

Whitelighters for April

By

Dr. David A. Dutcher



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WHITELIGHTERS FOR APRIL

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editors@dnapress.com

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C H A P T E R O N E

Whitelighters

“We have chosen you people for a special purpose,” Bill explained, pacing, his hands behind his back. “You are here because all of you have met the qualifications needed to be part of this experiment. I want to say again, like I’ve said a hundred times already, this is an experiment. Your lives are at stake. You could die, any or all of you.” Then after giving all of them a chance to reflect on the gravity of his comments, he asked, “Any questions?”

“Yeah, when do we get the money?” Someone quipped from the back of the room.

Steve, standing off to one side, smiled. From his vantage point he could see that whatever warnings, tales of apocalypse, or prophecies of doom Bill shared with these people, they had come with one thought on their minds, money. Each knew the risks. Each in their way knew there was a better than average chance they would not come out of the lab walking. They had come to terms with their lot in life and each of them was willing to change that lot, even if it meant risking their lives.

“When do we get the money?” Someone repeated.

“I made that clear to every one of you,” Steve answered, stepping in front of Bill. “I told you when we would pay and you each signed the proper paperwork to open bank accounts. So let’s not have any more talk of the money. You must concentrate on your tasks. When you’ve completed the terms of the contract, we will pay you as promised. Also, as a bonus, we will provide your lodging and all your meals free.”

“We have assigned each of you a number,” Bill continued after the clamor of appreciation died down and Steve returned to his place at the side of the room. “This number is important because from now on this is how we will identify each of you on our reports. This is necessary to protect your identity from others in the hospital. We don’t want people coming to you for a loan after you get all that money,” Bill teased. Even though it was a joke, no one laughed. Loans were serious business, especially when you were the lender.

“We have also issued each of you a lightweight jumpsuit,” Bill continued, holding one up for all to see. “You will wear the jumpsuit always while you are a participant in the experiment. This suit also has your number on it. Please try to keep your jumpsuit as clean as possible. We will issue each of you a clean one every two days so we can launder the first. We have provided everything you will need while you are here; toothpaste, toothbrushes, soap, shaving cream, everything. If there is anything you need that is not in your rooms, let us know and we will provide it for you.”

“Is there any scotch in my room?” Someone shouted.

Again, there was a general clamor of jeers, requests for women, drugs and sundry other items.

“We will immediately disqualify anyone caught drinking anything stronger than water from the experiment. And NO MONEY,” Steve interjected, stepping forward once more. “I will excuse anyone here who isn’t willing to take this experiment seriously right now.”

“Just kiddin’, Doc,” the man said dejectedly.

“Listen to me. From now on we will call you *Whitelighters*. You will learn why soon enough. There are fifty-five of you, eleven groups of five. We have assigned a specific lab for each group. Eventually all of you will arrive in the main lab where Bill and I will take you through the final tests. We will be right

there for every one of you,” Steve said. Then after a brief pause he continued. “Now I would like to introduce our assistants to you. This is Dr. Aaron Debries. He will be in charge of the relaxation part of the experiment. Dr. Debries will teach you how to fall asleep easily.”

“This is Jason,” Steve continued, standing beside Bill’s assistants. “Jason is in charge of supplying your rooms and making sure we meet your needs. If there is something you need or want, ask Jason for it.”

“This is Boa,” Steve continued, putting his hand on the man’s shoulder. “Boa is in charge of bringing you to the various labs and helps us with different parts of the experiment.”

“And this is Margo. She’s in charge of heart and brain wave tests. We’ll be doing various tests on each of you.”

Moving again he said, “And this woman is not only beautiful, but she’s smart too. So don’t even ask gentlemen. The answer is ‘no’ before you ask. This is Ronnie. Ronnie runs the various labs. She won’t be working directly with you and you may not see much of her once you leave here, but she is an important member of our team. Other than the people you see here - Bill, Dr. Debries, Margo, Jason, Boa, Ronnie and I - you are not to talk to anyone else about the project. If anyone asks you about the experiment, you tell him or her to ask one of us. Is that clear or are there any questions?” Steve asked and paused. When there was no response he continued, “Good. Then let’s start.”

Jason and Margo led the Whitelighters out of the conference room and down a series of corridors. They showed each to a room with their number on the door and familiarized them with the comforts which included a T.V., double bed freshly made, flowers, a coffee table and shower. Next they went to the cafeteria where they chose roast beef or chicken, vegetables, and a wide variety of desserts. The Whitelighters stuffed

themselves. None had a meal comparable to this in months and some for years. After dinner, Margo showed them to a day-room equipped with a T.V., ping-pong table, pool table, card tables and various games, none of which any of the Whitelighters knew how to play. Margo told them they could use the dayroom whenever not physically involved with the experiment, an experiment that for most was beginning to seem like a vacation in a plush resort hotel.

“It will be difficult to get rid of them if they do survive,” Steve said, settling back in his chair.

But it was the least these poor souls deserved before some of them went to meet their Maker, which was exactly the misfortune of all but three.

The News
The Doctor's Office

It was in April they had come to seek his services. Renowned for work in both neurophysiology and his ability to deal with the troubled spirit of the patient who suffered an incurable illness, Dr. Aaron Debries was their only hope.

He had never expected to fall into the field of neuromuscular research since his first love was psychiatry. He enjoyed the challenges it offered, although at times he wasn't sure he wanted to meet the monsters that hid in others' minds. He wished after every interview with the terminal patient that he had fulfilled his passion. There wasn't much in the way of therapy to offer the terminally ill save comfort but fate hadn't led him in that direction. Perhaps it was the Turner incident that had altered his course. One can only speculate what enigma he found in her mind.

April reflected on their first meeting, one permanently imprinted in her memory. They had liked him on sight. He was tall and slender, a virtual Marlboro man, tranquil and confident, who offered hope, and hope was the only life raft they could cling to on the rough sea of confusion. His voice was soft, yet firm and direct. He moved slowly, yet purposefully. Most importantly, he didn't mince words.

"How can I help you two today?" He had inquired. They looked like an upper-middle-class couple, clean-cut, and uniquely attractive. There was something about her; was she ashen? Mildly jaundiced? Cyanotic? Perhaps it had been the fluorescent lighting. Something in her appearance hadn't

looked right.

Steve had looked at his wife who glanced back at him nervously. Clearly neither knew how to begin. Dr. Debries waited patiently for them to come to the point. Waiting was one of the virtues he had learned in his psychiatric rotation.

After an uncomfortable few minutes, Steve spoke. "I am also a Doctor," he said.

"Aaron, please," Debries offered.

"Thank you, Aaron," Steve had continued. "Phil Becker referred us."

"Yes, I know Phil. Your wife's family doctor?"

"Yes. He and I have done everything we know. We've exhausted every test we know of. It seems he can't help April any more than I can."

"What is your problem?" Aaron's eyes met April's. It was clear that she trusted him.

"If I knew the answer to that I would have treated her myself," Steve had interjected impatiently, and he leaned forward in his chair. Then, clearly embarrassed, he relaxed and added, "I guess I'm a little touchy these days. I'm sorry, Aaron."

"No apology necessary," he had said and he dismissed the outburst with a wave of his hand.

"I'm afraid that my wife may have a neuromuscular disease. Myasthenia Gravis, M.S., I don't know. Anyway, we want you to find out."

Aaron hated this side of medicine. The possibility that this beautiful young woman might have some god-awful disease turned his stomach. He had been sick of it before, and he would be sick again. Of that he was sure. In this business there seemed an overabundance of misfortune. It was the Red Sea of his work. It parted, invited him in, and then engulfed him and he knew that someday he would drown in it.

“What are your symptoms?” He had asked April.

Her mind dreamily went back in time. She liked him because he had reminded her of a doctor she had had good reason to trust. When she was five years old, she had cut her face on barbed wire when she and her older brother, Fred, had been sledding down the hill toward Thompson’s Mill. April hadn’t realized the danger until it was too late. A twisted metal strand, part of a fence used in times past to fend off unwanted visitors, had stretched across the field like some forgotten weapon. A hooked, rusty barb caught the corner of her left eye and ripped a trench all the way to her chin, laying flesh open as easily as a surgeon with a scalpel. The impact lifted her off the sled like some invisible force and when a neighbor ran from a nearby barn to lift her in his arms, she had seen the blood on the snow and fainted.

The doctor had been kind. His name was Dr. Butcher. April hadn’t been old enough to see the irony of that, but her father had. He simply muttered, “Great,” but said nothing more of it, although he had told her later that he hoped the name wasn’t a testimony to his work.

Dr. Butcher patiently explained what he was going to do, and when he finally put stitches in her face, she wasn’t afraid. And it didn’t hurt. It was his eyes that made her comfortable, eyes that had witnessed unimaginable suffering and reflected the pain of each. His eyes said, *I wish I could take all the hurt away and make you just like you were before, but I can’t.*

April’s thoughts had found their way back to Dr. Debries and her current issue. This man’s eyes were like Dr. Butcher’s. They were sad, soothing; eyes not anything like those of her husband. Steve had *intelligent* eyes that had seen all the same brutalities and more. He had spent one year as a corpsman in the Gulf, hauled mutilated bodies off the battlefield and tried to piece them back together. Now he hid behind eyes that

revealed nothing, neither compassion nor sadness. Nothing in his eyes recognized the existence of pain or suffering. Simply fact. April called him *The Iceman* when he looked at her like that, but not aloud.

“I started feeling weak about four months ago,” April answered now in response to Dr. Debris’ question. “At first it was like how I feel when I wind down at the end of my day. But I was winding down at noon after getting up at nine. I thought I might have a flu virus or something. Other than feeling weak, I felt all right. Now I feel like I’ll collapse if I work for more than one or two hours.”

Aaron listened intently. He had heard the same story told in different ways so many times before and it usually suggested the same diagnosis. He feared it would again. He asked the proper questions and got the answers he feared most. He knew the diagnosis and the prognosis five minutes into the interview with April. *Yes*, he thought, *this is a foul business*.

“I’d like to order a couple of extra tests just to confirm my suspicions,” he had told her. “I want to be frank with you, April. There are several possibilities.” *And you don’t want to hear any of them*, he thought. “But I would like to narrow it down to just one,” he went on. “Now I must tell you that of the choices I am considering there are none that you would consider the lesser of the evils. All the conditions I am thinking about are exhausting if not potentially fatal.”

Perhaps it was a sixth sense that prevented them from pressing Aaron for an immediate diagnosis, possibly to buy time, to remain in that world between denial and bargaining, where everything is going to be A-okay! They were content to cling to the life raft of hope they had initially seen in Aaron’s eyes. Steve knew what was happening to April even before they had seen Aaron, or Phil Becker, for that matter, but he wasn’t ready to accept it. He would never be ready to accept it.

Weeks had passed. April had endured every test known to modern medicine. And today was D-day. This day they would get the *diagnosis* they feared hearing. The time had arrived and Dr. Debries would reveal the facts. April had been through the ‘couple of tests’ and now, two months later, she would hear the grim report.

“Come on Doc. Let’s have the news,” she said.

Aaron looked at her and thought, *God, how can you expect me to stay in this wretched business much longer?* “You have a disease known as A.L.S.,” he told her finally.

Steve, shocked at the words, blankly stared at Aaron and whispering said, “That’s Lou Gehrig’s disease!”

“That’s right,” Aaron said reluctantly. “Gehrig did have the disease. But the real name for it is Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis, April. That’s a big name for a disease that causes big problems.”

“So what’s the cure?” She inquired and knowing from her husband’s reaction there was none.

Dr. Debries shook his head.

“You mean I’m going to die!” She spoke the words emphatically, as though she pronounced her death sentence.

“Yes,” he said simply.

April flushed. “How long do I have?”

“That’s impossible to answer. Some patients have lived twenty years or more. Others, the majority, die within three to five years of diagnosis with the disease.”

“What causes it?” She asked, leaning forward, hands clenched.

Steve responded to the question before Aaron could. “Honey, if we knew the answer to that question we would most likely have a cure. But we don’t.” It was as if he tried to talk with a mouth full of taffy.

“Most researchers feel it’s caused by the absence of something called an enzyme. The enzyme that’s absent is responsi-

ble for allowing nerve impulses to pass from the nerve to the muscle. In your case, your body makes less and less of the enzyme. That results in less nerve impulses to the muscles. That's why you are weak."

Shaken as she already was, April stared at her husband expectantly. Facing the shock of the reality he already knew, Steve's mind went into overload. There was little emotion, or empathy, in his voice. His mind raced. He was robotic.

The Iceman, April thought. Did this mean she could expect nothing more from him than clinical analysis? Would there be no warmth, no sympathy in the months to come? "Why did I suddenly stop making the enzyme?" She asked shakily, turning back to Aaron.

"Again, April," Aaron said gently, "we don't know why the body suddenly stops manufacturing something that it has been manufacturing for years. This disease usually affects people between the ages of thirty and forty-five. Something in the body just quits."

"How will I die?"

"Honey, you don't want to know . . ." Steve started.

"What do you mean I don't want to know?" April cried. "I *do* want to know. How are we going to tell Joshua? How do you think he will take this?"

She was sobbing now, not for herself, but for her two-year-old son. She loved Joshua more than she had ever loved anyone. Joshua was her reason for living. She had long ago accepted her husband's busy clinic schedule, the nights she waited until all hours of the morning, the evenings of dinners prepared for an empty table, dinners which she often ate alone. But she always had Joshua. Fighting back tears of his own, Steve excused himself and left the office.

* * * * *

April had become pregnant one other time; a pregnancy that had ended in less than four weeks. After Dr. Becker, her gynecologist, had told her the *rabbit died*, she had rushed out and bought a tiny pair of knitted mittens. She prepared a beautiful dinner and resolved that even if Steve came home at four in the morning she would wait up for him. She placed the little mittens on his dinner plate and covered them with a silver lid. He came home at nine, apologized for being late - again - and thanked her for waiting up for him with a meal ready. She had contained her excitement for so long she was ready to burst. He sat at the table, lifted the cover expecting to find some delicacy and instead, found the little mittens. Blankly staring at them for a moment, he suddenly gasped in recognition and jumped up.

“Are you?” He asked excitedly, and he grabbed her by the shoulders.

“Yes,” she gasped.

She felt as though the answer exploded from somewhere deep inside and tears welled in her eyes. She freed the urgency of the entire day by a single word. They kissed and laughed and cried together. And after dinner, they made love. Then, several days later, she lost it.

The loss devastated April. She had spent the next four months awfulizing and terrorizing herself for being fruitless, barren and unproductive. Steve offered reassurance as best as he could, but it was no use. Over and over, he tried to convince her to become pregnant again, but she refused. In desperation Steve sometimes hid her birth control pills or replaced them with sugar pills. But she always found him out.

“The only way you could know these are not birth control pills is if you eat the damn things like candy,” he would accuse.

Their arguments usually ended in a lovemaking session.

When April did get pregnant again, she insisted on remaining prostrate the entire term. She would do nothing she thought would harm the baby and had worked herself up to such a point of frenzy that she was unable to sleep for a week. Then, when respite did come, foreboding dreams robbed her of the peace sleep should have granted her. Something evil, the blackness of death, gripped her, and then something or someone else drew her back. Life came back to all of them.

Subconsciously she shook herself clear of the cobwebs of that ghostly memory and recalled instead that eventually goodness had triumphed; the most joyful experience of her life had happened. Joshua.

She protected him then and she would protect him now, no matter what the diagnosis.

* * * * *

“ . . . and in the last days your breathing will fail. That, in all likelihood, will be how you will die, April,” Aaron said as she came back from her thoughts. “But we can talk about this some other time. Right now I want you to go home and get some rest. I’ll see you again in two weeks.”

“Just rest, take two aspirin and call you in the morning, right?” She asked to lighten the mood. “You’re beginning to sound like my husband.”

But her mood was dark. It would take a long time for her to come to grips with this illness and she was afraid that, meanwhile, she would make everyone - Joshua - miserable. She resolved she would not do that.

Aaron watched them leave through the shuttered windows in his office on the second floor that overlooked the parking lot. He took a deep breath, held it in momentarily, and sighed as he let it out. This was, after all, a shitty business.

As Steve and April drove home each of them kept silent through their internal suffering. April thought of Joshua. Steve searched his mind for a cure for his wife.

The Five Stages of Denial

The next few weeks were uneventful. April went about her daily routine as best she could feeling, oddly enough, that she had more energy than ever before. She did not tire as much and could play with Joshua without too much fatigued. She began to think that these *brilliant minds* were wrong about her condition. Hell, she wasn't even a doctor, and she could see she was just anemic again. Why were they too blind to see it?

April called Sun World Health Spa not far from her home and inquired about an appointment with a fitness expert, resolving to get back in shape. Lifting weights and doing aerobics might be the answer. And the price was right, too. Just \$600 a year. They offered baby-sitting services, sunlamps, racquetball, an Olympic swimming pool, sauna rooms, steam rooms, hot tubs and, for a nominal fee, a masseuse. The place made her feel pampered. All she needed was a new outfit and she would be back in the groove.

The next day she went to her favorite department store and found just the outfit, one of those bodysuits that looks like silk, fits like a glove, and has an outrageous price tag. One hundred eighty five dollars seemed a small price for a suit to outfit her new self. She picked out towels with fitting logos and colors, sweatbands for wrists and head, and the perfect tennis shoes for one hundred sixty five dollars. Then she headed for the health club, fighting off the fatigue that had been dragging her down since noon.

Her fitness instructor and tour guide, Miss Jensen, looked like she had just come out of the mold. Five feet tall, and one

hundred solid pounds, she wore a low-cut black T-shirt over braless breasts effectively showing her notable cleavage and allowed her nipples to project a replica of themselves through her shirt. Ending six inches above the top of her shorts, the T-shirt also allowed her to show off her flat stomach. She wore white short shorts that exposed one-half of her derriere. April gave Miss Jensen a top to bottom once over and thought, *I've got to keep my husband out of here.*

Miss Jensen gave April the grand tour. It was a luxurious layout. Each member had her own locker. The stalled off showers offered a maximum of privacy and sported lotion soap, razors and shave cream in each. Above each well-lit vanity were various items that included perfumes and makeup. An exercise room *For Women Only* boasted twenty computer-operated exercycles, fifteen computer-operated rowing machines, twelve stair machines, and various and sundry weight machines on which to burn off the fat or just sit and chat. The club also offered coed game rooms, a library, hot tubs, sauna, steam room, ice bath, bar, and weight rooms in which Miss Jensen assured April she could view the most beautiful male bodies she had ever seen.

Miss Jensen offered to start April on her own, personal, private, and sculptured fitness program that minute but April told her that she could conduct her own program as her husband was a doctor and she was aware of her body's needs. Smiling, Miss Jensen told April that she would be available if she needed any help, and excused herself.

After three minutes of fighting the abdominal machine, April decided she had had enough for one day. After she sat in the hot tub for twenty minutes, she changed cloths, placed her exercise clothing in her locker, rescued Joshua from the sitting service, and left. Tired though she was, April spent the ritualistic five minutes to make sure she strapped Joshua into a car

seat that looked like something out of a space capsule. Padding at every possible corner and curve, it included multiple belts that crisscrossed his chest, went around his waist and between his legs. Steve often teased her that if they were ever in an accident, God forbid, the crotch strap would ensure that she would end with the girl she wanted after which April would roll her eyes toward the heavens and sigh.

“Want some I — C — E — C — R — E — A — M?” April asked brightly now, spelling it as quickly as possible.

Joshua’s eyes lit up, “I ceem,” he cried.

He loved the stuff, although his father hated to have him eat it. Steve was one of those people who believed in healthy foods. Although he wasn’t a strict *health food* individual, he did believe in small portioned, balanced meals, as his philosophy was that wholesome food in moderation was the key to preserving a healthy posture throughout life. Steve continually recited his *white lecture* to anyone who would listen. “Don’t eat anything *white*, or anything with anything *white* in it. That includes: Sugar. Sugar is B—A—D. It rots your teeth, causes diabetes, atherosclerosis, and arteriosclerotic heart disease, all of which will eventually kill you. Salt. Salt causes water retention, hypertension and general tension. It is *bad*. It, too, will eventually kill you. Processed flour. They bleach it. When they do, they strip out all the nutrients. All it does is make you F—A—T and that is *bad*. Eat whole-wheat products but stay away from foods made with processed flour. White rice. They bleach it. Same as white flour. Eat brown rice. White rice does nothing. It’s just B—A—D. Eggs. Too much cholesterol. One egg gives you your dietary need for cholesterol for a week. All the other cholesterol you eat for the rest of the week in everything else clogs up the pipes. That with the salt you put on them will help to contribute to the arteriosclerosis and atherosclerotic heart disease. It is just plain BAD. Whole milk.

Whole milk contains too much F—A—T. And that is just B—A—D. And that includes cheese. They make cheese from whole milk and, therefore, it is no better than drinking whole milk.” On he would lecture.

Whenever April gave Joshua a doughnut or piece of cake, Steve would recite all the ingredients from his ‘white list’. “Salt, sugar, white flour, eggs, and milk. Why don’t you just have me start an I.V. of lard on him? That will fill his arteries real fast. That way he won’t have to suffer slowly from the heart disease you’re giving him.”

April just laughed at him and let him finish his tirade while Joshua continued to eat his cake and love every sinful bite of it.

This time they went to Gelato’s Ice-Cream Palace where April bought Joshua his favorite flavor, Snickalicious; chocolate ice-cream with big chunks of Snickers bars in it. Joshua loved it. What he couldn’t reach with a spoon he reached by putting his entire hand into the cup, with a dreamy look of ecstasy on his face. Afterward, April would clean him, the seat, the car, and the clothes. But she always left him alone while he ate.

As for April, she always had Strawberry Cheesecake, her favorite flavor. It was decadent, but she savored every spoonful and all the while she told herself that she would burn off those few calories in ten minutes at her new spa. She had never felt better. There was no denying it. Steve and Dr. Debries were wrong. There was nothing wrong with her, nothing at all.

* * * * *

“You bought *what*?” Steve bellowed. He couldn’t believe that April would be so irresponsible. All the training he had in psychology while in medical school flew out the window when he heard what she had done. “How in the hell could you do such a thing? You’re sick, damn it. You can hardly dust the furniture. Now you want to spend the day at the spa working out?” He threw his hands up in despair, not because of the wasted money, but because April didn’t realize that she was not getting stronger, but weaker. The spa would entertain her for about one month and then she would realize she couldn’t do her exercises anymore. She would go less and less often until the demons of depression hit and he didn’t, by damn, want her depressed.

“I swear,” he continued, pulling up a kitchen chair and sitting heavily. “Sometimes you act just like a child. At times I think *Joshua* has more sense than you. Don’t you realize you need to preserve the energy you do have so you can work around here?” He hated treating her like a child, but he was at wits ends dealing with her.

“I am *not* sick! I feel fine. Since I left that office I have never felt better. You tell me I am sick and I am telling you that I am *not*.” As she said the last word she stamped her foot and turned on him. He had started to follow her and she was so close when she turned that their faces were within inches of each other. In the momentary silence, they heard Joshua crying.

“Great. You woke Joshua up,” she said disgustedly, and went to fetch him just as Steve’s beeper sounded.

Groaning, he headed for the phone to call the exchange. It seemed that one of his patient’s, Mr. Nichols, heart had stopped and the staff had just revived him. Medical personnel worked on him for thirty minutes and they were just ready to

'call the code', shoptalk for give up, when Mr. Nichols gasped a breath and nearly sat up; and he would have except for the restraints around his wrists.

Steve didn't bother to tell April he was going. He knew her well enough to know that it wasn't going to do any good arguing.

Once he arrived at the hospital, Steve found Mr. Nichols awake but barely clear. "Let me go back," he gurgled through an oxygen mask.

"Where do you want to go, Mr. Nichols?" Steve asked. He always spoke gently to his patients, and he was a perfectionist with the staff.

"Back there," was all Steve could make out of the answer.

"If he hasn't had too much morphine, give him ten milligrams IV," he told the nurse.

"Right away doctor," she said, hurrying out of the room. Then to another nurse busying herself over the patient, he asked, "Was he complaining of chest pain?"

"Yes sir. He sat up, said 'It feels like a tank is riding over my chest', and then he lost consciousness."

"Did you give him any Nitro before he passed out?"

"One."

"Pop two more under his tongue right now. Then call respiratory therapy and get someone up here for blood gases. Call the lab and get a stat CPK-MB, Troponin and Myoglobin."

"Ten milligrams of morphine IV," the first nurse said, re-entering the room and showing Steve the syringe that contained the medication.

"Slowly," Steve said. "We don't want to send him back to wherever he was mumbling about."

Behind him, Steve heard, "Anything I can do to help?" It was Bill Levitt.

* * * * *

Bill and Steve had known each other for eighteen years. The circumstances of their first meeting could make part of a Rambo movie. Steve considered what occupational endeavor he wanted to follow. He knew it was medicine but he was uncertain about what area of medicine. He thought about joining the Marine Corps but decided to join the Navy since the Marines had no medical training programs. He became a Corpsman and soon after he finished Corps school the Gulf war was raging rampant. He immediately requested to enter the elite Special Forces group of the U.S. Navy known as the Seals and the Navy accepted him. His medical knowledge, coupled with his achieving the rank of black belt in both Kempo and TaeKwonDo made him a valuable candidate. These two areas of expertise bought him a ticket into the Seals' dangerous training, training unlike anything he had ever known. Immediately after he graduated, he and his company went first to Kuwait, and then to Iraq where insurgents had a group of doctors pinned down after their helicopter lost power. The Marines who transported the doctors held off the Iraqis as best they could. It was hot in the kitchen, and crowded.

The pilot flew in low and dropped Steve and the rest of the group in to do what they could. It was their responsibility to get the doctors to safety and wait for help to return. When Steve jumped out of the Chinook he landed on the back of Bill Levitt who was on his knees with his face in the sand, clutching his helmet and groaning about how he was going to die. Steve had told him to get his ass out of the air before he got it shot off. "It makes too big a target," he had warned Bill.

Once they were out of the immediate danger Bill had demanded the military send him home but he served another eleven months before they would do so. He hated every day of

his duty and swore the leaders of the countries involved could fight the next war so far as it concerned him. Once back in the States, Bill became an activist in several antiwar causes, let his hair and beard grow, smoked some grass occasionally, and mellowed out. Three years later he had regained his sanity, applied for a residency in internal medicine, cut his hair, shaved his beard, took his earring out, and got serious.

* * * * *

Steve turned and, throwing a thumb towards the patient said, "I don't think so, Bill. Mr. Nichols tried to check out against medical advice."

"Did you get him to sign a release?" Bill replied, laughing.

Steve shrugged. "He's just being difficult. We revive him, and he starts talking about wanting to go back. How's that for gratitude? Listen, how about some lunch, got some time?"

They found their way to the cafeteria where Bill ordered a cheeseburger with everything on it. Steve ordered a whole-wheat turkey sandwich, plain, so he could garnish it himself.

"Still eating that shit?" Bill asked.

"That's funny," Steve countered, "I was just going to ask you the same question. They boil everything made in a hospital cafeteria in lard."

Steve referred to all hospital cafeterias as the 'suet suite'. Once, to prove this point, he ordered a plain hamburger patty, placed it on a salad plate and took it to the lab where he left it in the refrigerator overnight. The next day when he took the hamburger out, there was a quarter inch of rust colored grease caked on the plate with the hamburger imprisoned in it.

"Now you can see what you're eating," he had told Bill, handing him the dish.

A few days later and not to be outdone, Bill went to the lab, opened a test tube he had taken from the refrigerator and dipped an ocular loop into it. Then he spread some of its contents on a slice of turkey he had brought from the cafeteria. The next day he took the slice of turkey to Steve.

"Look at *that* under the microscope," he said. "I'll bet there's stuff on it that would make you stop eating it, too."

"Give me a break, Bill" Steve had protested. "There's nothing on a plain slice of turkey that would be harmful."

“If there’s *that* much lard in the hamburger, there’s got to be something in the turkey,” Bill countered.

“All right, I’ll look at it,” Steve had replied. “Then you can see who eats better food.”

Taking a small piece of the turkey, he had placed it on a microscope slide, and adjusted the objective. “Great Christ!” Steve shouted. Bill could hardly contain his laughter.

“What is it?” Bill asked, trying to sound convincing.

“There’s E. coli all over this turkey. These bastards are feeding us shit!” Steve yelled. Jumping up, he headed for the cafeteria.

The entire incident had landed in the Administrator’s office. Bill had admitted putting the E. coli, a microorganism found naturally in the intestines of man, on the turkey. Steve was furious since he had made a large production in front of half the hospital staff in the cafeteria where he had loudly announced that they were serving ‘shit cakes’. The incident had almost cost each of them a suspension.

Now they found a table outside, anchored their napkins under salt and pepper shakers against the wind, and sat. Bill picked up his burger and stuffed it into his mouth. Steve gave him a look of disgust but said nothing. He picked at his sandwich and found that he wasn’t hungry.

“What’s the matter? On another diet?” Bill asked. “What’s this one called, ‘order it and then don’t eat it’? You’re not still mad at me for spreading E. coli on that piece of turkey are you?” Bill added, a streak of grease running down his chin.

“Give me a break. I’m just not hungry today, and wipe your chin for God’s sake,” Steve said, tossing his sandwich at the plate.

“Mind if I eat it then?” Bill asked, grabbing a napkin from under the salt and dabbing at his chin.

“Go for it,” Steve told him. “It’s what you should have eaten in the first place.”

Bill let it go. “How are April and Joshua?”

This was the moment Steve had waited for. He needed to tell someone about April. He hadn't spoken with anyone about the meeting with Dr. Debries since the day he left his office. In fact, Steve had kept to himself, using the excuse that he was too busy, to avoid any confrontation. He felt like he was going to cry two or three times a day and the ability to control his emotions was becoming more difficult. *I'm losing my mind*, he imagined sometimes, and even thought of talking with Dr. Gates, the chief of psychiatry, but decided to put it off. Now his best friend was a captive audience and he could finally get it off his chest. There was no denying that he needed to talk and yet he couldn't find the words.

"They're just fine," he said finally. "Both of them are just fine."

Melinda

April put Joshua down for a late nap and was ready to collapse. She had just dozed off when the phone rang. It was Melinda.

Melinda and April were friends. They had known each other most of their lives. April remembered times when she was three and Melinda was four and they would play in the creek behind Melinda's father's house, fishing for rocks, capturing bugs, making mud pies, and having wonderful fun. Those days would often result in a good tongue-lashing from their parents for getting their clothes filthy and trailing in mud. Melinda had witnessed the accident when April cut her face. That memory scared Melinda's heart far worse than it had April's face since she was certain that somehow she could have prevented the accident. She blamed herself to the present day.

Melinda was a large woman. Even as a child she could lift her classmates and hurl them across the playground with ease; even the boys. Through school she towered over her classmates. She also owned a booming voice. You could hear Melinda from anywhere in the house even when she was speaking in a normal tone of voice. And when she yelled, the hair on the back of your neck would stand on end. Melinda was always jovial. Nothing got her down. Whenever Steve asked her, as he often did, if being 150 pounds overweight ever depressed her, she would simply say that if she did feel down a good old-fashioned hot fudge sundae would set her up again, thank you very much. She hated the 'White Lecture' she got every time she saw Steve since she could see how much he

loved giving it to her.

“Want to go shopping today?” Melinda asked.

“Joshua has a cold and has been cranky,” April lied. “Besides, Steve is coming home early today and we’re going to take a drive.”

“Oh Foot,” Melinda said. She had heard this expression from her grandmother and had used it since she was a little girl. It was her word for ‘shit’, ‘sure’, ‘right’, and several other expletives.

“Why is it that I don’t believe you, sweetie? You and Steve don’t take drives at three in the afternoon or at four, five or six either,” she said.

“Okay, the truth is I am not feeling well today,” April admitted.

“What’s the matter?” Melinda asked, concerned.

“I don’t know. I guess I have the flu or something.”

“What the hell are you married to a doctor for if the big galoot can’t even keep you healthy? I always knew he was a quack,” Melinda said disgustedly.

“It’s not Steve’s fault. Besides, it’s probably nothing,” April protested.

“You shouldn’t have to tell him! He should just know. He *is* married to you isn’t he? You two are still sleeping in the same bed aren’t you? Doctors should be able to pick up on these things. That’s why they go to school for fifteen years, to learn to be human thermometers and to learn to diagnose instantly by sight. What is it Steve called that? ‘Augenblick’, I think. I don’t remember. Anyway, I guess I need to come over there and take care of you and Joshua myself,” Melinda finished.

“No,” April snapped. “I mean, I can handle it Melinda,” she finished, softening her tone.

Now Melinda was concerned. April seldom raised her voice, especially not to her. Even when they were children April rarely raised her voice to Melinda because when she did, Melinda would sit on her until she had given her an oath and

sworn the poxies on herself that she would never do it again. What's more, April only called Melinda *Melinda* when something really troubled her. Otherwise it was *Mel*.

"You're scaring me, sweetie," Melinda said softly.

"I'm Okay, Mel. Honest. I just don't feel well today. I'll make a deal with you. Let me get some sleep and we'll go shopping tomorrow. I promise," April finished, sounding pathetic.

"All right," Melinda told her. "But if you need me for anything you call me. I'll pick you up around ten tomorrow morning."

"Could you make it nine?" April asked. "Joshua will be ready for a nap when we get to the mall, and maybe if we're lucky, he'll stay asleep in his stroller for most of the time we're gone."

"Sure, sweetie. Nine it is," Melinda said. "Love you."

"Love you Mel," April replied. The minute she hung up she was asleep.

Melinda sat and thought about the conversation for a couple of minutes. She had a nagging feeling something just wasn't right, but finally dismissed it. April was probably going through something she didn't feel like sharing yet. But, she was fine. Still, if there was something wrong, she would get truth out of April tomorrow, even if she had to sit on her.

Melinda was there at nine on the dot. April had spent an hour putting on makeup and checking, then rechecking, to make sure that it hid any evidence of her being ill or tired even though she knew she would have a hard time keeping it from Melinda for long. She dreaded the day that Melinda would find out.

"Ready to go, sweetie?" Melinda asked in her typical jovial manner.

"Ready."

They headed for the mall where they visited their favorite

stores, which included the one where April found her exercise suit. They talked about everything and everyone and stopped three times for something to eat, and, or drink. In Melinda's case it was both at every stop. Finally they had covered every store in the mall and picked up, examined, and put back what a husband would count as thousands of objects. April was right about Joshua. He slept for the first two hours and had been good for the rest of the shopping spree, keeping busy with a candy cane Melinda had bought for him.

"Remember to tell your daddy that Auntie Melinda bought you a big candy cane, Joshua," she told him, getting in the car. April smiled and gave her a wicked look.

When they arrived, Steve was waiting, having come home for some lunch and to look in on April. "Been shopping?" He asked.

"Mel called yesterday and asked me out. I forgot to tell you," April said nervously.

"That's all right, honey. How much?" Steve asked gesturing to the many packages. Not that he cared how much April spent, but he wanted her to think he did.

"Don't tell him," Melinda warned. There was something about the way April was looking at Steve that she didn't like. *Was she afraid of him?*

"Not much," April said, still looking nervous.

"How do you feel?" Steve inquired.

Afraid that he would let something slip, she quickly said, "I feel fine, how do you feel?"

"I feel great," Steve said. He had gotten the message that April wanted him to pretend everything was all right.

"Aren't you going to ask how I feel?" Melinda chimed in.

"I know how you feel, Melinda. F—A—T," Steve said, spelling the word slowly and succinctly.

"Stephen," April said, scolding. "Now you apologize,"

she demanded.

“Sure. I’m sorry Melinda,” Steve said halfheartedly. “How do you feel?”

“Fine,” Melinda replied in her coldest tone. “By the way, why don’t you give your wife a checkup? She hasn’t been feeling well, you know. Or are you too damn dumb to see it?”

“I know she hasn’t . . .,” Steve began.

April interrupted. “I’m fine. I’ve had the flu or something. That’s all. I feel fine today. Now you two quit picking at each other.”

“Picking,” Joshua aped.

“Yes little Prince,” Steve said lovingly, bending over and picking up his son.

As soon as Melinda left April went inside and collapsed on the couch. Steve sat next to her and ran his fingers through her hair. “How are you really doing, champ?” He asked.

“I’m fine. Every day in every way I’m getting better and better,” she said jokingly.

“You get that from your yoga instructor?”

“No. I got that from my therapist,” April said laughing.

“Why don’t you get some rest now,” Steve suggested. “I’ll take Joshua to the hospital with me and he can play with some kids in Pedi until I finish. It won’t be late, I promise. Give you time to relax and take it easy.”

“Are you sure he won’t catch the galloping crud from one of the other kids?” April asked, a look of concern on her face.

“I’m not going to put him in contagion, honey. He’ll be fine,” Steve said reassuringly.

“Okay, but please don’t be too late,” she said moving her hand along the inside of his thigh up to his crotch. “Joshua needs to have his dinner and bath on time tonight so we can *visit*.”

“Visit it will be then,” Steve said smiling, gathering Joshua and his favorite toy.

April slept and had another dream about dying. As she was floating away from her body and toward a bright light in the distance, she could vaguely hear Steve calling for her to wake up. And then she did wake up. It was dark and the large, green LED crystals on the VCR told her that it was 7:13.

“Steve?” She called, disoriented.

There was no answer. April came to her senses and anticipating the pleasures she would share with Steve after putting Joshua to bed, she thought she might have just enough time to freshen up, become an alluring goddess to tease Steve before driving him over the edge of ecstasy. She smiled seductively in contemplation of some new, imagined technique, decided that haste was in order, and tried to roll over to start off to the bathroom. She couldn’t.

“Oh, my God,” she cried out in panic. “Why can’t I move? What’s happening to me?”

Frantic with fear, she lamely tried again to rouse herself off the sofa. It was no use. Her body simply would not respond. Through the terror that gripped her, she tried to think logically. “*Mind over matter, come on, you can do it. Get up April. Get off that couch,*” she demanded of herself.

Calling on all the determination she could find for one last extraordinary effort, she managed to list so she fell off the couch, landing with a thud flat on her face. Despondent, fearful, bleeding and crying, she lay and waited.

It was soon after April fell off the couch that Steve and Joshua arrived.

“Honey?” Steve called, throwing his keys on a marble-topped table in the entry.

When he heard April crying from somewhere near the couch, Steve ran to her. Seeing her lying on the floor, blood pouring out of her nose and a wild look of fear in her eyes almost broke his heart. It reminded him of the look of sheer

fear and panic in a rabbit's eyes when dying.

"Oh, Jesus!" he said to himself, gently rolling her over. "Are you all right?"

"I tried to get up and couldn't," she blubbered through a nose full of mucus and blood.

Steve carefully lifted her from the floor and carried her to the bedroom, all the while rapidly assessing her medical condition. He could see April was quickly approaching hysteria.

"Shhh," Steve whispered. "You're going to be all right. Do you understand?"

"Yes," she whispered, tears still streaming down her face.

He hurried to the bathroom, wet a washcloth with cold water, and ran back to wipe her face and nose. Ten minutes of intensive assessment revealed that April had all the proper responses, the ability to distinguish between hot and cold, sharp and dull and light touch and painful touch. But when Steve asked her to lift her leg from the bed, she couldn't.

Steve tried reaching Aaron but an operator at his answering service intercepted the call. She explained that Dr. Debries was out of the office, would be in tomorrow at 10:00 a.m., and asked if she could take a message. Steve asked her to get hold of Dr. Debries at home.

"Is this an emergency, sir?"

"Would I be calling at seven forty at night if it wasn't?" Steve asked sarcastically.

"Would you like me to call for emergency personnel to come to your home, sir?"

"No I wouldn't," Steve shouted angrily. "I want you to get hold of Dr. Debries at home right now," he yelled.

"I'm sorry sir, but if this is not a true emergency I'll have to take your name . . ."

At that Steve slammed the phone down with a thud, irate. "Do these idiots have to go to school to work in the doctors'

exchange?” He asked rhetorically.

He picked up the phone again to call — who? He didn’t know. His priority was to get April to the hospital and, once admitted, he would call Aaron. He dressed April in her pajamas, put a robe on her, and carried her through the house.

What about Joshua? Do I take him with us?” He thought.

He lay April down on the couch and went back into their bedroom. Then an idea came to him. He picked up the phone and called Melinda.

* * * * *

“What have you done to her you bastard?” Melinda bel-
lowed through the phone.

Does this woman’s voice self-amplify? Steve thought. “Melinda, please. Just get over here now. I’ll sit in the car until I see you pull up and then I’m out of here. When I get home I’ll explain everything to you. Just do this for April’s sake,” he pleaded, keeping his tone of voice low.

“All right,” she said coldly. “But if you have done anything to her Steve, I swear to God I’ll knock the . . .”

Steve hung up. He wasn’t interested in *what* Melinda was going to knock out of him. He knew she was serious and he knew better that she would try it. He admired Melinda in that moment for being a faithful friend to his wife, although he would never admit that to her. He gathered April off the couch where she had fallen asleep. She hardly stirred. He placed her gently in the front seat, ran around to the driver’s side and started the car, and then he stood in the doorway where he could both hear Joshua and keep his eye on April. When he saw the headlights of Melinda’s car approaching he got into his. As she pulled up he drove off and he caught a glimpse of Melinda as he did. She was ashen and he knew that she was sick with worry.

Once at the hospital, Steve admitted April to the general Medical/Surgical unit on the third floor of the hospital, Third West, where he felt confident in the nursing personnel.

“Good evening, doctor,” a nurse said, directing an aide to take April into a room. It was Julie Kern.

Julie

Julie Kern was one of Steve favorite nurses. She was a five-foot five, 220 pound ball of fire with short, black hair, green eyes and a large, round face accentuated by too much makeup. At times the makeup created a comical effect; dark foundation, bright red blush, dark green eye shadow, purple mascara, and thickly applied ruby red lipstick. If Julie had a failing, it was the temptation for an occasional nip. She was fond of scotch. Steve knew that in the past she had kept a small flask of it in the nurse's station desk. This would effectively get her through the shift without threatening her job or the safety of the patients. The nip once in a while aside, Julie was a crack nurse. It disturbed Steve that she may be an alcoholic and he had often offered to send her to the Drug and Alcohol rehab unit for help. She always declined.

One morning at 3:00 a.m. when Steve had admitted a patient with possible appendicitis, Julie had been on the night shift when Steve called up to the floor to leave orders for his patient.

"Third West, Julie speaking," she had replied, her voice slurred.

"Hi, Julie. How are you tonight?" Steve had asked cautiously.

"Oh fine, Doc," she mumbled happily. "Need somethin'?"

"Yes, Julie. I'm sending you a patient."

"Wonderful," she moaned. "Can't you send him to Fourth East or somethin'? I'm short staffed up here tonight. We can't manage another patient."

This had not been at all characteristic of Julie who was enthusiastic at the prospect of admitting any new patient. She loved being the primary admitting nurse and making the patient feel like he or she was at a relative's home for the night. Some of them would keep in touch with her for years after their discharge.

"I'm sorry, Julie," Steve had told her, "But I want to send this guy to the best tonight. I think he's got a hot appy and I don't want him to rupture and die on another floor while the nurses nap."

"Come on Doc. I would nearly have to sit on him all night and I can't." It was clear to Steve she was trying to speak clearly and with little success.

"Sorry Julie. No choice. I'll get you some help up there even if I have to get Dan out of bed. I'll send Terry up from E.R. with him to help you get him tucked in. When they get to the floor, I want you to have a Phenergan suppository ready. I'll write some more orders tomorrow," Steve said decisively.

