality and injustice for another. Hence, it's a form of false progress, and, thus, *false feminism*.

And this phenomenon is by no means limited to the realm of sexism, for it's the same with *many* BLMers. MLK's universal equality and 'table of brotherhood,' the platinum standard for the movement against racism, and for social justice in general, as far as I'm concerned, has nothing to do with the true beliefs and regards of many of the most vocal BLMers. They're secretly of the Malcolm X set that just wants to attack the perceived grouping of persecuting people. Again, name the historical injustice, and you'll find false progressives of this order; 'feminists' who hate men and are at least as sexist as those that they target; BLMers who hate the 'dominant white man' who are at least as racist as he is; homosexuals who hate either heterosexuals or women, or both.

They're all looking for an excuse to attack their targets whilst *appearing* to be on the side of social justice, but they're actually just as bad as those they target, and they would, by their words and actions, perpetrate the same injustice in the

reverse direction if awarded the power and opportunity to do so. Abuse with impunity whilst wearing the façade of victimhood! False progressives of the politically correct order unite, and cancel all reason, truth and justice that doesn't fit your falsehood! Hooray for your 'wokeness!' Any chance of cancelling false progressives? No? I thought not, they're just too many of them to shove in front of this ego-crusted mirror.

The politically incorrect truth is that women are equal to men in the propensity to abuse their power, the difference being the common methods and manner of the abuse, and that the prevailing modern notion of the gender power disparity in working relations is largely anachronistic. Whereas men abusing women is more likely to lead to a "no means no" situation, the abuse of men by women tends not to present that opportunity; it's less overt, more deceptive, and more manipulative of popular perception and assumptions. And I would argue that *true* feminism is about the aforementioned equality of rights and protections *regardless* of gender, not about attacking modern man for past patriarchal abuses based upon inequality, and that, therefore, *true* feminists possess the power to recognize the truth of this editorial, whereas the false, self-righteous type of 'feminist' lacks the ability to do so, condemning me before they picked this book up, or, more likely, refusing to do so, calling for its burning.

Perhaps that's what modern Masculinism should be about: not attempting to reinforce outmoded ideas of masculine toughness and self-reliance, like never apologizing or being able to admit wrongdoing or the liking of things associated with a 'soft side,' like poetry and puppies (most of which are based upon insecurity and misinformation, just like false progressivism – in terms of 'manhood,' it takes *far* more strength to admit wrongdoing and vulnerability than to pretend infallibility and invulnerability, ye tough guys);

perhaps masculinity is about realizing that *true* strength is being able to admit that we like certain things (including young women sending signals to our biological programming), that we make mistakes (like being too lonely and weak to refuse them when they amplify this signaling and encourage the resultant attractions, in my case, as semi-fictionally told through the previous novella), and that we're just as vulnerable and needing of others as women are, admitting and even embracing all of this whilst simultaneously countering the contemporary current that pushes the narrative that men are the more abusive and 'creepy' sex.

Maybe masculinity can be the first modern movement that not only reconciles itself with the injustices of the past, but which acknowledges that any *truly* progressive movement fights for equality of rights, privileges, protections and opportunities *regardless* of demographic considerations. Maybe masculinity can come to mean this, above all: that *true* men, like true women, fight not on behalf of one or more disadvantaged or misunderstood contingents of contemporary society, but for *all* of society, applying the same standards and empowerments to *everyone*. This progressive fight would entail discarding all that which belongs to the mentality of divided standards and its judgments, and all that which relies upon arguments that aren't only outdated and encouraging of those divided, prejudicial standards, but which disregard the fact that it's those very divided standards which *prevent* progress, for they condition the easily persuaded public to fight largely mythical monsters rather than fighting for a single universal standard of, and struggle for, justice.

Women have had *more* power, if anything, in the professional realms I've moved in and out of in seeking my best fit in this world, and not just within the organization that inspired this book, where the ostensible 'man in charge' was *highly*

influenced, if not outright controlled, by a cohort of female supervisors. Moreover, several of these female supervisors were friends outside of work with the other young women working there, and it was my sense that they were all constantly competing with one another for favoritism within that clique. After my misunderstanding with Miranda, this ultimately led to her supervisor friend employing politically correct presumptions and corporate-liability-based fears to make me look like the monster that was harassing young women, when the truth is that I don't think that I've ever even 'hit on' a woman, not once in my entire life, much less pressed unwanted advances; I'm the opposite of this, if anything. In fact, in the case of the circumstances inspiring *Holier Than Thou*, it was the young women who instigated the flirtation, and encouraged our ongoing correspondence, *and* constantly gossiped amongst themselves, building this little sociopolitical apparatus at the center of it all, of which I, in my weakness and want of love, became a target. The official judgment, of course, was inconsiderate of *all* of these factors, which is why I alluded to the Salem Witch Trials by placing this story near Salem, MA. Because *this* is the modern witch hunt. All popular perception, no truth; what things can be made to appear like for one-sided profit, pandering to the perception of progress.

For one reason or another I keep finding myself in similar positions, and I honestly believe that it's not only because principled thinkers naturally make for provocative, counter-cultural rebels, but also because of my history of vulnerability. I love too passionately, presenting a target that even a 'good person' can't help but strike at. It's just too tempting, and too gratifying to the ego, to have that much power and not wield it. The only woman that I've ever loved (*not* Miranda) used my love for her against me, through subtle manipulations and purposeful neglects and denials. I tell you this not in the attempt to provoke pathos, but to demonstrate the fact that

my love for particular women has consistently been met with sly forms of emotional and psychological abuse. That's simply my experience, inviting evil by my vulnerability, loneliness, weakness and desire (there's no separation between these), and it's had the effect to where I now shrink from showing *any* affection for women, knowing that to show undeniable desire is to display a weakness that'll most likely be exploited.

