

# The Getaway Driver:

Three Stories

By

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## ABSTRACT

The three stories in *The Getaway Driver* aim to explore the means by which we find ourselves down paths we never imagined, towards uncertain, unanticipated, or unwanted goals. These stories also offer practical advice on a variety of topics as diverse as proper firearm handling, igloo construction, and the seeking out of deities in the continental United States.

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## THE GETAWAY DRIVER

ELI CALLED ME around ten in the morning the day before he was supposed to go to jail and told me to come over to his apartment. When I got there, he was smiling like an idiot and smoking a cigarette, sprawled out on his couch. He was a big guy, though he managed and concealed his girth with expensive button-downs that he spent most of his money on. His mop of curly, light brown hair seemed to inflate and deflate along with his disposition; when I found him that morning his hair was

standing on end, as if it were trying to leap off his head. Eli had high cheekbones that, on a thinner guy, would have made him look effeminate. I could tell he was stoned—his face was red and swollen—but I didn't know on what. "Check it out," he said, pointing at the wall just beyond the coffee table I'd lent him a year ago. His apartment wasn't much; the living room barely held his white leather couch and the coffee table and a Panasonic TV sitting on top of a pedestal. It was literally a pedestal: a hollowed-out, Roman-looking cylinder with ridges that Eli had found in an alleyway and dragged home. I don't know what the pedestal had been used for originally, or why it had been in that alleyway, but Eli had the sharpest sense of fashionable irony of anybody you've ever met, and he knew the effect the pedestal would have in that shithole. "Look at the floor," he said.

Following where he was pointing, I kneeled. There was a burn mark in the floor about the size of a nickel, right at the edge of the carpet where the floor met the wall. I thought I could smell the smoke, but given the range of odors in the apartment that seems unlikely. "What is this?" I asked. "Is that from a cigarette?"

"Nope!" Eli laughed. From the coffee table, he picked up a revolver that I hadn't even noticed was there and pointed it at me. "Kah blaow!"

I put my hands on my head and ran towards the doorway. In my mind, when I imagine myself in heroic situations that involve guns being

pointed at me, I always see myself performing some kind of disarming maneuver that tips the scales in my favor. Some piece of jujitsu I'd intuitively realize. It seems too me the last thing a thug would be expecting is someone so fearless, and that my fearlessness alone would frazzle him and, in his panic, I would be saved and be able to save whatever beautiful woman I was with. But there were no beautiful women in Eli's apartment (nor had there ever been, as far as I knew) so I covered my head with my hands and, screeching a little, ran for the door.

"Jesus Christ, no!" Eli said, though, for some reason, he followed me with the barrel of the gun. "Don't freak out. It's not loaded anymore."

"Don't fucking do that!" I yelled at him, still pawing at the deadbolt.

"I know, sorry. Jesus Christ."

"Don't point fucking guns at people!" My voice was up three octaves.

"I know, okay. Okay, that was dumb." Eli started giggling. He looked at the revolver in his hand and realized he was still pointing it at me. He looked as surprised as if it were being pointed at him and set the gun down on his lap. "That was dumb. I'm a little shaken up, and I'm not thinking so good. Sorry."

I took a long look at the door and considered leaving. I'd just woken up, for Christ's sake. If it had been any other day, when Eli wasn't being sent to jail within 24 hours, I'd like to think I would've left and



spared myself his bullshit. Instead, I took out a cigarette of my own from my jacket, walked over to the table and lit it with a match from a box of Kitchen Strike-Anywheres sitting half-open on the couch. “Is that why you called me over here? To point guns at somebody?”

“Did you think I was going to shoot you?” he asked with interest. Eli was a natural mouth-breather; his default facial expression was a slack jaw and wide eyes. He knew how unappealing this expression was and so, for the most part, he made an effort at controlling his face and his mouth, especially in front of others. He slipped and breathed loudly and obviously through his open mouth when he smoked, which was often, or when he was fascinated by something or other or captivated or when he was drunk. He was smiling at me now with his weird, gaping grin. “Did you think I would do that?”

I took a drag off my cigarette. I was actually still catching my breath. “Quit grinning at me and breathe with your goddamn nose. What happened to your carpet?”

“You need to get a hold of yourself, you know? You can’t panic like that. That’s why you’ll never make a decent getaway driver. It’s vitally important that you *keep your cool*. “

“What happened to your carpet?”

“I shot it with this gun,” he said and brandished the revolver again.

I had no response to that. Maybe it was embarrassment over panicking and squealing at having a gun pointed at me, but I didn't want to be the square who pointed out how monumentally bad it was that he'd shot off a gun inside an apartment complex before noon on a Wednesday. That's the effect Eli had on me—I felt, somehow, less cool or worldly because I *hadn't* endangered anyone's life today and I wasn't going to jail tomorrow. I looked at the gun which he'd set back down in his lap, and thought I could see the barrel glowing red hot. I almost told him not to burn himself, but caught myself in time.

I'd known Eli since we were in junior high school, but I didn't have much use for him then. He had a weird arrogance that rubbed everyone the wrong way, and even then he had an amazing talent for winding up mired in bullshit. Eli lived in the same neighborhood as my best friend Dolph, and the two of them had known each other since they were very young. It was through Dolph that I met Eli. Dolph was a restless guy and he always wanted to climb something or fight somebody. We became friends over comic books and kung fu movies, and the first time I went over to his house he insisted we climb on top of the Westgate shopping center to see if we could do back-flips off the roof. I agreed that it sounded like a good idea and, without saying anything, Dolph had us out of his house into his neighborhood.

We walked for a block or two until we came to a long driveway that curved off from the road, obscuring the house that it led to. There wasn't another driveway like it that I had seen in that neighborhood—it was like the suburban equivalent of a private drive. The rest of the neighborhood was made up of cheap, one story houses, the kind of thing you'd expect from an area sitting across from an Interstate exit. Eli's house was easily the nicest in the neighborhood. It rested against a small lake, with a wooden dock leading out from the yard into the water. I found out later that his parents were both psychologists with private practices. The house, where I'd come to spend some time in over the next decade, was a two-story behemoth with a finished basement. It was a house of dens, with two or three rooms that served no purpose other than watching TV or playing foosball, the most impressive of which was a loft that overlooked a massive living room. But all I could see when Dolph and I walked up was the outside – brick, covered in Ivy. “This is a nice house. Whose is it?” I asked, after walking down the driveway for what seemed like a long time.

“His parents are Jewish,” Dolph replied, and left it at that.

Eli answered the door, his mouth hanging wide open. He hadn't gained a sense of embarrassment over this feature yet. “Good Morrow, sirs,” he said. I immediately disliked him. We were thirteen and thus had no etiquette when it came to introductions, so the two of us just eyed

each other for a second or two before we both turned our attention to Dolph.

“Let’s go, let’s get up on that roof.” Apparently the two of them had discussed this idea before, because Eli knew instantly what Dolph was getting at and he turned green. “Come on, let’s do it, quick quick quick.”

Eli looked at something behind him in the vast compound that was his house—maybe his television with its promise of safety. Then he looked back at Dolph. Dolph was a hard guy to say no to, as numerous, frustrated women would later attest. The problem was, as Dolph knew full well, Eli’s weight. When Eli and I would reconnect years later, you’d have called him stocky, bordering on chubby. But, at this point, he was a full-on Fat Kid, and years of forced schoolyard athletics had instilled in him a natural fear of activity. But there were worse things than being out of breath and he was standing at Eli’s front door. “Indeed,” Eli conceded with a sigh.

We walked about a mile to the shopping center, stopping first in a toy store that featured educational novelty crap. The clerk recognized Dolph and Eli immediately and eyed them terribly. Dolph nudged me. “Go talk to that ass-head,” he whispered. “Ask him about the matinee puzzles.”

I did. The clerk became animated and started showing me pictures out of a catalog of seals and porpoises. While he did, Dolph and

Eli darted around the shop for a few minutes before quickly walking out the door. I let the clerk run out of steam and told him that I didn't know, that I'd think about it. When I walked outside, I saw the two of them turning a corner of the parking lot toward the rear of the shopping center.

I ran to catch up. Dolph had snatched a fistful of marbles and a small snow globe with the letter "B" frosted in fake snow inside. Eli had one of those green army men with their feet attached to a molded plank and a plastic parachute fixed to its back. "I'm going to toss this from the roof," he said with a grin. "See how she flies!"

"That's pretty gay," Dolph said. Eli shrugged.

The back of the shopping center was all pallets and dumpsters. The doors were all the same tan color, and some of them didn't have door knobs since they were only to be accessed from the inside. We spotted a pile of milk crates behind the drug store and Dolph ran toward it. He had one leg on the crates and in an instant he was pulling himself up onto the roof and looking down at us. He wasn't that high up - maybe twelve or fifteen feet - but the distance seemed like a lot. Dolph had shoulder length blond hair and standing up there with the sun behind him he looked very impressive. "He looks a little like a god," Eli muttered. I had never heard anybody talk that way before. I kind of liked it, since the phrase reminded me of something somebody would say in a Bruce Coville novel, but I recognized that it was unusual and that, combined

with the first impression Eli had made on me as a fat, spoiled mouth-breather, turned me sour. Turning towards him with a shitty look on my face, I saw that he was already regretting saying anything.

I walked towards the crates and climbed them. I didn't have Dolph's grace but I made it up. I asked Dolph, "still wanna do a backflip off?"

Dolph grinned. "It's pretty high, ain't it?"

Eli walked over to the crates and put a hand on them. I saw he was shaking. He fumbled up on the pile and grabbed the ledge of the roof with both hands. Beneath him, the crates wobbled and tipped over, and we had to pull him up by his arms. He lay panting on the roof, clutching the paratrooper that he had fished out of his pocket.

The clatter of the crates falling over and Eli kicking at the wall trying to get up must have been louder than we thought. A man in a white dress shirt and a tie came out of a doorknob-less exit with three other guys. Their uniforms were from the drug store—apparently what we were on top of. "Get off the roof, *now*," said the guy with a tie who I assumed was the manager.

Dolph relished the opportunity. He ran down the roof a ways until he was just over a dumpster. The lid was closed and Dolph jumped down on top of it. There was a hell of a noise. Then he hopped down to the pavement and took off, not looking back. This was his way; sudden, drastic action without consultation or regard for his accomplices. This

scene would repeat itself with subtle variations for years to come. Sometimes I'd follow him and we'd outrun whoever was chasing us (or whoever we assumed was chasing us) and sometimes I'd stay behind and try to talk my way out of the situation. I usually failed, and I'd take my scolding and sooner or later they'd turn me loose. Eventually I learned that you always run because they never wanted you bad enough to seriously try to catch you, not when you're fourteen or fifteen or sixteen, and you were just on their roof or stole something stupid or were generally being a minor pain-in-the-ass. They almost never called the cops, and when they did, we'd get yelled at and that would be that. Eli always stayed and he always got caught. He didn't trust his body enough to carry him out of trouble. As a result, he became very, very good at talking his way out of bullshit. He cut his teeth for bullshit on the fire escapes of downtown Ann Arbor and in the back rooms of small businesses too numerous to count. Over the years, as Eli grew into himself, he had to rely on this skill more and more often and the stakes grew higher with each successive encounter. This time, on this roof, my first, I stayed because I didn't know any better, and Eli stayed because he did.

The pharmacy people watched Dolph's escape with awe. One of them whistled and said, "Jesus Christ, look at that little shit run." I couldn't believe I'd been abandoned. And left with Eli, no less, who sat on the roof cross legged. He didn't seem surprised by what was going on.

