







∞ PROLOGUE ∞

Joe Bean walks on stage. He is watched by 1000 eyes. He does not know he is being watched. To him, all the world is *not* a stage. To him, the walk from here to there appears to be just another walk through the market where he almost always has lunch. It is important you know this. Not that he has lunch in the market, but that he does not know you are watching him. Shhh, it's a secret.

\* \* \*

We, the audience, see that what appears to be a yoga studio is actually a set piece and that it sits rickety on a darkened stage. A young actress eyes the Yoga teacher in front and holds her *Virabhadrasana*, Warrior Pose. The man onstage is very calm. Handsome. Older. And more-than-likely married. She assumes that hunk of gold *bling* on his finger must be a wedding ring. The actress follows the trickle of sweat dripping down his back as Joe Bean begins to chant and stretch himself out like some sort of yogi/clown,

Llama, lamma, pizza rama,  
Vishnu wish you peaceful manna  
Yin, Yang, Paddywack Hari Hama  
This little piggy went to market, Mamma  
Nam Yo ho, Renge Kio yo,  
Shivananda, Hopscotch Vegananda,

The yoga class laughs and Joe winks. The audience remains silent. We're waiting for something else.

The young woman feels her heart beating through spandex bra and studies herself in the big mirror. The carefree double-horned-curled-over-ponytail satyr thing she'd been doing with her hair lately was good. She thinks, 'If only he could know her. If only there were ways to tell this man who she was. Or to tell him who *he* was.'

Such old souls, and yet it is not for him to remember, and never will be. It is only for him to act out his story: The story of human suffering.

Serious, now, he sweeps deftly through his sun salutations, and she breaks momentarily to wipe a small and irritating bead of sweat from her eyebrow.

*Breathe, pranayama, cinco, quatro, tres, dos, uno, and..  
Release.*

\* \* \*

# Joe Bean

A Novel by Mark Nichols

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## ❧ CHAPTER 1 ❧

Some people are lucky. Some people are obnoxiously, outrageously, sickeningly, ridiculously, appallingly, and incredibly lucky. Everybody knows Joe Bean is this sort of person.

Our hero hums a little tune as his soft hand slides the ignition key into his efficient new Mercedes hybrid/diesel off-road, leather-seated multi-purpose machine, which Joe simply calls “the truck”—a vehicle the environmentally conscious man should be at peace with (29 city and 35 highway!), with a nearly sterling engine and an unparalleled safety rating. Lots of space for all the bikes, kayaks, ski stuff, *ya just couldn't beat it.*

Joe Bean fancies himself a bit of a tunesmith, so this is not uncommon for him to be humming. The song of the day is called *Lucky Mugsie*. He's been writing it for his kids. In the song, Mugsie, the family dog, has finally passed away after

years of what most people would call a tortured, but happy, life:

*It gives my heart a happy tug  
To think of Mugsie's ugly mug  
We've still got poop in the sandbox  
The only dog who'd been through detox—*

Joe slows to let a car pull in front of him, and nods his head when the driver gives him the polite “Seattle wave”, then he’s back to the song.

*Why do cars run over man's best friend?  
And do it over and over and over again?..  
The vet said that it might be worms—*

Worms. Hmm. Joe is sweeping through his memory for a rhyme for “worms” when a woman steps right out in front of him. No time to turn. Their eyes lock for an instant, and then THUD. It’s over. Joe stops. Unblinking.

The engine has choked off, and before sheer panic sets in, Joe can’t help but flash back to his song.

*Why do cars run over man's best friend?*

The irony of the timing stuns him, then instinct takes hold, he opens the door and quickly prepares himself for some sort of tragedy. “Are you OK?”

No answer.

“Hello,” Joe says, throat dry. He walks toward the front of the car. There is nothing. No one.

“Hello?”

Silence. Quickly, he goes around to the right wheel and looks under. There is no one there.

“Where are you?”

Joe Bean rubs the back of his hand over beads of forehead sweat and exhales. Deep in thought, he climbs back into his Mercedes Inquisition and pulls off his suede jacket. God, is he sweating. Buckets. He’s absolutely soaked. He wipes his brow again, and then sinks forward, his hand cupping his mouth. He breathes slowly through his nostrils. The woman must have hit his car with a fist, and disappeared quickly. A joke maybe. An *angry* joke if it was, but wow, is he shaken. Not funny at all.

Joe Bean shivers. It’s November cold. One’s supposed to shiver in November.

But Joe Bean is not the shivering sort, and certainly not the type to succumb to moments of doubt.

He leans back and closes his eyes. The homeless woman’s face was like a mask, hanging in front of him.

Joe starts the *Inquisition* and moves slowly and carefully to First Avenue, down, until he comes to Madison. A right, then left at the waterfront, and he pulls into the ferry terminal. As he lines up with other commuters to wait for the boat, he cheers himself up by making up a few more verses of his epic, silly mantra.

*Kundalini Ya, Ya*

*Yoga mat Gucci do a chakra cha cha  
Baba Yaga! Burn petchuli Rasta...*

This goes on for a while, and like all his little tunes, it does the job. Joe feels himself relaxing, coming to terms with the universe, and he laughs when it comes to the line his daughters had written for him recently,

*Latte, Latte, soy, stigmata,  
Feng Shui, Dada, soul, Oy! Lambada!*

The Bean family loves words. They spend hours playing games with words, like the “association” game—only when they play it, the object is to *avoid* association. It’s harder than it seems. *Family. Explosion. Mouse. Hospital. Funeral. Umbrella. Dog*—Nope! Nope! Nope! that’s too close to “cat”, which everyone thinks of when someone said “mouse”. You get the idea.

5:30 is rush hour on the Puget Sound ferry. Around four-hundred commuters sit quietly in small groups, chatting or by themselves in a book or with nose in a laptop. There is a pervasive feeling of sacrifice & trade off. For most, this ride is a transition from “intense”, “stressful” city job, home to the quiet isolation of the island. Many have the kind of job where it only takes one partner working to pay the mortgage. Most of the people on the boat are overeducated but don’t flaunt it, and instead are “folksy” in a sort of bitter hippy way. They are all white, but would genuinely love more diversity on their inland. It would be hard to pigeon-hole these people. Part city, part

rural county, they are the type 'A' lawyers, family folks and rugged "stay off my land" individualists who dream of (and purchase or inherit) a way to live the country life, but keep the city within an easy 35-minute boat ride.

Some fantasize at one time that commuting will be a relaxing pleasure, and for many it is, but there are days when it just plain sucks. Some day exude an overriding sadness. After all they are riding a ferry, and ferries have never symbolized complacency or relaxation. No, it's more appropriate if you picture the damned crossing the river Styx. That's more what it's like. Tired souls forced to travel to and from world to world, unceasing. Back and forth from heaven to hell with the two destinations switching places, depending on which is going better: work or home. Sometimes it's a drag.

Except when you're around Joe Bean. Everybody loves Joe Bean. So when he appears on the main floor of the ferry you can almost feel the atmosphere change. It's like relief, Man. It's like: oh, Joe's here, great, hey Buddy!

There is a sense of time passing quickly when Joe Bean is around.

"Hey Joe!" says Steve Jensen. Steve's a dentist, early 50's, also an upright bass player. A cool dude, or 'cat' or whatever.

"How 'ya doin', Buddy?" Joe calls back, then grabs a seat with a cluster of folks who adjust themselves as if they've been sitting there for 100 years. "Hey, Man!" "Good to see you!" says Dr. Richard Van Winkle, yawning, stretching and extending a long hand.

The boat pulls out and people settle. Occupied. There's a pattern to this Joe thinks as he looks around. The way people

move. The rhythmic page turns, the nods and head bobs of a conversation. Verse, chorus, verse. He thinks of that movie, *Koyaanisqatsi*, where the filmmakers used stop motion to make intricate patterns out of pedestrian traffic. Good movie. Mind-numbing and boring after the first 5 minutes, but really excellent. This is what Joe Bean thinks. Now you're getting to know him.

Maggie Myres is looking at Joe. He wonders what *she* thinks *he's* thinking? He thinks maybe it's something like, "oh, I love Joe Bean." But you know, he's probably right, so don't fault him too hard.

"Hey, Joe, how you doin' Joe?" She says, all new age and sage. Rhythmic, soothing, nurturing.

He looks at her and smiles, but Joe Bean is going far away. He's choreographing the musical he will someday write if he ever gets the time.

*Surreal*, Joe thinks. All of it. This life, this show, this game, this mess we've made, this party. Why don't we just sing everything? What have we got to lose? Break the rules, Baby! Who made the choice so long ago, that human speech would be so short and clipped? Why not long and spread out? *That's all singing is*, Joe thought, just normal speech stretched out. Elongated. Life *could* be sung. He couldn't help smiling at Maggie Myres as he pictured her singing to him. He looked around.

Tap, tap, tap, on the laptop. Take a swig of coffee. Tap, tap, tap, tappetty tap, rest and swig! Shuffle paper, cough, scratch, shuffle paper, cough.

Joe smiled, Maggie is tap-dancing now. Looking right at

him. She was good too. Joe turns to see Steve with his bass a flappin'. A steady walking line. Steve winks. A piano joins in. Some Brushes on a briefcase from realtor, Jim Edmonds. "I didn't know you played drums, Jim?" And then the chorus. Twenty of the them, dancing in unison, until they all turn and start singing Joe Bean's theme song.

*Joe Bean, you're the mellowest guy we've ever seen  
Joe, Joe Bean you're the happiest,  
luckiest, funniest, wealthiest,  
Luckiest, mellowest, sickeningly modest,  
stable, religious, guy we know!*

And then the beat really kicks in and the commuters form a Busby, Fosse apex around Joe Bean. And it's *Jazz Hands*, and they're waiting for him to sing and he does:

*Well, I'm not really that religious,  
I'd say I'm more "spiritual"  
My wife's the religious one in the family  
She's pretty "Old Testament" compared to me.*

And everybody spins, jumps, slides, "ooh"

*Joe, Joe Bean. He's the luckiest guy we've ever seen  
Joe, Joe Bean. He's the opposite of poor and mean.  
Joe, Joe Bean He's the funniest, wealthiest, mellowist  
sickeningly modest, stable, modern, Buddhist kind of guy we  
know!*

And now, it's all about Joe again, who spins, jumps slides,  
"ooh yeah!" The bongos are pumpin! Who is that? The  
buskers? I didn't know we had a djembe on this boat today!?  
*Sing it!*

*Well I'm not exactly a Buddhist,  
But I do think the universe takes care of us,  
In a "Zen" sort of way, I have no fear  
No fear of anything*

(And then to the side as the music stops, with a hint of  
ironic self doubt.)

*At least I'd like to think so.*

Pause, two three, four. Then *a capella*, a small group of  
people, and a grinding chromatic bass and guitar groove  
underneath:

*But how do you stop the stress from building up?  
How do you keep yourself from jumping off a building?  
Because of a sense of creeping malaise  
and overwhelming guilt?*

And break, two, three, four. Funk.

*My family keeps me going. They're really wonderful  
My family keeps me going. They're really wonderful.*

Come on, Joe, break it down. That's it , Baby!

And it's the dance section, 'cause you *gotta have one*. And the music becomes funkier still, and it jives, and the men in their work suits look like the *Jets and the Sharks*, But they're all so white! So corporate! And the song's building to a real peak, and the women are *high*, and the men are *low*, and it's "big groupings"--Alvin Ailey style! Eat your heart out! These crackers are goin' funky like sidewalk stink on Sunday!

Yeah. Big push. The finale...

*Joe, Joe Bean, Joe Bean...Joe Bean...*

And it's over, and the boat returns to normal, with a single, simple jump cut.

Silence.

A cough.

Steve looks up from his laptop.

"How 'ya doin', Joe? You seem a little out of it today."

"No," says Joe. "I'm good."

\* \* \*

The ferry pulls in. It is 6:05. Seagulls slice the air. Grey clouds threaten. The smells of kelp, sea salt, and dead fish squeeze through the rolled-up windows of the *Inquisition*. Tall Evergreens loom everywhere the eye can see, like an eerie shadow puppet theater backdrop, masking the sun's disappearance.

"Ah..." Joe sighs, "home sweet home." He pulls up the dock

ramp up and over the long hill.

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## ❧ CHAPTER 2 ❧

Rezbecca Bean is ten. Her nickname is Rez. Her bike is fluorescent green. As she tears down the long gravel driveway toward the house she deftly dodges puddles and lunges forward. She is about 100 feet from the house when she sees the homeless woman. Black. *That's weird, I've never seen a black person out here*, she thinks, as she skids to a stop. 20 feet away, the woman stands very still. There is a sound behind the little girl, and she turns away to see, and quickly turning back around again, finds the woman gone. "That's weird," she says out loud. Then, "Mom!" as she frantically pedals toward the house, the sound of gravel crunching like bones under her tires. "Mommmy!"

Ten feet from the door she drops the bike on the lawn and races into the house.

Skidding through the front door she stops, freezes really.

She is not in her house, but in a grand theater. Stage hands are lowering a backdrop of her living room. They halt slowly and look up. At her. Little Rez blinks, and they are gone.

\* \* \*

When Joe pulls up the driveway a few moments later, he is thinking again about luck. It's not luck, it's faith, He thinks. It's 'going with the flow'. It's acceptance. It's being in the moment. It's being connected. That's why I've been "lucky". He knocks on wood. Hopefully it's wood. Heck yeah. Mercedes? It's wood.