In the 'real world,' Miranda herself made it clear to me, during her ongoing, overt flirtation which, in truth, made any notion of my harassing her nearly impossible: "Young women like older men." What she *didn't* say is that it's the older men almost exclusively who pay for anything that goes awry because of this fact, and the fact that the feeling is mutual with the older men, regardless of what your boyfriends and husbands say, ladies. Now, I'm *not* saying this automatically makes it okay for the man to act upon this fact, and that every woman eighteen or older is on the same level and 'fair game,' but if he's unattached, and especially if he possesses a natural affection for her (I maintain that I was falling in love with Miranda, regardless of anyone's judgements), then...

Let me again suggest the possibility that *true* feminists, whether men or women, see through the self-righteousness that plagues the movement, and aren't reflexively condemnatory of men who find themselves in conflict with women; especially women who think like the *BookLife* critic, and like the two women from the previous examples. Can we get an official ruling on this please, once and for all? Is it wrong for men to admit the truth of their programming, or to follow through with it, *especially*, as in this case, when the young women are equally, if not more, inviting of and responsible for initiating such trysts and potential relationships? Is it impossible for a young woman to have a healthy, natural relationship with an older man that's

mutually enriching on *every* level? No? Then is calling such an admission by men “creepy” thereby anything but incorrect political correctness, typically spurred by self-righteousness, insecurity and/or jealousy? There are a *lot* of lonely men out there who, by causal nature, happen to be readily beguiled by women in their sexual prime. Does denouncing those vulnerable men as “creepy” thereby do anything but dismiss and extend the pain of their loneliness and ironically pretend that their biological programming is unnaturally illegitimate?

But back to *Holier Than Thou* and how the review that spurred this essay is a concerning commentary on the largely failing art of contemporary criticism: This critic didn’t allow his or herself to explore, understand or appreciate the wealth and beauty of this book as confirmed by other readers, saying next to nothing about the ideas, themes and core events which any *quality* review can’t ignore, simply because he/she had an issue with the protagonist talking to the teenagers he was surrounded by (both in the book and in the real circumstances upon which the book is based), and with his having sex with a nineteen-year-old, which isn’t illegal or, I’d argue, even immoral. This triggers a critical question: Is it not the job of the reviewer to see *past* their own narrow-minded prejudices and read the book for what *else* it is, outside of their inclination towards condescending sociosexual judgments? Is flushing the book down the proverbial drain due to their ‘values’ not an example of unprofessionalism? One of *BookLife’s* editors (and the likely reviewer considering the content of our correspondence), in an email, says that he expects the book industry as a whole to read the book the same way. In other, unspoken words, to not *really* read it.

Having poured so much of myself into this work and being so steeped in the wealth of ideas, allusions and language that it contains, I’m honestly shocked that such an ugly, dismissive

review was even possible. I'm experiencing it as 'cognitive dissonance,' similar to how I experienced Trump being elected U.S. President *the first time*. Like: *Really?! This amoral showboating clown is president?! What a blow to presidencies everywhere!* And if it's to be common to the book industry, as the aforementioned editor predicts, then minds are far more closed and controlled by a need to appear politically correct than I realized, even as one constantly accosted by this fact. It raises a related question as to the critique of literature: Do you even need to like the protagonist to appreciate his story?

Of all the reactions that I imagined fielding for this book, this wasn't one of them. I didn't think that it was possible that a book reviewer at a top review company wouldn't *really* read the book (a review for which a considerable sum of money was paid before the reviewer shit on it and flushed it down the drain), and could be so narrow-mindedly judgmental and dismissive. From other readings and reviews it's clear that this reviewer became biased against the protagonist, which he/she knew was based upon the writer, and allowed that bias to determine their review thereafter, as *none* of the beautiful language and ideas in the book were given anything but the briefest of mentions. I thought book reviewers were meant to be the opposite: intelligent, open-minded people who can think beyond the lines that narrow popular perception. Can allowing one's biases to not just influence, but *dictate*, one's 'professional review,' thereby be considered anything *but* unprofessional, and worthy of their dismissal?

It makes me wonder to what extent the book industry is thereby constrained and directed as a whole, if books are dismissed and denied their due consideration because of similar value issues possessed by critics who ultimately determine which books are broadly read? Should it not be that the offending books, if possessing laudable attributes

outside of a critics' moral qualms, be labeled *provocative* rather than being simply cast into the fire? Certainly this would challenge and edify the readership beyond the capacity of playing moralist and, ultimately, blocker and burner of books, keeping those approved within preset lines. If nothing else it should be ethically incumbent upon reviewers to bow out of the review process of any project with which they're morally misaligned, knowing that they can't provide a fair assessment. If *BookLife* is typical of the gatekeepers set between the reading and writing worlds, God help us, as nothing will make it past the guards that strongly challenges presumptions over what constitutes moral correctness.