The manager watched Dolph run for a moment, then fixed his attention back on us. “Both of you get down right now, or I’m calling the cops.”

“You don’t have to!” I yelled, a little louder than necessary. I felt a panic rising. “We’re coming down! We’re sorry!” I walked over to where Dolph had jumped down over the dumpster and lowered myself onto the top of the lid, which buckled and collapsed as soon as I landed. I fell into the dumpster which was mercifully full of closed, secured trash bags. I climbed out and put my hands up, for some reason.

Eli was still cross-legged on the roof. The manager yelled up, “Now you, tubby.”

Eli shook his head. “I don’t think I’ll be doing that, no.”

“I’m not playing around with you. I’ll call the fucking cops.”

“Nevertheless, I’m not jumping down. I could very well break my ankle or tear my ACL.”

One of the lesser pharmacists made a hissing noise with his teeth, as if he had just stubbed his toe. “Shit, he’s totally right. If he gets hurt we are fucked. His parents could sue.”

“His parents are psychologists,” I offered.

“What does that have to do with anything? I think we better call the cops or something and let them deal with these idiots.”

And that’s how, an hour later, Eli finally got off the roof. The Ann Arbor Fire Department parked a fire truck behind the Westgate shopping



center and raised a cherry picker and a fireman to the roof to get him down. They blocked off either side of the building with cop cars and brought an ambulance along for good measure. It was nearing dusk and the lights from the emergency vehicles must have been visible from the highway. Passersby probably thought someone had taken hostages or robbed a bank. The cops and paramedics and extra firemen stood looking up at Eli, shaking their heads, disgusted. One of the firemen shouted, "What were you even *doing* up there, kid?" Eli took out the little paratrooper and carefully unfolded his parachute. Without saying a word, he tossed the figure into the air and we, all of us, watched silently as the toy rose, its plastic parachute expanded, and the paratrooper wafted gently to the ground. The little man even landed on his feet.

Eli and I walked along the outer wall of his apartment building trying to locate the exit hole. "I'm certain, *quite* certain, that the angle I fired from would have made the bullet leave the building." Eli straightened his arm in an imaginary trajectory.

I craned my neck to see better along the white siding. The building was a duplex and Eli lived in the upstairs unit. "You are quite certain of fuck-all."

"Don't be that way."

"What if you shot into somebody else's apartment? What if you shot your downstairs neighbors?"

“Impossible. You saw that hole. It was along the wall. Nobody was in any danger. You need to keep a positive attitude. That’s why I called you: I need positive support right now.”

We walked around the building for another half-hour before deciding that if there was a bullet hole, we couldn’t find it. Eli explained that he was preparing his guns for storage in anticipation of getting locked up. He was cleaning them, something he’d never done before or even knew how to do. This one happened to be an antique and he must’ve been distracted, he said, because he’d inadvertently left a round in the chamber.

“It might be lodged in the wall. Maybe it hit a stud,” I said.

“That’s unlikely. That is a huge gun. If it couldn’t go through a few pieces of wood I would be very disappointed in the gentleman who sold it to me.”

“Well, shit, Eli. I don’t see a hole. And your neighbors must be at work because they definitely would have called the cops. I think it may be your lucky day.”

We walked around to the front of the building and sat on the roof of his car (a beige ‘89 Ford Escort I’d sold him a year earlier). “What would they do to me?” Eli said, not looking at me. “Throw me in jail twice?”

I could see he was being morose, but I couldn't resist correcting him, then or ever. "They could throw more charges on top of it. They could keep you in longer."

"I know that, man. I was kidding. Jesus." Eli pulled out his wallet and flipped through the cash. All twenties from what I could see. "We probably oughta leave though. Just to be safe."

"I agree."

"Okay, I'll buy you some breakfast. For being such a little ray of sunshine. But you drive though, yeah? I've had a few beers." He was not concerned with my safety; the Escort was equipped with a breathalyzer attached to the ignition that prevented the driver from starting the car if their blood-alcohol content registered above a certain point. Not only that, the information was stored in a database that'd be analyzed later by Eli's probation officer. He told me once that *that* was what disturbed him the most; some bureaucrat from the future, spying on him, judging him. So I drove whenever we were together not only because I was generally sober in the middle of the day, but also because of the device itself. To get the breathalyzer to read accurately, you had to breathe into it with a certain amount of force while humming at the same time. The resulting noise sounded like a kazoo when performed correctly. I don't know why you had to hum, why just breathing wasn't enough. Eli said otherwise you could fake out the machine with an air compressor or a fan, but I wasn't sure. At any rate, Eli was incapable of making the sound in front

of an audience, and so when we were together, he asked me to drive. I breathed into the tube, waited for the congratulatory three beeps, which meant that you were sober enough to drive according to the State of Michigan, and started the car.

“Let’s make one stop before we grab food.” Eli said. He was fussing with the glove compartment, and I thought I saw a glint of black metal before he latched the little door.

The three of us, Eli, Dolph, and I, got into the local “open” high school together, where students had to apply to get in and then were selected by lottery. The premise behind the school was progressive; students called their teachers by the first names, the entire city was designated as the “campus,” and the administrators generally emphasized non-traditional education. What happened in practice was that some students, a minority of self-motivating go-getters, were able to “take hold of their education” and create a curriculum in conjunction with school administrators that made college admissions officers go cross-eyed with pleasure. These students then wrote their own ticket and eventually became the leaders of the free world, the movers and shakers; well-rounded, interesting people who never told lies and were, one assumes, amazing lovers to boot. The rest of us smoked pot.

Eli took to marijuana naturally, gracefully. Perhaps the only graceful transition of his life. While the rest of us went through an

awkward period when we were first introduced to pot—a general discomfort with the new sensation, the strangeness of the first high, the reconciliation one had to make with the anti-drug espousals from teachers and celebrities that we had been subject to our entire lives, the adjustment to secrets kept from your parents, the shift in seeing “the system” go from something you never thought about at all to a looming, threatening force that wanted to stop you from having fun—Eli didn’t miss a beat. It was as if he’d been unconsciously waiting for marijuana his whole life. His neuroses dulled, his speech became less pretentious and he became generally more relaxed around others. And his immediate adjustment to the pot culture into which we were all initiating ourselves made him somehow superior, like some kind of slacker guru. Here was someone who took being high in stride; Eli enjoyed smoking, but he wasn’t ostentatious, displaying brand new pipes and paraphernalia every week like some did, or reminding everyone how high he got when he smoked. He functioned; he mastered the careful art of attending class stoned, which was crucial to that all-important practice of speaking with authority while stoned. Eli gained confidence, lost weight, learned to breathe through his nose, and I started to like him.

I was one of those for whom the drugs would have been better put off. Pot was everywhere; smoking a joint was as casual as drinking a glass of water in our high school. I smoked for the most after-school-special reason of all reasons: everyone was doing it. Instead of meeting

girls or developing interests or taking any steps whatsoever to better myself when I was in high school, I smoked pot. The ubiquity of smoking had me fooled that getting high was a substitute for having a social life, though I wouldn't realize that until well after I'd graduated.

I began to live vicariously through Eli and Dolph, even though I was right alongside them. I tagged along on their escapades, climbed more roofs, stole more shit that I didn't need or want, wondering what made them so fearless and increasingly wanting to show them that I, too, didn't give a fuck.

I don't mean to say Eli turned into Frank Sinatra overnight. On the contrary, for those who didn't know him, he developed a preternatural ability during high school to rub people the wrong way for the smallest offenses. For looking at a girl's leg (her name was Sasha and she was wearing a mini-skirt, sitting on a bar stool at a local diner and we were all staring at her legs—my god those legs) Eli was forced to lick her boyfriend's shoe as punishment. It was an ugly episode, a moment in my life I'm not proud of. Here was my friend—regardless of what I might've thought of Eli, we were childhood friends—on his hands and knees in the parking lot of a real-estate agency, nearly enclosed by a sickle of high school seniors, one of whom, Romeo, a dark-skinned, black-haired, mustachioed bad-ass, had taken offense at Eli for staring at his gorgeous, exhibitionist girlfriend and her world-class legs.

Dolph and I watched as Eli tried to talk his way out of the shoe-licking as he had talked his way out of so many ass-beatings for similar offenses, looking over at us while his face was inches away from Romeo's size-twelve Nikes.

"I just think it's possible," Eli said, on his hands and knees, supplicating before the cross-trainer, "it is *possible*, that she mistook me checking my watch for something else. Which is *completely* an honest mistake. I'm looking down—you know, at my wrist—her legs are down there... that *completely* makes sense, right? I would make that mistake, absolutely. If I was her, you know?"

"You need to shut the fuck up and lick this shoe, man." Romeo spoke loudly, for the benefit of his crew, who frequently hooted and hollered their encouragement .

"Okay, but what does that get you?" Eli asked, looking up at Romeo. "I lick your shoe and *then* where are we? Sure, everyone's gonna see me lick your shoe and that's really humiliating and everything but at the end of the day, who really wins?"

"I win, motherfucker."

"Of *course* you win, no one is disputing that. But wouldn't you rather walk away with something? Wouldn't you rather win...a prize?"

I couldn't believe my ears. What in the fuck is he talking about? Did he just say a "prize?"

Dolph and I looked at each other. Dolph was barely suppressing a giggle. Romeo and his friends laughed. “What’s my prize, bitch?” Romeo asked.

Eli smiled. For a second I thought he might walk away from the whole thing. “That’s the beauty of it, Romeo! Whatever you want, man! Let’s make it happen! A mistake was made, not her fault, certainly not my fault, and now we can forget this whole thing with some kind of...prize.”

Romeo was almost buying it. “What you got, man? What you got for me?”

“Okay, all right. Now we’re talking, right? I’ve got like...”Eli paused and did some calculations. “Forty some dollars in my wallet right now.”

Romeo’s smile fell away. Everyone was quiet and I felt the air grow tense. Dolph folded his arms and took a step backward. One of Romeo’s crew whistled and said “Romeo, he tryin’ a *buy* you dawg.”

Romeo glared down at Eli without saying anything for what seemed like hours. Then he said, quietly, almost in a whisper “you tryin’ a *buy* me, motherfucker?”

I wanted to shout from the sidelines: that’s what a prize is! What did you think he was offering! It’s a motherfucking prize! But I was a coward and I stayed silent. The reversal seemed so unfair to me, to dangle the promise of escape in front of Eli’s nose only to snatch it away, to use the offer as an excuse for aggravation. Only later did I realize that



the whole shoe-licking was theater: there was no right answer, there was no restitution, just the delicate dance with fragile, teenage egos and juvenile notions of respect and manhood. Eli was attempting reason in an unreasonable situation and I admired him for it.

So the negotiations fell apart. This was the compromise; Eli would lick Romeo's shoe instead of receiving an ass-beating for disrespecting Romeo's woman and his honor as a man. Eli licked that shoe, and the sight of it made everyone watching sick to their stomach, including the crowd of seniors supporting Romeo, all of whom stopped laughing and watched in silence and disgust as Eli put his tongue to the white laces, his eyes wide open. The crowd dispersed, leaving Eli and Dolph and me in the parking lot. I reasoned with myself that there was nothing I could do, that there were too many of them for Dolph and me to get involved, but I felt deeply ashamed of my inaction. Dolph hardly waited for the assailants to leave before laughing his ass off.

"You licked a fucking shoe!"

"I know I did."

"You *never* lick a shoe! Didn't you know that? Didn't your mother ever tell you that?"

