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FICTION

MYTH OF MAGIC

THE CHILDBEARER

A THOUSAND POINTS OF DARKNESS

HOFSTADTER'S GRANDCHILDREN

SEVEN WAYS THE WORLD CAN END

Vival of the Fittest

Book 1 – MUSIC UNDER THE MOUNTAIN

Mara Solomon, Music Detective

HER FINAL NOTE

NONFICTION

SOLFEGE TOWN

BALLET MUSIC FOR THE DANCE ACCOMPANIST

A Thousand Points of Darkness

A Thousand Points of Darkness

Adam Cole

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Dedicated to Mike Shaffer,
World's Best Mailman.

Special thanks to my readers,
who made this book so much
better than it was:
Teresa, Louise, Vince,
Tom, Chris, Jason and Anna.

“Corporations are people, my friend.” Mitt Romney

Author's note: The name of the town in this book was chosen for its personal and literary significance. It is not meant to refer to the real town of Clear Point. The author has not been to any city of that name.

At first, grey spots are covering my eyes, like my friends gathering in to take a look at my face, blocking out the light, to see if I'm all right. Then I remember that I have no friends, and these spots are leeches that have always sucked the breath from my mouth and left me suffocated.

I brush them away and they scatter the way the images on the AVE scatter when you pass your hand through them, all the faces that chatter at you all day long 'til you just put your hand in the images and they scatter like frightened fish in a pool.

For a minute I can see, and what I see is the white woman. I think I've seen her before, black eyed, skin like ashes, long lashes droop over curious pupils, deep pools that look into my eyes and don't see the grey spots.

When I speak to her I hear a rumble from the grave, a ghoulish spirit that drowns out my words and makes a mockery, tries to frighten the white woman away.

She is not frightened and peers deeper into my face, the brown, wrinkled parched wreckage that contains the lines of where I've gone these last few...

Again I try to speak. Again the monkey demon growls up from under the bed, *mwahaing* and making the stupidest rattle so that I get angry and I try and shout, but that just makes the monkey man angrier and he shouts louder too. The woman's already wide eyes open wider and she backs away two steps, then three quick ones, then turns and runs as fast as she can from the room.

The wail of the monkey man follows her and rushes out the door.

The Virgin

In the autumn after his tenth birthday, Basil Ortega, apprentice to the Padre of the Drug Church of Glenridge, was making his way to the Noke Company headquarters. It was his job to give drugs to the executives at their party. He stood on the platform enjoying the warm November sun, thinking about the ride that would take thirty minutes.

Basil had ridden the train before, but never by himself. Never as the one in charge.

When Padre had told Basil he'd be going to Atlanta Proper, he had assumed it would be to help Padre administer the drugs. He had been amazed when Padre had told him that he'd be going alone. He had never been to the heart of the Proper, much less to a big CUSA building. He wasn't even sure he'd be allowed; he thought that somehow the embodied city would know who he was and prevent him.

But when he stuck his face into the holographic envelope, the sensation-generating AVE machine that produced it knew him and let him step on board.

Basil stepped back out of the pool of light, the dust-flecks flying inside it like fish in a fishbowl. Even though it was just a holographic space, it seemed to release him reluctantly, the light-ball in front of him closing like a disappointed pair of lips. He heard the doors coming together behind him, and he looked for a seat.

The acceleration was so smooth he hardly noticed the transition to flying at 100 kph towards the City Proper of Atlanta. The ramshackle buildings rocketing by him seemed to be fleeing from the mass of golden towers that made up the Proper. That mass, lying on the other side of Peachtree Forest, loomed larger and larger out his window.

This far out the train was generally empty. It only came to Atlanta's run-down outer neighborhoods to bring Shareholders who were making in-sight evaluations of real estate or other consultations in the land of the cricket-eaters. At least that's what Padre had told Basil. As the train got closer to the Proper it would pick up more veeps, some Uniforms. Would they be surprised to see the ten-year-old boy riding by himself? Maybe if they saw the canvas bag he carried over his shoulder, the bag of a Padre, they wouldn't think twice about it.

At the back of every seat was an AVE, an Audio-Visual Envelope generator, which generated commercials all the time. If you had good number—that is, if you were rich—you could buy anything from them you wanted. All you had to do was speak to it or touch the pool of light, and it would respond like a budding flower or a welcoming lover. But Basil was ten and didn't have any number at all yet, and he wouldn't have been allowed to buy something if he had.

“Spikey, Spikey, so refressshhing—”

A drink-can was hovering right in front of his hand, and if he moved through the image, he knew the AVE would go crazy trying to sell it to him. He kept his hand still while his thoughts spun backwards to the memory of his Padre's words.

“You're just a servant. As am I. Don't forget your sacred obligation, not to stand in the way of the Body and Blood, or I will be forced to beat you.”

Basil had nodded quietly, even though the sound of Padre's voice was only in his imagination. He had been beaten several times before and was generally learning how to avoid it. You did a lot of nodding.

Coasting above the canopy of the forest, the train afforded an unobstructed view of the golden towers of the City Proper, wrapped in a loving network of alternate rail tubes. They

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loomed so large now that their shadows darkened the windows. On either side of the empty car the lush green alleys that had been planted full of briars with the bright red berries blurred into a messy brown. Basil opened his drowsy eyes to see a lone auto, over a hundred years old, lying on its side by some abandoned railroad tracks. The car was filled with dirt, and purple and yellow flowers sprouted out the windows. He passed it so fast that he couldn't believe he had really seen it. He jolted onto his knees and stared back the way he had come, hoping to get another glimpse, but the train had already gone around a curve and the car was lost to sight.

How did it get there? What was it? 2002 Honda Civic? 2003 Volkswagen Passat? The train ran on the old expressways heading in and out of the city, but the pavement had been wrecked years and years ago and no one could have driven on it. Had he really seen the car? No one would believe him if he told them. Padre wouldn't care. Maybe he'd tell Rosa about it if she wasn't being a pain.

A few minutes later the train pulled into Five Points Station, where it became a local. As he stepped off, hundreds of suit- and skirt-clad Shareholders stepped on. A few gave him an odd stare, this little coffee-colored boy with his hemp shoulder-bag nearly as large as himself. Most just stepped around him, as though he were one of the vacuums gliding around sucking the dust off the pavement.

He didn't mind. He was too young to be in awe of Shareholders, young enough to be able to maintain a slight attitude of indifference. Besides, he had too much to think about. He had to remember what his Padre had told him. He had to remember the routine.

"We do not encourage the Indulgences of the unfaithful. But we are in no position to resist. They know we can arrange them and we are legally obligated to comply. That is why we take our duties even more seriously with the infidels than we do with our own flock. Who are the six who do not lock the gates?"

"Amphetamine," Basil answered. "Cocaine hydrochloride. Methamphetamine. Methylenedioxy-methamphetamine, methylphenidate, nicotine."

"Who are the three who sleep but do not die?"

"Benzodiazepine, gamma-hydroxybutyrate, methaqualone."

"How is the lion brought to sleep with the lamb?"

"By the—" Basil paused. He could not remember.

He involuntarily winced and huddled towards the wall. He had been hit for forgetting that last one. *By the China Girl*. He could not forget it now. It came to him with the dull ache he felt every time he moved his shoulder wrong.

Someone had decided to do more than stare at him or ignore him. A squat man in a grey charcoal suit and a matching cap approached him.

"Ortega?" he asked.

Basil nodded.

"I was expecting somebody older."

Basil shrugged. He waited patiently, and finally the man in the suit also shrugged and turned away. Basil followed him along the worn platform and up an escalator. In the stone façade of an ancient building buried in the tomb of the station, two stone bare-breasted white women stared absently down over an old catwalk. Basil watched as the escalator slowly pulled the two sentinels past his vision. At the end of the line, the escalator dropped him onto a sterling, scrubbed plaza. A glass roof filtered the sunlight pouring from above into a golden haze filled with bugs.

The man led Basil across the Elysian courtyard of Five Points Station to where his rickshaw was parked. Basil climbed into the back as the driver stepped behind the pedals. Leaning forward, the driver brought the carriage in motion and eased them into the light midmorning traffic.

Basil had never been to the Proper before and Padre had told him not to be seduced. But it was hard not to look as they glided past one after another of the colonnaded buildings of stone and glass, set off from the street by cultivated lawns with bright flower gardens and sleek plastic sculptures with brand names. A holographic band played commercials from a bandstand by the statue of Herman Talmadge. Basil's own world seemed drab by comparison; even the interior of the Church, which was beautiful and always clean, seemed ordinary in his memory. Everything here was *new*. Even the smoke-free air sparkled.

"Where do you live?" he asked the driver.

"In a coffin off Andy Young," the driver said over his shoulder. "You ever been Proper?" Basil shook his head. Then man, who did not see the gesture, looked back and said, "Eh?"

"No," Basil said loudly over the whistling wind.

"It's pretty, isn't it?"

Basil nodded. An immaculate woman, her skin glowing like a copper plate in the sun, led her two children and a perfectly groomed chow westward, balancing in her high heels on the marble sidewalk.

"Where do you live?"

"Sandy Springs."

"You really have drugs in that bag?"

Basil nodded.

The man did not see, but he asked a second question. "Anybody ever try and take that bag from you before?"

Basil did not reply. His Padre had never suggested that possibility. As far as he knew, no one would steal from a Padre in sight of an AVE. Uniforms would arrive to arrest anyone stupid enough to attempt it. Of course, he wasn't a real Padre. He folded his hands and looked away, across the lush expanse of Centennial Olympic Park. Happy *pequeños* could be seen screaming with delight as they romped naked in the squirting fountains.

The driver continued down Maynard Jackson for about ten minutes and then slowed at the base of a large pyramid. Before it floated a holographic sign that read *NokeCUSA LLP* in ornate Spanish letters. Smooth as a skateboarder, the driver swung the rickshaw around until it was parallel to the walkway neatly sheltered beneath the pyramid's base.

Basil got out, clutching his bag close to his side, and followed the driver through a revolving door and into a plush, spacious lobby bustling with prim, suited workers. They were lined up in rows before AVEs that sang the promise of various nutrition-bars and beverages. "Oooo, yes... *I never had anything like it before, Lotta. Spikey, Spikey...*"

An elevator shaft shot diagonally up the spine of the pyramid into the undersides of the office-homes that took up the bulk of the building's mass. Basil and the driver crossed the lobby, bypassing the receptionists with a sly nod from the driver, and entered a lift, which was waiting patiently for them. As they ascended Basil watched the floors collapsing beneath him, stacking like a deck of cards. For a moment, the elevator was enveloped by darkness as it reached the top floor.

The driver led Basil out the elevator and along a posh, carpeted hallway. The wall broke off after a short interval to reveal another level above and behind. Now Basil could see the high ceiling coming to a point at the apex of an enormous area within which were hundreds of offices and apartments. Happy commercial music, cooing from a hidden source, suffused the whole enclosure.

The driver took Basil up a short escalator. Now he could see the expanse of the uppermost offices, the desks of the secretaries laid out like watch posts in front of the huge mirrored glass doors and walls of the execs. All the voices combined and floated up to the blue sky, which seemed to be trapped in the pyramid's ceiling-point.

"Wait here, okay?" the driver said to Basil.

He went on to one of the desks and exchanged words with the secretary behind it. She directed him with a transparent-nailed finger to a spiral crystal staircase a little way off. The driver nodded, turned around, and walked back to Basil.

"You sit here, *capitán*. He'll call you up when he's ready to see you. Dow!" With a cordial wave, the driver pranced down the escalator and was gone.

The secretary, who was talking simultaneously to three holographic heads that floated in various places around her, did not seem to notice Basil. He sat down in a nearby chair. It molded to fit his bottom. Then it began to vibrate a little.

"They don't believe. They have no souls."

"They seek but they know not what."

"Little boy?" the secretary called down, standing over him. Basil had fallen asleep in the vibrating, form-fitting chair. Basil blinked, dazed. As if on cue, the chair ceased to shake. "You can go up." The secretary watched Basil get to his feet. He clutched his bag and plodded to the crystal stair.

Mr. Sattari's name was holographically projected on a door that slid soundlessly to the left as Basil came within a foot of it. That door was the only executive door in the entire upper chamber that did not mirror the person in front of it. Instead it was opaque, black. Once the door had given way, Basil could see that Mr. Sattari's office had two stories. Little boats floated in a small pool in the far left corner—real boats, real water, no holograph. Along the other corner sat what looked like a wide, squat armoire, its handleless doors closed tight at the bottom, its one drawer lying open in the middle, revealing a long row of black and white blocks arranged in a regular pattern of twos and threes. Leather-bound books, their spines decked in stately purples and forest greens, lined glass-enclosed shelves. Certain sections of the floor were transparent and showed several stories below.

Three servants fluttered about the space. A woman in a pink corset was removing the remains of a food tray to a hole in the back wall. A man in a tunic was dusting busily with an ion-sweeper.

Mr. Sattari's desk was on the upper level, accessible only by a short arching stairway of wide platforms, each of which seemed to have no visible support. The high plateau that was Sattari's work-space was crowded by a huge mahogany desk; a straight-backed chair facing it; a more comfortable chair behind it, in which Mr. Sattari sat; and a small sofa off to the side whose back was unprotected from the one-story drop. Standing just behind Sattari's left elbow, an unmoving servant with a solemn expression stood at the ready for anything he might desire.

Mr. Sattari, the *Siyo* of the Noke Corporation, was stern-faced, bent in concentration over his personal AVE, his fingers manipulating symbols made of light, his eyes oblivious to the

images blinking in the air before him as if he could see their characteristics without regarding them. To his right was a disregarded silver plate containing the remains of a meal. Basil gaped at the meat left on the plate. He had never seen real meat, only holographs of it in commercials.

Basil should have been in awe of the man rather than his dinner. This was the *Siyó* of the Noke Company, one of the huge conglomerates that made up the Corporation of the United States of America. He *should* have been overwhelmed. But he had a job to do. His position in the Drug Church kept him from losing himself. The *Siyó* would need him.

As the small boy ascended the platforms, Mr. Sattari's expression did not change; his brow did not unfurrow, nor did his eyes lose their concentrated focus. By the time Basil had mounted the lip of the last stair, he had returned his gaze to his fingers.

Basil stood uncomfortably for a second. "Sit down," Mr. Sattari dictated in a faraway voice. Basil took the straight-backed chair and waited.

After a while, Mr. Sattari looked up with the same distant expression and said, "I was expecting the Padre."

"He sent me, Mr. Sattari." Basil used his best Spanish.

Mr. Sattari regarded the boy critically up and down. "You're very young."

"I know the rites," Basil said, defending himself. "He sent me on my first assignment because I know them all."

Still, Mr. Sattari regarded him severely. "How old are you?"

"It doesn't matter, *señor*," Basil answered.

Surprised, Mr. Sattari started back in his chair. His eyebrows had exploded upwards, but his eyes remained crossed. Then he nodded, relaxed, sat forward. "You're right. You have the drugs, after all, don't you?" Now that Basil was closer, the *Siyó* looked very different. His brown face appeared much older, despite the absence of any grey in the bob of jet-black hair, tied in a pony-tail behind him. He sat stiffly, his body thin and erect under a white suit-blouse.

"The Body and Blood," Basil said, nodding.

Mr. Sattari barely heard him. He leaned back in his chair and regarded Basil more curiously. "How old are you?" he asked again, but this time the meaning of the question was different.

"Ten years."

"So young."

"Most boys start learning at four."

"Do all ten-year-olds make these trips?"

"My Padre's a stern man," said Basil with curious emphasis, suggesting more than he said.

"So you really know what you're doing," Mr. Sattari answered, understanding his meaning.

Basil nodded.

"You know we're not worshippers," he said.

Basil nodded.

"But you bring us the drugs anyway."

"We have to," Basil replied. Immediately he wondered if he should have said so in front of Mr. Sattari's servant, still standing obliquely behind the *Siyó*. Although anyone might have guessed about the relationship between the Corporation and the Drug Church, no one was

supposed to suggest it openly. Sattari's stone-faced accessory seemed oblivious to the comment, as did Mr. Sattari.

Surely Mr. Sattari was playing with him. As a *Siyó* he most certainly knew that the Drug Church was a legally independent organization in name only. CUSA liked to maintain the charade that the Church, by offering free, limitless substances to its addicts, was evil because it was outside of its direct control. But the Corporation secretly gave limited funding to the Churches, even while it pretended to oppose them, in order to get drugs for their own sinful indulgences. It was a compromise. The Church ignored its stance against giving the sacred substances to nonbelievers in order to stay solvent, and the Corporation got its carefully controlled drug parties.

"It's a strange thing," Mr. Sattari said into his hand.

Basil didn't know what the *Siyó* meant. He sat in the straight-backed chair and waited.

"You give these drugs to addicts for free."

"Yes, *señor*." It was true. The addicts came and the Church provided. No questions were ever asked; no demands were ever made. Whatever means of worship addicts required, they got.

"Why?"

"They come, we serve."

"But they aren't happy," Mr. Sattari argued.

"Not until they use."

"But the drugs make them vomit. They turn them into slaves. They blindly roam CUSA like zombies. They don't even know how to feed themselves."

"We take care of them," Basil replied.

Mr. Sattari paused to consider. "Yes, but—" he began. "Why don't you help them quit?"

"That's their part," Basil said.

"What?"

"That's the burden placed upon them," Basil said, parroting his Padre.

"What do you mean?"

"They have to quit. They take the drugs to go deep inside themselves. When they come out, they quit."

"But they never quit!" Mr. Sattari exclaimed, obviously irritated. "The drugs are so addictive!"

"It's up to them to quit," Basil said, simply.

Baffled, Mr. Sattari stared through Basil, leaning back, his hand on his mouth, his eyes in that pensive expression. After awhile he straightened up. "Are you going to give my people addictive drugs?"

"No," Basil said. "We don't give those to nonbelievers."

Mr. Sattari nodded again through his hand. He seemed to have dismissed Basil with a thought. "Well," he said. "That's fine. Why don't you go down and wait by Ms. Sanchez's desk? The party won't start until this evening." By the time Basil had gotten to his feet, Mr. Sattari was immersed in his symbols again.

Basil descended the platform arc and exited into the lobby, hearing the door slide swiftly shut behind him. He came down the stair to stand in front of the secretary's desk. Ms. Sanchez gestured to the chair where he had sat before. "You can sit there," she said.

Basil slid into the chair once more. It molded to fit his form. Then it began to vibrate again.

“We do not encourage the Indulgences of the Infidel...”

“Little boy?” The secretary, Ms. Sanchez, was standing over him, smiling. “It’s time,” she said.

Basil shook himself. The chair had once again gone still. The sky trapped in the apex of the pyramid was now black. Ms. Sanchez extended her hand. Basil took it and pulled himself out. He looked back at the chair suspiciously. “Usually clients aren’t in there for more than forty-five minutes,” she said. “You were in stasis for four hours. You can feel it.” She sounded sympathetic. “You don’t notice the time passing, but you can feel it.” She nodded to affirm her own words. Basil had said nothing.

He felt naked, overly light. He looked himself over, and his breath caught in his throat. Trying to keep the trembling out of his voice, he said, “My bag.” He was missing his drug-bag, with the sacred implements inside.

“We have it,” said the secretary, reassuring him.

“Give it to me!” He was quickly coming to himself as he looked directly into her eyes. The secretary frowned, unpleasantly surprised that a little boy had the nerve to address her in this way. “Give it to me now!” Basil repeated, with more volume.

Put off by the intensity of his order, she found she could not answer him as she would have spoken to a child. She shook her shoulders a little as she turned. “Follow me,” she said. “I don’t have it.” Basil followed right at her heels, ready to overtake her at the moment he saw what was his.

“Oooo...yes...” came the voice from all directions, soft and sinuous. The AVEs were spaced every twelve meters along the wall, broadcasting at low volume. Voices came from everywhere, selling, tempting, accessible to anyone who came within reach of the spherical halo. Finally, after running this gauntlet of temptation, Basil and Ms. Sanchez arrived at an open doorway.

Several people were in a bare conference room, sitting around a low table on a sofa and chairs. The canvas bag was on the table.

Startling the occupants of the room, Basil sped towards it and grabbed it by the strap. They laughed, thinking him the child of an office-worker. “Hey, *amigo*, that’s not yours,” one of them said, rising.

Basil had gone into the corner with his back against the wall and glared at the man, who had begun moving towards him.

“It is,” said the secretary quickly. “It is his. This is the dealer.”

“Him?” the man asked, pointing at Basil. He seemed not to believe it.

The secretary nodded. Basil rummaged through his bag. It had been opened, but nothing was missing. He let out a barely audible sigh of relief.

“You’ll be in here,” the secretary said to Basil across the room. “You can start any time someone asks.” Basil nodded at her curtly, to let her know he was ready for her to be gone. Making a funny shape with her mouth, the secretary turned on her heel and strode from the room.

The four people who had been sitting when he entered now regarded Basil. The one who was standing stepped towards him. “So, kid,” he said. “You’re the dealer.”

Basil nodded, still holding his bag tight.

“We didn’t go in it,” he said, pointing at the bag. He was lying, but they were fortunate they hadn’t opened anything. People had died at parties by ingesting unidentified powders and drinking liquids meant for syringes. If anyone at this party died, Basil would be held responsible.

“When can we start?” a woman asked him.

“Ms. Sanchez said we could start any time,” a man interjected.

“Well, I want to start now,” said the other woman in the room, getting to her feet. She moved towards Basil, who was still sitting on the floor in the corner. Coming near him, she slowed awkwardly. He watched her approach impassively but made no move to receive her.

“What do we do?” she asked, uncertain.

She had never taken before. “*White Lamb for the child,*” Padre would have said. Basil opened his bag with a slow, practiced movement. He knew what to pull out without having to look, but he looked anyway, just for show. He removed a small pill, flexible like a sponge, with his fingertips.

She reached out her palm, but he shook his head. He signaled for her to get on her knees.

Smoothing her skirt, she knelt before him. As he held the pill before her mouth her eyes went soft. Like a child, she opened her lips, an expression on her face that was part surprise, part exultation, and solemnly he slipped the pill between them. “Don’t chew,” he instructed. “It has to sit beneath your tongue for thirty seconds. Then swallow it.”

She nodded and closed her lips, remaining still. “In the name of the Holy Spirit,” Basil said, making the sign of the cross over her. The other people in the room were getting to their feet. The man who had remained standing the whole time quickly knelt next to the woman, whose eyelids had begun to flutter.

“I want a Green Bus. Do you have a Green Bus?” he asked eagerly. “I had one last time.” Basil nodded and reached for the capsule.

Next came a small man with wiry arms and weak eyes. He hardly looked at Basil as he knelt on the floor before him. Basil recognized the telltale expression of a Gamer. He was employed to play virtual scenarios on the AVE all day long. Basil knew about Gamers because they had to be blessed differently. Gamers rarely left the confines of their AVEs. Most of them had remained in full-time login since their school-days. Because they already lived in their own little world it was not helpful to give them certain kinds of substances. Basil had been instructed to make their forced sojourn in the physical world tolerable through mood-enhancers. Padre had told him that for Gamers this would suffice.

Just as the first woman was entering her convulsions, several other people came into the office. By the time her movements had stopped and her euphoria began, twenty people were lined up waiting for Basil’s benediction.