"Great. Now you want me to stick my finger up his ass. Want me to kiss it before I do?" Julie bitched.

"Tell you what, Julie, I'll be right up," Steve had told her, now very concerned since to his knowledge Julie had never been drunk on duty before.

He found Julie sitting at the desk with a stack of charts in front of her and she looked like she had just had a fling in the laundry room with Bigfoot.

"Are you all right, Julie?" Steve asked, knowing she wasn't.

"Sure. Listen, sorry about the kissing of the ass statement. I'm just a little upset." As she spoke, she listed in the chair.

"You want to talk about it?"

"Not here," Julie told him warily.

Steve directed Terry to take the patient to his room, told her he was eloping with Julie, and for her to take charge for about

an hour. The nurse grinned and told him to go ahead.

“When’s my turn?” She asked as they left.

Steve just laughed.

“Come with me, Julie. We’re eloping.”

“Well, this is the first. Should I bring some birth control or are we going to spend the honeymoon back here putting in suppositories?” She asked, snorting as she laughed.

“Just leave the birth control. You don’t need it anymore anyway.”

“Tell me about it,” she intoned, half to herself.

Steve helped her into the doctor’s lounge and poured her a cup of coffee, so old and strong that it looked like tar and as he knew from former experience, tasted like swamp water. Julie took a taste and nearly spit it all over the lounge.

“This tastes like . . .,” she began to say but stopped herself.

“Talk to me, Julie,” Steve invited.

“What you want me to say Doc?” She asked avoiding his eyes.

“Let’s quit playing games,” he told her. “We’ve known each other too long to be doing this.”

“Hell, we haven’t started doing anything to each other yet and you already want to stop. Okay, Doc. I’ll talk. You’re wondering why I have been drinking tonight, right? Well, I’ll tell you. I went and saw Dr. Parker today.” Richard Parker was the chief of neurology.

“Why did you see him? You having headaches or something?” Steve asked, concerned.

“Have been for several months. I saw Rich about three months ago and he set me up for a CT scan. I told him I didn’t want to but he made me. Now he tells me I have a glioma. Sounds like a freakin’ tumor anyway you say it.”

“Oh Julie, I’m sorry,” Steve had said and he realized the extent of the problem. He paused for a few minutes and let her

suck down some more coffee. “What has he told you about it?”

“That it’s in the brainstem.” Tears began to roll down her cheeks and she then began to sob heavily. “I’m so afraid, Steve.”

Steve had put his arm around her and let her cry. He had known then there would be no surgery for the tumor since it was in a part of the brain the surgeon couldn’t get to. The tumor would continue to grow. Julie would experience bazaar changes in her thought pattern. She would smell odors that weren’t there, feel hot and cold sensations when there was nothing hot or cold touching her, and hallucinate in the final days. Then she would die of depression of the breathing centers where the tumor was growing. These thoughts had made Steve feel sick.

“Want me to take you home, Julie?” He had said finally. “I can get coverage for you tonight.”

“I’m afraid to go home. It’s like sitting in front of a firing squad wondering when they’re going to start shooting.”

“Let me admit you to the unit so you can get some rest.”

“I can’t . . . ,” she started.

“Nonsense. I’m going to do it, Julie. Look at you. You’re exhausted. I’ll bet you haven’t slept for weeks. You can’t keep going like this. You’re burying yourself in a bottle of scotch.”

“It’s a hell of a lot quicker than this tumor and feels a lot better. Besides, they won’t let me have any booze in here and you know I need a little from time to time.”

Steve had appreciated her honesty. It made him feel good that she would admit what both of them had always known. “Don’t worry about the booze,” he said with a wink. “I’ll make sure you’re flying high all the time you’re in here. After all, anyone would agree there is a need for a little medication to help you cope with this condition, don’t you think?”

Reluctantly Julie had agreed. She realized she was on the verge of losing her job and her mind. She was grateful for

Steve's help. "Thank you," she whispered, leaning against him. "Make mine morphine, Okay?"

Steve had kissed her forehead and hugged her, glad that she could not see his face and the pain he felt for her. Perhaps tragedy was catching up with him. The "intelligent eyes" his wife had accused him of hiding behind were rapidly becoming windows to a depressed soul.

"Don't worry about me, Doc," Julie had said bravely as she pulled away from him, her voice steady now. "I've been around the block a few times and this little tumor isn't going to get to me."

"I believe that," he had told her. Both realized it was a lie but it was all they had. *A lie is still a lie, no matter how good it sounds*, Steve thought sadly.

Steve had admitted Julie that night and ordered morphine for her every four hours whether she wanted it or not, keeping her either asleep, or on cloud nine, or both for a week. She had rested well and felt on top of the world when he finally reduced the dose.

The administration had placed Julie on temporary leave and assured her she could return to work on the part-time basis under the direct supervision of other registered nurses as soon as she was ready. She understood this was necessary to protect both herself and the patient.

* * * * *

“Hi Julie. Who’s in charge tonight?” Steve asked now.

“Ramona.”

“Let me speak with Ramona, please. By the way, how are you?”

“Hanging in there, thanks. Here’s Ramona,” she said, handing over the phone.

“Ramona, I’m admitting my wife to your unit and I don’t want it spread over the hospital. Can you help me out?”

“What seems to be the patient’s problem?” She asked playing along.

“Thanks, I knew I could depend on you. I’ll explain what’s going on later. As soon as she gets to the floor I want you to give her fifty of Thorazine. Then give her seventy-five every eight hours. I want her in a private room next to the nurse’s station and I want a private duty nurse to stay with her round-the-clock. I don’t want *anyone* except you and the private duty nurse in the room on your shift. I want you to speak with Kathy on days and Phyllis on P.M.’s and let them in on this. Other than the three of you and the private duty nurses, I want this kept quiet. If anyone calls the hospital asking to speak with April I want you to tell them there is no patient by that name in the house. A doctor named Aaron Debries will come in to talk with her. Other than him, I am the only other doctor allowed in her room. Did you get all that?”

“Yes, Steve. You aren’t referring to Aaron Debries the neuro specialist?”

“Yes.”

“Oh my God, Steve. What’s wrong with her?”

“She has A.L.S. Ramona,” he said, his voice cracking. He was ready to lose it.

“I’ll handle everything, Steve,” she told him. “Don’t worry.”

“What about Joshua?” He asked.

“I’ve arranged everything,” she assured him.

“Thanks Ramona. I owe you one.”

“I still owe you about a hundred,” she countered. “I couldn’t count the times you’ve treated staff, staff’s kids, even myself on the fly and never accepted a dime. Don’t mention it.” Then, as almost an afterthought, she said, “Steve, I’m sorry.”

“Thanks, Ramona,” Steve said, hanging up.

He took his wife to the unit in a wheelchair; a towel partially veiled her face. Once on the floor he wheeled her straight into the room and shut the door. Ramona, who waited for him there, helped put April in the bed. Then she held up the syringe containing the Thorazine and asked, “You want the honors?”

“No. You do it, please.” Steve knew that would knock her out for the rest of the night and sleep was what she desperately needed. “I’ll be back early tomorrow. Call me on my cell if you need anything.”

“Get some rest Steve, or you’re going to crash,” she finished.

Steve left the hospital, slipping out through the emergency room after calling Dr. Debries’ exchange again. He told the operator that he needed Dr. Debries immediately. As he got into his car he remembered that now he would have to face Melinda. That would be the worst part of this night.

* * * * *

After Steve drove off Melinda had checked on Joshua, who was sound asleep, before fixing a pot of coffee and a large sandwich. After all, there was no sense in starving while she waited to find out what the hell was going on. She took the sandwich, a large glass of chocolate milk, a bag of Doritos, an apple, a banana, a block of Monterey jack cheese and a cup of coffee into the living room, turned the TV set on and then, seeing the blood on the carpet at the edge of the sofa, freaked out.

“That son-of-a-bitch hit her!” she cried aloud. “I’m going to kill him.”

Suddenly, she looked up and noticed Joshua standing nearby. “Oh, I’m sorry, honey,” she said running to him. “Did Auntie Melinda wake you up? Oh, precious. I’m so sorry.”

Melinda picked him up, smothered him with kisses and put him back in his bed. When Joshua slept, she went back out to the living room and began to obsess about what must have happened. She imagined Steve demanding to know how much April had spent at the mall. When she told him, he must have hit her, knocked her off the couch and bloodied her nose. Melinda’s mind flashed back to a moment long ago when she stood frozen in fear and panic, white snow, red blood, and April prostrate in the middle of the chaos.

“Big fat dummy, big fat dummy,” her father shouted as he raced toward her, black strap snaking wildly, seeking its goal of flesh. Then came the blackness.

With a shiver, she vowed to bloody more than Steve’s nose. Melinda paced and festered like a boil until she thought she would go crazy while waiting for the bastard to come home.

Steve finally pulled into the driveway at 12:50 a.m. When he saw Melinda standing in the doorway like a massive watch-

dog, he exclaimed, “My God. Has she been standing there waiting all this time?”

Melinda ran out to the car and nearly tore the door off to get it opened.

“It would be easier if you would wait until I unlock it, Melinda,” Steve said through the partially opened window.

“Why did you lock the damn door in the first place, you faggot coward? Were you afraid of what was going to happen to you when you got home?” She shouted angrily. Melinda was in a rage.

“Melinda, would you calm down?” Steve exclaimed. “I told you I’d explain what happened and I will. Let me out of the damned car, would you? Let’s go inside and I’ll tell you everything,” Steve said, opening the door.

Reluctantly, Melinda backed away. She would have her chance. She had waited this long and waiting a little longer wouldn’t make any difference. Once inside Melinda offered Steve a cup of coffee. He gladly accepted and joined Melinda on the sofa, examining the food on the coffee table.

“Did you invite a football team over for a snack?” He asked. But Melinda wasn’t in the mood.

“Okay, Steve. I’m listening,” she said never taking her eyes off him. “And it better be good or I meant what I said.”

“Cut the intimidation tactics, Melinda,” he told her. “I could take you down without even thinking about it. But that wouldn’t help anyone. Besides, it’s not my style to whack women.”

Right, Melinda thought, still convinced Steve *had* ‘whacked’ April.

Steve related the entire story to Melinda, including their visit to Dr. Debries’ office and the diagnosis. He told her of the incident when April fell off the couch. He told her that he had taken April to the hospital and admitted her so she could get some rest. Melinda cried as Steve related what had happened to April that

evening. She excused herself for a moment and went into the kitchen. Steve rested his head against the couch and closed his eyes. It had been a long day. As he rested he suddenly felt a pain in his head and then he remembered nothing.

When Steve woke up he was lying on the floor. Melinda was gone.

* * * * *

April woke confused, disoriented, and frightened. She felt different, as though someone drugged her. Trying to raise her head, she found she was too weak. She closed her eyes to clear her mind and when she opened them again she saw a stocky, short, curly haired woman standing next to her.

“I’ll be taking care of you until eleven, April,” the nurse said, putting her hand on April’s arm. “Do you know where you are?”

“No,” April answered sleepily. “Why do I feel so tired? I feel heavy.”

“You are in the hospital, April,” Nurse Wright told her. “I gave you a sedative to help you rest. That is why you feel so tired.”

“How long have I been here?”

“Just two days.”

“Have I been asleep for two days?” April asked, frightened.

“Off and on. The medication has made you sleep for most of the time. Obviously your body needed the rest or you would have awakened sooner.”

“What happened to me? Was I in an accident or something?” April asked.

“No, April. I read your chart and from what it says your husband brought you here because you fell off the couch and hurt yourself. Do you remember?”

April tried to piece together what she could remember. It all seemed like a bad dream and she had difficulty sorting fact from fantasy. She remembered that she saw Dr. Debries, shopped with Melinda, fixing dinner for Steve and that he put her in the car the night she fell. Bits and pieces of information, but nothing concrete. She started to doze again and Amy Wright gently shook her arm.

“April, I am going to give you a bath. Try to wake up a little bit, Okay?”

“I’m trying but it’s hard,” April moaned.

“I know it is. Can you tell me what your son’s name is?”

“Joshua,” April answered immediately. Then opening her eyes wide she asked, “Where is Joshua?”

“Don’t be alarmed. Joshua is fine. He is with your husband. He has been playing with the other children in Pediatrics and having a great time.”

Amy fed April little bits of information at a time while she was bathing her and gave her time to absorb what she said so as not to confuse her. Slowly, although she still felt drugged, April regained most of her faculties. Just as they finished the bath Dr. Debries walked in with a woman April had not met.

“Hello, April, he said with a reassuring smile. Let me introduce Dr. Jean Gates to you. Dr. Gates is the chief of psychiatry. Steve has requested that she see you. I also felt it was a good idea.”

Dr. Gates, picking April’s hand up off the bed and holding it momentarily said, “It’s good to meet you. Just call me Jean. Do you mind if I call you April?”

“Please do,” April replied.

Dr. Debries offered a couple more pleasantries and then he and Nurse Wright left the room, the latter assuring April that she would be just outside. Although she could not move, April felt comforted by their kindness.

Jean pulled a chair up alongside the bed and sat down. She was an attractive woman of about fifty with brown hair, blue eyes, and a broad forehead. She didn’t look like a doctor to April. Then April thought, *Well, what is a doctor supposed to look like?*

“Your husband asked that I talk with you about the disease,” Jean began. “I also want to know how you have felt

since learning about it.”

“Could I have some water?” April asked. She felt nervous, anxious somehow but she could not put her finger on it. It was as if she wanted someone to tell her everything was fine, that she had been in an accident, that she was in a coma for several weeks, and now she was going to be fine.

“Sure,” Jean answered. “There’s some on the table in that green pitcher right in front of you. Help yourself.”

April leaned forward and poured herself a cup of water. She drank it all in one breath. Her mouth tasted like cotton. Then she put the cup back on the tray and pushed the bedside table away so she could see Jean better. “I don’t know what you are referring to, Jean.” she said. “I’m anemic. But I don’t have A.L.S.”

“I didn’t say anything about A.L.S.,” the Psychiatrist reminded her. “How do you suppose you became anemic?”

“Probably I didn’t eat enough liver?” April asked bitterly. “You’re the doctor. You tell me.”

“April, you are not anemic. I’ve read your chart and your blood is normal. You do have A.L.S.”

“How come I feel so much better then?”

“Do you? Do you remember what happened to you?”

“I remember that I got sick at home and Steve brought me here.”

“You fell off the couch and landed on your face. Steve brought you here because you couldn’t move. Do you remember that?”

April thought about it for a couple of minutes and recalled her dream. She remembered that she tried to move but was unable. “Yes. I remember parts of it.”

“Why do you suppose you are no longer paralyzed?”

Puzzled, April looked at her. “What do you mean?”

“You just sat up and poured yourself a cup of water, drank

it down, put the glass down and pushed the table away.” Jean remarked. “That doesn’t look like *paralyzed* to me.”

So it hadn’t been a dream! She was paralyzed! April brought her hand up to her face. She watched herself move fingers one at a time. Then she moved her arm. She wiggled her toes under the covers and watched them move. She pulled her legs up toward her chest and then let them back down.

“I don’t understand,” she said.

“We have some big words for what happened. It’s referred to as ‘conversion hysteria’ or a ‘conversion reaction’, but that just means you were frightened.”

“I remember I had a bad dream and when I woke up I couldn’t move,” April told her.

“Sometimes our dreams are reality and our waking states are an illusion,” Jean offered. “Your brain is more willing to accept your condition while you sleep than it is while you are awake. But awake or sleep, you’re just as frightened,” Jean explained. “Steve tells me the first action you took after learning you have A.L.S. was to join a fitness spa. Is that true April?”

“. . .and here you will have your own personal and private locker. Over there you will see some of the most gorgeous hunks you have ever seen,” Miss Jensen said in April’s mind. *“Trust me April, you will see more eye candy in here than you have ever seen.”*

“April?” Jean asked.

Coming to her senses, April objected, “I joined a fitness spa because I have not been as careful about taking care of my body as I should. I decided it was time to start thinking about it. Is that such a crime?”

“What were your thoughts about joining the spa?” Jean asked. “Were you depressed?”

“I already told to you. My body is out of shape. I wanted to

get back into shape.”

“Have you experienced depression?” She repeated.

“I have been angry,” April said with slow deliberation, sensing Jean had her cornered, “not depressed, because I have been trying to tell a bunch of pigheaded doctors who think they have all the answers that I am not sick. They insist I am. It’s as simple as that.”

April wanted this prodding to stop. She needed to see Steve. More than that, she wanted to go home. All this talk about conversion hysteria was nonsense

Jean smiled at April and said nothing. She sat and waited as if she were waiting for an answer to a question. Finally, after April offered no more, she said, “Well, I think we have talked enough for one day. I think you need some rest right now. Would you like for me to come back tomorrow to visit?” She asked.

“Well since you’re the only visitor I remember having I should say yes. Otherwise I’m liable to find myself left alone forever,” April said.

“Very well then. I’ll see you tomorrow,” Jean said, smiling at her and squeezing her hand.

When Jean was almost out the door, April said, “Dr. Gates?”

The psychiatrist turned and standing in the doorway responded, “Yes April?”

“I haven’t been in an accident and in a coma for three weeks, have I?” She said it emphatically, not as a question.

“No April, you have not been in a coma.”

“Thank you,” April said, slumping against her pillow.

“You’re welcome, April.”

Jean Gates left the room and as soon as she did Amy returned with a tray. “It’s time for some dinner and then you can have a nap,” she said happily. “Did you enjoy your visit with Dr. Gates?”

“I suppose so.”

“Let’s eat,” she said, lifting a metal cover off a plate. “Let’s see what we have here. It looks like chicken. Do you like chicken, April?”

“I suppose I do,” April said with disinterest.

Jean Gates went to the nurses’ station after she left April’s room. She found April’s chart, opened the ‘Progress Notes’, and wrote:

- Plan: 1) Suicide precaution
2) Delusional?
3) Cut Thorazine to 50 mg every eight hours
4) Will return tomorrow.

She then signed the chart, Jean Gates, M.D., and left.

The Promise

“What in the hell . . .” Bill said as he raced toward Steve. He leaned over as far as he could to the phone, picked up the receiver, dialed 911, and ordered an ambulance and a police car. Both arrived within three minutes. The police asked Bill several questions, none of which he had an answer for. The paramedics attended to Steve on the floor. One of them held a pressure dressing on Steve’s head. The gauze quickly filled up with blood and soon began to drip. “Reinforce that dressing with another,” Bill ordered the paramedics.

“Why don’t you just go over there and have a seat, buddy,” one of the paramedics answered.

“Listen to me. I’m a doctor and I’m going to give you some orders. If you don’t follow them to the letter I will have you arrested and removed from the property. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, sir,” the paramedic responded, taking another dressing and applying it over the first.

“Good. Start an IV of D5W. Do you have any hemostats in that kit?” Bill asked.

“Sure do. How many do you need?”

“I don’t know yet. Just give me one and have some others ready. I’m going to try to clamp off the bleeder in that cut on his head,” Bill answered.

“It looks like a good bleeder,” the paramedic warned.

“Piece of cake. I clamped these a thousand times in the Gulf, guys. It’s a walk in the park. Besides, it’s not that big a

bleeder or he'd already be dead."

Bill took the hemostat from the paramedic, removed the dressing, which by this time dripped with blood, dabbed at the hole in Steve's head with a clean piece of gauze, stuck the hemostat in the hole, grabbed something and clamped down on it. The bleeding stopped immediately.

"You see? Piece of cake," he said, relieved. "Let's get him loaded and out of here."

They lifted Steve onto the gurney, covered him with the blanket, and rushed him out to the waiting ambulance. Bill rode in the back with the paramedic and checked Steve for other wounds and injuries. He found none and had just finished his assessment when they pulled up to the emergency room entrance. As soon as the doors popped open Bill jumped out. He recognized the nurses coming out to receive them and one of them recognized him. "It's Steve," Bill said. Get a room ready," he ordered

"Yes sir," the nurse answered. She immediately turned and went back into the emergency room.

"Helen, could you call Dr. Anderson and ask him to meet us in X-ray right away?" Bill asked an aide.

"Yes, sir," she answered.

"Okay, guys," Bill told the paramedics, "were going straight to CT. Do not Pass Go and do not collect \$200."

They passed down a long corridor, turned, passed down another long corridor, crashed through a set of swinging doors with a "Radiology: DO NOT ENTER" sign on them, and stopped just on the other side.

"We'll take it from here gentlemen," Bill told the paramedics. "And thanks guys. That was good work."

The nurses had Steve undressed before Bill finished thanking the paramedics. They covered him with a sheet when Dr. Anderson came in. He was short, bald, wore wire rimmed

glasses and a thin layer of perspiration that never evaporated. He talked in short, rapid, staccato style bursts.

“What do we have, Bill?” He asked. It sounded like, *WhadowehaveBill*.

“We have Steve,” Bill said pointing to the gurney.

“What in the hell happened to him?”

Anderson already had a surgical scrub packet torn open, the sponge extracted, had turned the water on in the scrub sink using his right knee, had his arms and hands wet, and was scrubbing hurriedly at his fingernails.

“I don’t know. Someone attacked him or something. I didn’t get the entire story. He has a good gash on his head. I don’t know if he has a crushed skull or not, Don.”

“I’ll take care of it, Bill. Don’t worry, Okay? I know how you are with him, mother hen, and I’m telling you, *don’t worry!*”

“Thanks, Don. Will you need any help?”

“I’ll have all the help I need. Now you go upstairs and get a room ready for him and I’ll send him up as good as new,” Don said, putting his arm around Bill’s shoulder making sure he didn’t contaminate his hands.

“Okay. Thanks, Don. But I already have a room for him,” Bill confessed.

“Great. That was fast. How do you manage these feats, Bill? You must tell me your secret. It’s impossible for me to get a bed sometimes.”

“No secret. Just luck. Anyway, when he’s ready you can send him to Third West, room 101 next to the . . . Oh my God.” Bill suddenly stiffened as if Don shot him. A single thought popped into his head after he mentally saw April in her hospital bed and Steve on the gurney. “My God,” he shouted again.

Don grabbed him. “What is it, Bill?”

Bill broke away from Don’s grasp and flew out of the door. As he ran down the hall he yelled back, “Joshua!”

* * * * *

“Joshua!” April screamed in her sleep. Then sitting bolt upright in her bed she whispered, “Joshua.” Feeling half alive and half dead, she knew the drugs dulled her senses.

“It’s Okay, April,” a voice said. Just then a nurse stepped up to the side of the bed and put her hand on April’s arm. “It’s just a dream, honey,” she soothed.

“Where is my son?” April demanded.

“He’s all right. I understand he’s in Pediatrics or with your husband.”

“I want to talk with my husband right now,” April pleaded.

“What is the number? I’ll try to reach him for you.”

April gave her the number and the nurse dialed. There was no answer.

“What time is it?” April asked.

“It’s 11:00 in the morning.”

“How long have I been here?”

“I believe since the day before yesterday evening. Two days. Don’t you remember? You saw Dr. Gates yesterday.”

April now had something tangible. She had been asleep since Jean had left. No, she ate dinner after Jean had left, so she must have been asleep since after dinner the previous day. Or was it lunch? She didn’t recall.

“There’s no answer, April,” the nurse told her hanging up.

“Try this number,” April said giving her another number. The nurse tried it and again there was no answer.

April was nearly in a panic. She began to cry. The nurse sat next to her on the bed and told her that she would find her husband. April took little comfort from it all. She felt as though her entire life had turned upside down.

Just then Ramona entered the room and asked the nurse to

step outside with her. “We need to put another bed in this room,” Ramona told the nurse.

“Are we putting another patient in there with April?” She asked in disbelief.

“Yes.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea right now, Ramona? April is upset. She is demanding that I get hold of her husband.”

Ramona looked down for a moment and then looking back she said, “It’s her husband we’re putting in there.”

* * * * *

When Steve awoke, the nurse caring for him immediately told him of the past twelve hours' events. She told him that he had surgery and there were no complications. He went immediately from surgery to recovery and would go to Third West as soon as they cleaned a bed.

"Why Third West?" Steve asked casually.

"You have reservations. Dr. Levitt made them," the nurse told him. "He wanted you to have the embassy suite."

Steve tried to fit the pieces of the puzzle together. He hadn't told Bill that April was in the hospital. How would he know to pick the same floor not knowing that April was there? Or did he know? He must have found out somehow. But how? Steve asked what Dr. Anderson had done and the nurse explained that he had mended some arteries.

"Did you see who attacked you, doctor?" The nurse asked.

"Yes. I think I could identify the assailant," Steve answered trying not to say too much. "Big fat person. Really ugly, too," he said making an effort not to laugh. "Can I have some water?" He asked to change the subject.

"Ice chips only for twelve hours," Ramona said entering the room.

"Hi, Ramona. What are you doing here?"

"I came to tell you that your bed is ready upstairs," she answered. "Would you excuse us for a moment, Vicki?" Ramona asked the nurse. Vicki left and closed the door behind her.

"We have a problem, Steve," she added. "I want you to stay calm when I tell you."

"What is it, Ramona?" Steve asked sitting up. As he did, he felt woozy and immediately laid back. His heart pounded. Had something else happened to April? So much had happened in

such a short time he felt disoriented.

“It’s Joshua. They can’t find him.”

Steve turned white. He almost vomited from feeling panic that struck him at that moment. “What are you talking about?” He asked quickly.

“When the ambulance picked you up they didn’t think to look for anyone else in the house. Bill didn’t think of it either.”

“Bill?” Steve asked.

“Yes. Bill was the one who came to your house this morning and called the ambulance when he found you,” Ramona said. “He said someone attacked you and you were lying on the floor in a pool of blood.”

“Didn’t Bill look for Joshua?” Steve asked, now trembling.

“He was too concerned with you.”

“So then what happened?”

“Bill remembered Joshua after he got you into radiology and surgery. He flew back to your house and found signs that Joshua had been up and about. He searched everywhere, Steve. He can’t find him.”

“Did someone call the police? Who’s looking for him? Where is Bill now? Steve asked.

“Bill has told the police. He’s taken care of everything,” Ramona answered.

Steve broke down. He sat and cried out of a sense of despair and grief he never thought was possible. Ramona sat with him but said nothing. When Steve regained his composure he asked, “Does April know?”

“Not yet. We’ve been stalling her. But she knows something is wrong. She had a bad dream and woke up asking for Joshua. We told her he was with you and she wanted to talk to you.”

“You should take me up to her, Ramona. I have to talk to her or she will lose what sanity she has left.”

“Steve, she might lose what sanity she has left if you tell her right now.”

“And has she been getting the Thorazine?”

“Yes.”

“Then she’ll be able to handle it. If I wait too long she will just worry herself into a catatonia.”

“Do you want Jean Gates there when you tell her?”

“Has she seen Jean yet?”

“Jean saw April yesterday. She cut the Thorazine to fifty milligrams and wrote ‘delusional’ with a question mark. She also wrote ‘suicide precautions’.”

“Shit,” Steve said, falling back exhausted. “What else can go wrong?” He asked, shaking his head.

“Well, you always said that if it can go wrong, it will,” Ramona said.

“Thanks for reminding me,” Steve said bitterly.

“Do you want Jean there?” She repeated.

“No, I have to handle this one on my own,” Steve said

“Okay. But we will be right outside the door if you need us.”

“Thanks again, Ramona.”

Ramona pushed the nurse’s call button and Vicki came back into the room. “Need something?” She asked.

They transferred Steve into the wheelchair, made sure they secured his IV, and headed for the elevator. Steve dreaded this meeting. He knew he had to tell April the entire story or she wouldn’t understand any of it.

When they got him to April’s room on Third West she was sleeping. As soon as Ramona left, Steve took his wife’s hand and found himself weeping silently while he wondered why his life had suddenly taken this incredible turn for the worse.

* * * * *

Joshua woke up as the sun rose and decided to play in his room until he got hungry. He turned on his TV set, dialed in some cartoons, got his Warlord set out and set up the players. He was in the middle of a battle when he heard sirens. He jumped up on his clothes hamper and looked out the window to see an ambulance and police car pass by slowly and then went back to playing.

After he defeated the enemy, he searched for Mommy and Daddy. He looked in their room, their bathroom, and every other room in the house before he decided they must be in the back yard lying around the swimming pool as they often did on Steve's day off. When he found they were not there he reasoned that they must have gone to Auntie Melinda's house. He didn't have a clue where Auntie Melinda lived, but he was sure he could find the place if he tried.

He headed out of the backyard through the side gate; a little boy in his pajamas, carrying his 'friend', and walking down the middle of the street.

When Bill got to Steve's house Joshua was nowhere. He searched every room in the house and every nook and cranny outside the house. Then Bill jumped the swimming pool fence and searched the pool and called for Joshua until he was nearly hoarse. He ran up and down every street in all directions but saw nothing and finally resorted to banging on the neighbors' doors, asking everyone he found at home if they had seen Joshua. Those who could joined the search while Bill called the police.

When the unit arrived two officers took a statement, another physical description and a picture of Joshua off the wall, then they reassured Bill that they would immediately put out

an A.P.B. on the child. Within five minutes the entire police department was aware the child was wandering around. There was the possibility that someone had seen Joshua, picked him up, and taken him to the police department or child protection services. There was also a possibility that someone had picked him up and taken him home. There was even the possibility, God forbid, that someone had picked him up and taken him out of the state. The state of affairs worried Bill sick. He knew he could not face Steve again if he didn't find his son. He knew more than any other person what Joshua meant to Steve. He had to find Joshua. But where did he go? He tried to think like a two-year old, decided that was futile, got in his car, and started combing the neighborhood.

* * * * *

When April woke up, she kept her eyes closed, half dreaming of Steve and Joshua and only vaguely aware of the presence of another person in the room, probably a nurse. She pictured the three of them visiting her parents in Ottawa. They were sitting in a large yard looking out over a field. It was green everywhere. The sun shone brightly and felt good and then, suddenly, snow blanketed everything. The field was solid white and kids sledded and rode snowmobiles across it. April stood up to call for them to be careful of the barbed wire and Steve was telling her not to worry, his hand on her arm.

“Is it time for my bath?” She asked, still keeping her eyes closed.

“It’s me honey,” Steve answered.

April opened her eyes. She was happy to know that it was Steve. Now she could let go of the apprehension about Joshua. “How’s Joshua?” She asked.

“April, wake up and listen,” Steve said gravely.

April recognized the tone of voice immediately. It was the same tone of voice Steve had used to tell her that her dog, Neiman, had died. April screamed. “He’s dead, isn’t he?” She demanded and dissolved into tears in Steve’s arms.

“No, he is not,” Steve said, his voice cracking. “He’s lost, but he’s not dead. I promise.”

“Then where is he? I want to see him *now*. I want to leave here.” April tried to pound on Steve’s chest as she spoke. But he just held her more closely.

Ramona entered the room with more Thorazine. “Do you want me to give this to her?” She asked of Steve.

“If you come near me with that, I’ll kill you,” April said, leaning toward Ramona and trying to get out of bed. “Get out

of here right now.”

Steve held up his hand and Ramona left the room. Then he fell back into the wheelchair.

“Honey, listen,” he said. “Joshua just wandered off. Bill is out looking for him right now with the police.”

“Why in the name of God aren’t *you* out looking for him? What are you doing here. . .”

April suddenly noticed the hospital gown, the bloodstained bandage on Steve’s head and tubes hanging out of his arms. Her mind reeled. This was more than she could handle, Thorazine or not. She quickly headed for that peaceful place in the mind where worries don’t matter, that place where nothing can hurt you, where the bogeyman can’t find you and where nothing can get in. She realized she was about to slip into a catatonic state, but it was too late

Steve pushed the nurses’ call button, asked Ramona to give April the Thorazine and to call Dr. Gates. April laid in the bed, stared at the ceiling and said nothing as tears streamed down her cheeks. She wasn’t aware of anything going on around her; didn’t even feel the needle going into her thigh as Jean came through the door at a half-trot.

Taking one glance at April, Jean recognized the state immediately. “Oh, Steve,” she said, “This is serious.”

Steve embraced April. “I love you, honey,” he whispered in her ear. “Joshua is going to be all right. And you will be, too. I promise.”

April stared at the ceiling, tears rolling down her cheeks, seeing nothing, hearing nothing except the words, “I promise.”

C H A P T E R T W O

The Other News

The 8:00 News

“Daddy, Daddy,” Joshua yelled as Steve entered the police station. There he stood, holding his ‘friend’, still dressed in his pajamas. Steve ran to Joshua, picked him up and squeezed him hard. Joshua let out a grunt and wriggled in Steve’s arms. Steve was so happy to see Joshua he hadn’t noticed Bill standing there.

“It’s nice to see you too,” Bill said.

“Thanks Bill,” was all he said.

“Don’t mention it.”

“Can you take us home?”

“Sure. Want to stop for something to eat first?”

“Eat,” Joshua said

“Okay Little Prince,” Steve said, continuing to hug him. “We’ll get something to eat.”

They stopped at a Burger King. Bill ordered a double whopper with cheese, Joshua a regular burger and fries, and Steve a Diet Coke, caffeine free, of course.

“You going to let him eat all that *bad* food, Steve?” Bill asked.

“Today he can have anything he wants,” Steve said, looking lovingly at his son.

“Aren’t you going to eat?”

“Not hungry,” was all Steve said still looking at Joshua, who was stuffing fries into his mouth.

“Bill, how did you find out that April was in the hospital?”

Steve asked looking at him. Bill looked surprised.

“April is in the hospital?” He asked, feigning astonishment.

“Cut the sh . . .crap, Bill,” Steve said quickly catching himself. “I was trying to deny there was a problem just as April was. I guess I felt as soon as I admitted there was a problem, it would somehow make the problem real. It would be like pronouncing a death sentence.”

“I think I understand,” Bill said, his mouth full of hamburger.

“Anyway, I still can’t believe all this is going on. Whatever happened to the good old days of peace and quiet like we had in the Gulf War?” Steve asked.

Bill laughed. “I suppose next you’re going to ask me if I’d like to go back there for a vacation with you?”

“No, I suppose not,” he admitted, chuckling.

After they finished their lunch, Bill took Steve and Joshua home.

“Well, I’ve got rounds at eight tonight,” Bill said. “Got to run.”

“Thanks again, Bill,” Steve said holding out his hand. Bill took it and they did the Bad Ass Gulf handshake that they had made up. Bill left with tears in his eyes. Steve held his back for Joshua’s sake.

It was getting late for Joshua and he was ready for his nap. It had been a long morning and exhaustion sweep over him. Steve bathed him, dressed him in a clean pair of pajamas, put him in his bed, and read Jack in the Bean Stalk to him for the thousandth time. Joshua was asleep before Steve finished. Steve went to the living room and mindlessly turned on the television set. He went into the kitchen, filled a piece of pita bread with tuna and sprouts, grabbed a Diet Coke out of the refrigerator, and went back to the living room. He sat and watched the news.

* * * * *

Stan Barnes arrived at work promptly at 7:30 a.m. stopping, as he always did, at the ‘slop wagon’, to buy a stale doughnut and a cup of black coffee before heading to the job site at what they called building three. Most people liked Stan. He knew the name of everybody on the job, and talked with everyone. His dry sense of humor kept everyone in stitches during the breaks. Everyone Stan knew owed him at least one favor. He gave of himself endlessly and took little in return.

“Mornin Stan,” a man carrying several two-by-fours said as he passed. He headed for a ladder extended to the roof. “Where you gonna be today?”

“I’ll be finishin’ the walls today,” Stan told him. “Probably start the exterior tomorrow.”

“Need any extra help?”

“I don’t think so,” Stan answered happily. “Bitch of the job though. I hate two by six, twenty-four inch on center construction.”

“I know what you mean,” the man said.

“What makes it worse are the damn ten foot ceilings all over the place,” Stan told him cheerfully.

“ ‘ We Build Castles’ is a helluva motto to try to live up to!”

“Oh well. Better get to it or we won’t be building anything.”

Stan strapped his carpenters’ belt on and carried a two-by-six board taken from a pile over to the radial arm saw. After he measured off one hundred and sixteen inches with a tape, he penciled a straight line across the board, placed it in the proper position on the saw, and turned the saw on. It didn’t work.

“Great,” Stan said loudly. He checked the switch and the power cord and finally, the plug box where he discovered a short.

“Hit the master switch,” Stan told the tender, who not

knowing the master switch simply switched off a couple of circuit breakers, and waived Stan the all clear. When Stan reached into the box, 220 volts of raw power coursed through his arm. The pain was so agonizing that he thought he was going to explode from the inside. As Stan lost consciousness with his fingers still stuck in the box, the tender panicked and ran screaming around the yard.

Stu was the first to notice Stan lying on the ground. He immediately recognized the severity of the situation, ran over to the circuit breaker and shut down all power. Then he ran back to Stan, pulled him off the wires and began checking to see if he was alive, thanking God that he had learned CPR at the Red Cross office one month earlier.

First, shake the victim and ask him if he's Okay, he thought shaking Stan and shouting, "Stan, are you Okay?"

Stan didn't move.

Second, tilt the head back and check for breathing. He tilted Stan's head back, put his ear next to Stan's mouth, and listened intensely for any sounds of breathing. There were none.

Third, give two breaths and check for a pulse. He did.

Fourth, activate EMS and began CPR.

"Call an ambulance," Stu shouted. He carefully identified the Xiphoid, placed his hands properly on the sternum, and began compressing Stan's chest until the paramedics arrived and took over. These same paramedics two days earlier had helped a doctor stop the bleeding on a man's head.

Within ten minutes Stan's heartbeat and breathing returned and the paramedics rushed him to the hospital. There was much concern among the men, many of whom wanted to follow the ambulance. Only the threat of losing their jobs made them return to their individual tasks. Stu promised he would call the site every thirty minutes with an update so everyone returned to work except the tender who was so shaken up that

he had to go home. *All for the best*, some of them thought.
Damned fool almost killed Stan.

* * * * *

Stan floated. He looked down he saw himself lying on the ground. There were people all around him. Someone pounded on his chest and the rest made a general fuss. Someone yelled for an ambulance and someone else thought, *forgive me Stan*. Then he was walking down a long tunnel. The sides of the tunnel were transparent gold. It was the most beautiful subway he had ever seen. Directly ahead of him was a light unlike any he had seen before; a pure, bright and white luminosity that drew him toward it and made him feel wonderful - euphoric. He had half a notion that he knew what he would find there but he wanted to wait before making any final decisions. In this tunnel he felt a sense of having the choice of staying or returning.

As he walked along he heard someone speak in a language he had never heard before but, strangely enough, he understood. The light got more intense and it made him feel increasingly euphoric, creating an urgency to run toward it with every step. And then, suddenly, the light began to fade. It was also dimmed. Stan felt something tugging at him and he tried to run to the light, but it was like trying to run through solid Jell-O and he struggled to advance inches. Someone pushed on his chest and when he opened his eyes there was a man looking down at him.

“Welcome back to the land of the living,” the paramedic said.

When they arrived at the hospital the Emergency Room doctor admitted Stan to Intensive Care where another doctor poked and prodded, stuck and pierced him until he thought he would die. He tried to joke his way through the entire ordeal until, finally fed up with all the fuss and ado, he wanted nothing more than for everyone to leave him alone.

“Hello Mr. Barnes,” a nurse greeted him. “I’m Mrs. Floy

and I'll be taking care of you for the next eight hours so you might as well get used to me."

"Well, I have the feeling I am going to be here for at least the next eight hours," Stan told her, as cheerfully as he could, "so we should get used to each other."

"Need anything?"

"I could use a steak and baked potato. Medium rare. Butter. Hold the sour cream," he said grinning.

"Coming right up," she said. "First let me figure out this IV."

She wrote some figures down on a piece of paper and tried to figure out how many drops of fluid she would allow to drip into Stan's arm.

"Let's see," she said rhetorically, "350 milligrams in 750 ml of solution and you're supposed to get 25 milligrams each hour. . . how are you at math?" She asked perplexed. "I was never good at figuring out these IV rates."

"I dropped out of arithmetic in the third grade," Stan told her. "I'm horrible at math."

"Great. Here we are a couple of scholars and between the two of us we can't figure out two-plus-two. I'll be right back, Stan. I need to recruit some help."

Stan absentmindedly picked up the piece of paper and looked at it quizzically. Then he picked up the pencil and started to 'doodle'. When he finished what he saw astounded him. He had covered the paper with mathematical formulas. He stared at it when Mrs. Floy reentered the room with another nurse. She took the paper from the table and looked at it with a start. Floy smiled and gave Stan a mischievous look. Then she said, "Lied to me did you? Thanks for the answer to the equation. But did you need to write all this other stuff down to figure it out or are you just showing off?"

"I swear to God, I don't know what any of that says," Stan said, a look of complete amazement on his face.

Sure you don't. You're a trickster, aren't you?" She said, snickering and pointing her finger at Stan.

"Please believe me. I don't have a clue what is on that paper. I was serious about not being able to do simple arithmetic. My dad used to tan my hide because I couldn't divide six apples by two."

"Give me that paper," the other nurse told him. Then she wrote down the following algebraic equation:

$$(5x + 4) - (3x + 5) =$$

Handing the paper to Stan she said, "Solve that one."

Stan looked at the paper for a moment, "I don't have a hint what that says," he told her earnestly. Even as he spoke he began doodling again and produced not only the correct answer to the equation, but other more complex looking mathematical formulas.

"Holy shit!" Stan exclaimed, throwing the paper at the foot of the bed. "What in the hell is going on? What's happening to me?"

One could best describe the events that followed as chaos. Over the next ten hours a mathematician, a clinical psychologist, a physicist, and a dozen reporters arrived in his room. The reporters shouted questions while the mathematician and physicist argued about mathematical equations he wrote, formulas none of them could understand. They faxed the problems to several mathematics computers for analysis. Some computers simply spit out a *Fatal Error* message while others worked and worked, the cursor sitting on a blank, blinking, CRT.

The next day Stan transferred to a specially prepared, large, circular room in the basement of the hospital with the walls, floor, and ceiling covered by aesthetic looking white tile. Long banks of fluorescent ceiling lights made the room blinding when you first entered. Here they employed technical equip-

ment to measure everything from heart rate to brain function; temperature to the oxygen in the blood. Technicians, like so many Androids, staffed computer terminals and keyboards associated with every machine in the room, inputting information of one kind or another while printers noisily regurgitated reports that flowed over backwards into disarrayed piles like waterfalls.

When the attendant wheeled him into the room, Stan noticed there was a single, tall, hospital bed in the middle of the room surrounded by a ten foot circular walkway. The attendants helped Stan into the bed as nurses began their task of attaching various wires to several parts of his body.

“You’re not going to put any of those wires on my privates!” Stan objected, winking at one of the nurses.

“Only if you want me to,” she answered, winking back.

“What is all this stuff?”

“It’s our answer to one hell of a lot of money in grants,” she said.

“What does it all do?”

“We set this room up to study anything about anyone we choose.”

“Why am I here? Just because I came up with a couple of weird looking math problems?”

The answer came from the other side of the bed. “We want to find out what happened to you yesterday, a tall young man with a mop of tousled black hair told him. “Allow me to introduce myself. I’m Dr. Bill Levitt. I’m in charge of the Frankenstein project down here.”

“Nice to meet you,” Stan said holding out his hand. “What do you suppose is going on with me? Is it something from the electricity?”

“If I knew the answer to that you wouldn’t need to be down here,” Bill said. “We hope to find out how you got hold of this

little gift of yours. I call it amazing.”

“I call it damn scary,” Stan replied.

“Well, whatever we choose to call it, aren’t you just a little curious about how you got it?”

“Not if it means tubes stuck down my throat and pulled out my ass. I hate tubes. And wires. I feel like the wires are zapping something in and tubes are sucking it back out.”