He thinks another thought.

*A rich man can pass through the portal to heaven as easily as a camel through the eye of a needle—or something like that.*

The subject is really bothering him lately. Money bothers him, and it bothers him that it bothers him. The ego games the mind keeps alive are endless and enduring. No matter how much you have-it-together you can never really fool the damn ego. Not in this body, anyway. Just got to keep trying. Am I a moron? Yes, and I sound like one of those self-help motivational convention center gurus I love to dis. Keep that kind of stuff to yourself, Joe. "From now on." Joe Bean concludes out loud, as he navigates the stone path through the garden, past a reflecting pool made of recycled glass, until finally, he opens the front door of his 10,000 square foot home.

He can hear Little Rez practicing for the wedding in the living room. The piano tinklee-tinkles a sort of twinkle twinkle

beneath her left hand, while her right pokes a melody tracing her soft voice like a Crayola crayon. Joe stops to listen, leaning on the entry wall. His eyes wander across family pictures as Rez sings.

*Last summer's flowers have gone to seed  
The wind from the north on a day in fall  
I play in the leaves like a ghost from spring  
Kiss the earth so cold...*

Tears well in his lower lids. Joe Bean is not a crier. No, Joe Bean mostly keeps it inside. But he does tear up occasionally and wax sentimental about the kids, and Rez, especially, seems to bring it out of him. What was that? A haiku or something? Beautiful.

Joe walks into the living room to hug her, but oddly, Rez has already disappeared.

Joe sits down at the piano, and the bench feels warm. He picks his hands up and puts them down, seeing where they go naturally. Damn! Jazz. Just like Dad. Always playin' the fricken' Jazz. The homeless woman flashes into Joe's head for a second and he stopped playing. It was before the thud.

I think I'd make it back again...

Who needs a 10,000 square foot house anyways? And suddenly--a new thought. A frightening and scary and complex thought. What if I actually lose it? He sits stunned for a moment. Then shakes it off.

The man who knows he has nothing coming out is a lucky man. That's luck. Just appreciate. All the time. Appreciate.

It was the God voice. That's God, thought Joe, that's the God that they're all trying to find out there in space. Right here, all the time. Appreciate. Appreciate.

"Rez?" Joe yells out.

"Yeah?" comes the response from down the hall.

"Where's Mom?"

"In town, she said she'll be back in a minute."

"You're here alone?"

"Yeah."

Silence. Man, what do I have to do around here to get some respect? Joe thinks with a grin. Like Rodney Dangerfield. A horse on his way to the glue factory gets more of it than I do!

"Why don't you come and say 'hi' to me?"

Silence.

"OK."

More silence. Joe waits another minute and finally picks himself off the piano bench and walks down the hall toward the TV room. *Smells like turkey. God, I hope it's turkey.* He opens the door and—"Surprise!!" His whole family is sitting there. All the kids and Sara too! A miracle these days, with scheduling the way it was.

Rez is grinning ear to ear. Joe's son, Sun is eighteen, He sits, kind of kicked back, in the leather lounge chair with a book. Moon, sixteen, sits on the floor, backs against the couch; and Sara, Joe's wife sits with a slight smile on the couch, her eyes down on her knitting, click, click, clickety clicking.

"Turkey, huh? And to what do we owe this occasion, or whatever it is?" Joe asks, smiling broadly.

“Rez just wanted to surprise you because we’re all here at the same time,” Moon Bean says.

“It doesn’t happen anymore, does it Dad?” Rez sang out.

“Hi, Joe,” Sara says, not looking up, but smiling primly.

“Yo, Dad, Word.” Sun acknowledges him with a half assed gang sign, as he continues reading. *Bridge Over the River Kwai*.

Sun Bean, or “Scud”, as he was nicknamed as a child was the fastest reader Joe had ever known, and spent way, way too much time ripping through war stories. “A numchuk nerd” Joe had called Scud’s type back in his own high school days. A “Rottsy Nazi” (*R.O.T.C. NAZI*). That was Scud. The biggest pride and joy Joe Bean had ever known, but also the biggest discouragement.

“How *could* you?” he had pleaded, “anything, anything but the military. Do you know what this does to an old hippie’s heart? Didn’t all those M\*A\*S\*H episodes mean anything to you? You’re killing me here!” But Sun Bean had been adamant. “It’s what I want to do, Dad.”

And Joe Bean had accepted. And loved again. And now Joe’s son is engaged to an Iranian girl, he’d met at the ‘U’ (University of Washington). So long, NAZI part, but the Rottsy remains. Active duty. But, hey, an Iranian! There is hope for Scud after all. The Bean acceptance was coming closer to the surface. “The apple doesn’t far fall from the tree does it, Sun!” The young man had grinned with pride. “Yeah, I guess not.”

\* \* \*

❧ CHAPTER 3 ❧

Sitting at the table, Joe's mouth waters as Sara brings out the bird and sets it before him

"Grace, Dear?" Sara asks, grabbing the hands of Rez and Moon. Joe smiles and takes Scud's and Moon's in his, and clears his throat. He acknowledges the repressed hysteria of the kids, by saying. "Oh, Holy Mother—"

"--Oh, come, Joe. Now God is a *woman*?"

"A black woman." He says, "And why not, Jesus was black." She rolls her eyes. One more time he clears his throat to great effect, as the peanut gallery almost bursts, but somehow chokes it back. The kids try not to look at each other, while Sara attempts to ignore them and remain focused. "Ahhemmm..." says Joe,

*Rub a dub, dub.*

*This beautiful turkey's in a shiny aluminum tub*

*And we thank thee for this exceptionally good grub...Bub.*

The kids are grinning ear to ear now.

*So everybody eat your share of the gizzards, and the liver and the tongue, and look out stomach here it comes.*

*Amen!* ”

“Dad!” yells Rez, “Good one!”

But Moon is starting to cry. And she suddenly slams her silverware. “Why do I have to have the name Moon? Everybody thinks I’m a freak--”

“I wanted you to be special--”

“Just be glad he didn’t name you Dweezil”

“Yes, we were going to name you Dweezil,” Joe confirms.

“Mom, Dweezil ripped my flesh!”

“Shut up, Scud.” Sara says.

“You know how your father is about Frank Zappa. I’m sorry, Honey. You can change it when you’re eighteen.”

“Thank God, two years, I can’t wait!”

“How come Rezbecca gets a normal name?”

“Cause I was born during Mom’s ‘Old Testament’ phase.”

Joe. licking his lips and laying slabs of meet on a plate: “Sara, you’re the most beautiful woman I ever did seen! Mm, mm. You are so-o-o good!”

“You’re talking about me, Joe, but you’re looking at the turkey.” My favorite joke. He thinks. Works every year.

“Touché”, he says and jabs the turkey.

“And...your prayers, well, they really just don’t seem that *thankful*.”

“It’s not thanksgiving for two more weeks, Mom.” Moon Bean says.

“Yes, I know, but it just seems that we shouldn’t fool around so much with prayer. It makes me nervous.”

“Come on, Sara, if God made *us*, you know She’s gotta have

a great sense of humor.”

“Please stop with this God is a woman thing!”

“Or androgynous,” Scud says with his best drag queen lisp.

Rez laughs and burps by accident which makes even Sara laugh, and then like a nightclub the lights go down and the family seems to sort of freeze as a spotlight hits Sara. She stands from the table. And as she walks to a small red curtained proscenium, we hear the strained subtle strains of a grand piano, and Sara, with soft focus-Vaseline filter, slides her hand over the children’s sweet, still heads.

Her torch-song melody melts us as the spotlight follows her and how rest. In turn, she caresses the fat old microphone, and croons in a warm and salty alto.

It’s as though we’re in a movie theater, we see from a back angle an audience watching her in the darkness. We can barely make out that these patrons are not human. In fact, they are creatures. Masked, mythical creatures, and they lean into her as she seduces them, seeking, mocking. Begging.

The audience sighs, and smells sage and snodgrass, and feels Sara’s contained emotion. Some begin to weep big crocodile tears, almost as if they too are being watched, for there is no entity more paranoid than a spirit. Like stoned schoolgirls they stare.

And a close-up on Sara, a soulful country girl, who uses religion at times to hide from her great spirituality. Sara is as close to a spirit being as can be counted amongst the living, and she doesn’t quite know it. She is a dishwasher prophet. How can she not be sad.

There is a silence, then,

*I'm so Afraid—  
Afraid that God will take it away.  
I'm so afraid that these blessings aren't really mine  
I'm so afraid at any moment that the sky will tumble  
Yes, It's true, that I'm afraid*

On this verse she is joined by a small backup of faceless ghosts who “ooh and ahh” through the verse like a plastic cactus cowboy chorus. The audience is now crying a river of genuine, honest to goodness, crocodile tears for Sara as she sings,

*These dreams of loss will shatter me in time  
I know this life will someday fade away  
And then, it won't be mine.  
And visions of all I love will disappear.  
This is the dream I fear:*

And a smile and a pause. A seasoned performer. Quieter now.

*Tomorrow, when She wakes us  
I pray She won't forsake us,  
And life will roll surely by,  
Without you I'll surely, surely die.*

The melody rolls away to nothingness as the spotlight dims and dims and finally clicks off. Blackout.

\* \* \*

If we think metaphorically,” Joe tells friends the next day, in his company’s fluorescent-lit lunchroom, over steaming cups of fair-trade, shade-grown coffee, “It keeps us sane. Take God and the Devil”

“Here it comes,” one of his employees murmurs out loud, “The World according to the Joe Bean”.

“Metaphor is just our brain’s way of keeping us sane and contained in this body, this experience.”

The friends laugh, shaking heads. “Hippy hoo ha ha.”

“No, listen: we’re all just symbolic representations. We don’t exist like this. It’s all just a representation of spirit. Our brains are making this dimension up as we go along.”

“You Indians—oh, ‘scuse me—*Native Americans*, are too deep for me, man.” Another friend says, “Over my head.”

“It’s just a hunch, but hey, we’re drinking coffee. It’s what you’re supposed to do when you sit around drinking coffee, right?”

“Whatever, Man.”

\* \* \*

## ❧ CHAPTER 4 ❧

God does not feel very *metaphorical* that day. That day, She is pretty much *livin' on the street*, and has been doing for a while. Things are hard for the *Almighty*, but “no use in complainin’” she says aloud.

She looks up and sees a billboard. Two weeks before Thanksgiving and they're already advertising Christmas. She shakes Her head. The billboard reads,

*Just in time for...*  
*Christmas, Winter Solstice, Hanukkah, Shawwal,*  
*Kwanzaa, Tihar or Nehebka!!*  
*A real Stocking Stuffer, Lintel Hinter, Kwanzaa-*  
*Mondo, Cool Yule Dowery Dropper, or sacrificial*  
*offering!!*

What the hell!?

An uptight blond woman in a business dress is walking through the market. She turns her head looking at God, frozen. “I just said there was no use in complaining.” The Almighty says. The business woman gives her that ‘I’m shutting you off’ look and walks on.

Homeless. Damn you Nietzsche! *God is Dead*. But I’m not dead, just adrift.

Actually She’d been able to sleep in the theater lately, so

'homeless' wasn't the best term to describe the situation.

"It's all good," she says out loud. "It's all good."

As She walks toward the theater She has to wonder *is* it all good? Is it all good? It's not exactly the way that I planned it, but, hey, I'm adaptable! Shit, I'm talking out loud again. "I'm adaptable", she whispers quietly.

So as the Heavenly Host ambls down the street toward the theater, she gets the usual reactions. A few people recognize her to be God for a millisecond and stand still. Then, the mystified looks will quickly fade, and their dreams will bring them back to 'America' and 'Western Civilization' and 'being late for work,' and on and on, and they will move on, undeterred, oblivious. The Creator of All Things still gets a kick out of this phenomenon. It's all good, she says, in a deep basso rumble.

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## CHAPTER 5

The Devil looks at Joe Bean and She (Or It or Him, but let's

just say She for now) has known Joe Bean on many levels and has had many experiences with him in the past, future and present, including the one you read earlier where she was attending his yoga class. It goes deeper than this though.

Like Punch and Judy, Pierrot and Columbine, they are both very old characters, and have known each other through many lifetimes, and shared the stage on many occasions. One outstanding difference in them as characters is that The Devil has a firm grasp on her mythological essence, her incarnations, whereas Joe Bean is perpetually ignorant of his. (That being one of his trademarks.)

In this lifetime, The Devil, or Eve, (as she is named, ironically) is a creature of habit and emotion, and love and sorrow. Whether man woman or child her “issues” seem always to be jealousy and disappointment. Green with envy. The other woman. That bitch. She Devil, The Seductress. At one time she was known as God’s greatest lover. She was the fallen angel. A woman scorned. The Ultimate X. The eternal mistress. Old as time itself, (First Lady, my ass!) Leading player in most of the *oldest stories in the book*.

Today, she sits in a small herb shop, working for a living.

Here, miraculously, is one of her fellow actors, sitting right in front of her again. The beautifully perfect Job. Joe Bean. Staring unknowingly, unaware of how thoroughly connected they are.

She is young now. Younger than he by half, and at first he doesn’t see her age, her wisdom. “What brought you here?” She asks him when he takes his seat.

“I felt a shift recently” he answers.

“Standard reading is \$50, or \$75 if you want a follow up.”

“Just the one time is fine.” Joe says, and pays up front.