Eli smiled, but he wouldn't look at us. "I guess I'm just a rebel, you know? They say don't lick shoes, and I can't help but buck 'em."

I couldn't tell if Dolph was trying to make light of what'd happened to ease the tension, to get us laughing to ease the awkwardness, to ease

his own guilt that must have mirrored mine, or if Dolph was laughing because he genuinely thought seeing his friend devastated and humiliated in front of a crowd of people was hilarious.

Eli began selling pot not long after that and eventually he started carrying a weapon around, ostensibly to protect himself from would-be thieves. And he made a point of letting everyone know; never missing an opportunity to flash the gun or to tell about some scrape he narrowly avoided with would be thieves.

Eli was arrested one night about a year before he shot the hole in his apartment. He'd met one of his usual customers behind the shopping center where he'd launched that paratrooper nearly ten years earlier. Eli walked up to the driver's side window with an eighth of an ounce of pot in a sandwich bag, and this guy snatched the bag with "baffling" speed, still sitting in the driver's seat with the seatbelt buckled. Eli instinctively reached into the car to grab the bag back, but the guy pulled a boning knife that'd been lying on the passenger seat and slashed Eli across the belly. Eli backed away, and the guy took off.

I found all of this out much later. I was living alone in an apartment near downtown, a place I'd had for nearly six months. I hadn't seen Eli for a while – we'd gotten into an argument over a girl I was seeing whose legs I felt Eli had been taking too serious an interest in. After floundering for some time after high school, I'd enrolled in a

community college and found that the change from smoking pot and doing nothing suited me pretty well. The time I spent with Eli and Dolph and the time I spent doing homework and going to class seemed to relate inversely and eventually I discovered I wasn't seeing either one of them much at all. When we did get together, I found myself using words I hadn't said since high school, like "grip," as in, "Yeah, I'm tryin' to score a grip of dope for this weekend" or "That motherfucker's in a grip of trouble if I catch him."

I'd been at home sleeping when, around four-thirty in the morning, I got a call from a mutual friend who said she'd seen Eli get into a fight with some guy on First Street, right downtown. I hung up the phone, and even as I was assuring myself this wasn't my problem, I found myself pulling on a pair of jeans, grabbing my car keys, and walking out the door to my car. I drove downtown and, as I pulled onto First, I spotted the Escort parked in the middle of the road, pointing the wrong direction for the one-way street. A tow-truck driver was hooking the Escort to his rig. I parked my car quickly and ran up to the driver.

"You don't have to tow it," I said, out of breath. "I can take it with me in just a second. I just have to get the keys."

"It's hooked up. Too late," said the tow-guy without looking at me.

"It'll take two seconds."

“It’s being impounded. Talk to the cop. They found some bullshit in it.”

I looked further up the street at the cop car, whose rear was facing me, lights blazing, and I remembered the fire trucks behind Westgate. I walked up to the cop car with my hands raised, just as I had when I’d approached the pharmacists when I was twelve years old. I approached the driver’s side and yelled, “Excuse me, officer!”

The cop was a middle-aged black woman with a full face, exhausted looking. She was writing something on a pad of paper while I stood alongside her car. She rolled down her window with a nonchalance that suggested nothing more could surprise her tonight. She didn’t say a word, just looked at me as if she were bored.

“Hi, officer.”

“What can I do for you?”

I looked in the back seat and saw Eli. His shirt was covered in blood, and he was swaying back and forth on the seat. He looked drunk, and his mouth was hanging wide open. I pointed at him. “I know him. He’s a friend of mine.”

“Well, that’s fantastic.”

“What’d he do?”

The cop glanced back at Eli in her rearview mirror for a second before focusing back on her pad of paper. “I was called to respond to drunk and disorderly conduct about a half hour ago. Your friend...” she

checked her notes. "...Elijah pulled his car down this one way here and exited his vehicle to assault a pedestrian."

I looked back at Eli and mouthed "What the fuck?" Eli rolled his eyes.

"Elijah and the young man were having a confrontation, and Elijah pulled out a...some kind of kitchen knife?" She glanced at her notes.

"The other party took off when I arrived. I asked Elijah to show me his identification and he pointed a knife at me instead. "

While she was talking, I saw a second cop car pulled up behind us. "Can I do anything? Is there anything I can do for him?" I asked.

"He'll be detained until tomorrow morning."

"What does that mean?"

"Elijah's going to have to sleep it off with us tonight, and he'll be arraigned before too long. You can bail him out at the clerk's office on Fifth Avenue."

"Hey, buddy! It's my getaway driver!" Eli shouted from the backseat. His hands were cuffed but he was trying to point his shoulder at me. "Where were *you* when I needed you?"

"How much is that...what does that cost?"

"You gonna have to take that up with the clerk's office."

"Hey! Getaway driver! You gonna bail out old Eli? You gonna bail out your *old buddy*?" Eli had his forehead pressed up against the

window. “You want some money? Take my debit card. That fucking cop’s got my wallet and my debit card.”

“Is that all right?” I asked. “Can you give me his debit card so that I can bail him out?”

The cop looked tired and bored. God knows how many times she had repeated this exact scene with some drunken asshole. She was going through the motions and she seemed to be able to foresee every possible outcome to this situation. She picked up Eli’s wallet from the center console between her seat and the passengers and plucked out his yellow, TCF bank debit card and handed it to me. “Makes no difference to me. One way or the other, he’s spending the night with us, so.”

“Thanks. Can I talk to him for a second?”

She reached behind her head and opened a small, sliding window in the Plexiglas that served as a barrier between the front and back seats of the patrol car. She went back to her notepad.

Eli inched his way to the opening. There was still a steel grate in the gap she had created in the Plexiglas and Eli pushed his forehead against it now instead of the side window. “How’d you find me here, old friend?”

“Somebody saw you get arrested. What’s the PIN on the card?”

“Use that card. It’s got a grip of cash on it. I just made a deposit so we’re *goodago*.”

“I will use it—I can’t afford to bail you out. Unless you want me to call your parents.”

Eli stopped grinning. “Don’t do that. Uh, for real, though, just use that card. There’s cash on it like a motherfucker.”

“What is the *PIN*, goddamn it? Give me the PIN number, and I’ll go bail you out.”

“Well, I’d tell you, but I don’t *trust this crooked ass cop any further than I can fucking throw her! This corrupt ass, crooked ass PO-lice!*” His voice rose to a yell and he started banging his head against the metal grate.

Before he’d finished speaking the cop reached behind her head, without looking up from her notepad, and slammed the window shot. Eli shouted at the top of his lungs, his voice muffled by the glass and metal and alcohol, “Hey! Hey, man! SIX! NINE! FOUR! THREE! SIX! NINE! FOUR! THREE!”

Eli spent the next year in a battle of wills with the Ann Arbor Police Department and the State of Michigan Probation Board. The police had found two unloaded, unregistered pistols in the Escort as well as an ounce of pot with “Humboldt County” written on it in thin, black Sharpie lines. That, combined with the knife he’d “pulled” on the lady-cop, the drunk and disorderly conduct, and the assault on some guy walking down the street in the middle of the night made for a hefty court case

and the threat of years in prison. Eli's parents hired a lawyer who specialized in drug-related offenses, but the lawyer quit after two meetings with Eli. Eli represented himself at the hearings. I've been told since that this is unheard of in a criminal trial, so rare that it is almost a legend in the legal world. I asked Eli if I could attend, but he said no. "I need to be in top form," he told me. "You'd make me nervous."

From what I gathered, Eli's performance was staggering. I have no idea exactly what he said, but he was evidently able to establish that the unloaded pistols in his car were antique family heirlooms that he kept in tribute to his grandfather who'd presented them as a legacy before his passing. The pistols were tokens of remembrance, nothing more, and Eli had never even fired them—he wasn't even sure they would fire. The scuffle he'd had with the guy on First Street was a non-issue since the guy had taken off and could not be located. As for the knife he'd held in full, menacing view of a police officer—that Eli chalked up to the unfortunate effects of alcohol. He acknowledged that he did, indeed, have a problem with drinking, one he'd been wrestling with all his life, and he'd welcome any assistance that the State might offer him in the form of substance abuse counseling.

The intoxication and the pot could not be gotten around. Another hearing was set to address the latter issue since the quantity indicated intent to distribute, but in the meantime Eli was released on the condition that his car be equipped with the breathalyzer and that he'd



attend AA meetings for six months. The presence of his wealthy, concerned parents at the hearing no doubt contributed to the judge's leniency, as did the fact that Eli was white, well-spoken and apparently sincere and full of regret.

Eli went as far as having the breathalyzer installed in his car, attending one AA meeting, and one meeting with a probation officer. After that he stopped going. He never said why, but he'd occasionally mumble that he found the whole business humiliating and unnecessary. A bench warrant was issued for his arrest, and eventually they picked him up. His parents bailed him out that second time (Why'd they allow him bail? What did he say to the judge this time to make him think he wouldn't flee?) after he was found guilty of violating the terms of his probation.

After he got arrested, Eli and I started to hang out more. In the early days of his "recovery," when he thought he might make an honest go at sobriety, he needed new people who didn't encourage his old habits. I wasn't a new person, but we'd been out of touch for a while and I'd cut out the smoking when I enrolled in college. Even when his attempts at clean living failed, we kept up the friendship because I missed him and Eli needed somebody to start his breathalyzer-restricted ignition.

I drove Eli's Escort through town the day before his sentencing, which he told me he planned to attend. The car reeked of cigarettes and filth; the ashtray was filled to the brim with crushed butts and the ends of joints. I could tell Eli's nerves were shot. He kept fiddling with his

hands. Eli watched the city roll by, his forehead leaning against the window. I thought this might be the last time I'd see him. Who knows what jail does to somebody like Eli? What would he be like when he was released? Would he be cut with muscles, hardened in body and mind, vicious? Would he be broken? Everybody'd seen the movies, including Eli. What would happen to him in there?

I looked over at him. He was quiet, staring out the window, speaking only to tell me to where to turn. I obliged him, willing to take him anywhere he needed to go. "Eli?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Are you really gonna go to the sentencing?"

Eli sat up. His mouth was closed, and his profile looked strong, resolute. It was clearly a ruse. "I am scheduled to appear, yes."

"And you're gonna go?"

He shrugged, and was silent for minute. "Time to face the music, motherfucker," he finally said.

"Why now? You didn't go to any of that other bullshit."

"It's no way to live. It's such a bother. Always in the back of one's mind." He grinned. "Why? You think I should skip it? You wanna skip town with me?"

I shook my head. "No, I think you should go. I thought you should've done all of that other bullshit. Gone to the meetings. I told you that. Get it over with and put it behind you."

“I know. You said that before. I don’t know. Take a left up here.” He put his head up against the window.

“Tell me again about that night you got picked up.”

“What about it?”

“Tell me about that guy you got out of the car for.”

“Didn’t I tell you about this?” Eli sat up again and pulled a cigarette from his jacket.

“Tell me again.”

Eli lit his cigarette, taking a little too long to do it. Building suspense. He loved to tell his crime stories. He was suppressing a smile. “So I was just back from getting stabbed,” he said, and took a long drag for further effect. “He got me, but it wasn’t too bad. You saw it. The cut was shallow, no big deal. But I was fired up. I went home and patched it all up and started pounding rum.”

“Why rum?”

“It was all I had in the house. So, anyway, I’m all fired up and I get hammered, like, *hammered*. Then I get it into my head that I’m going to go find Romeo. You remember Romeo? From high school?”

“You never told me that.”