“The wires measure electrical currents produced inside your body,” Bill explained. “The computer analyzes the information transferred to it. Checking up to see if you’re normal or if you have devious fantasies of some kind,” Bill smiled. He paused before adding, “The tubes are necessary in case we have to put any medicine into your veins.”

“Why would I need medicine in my veins?” Stan asked wearily.

“We’ll probably want to put you into a half sleep state so your mind will be more willing to communicate,” Bill told him, all the while subtly watching Stan’s movements. “Right now fear and anxiety prevent your mind – call it your subconscious – from releasing the information hidden there. So, we give you a little joy juice, you float happily away, and we talk to your inner mind. Sounds like the Twilight Zone doesn’t it?”

Bill Levitt continued to explain the need of the tests, making sure that he answered all Stan’s questions. As a result, Stan’s anxiety level went down and he decided that he would play the game. He was, after all, handsomely compensated for his time, having taken a leave of absence from the Carpenter’s Union, local No. 4, with pay. Hell, he had the bull by the horns and he wasn’t about to let go. Not yet. If things got too weird, he could pull the plug. But right now he was on easy street and was enjoying all the attention.

Yep, he thought, this is going to be one hell of a lot more fun than fram’in’ out a wall.

While he reflected on his new found good fortune, Bill injected Pentothal from behind as a news team came through one of the several doors. Twenty seconds later Stan slept and as he did a reporter, Jamie Jamison from KISS the local television station, told the story.

“A thirty-four-year-old man was electrocuted today as he was attempting to repair a wire in an electrical box. The victim, Stan Barnes, whose picture you see on the screen, was dead at the scene but revived by a co-worker, Stu Hodges, until paramedics arrived. Paramedics then took Mr. Barnes to Memorial Medical Center where doctors admitted him to the intensive care unit in guarded condition. Let’s go live to Jim Roach at the victim’s bedside. Jim? Can you hear us?”

At the same time, and from a different place, Steve watched the news. *I hope they don’t call me on this one*, he thought.

“Yes, I can, Jamie,” the reporter answered adjusting the earpiece in his ear.

“What’s so exciting about this particular case?”

“Well, Jamie, it seems that Mr. Barnes has come back from the dead with something of a gift. It is bizarre, to say the least. Mr. Barnes, who dropped out of school in the sixth grade, now has brilliant minds in the fields of mathematics and physics scratching their heads. He has written down some mathematical formulas that one can only describe as amazing. The experts have fed these equations into various technical computers and none of them, as surprising as that might sound, can come up with an analysis or answer to any of the equations.”

“Now let me get this straight, Jim. Are you telling us that Mr. Barnes, a man who is mathematically illiterate, suddenly became a mathematical genius?”

“That’s what I said, Jamie. As absurd as that might sound, it is as close as we can come to the truth. Although able to write down these equations, Mr. Barnes insists he does not

understand what he is writing. He reported that during his brush with death. . . “

Steve sat and watched with some degree of interest. He had been aware of many reports of near death experiences, referred to as NDE's, and spoke with patients who had reported seeing all manner of visions during their brush with death. He credited these events to activities in the subconscious of the individual. Each told their story with slight variations of the incident, depending on their subconscious views. They nearly all reported seeing the white light. He considered these unsolved mysteries, but Steve knew that Bill Levitt had more than just a casual interest in these bizarre events and that Bill would be chasing the mystical, the unexplainable, in his lab as long as they occurred.

I pity you, Mr. Barnes, if Bill Levitt gets you down to his lab. You'll be lucky if you ever see the light of day, Steve thought, amused as always about his friend's involvement in such projects. *Whatever pulls his pin,* he thought. He'd stick with what was real.

That night Steve stared up at the ceiling for two hours worrying about April before he decided to take an Ativan to help him sleep. His dream that night changed his life.

C H A P T E R T H R E E

The Idea

The Revelation

In his dream, Steve ran down a poorly lit tunnel with bluish green, tiled walls toward a small light and yet, strangely enough, he could make no progress. And then, suddenly he stood at the foot of April's hospital bed. Dressed in the white lace nightgown he had bought for her several years earlier, her hair laid out behind her head on the pillow in the shape of a fan. As Steve looked at her she began to glow brighter until the light was so blinding that he was unable to look at her any longer and had to shield his eyes with his hands. Then, in the next instant, the light was gone. And so was April.

"Nnnnoooooooooo," he screamed, although somewhere in the back of his mind his voice told him not to scream too loud or he would wake up.

Next he stood in a construction yard talking with Stan Barnes. Mr. Barnes, dressed in blue jeans and a blue denim shirt, wore a leather tool belt around his waist with a hammer dangling easily at the hip like a gun.

"That light made me feel like I didn't have a care in the world," Stan told Steve. "Let me go back," he said and slowly mutated into Mr. Nichols.

"I want to go back to the light," Mr. Nichols said. His face was hideous. Steve started to back away but Mr. Nichols stepped forward matching him step for step chanting, "Go back, go back, go back."

Cowering, Steve shut his eyes and covered his ears. When he opened his eyes again, April stood in front of him. Although her lips did not move, he could hear her voice. She said, "It is a bluish liquid that is an allotropic and more active form of oxygen created when oxygen is exposed to the slightest discharge of electricity, and is both irritating and toxic in the pulmonary system."

"Where did you learn that?" Steve asked, noting that he too could speak without moving his lips. It was a strange sensation.

She continued to expound, ". . . is a general term for a sheet-like mass of substance of nearly uniform thickness, particularly when the layer is one of several associated layers."

"Where did you learn that?" Steve's inner voice repeated.

"They told me," April said, pointing behind herself. Her mouth did move this time.

Steve looked behind her. Standing fifty yards away were several figures all glowing with the same white light and having wings. Then, as if enlightened, he asked, "Is this an angel dream?" He knew it was and he tried to make himself wake up but couldn't. He looked back at April who now talked about something that Steve could not understand. She spoke in a different language and he could tell she was talking about something technical. Steve reached out to touch her but couldn't.

"You can't touch me anymore. I've moved beyond you."

"I'm a doctor," Steve asserted, annoyed. "How can you move beyond me?"

"What you do is child's play," she told him. "You don't have The Understanding. You can't have it until you follow us," she finished and then vanished.

Steve was frantic. He tried to run after her but the floor of the tunnel turned to thick mud so his feet sank deeper with every step until he couldn't move at all. He suddenly jerked and awoke. He sat up and looked at the clock that read 3:33 in

large, amber numbers. Still groggy from the Valium, he got up and slipped on a robe lying nearby. Then he headed to the kitchen, all the while wondering in which part of his subconscious he had stored all the definitions he heard April recite in the dream. *I know I had all that stuff in college, but I sure as hell don't have that recall. At least not consciously*, he thought. Granted he had always been analytical in his thinking. In fact, it had been a source of many arguments between him and April in the past with her badgering him for thinking with his head rather than his heart. He could never grasp that idea and now he knew for certain that he needed to reason with his head and leave his heart out of it. His heart clouded his intellect since the diagnosis of April's illness.

Remnants of the dream kept weaving their way closer to the forefront of his mind as he made coffee. Bits and pieces of information fell into place and the glimmer of an idea slowly surfaced. The process was slow but as the idea began to jell, he became more exhilarated, his heart pounding adrenaline through his arteries. The implications of the idea he developed were overwhelming. *My God, my God*, he thought. Then he reeled because now he knew he was going to save his wife's life.

* * * * *

“Mommy, Mommy,” Joshua screeched as he flew into the room. April sat in a chair eating an apple and some saltines. Her movements were purposeful and slow. She was still getting the Thorazine but in smaller doses. She had her hair pulled back and tied and managed to put on some makeup. She looked better than she had in days. Her eyes lit up when she saw Steve and Joshua.

”Come to Mommy,” she said, pushing the bedside table away. Joshua ran to her and jumped into her arms. He smothered her with hugs and kisses and she returned them one for one. Steve leaned over and kissed her fully on the mouth.

“Miss you. Can’t wait for our next ‘visit’,” he said winking.

April swatted at him and said, “Shush, little ears.”

“Mommy home,” Joshua said.

Tears welled in April’s eyes and she hugged Joshua again. “Soon, baby,” she said soothingly.

“How about right now?” Steve asked.

April jerked as if Steve slapped her. “Really? Can I?” She pleaded.

“I checked with Dr. Gates before coming in,” Steve told her, “and she thinks it would be better for you. We’ll give you a milder medication so you can function better. What do you say?”

Tears flowed down April’s cheeks. She hugged and kissed Joshua until he wiggled. Steve packed her personal items into a brown shopping bag — plastic washbasin, toothbrush, toothpaste, comb, emesis basin and other items given her on admission. He pushed the call button and a nurse came in with a wheelchair.

“Ready to go?” The nurse asked.

“We’re ready,” Steve said.

“Do I have to ride out in that thing?” April asked putting Joshua down.

“You do want to leave don’t you?” The nurse asked.

April almost flew into the wheelchair. “Let’s go,” she said.

Steve laughed and put Joshua in her lap. “Want to ride with Mommy?” He asked.

“Ride,” Joshua said.

On the way home they talked about the events that had occurred since April fell off the couch. When Steve told her what Melinda had done to him, April began to cry again. “Where is she?”

“She’s back at home,” Steve said. “I didn’t press charges so they didn’t have a case. I explained the reasons for my secrecy to her while she was at the police station. She finally accepted the truth. I never realized how close she felt to you.”

“She always felt like it was her fault I cut my face,” April said thoughtfully, running a finger over the scar. “She’s lived with that since she was a little girl. After the accident her father almost took the hide off her for allowing me to get hurt. I remember Melinda telling me he shouted, ‘Friends is s’posed to watch for friends’, as he beat her. I have the feeling he said more than that. She told me about it when we got into high school. We were in the showers one day after P.E. and I asked her where she got some scars on her back and legs.”

“My God!” Steve exclaimed. “I’m sorry, April.”

“I want to see her, Steve.”

“Tonight?” Steve asked, exasperated.

“Tomorrow, please,” she answered softly.

“Okay. I’ll take you over to her house and you can spend some time with her. I don’t want you driving right now. If the police stopped you you’d end in jail. Too many drugs.”

Steve explained the series of events that had led up to Joshua’s disappearance while both of them avoided all men-

tion of ALS. When they arrived home Steve carried April into the house and told her to pretend it was their second honeymoon. As for Joshua, he tagged along behind, so happy to see mommy and daddy together again that their not carrying him didn't concern him at all. Once he was asleep, Steve and April made love, and slept better than they had in a week.

The next morning Steve called the hospital and told them that he was taking the day off after which he made breakfast for Joshua and April and asked them if they would like to take a drive. Excited at the possibility of getting away for the day, Steve packed everything for a picnic lunch except the chicken. Kentucky Fried would provide that. Joshua loved the extra crispy. Even Steve would eat some today, though it was deep fat fried.

“Wait,” April said, stopping dead in her tracks going through the door. “Is this a ploy to keep me from seeing Melinda today?”

“Not at all,” Steve said, patting her on the butt. “I completely forgot about it in all the excitement of last night.”

“I want to call her as soon as we get home then.”

“Fine, honey,” Steve said, pulling her out the door.

They climbed into the Buick convertible, put the top down, and drove for wine country. Joshua played with the wind as they drove along. He loved to sit in his car seat, one that boosted him up to sit almost as tall as his Daddy, put his sunglasses and baseball cap on and ride with the top down.

After visiting several wineries they stopped at a park on the way back. There they ate lunch and then Steve played baseball with Joshua for an hour while April rested. As she watched them she thought how it would kill her if anything happened to either of them. She didn't dare think about the possibility of anything happening to her. When they got home it was late and April was exhausted.

“Go ahead and rest,” Steve told her. “Joshua and I will be fine.”

April slept as soon as her head touched the pillow. Steve sat Joshua in front of the television with the box of diet crackers and went into the study to work on the grant proposal that would lead to a cure for his wife. When he finally looked up an hour later, April stood in the doorway, her hair tousled.

“Joshua fell asleep on the couch,” she said. “What are you working on?”

“Patients’ charts,” he said and he quickly stacked the paperwork into a pile. “Want some dinner?” He asked, trying to change the subject.

“Those aren’t patients’ charts,” April said, blocking his retreat.

“It’s not important,” he protested, kissing her. But she was not willing to let it go.

April knew when he was lying to her by the expression on his face. “I want to see,” she said.

“Honey, let it go,” he warned.

“I want to see,” she repeated.

Steve sighed, walked back over to his desk, picked up the stack of papers and held them out to her. She sat on the couch and began to read what Steve wrote. Then she frowned and looked up for an explanation.

“I’ve come up with a great idea for a research project,” Steve told her. “I want to get a grant and start doing some work that involves the ability to resuscitate an animal after it has been dead for some time.”

“You’re too smart to work on a moronic project of that caliber,” April told him, narrowing her eyes. “Freshmen do these experiments on rats in college labs. Tell me what you’re really trying to do.”

He looked at her. Perhaps he could tell her something about

his plans but not all of it. That would be too much for her to cope with, of that he was sure. “If I can correlate time intervals involved in resuscitation of animals subjected to different traumatic events,” he said, choosing his words carefully, “then I can apply that data and come up with methods of increasing the chance of resuscitating patients. For example, let’s say some kids sucks a balloon down his throat and suffocates. If I could figure out a way to decrease his internal metabolism even more once he gets to the hospital, it might buy time. Maybe I could even shut him down completely. Then I extract the balloon, and start him up again. Under the right set of circumstances, I could save his life. I just have to find the right set of circumstances. That’s what my experiment will be about.”

He tried to sound as technical as he could, hoping that detail would produce disinterest.

April decided she would accept the explanation, not because it sounded technical, nor because she was not interested. She didn’t believe all of what he was telling her but knew she could get more out of him as time went on.

“I’m hungry,” she said, handing the stack of papers back to him. When she turned her back Steve let out a silent sigh of relief, rolled his eyes heavenward, and made the ‘she bought it’ face.

At two-thirty in the morning Steve got up and went into the library to work on details of the experiment. He knew time was short and wanted to get the show on the road. The next time he looked up April stood in the doorway again. It was 9:00 a.m.

* * * * *

“Thank you for meeting with me this morning,” Steve said, sitting on a sofa chair. “As I told you on the phone I want to explain the entire project to you, Marvin. It is important to me that you fully understand what I am proposing so you can advise me properly. I saw a news report one night about a man electrocuted in a lumberyard. A worker revived him on the job site and paramedics took him to the hospital. While there, he started doing some weird stuff, weird meaning incredible. He found he could write down math equations of astounding proportions although he had little or no mathematical background. Did you catch that news? I think it was last Thursday or Friday.”

“No. Strangely enough, I was visiting at the hospital on those nights,” Marvin replied. “Was the lack of math background confirmed?” Marvin asked.

“Marvin, you’ve been our Pastor for, what, six or seven years now? I wouldn’t come to you with this unless I had covered every base. And I mean all of them.”

“Fair enough,” the Pastor said, relaxing in his chair.

“The man’s name is Stan Barnes. Mr. Barnes was scarcely aware that he was writing. He thought he was doodling. When he looked down, he was as surprised as anyone. After various experts in the fields of math and physics interviewed him, one of my colleagues, Bill Levitt, got hold of him. You met Bill once at a picnic didn’t you?”

“I vaguely recall meeting him somewhere,” Marvin replied. He was a well built man with longer hair if I recall.”

“Well, anyway,” Steve went on, smiling. “Bill took Barnes to his lab in the basement. We call it ‘The Dungeon’ because we swear they build Frankensteins down there. Bill is in

charge of research dealing with bizarre events like this. He loves that stuff. He's a real X-Files type. At any rate, he has been working with Barnes trying to find out how he gained this 'gift' if you will. Mr. Barnes says he died, saw a big white light, and somehow he became aware of some secrets of the universe. Then suddenly he found himself in the hospital and that's all he remembers."

"That sounds familiar," Marvin responded. "I've listened to many accounts by members of my church congregation who claim to have had these types of experiences. They've all experienced this light. Very bright. Warm. It engulfs them and makes them feel divine. It must be comforting. And I believe this man when he says that God started passing on knowledge to him. The Bible says that God will share all His knowledge with us when we die."

"I don't know about that," Steve said, "but I'm banking on it."

Marvin looked at him quizzically.

"Let me explain," Steve added holding up his hand. "Let's assume that what you just told me is true."

"Steve, you know in your heart it *is* the truth," Marvin interrupted. "You just have a problem admitting it because of your misdirected logic."

"Maybe that's why I'm so sure about my idea," Steve said. "Okay. It *is* true. Now, knowing that, let's assume we can tap into that wealth of knowledge while here on earth."

"I believe that is impossible," Marvin replied, shaking his head. "I think it is safe to say God doesn't share knowledge like that with us while we're here, in part, at least, because it could be harmful to us. Suppose a nuclear physicist in Iran knew all there was to know about fusion or fission. With that knowledge the Iranians would progress so quickly in the arms race that every nation on earth would be a country under siege tomorrow. No, for that reason I don't believe God does give

spiritual knowledge.”

“Let me finish,” Steve said insistently. “If Barnes received this knowledge from God, and God firmly fixed it in his mind, there must be a method of getting at it. Hell, the knowledge he did get is trying to pour out of the man as it is. It’s leaking out of his good hand through a pencil. Let’s take it a step further. Suppose we were to hypnotize someone and give him or her a suggestion that they were to think one thought. What if we suggested that they think the following: ‘Ask only this question of God: What is the cure for strep throat?’ If that person died, what do you think would be the first question out of his mouth when he got to wherever he was going?”

“I don’t know. But I imagine you want me to say, ‘What is the cure for strep throat?’”

“Right. That’s *exactly* what I thought. Now, what if we got some volunteers and programmed them with that thought? We put them through eight or ten hypnosis sessions. We ‘brain-wash’ them so they have one, and only one, thought in their minds. ‘What is the cure for strep throat? What is the cure for strep throat?’ Then, we kill them. We do it under controlled circumstances, but we kill them nonetheless. We wait until we think they have met God and asked, and *most* importantly, received the answer. Then we try like the dickens to bring them back from the dead. Just like Mr. Barnes. After we get them back, we hypnotize them again and asked them to tell us the cure for strep throat. If they are anything like our Mr. Barnes, they will be virtual fountains of information.”

“That sounds like something right out of The Outer Limits.”

“It is in a sense,” Steve admitted. “After I saw that news report I didn’t give it much thought. But that night I had a strange dream, one of those dreams that haunt you even after you wake up. There was a message in it and now I know what it was. I plan to hire people to go through hypnosis, die, come

back, and give us the information they have gotten while dead,” he finished emphatically and looked at Marvin triumphantly.

“But what if someone doesn’t come back, Steve? What then?”

“That I will have to live with,” Steve said as seriously as he could. “I want you to know I’ve given that much thought. Look, Marvin, I don’t want anyone to die and I know there are important moral questions surrounding what I propose. But I feel like a kid with a new toy, like a man with a new car. I can’t just let this idea die. There are so many possible applications for the outcome if it is positive. We could cure diseases. We could advance technology beyond our wildest dreams. Couldn’t we just consider this a form of prayer? We ask, *through* someone of course, and God gives us the answer. At least we hope it is.”

“What could be so important that you couldn’t wait for the answer until you are dead yourself?”

“Research must go on.”

“At the potential cost of lives? Sounds selfish to me.”

“We lose lives every day in the name of science and medicine Marvin, not to mention the number of lives lost in the name of religion,” Steve argued. “And many of those lives ended with much less thought put into them than this.”

“What makes you so sure programming someone will help? What if God starts with the ABC’s and makes you go through grade school?”

“I’m *not* so sure. What makes you so sure it wouldn’t take milliseconds for God to get the information into us? One thing that makes me think it will work is this; Mr. Barnes was wishing he could figure out how to measure a board in metric units at the time he got zapped. How’s that for coincidence?”

“What if those that you have chosen aren’t ‘fit’ to make it into His presence, if you get my meaning?”

“Funny you should mention that, Marvin,” Steve replied, shifting in his chair and leaning forward. “I went to get my hair cut yesterday and I had an interesting experience. I sat in the chair and this guy starts asking me what I do. Typical barber chatter. I told him I’m a doctor and he tells me what led him into the barbering business. He told me that he used to be a cop. According to him, he was a ‘scoundrel’. Stayed out late every night, screwed wom , uh, I mean he committed adultery,” Steve said apologetically. Marvin simply smiled. “Anyway,” Steve continued, “the guy was a real sinner. Then he had a heart attack. He told me that he remembers going into the hospital and a priest came in to give him last rites – it seems the nurses got his religion confused – which *he* refuses because he’s not Catholic. So he thinks about it and decides that since a priest came in, that meant a doctor thought he was going to die. In fact, he says he did die. He told me the same White Light story. He felt love, peaceful, all of it. Now, here’s a guy that according to him, should never have seen the light at all. Yet someone or something sucked him into it the same as everyone else. So how do you explain that?”

“Perhaps that’s what *Hell* is all about, Steve,” Marvin suggested, folding his hands in a prayerful pose. “Maybe God invites you into the Light, Love, Peace and Truth so you will know for eternity what He is separating you from. If that is the case Steve, wouldn’t you think hell is worse then we can imagine with our limited intellect? It seems to me that having seen the light your barber might have changed his ways.”

“It didn’t sound like he had. I don’t know. At any rate I’m not worried about my ‘Chosen’ not at least making it into His presence, even if they don’t stay there for long.”

“I can’t tell you what you’re planning to do is right,” Marvin said earnestly, putting one hand on Steve’s shoulder. “In fact, I believe it is wrong. But I’ll still give the idea some

thought and get back with you on it. Is there anything else you want to tell me because I sense that you're keeping something back," Marvin asked. "After all, Steve, I have been your pastor for several years and this is the first time you have intentionally kept anything from me."

"It's something I'm not ready to share yet," Steve confessed.

"I'll be praying for you Steve, and I'll be praying for April too," he added, leaving Steve to wonder if he knew about April already and decided that, somehow, he must. Maybe God had told him.

* * * * *

“You, my friend, have flipped your cookies,” Bill said, storming around Steve’s office.

“Damn it, Bill, just think about it. It can *work*,” Steve said placing emphasis on ‘work’. “I know it sounds a little strange but . . .”

Bill cut him off. “‘Sounds a little strange’? Do you have any idea what you’re proposing? Christ Steve, you’re talking about something that is not only unethical and immoral, but illegal. You’d never get away with it.”

“Why not?” Steve demanded. “People *volunteer* for all kinds of medical tests for pay. What about all the shit they’re pouring into the AIDS patients right now, or the experiments with Avian Flu? We do research all the time that involves human animals. And don’t you preach to me about morality, damn it. You’re the master of experiments and you’ve crossed the moral barrier one hell of a lot more often than I have. I covered your young ass more than once when you screwed up down here in the basement. So don’t you tell me about moral or legal. Besides, Bill, this is *my wife* we are talking about here.”

“All I’m saying is that you had damn well better do this on the up-and-up,” Bill warned, falling into a chair, “or you’ll end up on the outside looking in.”

“So you aren’t going to help me?” Steve persisted.

Bill got up, sat down at one end of an exam table and put his head in his hands. He wondered how he could help his best friend and not end in prison. “Go back over the plan again so I can think about this,” he said, finally.

Steve smiled and rushed over to Bill. He shook him by the shoulders, he said, “I knew you would come through for me, Billy Boy.” Then he kissed Bill on the top of the head.

“Cut the enthusiasm,” Bill said. “Just go through it again. I haven’t agreed to help you yet.”

“Okay. First we, I mean I, write up a proposal for a grant to do research. Since I’ve written these types of grant proposals in the past, it will be easy to get one put together quickly. And since time is of the essence, I need a grant that gets recognition and acceptance as quickly as possible. If I use wording that is specific to one goal, for example dealing solely with the incidence of restorative measures following assorted episodes, I should get approval quickly. I’ll put it together so it looks like a ‘prima fascia’ project.”

“Ok, sounds like that part of it will go fine.”

“After we get the grant we start with the usual animal subjects; rats, then cats. We’ll progress to dogs. There we’ll quit. Again Bill, time is of the essence and we can’t afford to spend much time with other animals – monkeys for example. After we have mastered revival of the experimental animal groups we can move to the volunteers, the human subjects for the final part of the experiment.”

“We might have trouble with that,” Bill argued.

“We’ll use several methods of shutting down the heart,” Steve continued, ignoring the warning. “On one group we’ll use narcotics. Morphine is a good choice. We will use other drugs on other groups. We just megadose them until there isn’t any heartbeat or breathing. Just shut them down. We allow them to progress to clinical death. The pupils must be dilated and fixed, and we make sure there is no heart activity for a minimum of six minutes. It is imperative that we wait until clinical death is a certainty. Then we do everything we can to pull them back.”

“Are you talking animal or humans at this point?”

“Both. We’ll try Narcan or something else I.V. and give high concentrations of oxygen. We’ll do whatever else is nec-

essary to combat the acidosis, shock the subject's heart, or do whatever it takes.

"This is where it starts to get a little shaky morally, Steve," Bill said softly.

Again, as though Steve had not heard, he continued, "In another group we can try hypothermia-induced death. We'll use the cryogenics lab. We can pump the subject full of oxygen and take them down to -50. We let all their systems stop cold, if your pardon the pun, and then we wait. After we are sure they are clinically dead we will warm them up and start resuscitation. One drawback is that it would take longer to revive this group. A plus is that we could keep them dead longer. That would give the subjects more time to get the information. In another group we will stop the heart with electricity and cause immediate death."

"Sounds like you're grasping at straws here."

"Perhaps. We'll crack the chest in the animal subjects and shock the heart directly. We can pour saline, adrenaline, whatever, directly on the heart when we restart it. We will vary the times that we allow clinical death in the animals. Will wait for six minutes, then eight, then ten, than twelve.

"I'm no surgeon Steve."

"I've cracked chests in the ER many times before. We'll go through the chest on the human subjects using higher voltage. If we have one that we are having difficulty getting back, we'll open the chest anyway. Last resort as I see it. They will each sign a consent as anyone would for any other experimental procedure. There are clauses in those waivers that warn the patient he or she may die. It states the chances are remote, but the possibility is there and we will make each person aware of it. "

Bill paced around the office for several minutes rubbing his head and periodically looking at Steve in disbelief.

"Do you know how many people die doing drug testing

each year?” Steve asked walking over to Bill. “Researchers tell them implicitly the drug they are testing might kill them. They take it anyway and some of them die. Do they have a death wish? Probably not. They take a chance, one in which the payoff was the supreme price. We will pay these people well with whatever grant money we get. We set up trust accounts for those we don’t bring back and the money goes to whomever they want. It isn’t the fear of death that will keep people away from this experiment, but the promise of money that will bring them to us.”

“You see? That’s exactly what I’m talking about,” Bill interrupted. “You already know that some of these poor bastards aren’t going to come back. That’s murder. And who in the hell is going to be stupid enough to let you kill them for *any* amount of money, Steve? This is absurd.”

“Ever been to a blood bank, Bill? I used to think the same. Then I watched people come into some of the city’s plasma centers to sell their blood. Some of them had already hit two or three other plasma centers in a row and were coming in to sell more. Hell, they would have been dead if someone hadn’t taken their blood pressure and realized they didn’t have one! I know that’s stretching it, but you get the picture,” Steve said throwing his arms in the air. “They didn’t care if they died. They wanted the twenty-five bucks to buy the Cold Duck, or something better if they were able to get enough money in a day. Anyway Bill, it’s the chance they take for the pay they get. My God, you’ve seen self-sacrifice before. What you think all those Iraqis were dying for? They sacrificed themselves for little more than some sense of honor and duty. Self-sacrifice is acceptable in other countries. It’s even honorable. Who’s to say what an honorable cause is to sacrifice oneself for? Is it honorable to pour gasoline over yourself and light a match for a cause? It’s an individual decision.”

“All right. Just keep going,” Bill said, resigned. He walked back to the chair and sat back in it.

“We get someone to do the hypnotic induction,” Steve continued, “the premortal programming, if you will. We’ll program each of them so they have the proper mindset as they leave their bodies. Their subconscious must have one question in it. That is the first answer they will seek after they have entered the light. This will ensure consistency in the group. They all come back, if they come back, and tell the same story and we simply extract the information. We send them over to ‘post programming’ and let them ramble until we have all the information they can give. I tell you it will work,” Steve ended fervently.

“Who are you going to get to do the premortal programming as you call it?” Bill asked.

“I have someone in mind, Bill,” Steve said confidently. “If I can pull it off it will assure us we’ll get an answer. Bill this is going to work and I’m not going to do anything is screw it up. I promise.”

Bill paused to think. As he looked at his friend’s weary face it reminded him of the many times in Iraq that Steve looked the same. Bill knew Steve wasn’t sleeping and he worried about whether he was eating.

“I’ll let you know, Steve,” He said finally. “I’m not saying no, but on the other hand, I’m not saying yes. I need to think about it.”

“Don’t take too much time, Bill,” Steve said solemnly. “April doesn’t have that much left.”

After Bill had left, Steve sat at his desk and pulled out a stack of grant papers for medical experimentation. He had filled out many such proposals in the past. This would be the most difficult to get through the committee but he already had the answer to that in mind. He continued to work through the

day and on into the evening and managed to have the proposal ready the next morning. He thought he could begin the research in about a week, pulling excess funds from residual grants until the approval and money came in, something he had done before. He was in good spirits when he left the hospital. Steve was on the way to a cure for his wife.

* * * * *

They were on the first tee by nine, ready to tee off as a two-some just behind the Johnson and Rickard foursome. The morning was beautiful; no wind, not a cloud in the sky, and the temperature already at a comfortable 78 degrees.

“Do you want me to do the honors?” Steve asked, teeing up his Slazinger. “Let’s see. This is a 515 yard par five that doglegs left about 250 yards out there, right?” Steve asked rhetorically.

He extracted his driver, eyed the shot and thought better of it. He then grabbed a three wood and put a beautiful shot down the center of the fairway.

“Nice shot,” Aaron said, putting a tee in the ground. He teed off with the shot that equaled Steve’s.

“The reason I wanted to get together out here is to tell you I need your help,” Steve said before teeing off at the second hole.

“What do you need my help with?” Aaron asked, leaning on his club.

“I want you to help me to do an experiment,” Steve said and then continued to explain his theory while they played the next nine holes. He told Aaron about his dream, his idea, and his current research efforts. He needed someone to do the ‘pre-programming’, and he couldn’t think of anyone better.

“Steve,” Aaron said, “I’m no psychiatrist or psychologist. If I were, I would probably have you committed. But on the other hand, I can see why you feel desperate to do this, plus the fact there could be some residual medical progress made through your efforts. While the ends are just, I have difficulty justifying the means. You need someone who is much better versed in these techniques than I. I understand *how* you want

me to program these people and I'll be happy to help someone else in doing so. I agree that I am probably the best choice for that part of it. I just don't think I would be effective doing what it is you need."

"You started a psychiatric residency once, Aaron," Steve said, backing away from his ball. "I know that. You would have been a damn good one too, from what I hear, but you decided to go into research. Now if this is about treating my wife," he began.

"Steve, it has nothing to do with your wife," Aaron insisted. "I just don't feel competent at this."

Steve stepped up to the tee and swatted the ball down the fairway. They continued to discuss the project as they played through the remaining holes.

"Listen Aaron," Steve said when they had played out the eighteenth hole and had ordered a sandwich and a beer apiece at the clubhouse, "why don't you give this a try? We aren't working with the most exacting subjects you have ever seen. Most of these people will have little or no education. They don't get up and read Forbes or the Wall Street Journal every morning while drinking their latte and eating their scone. They live uncomplicated lives and have uncomplicated thoughts. The high point of their day is buying a bottle of wine, or standing on a street corner holding up a newspaper hoping someone will buy it. They are uncluttered minds yearning for us to fill them, and you can do it. Why not try it with the first couple of volunteers and if it doesn't work out, then you can say it was a failure. Don't give up before you even try though."

Aaron looked thoughtful. It was true that Steve piqued his interest. It was a fascinating idea and it would be more so if it worked. It would make everyone involved famous, to say the least. He wondered whether he had forgotten how to hypnotize someone. *I guess it's like riding a bike*, he thought. *Once you*

do it you don't forget how. He knew he could plant whatever suggestion he wanted to into the subjects' minds because he was the leading authority on the subject of neuromuscular research. And he knew that if by some miracle the experiment worked, they would need him to extract the information since he would know how to apply it. This was an opportunity of a lifetime.

On the other hand, he knew the experiment wasn't going to be on the up and up. *What experiment was,* an inner voice asked? He knew there was a good possibility that some of his subjects would die. *What experiment worth its salt didn't have a few casualties?* His inner voice continued. He knew he wanted to be part of it but he had a nagging concern in the back of his mind that he couldn't pinpoint. Apart from the obvious, that this was an experiment of desperation proposed by a distraught man, there was something more macabre about it. He also knew that if anyone in a position of authority ever found out what was going on behind the smoke screen Steve had set up, heads would roll.

But the excitement of being on the ground floor of this research was like the prospect of having sex of the first time. Every nerve ending in his entire body poised itself expecting the positive outcome of this experiment. An orgasm could not compare to the grand finale of this if everything went as expected.

"I'll give it a try," he finally agreed. "When do I start?"

It took every ounce of willpower Steve had to hide his true exhilaration. "Welcome to the realm of the unknown, Dr. Debries," he said. "We're going to blow the minds of the scientific community with this. Once we have the method perfected, there's no limit to what we'll be able to do. But I don't want to put the cart before the proverbial horse. We need to go about this methodically and carefully or we'll be sucking raw

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eggs, if you get my drift.”

He knew by the expression in Aaron’s eyes that he knew exactly what he meant.

Promises, Promises

“I knew you wouldn’t let me down, Bill,” Steve said smiling. “I knew you would come through.” They stood in Bill’s aesthetic looking lab.

“There are conditions, Steve. I have to explain them to you before we ever start because I want you to understand that if anyone neglects any of these conditions the project is O-F-F.”

“Explain away. I don’t have much choice.”

“One, we go at my pace and here in my lab,” Bill said pointing at the floor. “Conducting the experiment in a state approved hospital in a federally supported lab will guarantee continuation of the grant. We aren’t doing this free. Two, my staff will conduct the experiments, be responsible for all the animal experimentation, and for documentation of the data. We must do everything in a specific order, and under strict scientific method, and documented whether it works or whether it doesn’t. We need to keep all the data to keep the grant money coming. Three, when we begin the experimentation on human subjects, I want to have the final say about whether we use someone or not after the interviews. If I say no I mean no. I want to be able to reserve the right to turn down any subject I feel can’t make a responsible decision.”

“And what in the hell am I supposed to be doing while you’re stealing my experiment out from under my nose?” Steve protested. “Making rounds for you? Come on, Bill. I need to have a hand in this.”

“You will have. You’re going to be out on the streets beat-

ing the blacktop for these ‘volunteers’. Most of the people we will need for the final experiments aren’t going to check the scientific journals for an ad defining the financial benefits of our project. You’re going to have to get into the community and get people to come in for interviews. And you’re going to have to be selective, Steve. I don’t want to interview a bunch of the brain-dead alcoholics or drug addicts just because they are willing to come in here. We need to corroborate these people are mentally competent to decide what they’re going to agree to.”

“Okay,” Steve agreed and visibly relaxed, “but I want to be in on the experiments after the interview has ended. I want to be responsible for the durations that we allow these people to be clinically dead. You just get them to sign the papers, and then you’ve done your part. If you can’t stomach mine, you can leave during that phase. I need to know we aren’t going to send these people to never-never land only to bring them back two minutes afterward because you can’t handle the pressure. If that’s not acceptable to you I will do the experiments in my own damn basement and you won’t have to know anything about them.” For a long moment they stared at each other. It was clear to Bill that Steve meant precisely what he said.

“All right,” Bill agreed. “You can be in charge when we start the experiments on the human subjects. If you kill more than, say, thirty percent of them Steve, I close it down. Deal?”

“Deal,” Steve said, putting his hand out for a badass handshake.

They agreed to meet with Dan Johnson the next day and the following day with Bill’s staff and let them in on the project. The day after that they would began animal phase of the experimentation. If all went as planned, and if they had success in reviving ninety-some percent of the animals, they would continue the animal experimentation within one week

and begin on human subjects the week after. This didn't seem too ambitious since most resuscitation, already an exact science, was successful under the correct medical conditions. If they took all the necessary precautions, the success rates should be favorable.

As they headed for the cafeteria for lunch, Steve rehearsed the speech he would be presenting to those human subjects. He also considered who to choose for his own staff for the human experimentation.

* * * * *

Word of the preliminary grant approval came in one week later, which meant that within a month they would see money. Steve climbed the walls while waiting for the experiments to start. He noticed there were little tasks that April was unable to do now. She would often drop silverware when carrying it to the table and she could no longer lift heavy pitchers and was unable to hold Joshua up for more than a couple of minutes at a time. She was even having trouble pulling weeds in the garden. And she was having trouble with walking. Steve grew concerned there would not be enough time. He had already made his first contacts and had decided that finding candidates acceptable to Bill was not going to be an easy assignment. Many whom he had interviewed were too eager once they learned of the money.

The next day Steve and Bill met with the hospital administrator, Dan Johnson, to explain the project and to gain his blessings. If he approved of the proposal, he would present it to the Board of Directors. If not, the project would die as a dream.

Dan was a large man, only five eight, but weighing two eighty. Little of the mass he supported was muscle. Dan had a weakness, and that was for sweets. He kept a round lead crystal canister filled with Hershey's kisses on his desk. He also enjoyed brandy. The chocolate brandy combination was life sustaining for him. The sum of his vices equaled his grim physical state.

"The project involves resuscitation in disastrous situations," Bill explained. "What that means for us is one or two hundred thousand in grant money available for this project."

"What are the chances of losing one of the volunteers?"

Dan asked.

“Good,” Steve told him. “Probably as good as thirty percent. But we plan to continue with the most dramatic measures until we are certain there can be no response. And we have all the stopgaps in place. We will follow exact ACLS protocol, including medication dosages to the letter.”

“Dan took a bottle of brandy from the top drawer of his desk, and after offering it to Bill and Steve, poured a stiff slug into his coffee.”

“Want anything?” He asked, again offering the bottle to Steve and Bill. They shook their heads. “What happens if after all your efforts the patient responds and he or she is a mere vegetable?” He asked. “Brain-dead.”

“Then we use those who have consented as organ donors. We’ve covered those bases. Some will agree to organ donation, others will just want us to pull the plug,” Bill said.

“An advantage of having a program like this in the dungeon is that we don’t have to search all the country every time we need a donor organ,” Steve interjected. “We can keep several ‘brain-dead’ people down there easily and as soon as the need for an organ arises we simply come up with a donor. Voila, we have our organ.”

“Where are these *volunteers* going to come from?” Dan asked.

“Transients, many of them. Some from the emergency room. Those from the ER we will revive conventionally. Others, for example those from the Operating Room, may be volunteers the surgeon opens and closes because there would be no point continuing. We will consult with them after they know their terminal state and see if they would like to take part in the project. What do they have to lose? We’ll find them in various places,” Bill said.

“It sounds risky to me, guys. What’s the final scene of this

project, Bill?” Dan asked.

“I’ll answer that,” Steve said. “As you know, Dan, my wife has been stricken with a neuromuscular disease.”

“Yes, I heard,” Dan said soothingly. “I’m sorry, Steve.”

“Thanks, Dan. I appreciate your concern. That’s why I know you’ll want to help us on this. The experimentation deals with the ability to keep someone ‘dead’ for extended periods. Slow down processes if you will. We . . .”

“Cut the crap, Steve,” Dan interrupted, “and tell me the bottom line.”

Steve and Bill exchanged glances, Bill shrugged, and Steve swallowed hard before continuing to tell Dan everything about his dream, his idea, and the ‘volunteer’ program. As Steve progressed through his explanation Dan went from one shot in his coffee to two.

“Sounds off-the-wall to me, Steve.” he said. “How are you going to get research money for this, Bill?”

“I already got it. Steve and I made a bogus proposal and presented it. It contained all the same bull shit rhetoric Steve started to feed you.”

“And they bought it?”

“Yes. I’ve done it before.”

“You think this experiment is going to work?”

“Probably not,” Bill said.

At the same time Steve said, “Hell yes, Dan.” Steve and Bill looked at each other.

Pointing first to one and then the other, Dan said, “May I present the eternal optimist and eternal pessimist.”

“I’m optimistic because I have a vested interest in the project,” Steve said sternly.

“I understand,” Dan said. “Next question. How am I supposed to get this by the board?”

“You can present the information off the grant proposal to

them. They will be none the wiser,” Bill offered.

“Good idea. Even though every ounce of fat in my body is screaming ‘Don’t do this!’ I’m going to allow you to continue. We’ve known one another for a long time, gentlemen. We’ve kept secrets about one another I would never want to revisit. But I’m going to take the ‘Mission Impossible’ stance here. If any of this gets out, or if something goes awry, I will disavow any knowledge of your actions, and you’ll all be out on the street. I’m not going to fall for this one. I’m too damn old and retirement is too near. Is that clear?”

“Thanks Dan,” Steve said offering his hand. “God’s speed in finding your answer, Steve,” he said. “Give April and Joshua a hug and kiss for me.”

Three days later, Dan met with the board. He passed the project through the agenda minutes before continuing to matters of greater significance, matters that involved a birdie on the fifth hole, a missed hole-in-one on the thirteenth, but only by inches . . .

The board meeting lasted one hour. The project was in full operation ten days after the meeting ended.

* * * * *

While Bill and his team readied the lab, Steve started his search for volunteers. He had contacted a pastor in charge of the soup kitchen, Pastor Yoder, a week earlier. The Pastor told him there were many homeless and needy who visited the kitchen on Tuesdays and Thursdays. They would be there more often if food was available, but so far the Lord had not provided the means with which to feed them more than twice a week. If he were to return Tuesday of the following week he could meet many of the city's needy.

"And what is it that you need volunteers for, Doctor?" The Pastor had inquired.

"We are doing some drug research and we are trying to recruit some healthy individuals who haven't had the good fortune we have had to help us. We need individuals who have not delved too heavily into drugs, and, or, alcohol in the past. We need clear minded individuals so they can report the effects of the drugs coherently."

"We have many such fine people who are down-and-out. After we have served the bread and soup, and have the blessing of course, you may speak to the congr . . . uh, I mean you may speak to the group."

Steve arrived at the soup kitchen at 11:30, greeted Pastor Yoder, and waited for the hungry to arrive. They did so in waves. Steve studied each of them carefully. *Too fat, too thin, too emaciated, too drunk*, he thought as he looked. Some were wearing little more than rags; others clothing that Steve was certain he had donated to the Salvation Army. *I used to own that shirt*, he thought seeing one in particular. There were the archetype homeless in the group. The ones that have made a living by living on the street. The experts of con. One man in

particular dressed in patched, plaid orange pants and a green shirt with some god-awful pattern that effectively clashed with the pants, caught Steve's eye. He wore shoes that could have once been white and was busy mingling, slapping some of his companions on the back and offering lighthearted greetings while asking for an extra cigarette here, and a sip of booze there.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Pastor Yoder announced as they sat down at long trestle tables. "Can I have your attention for a moment so I might offer a word of Thanksgiving to the Almighty?"

Hats came off and most heads bowed.

"Lord, we thank you for your provision of this food. We thank you that you have led us out of the bonds of iniquity and we ask that you bless this food to our bodies so it might strengthen and nourish us in your service, in Jesus name, amen, and amen. And now, ladies and gentlemen, if I might have your attention for a moment more. We have a guest who would like to address you in a matter that you may find to be of interest."