Not that we're comparable writers, but D.H. Lawrence certainly faced the same. The reaction of this critic has, as another silver lining, helped me realize how appropriate the inclusion of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* as an inspiration for the main relationship in the book really is. Miranda and I discussed it a number of times, in fact. *BookLife* is here playing the same role as Lawrence's critics in the early twentieth century: Make sure no one reads this creepy trash! As I finish typing this reflection, all I can see in my head is the woman I dated screaming at Alex for wanting Miranda, and a red-faced middle-aged male reviewer reading *Holier Than Thou* in his bedroom beside his wife while his eighteen-year-old daughter is across the hall with her friends whispering about the boys, and *men*, they want to have sex with, hexing me in his mind, and likely to his wife, whilst simultaneously being ashamed of himself for desiring those friends, secretly wishing it was *he* they were whispering about (*American Beauty*, anyone?), unwittingly trained to think it "creepy" to desire a 'girl' before she becomes a 'woman' after passing some arbitrary age line.

It again makes me wonder about the extent to which feminism has been coopted by and inseparably entangled

with forms of self-righteous anger and empty indignation; tied to masks hiding the actual source(s) of the issue, those issues coming in many forms, including jealousy, prudery, misandry, insecurity, peer pressure, fear of political correctness and the social and egotistic consequences of going against what's deemed 'correct' by the baaing majority of the 'woke.' Being angry at the flower for blooming, and the bee for being drawn to its scent. Is that what feminism has been reduced to?

On an emotional and psychological level this review, being written about a project and a period of my life that was traumatizing, has been experienced as an internally-violent re-traumatization. I've been judged and condemned all over again, with the deceitful plotters *again* having been exonerated, and with the editor and his *BookLife* compatriots casting further stones! The same can be said for my date with the woman from my discussion group; I woke up the next morning feeling like my psyche had been raped. And I'd imagine that most women would do the same, and happily, feeling like they're dealing a blow in favor of the good guys, when the truth is that they're dealing a blow *against* a good guy; against a *true* progressive. And here I thought Alex was dead, and would be spared further pain. It seems it's the curse of the intelligent and, by virtue of being uninhibited, of the unconventional, naturally provocative thinkers to pay the price for the political correctness and coupled rational and moral *incorrectness* of the conventionally-minded majority.

Throughout history the self-righteous have played at policing morals, by which, even absent legal authority and position, they pretend to possess a superiority over those whom they judge, and seldom with good results. Certainly this is the very last role that a critic should play, for whom it must be considered essential to the role of progressing literature that they open minds and suspend prejudices for the sake of more

and challenging perspectives, rather than, like this critic, assure they remain closed, and such prejudices be perpetuated. Punish me not for your prudery, whilst I remind you that the cultures of humanity in most regions of the world, including in America prior to European invasion, considers a woman ready for sex when she's able to become pregnant, and that eighteen is a rather arbitrary number, not one dictated by some absolute moral truth. I say this, again, not to suggest that all young women are 'fair game' when they're able to reproduce, but to suggest that what constitutes moral correctness isn't so black-and-white.

As I finish this, I'm just now realizing that there's a distinct possibility that this is an entirely political decision on the part of *BookLife* and *Publisher's Weekly*, relative to the 'book world.' It's entirely possible that, realizing this book doesn't shine favorable light upon a certain major book retailer alluded to herein, they're trying to gut it; to belittle and minimize me and make certain that the broader reading world doesn't pick this up. If this is true, and it makes sense from a motive standpoint, which tends to be revelatory, then this review ultimately constitutes an even more detrimental, dangerous form of censorship. It would essentially constitute ownership of the book approval process; a form of control that isn't unlike the controls which this book battles. No, dear reader, this isn't necessarily paranoia, it's 'just business.'

Takeaway: *BookLife* chooses political correctness, prejudice and politics over everything that the literary world *should* stand for. They reduced an immensely personal, heartfelt, spiritually, philosophically and imaginatively rich work into the appearance of the tiny and ugly. Consider this transmutation of the resultant indignation a 'return to sender' of the self-righteous shit that you dropped upon me.

P.S. Since *BookLife* condemned me as a “creep” via *Holier Than Thou*, *Publisher’s Weekly*, their parent company, refuses to review anything that I write, taking their role as ‘critic’ to the extreme of censor, representing the enemy of open minds: prejudicially prejudging the work of the artist relative to their moral regard of him/her, failing to honor the fact that the most valuable writing doesn’t pander to moral or political conventions, but *challenges them*. The worst thing that a critic can do is pander to the ‘cancel culture’ that dismisses the value of a creator because of a moral judgment, thereby inhibiting the dissemination of his/her work and its value. Let not the value of anyone be discarded with your personal judgments of them, else all may be discarded, and your progressivism shall be revealed as false relative to what’s lost!

Part Two:

Machiavellian Modernity Makes for Words of War

From the Introduction of the Poetry Collection:

The Empress Needs No Clothes

"Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. Society is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion. (Society) loves not realities and creators, but names and customs. Whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist."

- Ralph Waldo Emerson

In my experience, 'politically correct' is usually a euphemism for *rationaly incorrect*. If someone is putting on self-righteous airs in making their point, knowing that most are reflexively conditioned to pat them on the back for towing the pretentiously pious line, chances are that they're wrong. For, in yet another inconvenient, unpopular truth, political correctness tends to be employed by those ruled by fear and popular perception; by those whom are afraid to have a thought, much less say a thing out loud, if it may misalign with what the mob says is correct, and thereafter incur its censure, and be condemned to shame and 'cancellation.' Hence it is that, as Emerson noted, there can be no manhood, nor womanhood, absent the courage to speak politically incorrect truths, without which a man is not a man, and a woman is not a woman, both remaining but boys and girls looking to the tyrannical parents of popular perception for the permission to speak their hearts and minds, their intellectual and emotional

faculties thereby not their own, but extensions of the modern tyranny of the mob that rules over them through the pretense of piety. Oft has this oversized net of appearance been cast over alleged wrongdoers, and has the mindless mob instantly begun to celebrate their seizure, and delight in the downfall of the iniquitous thereby seized, and congratulated one another for enforcing their piety, only for the rationally removed sitting on the sidelines to whisper amongst their minority contingent: "There's nothing in the net. Socrates slipped through its holes during their celebration of his capture. They shan't haul him ashore, nor force him to imbibe the hemlock."