“I could have sworn I told you that. Yeah, I remember thinking; I’m gonna go find that fucker. Somebody told me they’d seen him around that club on First Street so I saddle up and I go down there. But I got all mixed up and took a wrong turn and I was going the wrong way on

motherfucking First Street. And this guy, some guy I didn't know, starts yellin' at me '*wrong way, asshole!*' I stopped the car, and I still had that knife that I got slashed with. That one dude threw it at me before he took off." He paused for a moment, considering. "Maybe it was my knife. Yeah, yeah it was definitely my knife. That one I kept in the glove compartment. So, anyway, I got out of the car with the knife—turn right here—and I told that guy I could cut his balls off if I wanted to. He was with some chick and I guess she called the cops. We were all yelling at each other in the street for a minute."

"Do you think you would have?"

"What? Cut his balls off?"

"Yeah."

"Fuck, no, man. I'm not cutting anybody's balls off. I was just drunk and pissed off, and this guy was just...I don't know. I mean, I *was* going the wrong way down First Street. I probably would have yelled at somebody too. Anyway, the cop showed up at some point, and there you go. We're here."

We were in a neighborhood I recognized. I'd been driving absent-mindedly, listening to Eli, thinking about Eli, and I just turned whenever he told me to. I realized we were in his old neighborhood. I saw Dolph's house coming up on the right. "You going to Dolph's? I haven't seen him in years." Eli didn't say anything. "Does he still live here?"

"Pull over. I'm going to jump out."

I brought the car up to the curb and put it into park. Eli reached into the glove compartment and pulled the revolver out. My muscles tensed as I stared at the gun.

Eli saw me staring at it. "Relax, buddy."

I looked at him and saw he wasn't smiling. Suddenly, I was walking out of a toy store in the Westgate shopping center, watching Eli and Dolph saunter towards another crime. And I was behind them, having taken too long making nice with the counter-guy. I was in high school, watching Eli lick a shoe, too scared to do anything about it and feeling complicit, as if it were my shoe. I'm in Eli's apartment, the straight guy, the one you call to hear what the sensible thing to do is when you've fired a gun by accident before noon on a weekday. The guy you show off to, tell your stories, because he's just a mark, a square, outside looking in. "What's the plan?" I ask, and all of a sudden I feel ready.

Eli laughed. "What do you mean?"

I gripped the steering wheel with both hands. "What's the plan? What are you gonna do? You're gonna go get Dolph?"

"Go get him?"

"What are you going to do? Are you gonna rob him? Has he got a bunch of pot? What is it?" My stomach turned over and my hands went a little cold. I kept my face as solemn as I could make it. I set my jaw, I stared right at Eli.

“Relax.”

“I’m just saying, tell me what the plan is. Dolph was such... he was a huge asshole when we were kids and if you need to...I’m just saying do what you need to do and then we’ll roll out and I’ll sit here. It doesn’t matter what’s going down, I’m just saying, let’s *do this*. I’m at the wheel. I’ve got the engine running.” My adrenaline was pumping and my eyes were wide. I craned my neck to look at Dolph’s house—a small, ranch style with a covered porch. I squinted and tried to see if there was anyone in the house through the windows, but the drapes were drawn on all of them.

Eli took another drag off of his cigarette. “You’ve got to be shitting me,” he said. “Grow up.”

He opened his door and left the car, and me sitting in it. He leaned down and motioned for me to roll down the window. I did. “I’ll see you around. Take the car to my parents at some point, will you?”

“What about your hearing? Are you going?”

Eli leaned forward, resting on his arms. “Yeah, I don’t know. Might be better to dip on out.”

“Like Dolph used to do? Like at Westgate when they called the fire trucks?”

“Yeah, this motherfucker knows how to dip on out,” Eli said, smiling.

“Where are you guys going to go?”

Eli backed away from the car. “Don’t worry about it. Thanks for giving me a drive. And thanks for coming over this morning. That shit freaked me out.”

“Call me in a while,” I said. “Call me up and I’ll swoop you up. Take you back home.”

“Yeah, man. All right,” Eli said, but he wouldn’t look me in the eye.

He turned and walked towards the house, shoving the gun into the back of his jeans and pulling his coat over it. As he walked towards the house Dolph came to the front door in a ribbed undershirt and long, black shorts. He’d become a man since I’d last seen him, but he still had long blond hair and a mean look. Dolph had a duffel bag in one hand. He motioned towards the street and raised his hand in a wave when he saw me, but Eli walked past him and said something that I couldn’t make out. Dolph’s smile dropped and he lowered his hand. He turned and went back into the house, shutting the door behind him.

I thought about following him in. I’d knock on the door and Dolph would answer. His house would smell like marijuana and cheap incense. We’d shake hands and hug and he would grin the way always did and the three of us, Eli, Dolph, and I, would plot our next move. We could pool our cash and buy some guns and hit the road. We’d have to get out of town, out of Michigan, hole up for a little while. But before too long we’d start a crime spree, the likes of which haven’t been seen since the days of Dillinger and Pretty Boy Floyd. We could rob banks and knock

over trucks. We'd live like kings in between each score, and soon we'd become legends. I wouldn't have to sit through another composition class, and Eli wouldn't have to go to jail. They might catch up with us at some point, but Dolph could keep us running for a long, long time. When they finally caught us, when they'd back us into a corner with no way out, there'd be a blaze of glory that none of us could attain on our own; not me in some community college classroom, not Dolph doing God knows what, not Eli faking it through another AA meeting. The three of us, on rooftops, forever.

But instead I sat in the car, both hands on the wheel, staring at the door to Dolph's house. I wondered about the hole in Eli's apartment and the bullet we couldn't find. I wanted to start the car and go look for it again, give the grass outside the building another once over. Was the bullet stuck somewhere in the wall? Did that bullet escape from the apartment, from Eli's gun, out into the world? Does a bullet stand a chance out there on its own? These questions, and the urge to go search Eli's old apartment, strike me sometimes for no particular reason, usually when I'm driving, and I linger on them longer than I should before pushing the thoughts from my mind and refocusing on the road, on the task at hand.



## THE IGLOOISTS

**10:15 AM**

SCOTT AWOKE FIRST of the four, acting against his habits and rising before noon. Scott had graduated from college nearly nine months earlier, his degree in Communications already gathering a thin layer of dust. In high school, Scott was talented, popular, and well liked. He excelled in nearly every sport he attempted, and his acumen extended to video games and musical instruments as well. Scott was tall, gangly,

with close set eyes and a lined, expressive face. After leaving for his undergraduate degree at the state college, he fell out of touch with his high school friends and spent four years that have not been properly accounted for. Scott entered the university and left four years later with his degree—not much else is known. What is known is that he seemed, according to his mother, “restless” upon returning home, though he wouldn’t speak about why.

His mother, a midwife who’d spent the previous night on call, was working a crossword in the living room when Scott descended from his room, covered in snow-friendly polyester, a blue-and-white winter hat with one of those dangling cloth balls attached to it, and wearing white socks with no shoes. Scott’s mother, so surprised to see him awake, set down her pen and crossword and folded her hands, didn’t say a word. He silently made for the front door without acknowledging her. He sorted through the pile of shoes and boots until he found his and forced them on while standing, nearly falling over in the process. His mother just watched. As he walked out the door, he nodded at her and said “I’ll be gone most of the day.”

The resolve in his voice moved her, for some reason. She tried to remember the last time she’d seen him stand so tall, even as he stooped over, hopping on one foot trying to stuff the other into his errant boot. “Where are you going?” she asked.

“I’m going to build an igloo.”

**10:20 AM**

Scott walked the two blocks from his house towards Derek's (the second of the four) and considered his neighborhood. The place was in transition; the eclectic collection of house-styles, from block two-stories to paneled, ranch-styles, were sporadically given additions, extra dens, sun rooms and wooden decks in their back yards. Occasionally, whole floors were planted on top of existing structures. Once upon a time, the neighborhood was the de facto segregated district for the city's black inhabitants. The eighties and nineties gentrified the neighborhood as former hippies needed a place that was cheap and distinct from the cookie-cut condos beings built on the other side of town.

Scott surveyed the land as he approached Derek's. The site chosen for construction was next to Derek's parents' garage. Their house bordered a small playground that took up an entire corner lot. There was a metal-and-plastic jungle-gym set in a bed of woodchips in the corner nearest the street and in the middle of the lot stood a huge maple looming over everything.

And there was Derek, walking out of the back door of his parents' house onto the cedar deck where the family (and, frequently, the other three young men) would gather for barbecues and evening long bullshit-sessions. Derek stretched, his arms akimbo as he bent backwards and forwards, decked out in similar winter clothing, his borrowed from his

snowboarding outfit. He was tall, nearly as tall as Scott and thin except for a pronounced stomach that seemed as if it might be more the product of posture than weight. Derek had bird-like features, a sharp nose and wide eyes and a small mouth. He was a lady-killer, to be sure, though it wasn't clear why, from the look of him. Derek had graduated only weeks before, his degree as goofy as his features; a BA in Event Coordination from the University of Vermont. Derek looked out across the park and waved at Scott. Then something caught his eye. From his vantage point on the deck, he could see what Scott, who stood in the park, could not; a small boy squatting at the rear of the property. While the side of the backyard opened up into the park, the rest of it extended back, enclosed by a garage on one side and a chain link surrounding the whole of it. Just over the fence and near the wall of the garage, Deon, a neighborhood kid, maybe ten years old, had his pants pulled down to just below his knees. He was shitting and smiling widely, his teeth as white as the snow that surrounded him.

Derek threw his arms out in a gesture that looked like surrender. "Deon!" he yelled, shaking his head. "What in the *fuck*, man?"

Deon gave a high-pitched, tumbling laugh, pulled up his jeans, and hopped the fence. Derek yelled, "You are a psycho!"

Deon shouted over his shoulder, "Psycho is Latin for soul, so thank you for the compliment!" and kept running, presumably back to his house.

Derek looked over at Scott, who could only see Derek on his porch and, eventually, Deon running off in the distance. “Did you see that?”

Derek asked.

“No. Did he take a shit back there?”

“Yeah, I don’t know. I guess I need a shovel.”

“The dog might eat it,” Scott suggested.

### **10:45**

While Derek was cleaning feces from the snow, Scott had evaluated the site and began tracing an outline when Spencer arrived. “I thought you were going to wake me up?” he said as he approached Scott.

“I was up early, I just kind of...headed out, I guess,” Scott said, not looking up, focused on the outline.

“Well, I would have gotten up early too,” he mumbled. Spencer had just returned from a sojourn in the American Pacific Northwest less than a month ago. The move west was a requisite rite of passage for any Midwestern white kid recently graduated from college. He’d graduated soon after Scott, and, after a brief stop home decided “he just needed to get out of town, you know?” and fled, like so many before him, to Portland, Oregon without any money and only the vaguest semblance of a plan. Seven months later, Spencer was back and the experience had left him cynical and prone to anger. It might be argued that Spencer was always prone to anger, the product of a childhood spent being teased for

having lesbian parents and high cheekbones and pale skin. But the excursion gave Spencer, in his mind, justification for his crankiness, since he was now a continental traveler who had Been Out in the World and had seen what cruelties it had to offer.

“What was that?” Scott asked.

“Nothin’,” Spencer replied, and sighed, loud.

Derek had finished his shoveling and he walked over the line being traced on the ground. He watched Scott drag his foot, scraping out a path in the snow. “That’s really big.”

“I think it’s all right,” Spencer offered.

“It is big. It’s good,” Scott said.

“That might be tricky, when it’s that big,” Derek said, his voice deepened with clear effort, projecting authority.