"I won't take too much of your time." Steve said, stepping up to the microphone. "My name is Dr. Stanley and I'm doing some research at a local medical Center. If it interests anyone here to make some money see me after you've eaten."

After they had finished, some simply left. Whether they had forgotten the invitation or lost interest, Steve wasn't sure. But others did come forward. Steve took down their names, whether invented or real, and arranged to see each of them privately at the hospital later that afternoon. He left with thirty-five names, having thanked the Pastor, and made a small donation to the soup kitchen.

Next, he headed for Union Hall Local 427 where he knew there would be laborers waiting for work, some lingering in

the halls all day expecting a yard boss to come in and announce the need for twenty men for an hour, a day, a week, or a month. He arrived to find fifty or so men sitting on wooden benches scattered around the room.

“May I have your attention for a minute?” Steve announced, stepping up on a bench. An anticipatory silence followed. Some men stood, others simply stayed where they were.

“I’m in need of a few men for an experimental project that I and some of my colleagues are doing at the medical center.” He paused to let what he said to sink in and then continued. “If this would interest any of you and you would care to talk with me about taking part in medical experimentation for pay, see me at the door.”

Steve spent much of the next week visiting churches and inquiring of those destitute and in need of some income, however temporary. One church in particular that he visited, the Central Christian Church, offered services well beyond the ordinary. There were thirty or so pastors on staff full time. There were counseling services for the young, the old, and the in-between. There was marriage counseling for those who were experiencing a temporary, or permanent, setback with their partners. There was Sunday school three times a day Sunday, and twice during the week for all age levels. There was a “singles” group in which one could meet the Christian man or woman of their dreams. There were more activities planned to keep people busy and out of trouble than goes on in the White House on any given day. With these services came a hefty budget; some number with seven zeroes after it; and much responsibility for the congregation. And since it offered its share of activities, it had more than its share of those seeking relief.

Steve offered to talk with those individuals who wanted work and interview them for his “research” project, keeping

the main points of it under wraps so as not to concern the pastoral staff. The church looked into him, of course, and once they settled his legitimacy they offered Steve a temporary office in which to carry out his mission of offering income to the destitute. This provided a welcome change to the alleys in which he had interviewed the disciples of Pastor Yoder. He eventually narrowed his list down to twelve. He thought it ironic that he should find twelve considering these were, after all, potential “disciples”, figuratively speaking of course, of the first experiment in which he was expecting to send them to meet their maker for a short time. He wondered how many of these twelve Bill would accept, if any. He thanked each of them and arranged to contact them when they were to suffer the final interview. He thanked the pastoral staff for their support, offered a gift to help with the large budget, which the pastor gratefully accepted, and left.

When Steve returned to the hospital, he met briefly with Bill who told him the lab was ready to begin animal testing. They had the computers linked and on line. Everything was in the lab except the animals.

“We can begin testing tomorrow if we can get something to test. Are there any stray cats in your neighborhood?” Bill asked.

“There are some dogs that bark all night in Skip Turner’s yard you can have,” Steve suggested. “But we don’t need to bring them back. Call them the first casualties of the experiment.”

Bill reminded Steve that, for the grant to be successful, the animals would have to come in registered and go out registered, no matter what their state.

Finally, Steve decided to go home and check in. Exhausted, he knew April must be also since he had averaged four hours of sleep a night for the past week and, when in bed, had kept her awake tossing and turning. It was beginning to catch up with both of them.

“You are going to be the first casualty of your own experiment,” Bill had told him.

After playing with Joshua, and putting him to bed, Steve and April talked for another hour. Although she had put in an easy day, she felt exhausted.

“Is this the way I’m going to feel from now on?” She asked him, as they sat together on the sofa in front of a blazing fire.

“I’m afraid so,” he told her truthfully. “You’ll continue to get weaker until you can’t do anything. That’s why I hit the roof when you joined that health spa. I didn’t want you discouraged.”

“I don’t feel like I’m *getting* weaker,” April told him resting her head on his shoulder. “I just feel like I’m in a weakened state. I don’t know how else to explain it. It’s like being pregnant. I feel good, great in fact. Emotionally I feel better than ever. But I can’t do easy tasks that I could do before. Like I get tired pushing Joshua on the swings and merry-go-round at the park after only two or three minutes. He’s getting annoyed with me too.”

“I’m working on an answer,” Steve said, fighting back the need to weep. Seeing her frightened was unconscionable. He wanted to protect her, to reach inside her and rip the disease out, fight with it if necessary. At least then he would have something tangible in his hands to wrestle with. *But that would be too easy*, he thought.

“Daddy,” Joshua yelled and bolted to him as Steve came into the kitchen the next morning.

“Good morning, Little Prince,” Steve said snatching him to hug and kiss until Joshua acted like he had had enough. He put Joshua in his high chair and sat to eat.

“Thanks honey,” he said as April placed the plate in front of him.

“You’re welcome, sleepyhead,” she answered, kissing his

head and then his mouth. “Don’t you have to work today?”

“Yep, but I don’t have to be there at any specific time.

“Don’t you have patients to round on?”

“I have someone rounding for me,” Steve told her, slicing the top of the single boiled egg he allowed himself each week.

“Why is someone taking your rounds?” She asked frowning. It was unusual for Steve to let anyone take charge of his patients.

“I asked someone to cover for me because I’m tired and need to get some sleep,” Steve told her. “I haven’t been sleeping well lately as you know.” He hated lying to April, even though the truth was that he knew she knew he was lying, but let him do it anyway; something that made him feel even guiltier.

“What are you two doing today?” He asked, changing the subject.

“I thought I would take Joshua over to see Melinda today.”

Steve winced at the name. “Are you sure you want to associated with that crazy woman? She might decide you’re her worst enemy in a fit of emotion and suck your blood or something,” he added threateningly in his best Count Dracula imitation.

“Stop it,” April protested. “Melinda is sorry for what happened and you know it. She apologized to you a hundred times already. When are you going to quit harassing her?”

“Probably when she moves to the Middle East or something. Ben-Laden would love a strong man like her on his forces,” Steve said, laughing as April gave him a look and said nothing further.

Steve finished his coffee, talked with Joshua for a couple of minutes, kissed him, kissed April, told them to have a wonderful day, and left.

As he drove away, he took a small book out of his shirt pocket and opened it to the first page. Steve had already crossed most of the seventy or eighty names in the book off.

There were eight, each marked with a red asterisk, which remained. He looked at the first name and address; Charles Hooker, 3343 Jackson. He closed the small book, put it back in his shirt pocket, and headed for the east side of town. His personal interrogations were about to begin.

Charlie

The house looked like something you would find in the middle of a county dump. Assorted articles littered the front yard; a bumper, an egg crate box, a cast iron skillet. An inverted, rusted washtub with a hole cut in the bottom protected the only small tree in the yard, a small elm that projected its trunk through the hole like a chicken with its neck through a wire fence. The grass appeared as though it had witnessed a thousand oil changes and was the target of much of the oil. Most of the wood siding of the house had warped and had fallen off. The porch consisted of loose, twisted boards in various stages of rotting. As for the screen door, it hung loosely off the frame by the bottom hinge, the top hinge frozen in rusted antiquity.

Steve felt like turning around and walking away. In fact, the only thing that prevented him from doing so was thinking of April. When he knocked, a man appeared, dressed in a dirty T-shirt that was so worn it was nearly invisible in places. He was unshaven, dirty, and unkempt with a belly that hung down over grease stained blue jeans. The sight of him disgusted Steve and it was all he could do to keep from delivering his “White Lecture” on the spot.

“Mr. Hooker? Do you remember me?” Steve asked.

“Course ah do. Soup kitchen, right?”

“That’s right. I wonder if this would be a convenient time to talk with you about our project?”

“Pardon the mess,” he said as they made their way to the living room where two old couches covered with tattered

green-brown material sat across the room from each other. “Housekeeper’s on v’cation.”

Steve noticed a small black and white television perched on top of a single wood cabinet pushed against a wall. A coat hanger twisted into a bizarre, contorted position jutted out the top of the television to serve as an aerial. A *Lucy* rerun was blaring out through a snowy screen. There were newspapers, magazines, books, dishes, silverware, and God knew what else strewn all over the room. Mr. Hooker pulled a metal chair out of somewhere, wiped the seat off and offered it for Steve to sit on.

“Don’t think y’d wanna get them pants dirty sittin’ on th’-couch,” he said. “Can ah getcha a beer?”

“It’s a little early,” Steve said looking at his watch.

“Wouldn’t know. Ah don’t have no clocks, an’ a good thing too,” Mr. Hooker said, laughing, reminding Steve of a man who had put down a few in his life.

He ambled into the kitchen, grabbed a Coors, sat down on the couch, and popped the top. “Let’s talk,” he said, sucking the foam off the top and belching.

“Mr. Hooker,” Steve began.

“I ain’t been called Mr. Hooker since I was arrested last, which was just a couple of nights ago,” his host announced. Anaway, call me Charlie if ya don’t mind. It makes me feel more personable.”

“O.K. Charlie,” Steve replied. “I’m here because I want to explain our work to you and find out if you would be interested in taking part in. One thing I want you to be aware of from the beginning is the experiment is dangerous. It involves circumstances that might cause your death. The likelihood of that is slim, very slim,” he lied, “but the possibility is there and I want that understood at the outset. The work we are doing involves studying how to bring someone back from the dead. Now I know that sounds a little unusual but let me explain. I’m sure you have

heard of someone drowning, or someone's heart stopping . . .”

“My Uncle Cliff's heart stopped,” Charlie interrupted. “I r'member good. I was just a little kid. The folks had gone someplace an' it was just me an' ma brothers. Uncle Cliff was sittin' right over there,” he pointed toward the television, “when all of a sudd'n he grabbed his ches', fell out a' the chair, an' landed on his face on th' floor. Died right there, he did.”

“Well, there you are,” Steve said matter of fact. “So you know what I am talking about. What we are doing is trying to figure out better ways of bringing people back once they find themselves in that unfortunate circumstance. We need to figure out better ways of what we call resuscitation. That means reviving someone to life. Sometimes it is easy. If the person hasn't been breathing, or his heart has not been beating for one or two minutes, it is easy to revive him. But, if his heart has stopped for ten minutes, it is difficult. And, what's more important, we ask ourselves whether we should bring someone back if there's going to be too much brain damage. How do you feel about that, Charlie?”

“A real pisser. So what 'm ah s'posed to do to get my money? Die?”

That's exactly what you're supposed to do, Charlie, Steve thought.

“Not really,” he said. “What we want to do is give you a mild sedative and then hypnotize you. Do you know what that means, Charlie?”

“Shore do,” he said. He drained his Coors. “I seen a guy hipnatise someone and then made 'um act like uh chicken.”

“Well, we won't make you act like a chicken,” Steve assured him. We are going to suggest to your brain that you don't want to die.”

“Hell, you don't have ta do that. It already knows that.”

“We want to make that point even stronger,” Steve told

him. “Everybody’s brain has that thought to some extent. But it seems there comes a point when people are dying that they want to die. Something grabs hold of them and they feel good. They just give up.”

“I know what’s gonna grab holda me. An ah don’t think ah want the damn devil on my ass quite yet,” Charlie laughed.

Steve laughed with him. “We will give you some medicine that will slow your heart and breathing down to where you are just barely alive. The medicine will make you feel real comfortable, like the way a few beers make you feel.”

“Ah’ll go fer that,” Charlie assured him.

“We allow your heart to stop for a fraction of a second, just a fraction, Charlie,” Steve stressed. “Then we quickly start it back up again. If the hypnosis has worked properly, you will revive fast. If you turn out to be a good subject, we’ll try it again about a week later. But this time we’ll let your heart stop for three or four minutes. During the entire time a team of competent specialists will watch you so the possibility of your dying is small. But like I said before, there is a possibility. At some point we are hoping you will have the experience of not wanting to come back. But your mind will be so programmed that you *do* want to come back that it will be easy to revive you.”

Charlie excused himself and grabbed another Coors. “So what in the hell is the point in all ‘o this?” He grunted as he sat. “You can’t go around hypnatisin’ everyone that they don’t wanna die. What are ya tryin’ t’ prove?”

“That’s an excellent observation, Charlie. Have you ever heard of a subliminal suggestion? Let me tell you what it is, Charlie,” Steve said and leaned forward. “Subliminal suggestion is a method of using secret messages to get people to do what you want them to do. For example, suppose you want people to drink only Coors beer. What you do is put a couple

of frames in a TV film with the word 'Coors' on them. Those two frames would pass by so fast that you wouldn't even see the word 'Coors' but it would repeat every thirty seconds through the entire movie. Now, though you never see the word 'Coors', your brain does see the word. Then you go to the store, walk right over to the beer section, and pick up a sixer of Coors without even giving it a second thought."

"Hell, that's nothin'. I do that ever' time I go to the store."

"But what if they flashed the words 'Saint Paulie Girl' instead and you came home and found that you had picked up a six-pack of that?"

Charlie looked horrified. "Ah don't drink that shit. It tastes like skunk piss," he bellowed.

"But you get my point don't you?" Steve insisted. "That's the way the advertising media works. Many times people buy products because of some suggestion, whether subliminal or otherwise. The point is this. What if we prove that subliminal suggestion works in helping people revive? We could plug it into cartoons and start programming people when they were children. We could flash it in the movies and on television programs of all kinds. We could reach most of the population. When an accident happens like what happened to your uncle, the chances of bringing them back might be better. If it helped even a little, don't you think it would be worth the try?"

"I 'spose so. But what's in this for me?" Charlie asked, raising one bushy eyebrow.

"We're willing to pay you thirty thousand dollars if we choose you."

"Holy shit! Thirty thousand!" Charlie exclaimed. "That's one hell of a lot of Saint Paulie Beer. Ya see, that sublin...sublam...shit's working already."

"Thirty thousand," Steve repeated. "*But*, Charlie. And this is a *big* but. We put you over the edge five times. After you

wake up the fifth time, the money is yours. If you quit before the fifth time, you get nothing.”

“And what happens if ah slip over the edge for good?”

“Then the money goes to anyone you name. Do you have any relatives you would want the money to go to if that did happen?”

Charlie thought for a long time. His face saddened as he thought. Finally, he said, “Yeah. Ah got someone. Ain’t seed her in mor’an twenty years. But ah got someone.”

“Great,” Steve said, getting to his feet. “Well, I’ll bet you want to think about this some more. You can give me a call at the number on this card. Call me in the next few days and I will schedule you for your final interview.”

“Ah got to go through another interview to risk my life? What the hell?”

“Strictly formality,” Steve assured him. “For the government.”

Steve piloted the obstacle course once more and made it outside without a mishap, relieved to be in the fresh air again. Charlie stood at the door and waived to him, beer in hand. He didn’t need time to “think” about thirty thousand dollars, even if it did mean he might die. *Yup Charlie*, he thought as he dialed the phone an hour later, *your luck has finally changed.*

C H A P T E R F O U R

The Team

“O kay Boa, Margo, Jason, Ronnie, you are the team,” Bill said. “We’ll start tomorrow. As you know, the research we are going to be doing is of the utmost secrecy. There are going to be times during the experimentation when you may want to act out of panic. How do you think you would handle that?” Bill asked.

“C’mon, Doc.” Boa told him. “We been workin’ together for ten years. I seen some strange shit down here and I ain’t lost it yet. ‘Sides, if things get too heavy I’ll ask you to prescribe s’more nose candy. That’ll keep me on the straight and narrow.”

“It’s just like you to want drugs, Boa,” Margo reprimanded him, disgust evident in her tone of voice.

“It’s not drugs I want from you sweetness,” Boa quipped.

Bill liked Boa. He was a straight talker. He seldom said what you wanted to hear but you could count on whatever he did say. If Boa told you he was going to rob a bank you could set your watch by it.

“Let’s not be squabbling among ourselves. I want you to be here at 6:00 am...”

“Six!” Boa interrupted, protesting loudly, “I ain’t even alive at six and how ‘wake you s’pose these critters gonna be?” he asked pointing at the lab animals.

“Six, Boa,” Bill said calmly as his ‘Chosen’ got up to leave. “Six,” Bill repeated.

Accepting defeat, Boa ambled off mumbling something

Dr. David A. Dutcher

about getting too old for shit like this. He was there at six the next morning, sharp. They all were.

Labrats

Jason peered into one of the cages, thinking about how much fun it was going to be to cut open the chest of one of these large, furry specimens, shock its heart and watch it slowly die. “Shhh. It’s Okay. I promise, you will be the first,” Jason soothed a cat mewling at him. He reached into the cage and read the tag on the right ear of the cat. The stamp in the metal band read GP#34340. “I’ve got your number now,” Jason said softly.

Closing the cage, he continued to feed, water and register the conditions of the other ‘specimens.’ His major concern was to keep them all as healthy as possible until the testing began. Jason loved talking to the animals, especially the monkeys because they looked to him as if they understood what he was telling them. He could see the fear in their eyes as he told them of the hideous acts he was going to do to them. Not even counting his meeting with Biffy, Jason had always been a kid who would pull the wings off a moth or fly. He loved the imaginary pain he inflicted on them. He had a special knack with animals. If life had turned out differently he might have made a good veterinarian. As it was, he was a good lab assistant.

“You are crazier than shit,” Bill would tell him. But the fact was, he could handle the animals better than anyone Bill had ever seen. “Probably because you’re an animal yourself,” Bill would tease, never guessing that he would learn how close to the truth that statement was.

Jason – Twenty Years Earlier

Jason's fondest memory was his experiences with Biffy. Biffy was his sister's Siamese cat. Her parents gave her the cat for Christmas one year when she was ten and he was twelve. She loved that cat and demanded that it eat at the table with her. When her father refused, put his foot flat down about the matter and her mother supported his father's decision, she calmly told them that, if Biffy couldn't eat at the table with her, she simply would not eat.

They called her bluff but being the strong-willed child that she was she stuck to her guns. After three days of fasting her father sat her at the table, tied a bib around her neck and tried to force-feed her. She clamped her teeth down tight. Not one bite of food would pass her lips until he allowed Biffy to eat with her.

Her father told her that if she didn't eat, he would not allow Biffy in the house until she did. She swore that if Biffy had to live outside, she would too. Immediately after she witnessed Biffy's eviction, her father sent her straight to bed. Her heart broke as she heard the cat meowing and clawing to find its way back inside and she resolved that she would sneak outside and sleep with the cat. She did exactly that. While her mother sat and watched '*Beauty and the Beast*' and her father listened to Goddard's '*Berceuse*' and read '*Caribbean*,' she slipped out of the front door and spent the night sleeping on the front porch swing with the cat cradled in her arms.

The next morning, her father tanned her hide as Jason

watched with spiteful pleasure. *Now she's getting hers*, he thought. But his sister continued her fast until ten days later dehydration and starvation forced her father's hand and he had her admitted to the hospital. The social worker from the hospital called a caseworker at child protection services who, not willing to buy the story of her fasting because of a cat, placed her parents on probation for two years. Each Wednesday, the social worker from the agency would come to the house and interview the children to make sure things were going well and that their parents did not violate their rights. After she got out of the hospital, things returned to normal, the only exception being an extra place set at the table each night for Biffy.

Jason learned to despise his sister. She told him that medical examiners implicated cats in suffocating bad children while they slept. A cat would put his face right next to the baby's face and each time the infant would breathe in, the cat would do the same. The cat got the air and the child got none. Jason sometimes slept with his catcher's mitt over his face so Biffy couldn't get close enough to steal his breath while he slept.

He despised the cat even more. Biffy had privileges that *he* didn't. If he found the cat walking on the counters, he couldn't scold it. In fact, his parents would reprimand him if he so much as raised his voice at Biffy. His distaste for the cat grew to a climax until one day he decided to have his revenge.

He planned to be conveniently sick on a day his father would be out of town, his mother working and his sister in school. That morning, he told his mother he didn't feel well, went into the bathroom, stuck his finger down his throat and vomited. His mother hurried into the bathroom when she heard him retching, wet a washcloth with cool water and began wiping his brow until he said he felt a little better. She put him back to bed and took his temperature. It was normal, but she wanted him to stay in bed all day. *Must have been something*

he ate, she thought. After his sister and mother left he got up, put his clothes on and headed for the garage. There he found the articles he had put aside for this day's work.

Biffy was inside sleeping on her back with what Jason called a 'shit eating' grin on her face. He hated the way Biffy smiled. Only her back teeth showed through her gaping mouth. Soaking a cotton dressing with ether seized from his biology class, Jason placed it over the cat's face. Biffy struggled for about ten seconds and then went limp.

"Have a nice rest, Biffy. You're going to need the strength," Jason told her.

Carrying Biffy to the garage, he laid her on his father's workbench, gently laid the ether bandage over her face to assure a continued sleep and shaved Biffy's entire body with an electric hair trimmer his father had bought when he had decided to become the family barber to save money.

When Jason had finished his work, Biffy was bald and nicked. He watched Biffy get up, then fall back over time after time until she finally found her sea legs and staggered around the yard like a drunken sailor aboard a rocking ship, howling like only a Siamese can. "Poor kitty," Jason said in his most loving voice.

Everyone had their suspicions about the cat disappearing, but no one ever knew for sure what really happened to her. The household was in turmoil for the next six months. Jason's sister swore that her father had taken Biffy out of town with him and dumped her somewhere.

"You always hated my cat," she screamed.

The child protection agency demanded that Jason's parents seek psychiatric counseling for his sister, which they did. His sister became a prostitute at the age of thirteen, had her first child at the age of fifteen and wound up in prison at the age of eighteen for helping her boyfriend murder seven people in a bank.

* * * * *

“You ready to start?” Bill asked Jason as he entered the lab. Margo, Boa, and Ronnie followed closely behind. All were wearing white lab coats.

“No time like the present,” Jason said, looking at his clipboard. “We don’t want to use cat GP#76233.” “Thing’s sick.”

“Destroy it this evening and chart it out,” Bill told him impatiently.

“Let’s start with *something*,” Boa said impatiently.

“I’ve got the first volunteer,” Jason told him taking a large hamster out of the cage. “I promised him he could be first.”

“I wish I could talk to these animals like you do,” Bill said.

“You can. Problem is, you don’t listen to them so you think you can’t,” Jason said.

“Just bring the hamster over here,” Bill told him, eyeing on the other assistants who busily arranged instruments, prepared machines, readied fluids.

Jason placed a two-by-two gauze pad soaked with ether over the hamster’s face and placed it on a Plexiglas board with clips at the corners for holding the feet. He attached the clips to the hamster’s legs, effectively exposing the entire belly. Bill made a small incision in the right groin and found a large vein, carefully cutting into it to insert a catheter. He sewed the catheter into the vein and attached the catheter to tubing and to a bottle of saline solution.

“Get the Pentothal,” Bill told Jason.

Adding some of the drug to the bottle of fluid, Bill threaded the tubing through an IVAC, a machine that would carefully control the rate at which the fluid ran into the hamster. Once the Pentothal had put the hamster into a deep sleep, Bill said, “We’re ready.”

Margo placed a tiny endotracheal tube in the hamster's mouth and down its throat with the precision of an artist, attached a small bag to the tube and pumped small puffs of air into the hamster's lungs.

"I'm breathing it," Margo told Bill.

Boa handed Bill another scalpel with which he made an incision from the hamster's neck to the top of its abdomen. Opening the hamster's chest with a pair of bone cutters that resembled wire cutters, Bill placed specialized rib spreaders in the hamster's chest. This exposed the heart and lungs so he could isolate the heart. Then he placed a four-by-four gauze pad around it to soak up the blood.

"Electrodes," Bill said, and took the two wires Jason handed him, one red, one white, both of which Bill placed on the hamster's heart.

"Hit it," Bill said. Jason pushed a button and a small bolt of electricity sped through the wires and through the hamster's heart, which instantly stopped pumping.

At Bill's command, Boa started a stopwatch. After three minutes had passed Boa said, "Time", and for the next ten minutes they busily injected medicines, shocked the heart to try to revive it and fussed over the hamster until the heart finally started beating and the hamster was breathing again on its own.

"Success," Bill declared as Jason placed the hamster in a special cage where he could watch it for the next twelve hours. We'll do brain wave tests tomorrow to find out how many brain cells we destroyed. Bring another one."

And so it went for the rest of the day. They methodically 'killed' hamster after miserable hamster and then brought them back to life. They allowed each to remain 'dead' for successively longer times until, in the end, they made a try at revival on the last hamster after fifteen minutes of physiological

death. The attempt was futile and biological death followed.

Exhaustion gripped Bill by the end of the day. The team had gone through fourteen hamsters and twelve cats. They had only lost nine animals total. According to Bill those were good odds, favorable enough to go on to larger animals the next day.

“We start on the dogs tomorrow,” Bill told the team. “We’ll do ten by lunch.”

“See you tomorrow,” Margo said as she started through the door.

“Want some company this evening?” Boa asked.

“No thanks, snake,” Margo retorted, a look of disgust on her face.

“Only one part of me resembles a snake and that part looks like a python,” Boa said laughing and grabbing his crotch. Jason laughed with him. Margo, looking repulsed, left.

“Frigid,” Boa said, pointing at the door after she left. “You leaving?” he asked Jason.

“No. Got to dispose of a sick cat,” Jason said, toying with an instrument on a metal tray.

“See you tomorrow, man,” Boa said, throwing a light-weight jumper over his shoulder.

Jason locked the lab door after Boa left. Standing at the door, he looked out of a window watching Boa until he was out of sight. Then, after pulling a black shade down over the window, he stood staring at the door for a few minutes thinking of earlier times. A look of genuine evil came over his face and a cynical smile touched his lips as he turned and said, “Biffy, here kitty, kitty.”

Whitelighters

“We have chosen you people for a special purpose,” Bill explained pacing, his hands behind his back. “You are here because all of you have met the qualifications needed to be part of this experiment. I want to say again, like I’ve said a hundred times already, this is an experiment. Your lives are at stake. You could die, any or all of you.” Then after giving all of them a chance to reflect on the gravity of his comments, he asked, “Any questions?”

“Yeah, when do we get the money?” Someone quipped from the back of the room.

Steve, standing off to one side, smiled. From his vantage point he could see that whatever warnings, tales of apocalypse, or prophecies of doom Bill shared with these people, they had come with one thought on their minds; money. Each knew the risks. Each in their way knew there was a better than average chance they would not come out of the lab walking. They had come to terms with their lot in life and each of them was willing to change that lot, even if it meant risking their lives.

“When do we get the money?” Someone repeated.

“I made that clear to every one of you,” Steve answered, stepping in front of Bill. “I told you when we would pay and you each signed the proper paperwork for opening bank accounts, etcetera. So let’s not have any more talk of the money. You must be concentrating on your tasks. When you’ve completed the terms of the contract, we will pay you as promised. Also, as a bonus, we will provide your lodging and

all your meals free.”

“We have assigned each of you a number,” Bill continued after the clamor of appreciation died down and Steve returned to his place at the side of the room. “This number is important because from now on this is how we will identify each of you on our reports. This is necessary to protect your identity from others in the hospital. We don’t want people coming to you for a loan after you get all that money,” Bill teased. Even though it was a joke, no one laughed. Loans were serious business, especially when you were the lender.

“We have also issued each of you a lightweight jumpsuit,” Bill continued and holding one up for all to see. “You will wear the jumpsuit always while you are a participant in the experiment. This suit also has your number on it. Please try to keep your jumpsuit as clean as possible. We will issue each of you a clean one every two days so we can launder the first. We have provided everything you will need while you are here; toothpaste, toothbrushes, soap, shaving cream, everything. If there is anything you need that is not in your rooms, let us know and we will provide it for you.”

“Is there any scotch in my room?” Someone shouted.

Again, there was a general clamor of jeers, requests for women, drugs and sundry other items.

“We will immediately disqualify anyone caught drinking anything stronger than water from the experiment. And NO MONEY,” Steve interjected, stepping forward once more. “I will excuse anyone here who isn’t willing to take this experiment seriously right now.”

“Just kiddin’, Doc,” the man said dejectedly.

“Listen to me. From now on you we will call you *Whitelighters*. You will learn why soon enough. There are thirty-five of you, seven groups of five. We have assigned a specific lab for each group. We will send some of you the main

lab where Bill and I will take you through the final tests. We will be right there for every one of you,” Steve said, trying to sound as serious as possible. Then after a brief pause he continued. “Now I would like to introduce our assistants to you. This is Dr. Aaron Debries. He will be in charge of the relaxation part of the experiment. Dr. Debries will teach you how to fall asleep easily.”

“This is Jason,” Steve continued, going to stand beside Bill’s assistants. “Jason is in charge of supplying your rooms and making sure we meet your needs. If there is something you need or want, ask Jason for it.”

“This is Boa,” Steve said putting his hand on the man’s shoulder. “Boa is in charge of bringing you to the various labs and assisting us in different aspects of the experiment.”

“And this is Margo. She’s in charge of doing the heart and brain wave tests. We’ll be doing various tests on each of you.”

Moving again he said, “And this woman is not only beautiful, but she’s smart too. So don’t even ask gentlemen. The answer is ‘no’ before you ask. This is Ronnie. Ronnie is in charge of running the various labs. She won’t be working directly with you and you may not see much of her once you leave here, but she is an important member of our team. Other than the people you see here - Bill, Dr. Debries, Margo, Jason, Boa, Ronnie and I - you are not to talk to anyone else about the project. If anyone asks you about the experiment, you tell him or her to ask one of us. Is that clear or are there any questions?” Steve asked and paused. When there was no response he continued, “Good. Then let’s start.”

Jason and Margo led the Whitelighters out of the conference room and down a series of corridors. They showed each to a room with their number on the door and familiarized them with the comforts which included a T.V., double bed freshly made, flowers, a coffee table and shower. Next they went to

the cafeteria where they chose roast beef or chicken, vegetables, and a wide variety of desserts. The Whitelighters stuffed themselves. None had a meal comparable to this in months and some for years. After dinner, Margo showed them to a day-room equipped with a T.V., ping-pong table, pool table, card tables and various games, none of which any of the Whitelighters knew how to play. Margo told them they could use the dayroom whenever not physically involved with the experiment, an experiment that for most was beginning to seem like a vacation in a plush resort hotel.

“It will be difficult to get rid of them if they do survive,” Steve said, settling back in his chair.

But it was the least these poor souls deserved before some of them went to meet their Maker, which was exactly the misfortune of all but three.

The Lab Transcends

“I want you to listen to the sound of my voice, and only to the sound of my voice. Do you understand, Sheryl?” The woman sat motionless in a comfortable recliner, feet up, head back, eyes open and she appeared just this side of sleep.

“Yes,” Sheryl said.

“Good. Now close your eyes and relax. I am going to give you a little medicine in your vein. This won’t hurt.”

Aaron injected Sheryl in the right arm. “I want you to concentrate on the muscles in your feet. Concentrate on making them relax. Now make them relax even more. Identify any pain you might have in your feet. Now, you will take a deep breath and when you breathe out, the pain in your feet will leave with your breath. Take a deep breath. Now breathe out.”

Sheryl did as Aaron said and found her legs, then her thighs, abdomen, back, chest and face relaxing. Taking deep breaths, she breathed out all her discomfort.

“Now you’re going to get into an elevator, Sheryl. I want you to imagine an elevator,” Aaron told her. “You’re getting into the elevator and you’re going to go down ten floors. Each time you go down one floor you will get more and more sleepy. When you get to the last floor you will be asleep. Relax even more. One floor. You are getting sleepy. Two floors. Can you hear me Sheryl?” he said when they had reached the tenth floor and her breathing slowed.

“Yes,” she said peacefully.

“Good. Now I am going to give you a question to remem-

ber. I want you to put every other thought out of your mind. I want you to repeat this question in your mind. Are you ready for the question, Sheryl?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Here is the question. 'What is the cause and the cure for Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis?' Can you repeat that question?"

"What is the cause and the cure for Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis?"

"Excellent, Sheryl. Now I want you to continue to repeat that question in your head. I will tell you when you can stop."

Dr. Debries watched Sheryl for ten or fifteen minutes, could almost hear her thoughts as she lay there. Finally he said, "Sheryl, I am going to wake you up in a few minutes. But I want you to remember something. Every time you fall asleep, you will continue to ask that one question repeatedly. No other thought will enter your mind while you sleep. Only that one question. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"What is the question, Sheryl?"

"What is the cause and the cure for Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis?"

"That's right. Now you are going to get on the elevator and come back. With each floor you come up, you will be more and more awake. When you get to the top floor, you will be fully awake and refreshed. You will not remember anything we have discussed during your visit here after you awaken. You will keep your question secret and in the subconscious part of your mind. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Good, Sheryl. Now, get into the elevator." When Sheryl reached the tenth floor, her eyes popped open, and she sat up. "How do you feel?"

“Great,” she told him.

“Do you remember anything about what we just talked about?”

Sheryl thought for a few minutes. “Nothing,” she said finally.

“Good,” Aaron said. “I’ll see you tomorrow then.”

After Sheryl left Aaron’s office, he pushed the ‘talk’ button on his intercom and said, “Next.” An attendant ushered another Whitelighter into the office where Aaron repeated the procedure. Two weeks later when Aaron saw Sheryl she looked better than she had in years. She was clean, gaining some weight and healthy. Her eyes were clear and sparkled. She looked like a new person.

“How are you feeling today, Sheryl?” he asked.

“Fine,” was all she said. Her only interest these days was ‘*Days Of Our Lives*,’ a program she only recently discovered.

“Are you ready to relax today?”

“Sure.”

“Okay. Let’s start. I will count backward and when I get to ten, you will be asleep. You will say the first word that comes to your mind and repeat it ten times. Do you understand, Sheryl?”

“Yes.”

“Great. One . . .”

Dr. Debries counted slowly. When he reached ten, Sheryl was out. The instant Dr. Debries said ten, Sheryl said, “What is the cause and the cure for Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis? What is the cause . . .” and repeated it ten times. Dr. Debries counted her back to being awake. “Do you remember anything?”

“‘*Days Of Our Lives*’ is on in twenty minutes,” Sheryl said anxiously.

Dr. Debries laughed. “Okay, Sheryl. Go watch your program.”

Sheryl's eyes lit up and she jumped for the door. She was out of the room before he could tell her she was ready for her first tests tomorrow.

C H A P T E R F I V E

The First Failure

Charlie II

Boa wheeled Charlie into the lab where Steve and Bill greeted him. He was wearing his jumpsuit that already had a grease stain on it. *Is everything this man owns stained?* Steve asked himself.

How are you feeling today, Charlie?" Bill asked.

"Just fine," Charlie told him.

"Are you ready to start?" Steve asked.

"Yup," Charlie said absently.

"Charlie, this is the last time you will get the opportunity to back out of this," Bill said. Steve scowled. All he needed was for Bill to talk everyone out of it.

"We haven't done this experiment on any human subject yet," Bill continued. "You will be the first. We have completed all the animal studies and they all went well. But I want to make sure you're prepared to do this."

Charlie looked as though he were pondering a great philosophical riddle for a few minutes and then said, "By damn, let's do her."

Transferring Charlie to a single bed in the middle of the lab, they undressed, bathed and prepared him. They glued pads with wires coming out of several machines to his chest. Then they glued smaller wired pads to his head.

As Steve explained the procedure to Charlie, Charlie looked wary but still made no objection. With Bill on one side

and Steve on the other, each anaesthetized a small area in the groin. Then, cutting into the area, they reached the large femoral artery, which Steve clamped with two hemostats, leaving a space of about one-half inch between the clamps. There he made a small incision into the artery and threaded a catheter into it. He sewed the catheter into the artery before releasing the two clamps. Checking for bleeding, he found none and closed the incision. Bill did the same.

Both attached IV tubing to the catheters and placed more catheters of various sizes in strategic veins in both hands and feet, capping them for future use. Boa allowed a solution from a plastic bag hanging just to his left to flow into Charlie's arm. Bill injected Pentothal into a Y-port between the bag and the catheter and within a few minutes Charlie slept. The team placed him in a blanket that resembled tinfoil on a bare metal gurney and transferred him to the ice chamber. Then they attached the wires on his chest and head to machines inside the tubular ice chamber. Boa attached more tubes to the catheters in Charlie's hands, feet and groin. Charlie resembled a large turkey at Thanksgiving wrapped in the foil blanket. Then they lowered him into the chamber, lowered and sealed the lid.

"Let's start replacing his blood," Steve said, hooking the tubes from the arteries in Charlie's groin to a machine.

Blood immediately drained from Charlie's body, replaced by a clear fluid that Steve called 'antifreeze'. The fluid slowly cooled Charlie's body, and his heart rate and breathing slowly dwindled. Finally Charlie froze. By now, seconds, which would turn into what seemed minutes, passed between the beats of his heart until at last, the beats came no more.

"Time," Steve said.

Everyone was silent as they watched the monitors. The respiratory monitor showed no activity. The brain wave monitor showed little activity.

“One minute,” Boa reported.

The brain wave patterns waned.

“Two minutes.”

They waited, all of them, holding their collective breaths until Boa announced that fifteen minutes had passed. Suddenly, the monitor that showed brain wave activity convulsed, all its needles jumped wildly across the heat sensitive paper. Then after thirty seconds the needles stopped dead.

“Warm him,” Steve ordered eagerly.

Team members switched switches, turned knobs, and opened fluid lines. Jason reported the increase in temperature at each degree. When Charlie was fourteen degrees Fahrenheit, Steve ordered the ‘antifreeze’ removed and the blood replaced. They worked feverishly until Charlie was able to come out of the freezer. When they popped the lid a large, cold cloud poured out of the chamber walls and rolled across the floor. They strapped a hoist around Charlie, gently lifted him still stiff as a board out of the mist soup, and placed him on the gurney. There they removed the tinfoil sheet. Charlie looked like he rolled in baby powder. A thin, semi-transparent layer of ice covered his entire body. They gently rolled him to one side and, with help from Margo, replaced foil with a warming blanket. After warming Charlie to 50 degrees, Steve and Bill started injecting the various stimulants into the tubing that flowed into his arteries.

“Okay. Let’s zap him,” Bill said.

Forty minutes had passed since placing the warming blanket over Charlie. Bill put the paddles on Charlie’s chest.

“Clear,” he said and depressed a button on the paddle. Two hundred and fifty volts passed through Charlie’s heart. There was no response.

“Clear!” Again, Bill shocked the heart. Again, there was no response.

“Up the voltage,” he ordered. Boa turned a knob.

“Clear,” Bill said again.

They continued to shock Charlie’s heart, inject drugs and pound on his chest for forty minutes.

“I’m going to crack his chest,” Steve said finally, wiping his forehead with the back of one hand.

Bill stepped aside as Steve opened Charlie’s chest almost effortlessly. He cracked ribs, pushed lung aside, reached into the cavity, found Charlie’s heart and manually pumped the heart with his hand. The method was ineffective, but better than nothing. Steve continued to squeeze the heart once every second for thirty minutes, pausing only long enough to inject some drug into it, or see if it was beating on its own.

“Let’s call it,” Bill said finally.

All eyes were on Steve who was still working on the heart. He started to argue, and then, obviously deciding against it, pulled his hand out of Charlie’s chest and plopped down in a chair next to the bed.

No one said a word. Boa and Jason began cleaning up and Margo had just started to pull a catheter out of Charlie’s arm when he suddenly sat up. Margo screamed. Jason dropped a tray full of instruments that clattered around on the floor. Boa spun around and assumed a position of readiness that any number of martial arts’ disciplines would have immediately recognized.

Steve jumped out of the chair and pushed Charlie back down to the gurney to peer into the hole in Charlie’s chest where, almost imperceptibly, his tired heart weakly beat. Charlie gasped for breath as the team frantically began to work on him. Steve closed his chest. Bill shoved more drugs into his arteries. Boa checked his breathing and heart rate. Jason gathered equipment for everyone. Margo manually forced air into Charlie’s lungs with an AmbuBag. After stabilizing Charlie,

the team relaxed for a moment.

“Charlie,” Steve said standing at the bed. “Charlie.” There was no response.

“He is not going to regain consciousness for at least a day, Steve,” Bill said. “That’s *if* he regains consciousness at all. He was under for a long time. It’s possible he might be brain dead.”

“Charlie,” Steve repeated as the others continued to clean the lab and Bill wrote code notes to account for everything that had happened. Steve, still watching Charlie, saw his mouth moving as if he were speaking. Detaching the hose from the machine that was breathing for Charlie, Steve put his ear down close to the tube that was coming out of his mouth. Their faces were within inches of each other when, suddenly, Charlie opened his eyes.

“He’s awake!” Steve cried excitedly.

“That’s impossible,” Bill said walking over to the gurney. “He can’t be awake.”

“Extubate him,” Steve ordered.

“You can’t do that,” Bill objected. “If you take the tube out of his throat he’s a dead man for sure.”

“He’s a dead man anyway,” Steve said emphatically.

Before Steve and Bill finished arguing Margo had the endotracheal out of Charlie’s throat. He gasped for breath, each a struggle making loud, snoring, sonorous sounds as he sucked in air. Eventually, however, the breathing became easier, and Charlie mumbled half audible words.

“Get Aaron in here,” Steve said.

Within minutes, Aaron had Charlie under hypnosis.

“Charlie, do you hear me?” he asked.

There was no response.

“Charlie,” Aaron repeated, watching the older man’s lips move.

“He’s trying to say something,” Margo remarked.

“Put him on the speaker,” Steve said

Charlie’s next words boomed out through the speakers in a rush. He drew one large breath and with that breath said, “. . . so during neurobiotaxis, that is, during that time the cell bodies migrate toward the stimuli . . .”

At that point, Charlie ran out of breath and died.

Steve, Aaron, Bill, all of them, stood as though frozen, stunned. The implications of what they had just heard come out of the mouth of a dying man with a second or third grade education hit them like a ton of bricks. Steve began shaking, first subtly, then almost violently, and then began to weep. “My God,” was all he could say. None of the others said a word. Finally, one by one, they silently went about their individual tasks of cleaning up the lab.

After placing Charlie’s body in cold storage, Aaron left the lab and headed for his office. He had notes to make, the excitement of the day growing like a tumor. His heart was ready to explode with it. Once outside the hospital, he ran to his car, quickly jumped in, slammed the door shut and shouted at the top of his lungs for a full minute. He felt better after he finished yelling, started the car, and pulled away from the hospital.

* * * * *

“My God, Bill. Do you believe it? We did it. We got through.”

They were sitting in Bill’s office. Papers littered a large oak desk. Coffee cups, empty sandwich wrappers, paper bags, and an assortment of half-eaten doughnuts lay mingled with the clutter. Bill removed a half-eaten, moldy looking ham and cheese sandwich from a chair, looked at it disgustedly and sat down.

“Steve, calm down,” Bill protested. “This is only the first victim. We haven’t done anything yet.”

“What in the name of Christ do you mean?” Steve demanded. “You were standing there listening to him just the same as I. You heard what he was saying. That wasn’t basic chemistry. That was advanced biochem and you know it.”

“I have been listening to the tapes of the event,” Aaron interjected, “and I don’t think that was Charlie talking.” Aaron interjected.

“Who in the hell was it then? Saint Peter?” Steve mocked. “Come on, Aaron. Cut the speculative rhetoric. We have broken through and you know it. You had to get out of here in a hurry yesterday because you leaked a little chocolate sauce into your shoes just like the rest of us. Now don’t try to intellectualize what happened because there isn’t any logic to it. It’s way beyond logic.”

“Listen Steve. We can’t continue with this project. It’s too big at this point,” Aaron said.

“*What?*” Steve yelled, jumping in front of Aaron. “*What?* You mean to tell me that you’re ready to give up now? What manner of man are you, you little wimp?” Furious, he was ready to beat some sense into Aaron but Bill stepped between them.