Joe Bean wonders how someone so young could be reading Tarot cards. He studies her arranging the cards in the pattern of a cross, face up, her eyes cast downward. Deep. It seems to give Joe an opening by which to study her again.

*The Younger Generation*, he thinks. So seemingly different from his own. Tattoos, nose rings, lip rings, Polyamorism. He knows about that, how these kids are infinitely more evolved and flexible than his own generation. More open. He feels himself wanting to ask her questions, but holds back, not wanting to come off interested in her looks. Catch 22. It's unlike Joe to not strike up easy conversation.

She finishes, inhales and exhales deeply, and finally looks up. Joe feels the stab of a long and rusty metaphorical knife. He has the sudden, overwhelming sensation of love and despair and an awareness of himself that makes his whole body feel instantly sick. He keeps looking at her. Can't pull away, and suddenly he remembers. THUD.

The pain becomes an immediate and eternal hopelessness, that every right choice has been a wrong choice, overwhelms him in a shroud of fear and panic. It isn't love he feels, looking at her eyes. It is desperate futility. It is death. Joe is burning now. Burning in what must be Hell, this realization. This awareness. Her stare continues.

She looks down again, then up.

“There is a way,” she says quietly. “Leave her. Leave them. Leave it all.”

Joe's brain is spinning. Please, not now. Not a seizure now!

Please, damn it!

A huge burst of electricity shoot through him. It is enough to lift him up wheeling and fleeing, with no conscious thought, away from the shop, down a flight of stairs, and out into the light, where the hundreds of tourists mill by Pike Market's famous brass pig. They are all looking at him.

And the damn Market fishmongers are *yelling* at him! *Why* are they yelling? Joe cringes from the screams burning his ears. Sadistic. Maniacal. Battering him.

Joe, finds himself bent over a pool of his own vomit, breathing deeply, trying to get his bearings, trying to center himself.

*Kundalini ya ya, Yoga mat Gucci do a Chakra cha cha!*  
*Feng Shui Dada, Soul, Oy! Lambada.*

And suddenly there are voices all around him, singing the words. His private, personal words. Many voices. Surrounding him like a blanket like fog. Like snow. They lift him up and carry him. Ghosts, spirits, ancestors, gods, demons, all one. All surrounding him, and he floats as if levitated.

*Baba Yaga, burn patchouli Rasta*  
*What you say bounces off me, Na, na na!*

Louder and stronger, Joe cannot look and feels tears screaming, burning in his tightly closed eyes. This is no trip, this is no hallucination, this is the real deal.

Then for no apparent reason, the burning sensation in his eyes is gone. Joe opens them slowly. He's flat on his back somewhere. Where? He looks up. It is quiet and dark. All around him are a thousand candles, illuminating a thousand spirits smiling. Smiling at him. Then like a choir they begin to harmonize.

*All life is one  
All breath is one  
We Breathe this life together  
Our masks are only masks  
Revealing deeper meaning  
Incarnate we are simply you  
And life is only seeming.*

Joe closes his eyes again and feels the seizure waning. Relief floods him like Epsom salt tank isolation and beautiful scent, and ripples over his drenched wrecked shell. This is thanksgiving and peace and blessed release, and all is right with the world and Joe isn't crazy. That isn't the Devil he'd known in another life, he had just hallucinated it all, and every spirit he'd ever considered was not just standing around him. It was all a vision. Not real. Ephemeral. Real, but not real. Calm down, now.

With the next blink, Joe Bean looks up suddenly to see the bustle of the market, and Joe Bean, the coolest guy you've ever seen feels silly and embarrassed and hopes no one has seen him. He is strangely happy, and oddly euphoric as he sets off for home. Home to his family to his wife, the Angel with "eyes

you could get lost in” (as a friend of his had once declared.) He’s going *home*, through a sea so black and deep that whales could get lost in it, and home past a beautiful fall field, filled with rotting pumpkins, to his 10,000 square foot “parcel in paradise”, where everything is going to be just fine.

\* \* \*

Suicide, the God of Self Destruction, does see it all. And he swivels his old electric wheel chair on the sidewalk and follows Joe with his eyes as the man walks by. *I know him. I never forgot a face,*

The decrepit god begins scanning his memory and raises his arm to put a cigarette into the hole in his throat. He manages to create enough suction to get a drag.

On his arms are scars. Some are early ones, going crosswise, and others, from later, more accurate attempts going parallel with the arm. Suicide had tried suicide. Yes, he’d tried.

It was all coming back now. A small boy running ahead of mommy so long ago.

“Look out you—“ But it was too late then, the boy had hit him and spun quickly to look. Because the sound device Suicide usually used for speaking had been removed for smoking, he had said nothing, only let out a breath of air forming one word. *Suffering.*

It’s difficult for a 5-year old to describe and vocalize deep,

complex trauma. Harder still to air the feeling of having looked into the face of sheer and complete despair. *The mask of death*. So it had been many, many hours of crying before little Joe Bean's brain had repressed and digested enough of the incident to allow him to get to sleep that night.

Suicide remembers fondly now the boy crying and running away from him, and he blows a puff of grey and purple smoke from his neck and clucks his tongue.

Joe Bean. Boy Howdy! The God of Self Destruction smiled, satisfied, as he repeated the name slowly. Joe Bean.

\* \* \*

## ❧ CHAPTER 6 ❧

Sara loves Joe deeply. She always has. Way before the money. Before the success.

She'd met him their first year in college. Both of them a little anti-social. She—a born-again Christian, he—a Polytheist, long before she knew what that even meant.

Often, late nights in the dorm they had found themselves to be odd ones out. So two lonely, wall-flower kids, found themselves sharing deep things in the recreation room. After a

while they would both bring pillows and sleeping bags and pop corn and take a couch a piece, quieting only when a wanderer would break the communion, then, feeling the heavy silence, exit just as quickly.

It was certainly not the things he said that she had begun to love, but the way he had said them that had started the attraction. Joe was compelling. Sara knew this, if nothing else. He was not verbal, not concise, not super intelligent, but *very* compelling, and as fanatically as Joe would fight for his beliefs, it was not his philosophy that drew her to him, but the fire in his eyes that entranced her and made her want to stay. Even then he embodied the optimistic spirit she'd always desired.

“Did you know Jesus was educated by Mystics?” he had asked in deference to some point of view of hers—about something ‘Christian’ she'd said. “No,” she had answered, “I didn't know that!” Trying not to laugh.

“Who do you think the Three Wise Men from the East were? Christians!?” Then she would laugh, finally.

“I hardly think they'd come all that way just to drop off their presents, never to return, or at least hang out for a while!”

“God, Joe, you're so cool! How can I be exactly like you?” She had said then, in absolute mock adoration. “That changes everything. You've really opened my eyes. Thank you for making my faith complete.”

For four years the good Christian intercourse continued and that, combined with Joe and Sara's shared passion, and the music they performed together every chance they got, led them eventually to the altar.

An event inspired in typical Bean fashion, the wedding was a complete melding of every cultural marriage ritual Joe could get his hands on, yet it fit into the context of a very typical evangelical wedding. After months of negotiation, Sara was happy with the content.

“Om Nama Shivaya. Do you, Sara Numbonski, agree to give this human being, we all know as Joe Bean, the space, the love and the comfort he might need, in order to manifest himself as the perfect husband for you, and to help him become a vessel for the works of Lord-God-Jesus-Christ-Our-Savior? I do.

And do you agree to help him cultivate that beautiful and precious heavenly light which is within him, so help you God, Shiva, Osirus, and Jesus, of course” Etc...

Then the circus clown flower children ran through the crowd with medieval accompaniment. The New Age was in full splendor and Joe was its champion. A pony-tailed everyman who loved everybody, and every body loved him. Everybody loved him. But most of all, Sara loved him. Sara, who envisioned scenes of a Von Trapp Family Orchestra and Choir. The Bean Family Singers, praising the Lord with song.

“I see it kinda like a New Age Osmonds” said Joe laughingly. “Or how about this: The Siblings of Invention?” Yeah.

Then Joe had given a little money to Bill, and Bill’s thing had taken off, and oh Jeez—not this again. She didn’t even want to talk about it! She was so tired of telling the story and laughing ironically with everybody, who was of course, thinking (and saying,) “Wow, that’s amazing. What luck! Yeah. The irony of having helped Bill Gates out with his first row of

computers, when times were lean, back when Bill was in Dad's garage. Anyway, that's the story. Just luck, that's all. No big deal. And now Joe was what you'd call a "money guy," generous to a fault, a popular because of it, too. Not afraid of risk. Able to lose large amounts in a single day if the cause was right. It was all about doin' the right thing to him. Irony? Yes it was. For God's sake, he hated computers!

Lately, Sara has been worried about the irony. More than usual—because Sara always worries. This is different. This is "The Fear". This is the knowledge that Sara plays down with her every waking thought and deed. This is the premonition and instinct that no faith and prayer can diminish or pacify. It is "The Shining" It is "Carrie" stuff. It is Mary Poppins. Good Lord! She's thinking about it *again!* Stop it girl! Don't even go there. No, no, no, don't think it.

Damn it. She'd thought it. That word. But it was her thought, and nobody, and "*I mean nobody!..*"

She jumps to reality then, noticing that she's almost talking out loud.

That's not me. That's not me in this life. I am Sara. Protector of the Word. A servant of the Father. Her words seem light and meaningless for a moment. And she thinks of her first communion and of the fullness and *complete love* and purpose that had graced the event. She feels so much peace knowing she is "safe" and has "something to do."

Joe understands her. The deep parts. Knows her complexity, but lets her be. Lets her be fearful of herself and lets her love God *her* way. Joe's faith in the universe, in the whole, has always protected her. She loves Joe Bean for that.

But now her fear has been winning. Her fear of herself and what she might do with her “ability.” How it might tilt her life the wrong way.

*Tomorrow when she wakes us  
I pray she won't forsake us.*

The song was about her, wasn't it? She was the SHE. It was a fear that she might leave all this, and be someone else: a dark person, full of fear—fearing death. A person She had refused to know always, a person who would someday rise up and crush the simple girl Sara.

It feels terrifying and inevitable. Just make it through the wedding, Sara. This is just nerves.

\* \* \*

When the Twin Towers come down Joe Bean is a wreck, like everyone else. And like many Pacific Northwesterners who had not yet communicated their deep feelings to one another, there is an immediate and overwhelming sense of isolation and confusion of mixed feelings. In whispers, almost, Joe confides to his friend Richard while they drink at the local bar one day:

“Did he actually use the word ‘*Crusade?*’” Referring to the President's follow-up speech to 9/11. Richard, a mostly unemployed fisherman Joe had met years before, agrees with the sentiment. “It's just like Nam, Man. I remember the

ambassador to Vietnam at the time, Westmoreland, I think, saying on *national* TV: ‘the Orientals don’t value life like we do,’ and this knucklehead’s saying the same thing! Can you believe it? They’re tryin’ to dehumanize, is what they’re tryin’ to do. And it’s so we can bomb the *shit* out of their country! It’s criminal!”

Richard, never one to beat around the bush, is one of the smartest, most compassionate people Joe has ever met. It amazes him that Richard is alone, poor, and intermittently homeless. *Some people are just born unlucky, I guess*, Richard had consented—more than once—and the thought had occurred to Joe as well.

Joe had helped Richard enough, given him cash often, but their relationship reached far deeper than money, and they both knew it. Richard was an angel to Joe more often than not, listening and advising like a father, his often ridiculous and ‘over the top’ suggestions putting life in perspective in a way no accountant or business consultant could. In that flemmy, smoky, thick New England (Maine) accent, Richard’s words are like strange oracular poems:

“You’re son’s gonna be over there soon...must be hard for a pinko liberal peacenik such as yourself, I imagine?”

It is. It is a pain unlike any Joe knew, and he can’t keep it to himself. To Sara’s dismay.

Joe Bean has been attending meetings with anti-war groups lately, and has been since day 2. There is a big fight coming, and everyone in the know knew it.

“If I can help out I will” Joe had said to Sara.

“Joe, our son is a soldier. If you antagonize the war effort

you will hurt Sun directly”

“People are smarter than that; they know that the kids don’t have anything to do with the big decisions.”

But Joe had known when he said it in his heart that it wasn’t that simple. War is war, killing is killing and death is death. Eventually that Karma will come back. To him, to Scud, to everyone on the planet. We will all be those people we kill at some point. The words from the market floated into his head:

*All life is one, All breath is one.  
We breathe this life together...*

\* \* \*

## CHAPTER 7

The phone rings just as Joe gets home that night and he hears a voice: “Hello, Joe, my name is Puyallup Washington—“ A damned robot-voiced *recording!* “—and I am calling from the Uz Life Insurance Company. We are offering a special for those under 50, and you, Joe Bean, have been specifically chosen to —“.

Click.

Joe Bean hangs up the phone. He hates insurance. The whole scam. Especially when sold by computerized,

disembodied fembots named *Puyallup*. “Who names their kids Puyallup, anyway?” he asks the dead machine.