“Go big or go home, motherfucker.” Scott told him.

Having just turned the corner, the last of the four, Alex, saw the other three standing in the park. “Gentlemen!” he shouted, and picked up his pace to jog over to the site. Alex was the sole iglooist without a bachelor’s degree. He lived on the various couches and in the basements of the other three, planning always for having enough money for a place of his own. Alex worked at a paint store, matching colors for the town’s pregnant women and angry, racist contractors. That morning he was the least equipped in terms of winter-wear. The other three were avid winter-sportsman: skiing, snowboarding, and in Derek’s case, ice-fishing. Alex

had been snowboarding once in his life, but his first day out coincided with an outbreak of symptoms from a case of mono he hadn't known he'd had. Forever after, whenever he thought of snowboarding or winter sports, he thought of swollen lymph glands and the terrible pain in his muscles that had crippled him for days. He was wearing jeans and a sweatshirt, along with a black cloth coat and boots he'd apparently borrowed from the same pile Scott extracted his boots from because they were clearly too big for him. He was short and broad, just barely overweight. He took a look at the outline. "Go big or go home, huh?"

### **A Brief Interlude on Igloo Construction**

Here's the proper way to build an igloo:

Start out by tracing an outline of the structure. Size is up to you, but depending on conditions and snow density, excessive ambition could wind up crushing you to death, or, at the very least, trapping you in ice for an uncomfortable length of time. If this is your first igloo, start small. It may be tempting to follow the four young men into renown and glory by getting some friends together and trying to build one the size of a two-car garage, but here's a nickel's worth of free advice: don't bother. It's not that you aren't up to it, or that your will is weak—don't misunderstand. But you lack the strange combination of factors granted the iglooists: the experience, the weather, the ambience of mood and temperament.

Once the outline has been established (as close to a perfect circle as possible to increase stability, aestheticism) begin the preparation of the blocks. This step is *the* most crucial. Fortunately, it can all be accomplished with items from home! Gather together as many recycle bins as you possibly can. Those box ones with an open top and ridged sides that allow for stacking are perfect. Lay them on the ground. Using ordinary, everyday snow shovels, fill the box to the brim with snow. Now stomp on the snow. Now do it again. Planting your left foot firmly on the ground, lift your right foot (which should be wearing the heaviest boot you can find or borrow) and repeatedly stomp on the snow until it has been compacted 5-6 inches *minimum*. Fill the box up to the brim again with snow and repeat. You should now have, within the box, a perfect igloo block.

Carry the box with the block inside (lift from the knees!) over to the outline and flip it upside down. If you performed the previous steps correctly, the block should slide out of the box (though it may need a few taps on the side to loosen it) intact, ready for neighboring blocks to strengthen and support it. Repeat this process by placing blocks adjacent to the previous one placed: in this way you'll effectively control the circumference of the base and not get stuck with an awkward gap, the bane of the amateur iglooist.

It's important, while laying down the base layer, to leave an opening, a gap, for the entryway. Building the entrance is the trickiest



part, so start early! Think of your base layer like a giant letter 'C', but with the two ends of the letter are closer together than usual. By leaving a proper gap, you will find that the construction of your entrance way to be intuitive and easily managed. It will practically build itself!

The rest is just good old fashioned manual labor. Shovel snow until your back is a gnarled, twisted abomination. Stomp on blocks until your hip cracks audibly and you can feel the bones in your right knee grinding against each another, your cartilage a forgotten memory. Your boots should be filled with ice and water-that-once-was-ice and, when you take a break to check on it (don't take any breaks), your foot should be deep purple and black and numb unless directly touched, at which point any contact should shoot searing pain to the center of your skull.

Finally, know there's nothing else you should be doing, nothing else that the world requires from you. Know that the most productive thing your family, your community and your God expects from you is that you produce this thing that will be of no practical use to anyone. Be desperate. Be terrified of your future. And have fun!

### **11:15**

They were well under way.

Labor was divided. Scott and Spencer were to fill the boxes with snow, Derek and Alex were to tamp them down and place them on the structure. Derek was the obvious choice for Placement Czar, according to

Derek, given that he claimed to have built an igloo once before. Alex demanded that he be involved, asserting that Derek didn't appreciate the scale of what they were going for and that his judgment was, therefore, compromised. Derek offered that maybe Alex shouldn't talk about scale, that short guys would do well not to draw attention to themselves like that. Spencer laughed, loud. Then they were under way.

For some time, the construction went smoothly. They quickly became a well-oiled machine. They cracked jokes, they were efficient. At this point, before the afternoon hit, in the late morning hours, they were more or less playing in the snow. This period was probably the best part of the experience for those involved, if not for those who were witnesses. And there were witnesses.

### **12:30 PM**

The crowd began to form after the first two layers of blocks were laid down.

Those whose houses bordered the playground were the first to take notice. The children from those houses poured outside to enjoy the Saturday afternoon where clouds were parting to show blue skies after days of snow storms and gray. In their heavy snow-clothes that splayed their limbs out involuntarily the children emerged and saw the igloo and let out cries of "Wooooaah!" They flocked near the structure, five or six of

them, none older than eight or nine, and Alex would set them back with diplomatic authority. “Stay clear, guys. Let’s keep it clear, all right?”

“*What* are you *doing?*” asked the ring leader, a girl named Aisha who was somehow related to Deon, the boy who had shat earlier in Derek’s backyard.

“We’re just building this igloo, guys,” Alex explained, tamping down a block with his boot.

“Can we play?” Aisha asked.

“This isn’t...we’re not playing, guys. We’re just...hey, just stay clear, all right?” Alex pointed at one of the kids, a little boy who’d veered close to the structure. The little boy had reached out a mittened hand to touch the base but he quickly retracted it and stared at Alex with his eyes and mouth agape.

Scott watched the exchange and kept shoveling. “You guys want to help?” The children all responded in the positive, one of them crying “Yaayy!”

“You can fill these boxes. It’s not hard. Just fill ‘em up. Do you guys have boxes like these at home?”

Aisha nodded. “Those are for recycling. *Of course* we got those.”

The little boy near the igloo squirmed. “My dad says recycling is a lie so we ain’t got ‘em.”

“Your father is a smart man,” Alex said.

“That’s okay. You just help me fill these up,” Scott said. “The rest of you guys go home and get a bunch of these bins. We’re going to need a lot more.”

The children scattered, except for the little boy who felt he’d earned permission to do what he had wanted to do in the first place: rub his cheek against the cold blocks that formed the first layers of the igloo. Derek settled his block into place and sat down next to the boy and joined him, his face against the compacted snow, his eyes closed.

## **2:00 PM**

The parents of the enlisted help had walked out to see what their recycling bins were being donated to and found themselves strangely entranced. The rhythm of the snow being tamped into the bins, the focus of the kids who seemed to work without words, the discipline of the younger children who normally couldn’t stay at one task longer than six minutes, the way the park was slowly being cleared of snow in plowed lines directed out from the igloo like sunshine in one of their children’s drawings; all of it formed a beautiful, hypnotic spectacle from which the neighbors could not turn away. They brought lawn chairs out from their basements and garages and set themselves up along the sidewalks, watching. Some of them called their friends and relatives, “You won’t believe what the neighbor kids are doing.” Some invited friends and relatives over, though the hypnotic nature of the task did not translate

well over the phone and most declined the invitation. All of them cancelled whatever plans they had for the weekend afternoon and chose instead to bundle up along the sidewalk and watch the construction, committing themselves silently to its completion, no matter how long it would take.

The more that gathered, the more the neighborhood paid attention and the more that came to see what all the fuss was about. Derek's mother prepared hot cocoa by the gallon and carried it out to the onlookers, shaking her head, saying, "I don't know, I don't know what this is about." The igloo was a little less than a quarter of the way built. It was three feet high.

#### **4:00 PM**

The crowd grew. The four young men, when they spoke at all, whispered, aware of their audience and self-conscious.

Spencer complained, "This is killing me. My back is killing me, fuck," to no one in particular.

Alex whispered to Derek, "Is it weird that we have all of these black kids, like, working for us?"

"I don't know. Do you think it's weird?"

"It seems weird, I don't know."

"It doesn't matter. We need their bins."

"I agree."

Scott didn't speak to anyone. He had the output of the three others combined—switching between roles, alternately filling boxes with terrifying speed and efficiency and unloading the blocks onto the structure, using his height to ease the placement. The mortar work of the walls was becoming increasingly complex, as certain blocks had to be placed particularly to balance those below them, or had to be shaved exactly to size in order to fit at the end of a layer. The other three hemmed and hawed over strategy and Scott would simply lift a block into place as if he were simply reassembling an igloo he'd built and taken apart many, many times.

But the work was difficult, and by this point in the afternoon the crowd began to murmur about the lack of breaks, food, or water being taken by the core group. The younger kids would come and go (except for Aisha, who came the closest to matching the effort of the four young men as she silently shoveled snow onto a sled from the outer edges of the park and hauled it closer to the structure to be compressed into blocks), some being replaced by others but altogether growing bored and mostly drifting out into the watching crowd. But the four young men never took a break. Was it because of Scott, who never complained and seemed to gain strength with every completed layer of igloo, setting an example to the rest of them? Was it more mutual, the four of them understanding that their progress was a freak occurrence that mustn't be interrupted for any reason, lest their concentration be shattered and further labor

rendered impossible? Was it the crowd, in the way that crowds do, providing an electric energy that pushed them to superhuman lengths? Or was it because the walls of the igloo were getting heavy and they needed to be supported in a closed dome and might not hold without constant reinforcement? At any rate, the four continued to work, and the crowd grew and grew and grew.

### **5:42 PM**

The sun was setting. Derek's parents and a few neighbors brought out tiki torches that they set up in the park, creating a large perimeter around the area that might be used for snow. Derek went into his garage and found three flood lights that the four of them had used in high school to light their late night, outdoor ping pong games. After some struggling with heavy, orange extension cords, he had provided the igloo with a spotlight that, in the dark, made it appear even more imposing and impressive. The dome shone in the growing darkness, a halo of mist surrounding it, a brilliant, brilliant white.

Who saw Deon first, as he broke through the crowd with that massive grin, crouched in the Ready-Position, head shooting back and forth, looking for action? His presence immediately caused a stir as he penetrated the perimeter of tiki-torches and the people who surrounded the work-site. He'd broken the wall of onlookers and the whole crowd focused its attention on him. The four young men plus Aisha, plus a

couple of other kids were working diligently, unaware of the breach. Deon caught sight of the igloo (how couldn't he?), and his eyes lit up as bright as the shimmering, spot-lit structure itself. Somebody shouted, "Look out, boys! There go Deon!" and the boy was running full speed towards the igloo.

Time slowed. From his pace, it was clear that Deon intended to ram the igloo, and why not? It's a perfectly natural desire for a child, or anyone for that matter. Imagine the thrill of the run, the looming edifice growing larger and larger in front of you, the anticipation of impact, the attention of the crowd. That moment, when the igloo would crash down around you, would be instantly as glorious as the igloo itself, if only for you, the Destructor. The crowd let out a collective gasp when they realized what was about to happen. The four young men raised their heads like gazelles when the wind shifts and the scent of a lion has been revealed. Alex uselessly shouted, "Nononono!" Deon laughed, the same tumbling cackle from that morning, and he spread out his arms for maximum effect upon impact. The crowd braced itself.