It was always busiest at first, Padre had told him. The beginners rarely came back for seconds until near the end of the night, and the more experienced knew enough to wait before mixing effects. Those who didn’t know how to be careful Basil had to turn away for a while.

He had no trouble. By the end of the first hour, he was the only responsible person in the building; the rest of the occupants were engaged in drug-play. When things had finally slowed enough for him to take a break, he stood up, closed his bag, tucked it beneath his arm, and left to roam the top floors of the pyramid.

He had seen the effects of the sacred implements all his life, but only on the faithful, who used the addictive drugs. None of tonight’s blessings would induce vomiting or generate hazardous delusions. As he walked around he saw some office workers leaping from table to

table in a kind of line-dance, overtipping empty wine-glasses. Others sat in chairs and sofas in solitude and watched their own little mind-shows. Some talked back to the visions. They would not remember what they saw. As he passed the stasis chair he saw the secretary, Ms. Sanchez, sitting in it. She was trapped in an endless vision compounded by the technology of the chair.

Basil had not expected this situation, nor did he know how to handle it. The woman might be in real danger. Putting a hand on her arm, he brought the chair to its still state. She did not blink.

He pulled her gently from the chair by her arms. She came out easily. Laying her on the floor face down, he checked her pulse. It was slow but steady. He pulled a salve out of his pack, wetted two fingers, and applied a patch to the side of her neck. Then he left her. She would soon recover and come back for more.

He wandered past a couple who held each other without moving, like two mummies in a single coffin. Another pair just down the hall were trying to touch one another but seemed unable to do it. The faces approached one another again and again, only to be stopped when the lips were just centimeters apart. Each seemed perplexed by their inability to cross the space.

Standing next to them, three men watched the Denver Post at New England Kellogs game being broadcast by the AVE, not really knowing anymore what they were looking at. Instead of cheering, they stared at the running men like baffled children. Basil strolled past them, walking through the 3-D image of the players.

Finally, several people accosted him at the bottom of the crystal stair. "We want more," said a man in a black frilled shirt and matching vest. "I want the Rainpowder. Do you have the Rainpowder?"

Basil shook his head.

The man looked crossly at him. "I know you have it," he said. "I took it at a party once before. I know you guys keep it in your bags."

Basil shook his head, feeling a little nervous.

The man's expression darkened. "Give it to me *now*, you little shit," he said. He grabbed Basil by the lapel with a black fist.

"Leave him alone," said another man, interfering with his hand on the first man's arm. "He's just a kid."

"But this other stuff is candy," argued the accoster. "I want you to try the real thing, and I know he's got it." He glared at Basil. Basil returned the stare, outwardly keeping his calm over the panic that was making him tremble.

"*If you lose control, you've got to go,*" Padre had said. "*Don't let them see you're afraid or they'll take the bag.*" Basil kept control. He kept his gaze fixed on the man who was holding him. "*Remember, he's off balance,*" Padre told him. "*When he's on the light take, you're smarter and stronger than him.*"

The executive glared down at Basil. Even in his current state he did not appear as if he would be intimidated by a ten-year-old. Basil began to be afraid that he'd given the man the wrong dosage or combination.

"Look," said a woman from behind. "He's just a little kid. Take him up to Sattari. He'll make him give it to you."

The accoster nodded. "You're right," he said. He grabbed Basil firmly by the wrist and began pulling him. The others followed, whooping, excitement surging behind them until, like a

wave, they burst through the sliding door and floated up the platform stair in Mr. Sattari's subdued, dark office.

The *Siyó* was still dancing through holograms with his fingers, now alone at his desk, the servant having vanished. He did not look up at the stampede that had entered his office. Basil suddenly realized that Mr. Sattari was the only one who had not yet come to him. The *Siyó* was still attired in his work clothes, still penetrating the light-symbols with his fingertips.

"Mr. Sattari, why are you still workin-*guh*?" an older woman giggled like a child. Mr. Sattari looked up mildly, a patient expression in his eyes.

"Come on, sir," an older man said, moving to grab Mr. Sattari's arm. Irritably, Mr. Sattari pulled it away. It came easily from the rubber grip of his subordinate. He kept his voice mild. "Go on," he said to them. "Have fun."

"But Mr. Sattari, you're missing the party!" said the first worker.

"That's all right," he said, smiling a little. "I'll come down later. I'm sure the boy has lots of drugs still." He had not seen Basil.

He was pulled out roughly by the disgruntled employee. "Mr. Sattari, he's holding out on us! I asked him for some Rainpowder and he said no. I know he has—"

Upon seeing Basil, Mr. Sattari's expression changed dramatically. The *Siyó* surged to his feet. "Let him go! *Now!*"

Cowed and terrified, the man fell back into the shelter of his group. Everyone had fallen silent. They stood there like guilty children, looking away now, afraid to move.

Mr. Sattari swept his grave eyes over them for a long moment. "Go," he finally told them. "I'll handle our dealer. If any of you lay another *finger* on company property, your contracts will be terminated. Mr. Valazquez, you have had enough. Go to your office and go to bed."

The disgruntled employee nodded his head as if were sitting on a spring. Half backing, half tripping, the group of workers made their way down the platform-stair and out the sliding door, a couple of them barely restraining a few giggles at last as they fell out of earshot.

Mr. Sattari cocked his finger in the air and the door locked with an audible click. He looked down at Basil. "I'm sorry," he said. "Did they harm you?"

Basil shook his head. He was shaking a little, but he felt he had to keep himself under control. A Padre wouldn't cry.

Mr. Sattari sighed heavily and sat back down in his chair. For a while, he lost himself behind his hand, swimming in a wash of thoughts. Then his eyes flitted up to Basil.

"Why didn't you give him the Rainpowder? Is that what it was?"

"I'm not allowed," Basil answered quietly.

"Do you have it?"

Basil nodded yes. "I'm supposed to carry it in case I meet an addict. But I'm not allowed to give it to you." He paused to consider his response. "It's for the faithful."

Mr. Sattari considered for a moment. Then, as if he had been thinking about it since their earlier conversation that afternoon, he said, "It's the mission of your believers to quit."

"Yes," Basil nodded.

"How can they quit when you keep giving them drugs?"

"We support them so they don't have any excuse."

"What?" Mr. Sattari seemed baffled.

“Only they can quit,” Basil insisted. Still vexed, Mr. Sattari frowned at Basil. “Padre could explain it to you,” Basil said. “They take the drugs to see. We make sure nothing gets in the way.”

“What do they see?” Mr. Sattari wondered aloud.

Basil hesitated. “I don’t know,” he replied. “We’re not allowed to take the dru—the Body and the Blood.”

“You’ve never taken them!” Mr. Sattari repeated, astonished. Basil shook his head no. “Why?”

“We’re not allowed,” Basil repeated simply. At first, Basil appeared as though he either would not or could not explain. Then he became a child for a brief instant. “Sometimes they see demons,” he said.

“Demons,” Mr. Sattari’s voice sounded hoarse, as if the word was heavy on his throat.

“Sometimes they see angels, too,” Basil said quickly. “They scream and carry on, or they sit for hours, sometimes days; some of them, they don’t eat unless we feed ’em, don’t drink unless we give ’em water. They just see and see.”

“And do they ever quit?” Mr. Sattari asked.

Basil shrugged. “Not when they’re with us. They come and go, they move from Church to Church. One day, maybe, they stop coming. We never see that part.”

“What do you suppose they see that makes them stop coming?” Mr. Sattari asked.

Basil shrugged.

Mr. Sattari hesitated. Basil watched him curiously.

“I want to see,” Mr. Sattari said.

Basil looked on Mr. Sattari’s desk. Holographic projections were organized and stacked upon each other. One of the papers blinked.

“I want to see,” Mr. Sattari repeated.

Basil looked up at him as the dealer again. “You want to escape?”

Mr. Sattari’s brow wrinkled. “No,” he clarified. “I don’t want any party drugs. I want to see like the faithful see. I want the real drugs.”

“You can’t take those,” Basil said.

“Why not?”

“You’re not a believer.”

“I want to believe.”

Basil’s face softened in surprise. Padre had never spoken to him about this. Nobody joined the Church. Addicts simply appeared, already lost, looking for a fix. Basil wavered. “I don’t—”

“You have them with you. You said you did!”

Basil began to be afraid again. He remembered the locked door behind him.

Mr. Sattari went on. “I have demons I need to see. I have to talk to my demons.”

“I can’t,” Basil said. “I—”

“You must,” Mr. Sattari growled.

“I don’t know how. I’m not a Padre.”

“You have them. Just give them to me.”

“I can’t!”

“Give...them...to...me...” said Mr. Sattari sternly, standing up again to his full height.

“I *can't!*” Basil’s voice was strained and anxious. Clutching his bag, he retreated from Mr. Sattari. The executive glared, but not directly at Basil.

“You don’t understand,” Sattari said gruffly, trying to explain to Basil as if the child were his colleague. “It’s not sane here. Don’t you see? I’ve got to become insane to think clearly.”

Basil regarded Mr. Sattari carefully from the edge of the platform. The *Siyō* was standing behind his desk looking down at the glass floor, as if reading the words that came out of his mouth on the polished transparent surface.

“I need—” he began. Stopping, he brought his hand to his mouth to consider. “I need *absolution*...to be released from my responsibility, if only for a minute. I need...*absolution*,” he said again. The *Siyō* looked at Basil now, his questioning eyes soft and pliant like a dog’s. “Aren’t you supposed to give that?”

Basil nodded. Then he shook his head. He didn’t know. “To the faithful,” he stammered.

“I want to join,” Mr. Sattari said again.

Basil shook his head.

“I said *I want to join!*” Mr. Sattari’s palm slammed onto the surface of the desk. Virtual documents flew into the air and quickly reorganized themselves in a blinking pattern.

Basil backed up a step, though there was nowhere to run. “You going to hurt me?” he asked.

That stopped the *Siyō*. But it didn’t shock him. He seemed to be considering, his face taking on a glassy, distantly rational expression. He lowered himself slowly into his chair once more, moving forward a little. As its springs adjusted with a groan to his weight, Basil realized it was an old-fashioned chair, not resting on a magnet or an air-cushion. “Do you play your history?” Sattari asked.

Basil paused for a moment before answering. Why this sudden change of subject? “I play a little.”

Mr. Sattari held the boy in his gaze, unblinking. “Have you ever played *The Sword of Hendrix?*”

Basil shook his head, no.

Sattari’s eyes lit up. “It’s brilliant!” he said. “If you ever really want to understand CUSA, you must play it. Do you log on to school? Do you know who Hendrix was?”

Basil hesitated. Quickly, Sattari spoke up. “He was the first President of CUSA, the great man who, seventy-five years ago, created the Corporation in order to rescue the old USA from its waste and dissent.” Sattari looked away and swallowed. “In the game, you become Hendrix. You are trying to end the Correction. You must make the decisions which will satisfy your rival politicians and the American People while all the while keeping the Sino Conglomerate from buying us. It’s a difficult game. But in facing his demons, you come to recognize his brilliance, the impossible ideas he was able to spin.

“He had to pay off our debt, do you see?” The *Siyō* gazed intently at Basil, trying to ascertain whether the boy could understand. “To China, to Japan. By seizing all of this country’s assets, making all of us employees of one great nation, he saved us!”

Mr. Sattari’s eyes looked off to the left. “It’s really stirring,” he said, “to walk the flooded streets of old Washington. To be there for the Kansas Famines, the Armageddon Swindle, the Sterility Incentives.” Mr. Sattari breathed deeply.

He looked back at Basil. “Do you know what ‘deficit’ is?”

Basil shrugged.

“Well, you need to know,” said the *Siyo* kindly. “Let me explain it to you. Have you ever run out of number?”

Basil nodded rapidly. Yes, he knew what it was like to have nothing.

“Well,” Mr. Sattari said, “If you’re CUSA, and you run out of number, you can always bring your number back up by borrowing. You can get someone to lower their number and you can raise yours higher. Then, later, when your number is up, you can return the favor with a little extra for the country or company that helped you.

“But you can only do this so many times!” said Mr. Sattari, wagging his finger with a little smile. “Eventually the number you have to return gets too big, and it threatens to turn into a hole from which you never emerge.” Mr. Sattari placed his hands on his desk and looked at Basil. With a sideways jiggle of his head, he shut his AVE off. The faces babbling around him vanished. Now only Mr. Sattari and Basil were in the room, and the silence was overpowering.

“You’d never know it,” Mr. Sattari whispered, “But CUSA is all out of number.”

“*What?*” Basil cried. “Can’t you borrow some more?”

“No, no...” Mr. Sattari said, shaking his head. “Like I said. Too many times. Our core is hollow. Many of our companies, Noke included, are bankrupt, no prospects of recovery.” Mr. Sattari sat back and laced his fingers behind his head.

Basil waited a moment, then asked, “What happens next?”

“Well!” said Mr. Sattari with a nod, glad of the question. “We don’t know, do we? We have to find a solution or the entire Corporation falls apart. Then where are we? What do *you* think we should do?”

Basil shrugged. “When *we* run out of number, we just hang on until it comes around.”

Mr. Sattari shook his head. “Not good enough. CUSA has been importing drugs from Venezuela to keep your Drug Church in business, but the supply has been interrupted by MexIran, and the price has been driven to an unprecedented high. Demand for our exports is down. So we are once again in recession.” Mr. Sattari’s eyes seemed to cross as he looked away from Basil. “But we found a solution. Do you know what I have to do?”

Again, Basil shrugged.

“I have to let some of our employees go. That will keep us solvent for quite a while.” Mr. Sattari paused. “One million one-hundred-fifty thousand and nine.” he finally said.

When Basil showed no sign of understanding, the *Siyo* went on. “In the old days, before the Correction, those people would be free to find new jobs. But CUSA isn’t just a company, you see. It’s a *country*. It’s responsible for *all* aspects of its employees’ lives, from birth to death. Once those people stop working, they will become even more of a burden on the economy. Therefore I have to order their termination. Their ‘discontinuance.’” He stopped again. “You know what I’m talking about?”

Basil nodded slowly, beginning to understand. He was going to order a million people to early euthanasia.

The *Siyo* continued speaking. “Basil, I’ve just told you a lot of state secrets. I wanted you to understand what my life is like, why I need absolution.”

Basil’s throat seized like his arms, clutching the bag before him like a shield that could protect him from the information he knew was coming. “You see,” said Mr. Sattari, “a man like me, he has to make extremely difficult decisions.

For the last time, Mr. Sattari rose solemnly to his feet. “You have to make a difficult decision, too. Right now.”

“You can stand there and watch while I order the discontinuance of a million people, or you can give me the drugs I want, which will surely incapacitate me and possibly make me forget you. Then you can get out the door and run to your Padre.” Mr. Sattari clucked his tongue.

Basil didn’t want to hear. He wavered on the edge of the platform, rocking from side to side.

Mr. Sattari put his finger over one button on his pad. “This symbol,” he said, moving the icon over a little, “unlocks the door to let you out. *This* one,” and he moved his finger, “orders people to die. Which one should I press?”

Basil did not answer. His eyes searched the room, the little glass ceiling raised to a point above them, the distant lights of the buildings beyond, the desk, Mr. Sattari’s face, Mr. Sattari’s fingers.

“I don’t want to,” said Basil.

“I don’t want to either,” said Mr. Sattari. “Isn’t that awful? We all have to make awful decisions. I’ll give you ten seconds,” said Mr. Sattari.

Basil looked at the door, which was obviously locked. He wanted to run. He just wanted to get out. “One,” came the *Siyó*’s voice. He looked up at Mr. Sattari, who was watching him with his finger over the death button. What if Mr. Sattari slipped and his finger fell through it? “*Two*,” continued Mr. Sattari ominously. “Three. Four...”

Basil put his bottom on the floor, his back to the empty space. He looked through his bag, going over the possible choices. What would Padre suggest? A stimulant; the *Siyó* would feel it much sooner. He was asking for a hallucinogen, but that would take too long. Basil’s hands found a syringe and a phial with a rubber membrane sealing it. He pulled them out. Leaving his bag on the floor, he rose to his feet and held the implements up to Mr. Sattari. “This is what you want,” he said.

Mr. Sattari gazed with wonder at the phial and syringe. “That will make me a...believer?” he asked in a surprisingly small voice.

Basil nodded. Mr. Sattari reached for them, but Basil held them back. “Take off your blouse,” he instructed.

Immediately Mr. Sattari did so. He fell back into his chair with a thump of flesh against leather. Basil looked at the executive’s virgin forearm. The veins were large and easily defined.

As Basil came around the desk, Mr. Sattari’s body lurched forward. Basil jumped back, but Mr. Sattari was only reaching for the symbol that unlocked the door. Falling into his chair again, he looked up at Basil. “Vam will drive you home,” he said. He offered up his soft forearm to Basil.

His heart beating wildly now, Basil applied a tourniquet to Mr. Sattari’s triceps. Returning to his bag, Basil took the syringe, expelled the air, and inserted it into the membrane. He drew all the fluid out of the phial.

Smoothly Basil injected the needle into Mr. Sattari’s forearm. “‘He was crucified’”—he gave the syringe a slow, steady push—“‘under Pontius Pilate, suffered, and died.’” Fascinated, Mr. Sattari watched the fluid leave the syringe and enter his vein. “‘And on the third day he rose.’” Now the drug was completely gone and was coursing through Mr. Sattari’s system.

The *Siyó* leaped to his feet. An obscene grimace stretched his face so far it could have pulled the skin from the bone. He began to shake triumphantly. “Go,” he whispered to Basil.

But Basil was already gone.

I turn away from the door to face the window where blackness reigns beyond the glass. I feel as if I have known this room for some time, have spoken to the glass and the man in the glass, but I have no memory of anything except not sleeping, not sleeping for the longest time, tossing and turning, feeling the pain in my hands, the terrible ache in each knuckle, crying out like a tiny bee trapped in the joint, a commercial of bees humming in some kind of harmony that hurts and hurts and only sleep will set it free, but I can't sleep. I can only vomit into a great and coated bucket by my bed on the hard wooden floor and feel a little better and lie on my back and rest,

But now I am turning to the window. There beyond the glass is the image of a little boy. He peers through the glass at my face. I roll towards his image and fall into a tangled mess on the hardwood, my shoulder throbbing, my head hitting the bedframe. I moan and I try to reorient myself, try to find the window. I don't want to lose the little boy. I need him. Without him, I can't escape.

I roll for ten minutes until I can get my skinny legs under me and I shove sloppy against the floor and somehow I rise, I get my head six feet in the air and I float across the room because I am not walking, could never balance on feet I no longer feel. Fortunately I float towards the window and there is the face of the boy, still peering, still unbelievably curious about me, and I see my own face now.

Haggard, wrecked, bloodshot, my face is not as black as the blackness beyond, but it shows the wear of the time I have forgotten, the stories I have created, some which were real and others...I get closer and my own face gets larger, so that I can see the lines I have followed to get me here to this place, this room I don't know with the hardwood floor and the dresser against the far wall, the bed with the bloody sheets and the pail in a puddle of vomit on the floor.

But the boy's face doesn't get larger, and it doesn't get clearer, and he doesn't look afraid as I approach. I only realize that his face is a reflection when I finally reach the glass and smash through it with my hands.

The American

Executives lived in crystal chandeliers, upside-down earrings, champagne glasses. Drivers lived in corrugated boxes. As a driver, Vam preferred the chandeliers, but drivers couldn't live and work in the same place. That was a luxury for the citizens on the upper end of the rubber ball.

Maids, street sweep operators, repair ops, and waste recyclers, born to their tasks, went to school for six years to learn the rules, then hit their stride mopping green slime off the reactor floor. Vam had inherited his position from his dad, who had passed up a higher bid for the position in order to bequeath to his son a way of life that was at least human.

But his father had miscalculated the effects of his deed, for Vam as a driver got to see the inside of the palaces, the work-play centers that were the world for the lucky few, those money-trading heroes of the City Proper who were the hum in CUSA's hive. Vam's father had died in a Euthanasia Center at age sixty-five before he could recognize the dissatisfaction in Vam's expression. His mother, ten years shy of her Discount Death Option, stood over the body of her husband and looked at her son with eyes sunken like trails in a canyon. She saw. Those maid's eyes had also been in the palaces and she knew the look of envy, and of self-disgust.

"Son," she said. "Your father died a happy man."

"Sure, Mamma," he answered. Sarcasm was merely a choice of repertoire at that age, not yet the habit it would soon become.

"Don't desire more than you can get," she warned him, her comment sizzling like a quickly drawn machete. He did not answer her, still not sure in his own mind of what he had already seen.

The programming had still been fresh on him, barely dry. *In America you got what you deserved.* "You could be anybody in America," they said, meaning that it didn't matter what race you were, what sex, where your family was from. There was fundamentally no difference between you and anyone else in CUSA, except your circumstances. So you needed to be happy with the position you found yourself in and never be bitter or sad, because you were supporting the way of life of your equals, even if they lived in a palace and you lived in a coffin.

That was the idea everyone was taught. But Vam had begun to see through this philosophy. Having been privy to the nicer places, he had seen where his education ended and true opportunities began. He knew there had to be a way to get more than your allotted share, have comforts of the palace in your corrugated box, be someone else for a while, or forever.

That's what he always wanted, to be *somebody else*. One Halloween, when he was just a child, one of his neighbors, an old woman living in the coffin next to theirs, had taken him in her lap to tell him scary stories. She had said that in the old days people could change who they were just by working hard. An office boy could become President.

That had scared Vam and made him cry. The woman nodded like she understood. She agreed that they were evil times. You had never known who was running the show. You might end up with an office boy as President. She told him he should always be grateful to the Corporation, where only the worthy served. She told him never to strive or dream, but always to stay focused on the President.

The woman had meant well, but the story had the opposite effect on him. As he got a little older the memory of the story began to appeal to him. More and more he began to dream of an escape from his life, rather than accept it, although he knew escape was impossible. Even when he learned about identity theft, he knew he could never afford it, couldn't even buy a night

in an executive's living room with a girlfriend. It would have depleted his account so deep as to put him in the debt cycle for the rest of his life.

Still, the commercials coming out of the AVE made friends with him. Deep in their thirty-minute stories and three-minute tunes were the smiles of the people he might have been, holding out a sweet drink to him, vacationing in the view-resort, encouraging him to spend his account on trifles by telling him that the products would transform him, make him someone else. No one ever came out and said it, but the advertisers used the programs, the little holo dramas, to play on the one void in his soul like a drummer on a stretched skin. Each blast to his eyes, ears, and nose shook him. He bought product after product with what little credit he had, depleted himself until he had to work like a dog just to get back out of the debt cycle long enough to get up enough number to cover his coffin, some macaroni and cheese, a cotton blanket.

But he stayed barely negative most of the time, his number taken out by his modest expenses, the food, the cost of his living tube, treading number like an exhausted swimmer, a lucky day's tip putting him on top for a few hours. Then he'd succumb to a temptation, or to simple time, and go under once more, and the panic would return.

It had gotten worse lately. His negative was deeper, the warnings on his brand coming more and more often. He would lose his coffin, have to sleep in his rickshaw. He could eat every other day maybe?

Then, one day, he'd forgotten himself and gone from negative to super negative, spending number he didn't have on a bottle of wine and a stim. It had been a mistake, but there was no going back.