Insurance. *Dharma* was all the insurance he had ever needed. Make good things happen and good things will happen to you. If not in this lifetime, then in the next. *Dharma*. But because all one’s lifetimes happen simultaneously, or so Joe believes at times, there’s no “timeline.” Our *Dharma* is an intricate, fluid combination of what we’re doing and thinking, combined with what God and the Universal Forces think we need to better ourselves and the universe itself. Joe thinks of it as a tide that flows back and forth through dimensions and spiritual realms. Joe’s “religion” was is what he calls a sort of pseudo “dreamer” religion. A school of thought he’d picked up from childhood. Joe is half Northwest Coast Salish “Indian”, and half English, (or “Settler”, as they called it on the Rez.) Joe has lived in Seattle pretty much most of his life, off the reservation, even though he’s officially registered with the US government as a native of the Lummi Tribe, way north of Seattle, near the Canadian border. He’d been brought up in a culture that, until recently, had tried hard to forget the past.

As a kid, Joe had ignored his ancestry and spirit in a way he saw his Mexican and Asian friends doing effectively.

Until the epilepsy. At 15, Joe began having Temporal Lobe seizures. Scariest in some ways than the Gran Mals, in that the person maintains consciousness during the episode.

Even at 15, Joe had known that his epilepsy was the doorway to his past. Almost a punishment for his denial. It was the way the spirit tried desperately to come out and through a

shell of a body who had neglected spirit for so many years.

Epilepsy had made his late teens miserable. Absolutely horrific. All of his neglected ancestry screamed out at him through demon's mouths and malevolent vibrations. For years he had no idea what it had been that haunted him, no idea that what he experienced every other week or so, if not his every waking moment had a medical name.

Each time the panic would set in and the hallucinations would start, and the shattering physical and emotional awareness set in, it was something only for him to understand. It was a hell given only to him. A time of the most lonely and isolated days of his existence, not days really but literally years he had seen himself as a tortured outsider; the hundredth monkey, the *Idiot*, as Dostoyevsky had called it. Life was living hell.

It had been Sara who had saved him, instinctively, when it finally happened in her presence. She had magically known what was happening and what to do.

"Let it go out of the top of your head," she had said, not judging, and not panicking. Just feeling. Her special gift.

Something in her manner and words had taken over the din of fear and paranoia in Joe's screaming skull and body. Joe didn't know how she had known. He knew only that her understanding was special and real, that he was in the presence of a loving and helping angel, beautiful and kind. She had given Joe the tools he needed to heal. His immense fear of the world and its universe was miraculously replaced with a conviction that everything could be all right--that good and evil were part of *the one*. That a complex balance

connected us all. *What does not kill us makes us stronger.*  
Insurance.

Who needs insurance, when life was so much bigger than that? Joe walks through the market today thinking this thought.

\* \* \*

The fact that he's been through these problems before makes it all the more scary when Joe suddenly finds himself not remembering why, when or how he had arrived at the market. He doesn't remember leaving the office and it's almost like a blackout.

Joe is passing his favorite singing group. The best street gospel in the world. The Apostles. Five black guys of varying ages, who stomp and clap the fattest beats. One time, Joe remembers finding out that some of these guys are old Motown men. One of them has a funny eye that stares out, captivating and snatching tourists: "Oh, Honey look at this!"

Stomp, clap, stomp, clap!

*Don't despair!* They sing.

*Don't despair! Like Jesus, Buddha, and Mohamed too*

*This is the message*

*They gave to you*

The eye stares him down. Like that famous story from Edgar Allen Poe. Clap, stomp, clap, Stomp.

*Don't despair!*

*Don't despair!*

Someone else is looking at him.

*Oh Hallelujah , this old world seems so unfair!*

She is smiling. It's her. He remembers her distinctly, this time, and the moment in the shop comes flooding back, and it feels the same. *Oh please, no, not today. Not this; not now.*

*Don't despair*

*Don't despair! Ahh!*

*Don't despair! No, Don't despair.*

The two of them are together now. In the crowd, standing shoulder to shoulder. The tourists are starting to sing.

*Don't despair!*

*Oh, Hallelujah!*

Where did that brass section come from?

The eye.

*I just got two words to tell you brother:*

*Don't despair!*

He can feel himself going with her. Steadily following away from the sound. Stomp, clap, stomp, clap. Fading away

Voices and singing, fading away.

And now she's looking right at him. Her chest on his, looking up at him and her eyes say, "give it to me." And for some reason he wants to, desperately. And still he says "I can't," and pushes her away with every bit of strength he has.

And then she smiles up at him, and his heart drops 3 feet. She turns and walks away, and he suddenly notices she is a kid with a backpack and big, low hanging jeans and he just stands there for a long time, wondering what the hell has happened. It's like the talking heads song: "How did I get here?" He stops. *What the hell, Joe? Is this a mid-life crisis? Is that what this is?* He laughs, until the laugh becomes a character of his doubt. And a thought pops into his head: *She will be the death of me.*

\* \* \*

## CHAPTER 8

Rez and Sara are there to inspect the wedding hall. It was actually a "multi-purpose center" collective space atop Seattle's Capital Hill. It was home to the yoga/dance studio where Joe often taught, a public access TV station, an acupuncturist, an

herbalist, the green party headquarters, a low-income soup kitchen, and what appeared to be a small theater/art space. The building had been, until its bankruptcy, a Catholic church.

“Mom, can we go to the theater?” begs Rez. “Look, it says *Bible Stories*, can we?”

“You go on in, Honey,” Sara replies, digging in her wallet for money and handing a small wad to Rez, “I’ve got some details to take care of for the wedding.”

“Like what?”

“Like figuring out if we have enough room for all the tables, for instance, real fun stuff, you sure you don’t want to stay here with me?”

While Sara heads into the main “sanctuary” to meet the facility manager, Rez takes off down the hall and up a flight of old stairs, following signs that say, “Old Testament Puppet Stage.” Then a bit further,

A poster on a wall beckons: “*Welcome Children! Explore the Wonderful Dioramas of G. Odd.*”

Rez feels her heart flutter. She loves plays more than anything in the world, and her family’s constant and keen interest in performance makes any theatrical experience desirable above all other distraction.

But this theater isn’t so much a theater as a sort of ancient throw-back of glass-boxed miniatures and small curtained-off peekaboos, and there don’t seem to be any living souls around except for a shadow at the ticket counter window.

“Here you go,” Rez says as she slips her \$2.50 in the small slot, squinting, trying to see who’s behind the glass, and

suddenly feeling a chill. *Why is it so dark in here? Where are all the other kids. Déjà vu.* “I’ve been here before.”

The little girl stretches her brain to remember. With her preschool. Or maybe it was a Sunday school class. Eerie as the situation is, she shudders and giggles with anticipation. It is very exciting, having this feeling. There is magic here. And like most kids, Rez loves magic and little things. This place has it all.

Standing before a big window, she pushes an oversized red button.

A light gradually comes on, like a rising sun inside the little diorama, and hypnotic, old-fashioned music begins to play through a tinny speaker over her head.

It’s a house. Rez swallows and suddenly feels a little panicked. *The house looks just like mine.* Not a little like her’s, but *exactly* like her’s. “Mom has to see this!” she says out loud. Through the speaker a gruff woman’s voice narrates and Rez picks out the words, “great suffering,” and she thought she hears her dad’s name.

*Maybe I shouldn’t be here,* Rez thins, looking all around her, and she considers bolting out right then, but something makes her more afraid to run than to simply freeze, shaking.

One by one, miniature lights come on, and one by one they light up small, delicately crafted characters that look exactly like the Beans.

Curiosity overcomes fear, and she pushes the next button on the next glass case. The light begins to illuminate a relief map of Puget Sound and her island, and tiny lights under the water blink on and seem to make a line across the water, to

her Dad's office in the market.

And then another diorama, and this one is just a warehouse building, where her dad stores "computer memory" stuff 'cause that's what he does for a living. Finally, the lights come up on a little, finely carved figure, sitting alone in an office and Rez wonders if that is her dad. It really looks like him. She wishes she'd been listening harder to the man's voice, so she could tell Mom what he had said, but it's too complicated, with tons of big words, and it's from the bible, and she doesn't really understand it. *This is not a kid thing!*

At the end of the room Rez sees a small stage, and its red curtains are slowly, magically beginning to part.

But Little Rez does not want to see the puppet show. Not at all. This is just plain creepy. So she takes a deep breath and bolts through the maze and out of the theater, and into the main hall, down the flight of stairs, and into the room where her mother talks to the man in charge of the building..

Rez is taking heavy gasps of air when she skids into the room, "Mom! You'll never guess what was in that theater. It was a little doll house that looked exactly like our house!" Sara listens half smiling to her daughter, whose babble is almost undecipherable, as she rants on about dolls that look exactly like them all, and the more she talks, the more like a child's imaginative fantasy it sounds to Sara. As they leave the multi-purpose center, Rez has all but given up. "You really have to see it."

"Not *today*. Too much to do. Sometime soon, OK?"

Later, as Sara replays the queer story in her head, she is curious though. Very curious. Some of the things the child

had blabbered were downright chilling, and Sara makes a mental note to come back alone when the wedding craziness has died down. Some other time, maybe, when there's not a wedding in a *week!* Ahh!

\* \* \*

Meanwhile, in the little theater, the light comes up on a miniature puppet theater and strange carousel music fills the musty air. The puppeteer screams and groans in merry falsetto, and the audience of spirits, gods, and devils look on, with a rabid passion of feasting wolves, laughing, as God, a middle aged black woman puppet, and the Devil, a young white woman with bright red hair puppet battle it out with sausages.

\* \* \*

## ❧ CHAPTER 9 ❧

It's eight in the morning in the Bean household and Joe is

singing, “for God’s sake get me to the church on time,” to which Moon Bean replies, “We fricken’ knew you’d be singing that song today, didn’t I say that, Mom?”

“Yes, Honey, you did. You called it.”

“Ding, dong, the bells are gonna chime!”

“I’ve been waiting for this moment my whole life. I swear, this is the best song ever, in a musical. Absolutely!”

“Absolutely!” says Rez, meaning it.

“Absolutely” says Moon, sarcastically.

“Get me to the Church, get me to the church. For God’s sake get me to the church on time!”

And they’re off. Finally, after the worst ferry boat shuffle ever. (Dad, turn around I forgot my shoes!” “No, tell me you didn’t forget your shoes...”)

Scud had taken an earlier ferry with his best friends Todd and Larry. The others chit chat, chitty chitty chit chat with friends going over for the wedding.

When they get there. It’s more beautiful than anyone could have imagined. Joe and Sara greet the Bride’s family awkwardly. Forced smiles all around. But Joe is happy. Ecstatic really. Friends he hasn’t seen for years are squeezing his hand in the lobby. Flowers of a thousand varieties. Turquoise. A perfect color for a wedding. Moon and Dweezil come upstairs holding their younger sisters hand, proud, bashful smiles. They are gorgeous, and Rez is cuter than a drawer full of buttons. Everything is larger than life. The greeters greet with a song:

*Shiva Isis, Gaia, Jesus, Bahl*

*Mother Earth, Father sun, Welcome one and all  
Pantheistic, Atheistic, Muslim, Jew and Christian,  
Fitting you in is our theologic mission.*

And suddenly Joe sees her. The young woman from the market. Why is she here? Sara feels him tense. “Who is she, Joe?”

“The Devil,” he says, trying to make a bad joke. “Don’t worry.”

The band, complete with string quartet and turntable DJ, (sort of P Funk meets Yo Yo Ma) kicks in to an infectious, yet somehow inappropriate groove, and turning to her date, the Devil raps sarcastically over the Hindi-funk beat:

*It looks like the house of God is subdivided  
Condos for rent all utilities provided  
Aryabatt wine, breaking bread  
wedding cake & the Grateful Dead  
It’s all right here, and It’s all just fine.*

As the ceremony starts, the Acolytes sing:

*Welcome Brother, Welcome Sisters,  
Buddhas, buffalos, Holy Cows, Missus, and Mistery*

And God, as a leader with white flowing robes says enthusiastically ,

*I see my man, Mohammed’s in the house.*

*We pray to the four directions:  
North, East, West, and South!*

An old woman Muppet turns to her husband, who is also a Muppet, like those two old guys in that famous show, and stage whispers

*Oh my God, I'm bored already.  
I hate weddings don't you Freddy?*

And he flings back twice as loud.

*Mirna, Mirna, I do to, but if we're lucky  
They've boiled it down to a concentrated stew  
A concentrated hoop-de-doo  
A concentrated wedding brew!  
Shhh!!*

\* \* \*

Shahira Al Saddim's parents are wholly unprepared for the spectacle of a Bean wedding, and though the Beans have done everything possible to make them comfortable and to accommodate the conservative Iranian family—put them up at the best hotel, send a limo to pick them up, provide translators and wheelchairs for the elderly, Jassim Al Saddim can not help but feel overwhelmed and frankly, a bit disturbed as New Age dancers gyrate and glasses are crushed under heavy boots,

and whoops and cheers echo throughout the old Christian church. I don't understand this culture, he thinks.

*A Um Ma Ja Bali Hai!*

*Uh! Uh! Bali Hai*

It's like a strange dream. Like being witness to an Indian musical gone wrong, knowing none of the songs, yet having all eyes upon you. Jassim's English is not great so when he hears a word or phrase from the Aryabatt he perks up for a moment, then again finds himself thoroughly confused. The Bean's had done an interesting job of integrating the Moslem tradition into the ceremony, at least visually, but there is something disturbingly American about it all. *Oh, why did I send my only daughter away to this country of infidels? I shall never forgive myself.* But it is too late; the marriage is almost complete. He brightens then, thinking about it deeply again, no need to worry about a dowry. The bastard's rich! Thank you, Jesus! Jassim shouts, and he smiles broadly to his wife who is clapping along with the beat.