Spencer saved everything. With perfect, divinely guided timing, he launched a shovelful of snow in Deon's path from maybe fifteen feet away. The boy ran directly into the snow in midair and instantly fell onto his back as if a clothesline had been drawn at chest level. He continued to laugh, apparently satisfied to be covered in some kind of snow, at



having made some kind of spectacle out of himself. The crowd roared its approval.

Spencer raised his arms and his shovel up in the air. Alex walked over and embraced him; Derek sat down and tried not to cry. Scott leaned on his shovel for a moment and nodded before returning to the block he'd been working on, the crowd still cheering.

### **8:00 PM**

The night was unseasonably warm, or at least not bitterly cold, and it allowed the crowd to stay on through the evening. Aisha worked until her palms bled, her woven mittens worn through from pulling a rope-led sled filled with thirty pounds of snow for eight plus hours. Her father had to carry her off the work site when she tried to pull the sled by placing the rope lead around her waist and kept falling down from the effort. She begged to be allowed to stay and continue. Her father cradled her head as he carried her and whispered, "Shhh, I know, I know. We can stay and watch." Father and daughter huddled together on a lawn chair with a blanket wrapped around them. Aisha would squirm occasionally and try and inch out of the chair to rejoin the efforts but her father would caress her head and say, "Shhh, shhhh."

**10:00 PM**

Progress slowed greatly, but the walls were over nine feet high. Construction was performed both inside and outside the igloo with the aid of step-ladders. A neighbor brought the materials for rudimentary scaffolding that he left at the foot of the tree that overlooked the park. He knew better than to volunteer his services; he knew that at this point he could only bear witness and, though he desperately wanted to be involved (for reasons he didn't understand then and still doesn't understand today, but were secretly shared by everyone watching), he dared not.

**11:30 PM**

The nature of a dome-like structure allows for the layers to become increasingly narrow as they approach the top. Fewer blocks are needed, but their placement becomes more and more demanding. Like a massive game of Jenga, it's not clear which blocks can be placed easily and which will end up being cornerstones on which the whole structure will depend. Twice, a block that had been placed previously, maybe an hour before, simply fell out of its place into the igloo's interior, leaving a hole where it had been. Derek put his hands on his head, expecting the whole edifice to come crashing down. Both times this happened, however, when a block would fall out of place, there was simply a hole left, nothing more. That block was deemed as unworthy, maybe, or superfluous, and was

cast out. The crowd started to whisper about the igloo making those determinations on its own.

### **12:15 AM**

Fourteen hours or so. The crowd had been gathered and watching nearly the entire time. Not many had gone home, but most were silent, covered in blankets and dozing off to sleep. Our four heroes were losing steam. Their movement was slow and they paused in between each stomp on the bins full of snow. Scott spoke with each of his partners in whispers that the crowd couldn't hear. The four gathered into a huddle. Spencer, at one point, gestured out to the crowd and Scott placed a hand on his shoulder, apparently to calm him.

They broke up the huddle and loaded a few sleds with snow. Alex and Derek dragged them into the igloo. Scott and Spencer followed them inside.

### **1:00 AM**

For the first time, one of the young men addressed the crowd directly. The four of them had been inside the igloo for some time, and their absence reenergized the crowd, that was buzzing in expectation, trying to see what was going on. From inside the igloo, a voice proclaimed, "This is the last block!"

The crowd shifted as one, moving to the north side of the park where they could see the remaining gap. By standing in the street, they could see the hole near the peak. Eventually one of the children (it sounded like Deon; the words were followed by a maniacal cackle) said “Look!”

The final block slid into place, the dark hole was made white. It fit perfectly.

The crowd, all at once, broke the imaginary cordon and walked towards the igloo. When they reached the structure they gently laid their hands on it, admiring the smooth topography that even up close was precise and exact; each block completely in sync, in harmony, with those around it. Glorious.

The young men emerged from the igloo. First Spencer, whose gaunt features were accented by the harsh glare of the flood lamps: then Derek, who looked as if he was about to fall over. They separated immediately and walked in opposite directions, ignoring the crowd. Spencer made for the street, towards his parents’ house. Derek walked to his back porch and quickly ducked inside the back door. His parents were outside and soon followed him in.

The crowd watched them go and then turned their attention to the igloo. They could hear voices inside, but couldn’t make out the words. The voices grew louder, and Alex emerged. He looked around, surprised

to see the spectators so close to the structure. He sighed. "Scott is still inside," he said. "He feels there's still work to be done."

Aisha broke free from her father and ran toward Alex to tug at his arm. "But isn't it finished?" she asked.

Alex looked at the little girl, and then at the igloo. He stepped a few paces out to get a better look at it. The crowd parted for him. He put his hands on his hips. "I think it's done. The rest of us think it's done. We don't need anything else from it." He stood and stared at the igloo for another moment before turning towards the street, following Spencer's path back to his room in the basement of his friend's parents' house. The igloo stood twelve feet high and looked as if it were twice that.

The crowd waited around to see if Scott would emerge, but he did not. A few poked their head into the arched entrance to see if they might catch Scott working, but all they could see was darkness. The crowd slowly, reluctantly dispersed, making their way home, carrying children and leaning heads on one another's shoulders. Most everyone turned back at least once to see the igloo one more time.

Some of the neighbors stayed in that park for quite some time. They waited on the park benches, watching the igloo, waiting for Scott to finish his work. They stayed for hours, who knows exactly how long? It must've been some time, though, because they grew tired and thought they saw something strange

The igloo seemed, somehow, to expand, to grow. Not just grow, but it appeared to become even more symmetrical, even a brighter color white, as if glowing somehow from the inside out. The light intensified, almost illuminating the park. The neighbors who remained wondered to themselves if what they saw was real or some kind of illusion brought on by the bright lights and the strange weather and the long day. It seemed to some of them that the igloo continued to grow, until it was nearly the size of the house it sat next to. Of course, that isn't possible, they thought to themselves, but still those that stayed didn't take their eyes off of the igloo. They thought that they heard the sound of snow being pressed as the structure swelled, the sound of a child making a snowball with his hands. None of them spoke aloud about what they were hearing or seeing, each one sure that it was only in their head, that they would be looked at askance if they mentioned it or laughed at or worse.

Scott didn't emerge while anyone was looking on. Eventually the events of the day became too much, and the holdouts decided to call it a night, though some agreed to come back the next day. Each of them looked back over their shoulder as they went home, wanting to see what would happen next.

### **The Next Morning**

The next day set was unseasonably warm for January. The temperature climbed to 53 degrees. The day had been forecasted to bring

more snow and cold by every reputable weather service in the tri-state area, but every single forecaster got it dead wrong. The neighborhood awoke with a collective start, and when the temperature began to climb many of them rushed from our houses towards the igloo.

It had already shrunk to a fraction of the size it had been when it was left. It sat surrounded by grass, the little snow that they had been unable to shovel into recycle bins and left on the ground having already melted away. The grass gave the igloo a surreal effect, making the structure seem even more out of place than it already did. But there was nothing imposing about it now—the igloo was small, lopsided, and unimpressive, like the effort of children who had gotten bored halfway through and abandoned the project. The first thought was for Scott, concerned that he might still be inside, unable to escape the shrinking tomb. A few of the neighbors approached the entrance and were looking inside, calling out for anyone that might be in there. As they were inspecting the entrance a cardinal landed on the peak and the dome collapsed, which brought the walls down instantly, soundlessly. Those peering inside backed away quickly. Someone asked whether there was anyone inside, but no one knew.

## INCARNATION

MIRIAM HAD EXITED the highway shortly after crossing the border from West Virginia into Ohio. After a few miles and a few turns, she found herself in a quaint, tree-lined neighborhood. The houses she drove past were small, for the most part, and varied. Miriam had expected another set of cookie-cut mini-mansions and condominiums set in developments with names relating to natural landmarks that were nowhere to be seen: creeks, arbors, and glades. This gave her a spark of



hope that she tried to suppress: the hope that perhaps the search was at an end, that the change in scenery was a sign that the previous tests and interviews, which were so marked by the bland sameness of the planned communities, were hindered only by their surroundings. This neighborhood was something new and new would be anything other than false hopes and disappointments. But this search was the task she had chosen and no one said it would be easy to find a living god.

If the neighborhood was different, the street signs still had the usual rustic, natural veneer. Miriam turned onto Lynnwood, off Maple Creek. This is it, she thought. This could be the one. She'd been driving through the night in hopes of avoiding another hotel room, preferring even to sleep in her car, though the interior was often cluttered with papers, three-ring binders, and plastic containers for instant noodles. Her eyes burned and she was certain she was going to get lost. She scanned the house numbers until she spotted the ones that matched those written on the manila folder lying on the passenger seat. One Fifty Nine. She considered the number one last time for significance as she had been told to do, trying every permutation she could think of involving the Founder's age, the date of the Temple's founding, the number of tenets of Rebirth and Awakening (five), and, for good measure, the number of steps between her room and the Founder's study (seventy). Miriam had been running the exercise since she first saw the address after her last Assessment. Nothing clicked, but that wasn't

necessarily a bad thing. The method of Assessment was more art than science, or so she had been told, and one could hardly hope for as obvious a sign as a street address. Still, the exercise always seemed to her a bad way to start an assessment, though, even after all this time, it wasn't as if she knew what a good way to start would be.

She got out of her car, removed a large suitcase from the trunk, and walked up the narrow walkway towards the front door. Miriam breathed in the warm, fall afternoon, enjoying the fresh air after the stuffiness of her car as she approached the house. Like its neighbors, the house was small and unassuming, painted white with dark green trim. If the house had a second story, it couldn't have contained much more than an attic or a den, given the pitch of the roof. Miriam rang the doorbell and listened to a sped up version of "What the World Needs Now" played in simple, electronic tones.

The woman who answered the door was in her mid thirties, perhaps a little younger than Miriam, though she seemed older. Her hair was blonde, though Miriam could see the dark brown roots beneath the highlights. She had light brown eyes and the skin around them had the very beginnings of crow's feet. Her skin was smooth, otherwise. She was wearing a gray sweatshirt and black running pants with a white stripe running down the sides. Miriam quickly looked down at her own clothes, her modest brown sweater and black pants seeming, all of a sudden, overly formal and intimidating. The woman held a towel in one hand. She

was sweating and seemed out of breath. She looked at Miriam, then at the suitcase. “Oh my, are you her? I mean, are you from...” she paused and lowered her voice, “the Temple?”

“Yes, I’m Miriam from the Temple of the Rebirth and Awakening. We spoke over the phone. Mrs. Holt, is it?” Miriam offered her hand.

“Oh!” the woman’s voice rose to squeal and she put a hand over her mouth, ignoring Miriam’s extended hand. “Oh, this is so *exciting*. I’ve just never been a part of something like this. You’ll have to forgive me.”

“Ma’am, it’s fine. I completely understand. It’s very exciting for us as well.”

“Please come in. Welcome to *my home*.” Mrs. Holt walked back into the house leaving Miriam on the front step. Miriam closed her eyes for just a moment and took a deep breath before following Mrs. Holt inside and shutting the door behind her.

No matter how the house looked from the outside, from the inside Miriam was struck by how similar it was to the condominiums and development homes she had been visiting recently. The floors weren’t carpeted like the others, but beyond that the differences were negligible. The entrance led directly into a living room, the walls of which were a creamy, beige color that Miriam couldn’t name. On the wall behind the sofa hung a framed, abstract painting of red and blue spheres that Miriam had seen on no less than three other walls in three other homes during her travels. She was fairly certain that the painting was available

for sale at a large chain store. From the living room she could see part of the kitchen through an open doorway. There was linoleum flooring, and what appeared to be brand new cupboards poised above black, marble countertops. A red Kitchen-Aid mixer sat next to a white refrigerator in pristine condition, as though it had never been used. Miriam followed Mrs. Holt into the living room, which was sparsely decorated with a small, dark brown leather couch, a coffee table with a glass top, a large television sitting on a black pedestal of some kind, the blue and red painting, and not much else. A few toys lay scattered around the room: a plastic dinosaur, some large Lego-blocks. They gave a splash of life to the room that was, even to Miriam, who had grown up in a Temple run by quasi-ascetic monks, cold and bare.