So he was here on 285, the neighborhood that circled the city, full of tin corridors called homes full of people who sold fried crickets. The old expressway, I-285, long since blocked off from cars and taken over by teeming filthy squint-eyes living close together like rats, some without even walls to divide them. There, among the faceless, he could pretend he was anybody. He could dream he had a spare dozen on his account, he could gamble his number and get it up to forty-eight. Then he might buy an hour in the company of a perfumed call-girl, dressed in a business suit, bowing to him and telling him he was so clever in the privacy of a noisy tent. Or maybe he could see the circus, watch the acrobats and tight-rope walker tottering twelve meters above the ground. Lots of executives in that crowd. In the dark he could be one of them.

But he wasn't here to dream. He was looking for Son.

It took about a half-hour to find the man. He was always harder to find when you were looking for him. Son San, the Freeway Baker, who could be relied on to get your number up, somehow, for a little while.

A man with a five-o'clock shadow of dirt on his lip whispered to Vam that the Baker was in Xiu Xiu Alley. So to Xiu Xiu Vam went, and there was the Baker, hunched over some woman or other. Vam approached cautiously.

"Sonny," he managed, like a weak greeting.

The Baker half turned, his eyebrow up. "Vam, chic, how you doin'?"

Spoken in Spank—half Spanish, half black English—a smooth voice, slick like the train rails. Oily hair, combed smooth to a stylish point, cross-stitched leggings under a pleather vest, light build, arms with veins like branches.

"You bein' taken care of?" he asked.

"Yeah, guess so."

"You *guess* so?" Son repeated.

“Yeah, guess so.”

“You guess so.” Son’s body stood at a profile, buckled, and a wave ran through him like the breeze through a corn stalk.

“Yeah,” Vam said lamely.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothin’.”

“What’s *wrong*?” Son approached, hovered around Vam like a bat. “Ex-mas coming. Life too short not to be happy *all* the time.”

“I’m negative.”

“Ah knew it,” said Son, nodding. “What you want from me?”

“*You* know.”

Son’s smile vanished. “You want me to take care of it for you. You want little Sonny to make it go away.”

A string of fireworks went off behind some stalls. The smell of flat smoke suggested a cave behind his sinuses.

“Don’t want to lose my house,” he said.

Son nodded, his lip twitching. “What you gon’ do for me?”

Vam shrugged. “What you want?”

Son smiled for the first time. “Now you talking. That’s what I got to hear.” He put his hands in his oil-slick pockets. “I tell you what. This you lucky day. I got me this situation, and you the dude can take care, take care. I got this game, it’s a sucka’s swim, and I can put you on top. Three veeps looking to get some 285 ass showing off round the table, they play with these sweepies on they arm, all the numbers flow-flow like fine wine.”

Vam’s interest was piqued. He smiled just a little bit. Son seemed not to notice and roiled on. “These guys play so bad at card, you feel like you could walk on they head.”

“Son, I got *no* number,” Vam insisted. “What I got on my tattoo isn’t enough to get me kicked off my own wagon.”

“Puppydog, I spot you a dollah. You win the game, we good.”

“Payday, then?”

“Payday, Mayday,” Son said, waving. “It’s so nice. You want to play?”

Vam nodded gamely. “Thanks, chic!”

“Sweet and Lovely, you gonna smile for me just one time.” He had already taken Vam by the arm and led him to a wall-terminal. Vam pulled open the flap on his left shoulder, exposing his brand through the manufactured flaps. Son pulled him gently back towards the scanner.

“You good,” Son said, beaming, after the transfer had taken place. “You good. Your number 26, mine that much lower.”

“Son, thanks,” Vam said.

Son had not answered. Vam still felt his hand on his arm, but it was a ghost of a sensation, which changed when he turned around to find Son gone.

“Sonny?”

Two children knelt at the base of a stall, looking for edible vegetables and scrap parts. A cat crept across the top of a dumpster, her nose bouncing off the rubber. Son was nowhere to be found. No footsteps, no wild talking in the distance.

“Son, where’s the *game*?” Vam asked, like his friend was invisible. Of course, there was no answer, none even apparent, none likely to follow.

He heard a scuffling, and the cat and the kids were gone. Vam blinked instinctively before it occurred to him who was about to appear around the corner.

Two Uniforms arrived in blue, silhouetted against the glare of the floodlight hanging from a nearby stall. They were out of breath from walking fast. Vam's eyes looked them up and down, suspicious, as any law-abiding citizen would be.

Strangely enough, he knew one of them. The officer, same height as him with putty cheeks that were permanently pulled out, giving his face a fat quality that his body lacked, generally kept a beat near Fairlie-Poplar where Vam did most of his driving.

"Yo," Vam said smiling a little. "Arni."

"What you say, Vam?" Arni replied, but his eyes did not look at Vam. They continued to scan the alley behind him. His partner, a lean, bony woman Vam had never seen before, kept busy looking around at other things.

"What's doing?" Vam asked. "You a long way from your beat?"

"They got a hundred of us looking for someone," Arni said. Now his eyes fell on Vam. "Anything interesting just happen around here?"

"No," Vam said shrinking.

"We gotta go," Arni said, looking around a final time. He thumped his partner on her arm. "Dow," he said to Vam

"Okay," Vam replied, nodding.

The two officers moved on. Vam remained behind, his thoughts returning to Son and his disappearing act. What had just happened? Son had generously given Vam an advance on his number. Out of the goodness of his heart.

Huh.

Vam turned around to face the numbers machine against the wall of the alley. He figured Son had taken a temporary loan off of him, putting him in the red. He slipped into the caring arm of the reader and let it infiltrate the flap on his shoulder. It blinked.

The number that came up was so ridiculously high it was too long for the screen. The only thing familiar about the readout was the words "Do you want to gamble?" blinking a little faster than normal underneath the Ex-mas shopping countdown, as if nothing was wrong.

He never even gave it a second thought: the reader was broken. Maybe it was blinked when Son had touched him. He set off to find another reader.

Down the street, he checked again at a machine hovering by an overpass over the distant orange, rain-swelled Chattahoochee River. The high number flashed by a second time, with the standard queries beneath. This time he decided that his brand was obscured. Maybe a mole had grown over it or something.

Automatically he headed for Julia Villanhueva. He didn't want to wait in line at an official brand center, have them ask all sorts of irrelevant and time-wasting questions, be probed, dressed down, reminded, then charged for the service. Julia would fix it for nothing.

Her shop was a little massage hut on Xien Wen Way. She had a customer when he arrived, because the curtain was closed, and behind it a man was moaning.

She came out in short order, businesslike air about her, wiping the oil off her hands with a white cloth. When she spotted Vam she smiled and mouthed a "hi." Her former customer came out from behind the curtain and slunk away. After a few seconds, she wheeled around and swept the curtain aside. Her battered table waited patiently.

"Yo, Vam!" she said, coming over and putting an arm around him. "Detox!"

“No slice,” he said, smiling back.

“You want some coffee?” She turned back to her table and was heading for a hot-pot. She looked over her shoulder at him.

“No, I need a favor,” he said.

“A *favor*,” she repeated heavily. “Whatchu want?” She scowled. Then she beamed to let him know she was joking.

“Can you check to make sure my tattoo is okay?”

“What wrong with it?”

“I can’t get it to read right.”

“What happen?”

“Number I get is way high,” he said.

She looked at him cross-eyed. “Boy! You crazy! You got a high number by accident, you spread it now! Fore they fix it!”

“No, it’s *really* high,” he clarified.

She eased him onto the table, which, despite its age, was sturdy under him and did not rock as he got on his stomach. Her expert hands entered his flap and found the tattoo.

“I don’t see nothing on it,” she said. “No hairs—you as hairless as you ever was!” She laughed. “Perimeter looks good. No pock marks.” Clicking her tongue, she found a portable reader and brought it over to the brand.

“Whoa,” she said, her voice lead-heavy. She stared at the number, having never seen one so large before. She read the number off to him. He confirmed it.

“Then it ain’t my batteries,” she said. Another pause. “Oh my God,” she said.

“What?” he asked, lifting his head.

“Oh my God,” she said again, backing away from him.

“What?” he insisted, flipping over to his side. The flap dropped into place.

“What you been doing?” she asked, eyeing him from the corner.

He squirmed a little. “Nothing,” he said. “Do you know Son?”

“I’ve heard of him, I think. Trickster, pretty boy.”

“Hangs around Bankhead arc,” Vam said. “That’s him. He offered to spot me a loan.”

“So you let him alter your brand,” she finished for him.

“Yeah.”

“Look,” she said, handing him the reader. All he saw was the number. He look it back and forth, trying to ferret out whatever hidden meaning she had seen in it.

“No,” she said, pointing a short, shiny, glitter-red fingernail at the screen. He followed it and saw, where his name usually was, the word SATTARI.

“Who’s that” he asked.

“It’s *you* now,” she said. “That guy just made you a new name.”

He sat on the table for a moment, his mind wandering. “What?” he asked absently.

“You just became the proud owner of an executive’s identity. Buddha’s butt,” she cursed, looking over the screen. “A *Siyo*. This guy...you...a *Siyo* at Noke.”

“Noke,” he repeated, still not registering what had happened. “I deliver there all the time.”

“Well, now you *live* there,” she said, tossing her reader on the side table like it was hot.

They both sat there blinking for a minute. Then she said, “Vam, you got to go. I’m gonna have this reader wiped.”

“But wait,” he said, still stunned.

She wasn’t listening to him. She was packing her things. “Wait,” he said, getting to his feet.

“You an accomplice to some bad shit,” she said. “IDing is a risky business anyway, but nobody’s crazy enough to traffic a *Siyo*.”

“What should I do?” he asked, but Julia didn’t answer. She was too busy packing. “What should I do?” he demanded, taking hold of her arm.

She shook him off like a bad itch. In seconds, she had zipped her flap, folded her table, and moved away.

“Julia! What I do?”

“Turn your ass in, I guess,” she said from far away. Then she was gone.

He stood there awhile at the empty tent and listened to the wind blow the old curtain. He had to find Son and make that crazy sumbitch put him back the way he was.

It wasn’t as easy as usual. Ordinarily, Son was so vain and noisy you could just about put your ear to the ground or your nose in the air and follow your best guess. This time there wasn’t any sign. Even the people who knew him didn’t know him today.

But someone like Son was too conspicuous to stay hidden forever. Vam spotted him on the overpass at Cascade. He pushed his way towards the exit and sprinted up its long incline.

At first, Son didn’t turn. He was talking in a low voice to someone standing in front of him, and Vam began to wonder if he had the wrong man. He stopped just shy of jumping on the pretty boy, panting heavily at his back.

Slowly, Son turned. He regarded Vam casually. “What’s up, slice?” he muttered conversationally, then smoothly returned to his present business.

Vam stood there, stupid. His chest ached. Son’s refusal to run or look guilty eroded his assurance that he had been wronged.

Son finished his conversation. The other person walked away a piece, then hung out by the rail, leaning over 285. Son wheeled around once again to face Vam.

“What’s the word, deal?” Son said to him.

“Cope, what you do to me?” Vam demanded.

“What you mean?”

“*You messed with my—*”

“Keep your voice down,” Son instructed, stooping and raising his eyes.

“My number—” Vam tried to begin again.

“Yeah, baby, I’m sorry to pull the wool,” Son said, pulling Vam close and putting an arm around his shoulders. “I needed to do something quick. But I make it worth your while.”

“What?”

“Baby, you in nirvana now,” Son said, smiling. “You all the way to the top. You can do anything! How you like it?”

“*Chicope, you crazy?*” Van exploded. “Anything I do they gonna nail me for IDing.”

“No, sweet, no. Look, you just gotta slow down. I wouldn’t put you in that kind of jam! Slice, we go way back! I love you.”

“You gotta take this brand off me,” Vam said, panicked.

“No, no!” Son reassured him, stroking his back. “Look, now, we can make some number on this. We play this right, you get some nice spiffy, get out squeaky free.”

Vam stared at Son, incredulous. Son responded as if hurt. “Why you eye me, child? Look, I got the medicine for everybody’s boo-boo. You just listen here.

“You *is* *Siyò* Sattari now, you zon? No imposter, you the real steal. Anything you want come straight out of that sweet little tattoo.”

“I don’t want—”

“And let me tell you what you want,” Son went on. “You want to go to his little *cuna* in the Noke building.”

“Why I want that?”

“Cause, sweet, you gonna get on his eyes-only AVE and pick up some goodies for us.”

“Son, you out of your mind.”

“Child, you gonna pass up an opportunity *this good*?”

“But—”

“I ain’t gonna make you go it alone. See that lovely right there?” He turned his body aside to reveal the woman he had been talking to, looking out over the railing into space. “She know AVE better’n AVEinc. She gonna piggyback with you and get what we need.”

“What?”

“Beauty, never you worry!” Son scolded gently. “I can use it, and you gon’ get some.”

Van worked his mouth. He squirmed under Son’s light arm. “No thanks, Son,” he finally said. “You find somebody else. Fix me back.”

“*Ain’t* nobody else!” Son cried. “You it! Sattari! The man!”

“Make somebody else Sattari,” Vam begged. “Trick them like you tricked me.”

“No no, slice, no no!” Son soothed him. “Listen, I need you because I know what you want.”

“What I want?”

“You want to be somebody else.”

Vam did not reply. He kept working his mouth and squirming. “Sure, baby, you talk about it all the time. I don’t blame you. Nobody wants to stay where they is. That ain’t America.”

Vam looked up suddenly. “What you mean?”

“America about movin’ up,” Son went on. “In old days, before CUSA, you could be anybody you want. Sweep a store one day, work your way up to President.” Vam blinked, watching Son with quiet, childlike eyes. “That’s the way it *s’posed* to be!” Son expounded. “Nowadays, you want to move up, you gotta steal your way up.”

“But Son, I can’t be the *Siyò*,” Vam pleaded.

“No, baby, you can’t,” Son agreed. “But look here.” He reached under his arm and pulled out a portable scanner. Flipping a button, he displayed a list of names. “I got lots of people, child. Dead, sick... Some that went ahead and stole up themselves, left they old self behind. You want to be one of them?”

Vam pored over the list with greedy eyes. Son saw the look and smiled.

“Sure, baby, what’s your pleasure,” he said. “You want to be a Uniform? A comptroller? Accountant? How about a small-time associate living at the GM Plant? He was retired, so you could take him on and keep to yourself. Nobody know.”

“Nobody?”

“Sweet sweet, ain’ no way I risk the well-being of my best customer, that’d be you, once you help me through my raspberry jam!”

Vam lowered his head and took on a thinking pose, but he had made his decision before breaking eye contact with the bakerman. His look of contemplation was just a show, and Son knew it. Son was waiting patiently for Vam to look up with agreement on his features, and sure enough Vam did.

“God bless America,” Son said. Vam didn’t know what that meant, but he believed it.

Vam left his rickshaw somewhere on 285 for Son to take care of. Meantime, he and the woman with whom Son had been talking, a short, bullish figure named Sance with a stiff tuft of hair covering her wide scalp, made their way to the station. Vam was petrified when she told him to let the station scan his brand, but he did as he was told, and the train came impossibly fast to pick him up. The only door that opened was the one on the front car, so they moved through into a plush cabin with deep-piled sofas, a stim table, and a 360 HoloAVE.

“Nice,” Sance muttered, nodding.

There wasn’t anyone else in that car, so Vam nervously made his way over to one of the couches and slumped down into it. As the door slid shut he saw two blue-uniformed officers running through the scanstiles. He slumped down to the floor as far as he could, and the train pulled away from the station, leaving the Uniforms behind. Sance had not seen them. She was observing the HoloAVE.

“Come over here,” she said. “I want you to turn this thing.”

Obediently, Vam rose to his feet. The train seemed to be moving faster than usual towards the City Proper, probably geared into an express mode for the sake of its all-important passenger. He walked over to the 360 and sat in the revolving chair. It roared to life like a gas flame, surrounding him with images of buyable merchandise and services that danced to tunes he had never heard. All his favorite commercials had been for low-grade snacks, the lotto, or shoes. These were for stock options, collectibles, gourmet foods, and air passage to other countries. The singers chanted numbers he couldn’t have found if he’d looked ten years through his accounts.

“See if you can direct it,” Sance said. “If you got access to Sattari’s personals here, it’ll save us a trip.”

Vam tried to access higher channels. He was able to get nearly everything he wanted: realporn images of lower-class citizens having sex in their homes, dogfights at the Stone Mountain Ice Skating Rink, the Quarterly Earnings Report.

Sance ignored everything but the earnings report. “That’s not bad,” she said. “See if you have access to deeper info.” She directed his hand towards certain symbols but did not touch the interface herself. He followed her lead, and streams of data came through. Sance devoured the readouts eagerly, but it became apparent after a minute that she didn’t see what she was looking for.

The train had slowed appreciably. All of a sudden it stopped, and looking around Vam realized with a sick feeling that they were not yet at City Proper.

The door slid open and two executives stepped on board. Vam froze on the spot, not knowing if he should run, explain, try to turn himself in. Sance watched the new arrivals casually.

They glanced at Vam and Sance for only a second, their eyes taking in the sight. Then they continued their conversation and wandered to the other end of the car.

Vam said. “What—”

Sance shrugged. “If you got in,” Sance said, “you must be somebody. They don’t want to do the Uniform’s job.”

“But aren’t they going to tell someone?”

“I doubt it,” Sance said. “When you’re in, you’re in. You are who your tattoo says you are, Mr. Sattari.”

Vam blinked, hardly even seeing the images on the AVE anymore, forgetting the tunes, not even smelling the artificial scents wafting out of the little grate by his foot.

“This doesn’t have it,” Sance said quietly. “Apparently, Sattari kept his information very private. Unusual, but not surprising.”

“So we have to go all the way in?” he asked her.

Sance nodded.

At the next station, the other executives got off without a backwards look. The train glided a little farther on until it penetrated the bowels of the Noke building. Following Sance’s prodding, Vam left the safety of the train and made his way to a row of elevator doors. One of them opened up especially for him as he approached. The others remained closed.

“That’s us, baby,” Sance said.

“Just a minute,” someone called out from across the dark basement. The woman who approached was tall, thin, and young. The hat that covered up her dyed blonde hair pegged her as building security. Vam had seen and spoken to this woman many times from his rickshaw. She was sure to recognize him. Vam froze, knowing it was game over. Sance tensed, looking ready to bolt or make excuses or whatever she had as an out.

Yet, the guard seemed to place little credence in what she saw. Vam and his companion had just come off the executives-only train and were heading towards a special elevator that had opened for them. These facts seemed to give her more pause than the presence of two foreign faces in the basement.

“Sir, I’m sorry to have to detain you,” she said cautiously.

“That’s all right,” muttered Vam. But his companion in crime was not so easily cowed. Seeing their advantage, she spoke up.

“Actually, it’s a problem,” she said. “Mr. Sattari has to hurry up and get to his suite. He has a meeting at six o’clock with a number of very important people. You can see he’s not himself right now.”

Vam quailed at the bad joke, but the guard seemed a little put off by Sance’s confidence. “Who are *you*?” she asked Sance, trying to sound menacing.

Speaking up quickly, Vam said, “This is my associate. She’s with me.” He swallowed hard and pressed the guard. “Do you have a *problem* with that?”

“No, sir,” the guard replied, trying to keep control of the situation.

“Good,” Vam said, shaking inside. “I can either enter a commendation for you for doing your job or I can put in a request that you be dismissed for detaining me.” His heart was pounding very loudly in his ears.

The guard held his gaze for a moment, but now even Vam could see that she was scared. Again, she looked at the train from which they had just emerged and at the elevator door that was unquestionably waiting for them. Finally, her gaze dropped. “Sorry, sir; yes, sir.”

Vam nodded and quickly made his way past her to the elevator, meeting no resistance. Sance followed along.

“That was nice,” Sance said after the door shut.

“I can’t believe it. They’re willing to pretend I’m Sattari!” Vam exclaimed.

Sance nodded. "I've seen it before. Nobody wants to take accountability. It'll work for a day or so...this has got to be the *niciest* elevator."

The executive elevator was a class affair all by itself. Even the AVE in it was nicer than one usually saw in such places, with a little glass pitcher of water and two crystal goblets next to it.

"Ooo...yes...*Spikey, Spikey...I tell you, Lotta, I've never had anything like it...*" As the elevator climbed through the heart of the great pyramid whose exterior he had approached on his little rickshaw time and time again, Vam helped himself to the cold, filtered water. The elevator door opened again just as he set the glass back on the counter by the AVE, which was now playing a commercial about the water he had been drinking.

They stepped into a palatial apartment. Elegant furniture was arranged comfortably around a crystal staircase in the center, which led up to a raised platform. The servants whom Vam would have expected were all elsewhere in the building.

"Niiizzze," Sance said, dancing around the room. "Where's the AVE?"

"Up there." Vam pointed. "On his desk. I think that's the one you want."

It was. As Sance practically fell up the staircase in her eagerness, Vam strolled about the room, touching the fine furniture and gazing longingly out the window. The view across the Park was spectacular. Far below, people were dancing in the waters of the five-ring symbol. Beyond it were miles of office-dwellings, the recreation centers, the CUSA-Westin City Hall Tower, and, still farther away, the more modest blocks where people like him kept their tiny rooms.

No, where people who *used* to be like him kept their tiny rooms. He lived *here!*

He moved towards a large piece of furniture unlike anything he'd ever seen before. It resembled a wide armoire though it lacked any doors on its face and contained only one drawer, which already seemed to be pulled out. But the drawer was covered with some kind of wooden sheath. He brought his hand towards the small yellow metal button that protruded from its front, and lifted. The sheath rose easily and, as if it were leading his hand, slid gently back into the armoire, revealing a huge row of black and white teeth, spaced evenly in some kind of regular pattern, the fewer black teeth raised higher than the more numerous white. His fingers reached towards the teeth and made to touch them, when a sound like a tinkling bell froze him.

He and Sance both looked up and back at the large door. From up on the platform Sance said, "That's his front door. Do we answer it?"

"I don't know!" Vam cried.

Whoever had rung the bell answered the question, because the door slid aside and a small, stout man strolled in. He was youngish, about Vam's age, but his hair and his skin would have suggested someone much older. He was dressed in the suit of an executive.

"Oh Dow," he said, startled, seeing the two of them. Again, Vam winced, fearing the worst. But the executive paused for only a second, put off far less than the guard had been.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Sattari," he said, trying not to look at Vam. "Vana said you were back, but I didn't believe it, and I wanted to check on something."

Vam still did not answer, still incredulous at having one of Sattari's own colleagues call him by that name. Sance looked down at him and smiled.

"That's all right, Mr. —" He faltered, wishing he had not said a thing.

"D'Arcangelo," finished the executive. "Come on, Mr. Sattari, I know you've got a lot of people to manage, but after ten years I'd hope you'd recognize my face!" He laughed, and Vam laughed with him. Vam scanned the man carefully. Now he could see that the executive was

hardly looking at him at all. His eyes were glazed, because he was just barely using them, having obviously decided that the image they were receiving was unreliable. No one else but Sattari could have been in Sattari's apartment, so Vam must be Sattari, no doubt about it.

"It's not that," Vam said, chuckling. "I'm just not good with names."

"All right, sir," said D'Arcangelo with relief. "All right. Sir, I came to talk about the Freodone Campaign, I actually came to look up some information which you know by heart and—"

"Not now, D'Arcangelo," Vam said, quickly. "All right? I'm very tired."