Jassim's enjoyment grows thinking about his fortune. What an occasion. There is not one minister, but three! One is a black man, darker than Jassim, who has with him a choir of men and women of mixed race, singing in what is surely 'the American Jazz' idiom. Lots of clapping and stomping. Then there was a white woman wearing what appears to be some sort of robe covered in buttons. She sings and plays a round drum which the translator tells him is a 'medicine drum' of the native Indians of the area. At one point in during the

ceremony she bangs it rapidly and lets out a grating wail, then stops and turns and is quiet for a moment. And then she does it again! Four times!

The Islamic sections are short and disjointed, and somehow choreographed like, as Jassim thinks again, an Indian musical number, real Bollywood—more spectacle than holy, a few more times an embarrassed flush rises on the Al Saddim faces. Yet it is all somehow exciting and confusing at once. This whole “to do” will provide conversation for many weeks and months when they’ve all returned to the village of their Persian homeland.

Little Rez sings *Ave Maria* to a Hindi pop beat, then there is a call and response, partly in English and partly in Hindi:

*Ganesha, Sharanam, Sharanam Ganesha*

*Everybody: Ganesha, Sharanam, Sharanam Ganesha*

Then the Native American woman:

*Oh God, your light's so bright*

*That sometimes we are frightened.*

*Give us all your gifts*

*so we may be enlightened.*

Then Sara, the mother of the Groom:

*The Lord will guide your going out and your coming in.*

Tears streamin' down faces. Noses a blowin'. Then Joe and the Groomsmen:

*Mazeltof! Heichka! Sala Malekum!*  
*The Petals they are many, but the flower is just one!*

At this point the dancing and movement have become a blur to Jassim, and he has not been this disoriented since childhood. It seemed that bridesmaids are spinning, and broomsticks are being leapt over, and clinking in between beats and words.

Men: *Catch the Moon, Ride the sun!*  
 Women: *Tara, Tara, Tara,*  
 Men: *Halleluia heya ho!*  
 Women: *Heya heya heya,*  
 Men: *The water and the rivers flow!*  
 Women: *Heya Heya Hey yo!*  
 Men: *Starchild, do not fear the spaceship when you go!*

And then finally the ceremony feels like it's coming to an end, when the translator leans over and whispers, "they're saying 'do you take this bride to be your lawful wedded wife...'"

And Scud is saying "yes". "And do you take this guy, here, in sickness and in strife?" And Shahira, *my darling girl*, is saying, "Yes." And everybody is cheering. All 500 *infidels* are cheering. Jassim finds himself cheering too. And he is the loudest of them all.

*I now pronounce you mu ha moo.*  
*A flippin' dippity dipsy doo.*

And Scud is planting a firm Bean kiss on the smiling lips of his everloving new wife, and almost immediately the tables are brought into the sanctuary as Scud and Shahira take their first dance while the Gospel choir and a bass soloist performs a poem Joe had written years before:

*There's a chapel on a seaside coast  
Bleak as mid December  
Where Seagulls slice the air  
In the country of remember  
There's a wide pen window  
Where the curtains flap with wind  
And dark creatures scurry  
And Scudtle deep within  
There's an alter of ancient oak  
Obscured by smoke  
Three words gouged in its surface  
Once he spoke:*

Then Scud sings with all his might to the amusement of the onlookers, "I love you!" And the choir and all those who knew the song screamed "I Love you!" as the champagne flowed freely, Amen. And Sara heard Joe sing into her ear, quietly, "I love You." And to 'oohs' and 'ahhs,' the shy Shahira says to Scud, "I love you," and Scud dips the shy Shahira like Marlon Brando, and everyone screams!

And then a shabbily woman man who has been running the show, and strangely seems to have come in off the street,

heaves herself on stage and in her bluesiest bluesy voice sings

*We were all born to breathe  
And also born to doubt*

And the backup singers do their best Supremes shtick on the offbeats.

*Born to breathe and doubt  
Oooohhh*

*We were destined to come in, and all must go out  
Life is a mix of dreams and despair.  
Nobody, no nobody ever said life was fair.*

Then everybody sings the chorus and starts swaying.

*We rise and fall, and wax and wane,  
And suffer love and suffer pain.  
And memory's both a foe and a friend  
Our way of beginning, is our way at the end.*

Then they're all dancing. And, let me tell you, Baby, you have never seen so much jubilation and rapture in one multi-purpose sanctuary!

Sara takes the last solo:

*Our way of beginning, is our way at the end.*

And there is a lovely slide show narrated by Moon featuring embarrassing pictures of Scud as a baby. Then Rez sings her song about the flowers in fall and everyone cries, and all this time Joes son sits with cheesy grin, in uniform, with his lovely wife next to him in sari and veil.

Scud's army buddies tell inappropriate jokes like, "Scud has always been the kind of guy who helps little old ladies across the street, which is a bummer because where we're going the old ladies are more often than not the suicide bombers!" Ha Ha. Rimshot. Uncomfortable laughter.

"Ok," Joe says, "here's a poem I wrote for Sara when we were married 15—I mean 18—years ago..." blah, blah, blah, everyone claps and throws bird seed, *so it won't kill the birds*, Rez says, and Scud and Shahira drive off to their one-night honeymoon, because Scud's shippin' out in 3 days to the Middle East. Rez falls asleep on the way home in the car on the ferry, and Joe looks into Sara's eyes and breathes deeply. Content.

As a smallish SUV pulls up the ramp on the "island side", the gods smile appreciatively at the shadow puppet perfect treescape and segulls in flight.

\* \* \*

## ~ CHAPTER 10 ~

The next week is a busy one, getting Shahira's parents off to the airport, Scud and Shahira returning from their ultra-quick rain check style honeymoon on Orcas Island, and then getting Scud ready to go overseas. On the tails of a whirlwind, the family drives him down to the base near Tacoma. Scud stands proud and even excited as his sergeant addresses the soldiers who stand square shouldered, square jawed in parade rest, while everyone else cries and listens on and looks and weeps some more.

"We leave our country today with the purest intention. To perform the most noble action of a US citizen. We plan to put ourselves in harm's way in order to defend our flag against the enemy. To fight for freedom. You should be real proud of these boys. They've trained hard and they're ready and able to do the right thing for you and our country. God Bless America. And God bless these kids here. They're leavin' here as boys, but I guarantee you, they'll come back men!"

And that is all. Everybody hugs and kisses Scud, then he boards the big green plane and is gone in moments. Moments are all it takes for Scud to be gone.

\* \* \*

That night Sara dreams that the woman Joe had called the Devil is sitting with Rez in the living room. "Mom, look, we're playing army!" And as Sara frowns at them, alarmed and unable to speak, the woman whispers something into Rez's ear. When Sara can finally speak, she says frantically, "What is it,

Rez? I have to know what she said.” To which Rez just looks back at her, not saying, and then Rez and the woman both laugh and crashed their tanks together and it’s simply horrible. The red-headed woman puts down her tank, slips her arm around Rez and turns, staring right at Sara, and then Sara sees them. A whole audience, barely lit. Masked grotesquery, eerie translucence, oversized limbs, staring unshaped eyes, like hippos, or elephants, or whales eyes, the creatures are unexplainable, unlike anything her dreams have ever conjured. Yet she has seem them before. She knows them all. The spirits of her dreams.

As always, the shock of seeing them wakes her like a jolt of electricity. She gasps, every inch of her drenched in sweat. She breathes through all the stillness and darkness of the room. A heaviness. Joe is asleep on his side, and rolls away from her, breathing heavily and regularly. Sara thinks of waking him up. *It’s too much. It’s all too much,* but instead, Sara prays to God. God above. God up in heaven. God, whom she’d always seen as Charlton Heston, brown skin, long flowing glorious white beard. And He comes to her as she cries and places his hand on her head. *Please, Please don’t let her destroy us, please. Please. Please. Please! Have mercy, Lord, please.* The ‘p’ word, over and over until finally she is asleep again.

\* \* \*

## ~ CHAPTER 11 ~

God surveys the audience from a peep hole. The house is full tonight. Bad form to show oneself early. TV head— God of Media is there, as is Suicide—God of Self-Destruction. Suicide is sitting in an aisle in the rickety old wheelchair, smoking through that nasty hole in his mole eaten throat; occasionally dissolving into tortured fits of hacking.

The crowd tonight is pretty impossible to describe. To the untrained eye, Usually the house may look a little like a midnight crowd at *Rocky Horror*, but tonight it's different, still. In amongst the spirits, gods, devils, the usually rag tag crew, the dregs of society, (a mixed bunch of nuts!) are some gods even God has never seen before. Like the gorgeous, but vacuous celebrity types—Goddess of Vanity, and the God of Material Possession. It is exciting to see them. God speculates that they'd shown up now because *somebody* had leaked the plot a little bit. *Hee, hee*. She chuckles. That's show business! It was truly a *cause celeb!*

Most people have no idea that gods of old still live among us and still exist in our society. Like matter and energy never lost, only transformed, these entities are still around. Wandering, never quite sure of themselves and their places in the modern world. This bunch has been roving the planet, struggling at various levels of respect and disfavor for eons. Lately, or at least since the *Age of Reason*, however, they've suffered profoundly as individuals, and have all but lost the knowledge of their natures. They have held rank among the

insane, poor, deluded, and despised. And have become all that. Mental institutions, freak wards, and the streets have been home to most, while others stay mired and confused in celebrity. It is only now, thanks to *The Almighty's* bold leadership, that they are beginning to unite together, assemble—to recognize themselves and develop a sense of purpose again.

These complex creatures feels themselves both gods and human. And Like attracts like. Here, in the theater, these creatures, who have spent lifetimes being persuaded that they are not heirs to godliness—that their quirks, strengths, and powers are “tragic flaws”, that their insights and prophetic notions are “delusions of grandeur”, and that their energy make them appear crazy and largely uneducable—are finally comfortable. At least here, with each other, they're able to be themselves, and, at last, to let down their hair.

These meetings at the theater occur outside of time as we know it, and some of the gatherings are bigger than others. This is the largest to date. The New Age is in full blossom and the gods have been conjured into prominence. God Almighty smiles at this. It's the evolution of the world.

One of the last to be seated tonight needs no introduction. In fact, her presence itself lends the evening a sense of heightened purpose and class. God's greatest lover. Outcast among outcasts. The Yin to the Yang. Beelzebub, Satan, Mustafa, The Green Man, Pan, Pandora, Eve now...her/his names are unimportant, yet well known. She/He is conflict itself. Always good for a good piece of theater. The crowd knows she is the anti-hero they will hungrily love to hate. You

don't get that kind of reputation without *something* to back it up!

“Bravo! Let the show begin!”

A chant envelopes her, lifting her, raising her spirits, egging her on. Will there be eggs? Hopefully.

High stakes. Hopefully. Hopefully. Only a good show could possibly bring her out of this funk. She needs blood. Not stage blood, but real, honest to badness, red red, drink this and remember me, it's sangraliscious! Not lambs, not pigs, but man blood. This had better be good.

“Let the show begin!”

A midget (of course it was a midget) appears from behind a red velvet curtain as the lights dim and the spotlight burns. This is no Danny Devito-style midget, but a real creepy looking small person, whose voice is neither woman nor man. He takes off his hat and humbly invites the audience to join him to a world of magic—to “leave time behind” and all that stuff, and to put their hands together for a warm welcome for the “one-and-only-undisputed-God-of-the-Universe!...Now- and-forever!! Amen!!! Brothers and Sisters!!!!”

And who appears on the stage to thunderous applause, but “God Almighty”.

If God is anything, She is a showman, and knows how to work a moment, so She waits until the applause dies down, and with the subtlest raised eyebrow, cues the band into a beautifully funky groove, to which She begins to dance smoothly, gracefully, cool.

This, of course, sends the audience into a frenzy. There is nothing quite like watching God boogie! So, She boogies into

the audience, grabbing the hand of a bashful goddess, and together the two become one in *the forbidden dance*. No, not the Lambada, but the *Wooha Chicken Dance*. The audience gasps, thrilled to witness this moment, and throws hunks of kale and pomegranate.

The Devil feels herself uniquely jealous. Remember, She is always uniquely jealous. After all.

And now, it's getting to be time to throw down the gauntlet! Yeah, Baby! The leading lady. The ingénue. The seductress. Femme fatale, Baby.

"Hey, Old Woman!" she finally yells out, and the music dies suddenly to a whisper, and all eyes are on her. All but God clear the stage quick—off, exit right, exit left—to get a good view and get out of the way.

*What's going on here?  
I'd really like to know, I'd like you to tell me  
Just what kind of show is this supposed to be?*

To which God replies,

*It's what I have to work with.  
I do what I can.  
It's the cast of Modern Gods, created by man.  
And where have you been, Devil!?*

Eve smirks, and looks around, gathering support.

*I've been walking to and 'fro,  
back and forth on the earth I go,*

*and it looks like you're fitting in I see.  
Looks like you sure as hell don't need me.*

'Oh no, oh no,' the audience shouts. And the Devil, taking her cue comes down from the audience, beginning an intricate dance of power with God. Part tango, part seduction, part something unearthly. Dip, spin, freeze for two beats.