In stark contrast to political correctness, philosophy uncovers the classical; that which survives and thrives in all ages, for it's true regardless of time and circumstance. Machiavelli, however, realized that few people penetrate the readily-perceivable surface, and so recognized the superiority of the show in persuading the public by manipulating the majority mind, saying: "Few see who you really are, everyone sees who you appear to be," going on to explain that the few who *do* see the truth haven't the ability to overcome the masses ruled by what the Greeks called "ethos," the perception of authority and credibility, or to prevail over the enforcers, whether they be of the state or the mob. Thus does humanity remain mired in Machiavellian rule; not just in politics and business, but in every strategy and art-form; indeed, in every shared thought, action and creation where perception begets deception, in betrayal of morality and divergence from truth.

Because of this, my pen *is* my sword. I'm at war every time I pick it up; at war with the Machiavellian-overlorded masses ruled by popular perception, to start with, but also with the systemic injustices of a bourgeois, conservative society and value system hailing from imperialist history, with the rational incorrectness of self-righteously 'woke' political correctness, with self-destructive demons, with the phantoms of unrequited loves, with psychological traumas, and with the myopic judgments of certain critics whom shall never understand Oscar Wilde's

refrain: "To define is to limit;" whom, within the context of this and other poetry projects, define the parameters of 'good poetry' in a manner evoking in me a response similar to Robin Williams' character in *Dead Poets Society*, when he has the class read the intro "Understanding Poetry" that attempts to reduce the sacred art-form into a rating system that produces a value for every poem based upon its objectified artfulness and importance. His response to the reading of the intro: "Excrement."

I, too, have been regularly reduced in this manner, and, like Williams' character, believe such hubristic attempts to 'define good poetry' based upon some sort of technical analysis, and upon rules as to what good poetry consists of, and what's not allowed, to be inherently limiting, which is antithetical to poetry, whose power, as I noted in *Rosebud*, comes principally from the fact that it *isn't* limited; that it laughs in the face of prosaic boundaries and assumptions. Anyone who judges a poem based upon anything other than what it evokes within them, typically inspired by its artistic, romantic, philosophical and spiritual insights, who lets not the wave of it wash over them naturally, and subsume them, such that they become indistinct from it, but whom, instead, acts to divert and constrain that wave, judging the poetry by 'what's popular' or 'what's acceptable' or 'what's expected,' has no business being a critic in my mind. Alas, most critics offer little to nothing but conformity to popular perception and prejudice, either jumping on the under-construction bandwagon as early as possible, so that they may acquire attention in leading its charge, else interceding in its construction, destructively pretending superiority in recognizing inferiority.

My father, having heard me convey my convictions countless times, often to his own irritation, once admonished me: "Don't take on the whole world at once." And he's right, I've long been at war with the manmade world, the list going on and on, feeling parasitism imbedded across the whole of the social body: in its prevailing powers and misleading paradigms; in all its mind-narrowing, blind-allegiance-inducing propaganda posing as truth and patriotism; in its plutocracy-pretending-democracy using purchased 'representatives' whom 'lead' an imperialism-

is-now-globalization society built by greed, ego, exclusion, exploitation, manipulation and mindlessly-consuming, overfed customers; in the propagation of petty, overbearing, punitive ideas of a God loyal to one 'race,' which occludes the true, perfectly inclusive, non-dualist, inseparable nature of being, and the fact that we're *one race*; in all the 'realists' pretending to be more rational than idealists whilst secretly being the craven, oppressive immoralists hiding behind misconceptions of what constitutes reality and human nature, and with most of that narrow conception of 'reality' actually being an artifice of evolving imperialism used to justify corruption. And yet, while I feel the weight of it all and sometimes feel as though I'll capitulate and crumble, I've never regarded any of this internal warfare, which finds form on the page, as a *choice*.

Much like love, there is no choice. You don't intentionally walk into it, it simply manifests itself from the forces of being bound to nature, like a natural, gravitational force that you *fall* into, and may only fight in futility. My convictions, like my feelings, represent an inherent, inborn truth having nothing to do with choice. So, no, I didn't 'choose' this path, but, whether or not I can confidently repeat the trite 'it chose me' allusion to a higher calling, certainly I *can* say that walking it is impulsion more than intention; more innate than calculated, or even considered.

When one's nature so strongly misaligns with the conventional wisdom and ways of the world, is one's rebellion against that world anything but being his or her self, and having a right to his or her natural existence, following his or her natural purpose? I challenge, provoke and reveal egotistic insecurities by my nature, *not* by malicious intent, as many would like to believe in assuaging their egos by pretending I'm just being malicious. Nope. I'm just that rare, principle-led person, though I do confess that I'm often aware of my natural effect of provoking insecurity, and that the imp in me that drives people towards uncomfortable realizations sometimes likes to come out and play.