The executive glanced up at Sance. Then he got a knowing look in his eye. "Oh, I see, Mr. Sattari. All right. Sorry to bother you. I'll tell everyone you've returned. There's a board meeting scheduled at four. Will you come in person or holo? It's only just down the hall."

"I'll see you later," Vam said, dismissively.

D'Arcangelo nodded quickly, and backed out of the room.

"You want me to lock that door?" Sance asked, when it had closed. "I guess it was set to open for him in your absence."

"No," Vam replied, climbing the crystal stair. "What's the problem? They all think I'm Sattari!" He was elated, felt lighter than air, half believed he was floating up the stair and could have continued right through the window to drift over Centennial Park.

Sance scowled. "I wouldn't push it."

"What do you mean?"

"You may be honorary Sattari for a day, but if anybody asks you any questions about his business, you aren't going to be able to answer. That'll wake them up."

"So maybe you could stay and help me," Vam suggested.

"What?"

"Can you get into that AVE?"

"As a matter of fact," Sance said, "I need you to come over here and let the thing smell you. There's an extra security precaution here, probably set up just in case this sort of thing happens. But that ID of yours is foolproof, so I'm not worried about it. Get over here and let me scan your shoulder."

He did as he was told, took a seat in the chair, and let her bare his shoulder with its now-sterling brand. A gentle wash of light came and bathed his back, then disappeared into the nook from which it had come. "I was only thinking," Vam said.

"What?" Sance said, a little annoyed. Words and symbols were floating around her head, and she was hungrily reading them.

"Look," he said. "We're in—you get it? You've got the brains, and I've got the tattoo. Everybody thinks I'm Sattari!"

"Of course," Sance muttered, shaking her head. She was absorbed in her work.

"Well, if you can get any kind of information out of that thing, you can tell me what's going on. Between the two of us, we should be able to convince other people that I'm really him. Think about it! We'd have the best life in the whole world."

Sance pulled out her portable and interfaced it with the AVE. "That's it," she said. "I got what I need. Now let's get out of here."

"No, *listen!*" Vam said, grabbing her by the arm. "We could make this work. I had no idea it was so easy to fool all these people. All we have to do is take a retreat in one of this guy's

hideaways for awhile, get up to speed. What's Son paying you? I swear it'll look like decimals compared to the kind of life we could have up here."

She pulled free of him, but for a moment she wavered. Then she looked up at him. "Are you coming?" she asked.

"No!" he exclaimed. "Don't you get it? I'm somebody else now! Somebody worth being." Sance did not respond. Vam scowled. "If you won't help me, then to hell with you. I'll hire me somebody who will. Someone to tell me what to do, someone who won't ask questions. I'm going to run this little slice of heaven, and the first thing I'll do when I figure it all out is invite Son up here for a party. You got it?"

Sance shook her head a little and made her way towards the elevator. "Open it up for me," she told him. "It's that symbol on the upper left, in the corner."

He found it and put his finger through it. The elevator door obeyed him and slid wide for her. "Why?" he demanded as she made her way towards it. "Why won't you help me?"

She turned back to consider. She shrugged. "I like who I am," she said. Then she entered the elevator and vanished.

He let her go, didn't give her a second thought. He spun around in the chair and looked out at the beautiful sunset that was pouring across the roofs of the buildings in the panorama in front of him. The chair felt so nice, he'd have traded his whole life just to sit in it.

"Wait!" said a voice from below and behind the door.

He spun around in his chair, and his eyes flew open. Two Uniforms were walking towards the stairs, Mr. D'Arcangelo running behind them. "What's this all about?" he cried. "You can't just barge in on the *Siyó*!"

They mounted the stairs, and as their faces crested the platform, Vam saw the same two Uniforms he had met on 285 not two hours ago—one of them his friend Arni, with the putty cheeks—advancing on the table.

"Whoa...Arni!" he began. "I can explain!"

Arni did not stop, but he slowed down. For a moment, he gazed, confused, at Vam sitting in Mr. Sattari's chair. Of all the faces Vam had seen, his registered the most indecision, the most bewilderment.

"Sorry, sir," he said finally. "You'll have to come with us."

"Arni, no," Vam protested, getting to his feet. "Look, I didn't mean to take the guy's brand. It was stuck to me, and I had to do this to get out of it."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Sattari," Arni said sadly, coming over to Vam and placing his gloves on Vam's upper arms. Vam felt the stasis field overcoming him. He lost control over his upper body and most of his lower, so that he had to be held up by Arni and the other Uniform. "I've been instructed to arrest you for dereliction of duty. You're to be held pending auditing by the authority of NokeCUSA."

"*Arni!*" Vam exclaimed. He missed a beat, but no one said anything to interrupt him. "I'm not Sattari! I'm *not!*"

"It'd be better if you weren't, sir," the other Uniform said. "We've been tracking you for a month. As clever a runner as you are, your brand is just too easy to spot."

"But I—" he cried. "I—" Exhausted by the stasis, he let surrender overtake him and fell into the caress of the Uniforms.

The elevator glided down the shaft. He watched NokeCUSA build itself up in front of him, level by level, his mind slowly drifting. He dreamed of a cozy little coffin with his name on

it, now occupied by whomever would be fool enough to buy his name from Son. His last coherent thought was wondering if his mother would feed that person when they showed up at her coffin on Ex-mas.

I turn to look for the boy whose face was behind me, not in front of me, and instead I see the woman. She is behind a white man who dresses in black, a smock the color of the night outside the window, and drawn to the black, I lurch towards him on my own useless feet, holding my bloody hands towards him.

He seems distressed about his broken window, and far more used to my face than I would have expected.

“Here now,” he says in English. “What are you doing out of bed?”

“Where am I?” I scream in Spanish. But the monkey voice also screams and I can’t make out my own words.

“I don’t speak Spanish, *señor*,” he says. Why wouldn’t he speak Spanish? Everyone in CUSA speaks Spanish. “Come back to bed.”

“Where am I?” I demand in English. “Where the hell...”

“Clear Point, *señor*,” he answers quietly, as if it’s the ninetieth time he’s had to tell me. “You’re not well. You’ve been under the influence of terrible demons...”

“Angels!” I cry. “I need to see my angels!” No longer sure whether I am speaking English or Spanish I nearly fall onto him and the room spins like a merry-go-round. I think he is holding me in long, strong arms. “Where is my bag?” I demand. “Where is my *bag*?”

“We’ll get through this,” he whispers in my ear, and the monkey man whispers too. “We’ll get through this together. I won’t give up on you.”

“Where is my *bag*?” I scream as if my favorite toy were inside. I swing around and I hit him in the face.

The One-Way Trip

Like most twelve-year-olds, Rosa hated school. Every morning and every afternoon she'd sit at her AVE in her bedroom and stare for three hours at a time, playing some dumb game with hundreds of thousands of other kids she didn't know. The game was always boring, and anyway it was so hard to concentrate when the commercials popped up on the side.

But Rosa had figured out that if you stay logged on to your game you could actually leave your AVE and nobody would ever notice. So many kids were logged in that the Administrator never actually talked to you, and if he did he'd probably think you were just shy or something.

Mamma was always working on her own AVE in the next room, and she kept so busy that she never checked on Rosa 'til lunch. Daddy was usually sitting next to Mama on his own AVE, trying for hours every day to figure out what form the City of Atlanta wanted him to fill out so they could finally get a funeral stipend for Rosa's little brother who died last year and get his body out of frozen storage. But today he was out fixing somebody's roof. So if Rosa just turned her AVE a little louder than usual, Mamma would think she was being a good girl and staying in front of it instead of sneaking off.

They lived in the roach-infested dining room of a three-floor McMansion on Randall Court. That room, their living space, was divided in two by a big piece of splintery plywood. The plywood separated the front half of the dining room which they used as a kitchen from the back half where they slept, and there was a little curtain between her parents' bedroom and hers.

Rosa's room was farthest from the kitchen so she couldn't sneak out the front door without her parents' hearing. But she had a window which opened up on a weedy backyard lawn. It was a risky place to go because Mamma could see the lawn too. But there was a big broken fountain out there with a huge crack in it, and as long as she could get to that fountain without Mamma seeing, she could hide behind it until she knew the coast was clear. Then she could slip down the hillside and go around the side of the house next door.

The window was supposed to be locked to keep the burglars out, but Rosa had broken the lock a year ago, and nobody ever bothered to fix it. There were bars on the outside, but they were loose. Rosa had sprayed some lubricant on them one time, and now they swung without squeaking, far enough for her to get out.

Everything went pretty smoothly this time. She got out the window and to the fountain and didn't hear anything except her heart beating really loud. She ducked down under the clothes line, the clothes still smelling of disinfectant, and slid down the grass into the woods behind her house. She didn't want any of the other parents to see her either because she knew they'd tell her Mamma. She had to be careful 'til she got all the way around the ratty condemned house next door. After that, it was a straight shot out to the street.

Randall Court was a cul-de-sac and didn't have a lot of traffic, but once you got onto Mt. Paran it was pretty crowded. Lots of bikes, a few city workers with electric carts, some rickshaws pulling Landlords around, every once in a while a bunch of kids playing tennis with nappy balls across the center line. And squirrels...squirrels everywhere, running around like they owned the place.

When she got out there she had to stand where everyone could see her. She was scared to death her Mom would spot her, but she couldn't leave now. She was waiting for Basil.

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Basil was her boyfriend. Mamma said she was too young to have a boyfriend, but she was almost twelve, and most of her friends had already Chinese kissed, so she figured she was old enough. Anyway, Basil wasn't *really* Rosa's boyfriend; he was just *sorta* her boyfriend.

Even if her Mamma had let her go out with a boy, she wouldn't have been allowed to see Basil. Basil was apprenticed to the Pastor of a Drug Church. Rosa's family were *chuseno*, and *chuseno* people hated the Drug Church. Sometimes her Daddy didn't come home nights because he was rocking with a crowd in front of one of the Churches, yelling at the addicts as they filed past. If Rosa's Daddy had known she had even looked in the direction of a Church he would have had a *chuseno* cow.

Rosa was getting mad at Basil now because he still hadn't showed up, and she was really worried somebody would see her, but then he finally came round the corner on his bike. He did this little wheelie thing and spun out in front of her, and she smiled.

"Sup slice," he said.

"Sup!"

"You ready?"

"Ahite!"

Rosa hopped up behind him and hung on tight to him, 'cause the seat wasn't very big in back. She didn't mind holding tight, and she didn't think he minded either. He started pumping with his muscular legs. He was strong for a boy his size. That was a good thing, because they had to take Lake Forrest to avoid all the gunfights on Roswell Road, and there were a lot of hills between Rosa's house and the place they were going.

They started moving into the traffic, which always kept pretty slow on Mt. Paran. The public AVEs hanging from the telephone poles looked like they were going to fall on them as they moved along the curvy street. Most of them out there in the 'burbs were broken. Once in a while one of them would be kinda working, and Rosa and Basil would cash in on a commercial or something as they passed.

"You sure you want to do this?" Basil asked Rosa over his shoulder.

"Yeah, I'm sure!" she said, though she didn't really know. She hadn't ever been inside a Drug Church before. None of her friends had, either, not even the ones who weren't *chuseno*. Only addicts and drug-clergy were allowed.

Basil hung a left on Lake Forrest, and the road dipped way down way fast. Rosa held on tight as Basil let the bike pick up speed. Not too far ahead, she could see the black asphalt swooping swiftly up again like a wall. Basil wanted to get enough momentum so that they'd make it to the top. When the bike hit top speed Rosa screamed because of the feeling in her stomach.

Then there was a goat on the street right in front of them. In order to miss it, Basil swerved so hard that Rosa knew they were going to wipe out, and she squeezed tight. But Basil saved them somehow. He pedaled away as the goat's owner came running out, shaking her fist at them and cussing them in Vietnamese.

The swerve had taken out his momentum, and his legs were obviously starting to hurt halfway up the other hill. So they got off and walked the rest of the way. After a few minutes the stifling April heat began to get to them.

"You sure Padre ain' gon' catch us?" she asked him, wiping the sweat out of her eyes.

"No!" he wheezed. He was still out of breath. They were nearly at the top, and Rosa's legs were screaming now just from climbing this thing. But when they got up there she was glad

they had walked, 'cause the downhill on the other side was way steeper than the one they had just left, and she wouldn't have wanted to ride down it on the back of Basil's bike. She didn't think Basil would have wanted that, either, but he didn't say anything. They just walked down with the bike in between them.

"If he catch us, what happen?"

"Nothing, to you," Basil said. "I get hit."

"Then why you doing it?"

Basil shrugged. "I ain' afraid," he said.

Rosa knew he was. He just said that to impress her. It worked.

They passed under 285. Some of the mongrel kids who lived up there were dropping rat-shit on them. Basil grabbed a rock and threw it at the kids, and they ran back to their tents or whatever they lived in.

They got back on the bike. Basil merged onto Long Island and cut across Roswell Road. From there it wasn't far to Basil's Church. It was a little grey stone building on Glenridge. Couldn't have been more than two rooms inside of it, or maybe three. There were some ruins behind it, some old shell of a building that used to be part of the Church but now wasn't anything but a place for grass to grow. The Church building was old, probably been there since before Rosa's grandparents were kids.

In front of it was a cemetery with faded gravestones. Rosa ran her hand across one as they passed. She could barely make out the number 1902 on one.

"Get down!" Basil said, and he threw his bike to the side and pulled Rosa behind a gravestone. They fell onto the grass, and Basil looked around the stone like someone would shoot them if they peeked their heads out.

"Whatchu do that for?" Rosa demanded, dusting herself off.

"Quiet, *perra!*" he whispered at her.

"Don't call me *perra!*" she snapped at him. To Rosa, it felt just like they were married. She liked it. He was just trying to impress her by being a macho.

He leaned his back against the gravestone. Then he looked at her. "You pretty," he said. He smiled a little. He brought his hand up to touch her arm.

"Go 'way, Basil," she said, pushing off his arm.

"What you gotta be like that for?" he asked her, keeping his hand close on her arm.

She stopped fighting and let him touch her a little. It felt nice. His face got soft, kinda curious. Rosa knew what he was curious about. Before he could think too much about that, she said, "You gon' take me in or not?"

He looked like he wasn't sure anymore, but he wasn't going to back down. "You sure you want to?" he asked her again.

Rosa nodded. But she was scared, too.

"Just stay close to me," he whispered, and he turned onto his belly and crept around the gravestone.

Rosa followed him through the scrubby grass behind a bunch of white stone pillars until they were right up behind the old grey building. She could see the stained glass windows along the side of the Church. A little light was coming through them. She wondered if they looked prettier from the inside.

Meanwhile, Basil was checking something out by a white door near the back. Suddenly a loud bell from somewhere high above them rang out. The sound made Basil panic, and he jumped, looking all around. "Let's go!" he whispered, and vanished through the door.

From over the hill, Rosa saw some shapes. They all moved towards the Church, coming from every direction. Each one had a different kind of walk. Some kept their heads way up like they were watching the sky for something. Others shuffled with their feet and never took their eyes off the ground. Then there were some who could have been normal.

All these people were the faithful, the addicts come to worship.

Basil grabbed her hard by the arm and yanked her in through the door.

She didn't have a chance to complain about being treated rough. She was too scared to make any noise at all. They were *in the Church*. Rosa wasn't supposed to be there. She wasn't even supposed to be *outside*. They crept up this old flight of wooden stairs, and she knew Basil was sweating it every time a step creaked. Finally they got to the top and, creeping on their hands and knees, went out through another door until they were on some kind of balcony with a high rail. She couldn't have seen over without standing up, but she could hear all sorts of shuffling and muttering from down below, only the words didn't make any sense. It sounded like seventy people having seventy different conversations. But it was quiet, too, like nobody answered anybody else, like everyone in that place thought they were all alone.

They kept creeping 'til they got to the middle of a big dent in the floor that was a different color from the other wood, like something big had once been sitting there. Rosa saw some old wires splayed around, the sliced pieces of rubber-insulated wires sticking up from the floor like two crazy hands. Basil curved his finger at her and pointed her to a little hole in the dent just big enough for the two of them to peek through. They had to keep their faces real close to one another to see. Ordinarily she'd like that, but this time the situation was too tense.

Down below she could see a very long room stretching out with rows and rows of benches all facing some raised platform. There were a couple of high tables, and on each table many bags and bottles. In front stood two people dressed in black robes with hoods over their heads, waiting while two lines formed, made up of all the chattering people who had been walking towards the Church.

"What they doing?" Rosa whispered to Basil.

"That the faithful lining up to get the Body and the Blood," Basil answered.

"What that?"

"What they need."

"How you know what they need?"

"It our *job* to know," Basil said, trying to sound wise.

Now each person in line was stepping up and showing them their arm or opening their mouth, and the robe-people were applying tourniquets or giving them whatever it was they asked for.

"We got to learn about seventy different kinds of drugs," Basil told her, "and they got to be the *right* ones or the faithful can die or lose control."

Rosa didn't know what to say. She just watched it for a while. It made her feel taller inside, seeing something that she knew her Mamma and Daddy never saw.

Basil squawked, and Rosa saw him being pulled away out of the corner of her eye. She was too terrified to move until she heard the other voice, a deep, dry voice.

“This is abomination,” it said. Right after came the sound of a hand hitting somebody’s face. That’s when Rosa turned around real quick and scooted away, looking up at the Padre, Basil’s father.

He looked down at her.

“Infidel,” he said, like he was spitting a bad taste out of his mouth.

Rosa didn’t know what “infidel” meant, but when she saw Basil with his face all twisted up, she could tell by that look that he was going to get it and he didn’t want her to see. So she ran out the room, down the stairs and away from the building through the cemetery.

She didn’t figure on one thing when she got out of there: How she was going to get back home before the school game let out? She couldn’t steal Basil’s bike. She couldn’t pay for a ride. So anyone could guess what happened when it took her three hours to walk it.

“*Where you been?*” Mamma screamed when she saw her coming down the street. Rosa didn’t say anything. “I have the *whole neighborhood* looking for you!”

Rosa rolled her eyes. That was the wrong thing to do. Mamma grabbed her. “Ow, bitch!” Rosa said, and that got Rosa slapped. “What wrong with you?”

“What’s wrong with *me?*” Mamma demanded, gripping her daughter’s arm and shaking it back and forth. She was doing like she always did when she was mad. She was about to tell Rosa she couldn’t hang out with her friends in the cul-de-sac tonight. Rosa didn’t want to hear it, so she pushed away. She ran past her mother and fled into the house. They were in the middle of another brownout, so the lights were all out. In the dark, she found a box of Sugar Noke-O’s with some little bits still in it and stole them off to her room. She didn’t want to see her mother. But it’s hard to lock a curtain, and when her Daddy came home, both her parents just walked in.

The power outage was still going, so Rosa couldn’t pretend she was studying on her AVE. “You could *knock,*” she said to them.

“Rosa,” Daddy said.

She waited for a minute, but he didn’t say anything else. She looked over, ready to shout out “What?” and saw her Mamma with tears in her eyes.

“Mamma! *Naz!*” she cursed. “*Okay.* I snuck out. I’m really *sorry.* I’ll never do it again.” But neither of them said anything, and Rosa wondered just how much trouble she was in.

“Rosa,” Daddy finally said again. “Something happened. Something bad.”

She blinked. She didn’t really understand what “bad” meant.

Mamma crossed herself. “Our President will take care of us,” she said quietly.

“Rosa,” Daddy said, almost like he was whispering through a mouthful of crackers.

“What, Daddy?”

“Mamma’s—”

“I lost my job,” Mamma blurted out, covering up her Daddy’s words.

Rosa sat quietly and didn’t answer. She didn’t want them to know how confused she was. As long as she made her parents do all the talking, she had some kind of power.

Her father went on. “I want you to gather up everything that is important to you in a small bag. We’re going to try to get passage on a bus heading to DC tomorrow afternoon.”

“Tomorrow! *DC?*” she exclaimed. “That’s a million K away! We ain’ never gonna make it all the way up there! What about my friends?”

“We have cousins in DC,” Rosa’s mother said in a voice pushed forward by strain. “If we can get up there, they may be able to help us...find another job.”

“But ain’ there crazy White People out between Atlanta and DC? What about the crazy White People?”

Rosa’s Daddy looked at the floor. Then he looked back up at her and said, “Get packed and get some sleep. Don’t forget to make sure the lights don’t come on when the brownout ends.”

For a while Rosa lay in her bed and listened to her parents whisper, whisper. They were fighting, and Rosa really wanted to know why.

At one point her father’s voice got kind of loud. “We don’t have enough *number* for vouchers...”

“Shhh! I know somebody...” said Rosa’s Mama, and her voice went really quiet. Rosa couldn’t make out any more, but she knew that things were bad, especially if her parents were fighting.

When the brownout ended, and Rosa’s parents were snoring, she was on her AVE watching commercials. “*Yo! Join the Young Guns, slice!*”

That was one of her favorites—about the Young Guns, the soldiers for the Corporation. She always liked the way it started, flying over the City Proper. You could see the tall buildings sparkling in the sunlight, surrounded by all those little blocks, all the golden arches, and then you were past it and all you could see were the empty lots on the other side that kept people like her out. Rosa loved the way the Proper looked.

“*Yo, join the Young Guns. Defend CUSA against the Axis of Evil. Y’daddy did it, y’granddaddy did it, now it’s yo’ turn, cuz.*”

Then she got to see the Young Guns in action, running across a grassy field, firing sprayers at enemy combatants, smiling, looking slick. There was this one soldier with hazel eyes she saw every time in that commercial. You could see him up close, good teeth. When Rosa was a little girl she used to fantasize about being married to him. There were female soldiers in the commercial, too. They looked tough, tight, confident.

“*We all in this together.*” Fade to black.

“*Oooo...I love it.*” Now the AVE showed a bunch of stuff on a golden shelf that Rosa would never get to own: better shoes, better clothes, better AVE. Rosa pulled out of the sensation-envelope and lay back on her bed, only able to hear the AVE now.

She didn’t want to leave Atlanta. Maybe she could run off tonight and join the Young Guns. Would they take her? She imagined herself in that uniform, coming home, telling her Mamma and Daddy that it was going to be all right, that she’d take care of them now.

Rosa heard a what sounded like a rock bouncing off her window. She looked over but didn’t see anybody through the bars, just a roach balancing on the window sill. She double-checked to see if her parents were sleeping, then swung the bars aside and slipped out into the dark.

Basil was out there. She could see the red tip of his cigarette, and he held it out to her as she came close.

“Whatchu doin’?” he asked her as she took the cig.

“*Nada*,” she said. She kept quiet for a minute, inhaling the smoke. Then she asked him, “You get hurt?”

“Nah,” he said. “I get in trouble all the time.

“We movin’,” she said. She felt like crying all the sudden.

“Movin’.” He seemed surprised. He looked down at his feet and watched her through the side of his eyes. “Why?”

“Mamma lose her job.”

He whistled. “What you gon’ do?”

“We don’t know,” she said.

“You ain’t got no place to go?” he repeated.

“Gaw, you quick,” she said.

“Don’t be cold,” he said back. Rosa just stared at him. Then she held his cigarette out to him.

“Where you gon’ go?” he finally asked, taking the butt back.

“DC,” she said.

“DC?” he repeated, like he couldn’t believe it. “Why you go there?”

“We got cousins.”

Basil didn’t say anything, but he was being quiet in a different way. He looked pretty agitated. “Why’n you come to Church?”