“Calm down, Steve,” he said softly, putting his hand on his friend’s shoulders.

“Calm down? My wife is slowly rotting away with a disease. My son is withdrawing because he sees his mother dying before his eyes. We have the opportunity of a lifetime here. We can find the cure for this lousy, damn disease, and Aaron wants to quit? Fine! If that’s what you want, Aaron, fine! You can quit. But I will never quit. If I have to continue this experiment in a motel room, I won’t quit!”

Aaron frowned. “All I’m saying is that we have to be careful how we diagnose this.”

“Diagnose? I’ll tell you about ‘diagnose’ Aaron. ‘Di’ is a prefix meaning ‘two,’ and ‘agnostic’ means ‘skeptic.’ We have two skeptics, all right. You and Bill. But I refuse to be a skeptic. The first time we run into something enigmatic, you become apathetic. What in the . . .”

Suddenly, Steve paused. “It’s Cathleen Turner, isn’t it Aaron? That’s it, isn’t it?”

But with the mention of her name, Aaron’s mind returned to the past, leaving Steve to wonder about something Aaron had never dreamed he could forget.

* * * * *

Aaron Debries had been at the top of his class at the University of California, San Francisco School of Medicine. As a senior he had done a flexible rotation. That is, he had not decided what, if any, specialty he wanted to pursue, and so he was moving through all the disciplines to decide which interested him the most. Aaron had just finished the rotation through obstetrics and gynecology and had decided that he did not want any part of that specialty. He decided that after spending five weeks in an outpatient free-clinic doing vaginal examinations, pap and venereal disease smears, and other even less exciting procedures involving patients from the lower socio-economic class. Most of them were there for birth control pills, others for pregnancy tests and still others for abortions.

All of this would have been meaningless for his training had it not resulted in Aaron being unable to have sex himself for the next fifteen months. Every time he tried, he would remember one of the many pelvic exams he had done and he would go limp. In his mind, he could see the thick, yellow discharge of gonorrhea or the cluster of venereal warts or some other grotesque condition he witnessed in the clinic. He had thought he would be impotent forever. Then he had met Cathleen.

Aaron had been in a psychiatry rotation for twelve weeks at the time. He was in therapy himself twice a week, which was a requirement of all senior medical students and was thankful for it, not least because he felt it was helping him forget some unpleasant memories he had saved from the time he had spent in the free clinic. He felt his libido returning and wished his girlfriend would reconsider. She had dumped him after six weeks of trying *everything* she could think of to get

him 'ready.' When nothing worked, she decided he must be gay and, although he had tried to explain why he was having difficulty, she wasn't buying it.

One day, he met with the senior resident who assigned him to a new patient coming in from the emergency room, a young woman who had tried killing herself by cutting her wrists. He asked Aaron to admit her to the unit, work her up and write the first orders for her care. But when Aaron saw her sleeping he was dumb-struck. She was the most beautiful woman he had seen in his life. It was like witnessing a vision. Unable to say a word, he had simply taken her hand and for a while he watched her sleep. Finally, he spoke her name. "Cathleen." There was no response. "Cathleen, can you hear me?"

Groggily, she answered him. "Pleaseleavemealone," she had answered him.

"Cathleen, my name is Aaron. I need to ask you a few questions. Can you wake up for a few minutes?"

When she opened her eyes and looked him square in the face, he nearly swooned. Her eyes were emerald green, piercing, with the radiance of diamonds. Her lips were thick and full and Aaron sensed a subliminal arousal from looking at them. Her beauty mesmerized him and he couldn't speak. He studied her face as if it were a painting. *I am in love. My God, I am in love for the first time in my life. I am in love and I am sitting here and I should get out of here.* Slowly, she raised herself to a sitting position. Her hospital gown hung loosely off one shoulder, exposing skin that looked like honey and, Aaron was sure, was as smooth as velvet. Her white blond hair fell loosely over the shoulder. It looked, he thought, like the angel hair he placed meticulously on his Christmas tree each year.

"Hello again, Aaron," she said softly, sweetly.

Surprised, he said, "You remember my name?"

"It's not every day I have a good-looking doctor sitting on

my bed, holding my hand while I sleep,” she told him with a slow smile. Aaron flushed. Did she know how long he sat there? Did she know what he had been thinking?

“I must admit I am taken by your beauty,” he told her, deciding that honesty was the best policy. “I felt – well, protective. That isn’t an unusual circumstance between a patient and her doctor, so I am told.”

“So what now, Mother?” she asked him.

“I’m here to do your early evaluation and take a few notes,” he told her after formally introducing himself, trying hard to raise the dialogue to a professional level. He knew too well the dangers of transference.

“In other words, find out why the chick is loony, right?”

“Are you loony?” Aaron asked smiling.

“Great,” she said curtly. “Now it’s time to play ‘twenty questions.’ ‘And how does that make you feel, Miss Turner? Did you hate your mother, Miss Turner? When did you first realize you were depressed, Miss Turner?’”

“I don’t want to play ‘twenty questions’ Cathleen. I just want to know why you tried to kill yourself,” Aaron said with genuine concern.

“Aaron, you seem like a real nice person,” she said with an abruptness that startled him. “If you’re going to treat me, I would like to give you some advice. Don’t emotionally involve yourself with me. It is unhealthy and you won’t last long as a doctor if you do so. Please, take what I say as a warning. Believe me. I know therapy like the back of my hand. And I’ve had some rotten experiences. Now, what do you want to know?”

“You’ve had some bad experiences with psychiatry in the past. I’ve had some bad experiences with some patients in the past. Why don’t we try starting on a level playing field? We’ll trust one another from the beginning.”

Cathleen shrugged, and nodded her approval.

“Why did you try to kill yourself?”

“There’s no purpose in my life. Because I’ve taken my own advice about not getting involved for fear that someone will hurt me. I have decayed into a nobody going nowhere.”

“How can a person as beautiful and as full of life as you appear not have a purpose?” he asked her. “Someone must have hurt you badly. Who was it, Cathleen? A boyfriend?”

“Yes, it was a boyfriend” she told him with a sigh.

Aaron felt a wave of jealousy mixed with envy flood his being. He selfishly wished he could devastate anyone in his life over the loss of his affection and then sanity replaced the primal wave of thought and feeling by a more sensitive and sensible fear for Cathleen’s well-being. How could he allow himself to forget for one moment that she was his patient, a woman in pain?

“Would you like to talk about it?” he asked her.

“Oh, sure. I’d love to relive unpleasant and emotionally troubling experiences so others can try to figure out ways to convince me the event was not important,” she said bitterly.

“Does sound dumb,” Aaron admitted. “But how else can a person help another unless they know what to focus on?”

“Perhaps the best way you can help me would be to give me the resources to finish the job I started,” she said coolly.

“I couldn’t even kill one of my fish if it was sick. How do you expect me to help you kill yourself? I had a dog once someone hit with his car and the dog lay suffering. I knew I had to put it down, but I couldn’t do it. My best friend shot the dog for me. I didn’t watch. I didn’t even want to see the dog after it was dead. I guess what I am trying to say is I am a great big coward.”

“How in the hell do you expect to make it in medicine?”

“Research. I don’t think I will need exposure to much pain and suffering doing that, do you?”

“Probably not. But the road there is going to be a tough one. Full of chuckles. You have to witness much pain and suffering to get the medical degree so you can go into research.”

“Cathleen, why did you try to kill yourself?” Aaron asked abruptly looking serious.

“Because, you son of a bitch, I want to die,” she yelled.

He couldn’t tell for sure, but he thought from the look in her eyes that she was thinking, *Die Aaron. Die.*

* * * * *

It was fifteen days later that Aaron saw Cathleen. She had gone into a severe depression the morning after the first night he had seen her and he kept her sedated. She slept, ate and did little else. Aaron sat beside her bed at intervals in the morning hours whenever he was free, wondering how he might help this woman find a purpose in life, not even sure that a purpose would keep her from killing herself. Finally, he realized he was beginning to own the responsibility for her life and decided to drop her from his patient caseload.

When Aaron talked with the chief of psychiatry and explained his feelings to her, she agreed that he had made the proper decision. She also expressed concern that he might allow similar circumstances to evolve in the future and asked if he thought he might be better off in some other profession. Perhaps research.

“Research is what I want to do. I have always wanted to be moving forward, doing something productive, no matter what the pace. I hate sitting around, being idle, doing nothing. I think that is the way I would feel stuck in a lab all day looking at pathogens crawl around on a glass slide until I needed glasses with lenses that resembled the bottom of a coke bottle. But there are many forms of research. I will find my niche,” Aaron agreed.

“Progress comes in many forms,” the chief of psychiatry said. “At any rate, you have a handle on what it is you want. Getting there might be a problem, but I don’t see much chance of anything stopping you. I respect your decision to drop Miss Turner from your caseload, but I wonder if running away from your feelings is the right answer. You think about it and let me know.”

Aaron left her office and went home. It was a week before he decided he had to see Cathleen. He had to tell her how he

felt and most importantly he had to tell her he was no longer owning the responsibility for her life.

* * * * *

“Before you say anything, I want to tell you I’m sorry for the way I talked to you,” Cathleen murmured, sluggishly adjusting herself in the hospital bed. “Is that why you haven’t been back to see me, Aaron?”

The way she presented the question, her manner, melted his heart. How could he possibly stand up and boldly tell her all that he wanted.

“No, that’s not the reason,” he admitted. “In fact, I haven’t been back to see you because I have been desperately trying to heed the advice you gave me at our last meeting.”

“Oh? And what advice was that?”

“The advice not to become emotionally involved with my patients. I don’t know what it is about you, Cathleen, but for some reason I can’t get you out of my mind.”

“I value your honesty, Aaron,” she said lightly touching his hand, “and I also have a confession. I am taken with you, though I am afraid you won’t want to get close to me because of my ‘circumstances.’”

“You can change your ‘circumstances’ with time, and your fears of rejection,” he assured her. “I can’t ‘date’ you while you are a patient, but I can get to know you. We can have a friendship. Learn to trust each other. I will be honest and I expect you to be the same.”

“That’s hard for me to do, Aaron. I haven’t been comfortable talking to anyone, much less a man, for a long time.”

“Well, at this point, that is something we both have plenty of. Time.”

Aaron spent the next four hours with Cathleen, telling her everything he intended to tell her and more. He found that it was easier than he expected, especially the part about how he

couldn't own the responsibility for her life.

She laughed and said, "If you learn only one thing from this Aaron, that is the most valuable lesson you could learn," and he was grateful that she understood.

Aaron spent the next three weeks visiting with Cathleen as often as possible. He even arranged to take her off the unit a couple of times on passes. He accepted the responsibility for her and documented it in the chart as 'reality testing.' They laughed about that but it was the only way he could get her out of the hospital. They went to the park, to dinner, to the movies and enjoyed each other more than either had enjoyed anyone else. Three weeks later, when the attending released Cathleen from the hospital, Aaron continued to see her and they began dating in earnest. He had never kissed her because he felt that he would be taking advantage of a patient and Cathleen had respected his wishes. All that changed since her release.

"Thank you, Aaron. That was sweet of you," she had said, kissing him on the cheek when he brought her red roses on their first real date. He held her gaze for a moment and knew this was to be the moment he had waited for. In a millisecond, a thousand thoughts passed through his mind. Would it be as good as he dreamed? Should he wait a while more? Would she like it as much as he? He closed his eyes and slowly bent forward. Cathleen did the same. Their lips parted and their mouths met. Aaron had kissed her for what seemed an eternity.

"God that's good," was all she said as she kissed him back, more and more passionately until he had responded by lifting her blouse. Frantically, they began peeling off each other's clothes. They dropped to the floor and continued to kiss and caress each other until, suddenly, Cathleen had stiffened and he had seen fear in her eyes.

"What's the matter?" Aaron asked. "Did I hurt you?"

"No, Aaron, you didn't hurt me. Please *don't* hurt me either."

“Are you afraid I am going to leave you after this?”

“No, silly. It is just that . . . well . . .”

“What! What is it?”

“It’s just that this is my first time, Aaron. I’m a virgin.”

* * * * *

“. . . so if you think you are just going to quit on me, Aaron, you've got another thought coming.”

“Huh? What did you say?” Aaron asked, blinking. Steve was standing in front of him, enraged.

“You haven't heard a word I have said, have you?” he demanded.

“I'm sorry Steve. I'm just not with it right now.”

“Well, you had better get with it Aaron. We are not playing games here. This experiment is the most important thing I have done in my life and time is running out, as you well know. Now, are you in or out?”

“I am not going to rain on your parade, Steve. Now, get out of my face,” Aaron said pushing Steve away. “I'm going to get your information for you so back off.”

No one spoke for a few minutes. Aaron finally broke the silence. “You're right, Steve,” he said. “It is Cathleen.”

“Aaron, that's ancient history. Are you going to let that interfere with your life forever?”

“Probably,” Aaron said acidly.

“Aaron, I don't mean that the way it sounds. It's just that you can't let Cathleen's ghost haunt you every time you decide to delve into the field of psychiatry.”

“Cathleen's ghost haunts me every day of my life in some way. It is just easier to escape it when I am doing something that keeps my mind off her. Every time I interview a client for our experiment I see her. I hear her voice. I smell her perfume.”

“Look, Aaron, I am sorry . . .” Steve began.

“Don't be. I'm not. I just wish I could get on with it. I thought I was doing well until I started working with this project. Now, I am not sure. How do you guys think I am doing?”

“You’re doing just fine,” Bill offered.

“Yeah, you’re doing great,” Steve agreed.

“Well, I don’t think I am doing great,” Aaron countered.

“Look, man, you’ve taken a group of misfits - no, worse than misfits, the dregs of the earth - and filled that little used space between their ears with three large words having the initials A.L.S. Those three words are going to result in a cure for my wife; no, not just my wife, but a lot of unfortunate people. Now, do you still think you haven’t done much?” Steve asked.

“If I could be as sure of that as you seem I would have a great deal more enthusiasm. But I don’t see it through your eyes,” Aaron said, his shoulders slumping.

“Why don’t we go home and get some rest,” Bill interrupted. “We’ve all been under for too much stress for the past few weeks. Let’s all go home, spend an evening with our families, enjoy life and get a fresh start on it tomorrow. What do you say?”

“Tell you what, Aaron,” Steve suggested. “You come over for dinner tonight and I guarantee April will heighten your enthusiasm.”

“I don’t think so . . .” Aaron began, but Steve interrupted.

“Nonsense. You’re coming, and I don’t want any argument.”

“Well, all right. If you insist.”

“I do,” Steve said.

“Great. See you both tomorrow,” Bill said and left his office.

“I’ll wait for you in the corridor,” Aaron said.

“Okay, Aaron, I’ll be right there,” Steve answered.

Steve gathered a few papers and stuffed them into his briefcase before calling April to tell her that he was bringing Aaron home for dinner. The thought of spending the evening with April and Joshua made him feel better and the visit would do Aaron some good also. He knew if Aaron could see April, witness her love for life - for Joshua - he would want to do as much as Steve in helping her. Steve felt like he was walking a

tightrope. If he fell to one side, April would die. If he fell to the other, Aaron or Bill, or both, would abandon the project. Either way, defeat seemed imminent. He decided he would never let that happen. No matter what he had to do, he would not allow his wife, or the project, to die. A strange thought breezed across his mind. Perhaps the best candidate to kill and send for the answer to April's problem might be Aaron. That thought made a comforted smile touch his lips. He shrugged a 'why not' shrug and, whistling, left Bill's office. Yes, his project would survive.

* * * * *

“Thank you for coming, Aaron,” April said, as she greeted him and Steve at the door.

“Thank you for having me, April,” he said hoping he was hiding the sorrow he was feeling for her. He had seen many patients with neuromuscular diseases and all of them lost weight and worsened, almost in front of his eyes. He was sad to see April looking so pathetic. She had been one of the most beautiful women he had ever seen, besides Cathleen, of course, and he had often told Steve so. Now, her eyes were sunken, her lips drawn and her frame frail.

“Come in,” April said taking his hand. He cringed at the touch of her hand on his. It felt like taking hold of cold bones. The texture of her skin was that like that of a thin plastic wrap.

“Where’s my little Prince?” Steve hollered as he came through the door.

Joshua came running. He screeched, “Dadeeeeeeeeeeeee,” as he ran to Steve.

“Joshua, say hello to Aaron,” April said presenting Aaron to Joshua. Joshua did. “And now, let’s eat,” April said, gesturing toward the dining room.

“Sounds great. I’m starved,” Steve said patting April on the backside. She scuttled away giving him the ‘we have guests, don’t do that’ look.

“How have you been feeling, April?” Aaron asked.

“I’m fine, Aaron,” April told him setting a bowl of corn on the table. It was all she could do to carry it. “Listen, I don’t want you in the ‘practice’ mode right now. Steve has to shed the ‘doctor jacket’ as he comes through the door. House rules. It’s the same for you. I know you get enough of it in one day without having to be in the mode all evening, too.”

“I don’t mind playing doctor with friends,” Aaron assured her, grinning. “It bugs the dickens out of me when I first meet someone and as soon as they find out I’m a doctor they start giving me their medical history.”

“That bugs me, too,” Steve agreed.

“Well, I don’t want either of you talking about medicine tonight. Would you like a glass of wine, Aaron?” April asked. “And stop being so formal. You’re like family. Take your coat off and relax. Stephen, take his coat. Hope you like red. It’s *Châteauneuf-du-Pape*,” April said.

“It’s one of my favorites,” Aaron said earnestly

“Dinner is served,” April announced in her best English butler accent.

The meal was delicious, featuring baked ham, mashed potatoes and gravy, salad and sweet corn, but Aaron noticed that April ate little. After dinner, Steve and Aaron retired to the family room, while April put Joshua to bed. The men sipped brandy in awkward silence.

“She is going down fast, Steve,” Aaron said finally. “I can see why you have such a sense of urgency. I am sorry.”

“You’ve done all you can, Aaron,” Steve told him setting his brandy on a table and folding his hands. “I appreciate it. I know what we’re doing isn’t easy for you. It’s not easy for me. I know it’s not easy for Bill either. I just hate coming home night after night and finding a smaller, frailer woman in my home each time. Could you do it if you were coming home to Cathleen and you saw the same happening to her?”

“It would kill me. It must be hell for both of you.”

“I think it’s harder for me than for her. You would think she has accepted it. I can’t.”

“She’s a strong woman, Steve. You have to be proud of her.”

“I am.” Steve agreed picking his brandy up and smelling it. “She is a trooper. I just hate imagining a future without her. It’s

like *your* not being with Cathleen, Aaron.”

Aaron said nothing. He looked into Steve’s eyes for a minute, and then shifted his gaze to the fireplace. The fire reminded him of times he and Cathleen would sit and talk. They would light a fire, grab a bottle of wine and talk for hours, watching the flames and commenting on how beautiful they were.

“I hope I haven’t conjured up any unpleasant memories,” Steve said apologetically.

“I have no unpleasant memories of Cathleen, only pleasant ones,” Aaron confessed.

“You guys aren’t talking about medicine are you?” April asked rejoining them and sitting next to Steve whose hand went instinctively to a bony knee where he let it rest.

“April, how are you feeling?” Aaron asked.

April knew she had to answer him. His tone of voice said that he wouldn’t take ‘no’ for an answer.

“I’m feeling like shit,” she answered honestly. “I don’t have the strength to pick my son up, I can’t make love to my husband and I don’t have the energy to last a day without taking three or four naps. To top it all off, Steve’s had to resort to having a cleaning service, nursing service, diaper service, baby-sitter service, and maybe even ‘wife’ service.

“April,” Steve said sternly.

“I’m sorry. Cut the ‘wife’ service,” she said winking at Aaron. “I know better.”

“I can vouch for that,” Aaron said chuckling. “He spends more time with me than with you.”

“Don’t you have some magic pill to help me get some strength back?” April asked after a minute.

Aaron stopped chuckling. A serious look replaced the softer one he had while laughing. “Unfortunately no, but we are making progress in the lab. Has Steve told you?”

“Steve hasn’t told me much of anything that is going on in the lab.”

“Well, we have had some success, and I think it is only a matter of time before we have the cure,” he said as enthusiastically as possible.

“I hope I’m alive to see it,” April said.

Aaron walked over to the couch and sat on the edge next to April. He put his hand on her arm and, looking her in the face said, “You will.”

“You’ll be alive,” Steve confirmed. “I promised didn’t I?”

“Yes, you promised,” April said wearily, as though she had no hope. “But I don’t think you realized what a big promise this one is, honey. It isn’t the same as when you promised you would marry me, or when you promised we would get pregnant, or even when you promised you would buy me a house. It’s different. Bigger. I think you might have bitten off more than you can chew this time.”

“The opera ain’t over ‘til the fat lady sings,” Steve said to lighten the atmosphere. Since April had received her diagnosis, both of them had tried hard to keep their spirits up.

“Well I hope she sings soon. I might fall asleep before she does, and I’d miss the song.”

“She’s warming up in the dressing room right now,” Aaron said getting up and going back to his chair. He decided that he might as well pretend to be lighthearted, too. “In fact, she’s next on stage.”

“Great,” April said laying her head on Steve’s shoulder. “Let’s hope the aria doesn’t last too long.”

“It’s going to be fine. Let’s stop talking rhetorically. You are going to be here to have another baby, see your grandchildren and see all your dreams come true. Trust me,” Steve said.

Aaron looked at his watch and said, “I have to run.”

“It’s still early. How about another brandy for the road?”

April asked.

“I plan to be in the lab tomorrow morning early,” he told her emptying his glass and setting it on a side table. You, young lady, have rejuvenated my spirits. I think my job is going to be easier from now on, thanks to you.”

“Just find a cure, Aaron.”

“We will,” he said putting his hand on her thin shoulder.

They walked Aaron to the door and waved to him as he drove off.

“I’m glad you brought Aaron home for dinner,” April said after he was gone. “He’s a very lovely man.”

“I know,” Steve said. “I think the visit did him a world of good.”

So long as he helps me find a cure I don’t care what he does. He may just have saved himself the agony of being the first doctor in history to ask God for the cure to a disease on which he is the expert, Steve thought.

He meant it.

C H A P T E R S I X

The First Success

The next six candidates died without even so much as regaining consciousness. Bill threatened to ‘close it down’ until Steve convinced him to continue one or two more times. The lab was beginning to assume the atmosphere of a morgue; the instruments nothing more than instruments of death, incapable of restoring life in lifeless remains. Then the break they had all been waiting for happened.

It was a Thursday. Rain had been coming down in sheets for two days. It was barely noon, yet dark. There was a chill connected with the storm that penetrated the warmth of the hospital, a cold that cut to the bone. Everyone associated with the experiment was feeling down. Nothing went their way until two o’clock when Bill, Steve and Aaron’s pagers sounded almost simultaneously, calling them to the lab. An emergency room patient who the doctor considered a perfect candidate for the experiment had a near death experience at home. Firefighters revived her and she barely clung to life. While Steve gathered as much information as he could about the patient, Aaron continued to the emergency room to decide whether he could plant a subliminal suggestion if she ‘died’ again.

Bill called Ronnie, who in turn called the rest of the crew. They all assembled within minutes. Each, moving swiftly, readied their station; one by fetching an EKG machine, another by arranging the monitor’s wiring on the bed. Once the team readied the lab Bill briefed them about the patient.

“We have a fifty-year-old, obese woman,” Bill told them,

“who lost consciousness at home, presumably an alcohol-induced narcosis. On arrival at the ER, she had a blood alcohol level off the chart. Now she’s on a mechanical ventilator and has been getting medicine to oppose the alcohol. It hasn’t aroused her yet.”

“Jesus,” Boa said. “She’s damn near pickled. How we s’posed to do our job with a pickle?”

“Let’s wait until she gets here and make that determination. Now lets get busy.”

As Bill finished, Aaron entered the room with a burly looking orderly pushing a gurney on which there was a monstrous pile of a woman laying partially covered by a bloodstained sheet. Machines teetered on the edges of the portable stretcher.

“Bring her over here,” Bill said pointing at the bed beside him.

Steve, who had been adjusting I.V. solutions and gathering medication, headed to the bedside to help in moving the patient onto the bed. When he saw the woman his heart sank. “My God, Bill, that’s Julie. Julie Kern. The nurse from the third floor who works nights.”

“Holy shit. You’re right. What in the hell is she doing in a drunken stupor?” Bill asked, looking at her in shocked recognition.

“I think I know, but I’ll explain later, Bill. Right now let’s just try to get her stabilized.”

They worked with her for three hours, repeating a phrase over and over in her ear while Steve continued to give her medication and Bill monitored her heart rate as it came out in jagged lines on the oscilloscope of yet another monitor. Suddenly, Julie opened her eyes.

“She’s with us,” Aaron announced. Everyone sprang into action.

“Julie,” Steve said, his face a scarce two inches from hers. “You have a tube in your throat so you can’t talk to me. If you can lift your right index finger, do it.”

She did so, slowly, in tiny jerks, about a quarter of an inch before letting it collapse back onto the bed.

“Great,” Steve told her. “I’m going to ask you a couple of questions. If the answer is ‘yes,’ raise your finger. If the answer is ‘no,’ leave your finger down. Do you understand?”

The finger came up and back down.

“This is important, Julie,” he continued. “Did you see the white light?”

Her eyes widened as if shocked that Steve would know about it. But she raised her finger, all the time staring at Steve with frightened eyes.

“Julie, I don’t want you to be afraid,” he said softly. “I know what happened and I have a good idea why you did this. Is my idea right?”

Again she raised her finger.

“All right.” Steve said. “No lectures right now, but by damn, when you’re better . . .”

As Steve trailed off, a single, heavy tear trickled down Julie’s right cheek, making a wet spot the size of a quarter on the pillow case.

“Please don’t, Julie,” he whispered. “It’s going to be all right. Do you remember our last conversation? Do you remember what I said, about when the time came for you to go, I would be there to help you, to make the event painless? Do you still feel the same way as you did then about it?”

This time the finger went up and down quickly, as if for emphasis.

“Okay,” Steve said. “I’m going to help you with that. But I also want you to help me if you can. Did you hear what Aaron was saying to you while you were out? Do you understand what it was he was talking to you about? Do you know about April, Julie?”

Again, she responded affirmatively. Another tear melted its

way down the same track left by the last.

“Julie,” Steve said softly. “I’m going to send you to the other side. I’m going to send you back into that light.”

Julie closed her eyes. Another tear squeezed its way out of her eye.

“Julie, I want you to go back to that light and get an answer to the question Aaron has been telling you to ask, and come back to us with it. Can you do that for me?”

The finger stayed down.

“Julie, is it that you don’t want to come back from that light? Because you’ll get to go back to the light immediately after you bring us the answer,” Steve promised. “Won’t you at least try?”

It might have been the stress in his voice, or the serious tone he used, but Julie finally raised and lowered her finger in agreement. Steve smiled, bent over and kissed her and one of his tears fell next to hers on the pillow.

After letting Julie rest for a few hours, Bill and Aaron explained what would happen to her. They would give her a ‘lethal’ dose of morphine leaving her ‘dead’. She was to try hard to come back when she felt them pulling her. They told her it would be difficult to fight the urge not to leave. When all was ready, Bill showed the syringe full of the medication to Julie to let her know she was about to leave. She looked apprehensive as she looked at Steve.

“Have you changed your mind?” Bill asked looking keenly at Steve. She raised her finger to signal ‘no’. “What is it then?” Bill asked.

Julie looked at Bill, then at Steve.

“Do you want Steve to do it?” Aaron asked. The finger raised and lowered.

Steve felt a wave of fear, guilt, love, nausea and rage all at once. What demon of fate had placed him in this position?

Why was he to be the one to kill again, to take one life for the sake of another? He looked lovingly at this large woman who he had known for many years and felt like weeping. Perhaps angels sent her to help him in her final hour. That thought alone was a comfort to him. Finally he took the syringe from Bill. Julie smiled around the tube protruding from her mouth and taped to the corner if it. Steve placed the needle in the tubing going into her arm. "I'll see you in a few minutes," Steve said as he injected the medication.

Julie's face slowly relaxed. Margo reached over and turned off the mechanical ventilator that provided breath. Julie's chest did not rise again on its own. The jagged lines on the oscilloscope went flat almost immediately. Julie Kern was dead.

While Julie lay dormant in a state somewhere between life and death, Boa sat on the edge of a desk and cleaned his fingernails. Margo primped in a compact mirror wondering if Bill had noticed the new eyeliner she wore. Margo seldom wore makeup, but she had decided if she was going to catch a doctor, she should get with the program. Jason caressed a scalpel and stared at one of the remaining cats. The hair on the back of the cat stood at attention. If one could see into the fifth dimension he would have seen sparks flying between the eyes of Jason and that cat. Ronnie sat and stared at the ashen figure on the bed and realized just in time that she had been holding her breath the instant Julie took her last. As unconsciousness crept up on her she realized she was not breathing and suddenly gasped. All eyes jerked to hers. She blushed and held up an apologetic hand as if to say, 'Sorry, I'm all right.' After fifteen long minutes, Bill said, "Let's do it."

The team jumped into action. Jason turned on the ventilator and increased the oxygen concentration to 100%. Steve and Bill injected drugs to combat the morphine using the same tube the lethal dose went through as they repeatedly shocked

Julie's heart. During the fifty minutes they worked on her, Aaron talked to Julie, trying to make contact through her subconscious mind. Suddenly, and without warning, her eyes opened and, before anyone knew what was happening, she reached up and pulled the tube out of her throat. Her words came out in short coughs.

"Borrowed time," she said in a harsh voice, one scratched through damaged, inflamed vocal cords. ". . . it's so difficult to be here . . ." she faded in and out. Most of what she said came through garbled. As she spoke, the color drained from her face. She became weaker with each word.

"Lay back, Julie," Steve urged her. "Speak softly, we're taping this. Don't worry about our not hearing you. We can pick up a whisper later."

Julie smiled at him. "It's so peaceful there, Steve. You should just let April go there."

Steve flushed. He could not think of allowing his wife to die.

"It's all so easy," Julie continued. "It's all so moronically simple. Medicine is almost the least complicated of the sciences. It's just a notch above the simplest of the sciences, physics. It's *all* so simple."

"Julie, what's the answer to the question?" Aaron asked softly.

Julie looked right into his eyes and held his gaze. Her face softened and she said, "She's there, Aaron. Cathleen loves you."

Aaron's eyes widened, his mind reeled as he almost passed out. Julie closed her eyes, her breathing becoming erratic. She was speaking softly and rapidly now. Steve bent his head to her ear and listened as she repeated the same line over and over. The rest of the crew stood silently by.

Finally, Julie opened her eyes one last time. "It's time, Steve," she murmured. "Thank you." With that, she died.

Steve reached up and closed her eyes before hurrying over to the tape recorder and hitting the rewind button. Putting on

the earphones, he cranked up the volume and dubbed out all background noise until he captured Julie's voice, scribbling down what he heard as he played the tape again and again. Then Steve headed out the door.

"Where are you going?" Bill shouted, running after him.

"To research," Steve shouted back.

"You can't just barge in there and hand them a piece of paper," Bill told him. "You've got to share the information with Aaron and me. That comes first. We have to approach this slowly. Let's just go back to the lab, have a cup of coffee and talk this over.

"Fine," Steve said walking back to Bill, the paper hanging loosely in his hand.

Once they had gathered coffee, cream, sugar and Bill had grabbed a cinnamon bun, they sat down at a large glass top table.

"What's the bottom line, Aaron? Is the answer there or not?"

"What do you think she meant about Cathleen?"

"I don't know Aaron. We'll talk about that later. We have to talk about what Julie told me."

"It was hard for me to decipher all of what she said. She had the knowledge to give us the solution, but her thoughts were so garbled that it was difficult for her to communicate that knowledge to us," Aaron explained.

"Kind of like us trying to explain relativity to an ape?" Bill asked.

"Yeah. I suppose so. Someone enlightened her. Anyway, some of what she said indirectly has to do with A.L.S. For instance, when she was rattling on about serum CK levels and myoglobin in the urine, she was describing a neuromuscular phenomenon similar to A.L.S. It wasn't A.L.S. she was talking about though. It was alcoholic myopathy. That's a condition that mimics A.L.S., but is caused by drinking of too much alcohol," Aaron continued.

“Are you telling me she was giving the cure to the cause of her own damn disease?” Bill demanded.

“That wasn’t the cause of her death. We were the cause of her death. Alcohol probably wouldn’t have been the cause either,” Steve explained smoothing out the page of paper he had crumpled in his hand in his excitement. “Julie had a brain tumor.”

“So that’s why she decided to drink herself into oblivion,” Bill commented rhetorically.

“Probably. Anyway, that point is moot. The thing that is interesting and most positive is what she was repeating at the end. I think there is something we can learn from that. ‘Look to the amino acid beta Methylamino L-alanine’. Is that right. Aaron?”

“I think it is,” Aaron said, leaning over to stare at the page with him. “The seed of a plant called *Cycas circinalis* produces the amino acid she spoke of. The natives in Guam eat the plant and, therefore, the seed and get A.L.S. It’s believed there is a connection somewhere. We’ve known about it and have ‘looked to it,’ as Julie has suggested, for many years.”

“Then there has to be more to look for,” Steve insisted. “She wouldn’t say that unless there was a connection.”

“How do you know that? Maybe she had read that somewhere and was simply reciting something she had recalled in that instant. She was a nurse, Steve, and a bright one from what I had seen,” Aaron said, leaning back and taking a slow sip of his coffee.

“Do you think she was bringing all that up from her subconscious mind?” Steve asked.

“I’m not sure. You know as well as I do that our brains are virtual computers. They store everything we see and perhaps Julie was recalling, nothing more.”

“I don’t believe it. There is something to that message. We

just have to find it.”

“I’ll tell you what. I’ll go over that tape until I wear it out, Steve. If there is something there, I’ll find it. I promise.”

“Okay. We might as well get back to our routines,” Steve told them. “I’ll see you guys later. Call me tonight, Aaron,” Steve said.

After Bill and Aaron gathered their papers and left, Steve sat at the table for a few moments, exhausted, thinking about Julie. He was happy that he had had a hand in helping her to find peace. The thought of her suffering had saddened him but now he was glad that he had had the opportunity to end that suffering swiftly. He was also encouraged by the information she gave them.

Steve decided to go home and check on April and Joshua. He hadn’t seen them in nearly two days and he was anxious to spend some time with his family. Leaving his work on the desk, he grabbed his coat and headed out of the hospital. The rain was coming down in sheets and the cold was cutting. Despite it all, Steve whistled as he left. He had some encouraging news for his wife.

* * * * *

“Daddy, daddy,” Joshua yelled out of a window as Steve pulled into the driveway. Steve jumped out of the car and ran into the house.

“Hi there, Little Prince,” Steve said hugging him. “Where’s Mommy?”

“Room,” Joshua said pointing.

Steve carried Joshua into the kitchen, calling out “I’m home. Where’s my wife?”

“In here,” April said. She looked worse than he had ever seen her look before. Her cheeks were sunken and there were dark circles under her eyes.

“What are you doing home so early?” she asked him. “It’s only been two days.”

“I’m sorry, honey. But I couldn’t help it. I had to see you. You know we’ve been working day and night on ‘the cure.’”

“Right. And if you believe that, I have an acre in downtown Hong Kong I’ll sell you cheap,” a voice chimed in. It was Melinda. Steve had not seen her sitting at the table as he walked into the kitchen.

He turned around slowly and said with as much contempt as he could muster, “Who invited you?”

“I did,” April said jabbing Steve in the ribs.

“Great. How would you like to leave now . . .” Steve said but April interrupted.

“Steve. Don’t be so rude,” she scolded.

“That’s all right,” Melinda said getting up. “I was ready to leave anyway, sweetie. I have some errands to run. Besides, the smell has changed for the worse in here.”

“Try using some deodorant next time and you won’t have that problem,” Steve said.

“Stop it you two,” April said. “Why can’t you be friends?”

Steve chuckled. “Right. You expect me to be friends with a maniac who almost crushed my skull?”

“That was a long time ago and Melinda has already apologized for it.”

Steve looked at his wife in disbelief. He was so stunned by the simplicity of April’s mind that he couldn’t think of anything to say. Pouring himself a cup of coffee, he waited until April and Melinda had said good-bye. When April turned her back Melinda flipped Steve the finger and left and Steve made some guttural sounds at her that remarkably resembled those of a pig. April shot him an angry glance and he stopped with the sounds.

After Melinda left, Steve received a ten minute lecture on his attitude.

“She has been my friend since I can remember having friends. If you think about it Sweetie, I have spent more time with Melinda than I have with you in my life. So, please, I’m asking you as a favor, try to get along with her.”

“Ok, ok,” Steve surrendered.

After April had calmed down, she was lovable again. Steve played teasingly with her. Joshua played with a Batman figure across the room and paid little attention to them.

“There wouldn’t happen to be any unsatisfied needs in your life would there?” Steve asked pinching April on the backside and winking at her.

“I’m sorry, honey, but I don’t have the energy. You don’t want to make love to a fish.”

“I wouldn’t be. I’d be making love with my wife,” Steve said.

“I’m fading fast, Steve. Are you making any progress at all?”

“Yes. In fact we had a breakthrough today,” he told her as he helped her sit at the kitchen table.

“What was it?”

Steve explained that they found new evidence of a specif-

ic protein enzyme they discovered might cause A.L.S. and they were focusing all their energies on it.

April stared at him uncomprehendingly. "I'm just too tired to take it in," she told him. "Perhaps later."

Steve helped her to the bed and tucked her under an afghan lying over the foot of the bed. That evening, Steve tucked Joshua in before she awoke, helped her on with her robe, carried her into the kitchen, served her some food and sat next to her.

"I called a visiting nurse service today. I'm hiring in some help for you starting Monday," Steve said.

"I don't need help," she protested.

"You need some help with Joshua and you need help with food," Steve told her firmly. "So, I ordered 'meals on wheels,' and all you have to worry about is playing with your son and taking care of yourself. I asked Lupe to come in every day to clean instead of three times a week. So, young lady, starting Monday you will have some peace and quiet. You can rest when you want, someone will be here around the clock to help you, and I can work better knowing you are all right."

"If you think that is the best thing, Steve, I agree," April said putting a bony hand on his cheek. "I have lost my heart for life. It seems such a burden these days. That's not my style and you know it. Do you have some 'perk me up' medicine in your little black bag? Aaron wouldn't give me any."

"Unfortunately I gave it all to Boa," Steve said absently.

"Who?"

"Oh, nothing. I'll ask Aaron if there's anything we can give you to help perk you up. He's the expert and I don't want to give you anything that might cause more harm than good."

As he spoke the phone rang. It was Ronnie. April heard Steve say her name and then pause for what seemed minutes. "Are you sure?" he said finally. "I'll meet you at the lab in fif-

teen minutes.”

“Who’s Ronnie?” April asked him curiously.

“One of the lab assistants. She thinks she has recognized something and wants to discuss it with me.”

“Are you having an affair?” April asked him abruptly.

The question stunned Steve. His face instantly told April what she needed to hear. As he floundered for the words, she said, “Forget it. I’d know.”

Steve’s face softened. He kissed her full on the mouth and left.

When he arrived at the hospital Bill and Aaron were going through the doors. Catching up with them, he asked if they knew what was going on.

“All I know,” he said, “is that Ronnie thinks she has found something. She wouldn’t discuss it over the phone.

“Shit,” Aaron said as he slipped on the steps. “When is this damn rain going to end? What the hell do you think is going on that made it necessary for her to get us out here in this weather?”

They found Ronnie in the lab listening to the tapes of Julie.

“What’s up Ronnie?” Steve asked while standing his umbrella in a corner.

“Come over here,” she told him, motioning them to join her at the console where she was sitting.

“I’ve been listening to these tapes. Now, listen to this.”

She pushed a button and Julie’s voice came out of the speakers in a faint whisper.

No one spoke or moved for the twelve minutes it took the tape to finish

“. . . enzymatic,” were Julie’s final words. “Simply enzymatic. Look to the amino acid beta N-methylamino-L-alanine. The likeness is astounding.”

“She wasn’t talking about the amino acid produced by the

seed,” Ronnie said scarcely able to contain her excitement. “She was talking about an enzyme in humans that produces a substance resembling that of the seed. If we can isolate that enzyme we might have the answer.”

“Of course!” Aaron exclaimed slapping his legs, his face beaming. “We didn’t tie it together because all we heard was half the message at first. Now it fits! She was trying to direct us to a different enzyme.”

“If my hunch is correct,” Ronnie continued, “I think she was trying to direct us to a specific allele in the genome or specific multiples. At any rate, it sounds to me like she had a good grasp of allelochemicals.”

“Possibly,” Aaron replied excitedly.

“Hey, wait a minute,” Steve interrupted. “Do you guys want to share this with Bill and me?”

“We’ll fill you in later. Right now, it’s best if we hit the computer banks and extract as much data as we can. We’ll see you tomorrow,” Ronnie told him as she and Aaron hurried out of the room.

Bill and Steve stood looking at each other blankly. After a couple of minutes, Bill said, “Is this as scary for you as it is for me, Steve? I’m starting to feel like we are tampering with something way out of our league. What do you say we get out of here?”

Steve decided to head back home. He would want to get an early start on the project in the morning. They would be putting Sheryl in deep freeze. She would be ‘dead’ for forty-five minutes, the longest they had allowed any of the others to go so far. But wondering what Aaron and Ronnie were doing in the lab, he decided to make a quick stop there before leaving and took the west wing elevator to the fifth floor where he negotiated a shortcut through the doctors’ lounge in surgery, coming out directly across from the research lab.

“Good evening, doctor,” the receptionist said.

“Good evening. Is Dr. Debries here?”

“Yes. He is in Double Isolation C. Would you like to go in or talk to him through the com?”

“Through the com would be fine.”

The receptionist took Steve to an observation room. There he saw Aaron and Ronnie through a thick pane of glass in the room below. Filled with machinery resembling so many computer terminals, all with flashing and blinking white, red, green and yellow lights the room looked aesthetically foreboding. Dressed in green surgical garb in the isolation unit which requires strict asepsis, and having donned gloves, gowns and withstood fumigation before entering the lab, they busily worked at the terminals. Personnel in this room even wore goggles if a tear should fall from their eyes.

Steve pressed the microphone switch. “What are you two up to in there?” he asked.

Aaron looked up from the microscope he had been staring into.

“Looking at some cells.”

“Find anything interesting yet?”

“Very. I’ll let you in on it later.”

“Why not now?”

“Because we are busy here, in case you haven’t noticed,” Aaron said sarcastically.

“When will you tell me?”

“In the morning. Be here at six and I’ll tell you then.”

“I’ll be here. Should we meet in the lab?”

“No. Let’s meet in the cafeteria and have some breakfast.”

“Sounds good,” Steve said, waving a hand, but both Ronnie and Aaron were too absorbed to respond to it.

The next morning Steve met them in the cafeteria where they gathered coffee, doughnuts, cream, sugar, cereal, and some fruit and headed for a booth in the corner.

“Okay. Don’t keep me in suspense any longer,” Steve pleaded.

“We think we might have isolated the enzyme,” Aaron said carefully.

Steve dropped his coffee cup in surprise. Once the cleanup was over with, Steve said, “Could you break news like that to me with a little more preparation?”

“Sorry,” Aaron told him. “I didn’t think you would get so excited. It doesn’t mean we found a cure. It simply means we are a little closer.”

“What do you mean? I thought once you found the enzyme we would be home free.”

“Not that simple,” Ronnie said. “We know what enzyme Julie was talking about but we don’t know how to find the one we need. It doesn’t do anything to reduce the problem of the disease.”