And I'd argue that this same imp is alive and well within *all*

intelligent, moral, contemplative people, and that only fools conditioned by unwise conventional wisdom sourced from the stale, empty rhetoric of controlling institutions would consider him evil, or condemn the imp and his invaluable role of 'playing Devil's advocate.' Further proving my point, my use of that phrase, 'playing Devil's advocate,' once provoked a Christian family member of mine to admonish me that it was offensive because it mentions 'the dark lord,' something which, to me, only reinforces the fact that those who see the world through the Christian bubble have been blinded, and love to self-righteously bully others into submission whilst patting one another on the back for their fight against us 'heathens,' even when we live far richer spiritual lives than the orthodox do. Not to mention the related, disturbing irony contained in the fact that the common intellectual exercise of exposing any claim or argument to doubt, and the existence of doubt in general, which is core to mental growth, is made to seem a 'sin' and 'lack of faith' that the Church uses to shame any 'doubters' into peer-pressured conformity by associating it with the Devil. Tell me, why would an institution whose power is built on a false form of faith requiring blind obedience condition its sheep to see doubt as an evil promoted by an advocate of 'the dark lord?' Might it be because doubt leads to the revelation of truth, and that this truth frees us from religion?

In the course of pursuing my natural purpose, I've run afoul of a great many who render judgment based upon various forms of misunderstanding, self-righteousness, insecurity and prejudice. And though I tire of being at war, I've come to accept that this war represents the purpose of rare principled people like me: to take issue with what needs to be taken issue with, for the sake of truth and progress. I've been censored by *Amazon*, who canceled my Amazon Merchant account because of t-shirt designs that criticized conservatism. And I've had so many ads removed by *Instagram* that I eventually had to abandon its potential for promoting my projects, including for attempting to promote an image of a book cover called "Heresies of a Heathen, Revelations of the Spiritual But Not Religious," which they said violated their policy against "profanity and insulting language," a clear enforcement

of Christian beliefs based upon the pretense that my 'spiritual but not religious' ideas are offensive, when, to me, the attempt of religion to control what constitutes divinity and to separate people from God is what's *actually* offensive. Similarly, my self-publisher refuses to post one of my books to its website because of its title: *God Isn't Religious*. But it's not just religion's false piety that arms the Political Correction Police whom patrol major media and enforce self-righteousness therein. *Instagram* also rejected my attempt to promote a post and webpage entitled "A Dawning Prophecy," seemingly because it criticized 'the free market.'

And those are but two of the times that I've been bitten by the Meta Monster. It goes all the way back to my beginnings as a self-published author, when I had an ideological project blocked by *Facebook*, attempting to promote a book called *Time for True Democracy* that suggested that the U.S. is a democracy in name only; that it's actually a plutocratic republic whose construct essentially violates inviolable principles of democracy, rendering American 'democracy' antithetical to the real thing. *Facebook* informed me that my promotion was 'hacked' and had to be taken down, which I assume means that either they or the intelligence agencies who gather and monitor information and 'threats to national security' through them believe that they have the right to determine who's a patriot and who's treasonous, when all progressive thinkers know that the common conception of a patriot who reflexively agrees with the powers that rule this country is anything but the *true* patriot, who is, by stark contrast, one who fights for the betterment of the *people as a whole*, even when those thereby being protected and served actively condemn you as the enemy.

I'm not even going to get into the number of times that I've faced the most demonic of attacks on social media by self-described Christians for posting writings and promoting literary projects of a 'spiritual but not religious' nature that they deemed "satanic," accusing me of spreading the writings of the Devil and often labeling me Satan himself, saying things like "that's exactly what I'd write if I were Satan," all for daring to

see through the propaganda and oppressive mind controls inherent to the historical development and contemporary use of Christianity, for *knowing* that God/Spirit will never fit into any one religion, and for identifying and detailing the ways in which religion is antithetical to true spirituality. I've also been booted by numerous *Facebook* discussion groups for, what was it, questioning the language of the BLM movement, in one instance, arguing that many of the phrases that they were using only exacerbated the racial divide, comparing them to Malcom X, arguing that true progress instead requires the MLK tact of tearing down lines of identity and inviting *everyone* to participate in producing universal justice, rather than making it a 'black versus white' issue. I was ejected from the other 'philosophy group' for espousing 'socialist ideas,' the moderator informing me that 'socialist rhetoric' wasn't allowed, and all because I was arguing for economic and commercial systems that did a better job of distributing the fruits of the economy, and that awarded some degree of equity to every contributor. How can a discussion group that bills itself as 'progressive' and 'philosophical' bar the discussion of socialism, or, indeed, of *any* ideology that takes issue with the status quo? So much for freedom of belief and expression; logic, wisdom and justice be damned.

In oppressive fact, media-based corporations possessing so much power that the individual can't do anything to counter their politically correct censorship, and that enforce that often irrational and immoral political correctness by blocking communications and the promotion of non-conforming projects, not only represents a breach of the supposedly sacrosanct American value of free speech, but also represents a serious threat to the public wellbeing by preventing the public discourse and information-dissemination endemic to the real, once-honored purpose of any truly moral 'fourth estate.' Critics, in fact, have been given too much power in the U.S., and all too often judge the merit of ideas and projects from prejudicial perspectives informed by false, conventional conceptions, standing on artificially high ground, looking down on the *actual* truth-tellers. All told 'freedom of speech' is largely mythical when the major media corporations that control the sharing

of information and the production and promotion of literary and other media projects censure that information, production and promotion when it doesn't adhere to their politically-correct, traditionally-based, Christian-value-conforming standards, justifying their censorship with misleading policy pronouncements and the denouncements to which they lead, thereby blocking progress under the pretense of blocking evil, effectively promoting evil themselves, albeit unwittingly. What was it Voltaire said? "To find out who (or what) rules over you, simply find out who (or what) you're not allowed to criticize." In modernity, political correctness is at the heart of this censorship, a force posing as progressive whilst perhaps being the greatest opposition to progression in existence. Telling the truth and being a moral person means *constantly* being at odds with its false truths and fake moral superiority. Speech, it seems, is only free so long as it refrains from rendering judgment against institutions and beliefs that Americans are meant to hold sacrosanct, especially when those institutions and beliefs prey upon the very people who tend, in their conditioning and gullibility, to judge their protectors and emancipators as enemies. Thus am I the target of attacks by the victims of systemic oppression.