“To Church?” Rosa said after him. It was hard not to laugh. “My father, he never go there.”

“We take people in,” he said. “It part of our mission.”

“My Daddy even knew you was here, he prob’ly throw me out.”

“You be better off,” Basil said.

“What *that* s’posed to mean?”

Basil shrugged. He seemed to be struggling with something he wanted to say. “I know some shit,” he finally said.

“What?” Rosa demanded.

Basil looked like he didn’t want to answer. “All I know is that it ain’t safe not to have a job anymore.”

“Whatchu mean?”

Basil looked up at Rosa. “You come live with me,” he said. “Forget your parents. You come marry me.”

“What?” Rosa cried. “*Marry* you?”

Basil tried not to look embarrassed at the way she responded. He turned a little angry. “You can laugh if you want,” he said. “But it ain’t safe not to have no job. You stay with your parents, you see. One day someone come—“

Something began pounding in Rosa’s ears. She couldn’t listen. “Our President take care of us!” she screamed, to block out his voice. She had forgotten it was the middle of the night and she was outside. “*Vaya*, punk! I never want to see you ugly ass face again.”

She turned and ran back to her window, slithered in, and fell to the floor. Her heart was beating so fast.

She lay there in the darkness, thinking. He didn’t need to scare her like that. *Pendejo*. Marry her! He just wanted to see her naked. Rosa couldn’t believe she’d ever liked him.

One bag didn’t hold much of Rosa’s stuff. She had to leave some of her clothes, her souvenir CUSA pen, and her “Help me” toy. “Help me!” the little robot screamed when she picked it up. “Oh, *God*, help me!” Rosa smiled at it as she took it upstairs. It went on screaming hysterically

until she put it on the floor in front of the door at the top of the staircase where her little neighbor Enrique would find it.

They left before dawn. The nearest convoy depot was in Vinings, not too far from them down in the I-285. They had to get up at five in the morning and hitch a thirty-minute ride out there with a cart-driver who knew Rosa's Daddy.

The driver let them off just at the top of the ramp, and they walked down into the old 285 loop. This was the old expressway that used to run cars around the outside of the city a hundred years ago. Now even city-carts couldn't get down there because it was off the grid, and there wasn't nearly enough room anyway. Only bicycles, rickshaws, and people could move along the little passageways between all the stalls and tents, and they did that slowly.

Rosa had been down there when she and her friend Maya met some boys one time, but her parents never knew. She remembered how wherever you went it smelled like boiled noodles, fried cabbages, garbage piles. It was always crowded, full of people with limbs missing or things on their faces, and at night you saw the escorts and little mamas selling themselves. You got pushed or run into at least once for every half-hour you spent walking around. The bugs, which were bad enough in her house, were so thick on the 285 that sometimes it was like walking through a fishnet, with the bugs leaving an itchy feeling on your skin as they passed by. There was always shouting somewhere off in the distance, and lots and lots of firecrackers.

They walked for nearly six hours with a small crowd of people who, like them, were trying to get to another hub of CUSA. Rosa's eye was drawn to a tall woman with a tennis-racket case. Several little Korean kids were walking with them in the caravan. Once a passing hooker knelt down and told them how cute they were.

Rosa's feet hurt after a while. The ground was just old concrete, torn up. In some places it had big gaping holes, fenced off with chicken-wire so people wouldn't accidentally fall fifty feet down. The stalls formed a messed-up maze that they had to walk through as best they could. Poor Mamma had to leave one of her suitcases behind because it got too heavy for her. She tried not to cry, but it had a lot of family snapshots and things. She gave it to a woman who ran a junk stall. Mamma told her to keep the valuables but asked her if she would send the photos to her. The woman nodded, but there was no way to do that, and Mamma knew it.

"Look," said a hungry looking man in a thirty-year old suit who had been walking just to Rosa's left. He called himself Mr. Sucher. He was an ex-doctor who had lost his license when the rules for examinations changed and he hadn't gotten the update, and then had gotten busted for practicing illegally. Now he was in the caravan with them, hoping to make a new start in DC.

As they passed under an old sign that said "Dunwoody Exit 1 mile," he pointed at it. He had tried to make casual conversation with her a couple of times, but she had just nodded politely, not really answering. It seemed he really wanted to talk, though, and now he was talking about something Rosa was really interested in.

Mr. Sucher now moved his finger to point at the sun glinting off shattered windows like a hundred dead eyes staring out. Two old skyscrapers rose up forty stories over the river of rocks that used to be Georgia 400. "That's the King and the Queen," he said. The two buildings were facing away from the neighborhood of Dunwoody behind them, like they knew what kind of hell it was. "They used to be really nice buildings," he said. He looked at her for a second. "My family was from Dunwoody, years ago."

"Mamma always told me Dunwoody was the first place to fall apart after the Correction," Rosa said to him.

“That’s true,” said Mr. Sucher, nodding. “It used to be really beautiful, like an enormous garden, with restaurants, shops, apartments. If you went up there now, you’d see empty buildings and smashed glass all the way to the horizon—a concrete wasteland. Smack in the middle of it is Perimeter Mall. That’s where the Governor used to have his palace.”

Rosa cut in. “Once my friend Tauna’s older brother went down into Perimeter Mall as part of his gang initiation, and he made it back alive. He said now it was like a big dark jigsaw puzzle that you could get lost in and never come out. He said that even if you didn’t get killed by some warlord on the streets up above it, you might starve to death inside.”

Mr. Sucher nodded again. Rosa tried not to look as the ruins of the mall sailed by them on the high bank to their left.

They moved past Perimeter into Chamblee Dunwoody. Everywhere people were selling worthless junk and noodles that smelled delicious. Most of them spoke nothing but Spank, the mix of Spanish and Black English that changed so fast that if you stopped speaking it for more than about a year you couldn’t understand it. One real old woman came right up to Mamma and tried to sell her some fried potatoes. Mamma spoke some Spank, but it was the Spank of about twenty years ago, and they couldn’t understand each other, so Rosa had to translate for the woman and then tell her no. The woman laughed a smoker’s laugh and tried to give Mamma a potato anyway, but Mamma wouldn’t let her.

At about four in the afternoon they saw the GM Assembly Plantation off to the right. Mr. Sucher, who was walking on Rosa’s left, spoke up again. “That means we’re almost at our departure point. We’ll get our vouchers evaluated somewhere very near here, and then board transportation out of CUSA Atlanta.”

The GM Plantation was a huge residential compound for people with a lot of number who weren’t in the City Proper. One part of it was a huge black square building with huge, dirty-white English letters visible, some of which had fallen off over time. However dismal it looked from the outside, it was supposed to be fabulous inside. If the commercials were true, there were gardens in there and an amusement park and pretty shops, as well as hundreds of nice homes just like the Proper.

Mr. Sucher seemed to think it was his job to tell Rosa as much about the world as he could. “This whole complex goes on for more than a kilometer. The part of the Plantation we want is still a ways on to the east, under those train-tracks and past a hill.” As the group of travelers went over a rise, four or five big exit ramps shot up into the sky from 285, moving off in different ways like a concrete aloe plant. “And there’s Stone Mountain,” he said. The huge rock looked like a hazy half-moon on the horizon; the abandoned mansions stuck to its slopes were like garbage clinging to the sides.

The way onto the ramps was blocked by Uniforms. Nobody who lived on 285 was allowed to go anywhere near those ramps. Their world flowed around the blockades like ants working their way around a rock. Every once in a while you could see a tiny motorbike with the City Police lights flashing on its back making its way up and down one of them. Only two things ran on I-85: City police and Bus Transports leaving the city.

They finally got a chance to rest. They had been picking up people all along the way, and now they were a group of about twenty. When they got to a huge break in the 285 stalls, guarded by police, their guides took them off the road along a little path that led to a building with a hole in the side.

Everyone went through the hole, and they moved along a tunnel towards the southern half of the Plantation. They couldn't see what the Plantation looked like because the tunnel was completely covered up. Shareholders didn't like lower folks to see the way they lived except on the AVE. When they got through to the end, they were in a small section of the Plantation that was the only place people like them could go. Some offices were there, like for the cheap lawyers who represented ordinary CUSA dwellers, and loan-sharks stood in front of their shops, talking to one another out of the sides of their mouths and watching, half-bored, half-ready to come over if anyone looked at them. Mamma and Daddy made sure they stayed far away from the sharks. Daddy told her they always made it sound like they were doing a favor to people in their situation, but he'd seen too many of his friends get into worse trouble. He didn't even want to be tempted, he said.

A man in a dress-skirt, with his legs close-shaved, came to their group. Even though he was dressed well, he had a mean look, and he didn't sound like he cared if they heard him or not.

"My name is Vic," he said. "I'm going to check your vouchers and then take you to the Bus. Have your voucher out by the time I get there. If I don't see it, you don't go, and I'll give your space to somebody else. There's a whole group over by that wall that's waiting to grab a spot. I won't check you twice.

"You can't take those animals," Vic said quickly to some people holding cages with chickens in them. "You can try to sell them to those lawyers." He pointed curtly to the sharks.

Everyone moved fast to do what he said. They lined up, and Vic moved along towards them, the transplants looking like five-year-olds with their little pieces of paper sticking out of their hands in front of them. Vic checked the vouchers really quick, like he'd seen a million of them. One woman at the front of the line had a ticket Vic didn't like. Vic just shook his head and moved on. The lady didn't even argue. She moved quietly out of the line and disappeared.

While Vic was checking vouchers, all of a sudden this little child came bursting through the line right where they were. Mamma jerked up her hand really quick, and it was a good thing, because without even stopping, the little child grabbed the voucher of the person to her right and was gone before she even knew what had happened.

Vic saw the whole thing with his fast little eyes, and he called out "Stop!" and made a gesture. Then two Uniforms came out of nowhere and ran after the kid. But that kid was gone. The next thing you knew, the police were staring at a crowd of people who were looking back at them. The kid was nowhere to be seen.

The kid's victim was Mr. Sucher. He stood there now, stunned, empty handed. He didn't move out of the line. He didn't say anything until Vic got to him. Vic didn't even pause at the man's empty hand. He just moved on to Mamma.

"But I had a *voucher*," said Mr. Sucher.

"You should have held on to it," said Vic. He hardly looked up.

"But everyone saw!"

"You have to have a voucher to go," said Vic. He looked down at Mamma's voucher. He hadn't moved away from her yet, and Mamma was getting nervous.

"You can't do that!" said Mr. Sucher. He sounded like he was trying to mean it, but he didn't have a prayer. "I paid everything I have for my voucher." He was pleading, but no one would look at him except the Uniforms. They were watching him carefully, with their hands on their sticks. Very slowly, as if hoping someone would change their mind, Mr. Sucher moved away out of line. In a minute he had vanished just like the kid had done.

Vic was still staring at Mamma's voucher. Then he looked at her. He looked deep into her eyes with his own little beady eyes. It was the scariest Rosa had ever seen her Mamma.

Really quietly, Vic spoke to her "How'd you get this voucher?"

"My cousin Lotta Luka in Washington, DC—she arranged it." Mamma was speaking fast, like she had done something wrong, even though Rosa knew she hadn't. "We picked it up in Vinings from the Cater Depot."

"The Cater Depot?" Vic said.

"Yes," Mamma said, nodding.

Vic's eyes flitted over the voucher. "This has a black stripe in the wrong place." He looked at her like she was supposed to know what to do about it.

But Mamma didn't know what to do about it. Daddy wanted to say something, but he was really afraid to.

"You arranged this through dot net?" Vic asked.

"Yes!" Rosa's Mamma said, nodding hard. "T733585dot-serial seven dot net."

Vic nodded. "The dot net connection is really old. A lot of forgeries come from the dot net."

"This one is real," Mamma said in a faint little voice, like she was begging for it to be true.

Vic kept looking her in the eye.

"It's real," he finally said, "But that's only because I say it's real. I'd know if it was a forgery. This is just an old template. I wouldn't buy anything off of dot net anymore." Then he moved past them with his eyes like little slits.

Mamma looked like someone had just given her back her life. She was shaking with gladness. Daddy rubbed her back and pulled away a little tear from the corner of his eye where he had been saving it. "The President is taking care of us," Mama whispered to Rosa. "The President always takes care of us."

They got on an old-time bus, one of those noisy, gas-smelling vehicles that you only ever saw on the roads heading out of CUSA. It had some newer parts sticking out around the outsides, and it wasn't that big. It had old blue painted stripes, and the tires were all worn at the letters. Rosa was scared about that until she got on the bus and saw the smelly pile of tires inside at the back.

Fifteen people followed her on, besides the driver. The first was a tall, skinny man named Firoz. He was alone and didn't have any bags except for one tiny one hanging from his shoulder. He got on, sat in the back corner, and looked out the window.

A noisy family of eight, the Kwangs, came on together. First came an elderly couple who had to hold on to each other every now and then to keep from falling. After them was a big woman who swayed very heavily onto her right foot when she walked. Every time she swayed the soft parts of her body would rock over to that side like water sloshing in a bathtub. A dark man, her husband, came after her, tall and strong like an oak tree. He had to be strong, because half the time she was leaning on him.

A younger woman came next, kind of like a miniature version of Mrs. Kwang—maybe a sister, only not as fat. From the front you could see she had one eye missing, with a black scar where the socket ought to be. If you saw her from the side with her good eye, she still looked kind of pretty. She was leading three little kids in a line down the aisle, holding the oldest's hand. The three kids followed after her in a train, the very littlest trailing along at the end,

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holding the paw of this nasty-looking stuffed bear. Its ear and part of its face had been chewed off, and it smelled funky. Everyone, adults, kids and the funky bear, sat together over two rows. Except for the old couple, they made a lot of noise. They had more stuff with them than Rosa's family did, probably because there were more people to carry it.

Next came the woman with the tennis-racket case. She was about the same age as Rosa's Mamma, with a bandana wrapped around her forehead. The tennis-racket case was the only thing she had. She put it on the rack above her head and sat down, but she kept looking up at it every few minutes, like she wanted to make sure it stayed put. When she noticed Rosa looking at her she smiled. Rosa didn't smile back.

The last three people to get on the bus were a Chinese pair traveling with a young woman who must have been their daughter. Everyone was shocked at how pretty she was. Even Firoz sat up when these folks came in. You usually never saw anyone that good-looking who wasn't part of the Corporation. By her face, she could have been a commercial-girl.

Those three kept near the front of the bus, and when they sat down there wasn't any more room. The whole bus was full of luggage and tires and spare parts and some food rations that were beginning to spoil. There was a little path to the bathroom at the back, but when Rosa went back there she saw that it was just a seat over a potty hole that went straight to the street. You could feel a breeze when you went, and it was even worse when the bus was moving.

The driver got on she turned to slip into her seat. She didn't speak to them at all, didn't check their vouchers, didn't look to see if everyone was there. She just pulled the door closed and started up the long, slow ramp that took them from 285 to 85 going north. It went way high, higher than Rosa had ever been in the sky before, and for a minute, looking back out the window, she could see all the way to the City Proper, the whole skyline, just like when you flew over it in commercials.

I-285 looked like a cast-off piece of bread with thousands of ants crawling around on it. Rosa could see it wind away into the distance to the east, full of stalls and barriers, swarming until it curved out of sight. Just past the curve was Stone Mountain again, with all the solar panels reflecting the afternoon sun, winking and blinding everyone. South across the endless neighborhoods that led to the Proper was a sea of tiny golden prayer arches, thousands of them, growing smaller as they spread out towards the horizon. Then the bus came down and the view was gone.

They drove for a while pretty quiet. The bus hummed and shook like an overfilled washing machine, but it seemed it was going to hold together all right. Nobody used this road anymore except veeps and Uniforms, so there weren't any other vehicles in sight, just them cruising up the middle of ten lanes all by themselves. You could see the train-tracks off to the side with trains rushing past them to the north.

Everybody was talking just to the people they knew, everybody except for Firoz, who didn't talk to anybody, and the lady with the tennis-racket case who looked like she was listening to something. Rosa didn't know what it could be; she couldn't hear anything except the bus. Whatever the woman heard, she seemed to be enjoying it a lot. She just grinned and tapped her fingers on the seat next to her.

They drove like that for about half an hour. Rosa looked out the window at the vast stretches of outer Atlanta. It looked pretty much like what she knew. Neighborhood after neighborhood after neighborhood, people walking, people sitting on curbs, strip malls turned into houses, houses turned into supermarkets. Some parts looked nice; other places looked pretty bad.

There were blocks dressed up to look proud, surrounded on all sides by cemeteries full of old and dead buildings.

The bus driver pulled out onto a ramp leading to a collection of cottages that had snuck up on them. She pulled off to the side of the road. Then she stood up and turned around. She was kind of short. She had straight black hair pulled back into a bun. It just barely peeked out under her blue cap. Her face was pock-marked and tan, and it was perfectly round. She was pretty old, but she looked solid, firm, like if you ran into her she wasn't going to be the one to fall. "We're coming into Georgiatown," she said. She spoke with a little accent Rosa didn't recognize. "Anybody wants to buy anything, exchange anything, or talk to anyone, you have to do it now. We can't stop anywhere on the route. Also" —she looked them all in the eye, one by one — "anyone who wants to get off, now's the time, okay?" She was quiet for a second, just looking at them. Then she said, "I'm not going to lie to you. It's a very dangerous trip. You know that. You want to get off, do it here. I wouldn't recommend changing your mind in the Unincorporated States." She stopped again. She looked down at the floor of the bus. Then she looked up and said, "We don't give refunds." She turned around, eased back into her seat, and pulled the bus back on the ramp to Georgiatown.

Georgiatown had started as a mall a hundred years ago. Then during the Correction people started living there. Finally it got so crowded it became its own little Proper. Now it looked like a wedding cake: a group of tall, skinny buildings rising out of one huge base. It was exclusive, like the Plantation, but people like Rosa could still visit Georgiatown if they had enough number to buy train fare.

Rosa thought they would finally see some Shareholders and walk around with them, that they would get to pretend they were big, powerful people with lots of number, even if it was just for a second. But Mamma told her that the Corporation people all shopped in different parts of Georgiatown, and nobody wanted people like them to mix in.

Where Rosa's family got to go was pretty lousy. A lot of lawyers' kiosks and cheap clothing stalls. But if when Rosa looked past the dirt she could tell that it had once been a really pretty place. There had been a big glass window in front of every shop, and some still had beautiful pictures and designs on the door. Some even had the old signs hanging above so you could tell what they used to sell there. Rosa spent ten minutes just staring at one that used to be a bridal shop. The sign for it was in English. All around it was a picture of a tall, white woman in a pretty gown that draped all over her feet. Rosa asked her Mamma why they used a white woman in the picture. Mamma said that was a picture of the woman who owned the store. Mamma seemed really nervous now, and she didn't want to answer most of Rosa's questions. She just kept looking around like she wanted to buy something but couldn't decide what to get. Her face got sadder and sadder the whole time.

Rosa didn't think they were going to buy anything, but Mamma and Daddy put their cards in the slots and used most of their number for cigarettes. Mamma said their number wasn't any good on the road, because there wasn't anywhere to put a card. So they bought cigarettes, because they could be traded in an emergency.

Still, they didn't end up with a lot of cigarettes.

The bus driver told everyone her name was Chassis. She didn't say much after that. Rosa wanted to go over to ask her questions, but she stayed by her Daddy instead. He was looking at Firoz like he hadn't seen him before.

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“What’s the matter, Daddy?”

“Nothing,” he said. He just glared at Firoz. Meanwhile, Firoz wasn’t looking back. He was still gazing out the window, looking exactly like he did when he first sat down.

Rosa was nervous about the way Mamma and Daddy were acting, and she wanted to get away from them for a while. She tried to get up and move to the front of the bus, but Mamma put her arm around her and kept her close. After about twenty minutes, the bus slowed down. Rosa thought Chassis was going to pull over, but she just stopped under a covered booth. She leaned out the window and started chatting with this woman in the gate. Real friendly. Chassis had her head out the window for maybe fifteen minutes. Rosa never heard a word, but she heard Chassis laughing. Chassis’ laugh sounded like two bricks scraping together, a laugh that could put you on edge or make you feel real safe, depending on whose side you were on.

The woman in the booth came out and walked around the back of the bus. She walked slow, Rosa guessed, because she was looking at things. Rosa wondered if she was going to look up the potty hole.

Finally, she got to the door and Chassis let her on. She was wearing a black and gold body suit with gold stripes down the side. She was heavy like Chassis, but a whole lot younger. Her hair was cropped short under a tight cap with a brim that shaded her eyes. Mamma and Daddy got nervous again, but this woman didn’t look like she would ‘cause them any trouble. She didn’t look like she even saw any of them. She just started talking in this dead voice.

“You are about to leave the Corporation of the United States of America. This bus is headed for the MidAtlantic Protectorate. You are expected to remain on this bus until it reaches its route.”

She sounded like she’d said this stuff five million times already, maybe even five million times today. She sounded like she didn’t care if they lived or died.

“CUSA makes no claim of your safety. Anyone traveling over the Unincorporated States by land does so at their own risk. Once you cross the border behind me, your connection to CUSA exists entirely in your voucher. If your voucher is lost or damaged, you will not be allowed back into CUSA. This is for your own safety.”

She looked around at them like she was waiting for somebody to argue. Nobody said anything.

“As citizens and protectees of CUSA, you will be allowed back into CUSA territory upon presentation and surrender of your voucher. You must surrender your voucher to re-enter CUSA.”

She stopped again. It was like the pauses were part of the speech or something.

“CUSA is not liable for anything lost or damaged in the Unincorporated States. Any disputes arising in or with the Unincorporated States must be taken up with the Office of Foreign Affairs in Baltimore. This includes all loss of property and/or life. Are there any questions?”

“When do we eat?” asked the woman with the tennis-racket case. Everybody on the bus chuckled. Even Chassis.

The border lady nodded like she thought the joke was okay, but she didn’t smile. “Have a good day,” she said. Then she stepped off.

Chassis pulled the bus through the booth, and they started heading for an underpass. They went underneath a big road that Rosa could see had a bunch of fences and barbed wire on it. “That’s the outer loop,” said Daddy. “Are you ready?” He looked down at her and ran his fingers through Rosa’s hair. That irritated Rosa, and she shook him off.

They went through three gates that were tucked under the tunnel. Once they got through, Rosa tried to look back, but she couldn't see behind them because the bus didn't have a rear window and Mamma wouldn't let her open theirs.

On the outer side of the loop everything was really green. Rosa was surprised. Nobody lived out here. Nobody. No Churches, no buildings, no houses. Just the road and a bunch of trees and weeds. At first, when they went under bridges, you could sometimes see old towers or something, but after a while it just looked dark and green.

They rode for a while with everybody keeping their seats. Rain started tapping on the windows. Rosa sat in the crook of Mamma's arm and watched the trees sail by. She thought about lots of things, then about nothing. She wished she had an AVE to log on to. She wanted a cigarette bad enough that she didn't care if Mamma and Daddy finally found out she had started smoking, but she knew they were saving them as number.

The Kwang children had started getting up, making lots of noise. Mamma Kwang and Aunt One-Eye tried to keep them in their seats, but Mr. Kwang didn't do much or say much about it. He just sat there like his oak-tree self and kept quiet, letting his women do all the work. After a while Mamma and One-Eye got tired of slapping the older one on top of the head, tired of yanking the younger one by the arm, and they fell back in their seats and let them run wild.