“My husband is at work. That’s all right, isn’t it? Does he need to be here? Please sit down. Miriam, is it? That is such a lovely name.” Mrs. Holt sat on the couch and patted the cushion next to her. Miriam sat, setting the suitcase to the side of the sofa.

“Thank you, Mrs. Holt. No, your husband doesn’t have to be here, that’s all right. Though I’d like to meet him at some point, when he’s available.” Miriam watched a bead of sweat form on Mrs. Holt’s forehead. “I hope I haven’t caught you at a bad time. I’d be happy to come back...”

Mrs. Holt glanced at her towel and then at her nylon pants. “Oh, no, I just wasn’t expecting you so soon! I was on the old treadmill. I expected you a little later.”

“Yes, the place was easier to find than usual. I ordinarily give myself time to get lost and find my way again.”

“To get lost and find my way again,” Mrs. Holt repeated, staring at Miriam and shaking her head. “That is so very profound.” She sat, gazing at Miriam for a moment. “To get lost and find my way again.’ I must write that down.” She checked her pockets for a pen that she must’ve known she did not have. “Did you learn that from your Order?”

“Ah...” Miriam took another deep breath. “It’s not an Order, per se. And no, I just picked it up from a lot of driving.”

“I see.” Mrs. Holt folded her hands and tilted her head. The tone of her voice changed, and it became clear to Miriam that the conversation would now take the form of an inquisition. Most of the mothers had taken this same route. “If it’s not an Order, what exactly is it?”

“The Temple?”

“The Temple, yes. I tried to do a little research on the Internet, and there wasn’t a whole lot there!”

“So I’ve been told.”

“You guys should really think about putting yourselves out there some more!”

“That may be true.”

“Perhaps that’s one of the changes we can look at if...well, at any rate, it was certainly hard to find out what you’re all about. So,” Mrs. Holt asked, “what are you all about?”

“What are we all about,” Miriam repeated with a nod. “What would you like to know?”

“Of course, I watched that video on your little website. The little documentary on the history and all of that. Do you know the one I mean?”

Miriam knew the video all too well. She had worked on the production of the four minute piece after the Founder’s death led to an increase in site traffic. The video opened on a picture of Reginald Granholm, referred to as a “world traveler and socialite,” the man who founded the temple in 1935 after extensive travels in the Far East. He announced his “ascendency into Awakening” upon his return and built his first temple in Millbrae, California the following year. There followed a series of shots of the ruins of that first temple, which was burned down by a man claiming to represent the “interest of the natural God.” The arsonist was acquitted, in spite of his strange yet explicit confession, and, on the courtroom steps in front of a small crowd that had gathered to celebrate the verdict, Granholm announced his intention to rebuild. “A fight broke out,” the narrator notes in the video, and here the solemn music swelled, long, low notes on a cello, “and Granholm was slain.”

“I mean...you’re what—Buddhists or something?” Mrs. Holt asked. “Forgive me if that’s disrespectful or whatever, but you’re, like, some kind of Buddhists or something. Is that right?”

“We have many things in common with the discipline and practice of Buddhism. We maintain that there is an awakened or ‘enlightened’ state which one...anyone can attain with the proper training and instruction. We believe in the necessity and efficacy of non-violence and gentleness in all matters. And, of course, we hold true that we are reborn upon physical death. Which is why I’m here today.”

“So, pardon me again if I’m being...how is that not Buddhism? Like I said, I’ve been doing some research and what you just said sounds a lot like Buddhism.”

Miriam smiled. Speaking about the Temple and about the lessons she learned from the Founder helped her relax and focus. This was familiar territory and the command she had over the topic put her at ease. “If it’s helpful, you can think of us like a ‘sect’ of Buddhism. Our Founder traveled in the East before establishing the Temple and surely took his inspiration from Buddhists he encountered in Mongolia and Japan. What he took issue with is the formality, the institutionalization that some forms of the discipline had adopted. Our Temple focuses on—tries to focus on—the personal side of meditation, of Awakening, and less on hierarchy and pageantry. Does that make sense?”

“Of course, yes. The pageantry.”

“That’s not to disparage pageantry, you understand.”

“Of course.”

“It’s just not our way.” Miriam crossed her legs and wished she had

a glass of water. “But,” she said and smiled, “hopefully, there will be plenty of time for you to get acquainted with our little temple in the very near future.”

“You mean if David is...who you think he is?”

“Yes.” Miriam clenched her jaw slightly, trying not to let the thoughts and frustration that sprang into her head at Mrs. Holt’s question show on her face; the nagging, increasingly frequent sense of futility, of exhaustion with the whole enterprise and, most frighteningly, of doubt. “If he is who we think he is.”

“And you all...you’ve done this before?”

“I’m sorry? How do you mean?”

“You all have...you’ve found this man...your Ocean-man? You’ve found him before?”

Miriam nodded. After Granholm was killed, the sect had released a series of press releases, which Miriam had seen framed on the walls of her temple. The statements announced their period of mourning, an avowal to seek no vengeance, in accordance with their practice of non-violence, and their intention to rebuild in Redwood City, about a dozen miles away from the site of the first temple. What’s more, they announced that they had begun their search for the reincarnated from their Founder, who they believed was born at the exact instant of Granholm’s death, and was waiting to be found somewhere within the continental United States.



The search was exhaustive and lasted for nearly two years. The methods used in the search were laid out by Granholm himself a year before his death and were never totally released to a curious public. The search and its surrounding publicity gained the Temple nearly a hundred followers. Dozens more volunteered to assist due to the strange nature of the project and the exotic concept of reincarnation which, at that time, was nearly unheard of in the United States. It was said that every major American city (and some not-so-major ones) had a candidate or candidates, who were interviewed, tested and, by and large, rejected by the Temple Assessment Board. Finally, in 1938, one of the Assessors sent a telegram from a post office in Buffalo, New York, to the San Francisco Chronicle announcing that the search was at an end. The second incarnation of the Founder of the Temple had been found and he was henceforth to be known as Awakened Ocean. He was two years old.

Miriam was born into the Temple at the height of its popularity in the mid sixties. The growing awareness of “alternative” faiths, the counter-cultural movement that was rapidly picking up steam and the Temple’s head start in the California Bay-Area provided no shortage of ready converts, Miriam’s pregnant mother among them. She had arrived at the Temple alone shortly before giving birth and she stayed for a year before leaving, asking the Temple administrators in a short note to care for her child. One of the administrators later told Miriam that he’d been fond of her mother, that everyone was, and that they didn’t hesitate to

allow Miriam to remain in the Temple. As an adult, Miriam reasoned that it didn't hurt that the Temple was then at the height of its popularity, and that it had the funds and personnel necessary to collectively raise a child (she found herself considering these facts occasionally, accompanied by a pain in her stomach which made her want to avoid the line of thought entirely). This was in no small part thanks to the charisma and presence of his Holiness Awakened Ocean, the thought of whom caused Miriam to smile whenever he sprung to mind. She could see his face, the deep set laugh-lines around his eyes, the beard he kept short that slowly turned from deep brown to gray as she watched him age, the ears that stuck out slightly from his head. She had always been close to the Founder (as he was called within the temple), and recalled her childhood at his feet. She remembered his constant presence in whatever room she was playing, how whenever she stole a glance at him, no matter how busy he seemed or whom he was meeting with, he was smiling right at her as if he'd been waiting for her to acknowledge him. She remembered the dark wood of her temple's rooms, the simple furnishings that smelled of turpentine and mineral spirits every spring when the initiates were made to stain the entire building from floor to ceiling. She remembered the gardens of sand and rocks where she was never allowed to play, except for once when she and the Founder ran through in their bare feet after a heavy rain. They'd sat on the giant rock islands in the sand and looked at their footprints and the Founder

explained to her that the footprints would wash away, that she could never step in the same place in the same way ever again, that she'd never want to. She remembered this making her feel at once very cold and very happy, though she didn't understand why.

Mrs. Holt unfolded her hands, smoothed out her sweat pants, and folded them again. "How did you find him?" She asked. "Why us? Why David?"

"It's a complicated process," Miriam said. "There are lots of factors. We have a board, the Assessment board, that assembles the names and locations of the children based on various signs."

"I read about this," Mrs. Holt said, nodding slowly. "Scattering ashes into the wind, like they do with Dalai Lamas?"

"In a sense. Only we read signs that pertain to our search area. The Tibetans would spread ashes and watch the patterns of how they moved, in what direction, that kind of thing. We use other mediums to look for patterns. Like television."

"You watch television."

"We watch the media, yes, and try and connect patterns, when we can find them. As I said, the process is complicated."

Mrs. Holt crinkled her nose and her lips parted slightly, as if she smelled something unpleasant. "That involves watching television."

"That's one method. There are many others. As I said, it's a very complicated process." Miriam realized how many times she had said

“complicated” in the past few minutes, how many times she’d heard her superiors in the temple use the word. She realized just then that she had never once heard the Founder say “complicated” ever, in all the years she had spent with him. What did that mean? “And we have some wealthy sponsors and contributors who give us a hand. But I can tell you that the first indicator is David’s age.”

“He’s six years old.”

“Mmm-hmm. And he was born on March twenty-third, I believe, around five or so in the morning?”

Mrs. Holt cocked her head to one side. “Yes, something like that.”

“That’s the same date and hour that His Holiness died.”

“His Holiness the Awakened Ocean.”

“The very same, ma’am. His Holiness follows a tradition whereby he chooses to be immediately reborn at the very instant of his death. So, among the other signs that led us to this point, your son was in the right place, at the right time, so to speak.” Miriam gave a little smile, hoping it might evoke one from Mrs. Holt. She didn’t react; Mrs. Holt stared vacantly at the coffee table.

Mrs. Holt fell quiet for a moment. Typically, at this point in the process, the novelty wore off. For some of the housewife mothers, the call or letter from the Assessment board or from Miriam herself was the ultimate in novelty. The mother might tell friends about the contact and even invite them to the meeting with the Assessor. The whole affair was

an opportunity, for some, to validate their bragging about their son's uniqueness; further evidence of what they had been claiming all along, that their boy was superior to all others, as now proven by Temple of the Rebirth and Awakening. At some point, however, the reality of the situation, or at least the surface of the reality, began to sink in: the reality that a strange, obscure organization has essentially been stalking your child for months on end. That the organization knows intimate details about you and your family, and that it seeks, it hopes, to make your child into some kind of god on the other side of the continent. Occasionally, this realization led to frustration or anger, the notion that they, the mothers, had somehow been tricked or misled, and that something sinister was afoot. Regardless, Miriam thought, the weight of the whole ordeal always sank in at some point, and for some reason, though she didn't know why, the realization almost always came about when she mentioned the business about TV.

"Mrs. Holt?"

"Hmmm?" She was still staring at the coffee table.

"Is your son home?"

"Hmmm? Yes. I'll go get him."