Add that to the list: people who pass judgment absent understanding, and in the prejudicial reinforcement of their own bias, in service of egos bound to political correctness. And not just through social media, but through the control of the art world as well. One particularly vile critic reduced *Rosebud*, a previous poetry collection, to an entirely mechanical analysis, dismissing what I'd regarded as a wealth of progressive ideas, tortured, unrequited romanticism and mystical experience because my technique didn't conform to his expectations, and because he believed poetry to be an unsuitable conveyance for ideology and conviction. I believe this viewpoint to not only be nonsensical, and belonging to a vain, pretentious school of thought sold to the show, but a condemnation of the entire concept and purpose of the philosopher-poet, half of whom is a *philosopher*, and, thus, dedicated to exploring and espousing *ideas* rich in meaning, not just producing pretty, elaborate lingual patterns and showing off through splendid displays of technical savvy.

Read my other work and you'll know: belief, ideology, conviction... these aren't affects for me, but the very catalysts of creation. They're not added to make my writing *seem* any such way, they are its very provenance; the force compelling its formation. I don't create in order to *appear* creative, or because I want to believe I'm creative, or to be 'on the cutting edge,' and thereby accepted as a 'modern poet,' having once been criticized for sounding more like a Victorian poet than a modern one. Again, I prefer the term 'classic.' For I don't write for any reason except that I'm daily compelled to write, through myriad inspirations, entering into me every day from endless sources; films, books, conversations... Unfortunately, however, my experience dictates that poetry has largely fallen into the Machiavellian trap of popular perception, disregarding anything that seems too 'real.'

Akin to the pretension of 'modern art,' it seems it's not only that the popularity of poetry is increased in *inverse* proportion to its perceived weightiness and substance, but is actually dependent upon being entirely *devoid* of any obvious substance, as if the reader fills the poem with greater value by its inscrutability, a hollow receptacle that's only of value if it can be filled with anything and everything, the reader *pretending* that what they stuff into it is what it was *meant* to contain, even when such notions never even entered the mind of the poet, like the modern artist. Thus the pretension. It's as though modern art, like poetry, is valued relative to its receptivity to the arrogance of the viewer/reader, meant to be as indefinite as possible so as to act like a gravitational force for their pride and presumption. Like most things, this is a double-edged sword, as it creates a worthy platform for the idea of every work of art being a mirror for the patron, permitting them to exercise their intellects and imagination in the attempt to draw personal meaning from the work, thereby making it customizable to every patron. Yet, if this means that anything with a definite motive and meaning is precluded from being an 'acceptable' form of the art, the philosopher is banned, which, as a philosopher and poetry lover, I find unacceptable.

The conventional wisdom seems to be that the more apparent the

meaning, and the philosophical, spiritual or ideological import, the heavier and more opaque the poem becomes, the more it sinks to the bottom of the literary sea, never seeing the light of day represented by the reading public. The 'best poetry,' therefore, is regarded like a floating filament, or a translucent and vacuous vessel reflecting a shiny, unfixed formation, empty of the writers' beliefs and convictions, which, it's insinuated, are only appropriate to *prose*, and even then tend only to be valued by a thin, well-educated minority of readers.

I'm haunted by the psychological scars remaining from the attacks of the aforementioned critic, whom almost convinced me of the unworthiness of my poetry, giving my work one out of five stars in a review whose derisions included rebukes of my "unconvincing convictions," my "unsophisticated technique," and my failure to live up to his expectations of the stylistic strategies of the "modern poet," as if anything that's about anything of significance, or that follows the style of previous eras, is unworthy of a contemporary audience, entirely failing to recognize the fact that *classic* means *standing the tests of time*, and that *authenticity* requires *not* imitating a certain modern or accepted style or strategy simply because it's likely to beguile and be rubber-stamped by readers. Were we face to face, dear reader, I may well inquire of you at this juncture, for the sake of exploring this important principle: What do *you* affix to *your* appearance, to bedazzle your way past people's perception of your conventionality, for the sake of popular acceptance? And so we come to my 'caveat lector' forewarning to readers, and to certain types of 'tough critics' whom, like the aforementioned, I've had the displeasure of corresponding with and being woefully misunderstood by on previous projects:

If you believe that poetry should be devoid of meaning and conviction, this book isn't for you. And if you're looking for adherence to traditional forms and/or flashy, 'sophisticated' shows of experimental technique, again, you've come to the wrong place. I employ poetry precisely because I believe it to be the *freest* form of expression; that it can't be confined, or bullied into critical submission. Also, I'm not really

a student of poetry, I write more than I read (typically in a free-form manner), my subject matter tends to be provocative and of a spiritual and philosophical nature that is likely to offend or go over the head of the average reader (especially those existing within the overlapping Christian and right-wing echo chambers), and I've yet to emulate popular writers, to the chagrin of the aforementioned critic. In addition, in my own estimation, at least, the convictions compelling me to write result in my placing far more emphasis on substance than on style, which, in my experience, doesn't attract as much attention as those bent on winning readership through 'the show;' through writing in verse judged as more elegant or new-aged; that is, on writing in an ostentatious, pretentious, strategically 'avant garde' manner, as a means of targeting those who place poetry in the same vein as 'modern art,' which I think makes such work deceptive and disingenuous.