Nobody seemed to mind. The kids were noisy, but they weren't bad, mostly just coming up to different people and staring at them.

The Chinese family were too polite to look unhappy when the kids came over. The really pretty young girl played with the middle child and made him giggle. Then when he started squealing she tried to send him away, but he wouldn't leave.

The tennis-racket-case lady watched everything with a great big smile. Rosa wanted to know what she was so happy about. Rosa wondered if she was an addict. She acted like she was proud, like the kids were hers, the way she caught the eye of grandpa Kwang. He smiled too and nodded quickly, showing his yellow, broken teeth, but he didn't look her in the eye.

The oldest kid and the youngest came to the back of the bus. First they went down to Firoz and checked him out. He didn't seem to notice them. He hadn't moved since he sat down. He was still staring out the window like those trees outside were really something interesting. The kids tried to get his attention by playing near him, then by poking him with their fingers and running away fast. He didn't move, not even to scratch.

Finally, they got bored and came up to Rosa. Mamma and Daddy smiled at them, but they were looking at her.

"I'm Leetha," said the littlest one.

Rosa nodded.

"Where you from?" the oldest one asked me.

"Buckhead," Rosa said. The tattered bear the littlest one was carrying smelled even worse up close. It reeked like sweaty socks trailed in spoiled chicken soup.

"Where you from?" Rosa asked him.

"Fairburn," he said.

Rosa knew about Fairburn. It was rough down there. Lots of old strip-malls falling apart, with people living in them.

"Come play with us?" asked Leetha for the both of them. Rosa didn't want to be around the stuffed bear, but Mamma patted her away, so she went. They took her up to introduce her to

the Grandma and Grandpa, then the Mamma and Daddy, then the one-eyed lady they called Aunt Kin.

The pretty Chinese girl at the front of the bus was still trying to get the middle child to go away, but he wouldn't go. The other two finally pulled Rosa up to where he was, and she and Leetha and the older one all bounced on the seats, laughing and making lots of noise.

They settled on the row in front of the Chinese girl's parents and stared at them for a while. Rosa never would have been allowed to stare if she hadn't been sitting with the Kwang kids, who were too young to know better. Rosa got a good look at them.

They didn't look like much now, but she was getting the idea they used to be pretty number, just from the way they sat. They looked uncomfortable, but they tried to pretend they weren't, as if the spongy seats were some kind of couch they were reclining on and this was a royal bus. Most Chinese, maybe all of them, lived in the City Proper, usually high up. Rosa didn't know what could have happened to these people to make them leave their home. Their clothes were old and faded, but they would have been expensive if they'd been new. She guessed they'd been in them for some time.

The man kept his eyes far away, but the woman would look back and smile really sweet, then look down. She did this three times. Rosa knew she was making the Chinese people uncomfortable, but she just couldn't resist getting a good stare at someone, especially someone interesting. Finally, the Chinese woman tried to make friends.

"What are your names?"

The Kwang kids wouldn't answer. Rosa waited for a second, and then she said, "Rosa."

"What does your father do, Rosa?" she asked.

Rosa didn't want to tell her that her Daddy had been out of work so long. "He works for the neighborhood," she said, just to come up with something.

"What does your mother do?"

"She was a code checker," Rosa said. "But she lost her job and now we're going up to DC to find a new one."

The woman nodded. "That's what happened to me, too," she said.

"Really?" Rosa asked. The older Chinese woman nodded again. "What did you do?" Rosa wanted to know.

"I worked for Noke," she said. Leetha had started stroking the hair of the Chinese daughter because it was so smooth and black. The daughter tried to sit there like she didn't feel it, and the parents were making like it didn't bother them, but Rosa knew it did.

"Noke? Wow! Us too! That's who Mamma made boxes for. Did you live in the City Proper?"

"We did," she said.

"That must have been great," Rosa said. "We just lived in Sandy Springs. Do you have a brand?" Rosa knew her mother would go crazy if she found out she'd asked someone about their tattoo, but her mother wasn't here, and she really wanted to see one.

The woman nodded again.

"Can I see it?" Rosa begged. The Kwangs stood up on the seats, interested.

The woman reached up to her shoulder and pulled a flap away. Underneath was a pattern of blue bars painted on her skin. It looked like an air-conditioner vent. She elbowed her husband. "Show them yours," she told him.

He did what she told him. His tattoo looked a lot like hers. You could see the hair growing all over it. “Don’t you have to shave that, mister?” asked the oldest Kwang.

The man glowered and looked away. The woman answered for him. “We don’t use them anymore.” The man turned on her suddenly like he wanted to argue, but she shut him up just by looking at him.

“Why not?”

“I don’t work for Noke now,” she said.

“Did you get fired?” Rosa asked.

“Yes.”

“That’s what happened to my Mamma,” Rosa said, trying to sound sympathetic. “You couldn’t find a new job in CUSA?” She figured it had to be easier for them than for her family.

The woman looked down at her feet. “Things don’t work that way in the City Proper,” she said.

Rosa didn’t understand that. She wanted to ask more, but she got a feeling that her Mamma would really pull her away now. The Kwang kids had already gone down the aisle, and Rosa wanted to follow them. “See you,” she said. The Chinese woman nodded back.

By the time she got to the middle of the bus, the three Kwang kids were all gathered around the tennis-racket-case lady. She was showing them something.

Rosa crept over and peeked across the seat. She couldn’t believe what the woman had taken out of the tennis-racket case: It was a *guitar!* A *real* one, made of orange wood, shaped like a cul-de-sac, with a scrape down near where her hand touched the strings. Rosa couldn’t look away. She’d never seen one before except as a tiny picture in an old commercial.

“What kind of tennis racket is that?” asked the middle child, who had never seen one.

“It’s a guitar,” she said. “A hundred years ago, people used to sing special commercials called songs. Want to hear one?”

“Can I play?” the oldest asked.

Instead of answering, the lady started singing some wordless melody. She held the guitar still the whole time and didn’t play it. “Do you all like that?” she asked. They nodded. “How about you join me?” she asked.

Then she added some words. “*I’d like to teach the world to sing,*” she went, “*in perfect harmony...*”

It sounded so familiar somehow. It was so beautiful. The woman was smiling now.

“*I’d like to buy the world a Coke...*” she went on.

“Rosa!” her Mamma called.

“I have to go,” Rosa told them. She left the woman and the Kwang kids singing behind her and went back to her Mamma and Daddy. She noticed that Firoz had fallen asleep against the window.

“What are you doing?” Mamma asked her.

“Nothing,” Rosa said. She sat down next to her Mamma and leaned on her arm. Mamma wrapped it around her.

It was getting dark outside.

Rosa didn’t think she was tired, but she woke up later in complete darkness, feeling the bus bouncing under her. She didn’t know how long she had been sleeping, but everyone was quiet.

Even the little kids in front had gone down. Only the bus driver was awake. Rosa could see her looking all around as she drove, even though she was just looking into the blackness.

Rosa got up and went towards her. The bus driver's comfy chair was set just a little below the floor, and she moved all around in it as she drove, like she was dancing on her bottom. When the driver heard Rosa coming she looked up out of her little cockpit. Rosa wasn't sure if she was mad at her for coming up, but the driver didn't say anything. She just turned around and kept dancing.

There were a lot of interesting things in Chassis' cockpit. All in front of her were dials and switches, some that were working, others dark. Some of the big switches were obviously missing, and some metal pieces were pointing out where plastic used to be on top. Along her left side were a bunch of hundred-year-old photographs taped to the wall. The images were really small and they didn't move, so Rosa couldn't make them out. She wanted to get closer, but she thought it would be rude.

Finally Rosa noticed the little box by Chassis' left hand that sounded like it had bees inside. But then instead of buzzing, it squawked.

"What's that?" Rosa pointed at it.

Chassis looked at Rosa's finger. "The radio," she said. "Old-time AVE."

"Oh," Rosa said.

"You've been asleep five hours," Chassis said. "You should go back to sleep."

"When are we going to be there?" Rosa asked.

"By noon tomorrow. Maybe sooner. It depends."

"On what?" Rosa asked.

"Lots of things," she said. "I know the roads really well, but things change out here. Depends on the route."

Rosa nodded like she understood. She tried to look intelligent because she had decided she liked Chassis and wanted to impress her.

"You log on to school?" the driver asked her.

"Yeah," Rosa said.

"What game?"

"*Ultimate Acquisition VII.*"

"They still play that one? That's a classic. You like it?"

"It's okay." Rosa said, shrugging. "I wouldn'ta chose it, but that's the one they assigned for my neighborhood." Before the driver could ask her another question, Rosa said, "Where you from?"

"I'm from everywhere," Chassis said.

"No you ain't," Rosa said, waving her head around.

"Yeh I is," she said in Spank.

That surprised her. Rosa answered her in Spank. "How you learn to talk like that?"

"Spank been 'round a lot longer than you!"

"You don't look like you speak Spank!"

"That 'cause Mamma 'Bangladeshi!" she said. "But I been 'round."

"You Bangladeshi?" Rosa asked.

"Mmm hmm."

"From there?"

"When I was little."

“How little?”

“Littler than you!” and she smiled. “We gone right before Bangladesh get taken over by Pakistan.”

“You remember?”

“Nothin’ to remember,” she said, shaking her head. “I been lots of other places since then.”

“Where you go?”

“Everywhere!”

“Where?”

“You name it.”

“Washington.”

“Uh huh.” she said.

“Houston.”

“Mmm hmm.”

“LA.”

“Yep.”

“How you go so many places?” Rosa asked her.

“Cause I done so many things.”

“Like what?”

She didn’t answer. She was slowing down. She was looking at something in her headlights. She cussed in some language Rosa didn’t know.

“There’s a bridge out,” she said in Spanish. “It’s collapsed.”

“How you get around it?” Rosa asked her.

“Wait,” she said. She reached down and grabbed a little box off of the squawking thing. It was attached with a funny piece of coiled rubber. She talked into it, quiet, so Rosa couldn’t really hear.

The box squawked back at her, and Rosa caught a little of it. Whoever was squawking told Chassis they didn’t know about the collapse.

“It must be a recent one,” she said. “They go out all the time, now. They’re finally beginning to fall apart.”

“How you get around it?” Rosa asked her again.

“We go up this ramp and down the other one,” said Chassis. She was looking around more intently now, like she was trying to see through the dark. She moved the big wheel at her chest to the right, and the bus pulled over and started turning around. She took them back the way they’d come a little ways and then wheeled the bus onto the ramp going up.

“What you used to do?” Rosa asked to get back to the conversation.

“Everything.”

“Like what?”

“When I was just a little older than you, I got my first job. I used to monitor websites for illegal activity. You know what websites are?”

Rosa nodded her head, even though she didn’t.

“Then I made deliveries in the boondocks.”

“The what?”

“I delivered things for people like those that live in the shacks on the I-285.”

“Oh,” Rosa said. “Like what?”

She smiled. "And I was a swimming instructor. You swim?"

Rosa shook her head.

She went on. "I drove my first bus when I was twenty-three. Took it all the way to Chicago. That was when—" Her voice died. She was looking ahead at the road. There wasn't any ramp back down. Just trees. She cussed again.

"What is it?"

"There's no return access ramp," she said. "Now I have to figure out where...wait a minute." She talked into her radio again and waited. The radio squawked back at her, and she nodded. Then she smiled. "Okay," she said. "I know where we are. That's fine. That will even save us some time."

"What?" Rosa asked.

"I know a good route we can take," she said, and she started moving the bus again, down the road into the darkness.

"Is it all like this?" Rosa asked. It looked even darker through the windows than it did along the highway, if that was possible.

"Like what?"

"Woods. Woods."

"No," Chassis said, cocking her head. "There's some cities out here."

"Cities?" Rosa said. "In the US?"

"Sure," Chassis said, moving her hands up and down the steering wheel. "Richmond is still pretty big. Charlotte. Wheeling. They even have electricity."

"No way!"

Chassis laughed hard. "What they teach you in that game you play now?"

Rosa shrugged. "We learn about the President, how great he is, how he gonna take care of us..."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Chassis said, like she'd heard it all before. Rosa raised her eyebrows. She was surprised that Chassis wasn't more respectful. "What else?"

"We learn about what we need to do to get a job, who we need to talk to, how we get around, how we stay safe..."

"Don't you learn any history?"

"Sure," Rosa said. "We learn about the Dow and the Great Correction and how the President saved us."

Chassis chewed her lip. "Huh," she said. "So they don't teach you any history."

"What you mean?" Rosa demanded.

"You know why the White People left?"

Rosa was quiet for a minute. Then she admitted, "No."

Chassis waited like she wanted her to ask. Rosa wanted to know, but she didn't want to sound any dumber than she felt. So she kept quiet. Finally, Chassis said, "You know what the Correction *was*?"

Rosa shrugged. She thought she did.

Then Chassis started rattling off facts like she was an AVE and Rosa was buying. "In what they used to call the Twenty-First Century, about a hundred years ago, people were living on borrowed time. Everybody knew something was going to come down on them, but nobody knew when. Nobody knew how.

“Well, one week, a bunch of people defaulted on their home loans. A huge bunch of people. Back in those days people didn’t have tattoos, and the credit companies weren’t part of the government, so you could get into a lot more trouble with your number and nobody would mess with you. Well, when all of a sudden everybody couldn’t pay, there was a bank-collapse.”

Rosa didn’t understand every word Chassis was saying, but she was really interested in the story anyway, since nobody had ever bothered to tell her this stuff before.

“Well, things got better for a while, but then they went bad again. Up and down, a bunch of falls, each one worse than the last. They take all of them together and call them the Correction. That would have been bad enough.

“But out west, the Colorado River had dried up because of the heat, and everyone left Las Vegas, pushing into the East Coast and West Coast. Right about then the ocean levels were getting high enough that when a bad bunch of storms hit the East Coast, all the major cities out there got flooded. New York, Baltimore, DC. The levels never did come down again, and everybody was just stuck.

“The people with all the number got out, you know? They fled to higher ground. That was happening anyway, though. After Iran took Mexico in, a lot of Mexican Catholics fled north, into the big dry cities where their families were.

“So when the government became a Corporation and changed USA into CUSA, it was mostly darker people living there.

“Then they built the levies around DC, and the walls around the Southern Protectorate, the Northern Protectorate, the Texas Protectorate...you know them all, right?”

Rosa nodded. Yes, she knew all the Protectorates. She was glad she knew *something*, anyway.

“Well, Richmond and those other cities got left out. Charlotte almost made it, but they had that *coup* and the President didn’t want to waste his number protecting it anymore. So now it’s one of those Unincorporated States.

“They got electric power,” Chassis said, getting back to that subject. “Though you can’t rely on it out there like you can in CUSA. There are lots of blackouts and things, especially when someone tries to take over as Governor, but it’s not as bad as out in the country where they make do with candles.”

“Do the Young Guns protect them too?” Rosa asked.

“*The Young Guns*? No way!” Chassis said really loud. “CUSA’s not going to use its troops and its number protecting a million little backwards White States, even if they are all gathered in one big place. No, they’re just out there, like the little towns in the woods.”

Before Chassis could go any further, Rosa heard a noise from the back of the bus. Chassis looked into her mirror. Rosa couldn’t believe the noise, because she recognized the voice. It was her father. He was screaming at Firoz.

Firoz was still sitting in the back of the bus, but Rosa couldn’t see him because her father was in the way, hanging over the seat. She quickly ran back there to see what was going on.

“Nobody said you could do that here!” he was roaring, his accusing finger pointing down.

Firoz didn’t answer him. He just looked out with big, sad eyes. Rosa looked down at his arm and saw the needle hanging from it.

Rosa’s father turned towards the front of the bus and began screaming at Chassis. “Nobody told me there was a drug-worshipper on board!”

Now everybody was awake. The little Kwang children and the beautiful young Chinese girl were all looking back at Rosa's father like they couldn't figure out how he had gotten on the bus. Everybody else was trying to ignore him.

"Daddy," Rosa said. "Forget it." She pulled his arm.

"Go sit down, Rosa," Daddy said.

"Daddy—"

"Sit down!" he shouted, and he shoved her away with a thrust so vicious that Rosa stumbled and had to catch herself on the hard rubber floor. The lines on the mat cut into her hands.

Rosa's father had turned back to scream at the drug addict. "If you don't get that needle out of your arm right now, I'll squeeze you by the neck until your head pops off!"

Rosa couldn't see Firoz's response, but before her father could do anything, Chassis had stopped the bus. She stopped it so suddenly it jerked everybody forward. Rosa fell over again onto her knees.

"What's your problem, mister?" Chassis shouted, rising to her feet from the front.

"Nobody told me there was a drug-worshipper on board!" Rosa's father answered her.

"So what?" the driver said. "He paid his money like you did; he gets to ride on the bus!"

"Not with me!" Rosa's father insisted.

"You want off?" Chassis replied, threateningly.

"I want *him* off!" Rosa's father said, the spit in his throat making his voice gravelly.

Rosa's Mamma was up by now, and she had pulled Rosa to her feet and out of the aisle. "Eduard!" she said.

"Nobody gets off this bus unless I throw them out!" Chassis said, coming towards Rosa's father.

"No, Katarina," he said, holding out his hand, stopping Rosa's mother from coming any closer.

"You need to tell me what your problem is, mister," said the driver. She shoved past Rosa's Mamma and was right in her Daddy's face. He should have been scared, but he was crazy, now, like Rosa saw him only when he was talking about drugs. His black eyes were wide open like big, bottomless pools.

"No prosperity without sobriety," Rosa's father quoted in English. "Genius is 10% inspiration and 90% perspiration!"

"There is no fear like a cockroach's head!" Firoz answered loudly. It was the first time he had spoken. Rosa could see the addict's face now. He was looking all around like he saw things moving down the walls that frightened him.

"Look, mister, I'll give you one warning," Chassis said. "And then I'm going to throw you out, with or without your wife and daughter." She was tense, like she was getting ready to move on him.

But Rosa's father hadn't heard. "Your fear is not as my fear!" Rosa's father shouted, pointing at Firoz. "And your bread is not as my bread. Therefore the body is not the body!"

Something exploded, and the bus rocked once like a big boat in a storm.

Chassis braced herself against a seat, and then she cursed in Spanish so everyone could tell what she was saying. There was another explosion, and the bus rocked again. Now it was leaning towards the front. By the time Chassis got to the front of the bus, there were four more explosions, and the bus rocked and leaned a different way each time.

Then Rosa heard glass shattering, and Chassis got back to the front really fast. The pretty Chinese girl started screaming. Rosa noticed through her terror that the Kwang kids didn't make a sound. They had already gotten down behind the seats. Even Leetha was completely quiet and still. Obviously those kids had been through something like this before.

The bus door shattered into a thousand pieces and folded in. Chassis watched a large man coming up the stairs with a shotgun in his hands. As he got to the top a little old lady stepped up behind him.

The man was huge, but he had a face like a little toddler—puffy and pink. His hair was cut down to the pimply scalp and looked like the bristle on a pig's back. Among the bands of the sleeveless T-shirt he was wearing, you could see pimples of various sizes all over his neck and shoulders. He spoke to all of them in a voice like the gunshot that had demolished the bus door. "Y'all are trespassing!" He was speaking English, of course. Rosa knew a little English because all the prayers were in English, but his accent was so strange she almost couldn't make it out. "We welcome you to the great sovereign nation of Steaksbury Under God On High." He held his gun across his chest.

The old woman creaked out from behind him, "Y'all speak English?" She was tiny compared to the man, but she didn't look fragile. You couldn't get a pin inside the folds of her prim old-fashioned suit. Her steely blue eyes were sweeping from side to side, and everything they touched was knocked away immediately. The little grey bun on the back of her head wasn't telling how it stayed where it was.

"I understand you," said Chassis, stepping up to the man and looking at his face. She didn't seem much afraid. That made him mad, and he glared down at her like he was ready to step on her.

"Any of these other folks?" the old woman asked, nodding with her head at all the passengers.

Chassis shrugged.

"Tell them they've entered our jurisdiction unlawfully by God's good graces, and that if they do as they're asked, no one will harm them."

Chassis turned back towards them and spoke to them in Spanish. "This is obviously a tribute ambush. I'm sorry. It happens from time to time. We can get out of it. Just do what I tell you. Don't listen to them. Listen to me."

The woman waited for a second. "You tell them yet?" she asked Chassis.

"What do you want?" Chassis asked.

"We ask what's fair in the name of the Skelton Treaty," she said. "Ten percent of all valuables on the bus."

"The Skelton Treaty was repealed," Chassis told her. "Virgilina breached—"

"That's *Virgilina!*" the old woman snapped, showing her teeth. Her eyes were like cold iron on Chassis' face. Rosa couldn't believe how Chassis didn't flinch from her glare. "We're a sovereign nation unto God, separate from Virgilina. You have a compact with *us*."

Chassis shrugged. She turned towards them and said in Spanish, "They want ten percent of everything you own. That's one tenth of your cigarettes, some of your food. Just use your common sense and give them something valuable. Don't hold anything back, or they'll get angry and we won't get where we're going."

Quickly the passengers started fishing through their stuff, finding things they could get rid of. When Rosa looked out the window she saw a people pointing big guns right at their heads.

“Don’t just give them any old thing,” Chassis said in Spanish. “It’s got to be something that will satisfy them.”

“You,” the little old woman said to Chassis. “Sit in the chair.” She had a small silver pistol in her hand, and she was pointing it, waving it towards the driver’s seat.

Chassis nodded and moved past the big man, then eased herself down into her chair. “Go on,” the woman said in English, and the big greasy man started walking down the aisle with an empty burlap sack. He looked over everything people handed him. Sometimes he nodded and took it. Sometimes he shook his head and roared in their faces until they gave him something else. He looked like he was concentrating very hard on his job. The lady with the tennis-racket case had to open it and show him what was inside. The man looked at the guitar like he couldn’t tell if it was valuable or not. Then he gestured at the strings. She took the strings off of it like she was undressing somebody, and after she gave them to the big man she turned away.

The man got to Rosa. She gave him a little gold chain that wasn’t worth anything to anyone but her. The man looked at it real close, then stuffed it in his shirt pocket. He reeked, like a chicken that had been sitting too long uncooked. The chicken smell was so strong it made her head swim.

When the man moved on to the back of the bus, he found Firoz just staring at the ceiling. The drug worshipper probably didn’t even know what was going on. “Come on, spig!” the man shouted at him. He slapped Firoz on the face with his huge hand. “Up!” But Firoz didn’t look at him. He just went where the man’s hand took him.

“He’s a drug worshipper,” Chassis told the woman at the front of the bus. “He doesn’t have anything but his drugs.”

“No food?” demanded the woman.

“Probably not,” Chassis said.

The big man went all over Firoz’s body, feeling for anything he could take, but all he found were needles and empty plastic bags. He just threw those to the side and glared down at Firoz.

“He ain’t got nothing,” the man said back to the woman.

“I told you,” Chassis said.

“Then he’s got to die,” the woman said, shrugging.

“No!” Chassis said, standing up.

“Yes, he *dies!*” the woman shouted at her. “He ain’t got no tribute. He’s in violation of the treaty. Penalty for going against a treaty agreed upon under God is death!”

“He stays on the bus,” Chassis said to her. “He’s in my care. You got plenty. Now you get off this bus.”