“It has to do *something*,” Steve said.

“It does. Look, Steve, this is the situation. We know that A.L.S. is a presynaptic disease. The membrane won’t let acetylcholine out, so the next nerve fiber isn’t stimulated. The enzyme Julie mentioned blocks any acetylcholine from going through the membrane. In effect, it paralyzes the nerve. If a person got a dose of this stuff he would drop dead in an instant.”

“You’re talking about curare, or a form of it,” Steve said.

“Not really. The body makes this enzyme as a stopgap mechanism. If it was not available to the cell, there would be no control of how much acetylcholine went through the membrane. It would result in nerve impulses bombarding the muscles of the body constantly. You would be as stiff as a board. One giant muscle spasm. What we need is the reverse of this enzyme. Julie told us to look to this enzyme because it’s the exact opposite of the one we need to find. The problem with the patient with A.L.S. is that nerve impulses don’t get through. If we find the enzyme that counters the one we isolat-

ed last night, we can make a drug to stimulate its production. Then we give it to animals. If they respond favorably, we can give it to humans.”

“There’s no time for all that,” Steve said impatiently. “We need to isolate the enzyme, make it and give it directly to a *human* patient.”

“That’s dangerous,” Aaron finished. “We don’t know if giving the enzyme directly will cure the person. Besides, we’re putting the cart before the horse. We don’t even know what the enzyme is yet. Let’s get that part solved and then we can decide where to go from there.”

“I’ll work on that this afternoon,” Ronnie said. “We should get over to the lab,” she added looking at her watch. “We have one in deep freeze now.”

They left the cafeteria and headed for the lab. When they arrived Bill was counting out loud. “Five, four, three, two, one, now.” Then he ended mechanical life support to the person in the cryogenics tube. Sheryl was about to begin her journey.

* * * * *

It wasn't like any of the movies she had ever seen. There was no sense of floating down a long tube of swirling colors. There were no explosions of colors resembling a child's finger painting, or a tie-dyed shirt. It wasn't like a long journey at all. In an instant there was a bright light that engulfed her. She felt warm, relaxed and confident. There was no fear whatever. In fact, the thought of fearing the light would have been ridiculous had she bothered to think about it.

At the same instant the light enveloped her she noted that her awareness of life was changing. No one actively taught her anything, yet she was learning. It was as though the knowledge had always been there, but suppressed. Now, in an instant, it was streaming out of her subconscious and into her conscious mind.

A thought crossed her mind like a whisper so she hardly gave it a second's concern. *What is the cure for Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis?* As quickly as the thought passed so did the answer. Her thoughts were racing. In her mind's eye she was seeing answers to questions she never knew she was capable of asking. The 'letting out of the knowledge' was speeding up. As the knowledge expanded she had a sense of floating in the light. It was as if she was the center of the universe and everything was coming to her. There was a sense of motion, but it was going on around her while she remained stationary. She was enjoying this new freedom from life. She remembered her life as easily as one would remember the answer to two plus two. She remembered the pain, the despair, the disappointment. Yet, there was no regret associated with her life. There was only a remembering. There was no shame, self-condemnation, nothing. There was simply peace about that part of her existence. She had moved beyond that now. Or so she thought.

Then, the light started to flicker around her. It felt as

though she was heavy, falling - no, something pulled her. Down. Down. And then she saw herself lying on a white sheet, with people all around her. She could feel air forced into her body and she fought it. There was no need to breathe where she was. No need for meaningless oxygen. Breath lacked meaning. She wanted to fight the pulling. She wanted to break away from the vision below and return to the light. Yet there was something in her mind saying 'fight.' Something put there by one of *them*. Suddenly, she remembered that someone had told her to fight. She could hear the words.

“When the time comes you must fight.”

She didn't want to fight but the more she thought about it, the more she did fight. Then there was blackness. No sound, no sight, nothing.

When she awoke, she tried to open her eyes, but she could scarcely raise her lids. Through the slit she could see a tube. Beyond there was a blur of someone standing beside her, someone she didn't recognize immediately. A voice sounded somewhere in the distance

“Sheryl. Sheryl, can you hear me?” someone called. Sheryl, you must wake up now. Sheryl, what is the answer to the question? Can you tell me the answer to the question?”

The voice was soothing, yet continuous.

“Sheryl, can you tell me the answer to the question?”

The question? What *was* the question? Then she remembered. She remembered everything. She also remembered the answer. At first it was clear. Simple. But as she thought about it, it became more confusing. Her mind began to wonder how she could know such a thing. She wanted to wake up. She wanted to tell someone the answer before it left her. Opening her eyes as wide as she could, she tried to tell him, but nothing would come out. There was something in her throat that was preventing her from telling them. *Take it out so I can tell*

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you, her mind screamed.

Then she started to choke.

* * * * *

“Get the tube out of her throat!” Bill told Margo.

Sheryl gasped in a breath as Margo extracted the tube and she sucked in some fluid that was in the back of her throat. She began coughing and choking violently, turning red, then blue, then purple.

“Suction her,” Bill ordered, moving back from the bed as Margo stepped in to stick a suction tube down her throat. Sheryl fought for breath. She clawed at her throat. Panic engulfed her. Someone held her down. She needed to sit up so she could breathe but each time she tried a large hand held her down.

“Calm down, Sheryl,” Steve said in a low voice. “Calm down. Relax and let us help you.” Finally she gasped a large breath and her color went from purple to blue. As she gasped in breath after breath, her color returned to normal.

“Sheryl, can you hear me?” Aaron asked.

After a futile effort to answer verbally, she nodded her head.

“Sheryl, do you know the answer?” Steve asked.

She nodded her head ‘yes,’ but wondered why. She didn’t know the question. The confused look on her face told Aaron he would have to extract the answer through hypnosis.

“She knows, but she doesn’t know she knows, Steve,” Aaron explained.

“What do you mean? She said ‘yes.’”

“She knows, but she doesn’t have the intellect to tell you. I’ll have to hypnotize her and get it.”

“When?”

“Do you mind if we stabilize her first?” Bill asked, perturbed.

“Sorry,” Steve said backing off.

They spent two hours with Sheryl. She had spent forty-five minutes in the ‘ice chest’ and had come out of it alive. Now if that

wasn't enough, she was clear, talking, and surprisingly cheerful.

"I think I should try to extract the information as soon as possible," Aaron said.

"It's too soon," Bill said.

"If we wait too long, Bill, she might suppress the information to the point of no return. Besides, a little deep sleep isn't going to hurt her."

"I suppose you're right. I'm just concerned about depressing bodily functions to the point where she goes into shock and goes back to the light."

"I won't do that. She'll just be asleep, the best thing in the world for her at this point."

"Go for it," Bill told him.

Aaron pulled a chair next to Sheryl so he was within inches of her left ear. "Sheryl, I want you to listen only to the sound of my voice," he began.

Within minutes, Sheryl was in a deep state of hypnosis. The premonitory visits paid off. The ease with which the Whitelighters went down into the hypnotic state even surprised Steve. Aaron was damn good.

"I want you to go back to this morning, Sheryl," he told her. "Do you remember this morning?"

"Yes." He could just make out the word. But it was enough.

"What did you have for breakfast?"

"Bastards wouldn't let me have any." Her voice was rough but increasingly audible.

Steve smiled. It was a precaution. None of the volunteers were allowed food or liquid twelve hours before the experiment. This precaution prevented them from vomiting during the revival. It just might have prevented Sheryl from sucking a doughnut and some coffee into her lungs earlier.

"Yes, that's right. After breakfast what happened?" Aaron asked.

"They brought me to the lab. They put me in the refrigerator."

"I want you to remember being in the refrigerator, Sheryl. Tell me about being in the there."

"It's cold in here. It's dark." Sheryl started shivering. There was even visible 'gooseflesh' on her neck. "It's so cold. I want out. Please let me out. I don't want to do it."

"It's all right Sheryl. Now you don't feel anything. You're so cold you don't feel anything. Tell me about that."

"It's just dark . . . Wait, there's a light."

"Tell me about the light."

"Why, it's *warm*," Sheryl exclaimed. "It's warming me. Oh God. It's beautiful. It's swallowing all the spaces around me."

"Is anyone there with you Sheryl?"

"Yes. Everyone is here."

"What do you mean?"

"Everyone is here. You're here, Aaron."

Aaron looked perplexed. He looked at Steve and Bill.

"Do you think she's seeing us there, Aaron?" Steve asked.

"You are here too, Steve," Sheryl answered. "And you, Bill."

Her speech quickened, her voice clearer with every word.

"You must understand the dictates of time and relativity, the interval separating two points on this continuum, measured essentially by events, suggests we have all passed from earthly confines millennia ago," Sheryl said

"Sheryl, slow down," Aaron said. "You're getting ahead of me. I'm not understanding what you are saying."

"Ah, yes. You're lacking of the letting out of the knowledge. I will try to put it into terms you can understand. When you die, Aaron, everyone you have ever known will be dead. Everyone who has ever existed on what we call earth, will have been dead for hundreds of thousands of years. We pass from earth time to 'God's time.' Do you understand me so far?" "I think so."

Sheryl continued. "Since God's time is eternity, there is no time. To put it another way, there is no sense of passing time. In one second on earth I would have watched the beginning and end of millions of universes, each with its own history."

"Sheryl, how can you know this?"

"The letting out of the knowledge."

"What is that?"

"It's too difficult to explain to you. Your intellect is too limited. Just know that your mind contains all the knowledge of the universe. The knowledge is in your mind like so many bits of data in a computer. When you leave the confines of your earthly body, which limits you, the knowledge comes to the forefront of your consciousness. Knowledge isn't the only reality that comes to you. Have you ever heard the sound a dog whistle makes, or the humming sound of an elephant? The answer is 'no'. A dog whistle makes a sound above the range of human hearing. So, too, the elephant hums below the perception of the human ear. I can hear sounds that you have never dreamed of. I have seen colors above and below the spectrum of what you can see. There are millions of them. Ultraviolet is beautiful, Aaron, as they all are. Do you understand?"

"Ask her about the enzyme before she can't even explain that, Aaron," Steve said impatiently.

"Sheryl, do you remember the question?"

Without a pause Sheryl answered, "What is the cure for Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis? That is, one of the diseases of muscle and the neuromuscular junction, which are genetic in origin, although metabolic and inflammatory."

The recitation continued, her voice expressionless until finally Aaron interrupted her.

"Sheryl, what is the cure?"

"Beginning with the presynaptic membrane . . ."

"Sheryl," he repeated impatiently, "what is the cure?"

But Sheryl spoke on endlessly describing the anatomical, physiological roles, and biochemical activities of multiple structures involved in the disease. Her mind was hastening more rapidly now. They sat and listened, astonished at what was coming out of the mouth of this ‘illiterate’ woman. She was describing events that Ronnie was unable to explain, even with her vast knowledge of biochemistry. At this point, Sheryl made them collectively look like a bunch of Chimpanzees.

“. . . during these enzymatic changes. Still, to explain in better detail . . . ,”

Then as if someone flipped a switch, Sheryl continued her dissertation in Latin. Her pronunciation, inflection, and vocabulary were flawless. She spoke Latin for ten or fifteen minutes and then, as if the switch flipped again, continued in a language unlike any they had ever heard. Boa began to fidget. Jason was also getting jittery, shifting positions on his chair every few seconds as though he wanted to bolt out of the room.

After a few minutes Aaron said, “Sheryl, Baby Bear.”

Sheryl stopped speaking and opened her eyes instantly.

“How did I do?” she asked.

“You did great. Now rest,” Aaron said patting her hand. Dumbfounded, Steve and Bill could do no more than look around the room. Bill shook his head as if to clear his mind.

“What in the hell just happened, Aaron?” Bill asked.

“I brought her out of the hypnotic state,” Aaron said simply.

“You . . .” Bill began. “What was the Baby Bear shit?”

“That was a command Sheryl and I agreed on during the first session. It is a command to bring her immediately out of the hypnosis. It’s like a short circuit. When I spoke those words, her mind short-circuited. She woke up, and she doesn’t remember anything.”

“That’s astounding. Does everyone have this command built in?”

“Yes. The command is different with each subject, but each has a ‘short circuit’ command.”

“How did you decide what to use?” Steve asked.

“I didn’t. They did. Sheryl wanted to use Baby Bear because she loved the story of The Three Bears. She was fond of Baby Bear, so she wanted to use that for her command.”

“Now that’s incredible,” Steve said.

Ronnie looked at him as if he had a disease.

“That’s incredible,” she said aping him. “You stood listening to this woman discuss branches of science that humans haven’t invented, switching between English, Latin, and God knows what else and you tell Aaron *his* command to wake her up is incredible?” All she could do was to shake her head. There were no more words to describe her amazement.

“Say, doc. I don’t mean to rain on your parade here, but do you think we could get some chow?” Boa asked.

Steve looked at his watch and saw that it was four-thirty. “Time flies when you’re having fun,” he said lightly. “You guys go get something to eat. ‘I’ll stay here with Sheryl.”

“Are you sure?” Aaron asked. I’ll take the first watch if you want me to.”

“No. You guys go ahead. I want to listen to the tape. See if I can make anything out,” Steve explained.

“Okay,” Aaron said.

“The rest of you come back at six.”

“Gotcha,” Jason said.

After they left, Steve checked on Sheryl one last time before going to the tape deck. She was sleeping soundly, her eyes rolling beneath her eyelids. Steve watched them for a moment, thought ‘*R.E.M. sleep*,’ rearranged her blanket around her shoulders and turned to the tape. Rewinding it, he listened intently for a few minutes and then fast-forwarded the tape to the point where Sheryl changed to Latin. Steve had

taken seven years of Latin in college. He had been on the Latin team, had entered Latin-speaking games and he knew that Sheryl had been discussing enzymatic changes occurring along the D.N.A. slices, as well as identifying points on the strands that coded specific enzymes. She also correlated the sites where certain enzymes originated with those sites on different segments. Steve sat and translated as much of it as he could. What he couldn't translate, he wrote down. He would look it up later. He wouldn't tell the others about it until he had translated the entire tape. He was glad he could understand. He had had no idea that Ronnie understood Latin too. Ronnie understood *all* of it.

Ronnie – Five Years Earlier

“Ronnie, can you tell me how you’re feeling today?” Aaron asked, pulling up a chair and slowly sitting.

“How would you like to take me, feel me, have me?” she responded, leaning back and opening her gown to expose herself.

He reached over and closed her gown.

“Has the medication been helping you?”

Aaron opened the chart and flipped through pages nervously until he found what he was looking for. Ronnie watched, all the time trying to appear sultry.

“It’s been helping me get horny all over your face and I don’t think you should name your dog Rover,” she said laughing hysterically. She moved to her hands and knees on the bed and put her face within inches of his.

“We’ll try again tomorrow,” Aaron told a nurse standing just inside the door. “Put her back to bed, and give her another twenty-five of Melaril.”

“Doctor, “ Ronnie demanded as the nurse took her arm to help her lie down. “When can I go home?”

He turned back to her, his eyes intense and motioned the nurse to stand aside.

“Do you want to go home?” he asked her. Then, when she didn’t answer he added, “Correct me if I’m wrong, but my asking you questions makes you uncomfortable.”

“Was I her just now?” Ronnie asked him, “Is that why you were going to leave me?”

“Were you who?” he asked her gently, walking back to her bed.

“You know, her. The vulgar, embarrassing me who isn’t me.”

“You were you yesterday, Ronnie.”

“You know what I mean. You know there is more than one of me in here,” she said, pointing to her chest.

“How many of you are there in there, Ronnie?”

“Just two, and you know it. Don’t play games with me.”

“Do you feel like I’m playing games with you?”

“Yes.”

“I’m not. Can you tell me why you feel there are two of you?”

“It sure as hell isn’t me saying the things the nurses are telling me I’m saying,” she told him, pressing her fingers against her forehead. “I’ve never even thought the ‘F’ word much less said it aloud. And Betty tells me that I called her a bitch this morning. I don’t recall saying any of the things I am supposed to have said.”

“You have been sick, Ronnie.” Aaron walked to a chair, moved it closer to her, and sat again. “There are illnesses that cause us to say and do things that we aren’t aware of. That’s why we have therapy and medication. With both, you will get better. But you must *want* to get better. It isn’t something I can do for you by waving a magic wand. You must be willing to identify the things in your life that are causing you stress and discuss them with us so we can help you sort through them. Only by doing that will you face the problem head on and defeat it. Right now you are letting the problems defeat you. Do you agree?”

“I don’t know what the problem is,” she told him, throwing her fists onto the bed at her sides. “Why do I switch back and forth like Jekyll and Hyde? I don’t even remember being Hyde. Those times are like a void in my life. Days pass that I don’t remember.”

“Let’s talk about what you have been doing for the past year.”

“I’ve been going to school.”

“What have you been studying?” Aaron shifted slightly in the chair.

“I am a graduate student in molecular biochemistry. You know that. I’m doing a PhD dissertation.”

“What are you writing about?”

“Enzymatic coding in DNA.”

“Sounds complicated.”

“Not really. Just hard to copy with the antiquated machinery science has now spawned. I know what I need, but I’m not an engineer so I don’t know how to design it.”

“Do you work?” he asked, intrigued.

“Yes. I’m working in neuromuscular research. We’re trying to isolate the DNA triplets responsible for a myriad of deficiency enzymes. These are, presumably, the causes of the neuromuscular diseases.”

“So, you work, write papers and what else?”

“What else is there?” Ronnie asked, laughing bitterly.

“There is rest. There is relaxation. There is recreation. You know, movies, picnics, parks.”

“Who has time for that? I work from five in the morning until eight or ten at night. I eat one, maybe two meals a day. During the little time I’m home, I sit at the computer terminal and type until two or three in the morning. Then I grab a nap, and it starts all over. That goes on seven days a week.”

“And you wonder why you are having problems!” Aaron shook his head.

“I’m not the only PhD candidate in the world. Why can the others handle it and I can’t?” she asked resting on one elbow.

“Do you take medication to help you sleep or stay awake?”

Ronnie looked at him as if he was a drug enforcement agent ready to make a bust. “Do you think I could keep up with the pace if I didn’t?” she confessed, half expecting he would scold her.

“What do you take, and how much?”

“If I answer you the next question is, ‘Where are you get-

ting it?’ and then I have problems.”

“I promise I won’t ask where you are getting it,” Aaron said honestly. She sensed he was telling her the truth and trusted him.

“I take amphetamines, specifically Dexedrine. I take between 60 and 100 mg daily.”

“That’s over twice the maximum adult. . .”

“I know what the adult dosage is,” she interrupted.

“What else?” he inquired.

“Barbiturates. Usually Seconal but sometimes Numbutal.”

“Do you know that a side effect of amphetamines is psychosis?”

For a moment she didn’t answer. “I didn’t think it would happen to me,” she said finally in a low voice.

“I think it *did* happen to you,” he told her.

“So now what?” she asked falling back onto the bed.

“So now what do you think?”

“I guess I quit taking the medication.”

“I think that’s a start.” Aaron looked at his watch. “We’ll talk about it some more tomorrow morning, Ronnie. I have to run now. Is there anything else?”

“Nothing that can’t wait until tomorrow.”

“Fine. See you then,” he said, and left.

The next morning at seven he stopped in the cafeteria and had a donut and cup of coffee. He stopped at the nurses’ station to pick up his charts. It would be a slow day; Saturdays generally were. He also dropped off some charts then went in to see Ronnie.

“So, how are you doing this morning?” he asked walking toward her bed.

“How would you like to take me, feel me, have me?” she asked opening her gown to expose herself. He turned on his heels and walked back out of the room with a sigh.

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“Give her the usual,” he told a nurse at the station and then headed for another room.

* * * * *

Therapy lasted for one year during which time Ronnie learned that she hated her mother, worked as much as she could to avoid facing her problems and had once almost died. It was at a time when she was taking large doses of tranquilizers. She had swallowed one and hid the other under her tongue until she had managed to save sixty tablets. One night just after taking her usual dose, she had swallowed those she had saved and laid down to die. She would have died, too, except for a patient who decided that pulling a fire alarm would liven things up a little. As a result, the entire staff had jumped into action awakening patients in order to evacuate them. When Ronnie could not be aroused she was immediately taken to the intensive care unit where she spent two very critical days. Later, she recalled that she had seen some kind of bright light and had talked with angels, dismissed it as a subconscious fantasy and forgotten it.

Months later, supposedly recovered, Ronnie decided to go to Tahiti, aware now that she must be careful to give herself leisure time. An hour after arriving, she was already on the beach sunning when a man walked up and asked if he could buy her a drink.

She looked up at him, removed her sunglasses, touched her crotch and said, "How would you like to take me?"

Repulsed, he walked away. Ronnie flipped him the famous finger, put her sunglasses back on and closed her eyes. She was thinking of how nice it would be to stick a knife in her mother and cut her all the way up to her throat.

* * * * *

As soon as she left the lab Ronnie headed for the research department. She was so excited by what Sheryl had said that she was ready to wet her pants. She was certain that with adding the data Sheryl had just provided, and once in the computer, it would come up with the cure. Ronnie now planned to program her secret password into the system so no one else could access her new found information. She could not share this. Not yet. She knew if she shared what she knew every patient with the disease would come begging for the cure. They would have to treat every one of them. And, she couldn't let that happen. As it was, she had a carrot to wave in one person's face. She would wait until that one person with A.L.S. was dead and buried before she would let the secret out. She had waited twelve years to see this person die, had prayed this person would die, had even killed this person in her mind, and no one would shatter her dreams this time. She plugged her information in the computer and waited. While she did, she was thinking, *You'll die, mother. I have the cure and you'll die. I'll show you the cure while you're taking your last few breaths, and let you know you will never get it.* A smile came to her face as she thought it.

* * * * *

Three days later, when Steve finished translating the tape, he decided to share his findings with Aaron who, after looking at the data, was as excited as Ronnie had been. He hurriedly excused himself and raced for the computers just as Ronnie had. He plugged the same information into the computer that Ronnie had and sat waiting for it to come up with some answers. After twenty minutes, the C.R.T. hiccupped and a message came up on the screen. It simply said, "Please insert formula for Enzyme Q-f-23."

"What in the hell is Enzyme Q-f-23?" Aaron asked aloud.

Pulling the computer's keyboard out of its drawer, he typed, *Please define Enzyme Q-f-23.*

The computer answered with, *No definition available.*

Aaron retyped, *Please describe Enzyme Q-f-23.*

The computer answered, *No description available.*

Aaron typed, *List any Q Enzyme.*

The computer blinked then printed, *Enzyme Q-e: glycosyl-transferase. No other Q Enzymes known."*

Aaron thought for a moment. Then he typed, *What will Enzyme Q-f-23 provide?*

The answer came up on the screen like the winning numbers to the state lottery, and it made his mind reel.

The heading was exact. *The specific cure for Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis and, with all likelihood, a myriad of the neuromuscular diseases.*

Aaron stared at the screen, unable to believe his eyes. Shutting the computer down after recovering a printout of the final answer, Aaron headed back to Steve's office to show him the printout. As Steve read the words, his mouth fell open. Picking up the phone, Aaron had Bill paged. When he showed Bill the printout, "My God!" was all he could say.

As the three stood by Steve's desk, stunned, a head popped through the door.

“Can I come in? What's the matter with you guys? You look as though you'd seen a ghost.”

It was Dan Johnson.

* * * * *

“You’re going to have to explain this to me slowly,” Dan said. “I’m a businessman, not a doctor.”

“Dan,” Aaron began. “I don’t think I can because. . .”

“Now you know how Sheryl felt trying to explain it to us,” Steve interrupted him.

“I’ll try to explain, Dan,” Aaron interjected, walking to a white board in Steve’s office. “Do you know what an enzyme is? An enzyme is something the body makes. The enzymes are proteins that either make something happen in the body, or make something that *is* happening go faster or slower,” Aaron said drawing a quick diagram.

“Sounds like the accelerator on a car,” Dan said trying to form an analogy.

“Right. Okay. There are many different types of enzymes. We categorize them by their actions. If they speed processes up, we call them by one name. If they use oxygen, we call them by another name. If they slow things down, we call them by yet another name.”

“That’s easy enough to understand,” Dan said pulling a small flask out of his coat pocket. “I have a filing cabinet for the same purpose. Listing.”

“Yes. That’s a good comparison. Now, Julie told us to look for an enzyme. We did. We have known about it for a long time. She told us to look for an enzyme that did the opposite of the enzyme she told us about. We think Sheryl has given us the name of that enzyme. I plugged all the information I had into our computers, and the computer says that if we come up with this enzyme, we cure A.L.S.”

“My God, Aaron,” Dan exclaimed. He was so excited his eyes lit up and he started pacing around the office as he continued to speak. “We’ll be famous. This hospital will be the

most prestigious research facility in the world. We'll get grants up the gazoo."

"Slow down, Dan," Steve cut in. "We don't have the answer yet."

"How do you know what you are getting is accurate?" Dan asked. "Who have you used for your control group?" Aaron looked shocked. He had done many experiments in the past. Every one of them had an experimental group and a control group. Why hadn't he thought of it? He wasn't sure why. But he saw the logic in what Dan was asking.

"We don't have one," Aaron answered.

"You don't have a control group? How in the hell can you run a scientific experiment without a control group?"

"Dan, we didn't feel there was time to mess around with a control group," Steve said.

Dan frowned and his posture relaxed. "You can't prove you're getting this information from God, or whoever it is you think you're getting it from, without a control group."

"It would be too dangerous to run someone through the experiment to come back with the cure for some disease we already have a cure for," Steve argued.

"If you took one of your subjects, one who wasn't bright, and sent him across the great abyss for the answer to a technical question, it would prove a great deal," Dan said angrily. "It doesn't have to deal with medicine. Send him for the answer to some mathematical equation we already have the solution for. Or, better yet, send him to find out who wins the next ten World Series."

"Dan, be realistic," Bill argued. "We aren't going to risk someone's life to prove something we already know. These people are coming back talking like Einstein, when they speak a language we understand, that is. Listen to the tape we have of Sheryl before and after the experiment. I think it will answer

some of your questions.”

“Oh, all right. I’ll listen to them. But I still want you to sneak in another question in one of these people, Aaron. Just a little suggestion, but the answer has to be exact or we are blowing smoke out of our asses.”

“I’ll think of something, Dan,” Aaron said.

“Good. Now where are the tapes?”

Steve handed him a cassette tape and said, “It’s all on there.”

“Thanks, boys. I’ll be in touch,” Dan said. Then he left.

“I have rounds,” Bill added, and left shortly after Dan.

“God how I hate the bureaucracy of this job,” Aaron said. “We come closer than we ever dreamed possible to finding the cure for a disease and he wants us to prove the experiment is a success?”

“We have to get the answer, Aaron,” Steve told him. “We’d better get Ronnie in here right now.”

When Aaron showed Ronnie the printout, she acted surprised even though she had realized the same thing three days earlier and had become just as enraged as Aaron. The vision of the carrot she wished to hang in front of her mother disappeared. Looking at the printout started her engines boiling again

“What do you expect *me* to do?” she asked angrily. “Come up with the enzyme?”

“Is something eating you?” Steve asked, exchanging glances with Aaron.

“I have been pouring my heart into this project for the past three months,” Ronnie told him, her face twisted into a painful expression, “and I have yet to hear even as much as a thank you.”

“Thank you,” Steve said. “I’ll say it now if you want me to.”

“See? That’s exactly what I mean,” Ronnie snapped. “Unless someone paints a picture for you, you are insensitive to anyone but yourself.”

“Have I been insensitive? I thought we were all in this together. Why are you in it?”

“Because you asked me to be, and I thought it would be rewarding,” Ronnie told him, pacing back and forth with one hand on her hip. Aaron thought she looked like the Wicked Witch of the West.

“Why *are* you in this project?” Aaron asked looking suspiciously at Ronnie? The tone of his voice told her she was in for an argument.

“I told you,” she said, looking at him scornfully. “Steve asked me to be. He needed *someone* with expertise.”

“What were you doing before Steve asked you to be in the project?” Aaron asked. The way in which he asked suggested he knew the answer, and knew Ronnie wouldn’t have wanted Steve to find out.

“None of your damn business, Aaron. What were *you* doing? No,” she said, holding up a hand, “you don’t need to tell me. I know what you were doing. We know what you were doing. You were humping that little mental case in an attempt to make her feel like she had a life.”

Aaron, enraged, backhanded Ronnie across the face. Steve jumped out of his chair and stood between them just in time. Ronnie went at Aaron like a cat. She was clawing and biting. “I’ll kill you, you maggot,” she screamed. Blood trickled down her lip.

“Stop it,” Steve shouted trying to hold Ronnie at bay. Ronnie finally calmed down and Aaron backed off.

“Aaron,” Steve said firmly. “I want you to go get some coffee, take a pill, do something else for a little while. I need to talk to Ronnie alone.”

Aaron left the office without answering, slamming the door behind him.

“Sit down Ronnie,” Steve said standing behind his desk and pointing at a chair. He held out a handkerchief so she could wipe the blood off her chin.

“I don’t want to sit,” Ronnie said angrily, snatching the handkerchief out of his hand and putting it over her mouth.

“*Please* sit down,” Steve asked again, with as much concern as he could “What’s bothering you?”

“This project is bothering me.”

“What is it about the project? Is it that you are having difficulty watching the patients ‘die’?”

“No. It’s that we can’t come up with the answer. I’m so damn frustrated. We are getting bits and pieces, like someone is handing us parts of a puzzle and then holds out when we need the last piece. Sheryl tells us about enzymes splitting other enzymes and, the exact locale, and we still don’t get the answer.”

Steve looked thoughtfully for a moment. Then, looking at Ronnie quizzically asked in his best Latin, “How did you know Sheryl talked about that? She was speaking in Latin at that point.”

“I took the tapes to a translator . . . ,” Ronnie began, then realized she was answering his question in Latin.

“You speak Latin, too. Why didn’t you tell me?” Steve asked suspiciously. Are you trying to sabotage my experiment?”

“No. I’m not trying to sabotage *your* experiment. I had my reasons for not telling you I speak Latin.”

“I want to hear them or you’re out of the project, Ronnie,” Steve said still looking at her skeptically. She, in turn, looked as though he told her she was going to die.

“Why are you working in the dungeon with us?” Steve went on. “You could be earning ten times what I’m paying you in a real research department. With your knowledge of biophysics, not to mention Latin, you could be the Chair of some department. Instead, you’re jacking around in my project with a bunch of second-class citizens. What’s the story?”

Tears began to stream down Ronnie's face. "My mother has A.L.S. That's what I'm doing in your project. I was hoping to find a cure for my mother just as you are trying to find one for your wife."

Now it was Steve's turn to look shocked. "I'm sorry, Ronnie. I had no idea. How long has it been since her diagnosis?"

"She has what Aaron would call 'atypical A.L.S.'" Ronnie said sniffing. "She's had it for fifteen years. She has progressively gone down hill since." She dabbed at her eyes and blew her nose in Steve's handkerchief.

"Fifteen years," Steve sighed. "That must have been hell for you as a young woman seeing your mother with that disease."

"It was," Ronnie agreed, figuring while Steve was buying her story, she might as well milk him for all the sympathy she could. "She couldn't go anywhere with me, do anything with me, or teach me how to do anything. All she could do since I was eighteen is talk. She can barely move her right hand, and that's *all* she can move. She moves it just enough to push a call button when she needs something.

"Why didn't you tell me about this earlier?"

"Because I felt you had put enough pressure on yourself to find a cure for your wife. I didn't think you needed the added responsibility to find the cure for my mother."

"On the contrary." Steve told her earnestly. "Knowing about it would have given me the feeling that we were working on something that was urgent for both of us. I would have appreciated your efforts more and understood your anxiety about finding a cure. As it is, I knew nothing. I was unable to help you deal with your problems because I didn't know the source of your anxiety. Now that I do, I think I can be more sensitive to your needs in the experiment. I also think Aaron will understand why you blew up."

"I don't care if Aaron forgives me or not. He's a boil on the

ass of humanity as far as I'm concerned."

"Why do you dislike Aaron so much?"

"I have my reasons for that, too."

"Wouldn't you like to share them with me?"

"No. I won't cause any more trouble with him, though. You can rest assured of that. I'll just do my job and let him do his."

"Ronnie, we have to work as a *team* here. We can't each be doing our own thing. That would mean duplication of efforts and, God knows, we don't have the time for that. I have a sneaking suspicion you knew about that printout before Aaron handed it to you. Am I right?"

"Yes," Ronnie said dropping her eyes.

"You see. We lost three days right there. It took me time to translate what you already knew, and then it took Aaron a half day to get the information into and out of the computer. You could have saved us all much work. I'll make a deal with you Ronnie. If you are the first to come up with the answer to the disease, I'll make sure you get the credit and not Aaron."

"Do you think that's why I hid the information from you?" Ronnie asked with a hurt expression.

"I can't think of any other reason," Steve said shrugging.

"Well that's not the reason. I just wanted to find the answer as quickly as possible. I thought if I took the time to fill you and Aaron in on what Sheryl had said I would have wasted time myself. I was so excited I just wanted to get to the computers right away. When I didn't get the answer I went there for, I was so disappointed that I simply forgot to tell you."

"Well, let's try to communicate a little better, what do you say?" Steve asked.

"Sure," Ronnie said with a half-smile.

"O.K. Now I want you and Aaron to come to an agreement so I don't have to act as referee. Do you think you can do that?"

"I think so," Ronnie said, handing Steve his handkerchief.

Steve looked at it like it was a plague and said, “That’s all right. Keep it. Now why don’t you go back to your research and let me do some work here.”

“All right. I’ll find Aaron and have a talk with him.”

“Be nice,” Steve told her.

“I will,” she said sweetly.

As she spoke she had a picture in her mind of sticking a knife in Aaron’s heart.

* * * * *

“Let me tell you something, Aaron. If you ever hit me again I will kill you.” Ronnie said fiercely.

“And if you ever say anything about Cathleen again I will put you out of the business forever,” Aaron said. “I should have told Steve and Bill I treated you those years ago and that you are a crazy bitch.”

“Aaron, do you think I would allow you to do that? Putting aside the issue of confidentiality, you don’t have a clue what I am capable of if I am cornered.”

“How do you think you could stop me?” Aaron scoffed.

“I think you know,” Ronnie said acidly.

As she spoke she looked into his eyes. What he saw there reminded him of that time he wished he could forget. He had seen that look before and it had frightened him as much then as it did now. He let his mind go back to the past. He was with Cathleen. She was so beautiful and she was . . .

* * * * *

“You’re what?” Aaron had asked her laughing.

“I’m a virgin,” she said shivering.

“I didn’t think they existed anymore. Like a dinosaur. You’re a medical marvel. I need to take some pictures; do some tests. I can’t make love with you,” he had said teasingly.

In return, Cathleen taunted him with a sensuous kiss that ended with her sucking his bottom lip into her mouth.

“Are you trying to seduce me?” he asked her, pretending innocence.

“What do you think?” she said moving her body under his. “I want you, Aaron.”

He kissed her as passionately as she had him, knowing the moment of truth had arrived, and gently made love to her. It was the most incredible experience of his life. When they finished she asked, “Would you like a cigarette?”

Aaron laughed a deep hearty laugh. Although she knew he didn’t smoke, he thought how apropos the question was. He loved her wit and sense of humor. He felt so alive.

“I love you,” he said kissing her again.

“I love you, Aaron,” she said holding him tighter.

They made love five times that day and both paid for it in the week to come. She developed a bladder infection and he was so sore he couldn’t wear tight underwear. They laughed hysterically at their conditions.

“Fine couple we make,” she said. “For an encore let’s contract leprosy for a week.”

They had spent every free minute together. Cathleen moved in with Aaron and the next four months were the happiest of his life. He continued with his rotation in psychiatry and decided he enjoyed it more than any of the other departments.

“That would be nice,” Cathleen told him when he talked to her about becoming a psychiatrist. “Then you could take care of me when I get crazy.”

“You’re no crazier than I am,” he said.

“I know you’re crazy. You ended up with me.”

“I’d be crazy if I hadn’t,” he assured her.

Cathleen had soon begun working part-time as a buyer for a large corporation. She enjoyed the challenge of the job and the hours were perfect. The job gave her some extra cash and the opportunity to be available for Aaron whenever. One day Cathleen had had come home early, fixed a beautiful dinner, put on a sexy teddy and sat waiting for Aaron. When he came home he seemed distressed, distracted, unable to make love with her and didn’t have much of an appetite.

“Aaron, what is it?”

“It’s a problem patient. I’m not at liberty to discuss patients with you. It’s confidential.”

“Can you tell me what’s bothering you without dropping any names.”

“Can’t we just forget it?”

“I’d love to, but you’re the one carrying it around.”

“Just leave me alone for a while. You’re smothering me.”

“I’m sorry Aaron,” she said sadly.

She walked into the bedroom and changed her clothes. Ten minutes later she had left the house, suitcase in hand.

After that, Aaron had lost all interest in his patients. He spent his nights staring into space, a glass of whisky and soda in his hand. Finally, the senior resident had cornered Aaron and asked if there was something bothering him, “Because you’d better get your head out of your ass and get with it,” the resident had said. “If any of these patients get upset because you can’t handle an emotional crisis, I’ll see to it that you are off the floor.”

“I’ll clean up my act,” Aaron had promised.

“Good. I have a new admit I want you to take, a Jane Doe.”

“Couldn’t you find someone else . . . ?” Aaron began. But it was no good. The resident had insisted.

Aaron gathered the necessary paperwork to admit the new patient, washed his hands, splashed some water on his face and headed for the room.

“Hello, he had said, my name is Aaron Debries.”

“How would you like to take me, feel me, have me?” she had asked, opening her gown to expose herself.

He turned on his heels and walked back out of the room with a sigh.

“Give her the usual,” he told the nurse and headed for home.

C H A P T E R S E V E N

Back To The Light

The Second Journey

“Are you frightened, Sheryl?”
“No. I’m anxious to get back to The Light.”
“Good girl,” Aaron said, nodding at Jason who then placed Sheryl into the cryogenic tank.

“I have a bad feeling about this,” Steve said, after Sheryl was out of their range of hearing.

“You and I both,” Aaron agreed.

He wished he could extract the needed information without having to send Sheryl back. But he hadn’t been able to. A wall of sorts blocked any information collected from the first journey. It was like trying to get a steak from a lion. If the information was still there it appeared suppressed. Even by putting her in the deepest stages of hypnosis Aaron could not break through the barrier.

“It’s the only way,” Steve said. “It’ll be easier for her to give us the structure of the enzyme if she returns. I think she realizes she has to be careful, that she is explaining it to a bunch of morons.”

“I hope you’re right,” Aaron said.

Sheryl was unaware the tank was getting colder. Her last thoughts had been of The Light and its warmth. The thought of dying seemed less intrusive to her. She accepted it as easily as she would an offer of kindness. As she breathed out her final breath, she immediately saw The Light. It enveloped her exactly as it had the first time. The difference this time was she

knew she would never leave it.

This time, the letting out of the knowledge progressed to the point where she shared *all* knowledge. There was no wondering *how* she knew all things, she simply *did*. As thoughts of the lab flashed through her mind, she realized that she had become aware of all things associated with it, past, present and future. Ghosts of experiments past gone awry waved to her as they passed by. To think of a single individual was to think of every facet of him. She became aware of all Jason's acts, brutal and otherwise, his deeds and thoughts, innocent or not, from his conception to his death. There was no pity, no judgment, and no embarrassment. There was simply knowing. Within a matter of seconds, she knew every secret of everyone in the lab: Boa, Margo, Ronnie, Steve, Bill and Aaron.

And then Sheryl moved beyond thought, beyond form, beyond life and she began to experience the sensation of a new movement, one she had never known before and as she 'moved,' The Light became brighter. She stopped seeing it. There was no need to see it. It burned through her soul. It *was* her soul.

Suddenly, there was one fragment of a thought forming a single idea that broke through the inner reaches of her memory. At first she couldn't grasp its significance. Bits and pieces of her life began to streak across her mind like small flickers of light. The scenes were not clear at first. Then, they began to flow through an awareness she had not been aware of. The seed sprouted as the vignettes of her past flashed through her mind. Suddenly, she recognized the thought that had been growing. There was temporary confusion at recognizing the thought. For Sheryl, the epilogue of the letting out of the knowledge was fear.

* * * * *

“Let’s call it,” Bill said. Steve’s hands dripped with blood. The team futilely worked on reviving Sheryl for four hours.

As a ‘last ditch’ try, Steve opened her chest and worked directly on her heart. He counted the seconds off aloud, “One-one-thousand, two-one-thousand, three-one-thousand.” As he counted, he squeezed the heart forcing blood out to the organs. The heart felt like a soggy sponge in his hands. It would never beat on its own again. The others stood by and watched. They were each aware of the futility of Steve’s actions, but were unable to dissuade him. He looked up and saw them staring at him in disbelief. He looked back down, saw his hands wrapped around Sheryl’s heart, gently let go of it, pulled the surgeons’ gloves off his hands, threw them in the hole in her chest and left the room.

The team continued to clean the lab. Aaron slipped out and Bill followed. No one said a word. Each went about his or her work until Sheryl’s remains were a memory and the lab was ready for the next subject. As soon as the lab was in order, Ronnie left, then Margo. Jason and Boa mopped up the remaining blood, washed the tile floor, then Boa left. Jason made one final sweep through the lab to make sure all was in order. He then entered the ‘walk-in’ freezer where they kept bodies until taken to the morgue and he unzipped the bag they placed Sheryl in earlier, uncovered her chest, made a small cut in her windpipe, poked a finger through the hole, extracted something and shoved it into his pocket. Then he covered her body, zipped the bag closed and left.

As he did, he whispered, “Another one for Biffy.”

C H A P T E R E I G H T

The Promise Kept

The Cure Eludes

As they wheeled him into the room there was a strange scent of garlic, herbs, maybe dust. They couldn't tell. It was a smell Aaron was familiar with. He had been with the Indian more than the others and knew his habits. The Indian was one of six survivors. The remaining had either died in the lab, or gone to The Light. Five left having fulfilled their contracts. They left the hospital little more than vegetables; scarcely able to appreciate the fact they were each thirty thousand dollars richer.

The Indian begged them to send him to The Light. Having heard the others describe the experience, Naiche was all too willing to meet The Great Spirit of Life. He had been asking since he arrived but Bill denied his request until this time. Steve chose Naiche mainly because of his physical prowess.

The Indian stood a little less than seven feet tall and easily weighed two hundred fifty pounds. Boa called him Chief Mountain. Naiche wore a grey silk shirt that laced up the front with a cowhide strap from the middle of his massive chest. Over this he wore a thin, long-sleeved, tan split-hide shirt. An ornate blanket folded neatly hung over his left shoulder. With long, black hair that looked like ravens' feathers, Naiche looked majestic. Margo had to feel the hair to believe the Indian didn't put something in it to make it so shiny. But he hadn't. It was naturally so. His face could have been on a post card in any of the hundreds of tourist stores in Arizona. The fact the other two

remaining candidates were physically unsatisfactory was the Indian's saving grace. He was to have his day.

Aaron had hypnotized him several times and, despite the Indian's feigned ignorance of the spoken language, he was easy to put under, going to level eight within seconds. His mind was an open book, both to suggestion and for information. Each time he came to Aaron, he had doused himself with herbs, oils and fragrances of healing and power, just as his great-grandfather, grandfather and his father had done.

"How do you feel, Naiche?" Aaron asked.

"I feel good," the Indian replied in his deep, soft voice.

"Are you ready?" Aaron asked.