The Second Incarnation had been killed by a Cal-Train at the Burlingame Station when he was sixty-six years old. He'd been pushed onto the tracks by a young man who was never apprehended or

identified, though the whole act was caught on a security camera. According to the local authorities, an attempted robbery had turned suddenly violent. Miriam, thirty-three when it happened, dipped into Temple funds to bribe the lead detective to show her the tape of the incident. She watched the grainy, soundless black and white video in a small room at the police station. She saw the Founder from a vantage point about thirty feet away; he was standing on the platform after purchasing a ticket from an ATM. His ticket was one-way, she later found out, to San Francisco. The Founder stood there for about five minutes, alone on the platform, before the young man approached him. The man was wearing a hooded sweatshirt with the hood over his head. The Founder was wearing his simple, brown robes. He must've looked strange enough to the young man to make him into a target, Miriam supposed. The two of them stood close to each other and appeared to be talking. The train approached in the distance. After a few moments, the Founder raised his hand and placed it near the young man's face. Miriam knew the gesture well and, as she watched, she began to cry. He was trying to put his hand on the young man's cheek, something the Founder might do to Miriam when she was upset or misbehaving. He would place his hand on her cheek and smile and maybe touch her forehead with his, and her crying would turn into a sobbing laughter, her anger instantly diffused. She might stomp her foot or try half-heartedly

to push him away, wanting to hold onto her indignation. But she never could.

The train drew nearer and when the Founder raised his hand slowly to the young man's face, the young man slapped the hand away. He yelled something and shoved the Founder onto the tracks as the train pulled up to the platform. From the position of the camera, Miriam couldn't see the impact. The young man stood there for a moment before running off. She stopped the tape and sat in the small room on a hard plastic chair and cried, trying to remember that his death wasn't death, that, for him, death was no more than stepping through a door. But still she cried.

The associate Elders of the Temple and Miriam herself had a number of questions about the incident that were never properly answered. Why had the Founder left the Temple in the first place? Why was he headed to San Francisco? Why hadn't he notified anyone about his departure? The Temple had a small collective and a fledgling branch in San Francisco and he might have been headed there. It also wasn't unusual for the Founder occasionally to venture out on his own, and the train was a logical choice since he'd never learned to drive. But he'd announced no such plans. Miriam heard talk around the Temple about the implications of the death, about what it meant for both incarnations of the Founder to be violently killed, about the meaning they were to take away from the tragedy. One of the initiates went so far as to suggest that

perhaps the Founder and his incarnations were cursed, but he was immediately corrected and the suggestion wasn't brought up again. The Assessment Board was called to order two weeks after the death, and Miriam was offered a position, but she declined. The thought of remaining behind in the Temple, staring at documents and monitoring "signs" made her anxious. She wanted the excuse to get away from the halls and rooms she'd grown up in, the rooms she had shared with her teacher. More than that, she wanted to be the one to find him again, to look into the eyes of the third Incarnation. She wanted to waste as little time as possible before seeing him again, and the most effective way to do so would be to get out into the world and find him herself. That had been six years earlier.

"We've never been very religious," Mrs. Holt said, reappearing in the doorway of a hall across the room.

"I'm sorry?" Miriam replied.

"We've never been religious. At all. I mean, we're Christian, of course, but we don't...we don't really go to church or anything." Mrs. Holt crossed her arms and leaned against the frame of the door.

Miriam didn't know how to respond. "Well, that's okay."

"*Well*, excuse me, but I *know* that's okay," Mrs. Holt said, raising her voice, slightly. "It's okay for my family. It's okay for me and my husband."



“I’m sorry, ma’am. I didn’t mean to say that it’s not. I just meant that...everyone has their own path? I guess that’s what I meant to say.”

Mrs. Holt pinched the bridge of her nose, her eyes shut tightly. “I don’t know,” she said. “Maybe my husband was right. Suddenly... I’m just not so sure about all of this.”

Miriam stood up. “I completely understand that this is a lot to handle.”

“Do you have children? Miriam, is it?”

“No, ma’am, I don’t.”

“Then, excuse me, but how could you understand? You want to, what? Take my child, right? You want to take him to some temple and put him in a cult? How am I supposed to react to this?”

“No ma’am, that’s not right.” Miriam felt a familiar pang in her stomach. She tried to push the discomfort aside, but she was stuck with an image of a little boy standing at the Temple’s entrance, asking for his mother. “With all due respect, that is not right. We don’t want to take your child. Absolutely not. If, after meeting with David, we, all of us, decide to proceed, you and your husband will be welcome members at our Temple. The three of you will be given accommodations while we take the next steps. We don’t want to take David from his parents. Under any circumstances. That would be horrible for you and horrible for David and horrible for us. But if David is who my Board thinks he is, than he will be given an unbelievable opportunity. Neither he nor you will have to

worry about money for the rest of your lives. You'll be completely provided for in every way. David's education will completely provided for at whatever university you and he choose when he's old enough. We don't want to claim him, and we certainly don't want to force anything on anyone. If my Board is correct, we want to give David every opportunity to achieve in every way possible so that he might, one day, lead our Temple if he so chooses. And ma'am," Miriam added, "I have dedicated my entire life to this discipline. It is not a cult. This is my whole world, and...it is not a cult. Please don't dismiss it like that. With due respect."

Miriam could feel herself tensing up, so she folded her hands and breathed deeply, focusing on the breathing as well as she could. Both women were still standing.

Mrs. Holt broke eye contact and stared at the floor. "If your Board is correct?"

"Yes."

"You said your Board. You didn't say you thought it was correct. You think there's a chance they're not correct? That they're wrong?"

"Mrs. Holt...may I call you Elizabeth?" Seeing Mrs. Holt's confused expression she picked up the manila folder from the coffee table. "From your file." Mrs. Holt nodded. "Elizabeth, I've been looking for the Third Incarnation for six years. More than six years. I've visited one hundred-fifteen children. David is one hundred and sixteen."

Mrs. Holt nodded, and looked behind herself into the hallway.

“That’s a lot of kids.”

“Nothing would make me happier if my Board was right this time. You have...no idea how happy that would make me. But at this point...”

“You aren’t holding your breath?” Mrs. Holt let out a small smile.

“No, I’m not holding my breath.”

“Do you wonder if he’s out there at all?”

Miriam thought about this for a moment. She leaned back on the arm of the sofa. “I’ve wondered that many, many times. Oh, hello.”

Miriam saw a small head poke his head out from behind his mother’s legs. He might have been there the whole time—in the hallway, out of Miriam’s view. Mrs. Holt looked down at her son without surprise. She put her hand on his shoulder and led him out to stand in front of her. He was small, even for a six-year-old. He had dark blond hair and fat, full cheeks. He wore a striped green-and-white tee-shirt and khaki cargo shorts. His ears were large and stuck out. He stared at Miriam without any trace of self-consciousness, just stared right at her. Miriam thought about the Founder and searched the boy’s eyes for any sign of recognition, though she knew there would be none. Still. “Are you David? I’m Miriam.”

Mrs. Holt considered Miriam for a moment, watching her watch David, before she gave the boy a little shake. “David, say hello to Miriam. She wants to talk with you.”

\* \* \*

The three of them walked to the back yard that was enclosed by wooden fence as high as Miriam's head. Off in a corner there was a sandbox that sat in the shade of a large Oak tree, the seeds of which dotted the sand. Miriam followed Mrs. Holt and her son, toting the suitcase. "Where should we go?"

Miriam nodded towards the tree. "Let's set up right over there."

David ran towards the sandbox and sat down in the middle of it. Mrs. Holt followed behind him and stood next to the tree. Miriam couldn't take her eyes off David. He had a presence that was startling to her. Something in his gestures, the way he scratched his head as he sat in the sand. Maybe it was his expression, his look of concentration when he focused on his mother, or when he considered Miriam. She didn't know if it was the long drive or her talk with Mrs. Holt or the memories that today felt so close and recent, but she couldn't help but notice the butterflies in her stomach as she approached the boy.

"What's in your bag?" David asked, pointing at the suitcase.

Miriam didn't answer. Instead, she walked up to the tree next to the sandbox and laid the suitcase on the ground. She opened it and removed a blanket that she then spread out on the grass. Inside, strapped to the walls of the case with makeshift Velcro straps, were a taxidermied blowfish, visibly hollow, its vacant eye sockets revealing the pinkish-cream interior; a bright red rubber ball, slightly scuffed; a small,

plastic snow globe with the words “Chicago” spelled out in block letters, a mock plastic skyline on top of them; a silver fork; a blue toy train with eyes and a cheerful face set into the front; an ink pen, overly long and heavy with a mock-quill tip; a worn tennis shoe that at some point may have been white; a brown coffee mug, the handle snapped off leaving two jagged, white porcelain spots on one side. One by one, Miriam laid the items out on the blanket and recited the script she had used one hundred-fifteen times before.

“As per my instructions, Mrs. Holt, did you speak with your son about why I’m here today?”

“No,” Mrs. Holt replied.

“Are you willing to allow David to participate in this test?”

Mrs. Holt watched her son in the sand. He was eyeing the collection on the blanket. Without looking up, she answered, “Yes, it’s all right.”

Miriam stood next to the blanket. “David, would you like to look at these?”

David stood up, dusted the sand off of his bare shins and walked over to the blanket. “What should I do with them?”

“You can play with them, if you like.” Miriam smiled and took a small step back from the blanket.

The boy crouched down and looked over the items. He traced a path between the objects with his finger, not touching any one of them.

Then he looked up at Miriam and smiled. He laughed and grabbed one of the objects from the blanket and offered it to her.

Miriam was pacing behind her car out on the street, phone to her ear, listening to it ring on the other end. She could hardly catch her breath and she couldn't stop moving. Finally, a man answered. "Hey!" he shouted. She could hear loud, indistinct music and people talking loudly. "Peace and greetings unto you!" the voice said with a laugh.

"This is Assessor number thirteen-fifteen from location one-one-six."

"Miriam! Holy shit." The man's voice quieted. He must have taken the receiver away from his mouth as he yelled, "Everybody! It's Miriam!" She heard a cheer. "It's Ian! I was literally seconds from calling you."

"Ian, I'm calling from location one-one-six and I have three confirmed selections."

"I swear, I just picked up my phone to call you," Ian said before she could finish. "What're you talking about? Did you hear? How could you have heard already?"

"What? Heard what? Did you hear what I just said?"

"Miriam, jeez, we *found him!*"

She stopped pacing. "How?" she asked.

"How, what do you mean 'how'?" Again, he must have moved his mouth away from the phone, "She just asked how!" Then back to the

phone. “You know better than anybody *how*, for chrissakes. Miriam, *we found him!* It’s over! You can come home! Can you hear? It’s a huge party!” She heard the din in the background raised in response. “We sent out the press release, like, half an hour ago. Some kid in Michigan. Well, not some kid, but you know what I mean. Can you believe it? Miriam?”

Miriam dropped her hand holding the phone to her side without hanging up. She leaned against the car. She looked up and down the small street and thought again how it really was unlike any of the other neighborhoods she’d visited. Turning towards the house, she felt a strange impulse to carry her suitcase back to the door, to ring the doorbell and introduce herself all over again, repeating the entire ordeal word for word. She didn’t know why this thought occurred to her. She could see the boy standing at the window, smiling, waving at her, his ears sticking out ridiculously from his head. She wanted to pick up her phone, to tell Ian that they had it wrong, that she had found the Founder. She had finally done it, she had found the third Incarnation, as she always knew she would. But she left the phone hanging dumbly at her side. Miriam smiled and waved back at David with her other hand, thinking that, no matter what, she couldn’t walk to the door in the same way she had, not ever, that it would never be the same.