The woman clicked her gun and pointed it at Chassis’ head. “You talk to me like that, you ugly old spigger, I’ll put a hole in you like—“

“See this?” Chassis gestured towards her radio. “That’s my radio. It’s on and it’s connected to my home base in Atlanta. They’ve been listening to everything that happened here. They know where we are, because you told them. You harm anyone on this bus, and the Young Guns will come out with sprayers and kill all your sons.”

The woman stared thin-eyed at Chassis for a second. She looked at Chassis’ feet.

Then she nodded. "Okay," she said, satisfied. "Come on, Porter. Get on up here."

The greasy man shambled up to the front of the bus, bumping each seat with his burlap sack. Just as he got to the front, he noticed the pretty Chinese girl and her parents. He was so surprised by the look of her that he stopped cold. The old woman and Chassis both watched him as he carefully put his bag on the ground. He reached out his hand and ran it amazed down the Chinese girl's black, silky hair. She started to tremble. Her mother was talking to her in some language Rosa didn't know.

"Look, Mimi," the big man said softly, his voice gentle like it belonged to an astonished four-year old. "A China doll! Real pretty."

"Come on, Porter," the old woman said, sighing like she was really tired.

The Chinese mother was watching the big man stroking her daughter. Rosa never saw anybody so still in her life. She kept her hands from trembling by holding them in little balls in front of her mouth.

"I want this one, Mimi," Porter half said, half asked, looking back at the old lady.

Chassis didn't say anything this time, but the old woman did. "That ain't under the agreement, Porter. Come on."

"I want her!" Porter insisted. "I want her for me!"

"No!" the old woman shouted. "It ain't part of God's agreement with Skelton. We keep our word. One tenth. Now git on!"

"I want her for the night, then!" Porter said. He grabbed the girl's long hair in a huge fist and pulled. The girl screamed, and the mother and father cried out and clutched at her.

"No!" the old woman screamed. She moved up the stairs and came right up to Porter. She slapped him hard across the cheek and stared at him with her steely blue eyes. The blow stunned the man, and he let the girl drop to her seat, moving his hand to feel his face. "Now we keep our agreements or God takes vengeance," snapped the old lady. "You don't get to take a woman out of marriage."

"But for the night," Porter protested.

"*No!* Not for the night! You follow God's Law or we throw you out!"

Porter stared at the old lady. Rosa couldn't see his face, and she wondered if he was going to hurt the old lady. But then he sniffled a little bit, turned, and looked around the bus. His eyes fell on Rosa.

The look in them changed from being frustrated to something Rosa don't want to say. She suddenly knew the smell of his breath, could feel his stubble pricking her throat.

"Rosa," muttered her Mamma, like she was thinking the same thing.

All of a sudden, the old lady turned, and her gun went off with a jerk.

The tennis-racket woman lurched as if shocked, then slumped over. Rosa could see the guitar strings fall to the rubber floor from her hand. She had been trying to take them back out of the burlap sack while the old lady and the big man were arguing.

The old lady came, picked up the strings from the floor, then put them back in the sack. She looked up at Chassis. "We stick to our agreement," she said. "One tenth." Chassis just nodded and didn't say anything. "Go, Porter," the old lady said to the man. "Or I'll shoot a hole in you for the same reason." Porter sagged a little. He moved to the front of the bus and down the stairs.

“You’ll have our protection all the way to Clear Point,” the old lady said to Chassis on the way out. “No one will harm you here. Throw six of your tires out, and my boys will put them on for you.”

Chassis nodded again, and she and Rosa’s Mamma and Mr. Kwang started throwing tires out the front door. They felt the bus shake some more. Rosa sat and listened to how quiet it was and how loud the pounding of her heart was. Rosa’s Daddy didn’t say anything. Not about Firoz, not about anything. He just looked straight ahead and sat really quiet.

Then Chassis started up the bus again and drove them away.

Rosa’s father didn’t open his mouth after the incident. He didn’t say a word to Rosa’s Mamma or to Rosa. Mamma was pretending he was okay, but she was tugging obsessively on her own sleeve. Rosa could tell she was pretty shaken up.

“Why isn’t Daddy saying anything?” Rosa asked.

“I don’t know, sweetie.”

“Is it ’cause of Firoz?”

“I don’t know, Rosa.”

“Why—” She was afraid to ask, because he was sitting right there, but he didn’t look like he could even hear what she was saying. “Why do we hate drug people so much?” she whispered into Mamma’s ear.

Mamma looked like she didn’t think Daddy was listening, either. She shrugged, and she looked really tired. “I wasn’t *chuseno* before I married your father,” she said. “His grandparents were believers. They came from really bad neighborhoods.” Mamma shifted like she was uncomfortable. “Drugs weren’t legal when your great-grandmamma was a child the way they are now. Back then, people that sold drugs ran those neighborhoods. But a bunch of residents got together and kicked the drug-people out. That’s what started it, the *chusenos*. They all got religion and swore to keep the drugs away.”

“You mean like Jesu religion?”

“Yeah,” Mamma said, nodding. “It was some Jesu and some Islam and a little Mormon. Your Daddy was raised that way, and it’s just in him forever. They put it in him really hard.”

“Is he gonna be okay?”

Mamma nodded. “Yes, honey.”

Rosa didn’t ask any more questions. She didn’t think Mamma wanted to answer any more anyway.

“Daddy,” Rosa said, quietly, patting him on the arm. But he looked like he didn’t feel or hear.

After a while, Rosa got up and walked towards Chassis at the front. On the way she saw the families. They were hunkered together. The Kwangs were talking with each other too quiet to hear with the wind whistling through the busted door. The old couple were asleep on each others’ shoulders. The kids were playing already. If what had just happened didn’t faze them, Rosa hated to think what they had been through already.

The Chinese family looked really bad. The three of them were all clutching at each other really tight like they didn’t want to even look up, like Porter and the old lady were still standing

there. The daughter sat like a statue, and the mother kept close to her, holding her hand, crying a lot.

Rosa didn't look at the body of the guitar lady as she passed. Even out of the corner of her eye she could still see the blood pooling on the floor under the seat. The steaklike smell made her stomach rumble. Rosa rushed past and tried not to think about it.

Chassis was calm and quiet at the front of the bus. The wind coming through the shattered door was cold, and it was making the little pieces of glass hanging from the rubber wiggle and flap a lot.

"Are we gonna be okay?"

"Yes," Chassis said. Rosa didn't think the driver meant it. She just didn't want anyone to worry.

"I'm not scared," Rosa said to her.

Chassis looked up at her for a split second before returning her gaze to the road. "Yes, you are," she said. "But you won't feel it 'til later."

Rosa didn't believe her.

"Are *you* scared?" Rosa asked her.

"You'd be crazy not to be scared," Chassis said. It wasn't a real answer. Rosa wasn't sure whether she meant she was scared or she was crazy.

"Our President will take care of us," Rosa said, over her shoulder.

Chassis looked back at her again. "You believe that?"

It surprised her when Chassis asked her that. Nobody had ever asked her that before. "That's what Mamma always says," Rosa told her.

"What does it mean?" Chassis asked Rosa.

Suddenly Rosa felt mad, being asked that question. Chassis *knew* what it meant! Rosa recited what she'd learned, trying to keep from messing up. "Mamma said the market rises and falls. She says it's designed to come round again if you trust in the President. The President takes care of us. You just—"

Rosa had to stop because Chassis was snorting, looking away.

"Why you laughing?" Rosa demanded.

But Chassis didn't answer. She just shook her head and smiled the rest of her laugh away. After a few minutes, she started looking in her side mirror. Then she kept looking in it.

"What's wrong?" Rosa asked.

At first Chassis didn't want to say. But after Rosa asked her a few more times, she finally admitted that someone was following them.

"It may be for our protection," she said. "But I don't like being followed." She started to speed up the bus.

She kept looking in her mirror, and it looked like she didn't feel safe enough because she sped up again. And again.

Then they passed a sign that Rosa could see read "Clear Point." "That's where our protection ends," Chassis said. As she said it, a pair of headlights came up in the side mirror like a pair of cat's eyes opening. Then another pair appeared behind it.

"They're behind us," she said. "And I think we'd better speed all the way up." She stepped on the gas hard, and the bus jerked forward.

"How fast will it go?" Rosa asked.

“I didn’t want to go too fast on this road,” she answered. “But if it’s that or the alternative—”

“What alternative?” Rosa asked.

“You ask too many qu—” With a sickening lurch the bus leaned down, and this time everyone on the bus screamed. The bottom of the bus scraped against the road and lit up the windshield with blue sparks. Chassis pushed really hard on the brake pedal and pulled hard on the lever by her right leg. Rosa grabbed a metal bar behind Chassis’ chair and hung on while her legs whipped out from under her. The bus screamed like it was about to flip over onto its side, but somehow Chassis hung on to the wheel and spun them right and left, and they stayed upright until the bus skidded to a stop.

For the first time, Chassis actually looked mad. This time she reached under her seat, and Rosa saw the huge gun she didn’t get a chance to pull the first time heavy in her hand. She said something into the radio and muttered at Rosa to get back to her seat.

Chassis turned back to all of them and spoke out. “Folks, this isn’t good, but it’s still not the end. Everyone needs to keep quiet and let me handle it.”

While Chassis was talking they heard heavy footsteps on the stairs, and Porter came up with his big gun in his arms. But there was no old lady behind him this time. Just a bony white man with a lot of scraggly beard and a long, sharp nose.

Chassis had her gun pointed at Porter’s head, right at the temple. He looked surprised, but he didn’t back down or put up his hands. “You better not,” he said. “You can’t get back on the road without us.”

“What have you done to my bus?” she asked him.

Porter grinned. His mouth was a big black hole. The man behind him said “I guess we didn’t put those front tires on quite right. Your front right axle came right off. We can fix it back up if you want.”

“Then do it,” Chassis said, each word crisp like the scrape of a knife against stone.

Porter still didn’t seem to care about the gun at his head. “I want something,” he said to her.

“You got everything you wanted in your agreement,” Chassis told him.

“My *Mamma* got everything!” he screamed, his cheeks puffed out, pouting like a child. “I didn’t get *nothing* I wanted!”

Chassis didn’t react to Porter’s tantrum. “You can’t have anything else,” she said, not backing off.

“You better put that gun down,” said the man behind Porter. “Phil is standing just outside with a rifle pointed at your head.”

Chassis’ shoulders tensed, and then sagged, and she sat down. “You know,” she said to Porter, “that the people where I come from can hear what you’re saying on the radio. If you do anything—”

“I ain’t gonna harm you,” Porter said. “I just want what I said I want. I want the China girl for the night.”

“You can’t have her,” Chassis said. “She’s not part—”

“*I want her!*” Porter roared again, spit spraying from his mouth. He moved his big belly towards Chassis. “I want her, or you ain’t going anywhere! You give me that China girl...” Then he paused, and his eyes found Rosa again.

Rosa tried to shrink away, but she was afraid to move. “Or I’ll take that pretty little spic there.” He gestured at her. Even though her Mamma was all the way at the back of the bus, Rosa knew she had stopped breathing.

Chassis looked at Porter, and Rosa saw her eyes get as little as slits. Meanwhile the mother and father of the Chinese girl were watching Chassis like they were afraid she’d vanish if they looked away.

Chassis finally nodded her head towards the Chinese girl. “Half-hour,” she told Porter.

“No, the night—” Porter said, even while the Chinese father and mother were crying out at her.

“No, one half-hour!” Chassis snapped, bringing her face into his. “You take that, or you see what happens when the Young Guns get here.”

“You can’t,” said the Chinese woman to Chassis, shaking her head. “You can’t you can’t...”

“Be quiet,” Chassis said to the woman. She pointed her finger. “Give him the girl.” To Porter she said, “Me and one other person are going with you to make sure you don’t go any farther than those trees. And when you’re done, you’re letting us out of here.”

Porter had been thinking while Chassis was talking. Finally, he looked like he was satisfied. Rosa saw her Mamma’s and Daddy’s faces. They seemed like they were going to be sick, but they didn’t want to say anything, not them or anybody else on the bus.

“Mr. Kwang,” Chassis said, nodding at him to come away from his large family.

Porter came over to the girl and started stroking her hair with his filthy, hairy, enormous hand. His voice was low and tender. “Pretty pretty,” he whispered. It was like he wanted her to answer him.

“You can’t! You can’t! You can’t!” pleaded the Chinese mother. Her hands were together, and you could see she was ready to get down on her knees.

But Porter had already picked the girl up in his arms, carrying her like she was his bride, and was moving towards the front of the bus. The beautiful girl was shaking, floating in front of him, light as a feather. It was such a strange scene that no one was watching anything else.

Porter made a sound like someone was sucking the air out of his lungs, and he fell on his knees, dropping the girl clumsily. He made a huge thump when he came down on the ‘tilted bus floor. He was squirming, trying to get to the hole in his back where the Chinese girl’s father had stuck him, but his arms were too big and he couldn’t even touch the knife handle. The girl’s father was looking down at Porter where he had stuck him, and when Porter wriggled all the way to the floor, Chassis and the man on the steps could finally see what he had done. Chassis’ face got all scrunched up. “Do you know what—” she started to say as the bony-nose man practically fell down the bus stairs in his hurry to get off.

Rosa knew what was about to happen next because she was watching the Kwangs. When they got down, she got down. Then everything in the world got shattered in the space of a few seconds.

After the crashing of the glass finally stopped, Rosa didn’t hear any cars driving away. That’s why she was scared to move. Her and everybody else. She thought they were just waiting, standing around the bus with their guns pointed at the windows, ready to shoot off the first head they saw peeking out.

So nobody made a sound. Rosa guessed it was for an hour. She didn't know. There wasn't any way to tell.

Later, she began to hear animals moving around, and she figured they wouldn't if there were any people out there, but she still didn't get up. Her ears were ringing, and she was positive that she belonged on that bus floor.

Chassis was the first one to move, rasping out, "Okay. They're gone. Everybody, let me see you."

Rosa was up fast. At first, it was hard to tell who was dead and who was alive, because some people wanted to stay on the floor forever. But finally, everybody who was getting up did.

Three people didn't. First one was Leetha. When old Mrs. Kwang looked and saw that her little baby was still, a wail came out of her mouth, a sound she knew how to make well, horrible and practiced. The poor little girl had taken a bullet right through the side of her head. The mama tried to hug her, but the child's body flopped around in her mother's arms like a doll. Her eyes were rolled up towards the left and her mouth was open a little, drooling. The pitiful smelly face-eaten bear fell onto the rubber mat and slid towards the front. Nobody touched the bear. None of the family was trying to keep the mom from crying, or to help her either.

The Chinese man was dead, too—the father of the girl that Porter wanted. He must have been standing there in shock when the guns were firing. He looked like such a mess Rosa couldn't have said who he was if she hadn't known. The Chinese woman and her daughter were rocking over him ritualistically, the blood leaving huge stains on their beautiful clothes.

The third person who didn't get up was Rosa's Daddy.

He was crouched down, like he had a cramp. He was breathing really hard and grinning a little. Rosa was so scared when she saw him that she was afraid to run back to him. She just stood there while Mamma checked him out. She followed Chassis down the aisle and they slowly made their way back. The driver knelt down on one knee with care.

"Mr. Chaves," Chassis said. Her voice was tired and ragged. "Mr. Chaves. Are you okay?"

"My side hurts," Rosa's Daddy said.

"Which side?"

"Left side." Then he grunted and bent over more.

"Don't move," Chassis said. "Don't move at all. Okay?"

Daddy looked like he was nodding, with his head bent down low towards the floor.

Rosa followed Chassis up to the front of the bus. The driver was moving slowly and carefully towards her seat. She stopped, and her head came over her shoulder. She didn't look at Rosa all the way, but she said, "Don't follow me. Get back there with your Daddy."

"What can I do?" Rosa asked.

"Keep your head," Chassis grunted. Then she moved forwards. Rosa went back to where her Mamma was kneeling.

"Daddy, does it hurt?" Rosa asked him. He didn't answer. "Does it hurt, Daddy?" She was afraid he was already dead. Mamma tried to calm her down.

"No, baby," Daddy finally answered. It was like he was speaking up to her from the bottom of a well.

Then Aunt Kin Kwang came up to Rosa's Mamma. "Our President will take care of us," she said.

Mamma looked up gratefully, nodding. Rosa could tell she really appreciated the comment, especially since the Kwangs had already lost their little girl. The one-eyed woman held Mamma's hand until Chassis came back.

It took longer than Rosa thought it would, but Chassis finally moved down the aisle with a box with a red letter "T" on the side. She laid it down by Rosa's Daddy, then asked him some questions, really softly.

She must have asked if he was able to move, because he finally lay on his back in the aisle. That's when Rosa saw how much blood there was. He was holding his side, and his hand was soaked. Rosa started to make a high-pitched squeal. She was embarrassed and scared at the same time.

She cried all the time Chassis was wrapping him up. Chassis worked so slowly, Rosa thought he would bleed to death before she was done. But after she finished, he did look more comfortable. His eyes were closed, and he was breathing—little shallow breaths, but regular.

The Chinese mother stood up. "What do we do now?" she asked like she was demanding an explanation.

Chassis sighed and sat down heavily in her seat. She grunted as she hit the chair, then her body sagged in relief.

"Ms. Chassis," the Chinese woman said, again. "What do we do now?"

Chassis didn't look at the Chinese woman. Rosa didn't know if she was mad at her for her husband having 'caused all of this, or what. But she kept looking out the shattered front window. "This bus will never drive again tonight," Chassis finally muttered. "Maybe—" She faded out for a second.

"Should we stay here?" asked the old man Kwang. He and his wrinkly old wife looked like they hadn't moved at all since they left port, even during the gunfire.

"Yes," Chassis rasped. "I've called into Washington. We're a little closer to them than Atlanta. They may send help."

"May?" her mother said.

Chassis didn't answer her. She just kept looking out the front window.

Nobody spoke for a little while. It was like they were waiting for Chassis to go on. But she didn't. Finally, the whispers started. Rosa wanted to talk to Chassis some more, so she got up and started walking forward.

Mamma grabbed her by the arm, yanking Rosa back. Rosa pulled free, escaped her Mama's clutches, and ignored her calls. When she got to the front of the bus, she said, "Chassis."

Chassis was sagging down in her seat like she was exhausted. She didn't look up, and she didn't answer.

Rosa didn't want to look too closely. She never saw a wound, but that didn't mean there wasn't any. She didn't know if she should tell everyone or not. Mr. Kwang noticed her standing there, looking stupid. "What's wrong?" he asked, like he knew but didn't want to guess.

"She's dead," Rosa told him. "Chassis's dead."

Then all the whispers stopped again.

"We have to decide what to do," Rosa's Mamma said. She looked worried, but she sounded real firm. Rosa knew that tone of voice. Mamma was going to *decide* something.

"We have to leave the bus," the Chinese woman said.

“No, we need to stay on the bus!” one-eyed Kwang said. “That’s how they’re going to find us!”

“I don’t think they’re coming,” Rosa said. But nobody listened to her. They kept talking like she wasn’t even there.

“What are we going to do with my husband?” asked the Chinese woman. “I can’t leave him. If those people come back—”

“She’s right,” nodded Mrs. Kwang. “They might come back.”

“But where do we go?” asked old man Kwang. “We don’t know where we are.”

“Chassis would have—”

“*Quiet, Rosa.*”

“I don’t think CUSA’s coming for us,” old man Kwang said. “They aren’t going to risk anything for us.”

“That’s what *I* said!” Rosa exclaimed.

“They have to,” said the Chinese woman. “According to the laws of the Corporation, all vouchers are strictly binding. As long as we have our vouchers—”

“Those vouchers are just pieces of paper,” One-Eye said. “You think the Corporation worries about pieces of paper?”

“The Corporation keeps a record of all transactions,” the Chinese woman said. “It’s all they care about. Lost vouchers have to be accounted for.”

“So they write us off as dead!” Mr. Kwang shouted.

“No, I was an accountant for the—” the Chinese woman argued.

“Are we going to get off this bus?” Rosa demanded.

Rosa decided the only reason people listened to her this time was because they were already asking themselves the same question. Mamma glared at her.

“Her father is hurt,” Mamma explained to everybody apologetically. Like that needed explaining. Mamma went on. “If we stay on this bus, we have a little protection, and a location where we can be found. If we get off, we just have to hope we can—”

“Why don’t we just get off the bus a little...” Rosa started to say. Mamma took her hard by the shoulder and tried to pull her in.

Old grandpa Kwang pulled out a cigarette. “What are you doing?” exclaimed the old lady when she saw him light up. “Don’t waste those!”

“We won’t need them now,” he retorts. “We’re all going to—”

“Why don’t we just go somewhere a little ways away from the bus,” said Mr. Kwang, “so we’re off of it, but where we can still keep an eye on it?”

“That’s what *I* said!” Rosa yelled, exasperated.

Mamma pulled her aside. “Rosa,” she whispered at her, word by word, harsh. “Your father is sick and we’re trying to figure out what to do!”

“But I’m—”

“*That’s enough, Rosa!*”

Rosa shut up.

Rosa started hating them all. They all thought they knew *so much*, the grownups. But they were in the same mess as her. Chassis had been the only one with any brains.

Rosa had to go where they went. They all got off the bus and moved a little ways into the woods. Someone took Chassis’ gun and gave it to the one-eyed woman to carry. They left the

dead bodies on the bus where the animals wouldn't get to them. Mamma Kwang didn't want to leave Leetha, but she finally came off, crying, holding tight to the stuffed bear instead.

It was much colder out in the woods than on the bus. Everyone hunkered down in a big circle and just sat still, not knowing what else to do. The moonlight was blocked by the branches of the trees, so they couldn't make out anything more than the shapes of each others' bodies.

Rosa's Mamma and Mr. Kwang carried her Daddy to a flat spot and laid him down. They had wrapped him up in a blanket, but he was still moaning a little, complaining of the cold. Rosa tried to talk to him, but Mamma said to leave him alone. Angry, Rosa moved as far away from her Mamma as she could.

That put Rosa next to Firoz. She had forgotten all about him. Through all the shooting, he had just been in the back of the bus, not moving. Rosa didn't even think he had gotten down when the guns went off. He had just sat there like it was part of the ride. The only reason he got off the bus with everyone else was because Old Lady Kwang spent the time to try and explain to him what was going on. Rosa didn't know if he had even understood. But he had gotten up and followed.

So now they were all sitting around, and she was next to Firoz, and he was the only one Rosa didn't hate right now. Because he was quiet, probably because of the stuff he had taken earlier, keeping him calm. Even though this whole situation they were in was kind of his fault, because he had tried to take drugs on the bus and her Daddy had yelled at him.

"Why do drug-worshippers take drugs anyway?" Rosa whispered.

He didn't say anything back. Rosa waited a long time, but he kept quiet. She felt tears stinging her eyes. She wanted to talk to somebody, but even Firoz didn't respond.

"The drugs require it," he mumbled after a while. Rosa looked at him. At first she couldn't even believe he had said anything.

"What do you mean?" Rosa asked him.

"We do what the drugs tell us," he said.

"Why?" Rosa asked.

"They're trying to teach us a lesson."

"What lesson?"

"Not to do drugs," he said.

Rosa stared at him. He didn't look down at her. "I don't get it," she said.

"It's hard," he answered, nodding. Like that was an answer.

"Rosa," her Mamma was whispering. She was looking for her. Rosa was glad it was dark. She didn't want to be close to her Mamma.