Whereas I like to think that I'm classically-compelled, the winners of every poetry competition I've ever been a part of are surface-level impressive, using elaborate and experimental styles which seem to bewitch most poetry readers. They could be writing about almost anything, with the result being much the same. I'll admit that such poetry is entertaining on some level, and that I likely need to open myself up to more experimentation, and yet, ultimately, finding a way to ooh and ahh the reader will never be what actually compels me to write. I write when I'm inspired by the revelation of a truth which my heart recognizes, and whispers to my mind, like the Spirit (or 'God') sharing a secret with a spiritual record-keeper. Sure, it may well be possible to be persuasive on both levels simultaneously, to make the substance sparkle, yet I don't subscribe to the notion that all entertainment needs to be flashy in order to capture the attention of the patron, even as I'm painfully aware of the modern addiction to overly-sweetened, artificial fare, and that the best films are flops whilst inane superhero flicks rule the box office.

In fact, most of my writing, whether in verse or prose, seems to be undervalued in this 'style over substance' manner by most critics and readers, many of whom focus on the tiniest aspect of the bigger picture,

and thereby entirely miss the forest for the trees. Reviews come in which criticize this or that element of my storycraft and style of verse or prose without even going into the *ideas* presented in the work, as if those ideas are entirely secondary to a more fundamental, in-demand form of entertainment. *Kirkus*, for example, the big-name review company guarding the gates of popular literary perception, has reviewed two of my books thus far. The book of poems, *Rosebud*, they called “intriguing but uneven...” and *Holier Than Thou*, the novella, they called “imaginative but uneven...” As alluded to earlier in this intro, they labeled my style of verse old-fashioned, “as if belonging to a Victorian poet rather than a modern one.” All that seems to matter is that I’m set ‘evenly’ within boundary lines. Alas, perhaps I should simply be thankful that I’m ‘intriguing and imaginative,’ but that’s not enough to gain any great readership. (Later: but they *did* positively review my novel *Old Blood*).

BookLife, by comparison, the review wing of *Publisher’s Weekly*, turned in the most dismissive and small-minded review of my novella *Holier Than Thou* possible, so much so that I suffered cognitive dissonance whilst reading it. They condemned the protagonist from the outset and thereafter belittled a work filled with spiritual and philosophical value that their prejudice prohibited them from recognizing, or, at least, from giving any credit to. In correspondence with one of their editors, he said simply: “You wrote an intentionally provocative book, and it provoked a response,” as if the motives for that response are immaterial to the purpose of reviewing and recommending a book.

Yet, despite running headlong into the wall of critical and commercial expectation, the narrow scope in which most see ‘entertaining reading,’ and the fact that I’m clearly not ‘proper’ enough to be well-received by the majority, I’m not overly concerned with such parameters, even as the *Kirkuses* of the world suggest that I’ll have to be in order to pass through their guarded gates and enter the gilded tower. Why? *Because I’m an ideologue*. Again, if you’re at all familiar with my work you already know that I’ve developed my own ideological foundation, and that all of my writing is naturally built upon that foundation. In fact, I strongly identify

with Emerson's line on the overlap of philosophy and poetry: "The true philosopher and the true poet are one, and a beauty, which is truth, and a truth, which is beauty, is the aim of them both."

So while I'm bound by heart and principle to the belief that *ideas*, and the big-picture truth which those ideas come together to compose, are of paramount importance, the surface seems to rule the popular perception; the manner in which the writing is *presented*, rather than what it's about or what it evokes. The result is rather tragic from my perspective: the quality and depth of the ideas, the philosophy, the spiritual allusions etc., receive little, if any, common consideration. It's as if the reading world says: We don't care *what* you have to say, we care *how* you say it. My readers, on the other hand, should I ever come to cultivate them, will be more about the 'what,' the style being but an enhancement of that core value. I write for the slim, underserved customer standing at the margins, peering into the guts of the artificial, inflamed, bloated market, wondering where the heart of it is.

Yes, you shall certainly sense my bitterness at not yet having been valued as a writer or a thinker in a modern world of mass, largely mindless, quick-fix, overly-sweetened, nutritionally-void consumption where both writing and thinking are not only tragically undervalued (ironically, the 'educated' of the Victorian era were *far* better and more broadly educated than the so-called educated are today, where 'education' is mostly about profitable specialization), but seem valued less and less each day, making work that provokes contemplation more and more the fare of the slim customer. But be assured that my writing this was motivated by more than my bitterness and connected frustrations, which I hope you'll read as honest vulnerability more than how one person read it: as "pathetic." I also write this as a wistful longing for a bygone era in which such subjects as philosophy, romanticism and non-religious theology (today most people erroneously conflate the words 'religion' and 'spirituality') were understood and valued as more than 'intellectual masturbation;' more than egotistical, self-gratifying exercises, and in which the *quality of ideas* were revered as much, or

more, than how they were presented.

I'll continue to evolve as a writer, and to seek *constructive* criticism, and yet I'll also continue to pair this ongoing development with the seeking of a rare readership: those who're entertained by *more* than the show, and can value something that *doesn't* adhere to traditional forms, pretentious shows of sophistication and easy entertainments, and the expectations that they engender within the vast majority of 'readers,' whom themselves are, tragically, an ever-rarer breed. I sincerely hope that, should you accept the challenge that this book represents, you'll feel some fraction of the elucidation that provoked me to write it.