Devilishly threatening:

*You're all warm and fuzzy now.  
Mrs. Hugs and furrowed brow.  
And now god is a woman?*

"Why not? It's how he sees it!"  
And then God belts out funky:

*Are we not above this?  
After all, am I not the God of the Old Testament?  
God who created the world!  
God who created the world!*

And then The Devil goes off:

*And, am I not the Devil?!  
The one and only Devil.  
Evil to the people,  
Booted out of Heaven,  
Working in a seven-11!*

The audience loves it! Eats it up!  
And a small trio of Gods sing backup,

*It's a dirty job, but somebody's got to do it.  
It's a dirty job, but somebody's got to do it.*

Eve cuts them off, and sings to God,

*With due respect  
For your high and might purpose  
These New Age Clown-Gods will usurp us!  
Man prays now to Gods of Gray!  
Gods of their own choosing.  
It's time to get back to black and white  
This yoga, mantra, touchy-feely  
Bullshit is too damn confusing!*

Ooooh... How they love to be goaded and egged on!  
And the band is playin' a funky, *funkadelicious, funk soup*,  
grooving like cobras on ecstasy. And the Devil screams out,  
with the backup singers,

*It's time to get back to black and white!  
It's time to get back to black and white!*

Then the band rocks while everybody thrashes around and  
suddenly, it's quiet again, but with the slightest hint of a high  
hat beat, God is saying, "bring it down, bring it way down."

*You miss the point*

*I have faith in this creation.  
 Mankind's better, better than ever.  
 It's the evolution of man  
 Mankind's notion of God has expanded  
 Even though it's not exactly the way that I planned it!*

And she lets him have it in the soft spot:

*You've lost your edge now  
 You sage burning Tao Cow  
 Excuse me if I stomp and shout  
 But you leave no doubt  
 The God of wrath has completely sold out!*

And the crowd goes nuts! They smell a good fight coming.  
 She goes on:

*Mankind's pathetic  
 Take any man; any old man,  
 and you dangle him over the frying pan  
 Just to see what he's made of.  
 Watch him do whatever he can.  
 And I guarantee you,  
 He'll be like a little baby  
 Goin' wee, wee, wee, wee, poor me.  
 Now That's the show I'd like to see!*

“What are you suggesting?”

“I'm suggesting we spend our time finding out if I'm right!”

“You can’t be serious.”  
“It would make me delirious!”  
“Find someone who has it all”  
“And toss that guy against the wall;

God, ponders for a moment, scrunching his forehead and putting his hand on his chin. The Devil, knowing she’s got the cat in the bag, puts out two hands as if to weigh the options, knowing the audience is right there with her.

*Einy meenie, miny moe,  
I know a guy who we both know.  
A cool, cool dude, who’s name is Joe.  
His heart is full of love  
He’s the opposite of poor and mean  
The perfect lead is a guy named Joe. Joe Bean*

And God says, “I know the guy, but the question is why?”  
“To prove I’m right.”

God gets right up next to her—takes her by the chin, and the audience leans in, “This is personal with you, a lover’s fight.

She smiles wickedly and says, “The stakes are high, I would agree, but this has more to do with you than me. You say the world is better off. And I completely disagree. His faith seems strong now, but give me just an hour, and his world will have turned sour. When things stop going his way and cease to be fun, he’ll reach for the razor, the knife or the gun, the gun or the knife!

“And to prove that I’m right he must simply chose life, is that it?” God asks, tongue firmly in cheek.

“That’s it, Old Man.”

“So let’s make it official,” and the music changes and the lights swivel and the drum rolls, and God steps downstage, facing the crazed audience and declares in long drawn out syllables, “The bet is on, and the show has begun!”

And as melodically and together as a bunch of outcast spirits, gods, and devils can be, they sing praises to the plot, and the devil and God shake hands to thunderous applause, and Joe Bean is woken up and pulled onstage in his pajamas through a back entrance that to him might just have been the bathroom door, and what might have been the mirror, reflecting a slightly worried and sleepless face, was really an audience of one hundred spirits smiling! “Bravo, Joe Bean!”

\* \* \*

## ~ CHAPTER 12 ~

Joe Bean’s personal enterprise at this point exists entirely in one building, which he calls, simply and modestly, “the warehouse.”

Because of his interest in music and media, he has invested heavily, in fact completely, in the notion that all media could and should be digitized and distributed for free on the internet. This is not a popular business idea, and Joe's altruism has created many enemies of those people who want to control profit from the media. Here is a filthy rich man, buying movies, books, educational programming, music, pictures, encyclopedias, and basically making it all available for nothing. The Bean online library is growing, and all of it is stored here at the warehouse.

Also, Joe's business rents the extra memory on its server space to paying customers like Microsoft, AT & T, the U.S. Military, and on and on. They rely on Bean for their data protection. It was ironic: Joe Bean, A man who doesn't really like email, who still carries legal pads around with him, is in charge of the largest data storage facility on the west coast.

"Shouldn't you diversify? You know, spread out your investments a little bit there, Buddy?" Richard asks him down at the bar one day. Joe shoot back, "The only investment I want to make is philanthropy. I want to give it all away. I don't want to support the same system that's killing us by investing in this stupid lottery we call the stock market! I mean, the only way to fight it is to just *give!* It's the one card we can play against the Man—"

"—And by that you mean the corporate elite?"

"Right—they don't know what to do with that! Giving it all away is scary. It frightens and confuses them. But it's the only way we're going to save this situation—and by that I mean save the world." When he says this last part he takes on a Gene

Wilder manic glint in his eye. And then laughs.

“But Buddy,” Richard continued, “havin’ all your money in that one place s risky. I’m just sayin’: spread it out a little bit, Man. That’s all.”

But Joe hadn’t. It was all there. So when the bomb goes off, it’s wreckage on many levels. No one is quite sure what the bomber’s motives are. After all, only two days prior, Joe Bean had led a high profile rally against the war. Sara had not attended the made-for-TV event on the steps of the Federal Building. It began with an address by Washington’s outspoken progressive governor, who blasted the D.C. war machine, and the care and cultivation the White House had taken to “make this war happen, come hell or high water.”

Local Native American poet, Sherman Alexie, told how, on the day after 9/11, he’d been standing on a street corner, and a truckload of rednecks had yelled at him, “go back where you came from!” Very funny.

Joe’s personal contribution had been a big song and dance number he directed and performed with the rest of the Bean clan.

*War, War, War, War*  
*Give me a lovely war*

Sang the Seattle Men’s Chorus, carrying pop guns and dressed in pink camouflage kilts.

*Fat Cats sit in Penthouse Pentagons*  
*Dreaming of toys their boys pull triggers on.*

*Yell it from the highest pyramid,  
Scream it from a pile of dung:  
We've run out of all our options  
And the hangman has been hung!*

And then a big push toward the audience with majorettes waving pink flags with dollar signs. Drum major in a George Bush mask.

*It's good versus evil  
It's black versus white  
It's love against anger  
It's wrong versus right  
If neither side can win we should fight on until the end  
That's War! War!*

Then the ranks broke and Joe appeared flanked by actors dressed in radiation suits, goin' "ooh ah, ooh, ah, ah..." And Joe had sung,

*I heard the big explosion  
A blinding flash of melody  
And then I got the notion  
That this could be a tragedy  
Don't need no records in the shelter  
To hear a radiation symphony  
A psychedelic smelter  
Blister me with harmony.*

Then flashes, explosions and a modern dance Butoh-style piece in slow motion. A group of dancers lift a person slowly head over heels into the audience. Bodies reach into the air for salvation, but there is none. The piece ends with the stage littered with destruction and a heavy silence. Then huge applause from the 10,000 or so watching from the street.

But some who watch are not so charmed. They know Joe's political and business beliefs. They had read the newspaper's reports about his son's marriage to a Muslim girl. They feel threatened and angry toward this man who had achieved the American Dream and wanted to throw it away.

Later, others will speculate that it was these disenfranchised white men who were responsible for the bombing which destroyed 10,000 terabytes of memory and a huge store of books, films, master tapes, paintings, and the entirety of Joe Bean's fortune.

But the real story is that a young woman held the blasting canister herself, and real 'cartoon-like' pushed the plunger like Yosemite Sam, teeth clenched, saying, "I'll get ya, ya durn rabbit!"

And back at the theater, God recites to a rapt audience a little poem She'd written years before.

*Tragedy has a funny way of testing man's devotion  
For he who in his daily life might never ever pray  
Will say a 'Hail Mary' when a bomb comes his way.*

\* \* \*

❧ CHAPTER 13 ❧

The next weeks are the most difficult in the all years of Sara's life. It's an understatement to say that things are a blur.

During the day, the Beans face a barrage of insurance agents, deal with a comic deluge of sympathy cards, and suffer through endless and enduring phone calls.

At night, it is the spectators, watching Sara like...gods. Silently, leering at the recurring stories of poverty she stars in.

Her dumb-show of catastrophe: A coffee making accident that becomes a Charlie Chaplin bit. A silent movie where the neighbors are buying *her* furniture and talking about her as if she isn't there.

And more terrifying ones, where she's not able to support her family. Where she is so hungry she starts hoarding bread, so she can survive longer.

Then every day, when she wakes up, Sara thanks God that her reality is more inviting than continuing to sleep.

\* \* \*

The Bean's are slowly realizing that they have lost everything. Law suits brought by the companies who had used the Bean servers are swift and frightening. And no amount of money can buy them off. Though Joe is the sole owner of his company, he has not insured himself or any of it, and as hard

as his accountants tried to pull him out of it and compensate the Big Boys by selling the Bean's assets, there just isn't enough.

One day it's all over.

As the Beans stand next to the 'For Sale' sign on their beautiful home, they watch as every item they own, love, or had ever touched is brought out to the lawn to be itemized, and either priced or readied for auction. Calm on the surface, Joe can feel the stunned pounding of his heart in his temple.

*Things, they're just things,*

He says to himself over and over.

*Things, things, thing-a-ma-jigs*

*Things they're only things...*

And the kids are saying, "No, no, they can't take that! Please, Not that!

And the Repo Man—God of Materialism takes the stage. Young, vibrant, covered in gold and fur, and wearing a diamond studded hat. He says,

*Bankruptcy, it's just a hiccup, see*

*We'll have you back on your feet*

*Credit card within a week,*

*But for now we'll take the SUV,*

*It once belonged to you and now belongs to me*

And that is how the cookie crumbles, how the lowdown goes down, how the 'ship hits the land.'

\* \* \*

Joe's perception, in hindsight, is something like this:

A dapper rapper gold-chain-studded-sunglass-freakshow, accompanied by a small army of realtors, accountants, and bankers, gets out of their Lexus/Lincoln/Porsches and do the soft-shoe on my property and suddenly it isn't *mine no mo'*. And the back up singers sing: "Hit the road Joe."

And The realtors sing and everyone joins in,

*Mr. Repo Man,  
He's here to take it back again  
Mr. Repo Man. Mr. Repo Man.*

And the Repo Man comes down and soft-shoe-slides up to one of the neighbor's babies and steals some candy while he's scratchin' that little fat chin, and he says,

*Hey! Hey!  
I'm slashin' half off everything  
Get it while it's hot, hot!  
Diamond ring, sure thing, can you sing?  
Get it for a song.*

*Mr. Repo man, he's here to take it back again,*

The neighbors stare shamelessly, "What a shame."

Rez sees her red umbrella lying in a box. "Dad, please, can I get it? Please?" And Joe digs into his pocket to find a bill, and pays it directly to the staring, grinning, Repo Man, who looks him right in the eye. There is a shock of recognition between them, as Repo Man laughs and ceremoniously presents the umbrella to Joe, who gives it to Rez.

*We're blowing everything out at funeral prices  
Here at the Bean house!*

He yells.

And the show goes on, neighbors keeping their distance until the sale starts, then they converge like hungry lions at a kill, an odd dance of gossip, guilt and day-after-Christmas-sale fever.

"I hear—shh!"

*I hear the Bean family is out on their ass!  
I hear they lost it all  
A bomb took out his whole building  
nothing left but a hole!  
Everything he had was invested right here!  
Didn't he have insurance?  
He didn't believe in it...*

Shame and scandal are crazed, nutty bedfellows, and *Shadenfreude* is their perverted uncle. And when greed and

gluttony are the drink of choice, it's not pretty. Not pretty at all.

"A Chipendale for \$100 bucks!" Someone whispers. "An 80-year old oriental for a grand," between clenched teeth. "I can't believe this,"

The Beans watch and chat with the same neighbors, who whole-heartedly offer to help, between purchases. Joe tells them all the same thing, with a smile: that money had come and that money had gone,

That a man was a man who wasn't afraid to start at the bottom and work himself up. Frying pan, or no frying pan.

And the afternoon goes on like musical chairs, the greedy hands of time grabbing what they can.

*I hear they're sleeping in a shelter.  
I'd take him in but his pride won't let him  
It's a shame. ( It's a damn shame.)  
It's a cryin' shame. (It's a crying shame.)  
He said they could take the shirt off his back  
And he'd bounce right back!*

"I don't know" they say, shaking their heads in wonder, loading the wagon with lawnmowers and skill saws, a grand piano, guitar, bass, and drums. Sara cries as she watches her Bean Family Orchestra being driven into the sunset.

"I don't know" they say, fitting a ping pong table onto the roof of a van...

"I don't know" the neighbors agree, moving huge couches into trucks or quickly stashing boxes of dress shoes in the

front seat.

“I just don’t know.” Joe says, looking into Sara’s eyes as they get into a friend’s old station wagon, on loan to them for a week or so, and head toward the city, and the community shelter, where they will start a new life from scratch.