"I'm ready," Naiche said and as he spoke he made small gestures with his hands, motions that resembled a crude sign language.

"Great," Aaron said. "Now, remember what I told you. You must not forget what I told you. Do you remember?" The Indian nodded. "Good. I am going to inject the medicine I told you about now."

As he said 'now' he nodded and injected the morphine. The Indian instantly went limp. Within a few minutes, there were no signs of life.

After twenty minutes had passed, they began the same restorative measures as they had on so many others in the days gone past. It was so routine now that no one said a word. Each had learned to anticipate the needs of the other and acted before anyone spoke. After ten minutes of resuscitation, Naiche opened his eyes and began breathing on his own. He was by far the most successful candidate they had 'killed' so far. Once stabilized, Margo pulled the tube out of his throat so he could speak.

"Naiche, I want you to listen to the sound of my voice," Aaron said. The others worked frantically as Aaron sat and talked him into hypnosis. "Naiche, can you speak to me?"

“Yes,” was the reply. Just then, Dan Johnson entered the lab. His eyes met Aaron’s and he nodded. Aaron had received the message.

“What are you doing here, Dan?” Bill asked.

“I came down to find out what manner of party you were having down here today. One thing I’ll say for this program is that it could have kept this and every other hospital in a fifty-mile radius in donor organs if we were so inclined. But I was hoping I would see something more than potential donor organs here today. Are you getting my drift?”

“Dan, we’ve been through this,” Steve said angrily.

“We’re going to finish it today,” Dan said. Then turning to Aaron, Dan said, “Ask him.”

Aaron looked sheepishly at Steve and then said, “Naiche, do you remember the question?”

“Yes, I remember,” Naiche answered.

“What is the question?” Aaron asked.

“What is the cure for *Yersinia enterocolitica*?” he replied.

Steve looked shocked. Bill followed suit. The other team members looked confused. Only Ronnie caught on immediately and smiled a knowing smile.

“You son-of-a-bitch,” Steve said, realizing what was going on.

“Just calm down, Steve,” Dan said.

Steve took a step toward him and Bill stepped in front of him. “What in the hell is going on, Dan?” Bill asked.

“You’re about to find out,” Dan said. “Continue, Aaron.”

“Naiche, do you know the cure for *Yersinia enterocolitica*?” Aaron asked.

“Yes. The genus *Yersinia* consists of three species, *Yersinia pestis* . . .” the Indian began.

After twenty minutes of explanation, the Indian finished with, “Therefore, chloramphenicol is the preferred agent for *Yersinia enterocolitica* with strict enteric precautions clearly

suggested.”

Dan was white. He looked like a man ready to have a heart attack. “You better sit down,” Aaron told him.

Dan found a chair and sat heavily on it. Reaching into his coat pocket, he extracted his flask, unscrewed the cap with shaking hands, and emptied it.”

“You bastard!” Steve shouted. “I should have known you’d try to screw us up.”

“Start talking Dan, or I’ll let Steve loose,” Bill demanded.

“It’s all my fault, Bill. I persuaded Aaron to change the question of finding out if we could get an answer. We talked about a control before, didn’t we? I just proved that what you are doing down here can work. You should thank me.”

“I’ll thank you, you piece of shit,” Steve said trying to get to Dan while Bill held him off. “My wife is wasting away into nothing and the best you can do to help is screw around with the best prospect we have,” he yelled at Dan.

“How was I supposed to know that?” Dan demanded. “I thought he would be the least promising. Hell, Steve, I asked Aaron, I even asked Bill, who the least likely candidate would be, and both of them told me the Indian. Do you recall that conversation, Dr. Levitt?”

Bill looked at him with disgust and said, “Yes, Dan, I remember the conversation. I didn’t think you’d pull something like this in a hundred years.”

“Something like what?” Dan said, feigning anger. “I’m in charge of what goes on down here, and I’m the one that would get the shaft if anything ever went wrong. I have every right to intervene if I think a project is on the rocks.”

“Don’t feed me that shit, Dan,” Bill said, letting go of Steve. “I’ve covered for you a dozen times. I’ve saved your ass when you were too damn drunk to see the pisser. I’ve lied to keep you off the hot seat by telling people I gave you medica-

tion for a headache. So don't you come down here and tell me about how you are going to save me."

Steve stepped toward Dan who cringed at the thought of the unavoidable blow. But none came.

"Go ahead. Aren't you going to slug me?" Dan asked, cowering with eyes closed.

"You're too damn pathetic to hit," Steve retorted.

"I'll hit him for you," Boa said stepping forward.

"I have a better idea," Steve said putting a restraining hand on Boa's chest. "I think we should put him in the tank and let him take the Indian's place."

Dan shifted uncomfortably in the chair. "You wouldn't dare," he cried, not so sure himself.

"Wouldn't I?" Steve asked. "If we don't get any more information from the Indian, except how to treat a shit-making, tofu sucking, insignificant bacillus, I am going to see you in the freezer, Dan. And by God, I mean it."

"I'll kick you out of the hospital before you can do anything to me," Dan said, sweat running down his cheeks.

"I'll do it in my basement, Dan," Steve said smiling, acting crazy.

"I'll help," Boa said.

"Me too," Jason agreed.

"Get away from me," Dan cried, cringing.

"Calm down, Dan. They don't mean it," Bill said.

"Get this giant turd out of here," Steve said retreating.

"Gladly," Jason said.

He reached under Dan's armpit, jerked him to his feet and escorted him out of the lab. Dan was thankful to have made it out with his hide. He thought about making a parting comment, saw the crazed look in Jason's eyes and thought better of it.

"Get to your feet, Aaron," Steve ordered after Dan left. "I ought to make you go into the tank, Steve told him, or better

yet, overdose you the same way you did Naiche. Then we'll get the answer we want for sure."

"Back off," Aaron said straightening his round, steel rimmed glasses on his face.

"You've put this experiment in jeopardy for the last time. I want you to get the hell out of here and don't come back."

"Would you like me to wake the patient before I go, or would you like to do it?" Aaron asked.

"Just tell me the magic word you two dreamed up and I'll do it," Steve said.

"I'd better do it. You couldn't pronounce it."

"Then do it and leave," Steve said, resigning to Aaron.

Aaron sat back down next to the Indian. "Naiche, can you hear me?"

"Yes."

"Naiche, we're going to plan B. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Naiche said.

Aaron then said something that sounded like Apache.

Naiche immediately responded. "What is the cure for Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis," he said in the same deep voice.

* * * * *

Naiche expounded on the disease. He started by explaining protein synthesis and followed with information that only Ronnie and Aaron could understand.

Just as the Indian was finishing with his explanation, so was Aaron. He was explaining how Dan had come to corner him.

“So, you see,” he finished, “when Dan told me he would shut the project down if I didn’t use the Indian as a control, I knew I didn’t have much choice.”

“Why didn’t you tell us?” Bill asked.

“Because I knew what Steve would do,” Aaron said shrugging.

“Yeah. Well, you’re probably right about that,” Steve said.

“Anyway, I thought it would be easier to hypnotize Naiche, make him memorize the question, before I read the information about the disease to him, including the cure.”

“So what Naiche was reciting was all information you gave him?” Bill repeated.

“Right. I simply programmed him to give his little speech in the presence of Dan. He didn’t get any other information about Yersinia from God, or whoever. I doubt he would have told him to use Chloramphenicol as a cure.”

“Why is that?” Steve asked.

“I think the answer to most of the disease processes - at least those we know of - we can cure by more natural cures. In other words, there isn’t a disease on the planet that a herb, root, plant, or any other natural substance wouldn’t cure. We’ve known about many so-called ‘natural’ cures for years. The Chinese have used combinations of herbs for centuries and with better success than modern medicine often.”

“What do you think God would have told Naiche to use?” Bill asked.

“Your guess is as good as mine. But I know it wouldn’t be a synthetic antibiotic,” Aaron said with a laugh.

“Aaron, I’m sorry I yelled at you,” Steve said.

“Well, you’re forgiven

“Thanks. I feel like a perfect ass.”

“You are a perfect ass,” Aaron agreed. “But you’re going to make us all famous so I don’t mind. Besides, where was I before I came into your project? I’ll tell you. I was playing ‘poor me’ and enjoying it. I enjoyed it most when I sucked others into playing it with me. What a waste of life. I haven’t been as excited about anything as I am about this project for a long time. And, despite what you might think, I would do just about anything to make sure nobody trashes the project.”

“That makes three of us,” Bill said. “I wasn’t so sure about it at first. I thought it was another hair-brained scheme Steve *dreamed* up, if you’ll pardon the pun. But since I’ve seen what I’ve seen, I think there is more to this project than we have hypothesized.”

“He’s not talking anymore,” Jason interrupted.

They jumped up and went to the Indian’s side. “Naiche, can you hear me?” Aaron said.

“Yes.”

“Naiche, open your eyes,” Aaron said as if commanding him. Naiche’s eyes opened. Lying there, he looked up at Bill and smiled.

“I met the Great Spirit,” he said, tears rolling down his cheeks.

“Naiche, I want you to sleep. Get some rest and we’ll talk about it later,” Aaron said patting the Indian’s hand.

“Let’s see what the tape has to tell us,” Steve said, going to the control panel.

“Did he say anything we haven’t heard before?” Steve asked Ronnie. She had been monitoring the entire message.

“Yes. He did,” she told him, her voice shaking.

“Are you all right, Ronnie?” Bill asked.

“I’m fine,” she said.

“Ronnie, what did he say?” Aaron asked.

“I think he told us the cure,” she said.

They stood stunned. No one moved. Steve’s face was like stone. Bill and Aaron looked as though someone told them each was richer by ten million dollars. Finally, the excitement hit them all. There were whoops, hollers, yells and catcalls. The entire staff went berserk. They were jumping around, slapping one another on the back and celebrating. After the mayhem had passed, Steve rewound the tape. They sat and listened intently.

“What part is it that he gives us the cure?” Steve asked impatiently.

“Fast forward,” Ronnie said, reaching to the control panel. She pushed the button and the tape reeled forward. She stopped the tape suddenly and pushed ‘play.’ Naiche was speaking an Indian language they did not recognize. Ronnie fast-forwarded again.

Finally Bill said, “I want to find someone to translate that Sioux, Navaho, Apache or whatever it is. I want every word of this in English if possible.”

Naiche then spoke Latin. It sounded beautiful coming out in his deep voice. Ronnie nearly swooned. As she listened she translated for them. Intermittently, Steve would translate. Between the two of them, they explained the entire message.

“My God,” Aaron suddenly said.

“My God, what?” Bill asked cautiously.

“Just ‘My God,’” Ronnie said.

“Look, this stuff is way beyond me. I can’t remember enough chemistry to put it all together. Can you two help the rest of us out here?” Steve asked Aaron and Ronnie.

“Rewind the tape some,” Aaron told Ronnie. As he translated one short piece after the other, Aaron explained to them

the significance of what Naiche said. “It’s like a puzzle he is putting together for us. We have had the pieces of the puzzle for a long time, we just haven’t been able to put them together. The first ingredient he is talking about here is a ‘silent allele’ at position 36 on section S2 of strand six.”

“What does that mean?” Steve asked him.

“What that means is that on one specific chromosome – on a part we label section S2, at one specific site, position 36 – there is a specific triplet that lacks detectable expression; the silent allele. Naiche just told us what the expression is.”

“What *is* it?” Steve asked impatiently.

“This specific part of this specific gene makes an enzyme,” Aaron explained, swiveling around in his chair to face Steve. “The enzyme it makes causes two other enzymes to mix. When those two other enzymes mix, a substance results that allows nerve impulses to flow. When the enzyme is absent, the two enzymes don’t mix, and there are no nerve impulses. We couldn’t see how this part of the genetic structure expressed itself because of our lack of knowledge. Therefore, we call it a ‘silent allele,’” Aaron explained.

“All right. The next thing he says is that this silent allele goes through genetic recombination at haplophase,” Steve said.

“What that means is that when there is just one-half the needed amount of chromosome in a cell there is a mix-up. The position of the mix-up is what he identified earlier, position 36 on section S2 of strand six.”

“So some wires crossed in the link-up between the sperm and the egg chromosomes,” Bill stated.

Aaron swiveled his chair back so he was facing the recording equipment and Ronnie swiveled hers to face Steve.

“Exactly, Ronnie confirmed.” She was visibly tense, sweat beaded on her forehead.

Moving on, Steve said, “The next thing he said was the

silent allele was allosteric. What does that mean?"

"What that means is this," Ronnie told him, taking over from Aaron who, clearly exhausted emotionally, had slumped in his chair, his hands in front of his face. "An allosteric enzyme is one whose reactivity with another molecule alters by combining with a third molecule."

"Julie gave us the site and name of the second enzyme. We've known how to configure the first for some time. Now all we have to do is ask the computer for the structure of enzyme three produced at position 36 on section S2 strand six. We know about enzyme two. Whatever the body *should* make at position 36 is what we need. We now know it's called Q-f-23, and we know it comes off a silent allele. That, ladies and gentlemen, is the enzyme that will cure A.L.S."

"My God," Steve said.

"Ditto," Bill offered.

"Get on it," Steve said.

"Now that you four is finish' playin' 'shuck and jive' with a genius, can the rest of us fools get some chow?" Boa asked, irritated.

"Sure, go for it," Bill said.

Jason and Boa left, Margo asked Bill if she could get anything for him.

"No thank you. I'll get something later. Thanks for asking."

"If you change your mind, I wouldn't mind getting you something later," she said sweetly, placing her hands on her hips to accentuate her waist.

"That's kind of you Margo. I'll let you know if I do," Bill said dismissing her.

Margo picked up her purse and left.

"When are you going to give that woman some attention, Bill?" Steve asked smiling. "Talk about a case of the hots."

"Cut me some slack. She's just being kind," Bill said

innocently.

“Right. Give her the chance and you’ll find out how innocent she is,” Steve dared.

“All right, you’ve got a bet,” Bill said. Then, getting back to the issue he said, “Aaron, I want you to go over the entire process with Naiche again. Tape the conversation. I want to make sure there is nothing we have left out. I want to make damn sure there is nothing *he* left out.”

After a long lunch, Bill met with Steve and Ronnie in the computer center where Ronnie was busy feeding information into the computer. She worked quickly and efficiently. After entering all the data she could come up with, she sat and waited.

“Now, it’s hurry up and wait,” she told them pushing back and putting her feet on the table.

After a few minutes, the monitor began blinking rapidly. Information was flashing across the screen in sheets. Each sheet flashed for a tenth of a second before the next replaced it. Finally, a single question flashed in the middle of the screen. Ronnie sat and stared at the monitor for a long time. Bill and Steve read, then reread the question several times.

“What in the hell does that mean, Ronnie?” Bill said in a low voice.

She dropped her feet, pulled herself up to the screen, looked up at him and her face drained of all expression

“When the body makes enzyme three it allows enzyme one and two to attach. Then one and two become inactive, causing nerve transmissions to decrease, or stop,” she said wearily. “The computer can’t suggest how to make a synthetic unless it knows the specific binding site of the enzyme. Otherwise, the enzyme might cause several problems.”

All of them repositioned at once. Bill shifted this way, Steve that. Ronnie squirmed and Aaron swiveled.

“Without knowing the specific site, we have one alterna-

tive,” Ronnie continued. “We tell the computer the binding site is at position one. Then we have the computer give us the molecular arrangement for the enzyme. We make a sample and give it to a volunteer with A.L.S and wait until we see if there is any change. That might take six months. If it doesn’t work, we go back to the computer and tell it the beginning site is at position two.”

“Six months!” Steve exclaimed.

“Then we repeat the process,” Ronnie interrupted him. “Then we tell the computer the site of position three, then four, and so on. We could end with over twenty thousand enzymes that would take ten thousand years to test. I don’t think we can afford the time.

“Then what in hell are we going to do?” Bill demanded.

Ronnie turned the computer off. “What we’re going to do,” she said with grim deliberation, “is to send Naiche back.”

* * * * *

“How did it go today?” April asked, as Steve came through the door. She was sitting in her wheelchair, the nurse standing behind her.

“Fine. We made some significant progress today. I think we have found it,” Steve said smiling.

“Don’t lie to cheer me up,” April said, wanting to believe him but not daring to.

Steve leaned over, placed his hands on the arms of the wheelchair, looked at his wife and said, “I’m not. It went well today. I’ll tell you about it after dinner.” He kissed her on the forehead. “I’ll take it from here, Jenny.”

When the nurse had left, Steve wheeled April into the kitchen.

“How’s it going, Frank?” he asked the cook he and April had hired.

“Goin’ fine,” Frank answered. “Dinner’ll be on in thirty minutes.”

“Great,” Steve said. Then he asked April, “What time will Joshua be home from his little friend’s house?”

“Sixish.”

Steve and April sat and talked for the thirty minutes it took Frank to finish with meal preparation. He rubbed her bony shoulders and explained some of what was going on at the lab. Frank had dinner on the table just as Joshua hit the front door. When he saw Steve, he shrieked “Daddy,” and ran into Steve’s arms. Steve showered him with hugs and kisses.

“Hi Little Prince. Are you hungry?”

“Eat,” Joshua said.

“Okay. Daddy’s hungry, too.”

“Mommy hungry?” Joshua asked.

“Mommy is hungry, too,” April said.

“Well, since everyone’s hungry, why don’t you eat,” Frank said, gesturing for them to sit.

Once seated, Steve passed up the blessing and invited everyone to dig in. His sense of God had dwindled over the past several months until little remained of Him in Steve’s life. They talked through dinner about issues in general. April had stood for twenty minutes during the afternoon and felt good about it. Joshua had broken a vase and felt bad about it. After they had finished eating, they retired to the family room. Frank cleared and washed the dishes after which he bid them good-night and left. Steve got Joshua ready for bed, read a book and tucked him in. Joshua was asleep in ten minutes. Steve sat talking with April for a couple of minutes about her day and then she was ready to hear about specific news from the lab.

“Tell me about the breakthrough,” April said finally.

Steve told her about Naiche and the success of the information.

“You see,” Steve explained waiving a hand in the air, “we’ve isolated all but one small piece of the puzzle. And that small piece will be the focus of our next volunteer trip.”

“What is the small piece?” April sounded discouraged. “And how many more people are going to have to die before you get your answer?”

“Hey, I told you I’d find a cure,” Steve said putting his arm around her and pulling her close to him. “I intend to make good on that promise. And no one else needs to die,” he lied.

“I am not complaining, honey,” she said, snuggling close to him. “I know I am lucky to have a husband who loves me enough to come up with an idea as daring as this. Not to mention that you have made it work. I’m just afraid the answer will come five seconds after I take my last breath.”

“I’ll have an answer by the end of the week,” he assured her. “You can last until then, can’t you?” Steve asked her.

And, although he spoke cheerfully, although he smiled

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down at her and cradled her wasted body in his arms, all he could think about was that fateful question in the computer screen. The question to which he had no answer.

* * * * *

Steve arrived at the hospital at six-thirty the next morning. Bill, Aaron, Ronnie and Margo came in ten minutes later.

“Good morning,” Steve said to them as they entered the lab.

“Mornin’,” Bill said. Aaron said nothing and looked terrible.

“Aaron, something bothering you?” Steve asked.

“Steve, I have some bad news.”

“What is it?”

“It’s Naiche.”

“What’s wrong with Naiche?” Steve asked anxiously.

“He took a turn for the worse during the night. We almost lost him. He’s critical this morning.”

“What in the hell happened?” Steve demanded. “Why is our healthiest specimen suddenly taking a turn for the worse?”

“I don’t know. I’ve been up all night trying to figure out what’s wrong. I had blood gases done every hour during the night and he isn’t getting enough oxygen,” Aaron explained.

“Did you get a chest x-ray?” Steve asked.

“No. He’s on the ventilator,” Aaron said pointing to the machine, “so I assumed he would be getting enough air. I didn’t want to bother Jason last night to come in and take the x-rays.”

“Why didn’t you have the hospital tech do it?” Steve asked angrily.

“Steve you know what the agreement was,” Bill said. “For secrecy, we agreed that we would not involve any hospital personnel no matter how critical matters got.”

“Yeah, you’re right. Where’s Naiche now?” Steve asked.

“He’s in our critical care room. Ronnie’s with him. Margo spent the first part of the night with him. Ronnie took over about midnight.”

“That was kind of you Margo,” Bill said. Margo beamed and blushed at the same time.

“Let’s take a look at him,” Steve said. “And bring the portable x-ray with you, Bill. I’ll take the picture myself.”

Ten minutes later, when Steve put the film on a view box, a look of utter perplexity came over his face as he saw the silhouette of a metallic object in the windpipe, something that, although it did not block the breathing, was large enough to decrease it.

“What in the hell is that?” Steve exclaimed.

“Margo,” Bill said, peering intently at the film, “check Naiche’s clothing and see if he has something in his shirt pocket resembling a metal marble; a ball bearing.”

Margo carefully searched but found nothing.

“How in the hell did a ball bearing get into his trachea?” Steve asked, clearly suspicious now. “Margo, you intubated him. Was there any trouble getting a tube in his throat? Maybe he had the damn ball in his mouth when you put the tube in.”

“Why would he have a ball bearing in his mouth?” Aaron asked.

“Why does he wear all the herbs and shit?” Steve retorted, his suspicion growing by the minute. “I don’t know why he would have a ball bearing in his mouth. But it got in there somehow. Bill, come with me. The rest of you wait here.”

Steve headed out of the room and down the hall with Bill in pursuit.

“Where are we going?” Bill asked.

“You’ll see when we get there,” Steve said.

Entering the lab they walked through to the cold storage lockers. When Steve identified Julie’s body bag and unzipped it, the first thing he noticed was the opening in her chest.

“What’s this?” he demanded, exploring with a gloved hand. “Stick your hand in here Bill.”

“For God’s sake, Steve, I don’t want to stick my hand in the corpse of a dead woman, particularly of one I knew,” Bill said.

“Please. I want you to verify what I have found. Just do it.”

“What is it I am supposed to be feeling for?”

“You’ll know when you find it.”

The remaining organs felt cold and hard. Bill grimaced and then a look of surprise came over his face.

“There’s a notch in the trachea,” he said.

“Bingo,” Steve said. “Why would there be an incision there? When I cracked her chest, I wasn’t anywhere near her trachea.”

“Someone must have done it after they put her in here,” Bill said, looking around at the other bodies lined up in the dim locker.

“Right. Someone *has* been trying to sabotage my experiment, Bill.”

Moving to the next body in the line, Steve unzipped the bag and, after feeling around for a few minutes found the same clean, purposeful incision in the trachea.

“I don’t want you to say a word about this to anyone,” he warned Bill. “I’m going to catch the son-of-a-bitch who is doing this and I will kill him or her.”

Within minutes, they had rejoined the others. “Set up for an esophagoscopy,” Steve said purposefully.

The others looked at him blankly but went into action while he scrubbed his hands, donned gloves, and prepared to stick a tube the size of a garden hose down the throat of the Indian.

“Take the endotracheal tube out Margo,” Steve said, tilting the Indian’s head back to place a metal blade in his mouth and look down his throat. After he identified the vocal cords, Steve placed a long tube in the Indian’s throat and pushed it down as far as he could before hooking the tube to the ventilator and letting the machine give the Indian some air. Peering into the small objective mounted on the side of the tube, he looked

directly into the Indian's trachea.

"Hand me the 'grabbers,'" he muttered.

The instrument Bill handed him looked like a long rod with a claw foot at the end. Steve watched through the eyepiece as he manipulated the rod down the tube until it was within an inch of the metal ball, at which point he depressed a button on top of the rod and a talon telescoped out and opened.

Grabbing the metal ball, Steve released the button and the talon closed around the ball bearing. Gently, Steve extracted it and told Margo to return Naiche to the ventilator.

"Who would have access to these people while intubated?" Steve asked, placing the ball bearing on a metal instrument tray. It made a loud thud.

"Just the crew," Margo said. "I'm the only one directly in contact while they have a tube, though."

"Are you sure there isn't any other time anyone would have access to them?" Bill asked gently.

"Only team members have access, Bill," Margo reminded him.

"Where are Boa and Jason?" Steve asked looking around.

"They won't be here for at least another hour," Aaron said.

"I want this kept in this room," Steve said. "I think I know who did this, but I want to catch him at it. No one is to say a word. Is that clear? Now listen to what I want you to do."

After Steve had explained his plan, he took the Indian to another room. He returned just as the others were arriving. Steve greeted them solemnly. "Good morning!"

"Damn early in the morning," Boa said grumpily.

"We have a problem this morning," Steve announced picking the ball bearing up and dropping it gently on the metal tray several times. "Naiche died last night."

"How the hell did that happen?" Jason asked.

"We're not sure," Steve said, shrugging his shoulders.

“Respiratory failure or something. Occupational hazard. At any rate, we’re going to have to use another of the candidates this morning. We’re almost there. All we need is the answer to one more question, and we are there. Then we can close it down.”

“Close it down? What do you mean ‘close it down’?” Boa demanded.

“Because, we’re finished,” Steve answered. “It’s as simple as that.”

“What about other diseases?” Jason asked moving to the tray and looking at the ball bearing. “Don’t we want to find a cure for them as well?”

“We’ve done our part,” Steve said. “We’ve proved it works. Let someone else do the rest. We can just sit back and take in all the glory.”

“You’ll take all the glory,” Boa muttered as he sat heavily on one of the chairs. “The rest of us will just be back to doin’ what we been doin’ all our lives. Slavin’.”

“Well, it’s not over yet,” Steve said. “Let’s not put the chicken before the egg. Now, Jason, bring thirty-one down here.”

While the rest of the staff prepared the lab, Jason went to recover the next volunteer. On entering the stairwell, Jason heard a moaning sound coming from an east wing room. He carefully followed the sound until he came to a locked door. Knowing the room was empty, he took a metal file out of his wallet and unlocked the door, slowly peeking around it. There, in the center of the room was a single bed. In it laid Naiche. Jason looked quizzically for a moment and then the answer came to him like a revelation. They had found out. They knew someone was slowly killing the Whitelighters.

Reaching up, Jason turned off the mechanical ventilator and watched Naiche’s chest rise and fall for the last time. He stood and watched the Indian’s color go from ashen, to blue, to purple, to gray, to the color of death. Jason waited until

Naiche's pupils dilated and fixed, a sign that he was 'dead dead,' as Jason liked to call it before turning the ventilator back on. Jason left the room, locked the door behind him, and hurriedly went to get number thirty-one. *They don't know it is me killing them, they just know it is someone. We'll see if this project ends soon,* he thought.

Just as he entered the room of number thirty-one he whispered "I'll have to be more careful from now on, Biffy."

* * * * *

Margo went to check on Naiche that evening to find the ventilator pumping air into his stiff, cold body. The rigor mortis was such the entire corpse inflated each time the ventilator delivered its volume of air. Margo hurried back to tell Steve and Bill. On returning to the room and examining Naiche, Bill turned off the ventilator. Steve stared at the lifeless body of the Indian, fury rising in him like mercury in a thermometer.

“When do you think he died?” Bill asked pulling a sheet over the dead man’s face.

“From the looks of him I’d guess sometime earlier this afternoon.

“Right around the time we asked Jason to bring back number thirty-one?” Steve asked.

“Sounds about right,” Bill agreed

“How do you suppose he found out!” Margo announced rhetorically looking at the mound lying in the bed.

“Your guess is as good as mine. One thing for sure is he is one shrewd operator. We’ve got to nab this psychopath before he can do any more damage,” Steve answered.

Bill played at a ventilator knob and asked, “How are we going to do that?”

“I don’t know, yet. But I’ll come up with something. I’m not going to let him destroy everything we’ve worked for. He knows too many of our little secrets to kick him out of the project. I’m not sure he wouldn’t take it to the press if we were to accuse him up front and tell him to hit the highway.”

“The only way we can stop him is either have someone watch him constantly or have someone with the Whitelighters all the time,” Margo warned.

“Then that’s exactly what we will do,” Steve assured her.

Margo pulled the tube out of Naiche's throat, re-covered him with the sheet and then wheeled him to the refrigerator. Once inside, they put him in a black plastic body bag, tagged the bag with Naiche's name and zipped it.

As the weeks passed, thirty-one, thirty-two and thirty-three passed without so much as regaining consciousness until two candidates remained. These were the frailest – and oldest – of the Whitelighters, neither of which Steve suspected would survive the ordeal. The thought bothered him for several reasons. Mainly, he feared Dan would stop the project. They started with thirty-five clients, three survived the journey and Steve paid them off. Two remained and thirty died. Thirty-one if they counted Julie.

To add to his sense of despair, weakness and respiratory difficulty confined April to bed. Steve knew that it would be only a matter of time before she would need a tracheotomy. The phone ringing interrupted his musings. He quickly snapped up the receiver. "This is Dr. Stanley."

"Can I come over and see you, Steve?" It was Melinda.

"Melinda, I don't have time to listen to your shit today," Steve answered, instinctively defensive, certain that as usual she had found some reason to lecture him on the qualities of being a responsible husband.

"Steve, I need to talk to you," she replied. "Just this once." If you don't like what I have to say I'll leave you alone."

There was something about the tone of Melinda's voice that intrigued Steve. In fact, there was something in it that told him that for once he *did* want to talk with her. She arrived fifteen minutes later.

"At the risk of offending you, Melinda, to what do I owe the privilege of this visit? And here at the hospital none-the-less," Steve said, with Melinda sitting opposite him in a wing chair in his office. He had been too busy to so much as think

about her in the past few weeks and her changed attitude toward him surprised him. She did not display any of her usual hostility and he sensed a tentative reaching out to him in the tone of her voice.

“Let’s cut to the chase,” Melinda answered. “We share something in common, Steve. We both want April to live. She told me that you were working on a cure for her sickness. She also told me it involved an experiment. Something about putting people to sleep and then hypnotizing them.”

Steve chuckled. “Yeah,” Steve admitted. “We do something like that. So what’s your point?”

“I want to volunteer,” Melinda told him. “I want to do anything I can to help April.”

“Melinda, I appreciate that,” Steve said, and he meant it. He would have loved to accept her offer. But he knew how much that would hurt April. As much as he disliked Melinda, he couldn’t risk her life.

“Melinda, it’s much more involved than that.”

“Whatever it is, Steve, I know I could do it. Listen,” she said holding up a hand – Steve had opened his mouth to refute her further – “just listen. You know as well as I do that we must credit, at least in part, your personal vested interest in the project for its success. None of the others had a vested interest. Now, I know you paid them. But that’s not an incentive. I’m different.”

“And what makes you different? Melinda, you don’t know the entire gist of the experiment. It involves more than simple hypnosis.”

“I’m not stupid enough to think it did.”

“What do you think it involves?”

“I can’t say for sure. Try telling me.”

“We cause our volunteers to experience a near death experience. They are going to the great beyond to get the answer from God for the cure.”

Melinda looked at him thoughtfully for a minute. She didn't even blink. Finally she said, "I want April to live."

It surprised Steve, but what Melinda said made perfect sense to him. Had he failed to realize an intrinsic fact about the Whitelighers? He wondered. He sat, looking at her, marveling how this big, fat, ugly woman could persuade him to do anything; yet she was.

"Look, Melinda, I appreciate the offer. Let me think about it. We still have two remaining volunteers who we have promised a chance. If we don't get the answer from either of them, I'll consider it. Fair enough?"

Tears began to stream down Melinda's face. For a few minutes she was unable to speak. Then, sobbing, she choked, "If April doesn't die first. What if you get the cure and it takes six months to make the stuff? What then? Does April have six months? Does she have one?"

Part of him knew that what Melinda was saying was true. What if it *did* take six months for them to make the enzyme? There remained the problem they would need to test the enzyme. How long would that take?

Suddenly Steve began to feel like he was suffocating. He went to the window and opened it. Outside, the air was cold and there was a brisk wind blowing. He took a deep breath, yet still felt he wasn't getting enough air. He *was* suffocating. Then his mind staggered as a vision of April came to him. *She* was suffocating. Foreboding struck Steve like a Mac truck.

"What is it, Steve?" Melinda demanded, coming to stand beside him.

"April's dying, he told her. She's suffocating," was all he could say.

The Irony

“April, breathe!” the nurse cried, pounding April between the shoulder blades. “Breathe, dammit!” She had tried to give April mouth-to-mouth resuscitation but the airway was blocked – no air would go into April’s lungs. Turning April onto her back, she placed the palm of her right hand just below her diaphragm, placed her left hand on top of her right and pressed down. She repeated the maneuver three times. There was no response. The nurse quickly turned April onto her side again and repeated the blows between the shoulder blades, all the time commanding her to breathe, but April’s body was limp and her color was turning from purple to ashen.

The nurse knew if she weren’t successful on the next try of the Heimlich maneuver, she would have to cut April’s throat with a knife to open the airway. Quickly, she turned her again, repeating the thrusts to the abdomen, until suddenly, there was a noise like the sound of a stopper coming out of a bottle of Champagne, followed by the sonorous sound of air sucking into burning, vacant lungs. April’s entire body jerked with each explosive cough. After what seemed an eternity to the nurse, April opened her bloodshot eyes.

“I’m choking on my blood, Dr. Butcher,” April gasped, remembering earlier years, lying in the snow, blood exploding through her cheek and down her throat. “I’m suffocating on my blood.”

“April, it’s all right,” the nurse said. “You choked on your lunch.”

“Why didn’t you just let me die and get it over with?” April

asked, still sobbing.

“Come on, April, you don’t mean that,” the nurse said.

“Look at me, Phyllis,” April demanded. “Would you want to live like this?”

Phyllis knew she wouldn’t. She *had* looked at April. She had watched April’s body waste away. She felt no muscle or fat under April’s skin now when she bathed her. Only bone.

“Life is precious no matter what the quality,” she said tentatively. She had once heard one of her nursing instructors give this as an answer to a terminally ill patient and resolved to use it herself in the same circumstances.

“I’m petrified of suffocating,” April told her. “I thought I was going to suffocate once when I was a little girl and the fear has never left me. I have always thought that would be the way I was going to die. Waiting for it to happen is more than I can bear.”

“I’m not going to let that happen to you,” Phyllis assured her.

But April had gone one step beyond comfort by philosophy or assurances. “Sometimes I lay in bed and I think about breathing,” she said in a hoarse voice. “I think about how *small* the little tube is that goes to the lungs. It doesn’t seem big enough sometimes. I feel like if it closes up just a fraction smaller than it normally is I will smother. I’m obsessed with that thought sometimes.”

“I think I should call Steve and have him come home and give you the once over.”

“Please don’t,” April pleaded as Phyllis helped her back to bed and plumped the pillows for her. “He’ll just worry more than he already does, and it would mean a lot to me if this could be just between the two of us. Please?”

“Well, all right. But if anything like this happens again, I’m telling him right away. Do you realize what this episode means?” Phyllis asked.

“It means I was trying to eat too fast and the food stuck at point AB.”

“Point AB?” Phyllis said quizzically.

“Yes, Steve says that both food and air come in through the mouth. Food goes down pipe A and air goes down pipe B. Point AB is where those two pipes split in the back of the throat. When food sticks at that point, you choke.

“We call it a Café Coronary,” Phyllis told her. “At any rate, what is important here April is the muscles that help you swallow are getting too weak to work.”

“Great. As if I’m not skinny enough as it is, now I’ll die of starvation,” April replied trying to reposition herself. “Steve told me people don’t die of A.L.S., but of the complications of it. Now I know what he was talking about.”

“April,” Phyllis said, sitting down beside the bed and taking one of April’s hands in her own. “Has Steve taken the time to go over the progress of the disease with you. In other words, has he told you what to expect on a week to week, month to month basis?”

“Yes,” April told her. “He has been good about that. At first he tried to keep me in the dark. I think he was trying to protect himself as much as me. It must be difficult for him to see me in this state, wouldn’t you think?”

“I think it must be difficult for both of you. Sickness is a disrupter. No matter how large or small the ailment, they disrupt routines and. . .” Ringing of the phone interrupted her. April gave her the ‘remember not to say anything look’ and Phyllis squeezed her hand.

“Phyllis,” Steve said, his voice sharp with concern. “What’s going on there?”

“Why, nothing doctor,” she lied. “Why?”

“Is April all right?”

“She’s just fine. We just had a bath and I’m putting her

down for her afternoon nap.” “Phyllis, I just had the strangest experience,” Steve told her. “I want you to call me back as soon as April has fallen asleep. Would you do that for me? I don’t want her to suspect that anything’s wrong.”

“Your husband is a lot more perceptive than you might think,” Phyllis said thoughtfully, placing the receiver on the cradle at the bedside.

“He’s just a worry wort. Don’t let him charm the truth out of you or we’ll both regret it,” April said.

The thought of Steve knowing she had choked frightened her. She thought Steve might want her to have the trach sooner than she was ready, if she would ever be ready.

“Get some rest, April. Let me handle your husband.”

With that Phyllis tucked April in, fluffed the comforter under April’s chin and left the room. After April had fallen asleep, Phyllis picked up the phone and dialed the number Steve had left on the refrigerator door. It rang twice.

“This is Steve.”

“Yes, doctor.”

“Is April asleep?”

“Yes. She’s pretty exhausted today.”

“Phyllis, I had an experience today as I mentioned earlier. I had a *vision*, if you know what I mean.”

“No doctor, I don’t.”

“Of course you don’t,” Steve said, realizing how foolish he must sound. “I thought I saw what was happening with April. I tried to call and when you didn’t answer I knew why. She was suffocating and you were busy trying to save her. Am I way out in left field with this?”

The accuracy of Steve’s vision amazed Phyllis. Before she realized what she was saying she said, “No, doctor. You’re right at home plate.”

“Thank you, Phyllis. Now I know I’m not going crazy.

What happened?"

"She had a Café Coronary. I Heimliched her. It was close, Steve."

Even as she spoke, Phyllis felt bad about having confessed the truth. She had, after all, betrayed April's trust. But surely Steve deserved to know and then there was his omen.

"Phyllis, you didn't have a choice," Steve said as though he had read her thoughts. "I would have gotten the truth out of you no matter what. So don't feel bad about having ratted. April will never know you told me, I promise. But what I have to know is this, has this ever happened before, or anything similar?"

"No. This is the first time she has had any respiratory distress whatever. Usually she eats like a champ. It was just one of those moments. Once I popped the bolus out of her throat she recovered like a trooper."

"Okay," Steve told her. "We'll leave it at that. But I want you to keep a watchful eye on her eating from now on, Phyllis."

When he hung up, Steve turned to Melinda who was still standing by the open window, watching him anxiously.

"You're on," he told her. "We'll start now. There's no time to lose."

* * * * *

“Bill, I believe you know Melinda,” Steve said. “Melinda, Bill Levitt.”

“Nice to see you again, Bill,” Melinda said sarcastically.

“The pleasure will be all mine,” Bill returned with equal contempt. He knew Steve’s history with this woman and there was no question on whose side his sympathies lay. As far as it concerned him, April did not need a friend like Melinda.

“What does he mean by that?” Melinda asked Steve, frowning.

“He doesn’t mean anything by it,” Steve said shooting a ‘*cool it*’ look at Bill, who retreated to the control panel. And this is Aaron Debries,” Steve continued.

“Nice to meet you Melinda,” Aaron said extending his hand. Melinda experienced the same immediate regard for Aaron as April had. There was something about him she liked, something about his eyes.

“And this is Ronnie,” Steve offered continuing with the introductions.

Taking Ronnie’s hand, Melinda said, “You look a little anemic, child. Need to put on a few pounds.”

“Never time to eat. Too much work,” Ronnie offered. Melinda snorted but said nothing more.

“This is Margo,” Steve continued. Melinda extended her hand but Margo simply said, “Pleasure,” and returned to her duties. She disliked Melinda immediately and having surmised long since there had been some conflict between Melinda and Bill, she was ready to defend Bill at the drop of a hat.

“The pleasure’s all mine,” Melinda said to Margo’s back. She made half an obscene gesture toward Margo, caught herself, and feigned an itch, which she scratched. Boa laughed. He had feigned the same gesture so many times himself it

seemed funny to see someone else try getting away with it.

Melinda felt uncomfortable shaking hands with Jason. She couldn't exactly pinpoint why, but it made her feel creepy.

"So when do I get to meet Dr. Frankenstein and his monster," she asked, suddenly nervous, "or are you Frankenstein, and these *are* the monsters?"

"We don't create monsters here, Melinda," Aaron said. "We get answers. That's the only business we're in."

"Well, I suppose I'm ready to get some for myself," Melinda told him. "What's the next step?"

"The next step is for you to get your clothes off and get into that bed over there," Aaron said, pointing at the bed.

One look at Melinda in the hospital gown caused a different response in each of them. To Steve, it simply affirmed what he had always known – Melinda was F.A.T. Aaron's eyes widened, and he resolved not to give this woman *any* reason to think she interested him. Jason simply rolled his eyes toward the ceiling and suppressed his need to laugh aloud.

"I'm going to hypnotize you, Melinda," Aaron told her. Because hypnosis makes sure your mind is in the proper frame to ask the most important questions once we put you under.

Jason thought, *We'll see who kills who, won't we Biffy?*

"I want you to listen to me, Melinda, and only to me," Aaron said.

"Your wish is my command," Melinda said dreamily.

"You're going to have to be serious, Melinda, or this won't work. What you must think about right now is that what happens from now on settles whether April lives or not," Aaron said grimly.

Melinda's face painfully showed that she understood the impact of what Aaron had told her. She took a deep breath, closed her eyes and started to consciously relax.

"That's better. Now, I'm going to start counting."

Within ten minutes, Melinda was in deep hypnosis. She had not responded as effortlessly as Naiche, but she had done well.

“Melinda,” Aaron said, “I am going to give you some information that I want you to repeat to me. Can you do that?”

“Yes.” It was only a whisper.

“Great. Now, Melinda, listen carefully. This is the question. ‘What is the structure of Q-f-23, produced at allosteric position 36, on section S2, of strand six, of human genomes?’ Repeat the question, Melinda.”

Before she satisfied him with her question, Aaron asked her to repeat it forty times. Then he woke her up.

“Do you remember anything?” Aaron asked her.

“Nothing,” Melinda told him. “Did I do what you wanted to? Because I can’t remember anything.”

“Are you ready for phase two?” Steve asked her. He felt that he needed to give her the opportunity to back out.

“Ready as I’ll ever be.”

“Okay. Let’s get the lines in,” Steve said to Bill.

Then to Melinda, “We’re going to start the IVs that we will use to inject the medication that will - - well, you agreed the details don’t matter. We’ll use these same lines to inject medications to wake you up.”

“Sounds scary. You wouldn’t forget to bring me back would you Stevie-ol-boy?” Melinda said.

“Not as long as there’s a possibility of your having an answer to my wife’s cure,” he told her. He was near exhaustion and beginning to feel sheer panic. What Steve thought would take a week was drawing into months.

“Right. I hold the ace, don’t I? Feels kinda good having an ace up my sleeve when I’m playing poker with you.”

“Relax, Melinda. You have one ally here to offset the hatred you obviously feel you have for Steve,” Aaron assured; he sensed the hate without knowing all the brutal facts.

Bill had readied Melinda's arm for the I.V. while she and Aaron were talking. "Melinda, I'm going to start this I.V. now," Bill told her.

"Go for it," she said. Bill jabbed the large boar needle into her arm. Melinda shrieked, "Shit-and-two-is-eight. Can't you be more careful?"

"That's painful isn't it," Bill stated. Boa turned his back so no one caught him smiling. *Jus' 'zactly the way I'd have put it in, Doc*, he thought.

"Damn right it is," Melinda said.

"It'll be over soon, Melinda, so just relax," Bill said jabbing it in further.