You could hear things moving around in the darkness. Rosa was scared to death. She had never been that near to wild animals before except for squirrels and rats, never even seen any other kind except in commercials. Now everywhere she heard scratching and sniffing. She heard chattering next to her ear, and way off in the distance she heard a dog howling. At least, she hoped it was a dog. Rosa felt herself starting to lose it. She wanted to scream. Then she thought about Chassis and what she said about being scared, and she got calm again.

Somebody spoke out into the dark. "Does anybody want to pray?"

Her father was groaning louder now, and her Mamma bent over him. Rosa wanted to be there, too, but she didn't want to be near her Mamma. She wanted to be with her Daddy alone. Where *she* could take care of him.

"I said, does anybody want to pray?" It was old man Kwang.

“I have a Century Report,” said One-Eye. “It’s in my bag. But it’s too dark to read.”

“I know it,” said the Chinese woman. She got to her feet. Rosa could almost see her looking sad in the dark. “I know a lot of it by heart. I’ll pray for us.”

She raised her head and started speaking in English. “Dean Witter, Seven, Twenty-three through Forty-seven.” She paused and took in her breath. The next time her voice came out, it was clear and strong. Rosa didn’t even recognize it.

“The last quarter of the 1970s were a difficult time for us,” she said. “Interest rates had skyrocketed, the price of fuel tripled, and violent crime was on the rise. The outlook was bleak. Few could have forecasted any kind of reprise. But the Corporation elected Our President, and he saw to it that smaller companies were able to grow. He took money out of the hands of big government and gave it back to the common people. And the companies grew and thrived. And there were more rich people to spend money. And it was good.

“But Our President looked and saw that all was not well, because the people were not happy. They sent out annual reports, telling the people that all was well, but people were still not happy. And they asked if the people were better off now than they had been four years ago, and the people said yes, but they were still not happy.

“‘How can we brighten your portfolio?’ asked Our President.

“‘Help the smaller people to become rich,’” answered the people. And Our President nodded. It would be so.”

Rosa remembered this story from when she used to watch the devotional commercials. It was one of her favorites. She could tell a lot of people liked it. She could hear a few of them coming in at places to say the words after the Chinese woman. Her Mamma probably knew it too, but she was keeping quiet.

“And Our President evaluated his surroundings, and the Corporation thought outside the box, and this thought gave rise to the Internet. And the President told our Corporation, ‘Nurture the Internet and make it grow.’ And the Corporation did so.

“And the people saw the Internet and saw what fruits it bore, and they invested. And the Internet grew. And Microsoft begot Java and Java begot Amazon.com. And even the smallest among the people grew rich. And it was very good.” The Chinese woman bowed her head. Then everybody knew what to say:

“In the name of the Corporation, the President, and the whole Portfolio.”

It used to make Rosa feel better to say that, too, when she was little. But something about that night made it seem kind of stupid. Here they were out in the middle of nowhere, the Corporation had already said they wouldn’t help them if they got stuck, and now they were praying to them. Rosa just felt like the whole thing was *stupid*.

It got even quieter after that, Rosa guessed, because the animals heard them and stopped moving. Her Daddy was moaning, though, even louder. Then one of the Kwang children started to whimper. She wondered if they were finally getting scared.

“We have to keep him quiet,” said Mr. Kwang about Rosa’s father.

“What do you want me to do?” demanded Rosa’s Mamma. She sounded angry.

“I don’t know,” said Mr. Kwang. “But if they come back—”

People were starting to get antsy. Rosa noticed that the prayer hadn’t made them feel that much better. The panic was sparking a fire as it spread from one person to another. Now the Chinese girl was crying, and her mother was holding her and telling her to shush.

“You aren’t being very quiet,” said Old Lady Kwang to Mr. Kwang.

“Shut up, stupid bitch!” said Mr. Kwang, turning to point at her.

“Don’t tell *me*...” the old woman began.

Mr. Kwang didn’t let her finish. “I said *shut up*. You’re only here because you’re married to my father.”

“Your mother was a *hooker*,” she rasped at him. “Did he ever tell you...”

“Quiet!” Rosa’s Mamma told them, before Mr. Kwang could push his father out of the way. “Rosa, where are you?”

“I want to pray,” said Firoz, standing up. “Will anyone pray with me?”

Nobody was listening to him. Rosa was mad for him. They didn’t listen to *her* either. But Firoz didn’t care. He was fiddling around in his pouch.

“We’re going to die here,” the old woman said, “and I don’t want to be quiet any longer. You all haven’t done anything to get us out of here.”

“That’s all you ever do!” Mr. Kwang shouted. “You complain. You moan and complain.”

Mrs. Kwang said to her husband, “Stop it. This isn’t—”

“Rosa!” her Mamma shouted. “Where are you?”

They were making more and more noise. But Rosa was sitting still. She was watching Firoz. He had taken out a little cigarette and was lighting it. He breathed in. The smoke curled around him and drifted away. She caught the scent. It was sweet and strange.

Firoz moved through all the fighting people straight towards Rosa’s Daddy. Nobody was paying Daddy much attention at the moment, but now she could see that her Daddy was shivering really hard.

Rosa followed Firoz to her Daddy’s side. Daddy’s eyes were closed, but his head was bouncing around from side to side.

“Hold him steady,” Firoz said to her. So Rosa took her Daddy’s head in her hands and stroked his hair. He stopped moving enough for Firoz to stick the cigarette in Daddy’s mouth. Daddy took a puff.

“*Rosa!*” her Mamma shouted. “What are you doing?” Then she gasped, unable to believe what she was seeing. “You!” She pointed a finger at the addict. She had seen Firoz giving Daddy the cigarette.

“Mamma, wait!” Rosa cried. She could see that Daddy wasn’t shivering anymore.

“What are you *doing*?” Rosa’s Mamma screeched. “Haven’t you got any decency?”

“I’m praying,” Firoz answered.

“Get away from my husband!” she frothed. “Get that drug worshipper away before I *kill* him!”

“No, Mamma, he’s trying to help!”

Mamma slapped Rosa so hard that she lost her balance and hit the ground. For a second, she lost her sense of direction. She could still hear her Mamma shouting at Firoz.

When Rosa was able to look around, she saw Mamma kneeling over Daddy. “Eduard,” she said to his face.

“Pestilence!” Mr. Kwang said to Firoz, coming over to him. “Parasite? Why don’t you leave us be?”

“You’re the reason we’re in this mess,” said the Chinese woman, pointing a finger at the drug worshipper accusingly.

Rosa wanted to stop them. But they were rising to their feet one after the other, starting to take out their fear and anger on Firoz. One of them picked up a rock. It seemed to bounce off the

drug worshipper before he knew it had hit him. He looked around suddenly, bemused, as if he had an insight. The next rock let him know what that insight was.

Stumbling to his feet, looking around curiously at all the people shouting at him, moving towards him, then scuttling away like frightened dogs, he acted like he didn't know what to do. Finally, he turned and stumbled away.

The people chased him out of the dim enclosure, yelled at him until he had disappeared into the dark, and stared after him, making sure he would not return. Terrified by their fury, Rosa got up and shuffled off away from all the sound. Her face hurt, and she didn't understand why she felt so ashamed when she hadn't done anything wrong. She really didn't want to be around these people anymore. They were all falling apart. She wished Chassis could have been here to shut them up.

First she started walking away from the noise, and then she started running, because it felt so good to move away from all that stupid yelling. She pushed through the trees and let them close behind her, to protect her from her Mamma and all those other stupid *chicopes*. But she could still hear them.

And now she could hear her Mamma shouting "Rosa! Rosa!" way off in the distance. Rosa was glad her Mamma was worried. She wasn't about to answer her. She hoped her Mamma was scared shitless. She wanted her to be sorry she'd ever yelled at her daughter, much less slapped her. So she ran farther. She ran until her heartbeat was louder than the shouting.

Once she couldn't hear them anymore she started to realize how dumb she was being. She considered that it was pointless to be running through the woods in the middle of the night when she didn't know where she was going. So she stopped running.

Rosa had thought that if she just turned around, she could walk back the way she came and she'd bump into everybody, no problem. But it didn't work out that way. For a while, she didn't hear anything. Then she made out their voices, way off in the distance. She thought someone was calling her name. But she couldn't tell which direction the sounds were coming from. It was really hilly out there in the woods, and the hills were steep, and the noise was echoing off them. She slid down some places and then couldn't climb back up. And even when she did make it up somewhere, she only heard the sounds coming from some other direction.

She kept trying to follow the voices, but the more she wandered, the fainter they got. Rosa wanted to call out, but she was too scared. She didn't know who else was out here.

So she kept her voice to herself and tried to listen, but the sounds got farther and farther away, and she thought she was heading in the wrong direction. She didn't know where she was going anymore. Then she fell about three times and totally lost her bearings.

She wasn't sure if she was crying. If she was, it wasn't on purpose. She didn't remember feeling bad enough to want to die, or to stop walking, even though she was getting really, really tired. She did remember hearing Chassis' voice in her head, telling her it was okay to be scared, and to just keep going. Keep going, the voice said. Don't worry about what anybody thinks.

So she kept going. And she didn't stop until someone grabbed her by the shoulder, at which point she screamed very loud.

She was sure it was that nasty man Porter laying his greasy neck on her. She cursed in Spank, and she flailed and hit at him. The man didn't fight back; he just kind of stood there like a tree, taking her blows, with his hand on her shoulder.

When Rosa realized it was the addict, she stopped hitting him.

"Firoz!" she said, out of breath. "Were you looking for me?"

“Hey,” said Firoz, like they were friends who had run into each other.

“Hey,” she gasped. His black shape looked funny through the darkness. “You know where the others are, or what?”

“I was hoping to find a Church out here,” Firoz said. “I’m out.”

“What?” she demanded. “So you don’t know where everybody is, either?”

“I know where everybody is,” said Firoz. “But I’m out.”

“Where is everybody?” Rosa asked.

“Everybody is in the future.”

“In the future,” Rosa repeated, looking around. She had no idea what he was talking about.

Firoz nodded. “You want to go to the future?”

“Sure, Firoz,” Rosa said. She turned away and started walking off. Something about seeing him had made her less scared, but she wasn’t exactly happy to know that he was by himself.

“The future is this way,” Firoz said, and he started loping in another direction.

Rosa watched him for a second. Maybe he did know the way back. Maybe he was trying to tell her but didn’t have his words all straight. Grumbling, Rosa took off after him. She figured following after him was just as good as wandering by herself, at least until she could find the voices again.

He seemed to know where he was going. He started moving faster up the hills than down them. Rosa tried to keep up with him as best she could, but it was hard. She was starving, her legs were sore where they were cut in a couple of places, and she just wanted to find a warm place to lie down and go to sleep. She wished she had Basil to talk to, or somebody, or anybody.

“Hey, Firoz! Where are you going?” she called.

He didn’t answer. He didn’t say anything to her at all. For a while, he was moving pretty fast in one direction. Then he started walking a more and more jagged path. Then he was making big half-circles around places where he could have gone straight. Then he stopped to look up into the trees a couple of times. When he started looping around the tree trunks, Rosa knew they were both in real trouble.

“Firoz, what are you going around those trees for?”

She knew, though. He was messed up and didn’t even know what he was doing.

She thought about ditching him then. She thought about leaving the last grownup behind her once and for all and taking her life into her own hands. But there was no way that made sense. Firoz might be crazy, but at least he was big. If they got caught by some other nasty people they might think he was protecting her.

She called out to him again. “*Firoz!*”

This time he stopped. He turned towards her like she had said his name for the first time. Then he sat down. He watched her as she came up to him. He was breathing heavy.

He kept his eyes on her as she got real close to him, looking up at her like he was a child.

“Firoz, get up,” Rosa said. “We have to get out of here.”

He started rummaging through his pockets. He looked through each one slowly and calmly. Then he looked again, less calmly. By the fourth time, he was beginning to panic.

He looked up at Rosa again. “Can you offer me absolution?” he asked.

“No, Firoz!” she told him. “We’re in the woods, you freak.”

He started looking much more frantically in his pockets.

“Something’s running dry,” he said. “One of me is going away.”

“Firoz, we have to—”

“No absolution—” he moaned. He started to rock back and forth.

“You got to do without for awhile,” Rosa told him.

The addict didn’t like that. He looked up at her like he was four and she’d told him he couldn’t have a dog anymore. He opened his mouth and began to howl. She wanted to run away from him, but he kept staring at her with big horrified eyes, and she couldn’t move.

Firoz fell quiet for a while and looked at the ground. Then his legs gave way and he half-fell, half-sat. After a second, Rosa tried to talk to him. “Are you okay?” she asked. She tried to pull him up. She lifted his arm, but he brushed her away.

Firoz groaned and started to shiver. He wrapped his arms around himself and shook. Never taking her eyes off him, Rosa backed away and sat down so she could lean against a tree.

Rosa decided they probably weren’t going to make it.

“Where are we?”

His voice croaked out of the darkness like an old frog. Rosa nearly shit her pants in surprise.

“Firoz!”

“Who are you?”

“I’m *Rosa*. Firoz, you *followed* me out here.”

He didn’t answer. She heard him grunt.

“Little boy.”

“I’m a *girl!*” she shouted before she could stop herself. Her voice echoed through the hills, and the animals went a little quiet.

“I only need the Body and Blood.”

“I don’t have any,” she said.

“That’s a lie,” he said. “I know you have some in that bag of yours.”

“You crazy,” she said. She had no idea what else to tell him.

“Why do they take the Body and Blood?” he asked her, softly.

She was getting scared. It was like he was accusing her of something. Quietly, she said, “You said they take them because the drugs teach them a lesson.”

Firoz’s eyes opened wide. “That’s right!” he said.

She hesitated because she didn’t know what else he was going to say or do. When he didn’t say anything, Rosa asked what she had been dying to ask him since he had told her that.

“What’s the lesson?”

He answered her immediately, like he’d been waiting since the beginning. “The drugs make everything backwards. You see from the outside looking in.”

He was silent again. “That’s weird,” she finally said, shrugging.

“Yes,” he agreed. “And it’s really weird because you find out in CUSA that when everything is backwards it makes sense.” She didn’t understand what that meant, but he kept talking before she could ask him another question. “The economy doesn’t support us. We live to support the economy,” he said. “Backwards. We find something that conflicts with what we already believe, and so we decide that the new something must be wrong. Backwards.”

He stopped. He swallowed hard, and she heard his Adam’s apple thump the bottom of his throat.

“A million people die so that I can live. Backwards.”

“What are you talking about?” Rosa asked him.

But he didn’t listen. He just said it again. Louder. “A million people die so I can live.”

He was scaring her again. She didn’t even notice her own tears, dripping down her cheeks. “Look, Firoz,” she said. “Stop, okay? We going to be okay, right?”

But he was just like all the other adults, just in his own drug way. He just kept on saying what he’d always said, only louder and louder. “A million people die so I can live!”

“Shut up, Firoz!” she said. She was getting tired of hearing him. Tired of looking at him, smelling his pukey smell.

“A million people die so I can live! Backwards!”

“Shut *up*, Firoz!” He wasn’t paying her any attention at all. He didn’t look at her. He didn’t cock his head like he had heard her. Just said the same thing again and again, like he wanted to shout it, but was afraid.

“A million people die so I can live!”

“Who died, Firoz?” Rosa yelled, trying to be louder than him. She wanted him to say something else, anything else.

“A million people die so I can live! I see it now, only now I can’t pray!”

She didn’t want to listen to him, or listen to her mother, or see her Daddy lying on the ground. She didn’t want to come out here on a bus and get nearly raped by some big hairy freak. She didn’t want to be in the middle of the woods with a drug addict who was coming down off of who knows what. She just wanted to *leave*. She just wanted to go home.

“It’s okay, Firoz,” she said to him. “Just shut up!” But he had begun to shake and writhe on the ground.

His hands were on his ears. “Oh, my head! I can’t pray!”

“Shut up, Firoz!”

“*I can’t pray!!*”

“I’ll pray for you, Firoz! Okay?”

“*I can’t pray!!!*”

“I’ll *pray* for you, Firoz, you *chicope pinga!* I’ll *pray* for you! I’ll *pray!* I’ll pray, okay? *I’ll pray!*” Her voice was going ragged, and it scared her how old she sounded all of a sudden. She didn’t care who could hear her anymore, or what was going to happen. Porter and all his ugly friends could go ahead and stick their guns in her chest and blow her away, because it didn’t matter now. She didn’t have anything left to save.

“You will?”

It took her a minute to hear Firoz. She was too busy wiping her eyes, coughing snot. The addict was lying on the ground in a pool of his own spit, looking up at her. His eyes were bloodshot, and one of them was half closed. But he looked like he was amazed by her.

“Don’t worry.” The voice came from behind her. She whirled around to face the person who owned it. Her hands were clenched in tiny rock-hard fists, and she would have tried to kill the man if she hadn’t thought he looked like her Daddy.

He had the same dark eyes and the same kind face. Rosa even said “Daddy” to him. But then she collapsed, either right then, or sometime after.

The Addict

When I took to the Body and Blood I followed two gods. I took the hallucinogens to see, and the syringe to feed me. Now that the hallucinations have gone, all that remains to me is the cruel hunger. And the pain in my arms and legs.

When I think over my life, it appears like a mural on the wall behind my head. I can turn to see a two-dimensional image of myself moving through the scenes.

There is a man who looks something like me, thin, grey, and tall, holding a gun about six inches from the face of a child. The child is me. There I am looking up the barrel, wondering if this is the end of my life, understanding what beginnings and endings mean.

There I go, taking up my duties, feeling too young for them, because my father was dead and there was no going back to him. There I am, burying my mother after her suicide option matures.

There is me taking the sacrament for the very first time. Over here I can see myself escape miraculously from the watchful eyes of the Corporation. Here I am, dwelling in the Churches, waiting in the lines for the Body and the Blood. There I am, learning how to become a Fryer from one of the Brothers who carry their sacrament with them. Free from the need to attend services three times daily, I am able to ride a bus. The bus explodes.

I emerge from the mural to fall onto my head on a hot flat mattress.

The Pastor comes usually in the afternoons. Sometimes he talks in English, and when I'm too tired to translate, I just let the sound of his voice wash over me because it's very pleasant, like music.

The woman comes much more often. She cleans the crap from between my butt cheeks when I am in too much agony to move or nod. I am humiliated and grateful all at the same time. She is the one I look forward to seeing all day, if only so that I do not have to lie in my own filth. But it was of the Pastor that I asked my first intelligent question.

"Where am I now?"

"Clear Point," he says.

I don't really know where that is. "What suburb?" I insist. But as soon as I ask it, I doubt myself. His accent is so strange. At first I can't place it, but before he answers I remember.

"No suburb, *señor*."

A commercial. I've heard the accent in some comedy commercial where a hick from the outside gets lost in the heart of CUSA. This man has that strange tinged accent, the accent of an English speaker.

I'm not in CUSA.

I manage dinner, even with my headache, but my body forgets I am clean, and I throw it up. I shake so badly I can't even see. I jerk around in a sweat-soaked bed like I'm being pulled by an epileptic puppeteer.

I have so many dim memories, but it's impossible to distinguish them from my delusions, which seem equally real. When I dream I go through the endless process of preparing myself to receive. Only I never do and I wake up again and again, still drained.

They know my name before I can tell them. I wonder if they know what it means. The Pastor calls me "*señor*" out of reverence, not for my former status but for all living creatures. The woman, this white-skinned angel of mercy, calls me "mister." She doesn't speak Spanish.

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“You want more water, mister?”

“No. Thank you.” My English must sound as strange to her as anything she has ever heard.

She does not seem to want to look at me. I try to be polite to her. I think she has been very good to me.

There is a child, a little boy, who is watching me from the corner. At first, I think I am hallucinating again. He sits there on the boards of the floor, blinking curiously. He is too blond to be real. His eyes are long-lashed, and they open and close slowly. His red lips are almost the color of blood as he stares.

I try to speak to him, because I think he is one of my fantasies. “I can’t pray,” I offer. “Do you have—” But my mouth is not used to obeying my commands. It goes off on its own, and I am not even conscious of what I am saying.

A man’s voice speaks from the other room, and the boy gets up quickly and flies out the door. Now I know, as I fall back onto the rocky mattress, that the child was real.

I get out of bed for a few minutes during the morning. My legs are so rubbery that I fall to my knees. Luckily, no one is around to see. I get back in bed quickly, my thighs trembling, the pitiful muscles twitching uncontrollably. I am determined to get back my strength soon because I’m tired of going in the bedpan.

That afternoon, I try to walk again. My self-control has deteriorated during my time away. It is hard to decide my direction. I jig towards the window. The boards are as smooth as stones under water. They groan with every step.

From this room I can see the sun shining on birch trees. Nothing else is visible from the window. My legs do a dance that somehow gets me back to the bed.

Just after dark, the woman comes in carrying my dinner and a small lamp, an oil burner or something. She sees that the curtains have been disturbed. She looks at me out of the side of her eyes, then lays the plate of greens and sweet potatoes on my side table next to the lamp.

I don’t remember eating, but the tray is empty as she is still sitting there. Seeing that I am done, she quickly takes the tray and leaves me.

The Pastor is sitting at my bedside. He wants to talk. I don’t tell him that I’m still not sleeping. I lie to him that I am feeling tolerable but am always starving. He smiles and nods and says he will see to it that I am served larger portions. That only makes me want to heave again.

“Why am I in here?” I ask him.

“You required sanctuary,” he replies. “Jesus doesn’t turn his desperate children away.”

“Jesus?” I wonder how far I am from a hub. “How did I get here?”

“We found you screaming in the woods.”

I have no memory of that. I sit up higher in the bed and look around, but I regret it almost instantly. Every flash of dust which sparkles as it passes through the light from my window ‘causes a flashbulb in my eyes. My forehead begins pounding as if someone were trying to let me know they are trapped inside. My arms and legs fill up with wicked needles. “What happens next?” I manage to ask him, falling back down. “How much do I owe you so far?”

He blushes. Instead of replying, he begins to talk about his parish.

The Pastor took the oath as a young man in a conscientious effort to repair the state of the world around him. Although he grew up here in the Unincorporated States, he shares little of the suspicion that overtakes his congregants since the war. He believes that his mission is to bring light to the darkness that has overtaken the land of Virginia. By doing Jesus' work, he is spreading the message of charity and good will.

"That's why you took me in?" I ask.

He nods.

"And the people of this town, they're fine with me being here?"

The Pastor looks away from me. "It's best to tell them as little as possible until you are well."

"And then what?" I say.

"What do you want?" he asks me, his eyes returning to mine.

I have to think about that for awhile.

"I don't suppose I can go back," I say.

"Do you want to leave?" he asks.

"No," I say. "I can't go back." I'm not talking about going back to the Body and Blood, but about my old job. Nevertheless, one made the other possible, and it seems I will have to live with this endless agony.

Realization dawns on his lined features. "So," he says, "you were running."

I'm not ready to talk about that. "Where can I go?" I ask.

He does not answer me right away. He looks awkward, as if he cannot decide what to say. "Will they come looking for you?" he manages.

"No," I reply. "I don't think so. It's been"—I wager a guess—"too long."

He nods, clearly relieved. "Then you should stay here," he says, "for as long as you can."

But I hate this place. No one has offered me the Body and the Blood. I've been here how many days? They don't understand me unless I speak Business English. I have to get back to what I was.

- END OF PREVIEW -