\* \* \*

## ~ CHAPTER 14 ~

Later, Joe sits at a downtown dive bar with Richard. Richard had offered to buy Joe a drink. He had been walking up First Ave with a duffel bag when Richard spotted him. And here they are now, sitting, and nursing beers at their favorite spot, The Family Affair, home of theater people and hard-working people alike, and Joe has been doing his best to tell the story.

Richard is thoughtful. His advice: “Borrow 200 grand from one of your rich friends and buy a scallop boat! It’s a great investment. I’d say in 2 years—in 3 years—you’ll be sittin’

pretty with 2 million dollars and your wife happy...”

And Joe listens absently, staring into space. His security blanket gone. All that toughness and faith he'd projected during the past week has dissolved, suddenly, washed away. Maybe he's full of crap. A lucky bastard who'd had his 15 minutes and had entirely blown it. *What are you? Who are you now?* He asks himself. The cheap beer in front of him grows warm and Richard is finally silent, pensive, trying to stay out of the way, while Joe thinks through his greatest moment of self doubt. He thinks about his young son, probably scared to death, part of the greatest killing machine the world had ever seen, and so alone. The thought makes Joe shiver. Has he ever really considered not having a penny? Having a son off to war? It's absurd. The stuff of his grandparents' generation, not his!

Joe looks askance at Richard, sitting there, nursing his beer. All this man has endured, through one bad fishing season after another. Sleeping on the street, divorce, children who he didn't speak to... Yet the man always, *always* has a kind, optimistic word.

*I need to do something now. Right now. Something to bust me out of this malaise.* Joe looks around the room and his slightly drunken eyes focus on the bar piano. Butterflies flutter in his stomach. Music. Music was what he needed, and what he always had to fall back on. He barely thought of it lately, but it is now, waiting.

Joe Bean grabs his beer and almost lunges to the piano, sitting down, he props the lid and feels his hands moving toward the saddest key of all. Not D Minor, as Nigel had proposed in *Spinal Tap*, but Eb Minor, certainly one half-step

sadder.

The patrons can tell something is about to happen and they throttle their conversations back and edge their bodies around to get a casual view.

Without forethought, Joe begins to sing:

*OK, I lost this round,  
But I'm standing her now with my feet on the ground  
They were trinkets & jewels  
Worthless crap put out for fools.*

He almost laughs out loud, the sheer rush of it. Look at me! Dad-gummit! Who's afraid of the Big Bad Wolf, not me, Baby!

*Life sets us up and traps us into thinkin'  
That our ship might not be sinking*

And suddenly they are there at his side—a couple of bums like him, nursing beers, singing right with him as if they'd been rehearsing for weeks in three-part harmo-nee... “But isn't that the story we are i-hii-hiinnnnn?”

Nice 7<sup>th</sup> chord! Like the old barbershop. Now take the “oohs” guys, and they do, while Joe sings on,

*OK, So let them take t all away  
You've got to die to be reborn  
You've got revolt before reform  
You burn like the Phoenix in the ashes*

*You suffer the thorns and the 39 lashes*

Then very quietly Joe sets them up for the punch line.

*You know it's true.*

Long pause.

*You gotta get up to get Down!*

*You gotta get down to get up!*

Major applause and cheers as the band (where did they come from?) kicks in loud and solid, and now Joe is rollin' and feels like Elton John. No--better than that--Neil Diamond! Freddy Mercury, Tom Jones even! Isn't that the guy who sang *What's New, Pussycat?* Ah, screw it! Who cares!?

*OK, So now I'm a poor man,  
But my soul's got plenty more, Man!  
And even though I'm all burned and dampened,  
Soot blackened  
I'll be damned if I slacken!  
I'll find a new way to pay off the rent  
I won't give in to livin' depressed  
I'm gonna get myself out of this mess  
My life's a gift, my family's a bow  
It's all I really count on, it's all I really know.*

One more time, everybody on the chorus!

*Ya gotta get up to get down!  
Ya gotta get down to get up!  
Ya gotta get down to get down!  
Ya gotta get up, Ya gotta get up to get—*

Then it's just pure madness as the band breaks into a frenetically paced gospel free-for-all. People up on tables. Up! Up! Got to get down to get Up!

*Joe Bean, Joe Bean,  
He's the coolest guy you've ever seen*

And Joe and Richard are crazy dancing arm in arm like little kids, throwing hands, feet, and soul into the air, and if Mick Jagger were here, he'd have the biggest smile on his face! And Joe Bean knows, everything is gonna be ok.

\* \* \*

## ACT II

## ~ CHAPTER 15 ~

The soothsayer in Sara had been seething lately. Like Joe, she'd accepted her new condition with very little *fussing and fighting*. The silly money had always been a gift. Now that it was gone, who knew? Maybe the nightmares will end. Up till now, though, they'd been more frightening than ever.

So, Sara decides to become proactive. She knows something 'supernatural' is happening. She also knows that red-haired woman at the wedding is somehow messing with the Beans. She doesn't know how, and she's afraid to directly confront her suspicion about Joe—the way they'd looked at each other. Finally, she gets up the guts to ask him.

"She did my tarot cards, at a little herb store upstairs, there, in the market." And that was all he says. Which doesn't help much. Sara knows enough to know how many empty sets could reside within her man's truths.

At another time, she prods again, and learns that Joe has had a mystical experience, a seizure, right after talking to this woman. *Well, that explains a lot...maybe.*

Then, finally, she gets somewhere.

"I think she represents some alternate life path." He grins, his coffee stained teeth shining off yellow, embarrassed. "Midlife crises?...Maybe? Maybe someone from a past life, like Cleopatra, who I fell in love with and we had a brief passionate affair, and then she had me jailed and later killed...maybe? Something disturbing anyway."

Sara wishes it were that stupidly simple. In her world, all that is mumbo jumbo.

“Why was she at the wedding is what I’d like to know.”

Joe shrugs. He has no answer, but decides for some reason not to tell her he’s seen the woman a few other times. Too complex. I’ll work it out myself, he thinks.

“I don’t like her, Joe. There’s something really weird about the whole thing.”

Joe can’t disagree.

Another thing that has been deeply bothering Sara was Rez’s experience in the little theater next to the wedding hall. She is sorry she hadn’t yet taken the time to investigate. Sara prods Rez that afternoon when they’re walking back from the ferry after school. Moon is walking ahead, talking loudly with herself about dresses she wished she had. Sara to Rez: “Honey, tell me again about the puppet place.”

“Well, they weren’t really puppets, they were more like characters. The house looked just like ours, Mom, and you push buttons and lights come on and things work and a guy talks with kind of *dee-deety-dee* music, like classical.”

“What do you mean, *things work*?” Sara plows on, trying not to show too much interest, trying to keep Rez talking quickly and freely.

“Like the ferry goes across the water. It was cool but kind of creepy. And there was a stage with red curtains, but I was too scared to stay for the show.”

“Scared?”

Rez looks ahead, and Sara can tell she’s far away. “What are you thinking about honey?”

Rez, replies to herself: *I was remembering this really weird thing that happened while we were still on Bainbridge. This*

woman was at the end of our driveway, and when I went into the house, it wasn't a house it was a stage like black and bricks and curtains, and guys were moving our tables and furniture around. But all she says is, "It's too stupid. You wouldn't believe me."

Sara will ask about that later. Moon was listening now. "Rez, you said that they said 'Joe Bean,' remember?"

"Yeah, the man did. The voice. It was Bible stuff. I don't remember anything, other than it had God and the Devil and the other character was Joe Bean."

"Mom," Moon says, with her most gently sarcastic irritated voice, "Don't you think that's way farfetched? I mean, if she's telling the truth it's way too weird."

"It happened!" Rez yelled, suddenly angry and almost violent. Tears are just about to start flowing so Sara turns the conversation to the upcoming school dance. Moon has been asked to go with some friends Sara knows are a bit on the wild side.

"Did you tell Dell that you're back here on the 10:30 boat?"

"Yeah, Mom, it's cool."

"It is? Good. Where are you going to eat?"

"Jenny White is working at *The Winslow Café*. She's getting us some special treatment. You know."

"Sounds fun."

As they near their current residence, an old Seattle church turned mission, the conversation dies.

*This is hard.* I know it's partly symbolic, Sara thinks, but the girls shouldn't have to live this kind of poverty.

As they pass the front desk the attendant looks up, a bit suspiciously, Sara thinks. They're all a bit suspicious here.

And why not? A white family—intact—mother, *father*. Seriously out of place. After they pass through the metal detector, the attendant buzzes them in.

A few men are sitting around on the couches in the “lobby” dozing, doing paperwork. Across, by a little kids’ play area, two young black mothers chat and watch their toddlers throw blocks, a shelf of hand-me-down books is spilled largely on the floor next to them.

“When do we get out of this place?” Moon whispers as she messes with the family locker.

“Soon, Honey. Your dad’s working today, so we should have a paycheck any day and we’ll be able to rent a place. Think of this as character building.” Sara forces a smile and Moon rolls her eyes as the lock opens with a pull.

\* \* \*

Two hours later, Joe is home and they’re eating at a large table with a big group of folks.

“This ain’t so bad, huh?”

“Not bad. Horrible, Dad,” Moon whines.

“It makes me want to drink and drive.” She adds dryly.

“Oh, come on!” Joe laughs, “You can *see* crazy from here, but it doesn’t mean you have to *go* there!”

“Funny, Dad.” Rez laughs in support.

“Thanks, Honey.”

“How about this one.” Joe says, wiping his mouth and setting the napkin on the plate. “Pain is inevitable, but suffering is optional!”

“Who-hoo! self-help Guru speaks.” Moon waves a spoon in the air, “Break out the incense!”

“What’s ‘inevitable?’” Rez squeaks.

“Dad, can we please walk on hot coals, now? I’m bored?”

“You think I’m *kidding* don’t you?” Joe does seem a little indignant. “But this (pointing around the room), this is nothing! Just think about all those who have gone before us...” And like an orator now, he stands and holds up one finger. “Think of all those who suffered, died and were buried.”

“I know who you’re talking about, Dad! Jesus! Right Dad?” Rez beams at him with a beatific smile.

“No Honey,” Joe places a hand on her angelic head, “I’m talking about *Mugsie*: the greatest dog who ever lived!”

Cue an old bum at the rickety upright piano. He looks at Joe smiling, and plays an arpeggiated chord. The conversation has stopped and all eyes are on Joe Bean, who gracefully breaks into *Sprechgesang*.

*Ahem...That dog he never shed a tear  
That dog he never cried  
And all the stars above him  
knew how much we loved him*

The Bean Family Von Trapp, minus Sara, who is brooding and not in the mood. Harmonize the next bit with cheesy grins

and leaning in, barber shop style.

*Loved him till the day he died*

Joe glances over at Stan who smiles as he lifts his upright bass in readiness, and at Ollie who flips brushes and sits with his old suitcase in his lap.

*He was a happy dog!*

And they're off. Boom-chakka-boom-chakka-boom-chakka-boom.

As the table is cleared, the Beans knock out choreography that seems pre-rehearsed and contrived, yet at the same time organic, natural and somehow unexpected.

MOON:

*There never was a dog who got so many hugs.*

SARA (Grudgingly, as the music stops for the punchline):

*There never were intestines with so many bugs!*

REZ:

*Mamma Mia, Diarrhea, had the cancer in his—*  
(hands covering her mouth suddenly)

ALL:

*—But... there never was a happier mutt*

JOE:

*He was a happy dog!*

MOON and DWEEZIL and REZ:

*Laughing while our Mugsie humped the Chipendale and Tudor*

SARA:

*Until we lost our patience  
and we had our Mugsy neutered.*

JOE:

*He was the most contented dog,  
To ever eat a turkey or a Christmas Log*

ALL:

*Couldn't smell to find a bone  
Couldn't stand to be alone  
Spent his last years fully blind  
But Lucky Mugsie didn't seem to mind.*

Now the other folks eating and watching laugh and smile as the song's formula takes hold. Sara, tired and eyes rolling is prodded to join in, but doesn't yet.

"C'mon, Mom!"

"C'mon, Sara, do the Mugsie!"

"No," she says adamantly, "No, I said...Oh...All right!"

And as the dance hits another level, with Sara joining in, barking to the tune of Louie, Louie, every smile cheesily and laughs when the music changes to a darker tone and Sara's wails are like a dog in extreme pain. The Bean family hits the chorus like a Mac Truck in reverse:

*Oh, why to bad things happen to good dogs  
Why did god give him breath  
Like a bullfrogs?  
Why do cars run over man's best friend?  
And do it over and over, and over again?  
Still our Mugsie had a grin,  
No matter what shape he was in.  
And just when he was on the mend  
It was ringworm finally got him in the end!*

Big finish!

*Flaccid bowels and bloody towels  
Used a dropper to give him sips  
The vet said that it might be worms  
On no uncertain, certain terms  
We'd let him lick our faces even though  
We knew he'd maybe give up germs in awful places*

And Joe wraps it up with a little soliloquy:

*So if you dogs just can't relate  
You're all hung up on Mugsie's fate  
You've got to keep it in perspective,  
Got to keep it all objective  
No matter how bad it gets  
No mater how many trips to the vets  
You're always...a lucky dog.*

The chords build and rise toward the final “Shave and a haircut” style ending which is instead:

*It’s a dog’s life! Arff! Arff!*

And just like a movie musical there is a beat of silence, then the scene dissolves into semi-forced laughter.