"I'll bet that's how you screw, isn't it Bill? Just thrust as hard as you can and hope it hurts?" Melinda asked.

"Why don't you just keep your filthy mouth shut," Margo piped in.

"Oh . . . *I* see," Melinda said. She hadn't suspected anything was going on between Bill and Margo, but she clearly saw Margo's side of the relationship. "Sorry . . . Margo, is it?" Melinda said, knowing she was wrong.

"Margo. It's Margo," Bill said quickly. He could see the anger welling up in Margo.

"Oh, sorry . . . Margo," she said placing emphasis on the correct pronunciation of the name. "Well, Margo, you would probably know how he screws, now wouldn't you?" Melinda asked.

"Melinda, you're not being a happy camper and making new friends here," Steve said. "Be careful. Margo is responsible for making sure you breathe during your little return from never-never land. You wouldn't want her to forget to turn the machine on at just the right time. You'd come back brain dead."

"What he means is 'more brain dead' than you already are," Margo offered.

“Oh, you’re quick. I’ll bet you learned that while you were learning the art of picking pockets and prostituting in Mexico; am I right?” Melinda asked. Margo took a step forward, her face beet red. She started to speak but Steve cut her off.

“Margo.”

That was all he had to say. The tone of his voice and inflection effectively suggested what he wanted. She fought back tears and stepped away.

“Melinda, are you ready to go to sleep?” Steve asked.

“I suppose so. Let’s get this over with so I can get out of this loony bin,” she said.

“Aaron,” Steve said looking at Aaron.

“Melinda, I want you to close your eyes and relax just like you did before.”

Melinda was under within minutes. “She’s down,” Aaron said.

“Injecting the lethal dose . . . now,” Steve said nodding. Boa started the clock on the wall. Thirty-five seconds after Bill injected the medication into Melinda, she expired. As they sat and waited for Melinda to journey, Aaron suddenly sat up and looked puzzled.

“Oh my goodness, guys,” he said finally. “I think we might be in trouble here.”

Steve and Bill jumped up simultaneously and checked Melinda. Margo instinctively reached for the ventilator switch, ready to turn it on with a single word from Steve.

“What? What is it Aaron?” Steve asked.

“I didn’t program Melinda with a ‘short circuit’ command,” Aaron said.

“A what?” Bill asked.

“You know, ‘Baby Bear,’ ‘Cold Duck,’ ‘Jim Beam’; just to mention a few.”

“Right. I remember. What does that mean to the experiment?” Steve asked.

“It means that we had better have several hours of tape ready to record every word she says because there will be no way to stop her once she starts.”

“Ronnie . . . ,” Steve began.

“I’m already ahead of you,” she said, busily setting up reel-to-reel tape. “I think forty-eight hours of tape will be plenty, don’t you?” she asked.

“Will there be any other complications that you’re aware of?” Steve asked.

“There shouldn’t be,” Aaron told him. “I don’t know for sure. I spent hours with the other candidates and twenty minutes with Melinda. I don’t know what to expect.”

“We’ll just have to cross that bridge when we come to it,” Steve offered.

The waiting was the worst. Thirty minutes went by before they decided to bring Melinda back. Then, at Steve’s command, they jumped into action, each moving with fluid perfection. They injected, shocked and pounded on Melinda for what seemed hours with no reaction, not even the slightest.

“I’m going to crack her chest,” Steve said finally and, as if Melinda had heard him, she opened her eyes.

“She’s back,” Jason said.

They all fixed their eyes on Melinda.

“Melinda, can you hear me?” he asked.

Her eyes blinked. “Good.” Aaron told her. “I’m going to hypnotize you again. I know you’re in pain and we’ll take care of that in a few minutes. You must try to relax so I can get you under. Try to think about April for a minute. Close your eyes and listen to my voice.”

“She’s down,” he said finally. “Now we need to get her stabilized enough to take the tube out, then we can start questioning her.”

“Right. We should give her about an hour then we can try. Meanwhile I suggest we get some food. Anyone else hungry?”

Steve asked. Most of the crew nodded.

“Great. Jason, how about you taking the first watch while we get some chow?” Steve asked.

So this is the big setup I've been waiting for. I'll have this fat bitch dead thirty seconds after they leave the room, then I'll be gone, he thought as he agreed.

Bill and Aaron looked at one another and shrugged.

Once outside, Steve asked Bill to remain with him, leading him into the hall that circled to the rear entrance of the lab where they entered a makeshift atrium in which there were supplies.

“We need to see if anything’s going on,” Steve said in a low voice. “Stand here by this curtain.”

Silent and motionless, the two doctors watched as Jason bent over the gurney, a strange smile twisting his face.

“Melinda, can you hear me?” Jason asked and when Melinda didn’t respond he said, “I don’t give a rat’s ass if you can hear me or not. I want you to know that you’re going to die. Not as slowly as April is dying, but slowly. I am going to see to it that both of you die.”

Steve started forward; ready to kill Jason with his bare hands. But Bill restrained him.

“Wait,” he whispered. “We have to catch him in the act before we can nail him. Once we see him trying to do something, we’ll act.”

Steve backed off but his blood was boiling. *Do something Jason,* he thought. *Then it’s you who will die.*

They watched Jason closely as he circled the bed, muttering inconceivable obscenities, like a witch doctor practicing voodoo. It was as though he had lost his mind. They could hear bits and pieces of what he was saying. “. . . have I been bald? . . . I’ll tell you how long I’ve been bald! . . . didn’t like Biffy? . . . I never liked Biffy! . . . killed her? . . . I killed her and liked

it! . . .” His face was grotesque and his movements were like those of a crazed man – quick, angry, full of hate.

“There goes one possessed dude,” Bill muttered. “He’s going to be strong as an ox, Steve. Anyone who is that crazy usually is. Let’s get Boa to help us.”

“What in the hell are you talking about? We have both been through hand-to-hand combat with guys that make him look like a Barbie Doll. Steve assured him. “We won’t need any help.”

Suddenly they saw Jason produce a small metallic ball from his pants’ pocket. Holding it just above Melinda’s face he said, “Look what I have for you, Melinda. I have the silver ball of death here for you.” Then, putting his face within inches of Melinda’s, he whispered, “It’s time for you to die, bitch!”

Suddenly, Melinda’s eyes opened and her hands flew out, seizing Jason’s throat, hanging on as if she were hanging onto life itself. Jason thrashed and tried to rip Melinda’s hand from his neck.

“My God, Steve, we have to do something,” Bill said.

Now it was Steve’s turn to restrain Bill. “Let’s not act too hastily, Billy Boy,” Steve said.

He hadn’t called Bill by that name since the Gulf War and Bill knew Steve would not interfere with Melinda even if it meant Jason died, which was exactly what Steve hoped would happen. They watched Jason’s jerking motions slow to a stop. He then stiffened, and then went limp. Melinda held her grip on his throat. Then, as quickly as she had grabbed him, she let go.

As Jason’s limp body hit the floor with a thud, Melinda closed her eyes and returned to the rest Aaron had sent her to. Brushing the curtain aside, Steve and Bill entered the lab. At the same moment the rest of the crew returned and collectively stood just inside the door, mouths agape, wondering what had happened.

”What happened?” Aaron demanded.

“You ain’t gonna believe this, Aaron, but have we got a tale for you.” Steve said.

“Wait,” Bill said, putting a hand on Steve’s chest. “Don’t say a word. Do you think they would believe what happened if you explain it to them?”

“I get your drift,” Steve said.

“Aaron, I want you to ask Melinda what happened. Do it before you ask her anything else. Margo, let’s get the tube out of her throat,” Bill ordered.

“You want me to ask a comatose woman how Jason ended up dead in the middle of the floor?”

“Yes. That’s exactly what I want you to do,” Bill said.

Aaron looked at Bill in disbelief. “Have I just entered the Twilight Zone, or what?”

“Just trust us on this one, Aaron,” Steve told him. “Margo, get the tube out of Melinda’s throat.”

Margo had pulled the endotracheal tube out of Melinda’s windpipe with the ease of a surgeon closing a wound. She had Melinda’s head tilted back to open the airway, allowing her to take long, slow breaths.

Aaron sat next to her bed and said, “Melinda, can you hear me?”

“Yes,” came a trace of a whisper.

“I want you to listen to me. I want you to tell me what happened to Jason just a few minutes ago. Can you do that?” Aaron asked looking toward Bill.

“I – I choked him,” she gasped.

Aaron sat, stunned. He didn’t believe what he was hearing. Now he was *sure* he had entered the Outer Limits. *Make no mistake about it. You went to lunch and when you returned, you found yourself in a different story,* he thought.

“But *why* did you choke Jason?” he asked her.

“Because he was going to kill me, just as he killed the others.” She choked out the words. “With the steel marble.”

“What steel marble?” Aaron asked.

“The one he took out of his pocket. He was going to drop it down the tube in my windpipe, so . . . so I shut his off first.” They told me. Julie. Sheryl. She choked on the words.

Aaron looked back at Bill and Steve as if asking for confirmation.

“She’s telling the truth, Aaron,” Steve said.

“Did you two *see* her do it?” Aaron asked.

“Bill and I got in on the end of it,” Steve said. “Coming through the back door we decided to wait for a few minutes and then see if he was doing anything suspicious. Just when we came through the curtain she let go of Jason. He fell like a ton of bricks.

“We were here, and we *did* watch,” Bill said defensively. “But we never thought she could *kill* him. We thought she would just cut off his breathing until he lost consciousness and then let him go. We never suspected she would hang on so long.”

“Cut the shit, Aaron,” Steve protested. “Jason was a scumbag. He had undermined the experiment since the beginning for his own wicked pleasure. Now the little pile of scum is dead, and I, for one, feel better for it. Boa, throw this slime ball in the freezer so we can get back to business. And, Aaron, just as a side note, I want you to know that if she hadn’t killed Jason, I would have,” Steve finished.

“How are we going to explain his death?” Aaron asked.

“We’re going to throw *it* in the incinerator with the tissue specimens we have gathered,” Steve told him.

“No one’ll ever ask ‘bout Jason. He didn’t have a friend on the planet,” Boa volunteered, closing the freezer door.

“There you have it,” Steve said waving his hand dismissing the subject.

“Well if anyone *does* inquire, I’m going to let them know. . .” Aaron began.

“I have listened to you snivel and whine since this project began,” Steve said through clenched teeth. “Now I’ve listened to as much as I am going to tolerate. I make this promise to you, Aaron. If you *ever* risk my project, my wife, I will personally kill you. Do you understand that?” Steve asked. “Now, if you’re not going to help us, get the hell out.”

“I’ll finish what I’ve started here,” Aaron retorted throwing a clipboard down on a table. “But I’ll be damned if I’ll play your game. You think you’re God, Steve. You act like the rooster in the henhouse, strutting around here, believing you’re doing something productive. You have even convinced these other poor fools that what you’re doing is noble. I’ll tell you something, though. You’re headed for a hard fall. This project will make you the asshole of humanity before it’s all over with. You mark my words.”

“Thanks for those words of wisdom, doctor. Now if you will please get your head out of your ass and get busy, I’d appreciate it,” Steve said. His dislike for Aaron was growing by the second.

Aaron looked at Steve and thought, *There but for the Grace of God go I*. He went back over to Melinda’s bedside. Clearing his throat, he said, “Melinda, are you still with us? I want you to go back to this morning. Can you tell me what you were doing?”

“I was talking with Steve,” Melinda responded.

“What were you talking with Steve about?”

“We were talking about the experiment and how I might be able to help.”

“All right, good. Now move ahead to late morning when you came into the lab. Do you remember Bill starting the I.V.’s?”

“Yes. I thought he was brutal,” Melinda rasped.

“I want you to remember going to sleep. Do you remember

going to sleep, Melinda?”

“I remember going to sleep, then . . . ,” she trailed off. Minutes passed before she spoke again. “There’s a humming sound. It’s a warm humming sound,” she said.

“What do you mean a ‘warm’ humming sound, Melinda?” Aaron asked.

“The sound makes me feel warm all over. Ohhh . . . ,” she said. She trailed off again.

“Tell me what’s happening, Melinda,” Aaron said.

“A light just hit me. It’s beautiful.”

“What are you doing in the light?”

“I’m asking the light a question.”

Steve moved forward and said, “What question?”

“Let me handle this, Steve,” Aaron said angrily.

“Get on with it, then. We don’t need the rhetoric, just the answer,” Steve responded bitterly.

“What question are you asking the light, Melinda?” Aaron asked.

“Why, the one you sent me here to ask, of course.”

“Did you get the answer?” Aaron asked.

“In time. I’ll give it to you in time.”

“Melinda, if you have the answer, give it to us NOW,” Steve demanded angrily.

“Steve, damn it. Would you back off,” Aaron said. “Melinda, do you mean you will give us the answer if we wait until you are ready to give it to us?” Aaron asked.

“No. That’s the answer I got from the light. It said, ‘In time, Melinda. I’ll give it to you in time.’”

Aaron glanced back at Steve with a look that spoke a thousand words. Steve, in turn, simply waived his hand dismissively.

“Melinda,” Aaron said. “I want you to go ahead in time to when you got the answer to the question.”

Again, there was silence and then she started speaking a

language that was foreign to all of them, going on and on until suddenly she stopped as abruptly as she had started. She looked like she slept. Her breathing was slow, her face reflective. Then she spoke again.

“Steve, worrying about April dying isn’t going to stop it from occurring.”

Steve jerked to a standing position. “What do you mean by that, Melinda? Is April going to die?”

“Everyone dies, Steve. I simply mean that you’re worried and you need to stop worrying. Will worrying save April?”

“I suppose not, but how do you know . . .”

“That you’re worrying?” Melinda finished. “The same as I know Aaron is thinking about Cathleen.”

Aaron flinched as though she shot him.

“Cathleen loves you as much as you love her,” Melinda continued, her voice stronger now. “Why don’t you find her. She’s waiting for you, you know

“Melinda, where is she?” Aaron cried. “Tell me, I beg you.”

“Vancouver, Aaron. Where else?”

Aaron stared at her, incredulous. Vancouver, BC, was the town where Cathleen’s sister lived. She was a schoolteacher, a ‘spinster.’ Cathleen had teased Aaron that *if* she lived, she would end living with her sister – like the sisters in ‘Arsenic and Old Lace.’ She, too, would be a spinster. His response had been, “Being a spinster is a better alternative to what you want for yourself now. Any life is better than no life.”

“Melinda,” Aaron said. “I want you to sleep until your mind has translated the answer to the question to English. Then I want you to tell Steve the answer. He will have a recorder going, so just speak when you’re ready. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” Melinda said and instantly fell asleep.

Aaron took his lab coat off and threw it on the floor.

Gentlemen, I have done as much as I can here,” he announced. “Melinda will give you the answer as soon as she’s able. If she doesn’t, there’s nothing further I could do. I’ll give you a call from Seattle to find out how it went.”

Then, before anyone could say a word, he was gone.

“That gutless wonder,” Steve said in disgust. “That stinking traitor.”

And yet, as he had watched Aaron go through the door, he had thought, *There but for the Grace of God . . .*

“Relax, Steve,” Bill assured him. “We don’t need Aaron anymore. As soon as Melinda gives us the answer Ronnie and I can get it to the lab. We’ll have a prototype enzyme by tomorrow this time.”

“I’ll repay Aaron for all his kindness some day,” Steve said.

“Let’s all get some rest. Ronnie, set up the recorders to autorecord. Let’s get a cup of coffee and relax for a few minutes,” Bill offered.

“I’ll stay with Melinda first if you want me to,” Margo offered.

“Thanks, Margo,” Bill said.

“Would you like me to bring you a cup of coffee or something when I come back?” Bill asked.

Margo blushed. “Thank you, doctor. But I’ll wait.”

“Margo, if you’d like, you can grab a quick cup and bring it back. Melinda isn’t going anywhere. She’s stabilized at this point. Come along, it’s been as rough a day for you as any of us,” Bill said.

“All right, doctor.” She wouldn’t have passed up this opportunity for all the money in the world. It was a date, even if it was only a short one, and that was a beginning. Steve dimmed the lights so there was a pale orange glow throughout the lab. He held the door until the last of them was out, then taking one final look at Melinda, closed the door. Just as he did, the freezer door opened.

* * * * *

Jason felt cold. He couldn't remember what had happened to him. He was alone in a dark room. He said, "Mommy, are you there?" But there was no answer. "Mommy, Biffy's here," he whined. I don't want Biffy here. Biffy's gonna suck the air away from me and I'll die."

As Jason regained consciousness, he realized his throat hurt. He started coughing and that made his throat hurt more. He coughed so hard that he puked. A long string of mucous hung from his lower lip. He wiped it off on his sleeve. Then he remembered Melinda. He froze. He tried to remember what happened. He was talking to her, and then . . . , "The bitch strangled me," he said aloud. "But how did I end up in here?"

He stood up and, rubbing his neck, found the light switch. The 15-watt bulb barely lit the twelve by twelve area, its faint glow passing through cold air, slowly finding its way through the fog. Jason sat on the edge of a gurney. One of the Whitelighters' remains lay there, and Jason had to sit on a stiff, cold arm.

Sliding to the floor, he went to the freezer door and heard the dampened voices of Steve and Bill without being able to make out the words. He remembered Melinda reaching for this throat, amazed at how strong someone so fat could be, and then losing consciousness.

The voices faded and he heard the lab door close. Pushing the freezer door ajar, he peeked out and saw the lab was empty save for Melinda who was lying in the bed in the middle of the room. They'd left her alone and from all appearances she was deep in hypnotic sleep

Jason closed the freezer door lightly and looked around for something to strangle her with. He found a cord they used to

tie the body bags closed, wrapped one end around his left hand twice and the other around his right hand three times. He quickly jerked his hands apart to test the strength of the cord. It was plenty strong. He quickly kicked off his shoes, opened the freezer door again and entered the lab as quietly as he could. Circling behind the bed, he inched his way toward Melinda until he was within twenty feet of the head of the bed. Then he heard the sound of metal on metal – like that of a door opening – and froze, a shadow in the dimly lit room. He listened intently for a moment. Then he heard a smaller clicking sound. It was the reel-to-reel tape changing tracks. Sweat was beading up on Jason’s forehead. A single tuft of hair that normally covered his bald head hung down onto his shoulder. He moved forward again, arms extended, cord slackened. Inch by inch he moved until he could hear Melinda breathing. He stood listening to the sound. With each breath Melinda took he could hear a high-pitched sound, like that of a tea kettle in the distance. *Got a whistler*, Jason thought. When Jason was a boy, he sometimes made that sound when he breathed. His mother would slap him in the head and say, “Go blow that whistler out your damn nose so I don’t have to listen to it.”

Embarrassed, he’d run to the bathroom where instead of blowing it out, he’d pick it out. He’d carefully place the large half hard, half mucoid booger in a plastic cup. Later he would put it in his mother’s food. He would sit and watch her eat, waiting for her to take the bite containing the ‘chip’ he left there. He relished watching her take that bite.

As Jason stood listening to Melinda breathe his heart pounded. He wondered if she could ‘feel’ him standing near, ready to pounce. *Should I move slowly or should I jump at her?* he thought. He decided to jump on the count of three. Silently he counted, one . . . two . . . three. Then he leaped toward the bed, slipping the rope easily around Melinda’s

throat. He quickly crossed his hands beneath her head and pulled them in opposite directions. Melinda's body began to jerk, slightly at first, then in powerful tremors. Finally the jerking ended and she was still. Jason kept his grip tight on the ends of the rope for three full minutes after she stopped moving. Looking at the heart monitor hooked on to Melinda, he saw a flat line. A point of green light drawing a line across the screen, moving to the right until it ran out of the room. Then it would disappear, only to reappear on the left of the scope as quickly as it had gone.

When Jason was sure Melinda was dead he loosened the rope. He noticed that his shorts were wet and realized that while he was strangling Melinda, he had had an orgasm. Extracting the rope from around Melinda's throat, he ran to the console, found a piece of paper, and wrote, "One bitch down, one to go." Then extracting a stickpin from the countertop, he laid the note across Melinda's face and stuck the pin into her forehead to secure it before retreating through the atrium and out the back door. Three minutes later, Margo returned.

* * * * *

“You checked the freezer before calling us?” Steve asked.

“No. I checked it after calling you. I figured he had to have been the culprit,” Margo said.

“Shit,” Steve said. “I don’t want a word of this to get out. Bill, I want you to get the lab ready for another patient.”

“Steve, don’t you think this has gone far enough?” Bill asked.

Steve looked stunned. “Are you going to fag out on me now, Bill?”

“Look, Steve. You and I have known each other for . . . ,”

“Don’t say it,” Steve said holding up a hand. “Just don’t even start. If you want to take apart the project then just say so. I’ll finish it somewhere else.”

“Where would you finish it, Steve? Be realistic. We’ve killed thirty-some volunteers, and you want to make it another?”

“I’ll make it one hundred, or one thousand, or one million more if it would mean saving my wife,” Steve said.

“Would you even kill me to save April, Steve?” Bill asked.

Steve turned his head so Bill wouldn’t see the tears stream down his face. He was on the edge and he knew it. His mind teetered on the same edge Jason’s had, just before Jason turned to the wrong side. Was that happening to him? Was he losing his mind? He gathered himself and wiped his tears before looking back at Bill.

“No, I wouldn’t,” he said simply. “I owe you my life a dozen times over. I love you as much as I do April, and I’d do the same for you that I’ve done for her. It doesn’t matter to me what I have to do to save one of those that I love. I’ll do it.”

“I know that, Steve,” Bill told him, putting his hand on his shoulder. “But look at the cost. We have called up a high price

for our information. Have we asked too high a price?"

"We haven't asked anything that someone didn't volunteer to do. We didn't take one life that someone didn't contribute to the cause. Those that died gave their lives for their cause. To say that they died unnecessarily is to undermine their cause. It's as though you and I had died in Kuwait and everyone said we deserved it for being there."

"You have a point," Bill agreed. "But where do we go from here? Our two remaining candidates aren't strong enough to survive the ordeal and we both know it. Besides, without Aaron here we wouldn't get too far with them. We don't know the magic words."

"Look, let's just all go home for a while. I'll get one of the two remaining candidates ready to go at eight o'clock sharp. I want you back here by seven thirty at the latest. If we don't get the answer this time, I will personally close the project down. Agreed?"

"Agreed," Bill said. He knew how hard it was for Steve to decide that and he felt his heart breaking for his friend. Bill had never known distress like he knew now. He grieved to the core of his soul.

"Don't worry, Steve. It'll work out this time," he said as he left. "Let's have a little wartime faith. What do you say?"

"Right," Steve said mustering as much confidence in his voice as possible.

After Bill and the others had left, Steve prepared the lab and went to his office where, after finishing some paperwork, he turned in his swivel chair and looked out of his office window at the afternoon sky. He recalled vignettes of conversations that he and April had shared in intimate times. He could hear her voice, see her smile, smell the wine and taste the meals they had prepared together in love. Hours later, he was still staring out the window into the night, tears running down his face. And then, hearing a clock nearby chime seven, he

jumped out of his chair, and headed out the door, only to stop short, return to his desk, and scribble a note which he folded, put in an envelope, sealed and left it lay on his desk.

Then, returning he undressed, put on a hospital gown and got onto a bed, pulling the tray he had prepared for the next Whitelighter close to him and trying not to notice Melinda's lifeless mound on the bed next to him. Picking up a tourniquet, he wrapped it around his arm and tied it off. He opened and closed his fist several times until a large blood vessels bulged through his skin, picked up a large needle and shoved it into the vein. Then he picked up a syringe containing a large dose of morphine and looked at the clock. It was seven fifteen.

Will I be able to get the information I need in fifteen minutes? he asked himself. *It had better be enough time because I'm afraid it's all the time I'll have. Once Bill comes through that door and sees me here, he'll figure out what's going on and start resuscitating me immediately.*

Steve reached up, took hold of the syringe containing the morphine, closed his eyes and pushed the plunger down as fast as he could. Immediately, he laughed aloud as he floated away from his body. He wasn't even aware when his breathing stopped and his heart followed suit.

As Steve lay dying Bill awoke. He jumped up, looked at the clock that read seven twenty and flew out the door. He knew he could make it to the hospital in ten minutes, but he didn't want to be late. It was too important to Steve who needed his moral support. Bill ran out to his car, jumped in and turned the key. There was a clicking sound, but the engine didn't turn over. "Shit," Bill said aloud. He looked down and found what he suspected. He had left his lights on; the battery was stone dead. Little did he realize that Steve was also.

* * * * *

As Steve was injecting the morphine, Jason watched from a corner of the room. He was laughing to himself how easy it was going to be to kill this Whitelighter. *After I've killed Steve, I'll kill Bill, then Margo, then Ronnie*, he thought. *There are too many loose ends in this tragedy.*

When Steve lost consciousness, Jason approached him. He took a piece of rope out of his pants and wrapped it around his left hand. Once directly over Steve, he began the same ritual of cursing and talking to himself as he had with Melinda. As he prepared himself for the sacrifice, he wrapped the rope around his right hand in a slow circular motion. He stood at the head of the bed and slowly placed the rope on Steve's throat. He stood, poised and ready, relishing the thought of what he was about to do. The feeling that he would experience an orgasm was culminating and he purposefully slowed his actions to delay it. He wanted this one to last forever.

Ever so slowly, he placed the rope around Steve's neck. As he began to pull on the rope Jason's pleasure heightened, and as he ejaculated he pulled the rope as hard as he could. It was then that he heard someone introduce a key into the lock on the lab door.

* * * * *

Steve was running down a long tunnel. Though the tunnel was semi-dark he could see the bluish-green mosaic walls clearly. Steve was running straight at a small light at the end making the tunnel appear literally hundreds of miles long. But, as he ran, an innate sense told him that he was not getting any closer. He tried to run faster, and as he did it was as if something was pulling him back.

Suddenly, he was standing at the foot of his own bed at home. April was lying there dressed in a white lace nightgown he had bought for her several years earlier, her hair laid out behind her head on the pillow in the shape of a fan. As Steve looked at her, she began to glow brighter and brighter until the light became blinding and he had to shield his eyes with his hand. Then, in the next instant, the light was gone, and so was April.

He screamed, “Nnnnnoooooo,” although somewhere in the back of his mind a voice told him not to scream too loud or he would wake April up. When he opened his eyes again, April was standing in front of him speaking, although her lips did not move.

“A bluish liquid that is allotropic and a more active form of oxygen,” she recited, “formed when you expose oxygen to the silent discharge of electricity, and is both irritating and toxic in the pulmonary system.”

“Where did you learn that?” Steve interrupted her.

“It is a general term for a sheet-like mass of substance of nearly uniform thickness, when the layer is one of several associated layers.”

“Where did you learn that?” Steve’s inner voice repeated.

“They told me,” April said, pointing. .

Steve looked behind her. Standing fifty yards away he saw

several winged figures, glowing with the same white light and he knew, with a sudden assurance, that they were angels. And now April was speaking in a different language, one he could understand. It was so simple. Steve reached out to touch her and immediately she was standing fifteen feet away. He walked toward her but the distance between them remained the same.

“You can’t touch me anymore,” April’s inner voice said. “You’ve moved beyond me.” And then she vanished.

Steve was frantic. Crying out, he ran toward the spot from which she had disappeared, only to be engulfed by the light. It surrounded him like water. He felt as though he could swim in it. He was floating. He looked into the light and saw . . . he wasn’t sure. There were people he had known in his life, but they were different, changed in a way he could not define. One by one they reached out to him. Each time he took another hand he felt warmer. Although there were no words spoken, he was receiving messages from each of them. “Welcome home . . . long journey . . . cherished friend . . . first love . . .”

And he was answering them without realizing it as he touched each hand. The messages simply flowed out without thought. He touched the hand of a brown skinned man who said, “Why would you want to know that?” His features were beautiful, perfect, flawless, and as delicate as crystal. He reached for the next hand and a message came through him like a bolt of lightning.

“The answer to the question is as follows.”

Immediately, Steve knew the structure of the enzyme that would cure April. He looked at the man who had given him the answer and recognized him immediately. Naiche had changed, but he was still Naiche.

Steve carried on what seemed a lengthy conversation in Apache with the Indian. The discussion lasted a millionth of a second in reality and carried through several different lan-

guages, and Steve was fluent in all of them. As he talked with the Indian he started noticing something that was unusual. He looked at Naiche to ask him what was happening. Suddenly, Naiche's perfect porcelain face splintered into a million spider web cracks. Steve started falling away from Naiche, tumbling in the light. Then there was blackness. When he opened his eyes again, he saw Boa looking down. He jerked with a start.

"Easy, doc," Boa said "Margo get the tube out. Ronnie, get the tape ready."

As the tube came out of Steve's throat, he started talking. His voice was a mere croak at first. The words were hard to force out and it was painful to speak. Still, he talked nonstop, recalling everything he could of his meeting with those he had met on the other side. He talked until he was too tired to go on and then he talked some more until, finally, he could not get his breath.

Then all was black again.

* * * * *

Bill got out of his car and ran to his neighbor's house. He banged on the door until his neighbor answered

"Jeff, I need to use your car. It's an emergency. My battery's dead and I have to get to the hospital right now."

"Well, sure, Bill. Let me find the keys."

After a few minutes, Jeff found the keys to the car and handed them to Bill. "I'll call AAA and get your battery charged for you. Then I'll bring your car over and trade with you," Jeff told Bill as he was leaving.

Bill received the message at eight and arrived at the hospital ten minutes later. He raced through the doors and down the corridors to the lab. As he came through the door, Boa said, "Thank the good Lord you're here."

Bill looked around trying to figure out what was going on. Margo stood at the head of the bed blocking his view. She bagged Steve while Boa stood at the edge of the bed with the defibrillator paddles in his hands. Ronnie pulled medications out of the crash cart as quickly as she could.

"Where's Steve?" Bill demanded. "What in the hell is going on?"

"That's Steve," Ronnie said. "Margo's breathing for him with an Ambu. We found him dead at seven thirty when we came in."

"He was just laying there, doc," Boa interrupted her excitedly. "There was an I.V. started and an empty syringe hanging out of the tubing. He injected himself!"

"Oh my god! Tell me where we are, Ronnie."

"As soon as we got here and realized what had happened, Margo intubated him and hooked him up to the ventilator," she said. "Boa got him on the monitor and he was flat line. I

shoved meds as fast as I could. Boa zapped him but he remained flat line.” She paused and took a deep breath before continuing. “Then Boa hit him again and Margo started pumping on his chest. We worked on him for ten minutes, then Boa zapped him again. We got a V-fib, I pushed some more meds, and Boa zapped him again. He converted to sinus rhythm and woke up. Boa told Margo to take the tube out because Steve looked like he wanted to say something.”

“I r’member how he wanted the tube out right away, so I thought he wanted it out of himself,” Boa said in his defense.

“That was the right thing to do, Boa,” Bill assured him. “What happened then, Ronnie?” “He started talking in that gibberish language and then in English. We got it all on tape but haven’t had time to listen to it. He rambled on for a while and then went into V-fib again. I got a Lidocaine drip ready there,” she said, pointing at one of the bottles hanging on the I.V. pole. “That’s where we were when you walked in. Margo has reintubated him and we’re ready to zap him on your order.”

“Hit him Boa,” Bill said, taking over. Boa placed the defibrillator paddles on Steve’s chest, one just below the clavicle on the right and the other on the left side and then, “Clear,” Boa called out.

He waited a second and then depressed the buttons on the paddles. There was the hum of electricity passing through circuitry before a thud-like sound exploded in the silence. Steve’s entire body jerked in response to the bolt of lightning passing through his heart.

Bill looked at the monitor. The line was flat.

“We’ve converted him to asystole, zap him again,” he said. Boa did, but the monitor still showed a flat line. “Let’s do some chest compression,” Bill said. Then Boa placed his hands on Steve’s sternum and began C.P.R.

“Let’s give him another plug of meds, Ronnie,” Bill said.

Ronnie extracted the syringes containing the meds, popped the tops off each, screwed the plunger into the syringes, inserted the needles into the 'Y' connector of the I.V. tubing and pushed the medication in. Bill let Boa continue with C.P.R. for three minutes before telling him to hit him again. Boa squeezed a blob of conductor onto Steve's chest, rubbed the paddles over the lubricant to spread it out evenly, pushed firmly down on the paddles, and shouting "Clear," zapped Steve again.

They continued twenty-five minutes until at last, Steve's heart took off like a racecar, after which, Bill, Boa and Margo accompanied Steve to the Intensive Care Unit of the main hospital.

Once back in the lab, they gathered around the machines and listened to Steve speak, first in a heavenly language and then in English. Ronnie listened intently as Steve gave what amounted to a lecture on enzymatic structure, writing down every word of what he said. As soon as the tape ended, Ronnie started for the door, but Bill caught her by the tail of her lab coat.

"Where are you going?" he demanded.

"To the biochem lab to start developing an enzyme."

"Did he give us the answer?"

"He sure as hell did," Ronnie said.

At that, all of them screamed, jumped, and celebrated the news. Each passed hugs around freely.

As Bill embraced Margo, he said, "Let's get together for dinner tonight. We have a lot to celebrate."

As the crew cleaned up, each lost in his or her own thoughts and remembering the trials, the tests, the lives lost in their own way, they felt sad about the possibility of the project shutting down. All, that is, but one.

* * * * *

Steve remained semi-comatose for six weeks, slowly regaining his strength. On the day he finally became fully conscious, he awoke to find Bill standing beside the bed. “Welcome back to the land of the living,” his friend said, squeezing his arm.

“How did I do?”

“You did just fine,” Bill told him. “I’ll explain it all to you when you’re stronger but believe me, you did just fine.”

“And April?”

“She’s right next door,” Bill said. “Relax. She’s fine. We’re giving her the enzyme.”

Tears began to stream down Steve’s face. ““Is it working? Please tell me that it is working.”

“Too soon to tell, but I think it will work.”

“I want to see her.”

“Okay,” Bill said. “But there’s something you need to know first.”

“What is it?” Steve asked. The tone of Bill’s voice told him that it was something he didn’t want to hear.

“She’s trached. We had to do it. It came to that point.”

“But she’s all right?”

“She’s tolerating it well. When she gets better there will be a minimal scar on her throat and that’s all.”

“What about Joshua?”

“Margo’s taking care of him,” Bill said.

“Where?”

“At my place,” Bill answered sheepishly.

“You devil,” Steve exclaimed. “I knew she would get to you.”

Bill pushed the nurses’ call button and a nurse came in. “Bring us a gurney. We’re going to take a ride,” Bill told her.

“Let me go in a wheelchair, Bill,” Steve said.

“Not a chance,” Steve told him. “You’re not well enough to sit up. You’re lucky to be here at all. Now you are going to do exactly what I tell you. I intend on getting you well enough to kick your ass all over the yard for the stunt you pulled.

“You’d better bring some help,” Steve said smiling. “Once I’m strong enough to leave here I’m going to take a little vacation with my wife and son.”

“You deserve it. You might have to fight off the press, though.”

“What do you mean?”

“Dan got wind of our success. Now its all over the world.”

“Great. What did he tell them?”

“They found a cure for A.L.S. and the team who found it would grant an interview in three weeks.”

“When was that?”

“Two weeks ago.”

“So in one week we’re going to have to meet the press?”

“Yep. Dan wants us to spill all the beans. He thinks the end justifies the means, and he thinks the press will feel the same.”

The gurney arrived and they lifted Steve onto it. Bill wheeled him out into the hall and through the door of the adjoining room. April was half sitting in a bed. A long, white tube extended from her throat at one end and to a machine at the other. When April saw Steve, tears began to roll down her cheeks. She was unable to make a sound because of the hole in her windpipe. Bill rolled the gurney over to the bed and parked it so Steve could see April.

“I’ll leave you two alone for a while so you can catch up on the news,” Bill said.

“How much have you told her, Bill?” Steve asked.

“Nothing,” Bill said. “I thought I’d leave that up to you, hero.”

Steve talked to April for an hour, explaining everything that had happened. April cried for Melinda, for all of them,

until she simply ran out of tears.

Steve left the hospital six days later, giving him one day to prepare for the interview with the press. That Tuesday, he arrived at the hospital early so he could visit April before going to the conference and then met Bill, Margo, Boa and Ronnie in the lab. They went as a group to the conference room where hospital personnel and press alike met them with a standing ovation. The ovation lasted for ten minutes and when the questions began, all of them answered as honestly as possible without bringing out any of the dirty laundry. Dan made excuses for Aaron and Jason, apologizing for their not being at the conference but insisting the people present could answer all questions. The interview lasted an hour and a half when Dan announced there was no more time. "I'm sorry ladies and gentlemen, but these people have another important meeting after lunch and they will need some time to prepare for it. We will arrange for another interview next week. That's all for today."

When they left Bill said, "That was quick thinking about another meeting."

"But you do have another meeting," Dan said.

"With whom?" Steve asked.

"With twenty of the top researchers in neuromuscular research in the world."

"No one told us about this," Ronnie objected.

"It came up last night at the board meeting. Numero Uno told me he invited them two weeks ago. What was I to say? 'Sorry, but tomorrow isn't going to be good for them. They have a press conference?'"

"Who told the board about our breakthrough?" Bill asked.

"I did. I wanted to start capitalizing on this success as soon as we could. Besides, the board has been breathing down my neck on this project since we took it to them. I felt I owed them

something. So I let them in on it as soon as you told me.”

“I should have never told you,” Bill said. “I don’t know why I did in the first place.”

“You told me because I asked you why Steve was in I.C.U. and you knew better than to lie.”

“Well, I’m sorry just the same.”

“Sorry or not, you have to impress these people. They’ve come from all over the world to hear this news. Corporations will divert billions of dollars from research in neuromuscular science and give it to other projects. You have to convince them that this isn’t just a hoax.”

“Why would we try to perpetrate a hoax on society about something like this?”

“Come on, Bill, don’t be so naïve. People do things like this every day to get more research money and you know it. In fact, I know you have changed some data yourself on a couple of occasions to get more money.”

“I was on the verge of finding the answer to some important questions, too. It wasn’t anything like this. And I did produce in the end.”

“So what? Does that make what you did right? You have to realize that these people are suspicious of your findings and you’re going to have to give them something. They aren’t necessarily asking for proof that you’ve found a cure. They want to know how to carry the ball you’ve thrown. They are going to want to *continue* your research.”

“Heaven forbid,” Steve said.

“Oh, right,” Dan said. “It was all right as long as this involved your wife. But now that you’ve done what you wanted to do, forget it? You’re even a bigger asshole than I dreamed.”

“I’m not justifying what I did, Dan. But I am saying there are going to be several people who are going to lose their lives needlessly because of it. Every nickel-and-dime research lab

in the country is going to be putting out ads for volunteers, victims, whether paid for or not.”

“You started it. I’m just along for the prizewinning ride and the publicity. I’m the most famous hospital administrator in the nation right now, and I love it. This institution will quadruple in size in the next ten years. Doctors from all over the world will want to come here. And I will demand twenty times my normal salary next week! And all because I took a chance. And now, it’s time for lunch. I want you to meet me back here at one-fifteen.”

They were there and they *did* grant the interview. The experience was grueling. Dan had been right. They did want to know how to carry the ball. Some researchers put together plans for their own programs while listening to them. Some would send volunteers to the other side for the answer to the problem of cancer, others for the answer to birth defects, yet others for the common cold. Each had a venture in mind that meant setting up research departments similar to those that Steve, Bill and Aaron had.

By the end of the interview Steve had a headache the size of the Grand Canyon. Bill offered to watch Joshua for the night and Steve gratefully accepted. After slipping in to see April briefly, he went home and crawled wearily into bed. So much had happened and now there was an uncertain future to face.

He had no sooner gone to sleep when the dream began. He was walking down the corridor to the lab when he saw the shadow of a hooded man in the hall, a figure he approached with caution.

“Who’s there?” he whispered and when there was no answer, a sense of urgency came on him.

Tearing off the cloak, he looked into the face of the man and screamed.

* * * * *

Fifty minutes after Steve left the hospital, the evening nurse bathed April, cleaning around the stoma in April's neck, and suctioned the mucous out of her windpipe before hooking April back to the ventilator. Then she returned to the nurses' station where she pulled April's chart out of the holder and charted her procedures.

"May I see that chart?" someone asked.

"I'm sorry Dr...?"

"Bishop. Dr. Bishop. Steve asked me to look in on April tonight before I left. I'm ready to leave."

"I just gave her a bath and medicated her," the nurse responded.

"Splendid. I'll let her rest then tonight. If Bill or Steve ask, tell them I checked in on her, would you?" he asked handing her April's chart. "And make sure someone calls those blood gases to Bill in thirty minutes."

"What blood gases?"

"The ones that Bill ordered before he left," Dr. Bishop said.

The nurse opened the chart and turned to the Doctor's Orders. There, Bill wrote the order: Draw arterial blood gases at six p.m. and call the results. B. Levitt, M.D.

"I didn't even see Bill's order," she told him. "I've never drawn arterial blood for gases before."

"Terrific," Dr. Bishop said disgustedly. "Can you find someone to do it? I want to get out of here before midnight and I still have my patients to see."

"I'm sorry doctor, but I'm the only R.N. on the floor right now. I'm just covering for dinner. This isn't my regular assignment. I usually work in pediatrics. I've taken care of April's son more than I've taken care of her."

“By the way, how *is* Joshua?” Dr. Bishop asked.

“Just fine. In fact, he’s in Pedi tonight.”

“He isn’t sick, is he?”

“No. Dr. Levitt asked if he could leave Joshua there until about seven. He and a woman he works with were going out for some dinner. Bill promised he’d watch Joshua tonight because Steve needed the break.”

“They all need a break right now. They have been through a lot today. You’ve heard about their breakthrough and all the interviews, of course.”

“Of course. Who hasn’t?” the nurse asked excitedly.

“Well, listen. I’ll go ahead and draw those gases for you *only* if you’ll let me come down and visit Joshua before I leave,” Dr. Bishop said winking at her.

“Of course,” she said.

“Deal. If you will get a kit out, set it up and heparinize the syringe for me, I’ll be right in.”

The nurse went to the utility room, snatched an arterial blood gas kit from the shelf and went to April’s room while Dr. Bishop went into the dirty utility room and washed his hands. As he was coming out of the room, the nurse was leaving April’s room.

“It’s all set up, Doctor. If you’ll excuse me now I have some other patients to see. Will I see you in Pedi later?”

“Count on it,” Dr. Bishop said.

April was sleeping soundly. He walked over to the tray the nurse had set up, put on the sterile gloves and, picking up the syringe, gently shook April awake.

“Hi, April,” he said as she opened her eyes. “I’m Dr. Bishop. I need to take a little blood from you for a test. Would that be all right with you?”

April nodded her head and closed her eyes again sleepily as Dr. Bishop picked up a small vial, broke the lid off, filled

the syringe and set the vial back on the tray. All the time he worked he spoke softly to her, reassuringly.

“I’m going to see Joshua tonight,” he said. “Would you like me to tell him you love him?” As she nodded, he held the syringe up, tapped gently on the sides to break loose trapped air bubbles in the medication, and ejected them from the syringe. Placing two fingers on April’s brachial artery to isolate it, he identified the landmark for inserting the needle and cleaned the arm with an alcohol swab.

“April, I’m going to stick you with a needle now,” he said in a low voice. “Please don’t jerk your arm or it will hurt, Okay? I’ll keep talking to you while I’m drawing the blood. Sometimes that helps take your mind off the pain.”

He inserted the needle into her arm and she grimaced in pain.

“I know that hurts a little, and I’m sorry,” he soothed. “But the pain will end soon. April, I want to tell you a story,” he said as he slowly advanced the plunger. “It’s about my sister’s cat Biffy.”

The End