Part Three: Gatekeepers of the Gilded Tower

How Petitioning the Overlords of the Literary World Makes Me Feel

It seems to me that it's the duty of the critic to destroy those whom he or she deems unworthy, doing so in such a way as to seem entirely superior to the criticized, and to thereby receive a pat on the head and a pence in the pocket for playing gatekeeper to The Gilded Tower; that edifice of consumerism-pretending-intellectualism wherein those few who've gained entry have been so spoiled by such a ceaseless tide of petitioners that they're inundated with the pretense of their own grand discernment, daily demonstrated by the fact that most who come crawling to their gates are carelessly turned away for failing to cook fare appealing to the common palate. All the while these towering overlords, in their saturation of suitors, have become oblivious of those who're too little concerned with producing the best bait for the herds heading to market, those paying for the upkeep, gilding and growth of the tower and its overfed masters. I can see you from here, seemingly far beneath you, whilst I write for the slim customers whom fail to feed upon the scraps that you drop.

All the while the gatekeeping critics are bound below, permitted entry into the courtyard, but never into the tower. They became gatekeepers after being destroyed by other gatekeepers, each of whom desperately seeks to become the 'tough critic' who, by their pretentious show of superiority in rejecting petitioners, might be thought worthy of passing through the gate which they protect, assuring no pretend literati pass. And so, in the deflation of their once hopeful, expansive egos, they've become the very force by which they were once deflated, obeisantly clinging to the only surviving remnant of their own shattered dreams: to shatter the dreams of others, their false superiors grinning fatly above.

Thus, back into the wilds do the denied men and women go, rejected by gatekeepers who failed to stuff them into a marketable shell in which they'll never naturally fit, to make of them a court jester to the feeble-minded masses gorging themselves on the oversupplied markets; back into the wilds, wondering if attempting to breach the tower is worth it.

Is it but their egos, their bellies and heads, clinging to gluttony and pride, which seek to be sated by such petitions? Shall we, the rejected of such seemingly badgering substance, if finally heeded, not bloat, soften and sour, turning ourselves into empty forms of fullness? Is what we seek to be given only givable by ourselves, and by The Mother of which we're offspring, her manifestations forever freely growing beyond the gates, in the windswept shadows, subsumed by the blanketing mist, where she, the only *true* gatekeeper, *never* bars entry, and *always* lights the way? Should we not starve ourselves of what we're taught to seek, creating a vacuum into which a fuller form of fullness may come to fill us, one as whispery, weightless and immeasurable as the wind that shall someday topple the Gilded Tower? For the ancients don't dwell there, but *here*, in the trees, wild and free, stripped to our essence.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR, BY THE AUTHOR

Born in the redwoods of coastal Northern California in the blue collar town of Fort Bragg, my early years were trouble-free times of active, youthful exuberance. I was very much a rural kid, playing sports with friends, catching critters, exploring the forest, shooting bb guns, swimming in the river and ocean and eating blackberries off the bush until my hands were stained purplish-black and my stomach ached. At the age of six my father was transferred to the rapidly urbanizing town of Santa Rosa, CA, in the heart of the Sonoma County Wine Country, an hour north of San Francisco. There, I gradually transformed into a video gamer with a strong creative streak. In my adolescence I concocted elaborate games for friends that captured their attention for hours on end, often during school hours. Some of these games were centered around toys, but the more popular were produced on paper, called “paper games.”

As I matured I came to the same conclusion that most young, observant people come to: money is the root of freedom, for freedom is *purchased*, not freely given. I knew that I had to do everything possible to accrue as much cash as possible, so that I could do what and be who I pleased. This culturally-pervasive mindset continued through most of college, during which I attended the University of California at Santa Barbara and studied Business Economics, entering the real estate business post-graduation. I was highly motivated by the orthodox ambitions inculcated into western youth by way of our aristocratically-hailing conservative culture and, through them, decidedly driven to pursue what most consider the hallmarks of ‘success:’ a lucrative career, the socioeconomic rank and all the trappings. This was before I realized the subjectivity of ‘success,’ and the fact that the greater form is that which

Einstein alluded to: "Try not to become a person of success but, rather, try to become a person of *value*."

Thus, I'd begun developing doubts during my last couple collegiate years that following the traditional path was what I was meant to do; that it was the best use of my abilities. Upon inspection, and in tracing the full causality, I realized that this path produces parasitism and suffering. The more you're said to 'make,' the more you *take*. Nothing materializes from nothing, and capitalism unbalanced by socialistic principles and equity sharing is less about freedom and hard work than exploiting disadvantage.

My heart and conscience thereby began to coalesce around the greater concept of success: defining it in terms of the *creation* rather than the *extraction* of value. Later, as my spiritual awareness grew and I began to sense that 'listening to your heart' is more than mere fleeting emotion, but a tapping into a truer, fuller form of universal Self, my earlier doubts began to crystalize along with my ideology and convictions, and everything changed for me.

Though I continued to struggle with some serious health issues at the time, much of which continues to plague me, on another level I came into myself and began to harness a deep sense of purpose. I realized that I'm meant to translate the spiritual messages I receive which, combined with my intellectual inspection of the world, have led me to some profound conclusions about the nature of existence and the greedy heart of western culture compromising our collective potential. My innate creativity found a grander outlet in conjunction with my naturally-philosophical mindset, and I began seeking the underlying nature of reality, formulating my own ideologies and envisioning the type of societal systems that might someday steer humankind away from a 'greed is good' attitude that short-sells total quality of life on Earth.