As the camera pulls back to reveal the dinner table and the shelter we see that it is a set on a theater, and pulling back further still we see that it is a miniature diorama and that the spirits, gods and devils observe it from near darkness. They laugh and smile, enjoying themselves immensely and they scream, “Bravo!” and “hooray for Joe Bean!” and “Joe Bean, he’s our Everyman! If he can’t do it, no one can!”

\* \* \*

## ❧ CHAPTER 16 ❧

Walking through the market the following day, Sara understands why Joe feels at home here. Something draws the

Native Americans here in great numbers. Maybe it's the totem poles that welcome, or the sign etched with Coast Salish poetry. "The street is our home now..."

Sara sees an Indian with a beer in his hand tip his head back and let out a ferocious yell. It's unearthly to see someone from a race, normally so reserved, so ... *Alive*.

Joe had tried to explain to her that spirit was everywhere. That the Indians lived more closely to the spirit world. Whether they liked it or not.

She thought of a story he'd told her a few times in that calm, slow way she'd come to associate with native storytelling.

*A long time ago...*  
*A long time ago...*  
*The Mountains thought they were People...*  
*A long time ago...*  
*A long time ago...*  
*The Fish and Whales thought they were People...*  
*A long time ago...*  
*A long time ago...*  
*The Birds and the Trees and the Animals*  
*thought they were People.*  
*And someday they will say...*  
*A long time ago...*  
*A long time ago...*  
*The Humans thought they were People.*  
*And that is all.*

It was strange to think that the tribal names like Lummi or Suquamish usually translated directly as, simply, "*human*"

*being person*". She could only guess what it was like to be jarred and barred from a world where man was *that* in touch with the 3<sup>rd</sup> world, as Joe called it. To be swept into the 4<sup>th</sup> world and all its contrivances of modern day, and feel the sickness of the world and remember the old world too. Impossible to really know.

And Joe on the native drinking problem: "Think of it this way: we're spirit already. It's like that feeling of being vulnerable and high already. So, when you add the alcohol it's pure rocket fuel, Baby!"

Sara passes the brass pig under the famous Pike Market Clock, and slides past bodies, past the fish vendors to the first floor recesses of the covered market area, and up a set of stairs to the herb store on the top floor.

The sign says,

### *Tenzing Momo*

*If it were easy to shop here, anyone could do it*

Sara smiles, though she's a nervous wreck. Like Daniel approaching the Lion's Den. "Oh God, please, please Lord, let this be the right thing to do."

Inside the store is a nice looking New-Agey sort of fellow with closely cropped grey hair, tattoos, hoop earrings, and bifocals. He has the sort of taught good looks you find in older guys who spend a lot of time on themselves. His gaze is serious and warm, and he folds up the book he's been reading to give Sara his full attention. Then he smiles, understanding her somehow. It is unnerving.

Sara moves around the store pretending, waiting. She can't help but look at things: Herbs, mimosa, snapdragons, peonies. It's all coming back. She has always been drawn to things of nature like candy. As a child, she'd grown toadstools in chamber pots, hadn't she? *Dead man's finger* in the bathtub. And at times, she had wished she smoked a pipe and owned a monkey. She'd often found herself collecting glass jars of rutabagas and stinging nettles, and like every child (she thought.) Sometimes she had wished her house was made of gingerbread.

She found herself suddenly fondling a jar, "deadly nightshade." She quickly put it back on the shelf next to "difficult" Foxglove, "lovely" chive, "sweet" Rosemarie, "frisky" catmint, "sly" monk's hood, and "Lusty" liverwort. It was all so real, and strange words and recipes (?) flooded her, suddenly. *Thorn-thicket-chicken-legs-black-coal—NO!* She panicked. Not those.

*Dear God,  
shut out unnecessary thoughts  
Protect me from Evil  
And I shall live for thee, Lord*

Sara is quick to speak: "I'm looking for a woman, young, short red hair, pretty. She works here, I believe..." She falters, seeing nothing like recognition in the man's expression.

"Hmmm. Don't think so. The only other person right now is George, every other day from, like 10 to 2, and then again for a few hours, depending." He can see her disappointment.

Almost panic. “Sorry about that. When was this? Recently?”

“Yes,” she says. “Maybe a month ago, I think. Sorry to have bothered you. Thanks.” Sara is flustered, She turns quickly, feeling her face with her hand. It feels as if someone is laughing at her. She moves quickly, trying to calm herself with a lullaby,

*Sleep, Baby Sleep  
Thy father guards the sheep  
The mother rocks the dreamland tree,  
Sleep, Baby sleep.*

She felt the age of the lullaby. An old witch song...She was dreaming, suddenly.

Hinx, Minx,  
The fat begins to fry  
There’s nobody home, but jumpin’ Joan  
And father and mother and I  
Stick stock, stone dead...

Sara sees herself rocking Rez. Back and forth. Then, pried from the baby by an angry mob—she looks up frightened, and runs.

She darts through the crowd, bumping into tourists who amble and gawk, trying desperately to get to the street before the panic can really take hold. Finally, she stops and breathes deeply, the exhalation becoming a force field around her. *Doesn’t work there. OK. What does that mean? Joe wouldn’t lie to me would he? No. He wouldn’t. He’s incapable.*

She knew this was true. She'd always caught Joe easily before—every time. He lied like a 6-year old!

So, what is going on!

Sara thinks of going back in and talking to the proprietor again. What will she say? “Are you a good witch or a bad witch?” *That’s a start.* “Scuse me, Sir, I’m really upset because my husband is seeing a woman who was pretending to work here...” Forget it. Or, maybe, “Do you have any herbs, spells, potions, maybe, that will ward off evil?...” This isn’t that farfetched. She knows that there are people who make careers of “cleansing”. In fact, Joe’s cousin had done it for years. Just a handful of sage and lots of “Heyas...” a day keeps the doctor away... She is suddenly very depressed. An overwhelming sense of fatigue and maybe even a bit of guilt mixed in.

*What sorts of paranoid wacko thoughts are these here, for a good Christian?* She chastises herself. In the distance, She hears a gospel group singing and moves toward the sound.

*Shut ‘de do’, keep out ‘de Debil  
Shut ‘do do’,  
Keep ‘de debil outside...*

These must be the guys Joe is always raving about. The Apostles. *C’mon, Sara, let God guide your game. The Lord is on your side. Let Jesus do his work.*

She watches for a while and stares at the eye. Transfixed. Then she boards a bus and headed to Capitol Hill to the Multipurpose Center. One more thing to do. Sara grits her teeth. Dear heavenly father, thy will be done. Thy will not my

will. *Thine. I am going to fight this darkness. And I am going to win.*

Sara stands outside the Center. It is a hundred years old. Beautiful stonework. Totally out of place on the hill. Not ten feet from it, street kids smoke cloves and compare tattoos and beg for latte money from suckers. She reads the sign: “Old Testament Theater: Event Planning, call Eve” and then a number. And below that: “Welcome, Sunday School classes!

Sara wonders if they’ll be open at 11:00 on a Tuesday, and she climbs the stairs finding the door open. It swings inward easily when Sara pushes. I shouldn’t be here. Like the stupid girl in a slasher film. Turn back before it’s too late!

It is too late. Sara hears the door close behind her. She is in a small theater lobby, lights dim, tiny par cans illuminating and highlighting various corners and cubbies. The place has a mysterious quality, and Sara feels a childish rush of excitement as she moves toward the old-fashioned ticket window. No one around. That’s strange. A curtain is pulled across behind the glass.

She walks toward the first diorama, slowly. Hesitantly, and reads the sign. “War: an exposition” The glass cabinet is dark, but a big red button beckons her with a “Push me” sign. She does. Tinny music. And a male voice narrates, as one by one, tiny lights begin to illuminate the scene. A war scene to be sure, but unlike Sara’s preconceived notions. This is a desert town. Men, women, and children crowd the streets. The soldiers all seem to be dressed alike, mostly dessert camouflage. The voice speaks poetically and positively of the war, *like a pep rally speech*, Sara thinks. The little characters

are very intricate and beautiful. The overwhelmingly frightening thing is how the soldiers are surrounded and crowded by people—the sheer number of *people*. Like a festival-type crowd. So *scary*. She thought. *Sun! Scud! My baby!* And she's struck with a pang of grief and panic as she realizes how frightened he could be right now, never for *one second* sure that one of these people isn't going to be blowing him to smithereens. She begins to feel the tears welling in her throat and eyes.

Finally, She moves on to the next diorama. It's a mass grave. The small characters are frozen in the process of removing children from a flatbed and throwing them into the grave. The stunning thing about this scene is certainly the overwhelming presence of the women who stand, kneel, weep, both prostrate and with hands in the air. As the obviously Eastern music comes through a loud speaker, Sara is horrified to hear the wailing and crying and bloody screaming. Too much. Who made this exhibit, and why? It's too cruel.

The final Diorama was a US press conference at the White House. The president's voice came through a speaker and Sara was hard-pressed to stay and listen. It was ghastly.

*What separates us from the enemy is that we value life  
And our enemies value none*

I get the point. *I get it!* The diorama's lights click off one by one. And the theater light begin to dim. Sara is drawn to a small stage in the opposite corner, where slowly and mechanically the curtain opens to reveal a group of half-sized

wax figures. The same women Sara had just seen. Veiled, Robed, frozen in the throes of anguish.

One moves. Sara stares, startled. How is this possible? It couldn't be a real person, but it seems so real. The little woman lifts her veil and, looks directly at Sara, who stares transfixed, hypnotized, as the woman begins to sing,

*Only a mother can tell this story  
Only a drum can sound this scene  
Blind tragedies of hope and glory  
Now the deaths begin  
Begin with Scud in a foreign lace  
Begin with the beans, happy but lost  
Start with ignorance and end with fact  
Start with the blows of the golden axe.*

Then the room comes to life with the sound of a thousand women making that strange sound, part song, part war cry, part liberation, part lament. It is as if 1000 tiny speakers project it, and then suddenly she begins to dissolve, and Sara felt herself slipping into a singular insanity that she knows, beyond a doubt, will never leave her. The chorus of women sing:

*What was living will die  
What was cherished will not survive.*

And, as Sara, who has now collapsed on the floor, weeps, the room grows quiet and still again, and the tiny woman comes and places her hand on Sara's heaving shoulders, and

sings,

*Filaments of love, bind this story  
So fine you might not see them  
Only a mother's grief and glory  
Her heart beats like a drum  
The eternal story...*

Then it is deathly quiet. Sara no longer feels the tiny hand on her shoulder. Looking up, she sees that the room is empty. Not just empty, but completely void of anything. Blackness. She is in a totally empty space.

Slowly, as Sara puts her head in her hands and sobs, the walls of the shelter are lowered around her, and the ratty lobby furniture as well. Stunned, weary, Sara picks herself off the floor and collapses on the couch. Then, pulling a blanket over herself, she falls immediately into a deep sleep.

\* \* \*

## ~ CHAPTER 17 ~

Some time later, Sara wakes to the sound of traffic outside. City traffic.

“Mommy, look outside.” It’s Rez talking, “Two soldiers.

Aren't those guys Scud's friends? They're coming over here.

Sara sits up with a jolt. Joe is reading in a lounge chair across from her. Is about 10 feet away, playing Solitaire at a table. Sara stands up to join Rez at the window. The soldier boys weave through traffic as they cross the street and hesitate before pushing open the door.

"We heard you were here," one of them says to her.

"We're very sorry," the other one says.

Joe shakes hands with them, as does Sara, who looks at them expectantly, searching, searching.

"Why are you here?" she asked, an unwanted shrill quality creeping into her voice.

"Why aren't you with Scud?"

"We came to tell you," says the other.

The image of the tiny woman comes flooding back to Sara, and she feels suddenly faint. What did the little woman say? Joe tries to take Sara in his arms, but she raves at the soldiers, "What did she mean! Why are you here!"

And slowly, ever so slowly, the realization is sinking in, and the walls are raising again and the Beans are moving in slow motion now.

\* \* \*

On stage, one minute equals one second, and the Two Soldier Boys find themselves in front of a desert village backdrop and backup singers dressed like angels appear. The lights are thoroughly inappropriate MTV concert-style lights and the Beans are onstage now too, and spirits, gods, and devils look on and the boys say all hip hop:

*Yo! This is the White House mix  
So come on up and get your fix.*

And the band busts into a tight groove that is part techno, part electronica and somewhat orchestrated. And the soldiers rap:

*Back from K.P. we were just chillin' till duty,  
Took his back, pulled the slack  
While Scud went lookin' for some booty  
Saw a sari girl, this is the third world  
He got adrenaline  
He got his glory in the end, Yo!*

Joe is reaching now for Sara, in slow motion, but she is somehow far away, for the audience his movements are so slow that they are barely perceptible. Scud struts on stage. A rock star. A superhero. Gods reach for him from the audience, but he is invincible and unreachable: an immortal hero.

The music reaches a new height and the drums are thundering. While Scud *throws down*, the angels sing and place hands on Sara's upturned face trying to comfort as they sing the tragic news:

*We're so sad. We're so sad  
We're so sorry. We're so sorry  
Not a lot we can say,  
Friendly fire that's the story  
Black smoke. Stop Scud!*

*Couldn't see. Burning tires,  
Scud got popped, popped.  
It was not our desire-ire*

Then there is another musical shift again as the scene becomes more vivid, violent, three dimensional. It is almost like we are there. Soldiers are all around us. Shots are fired overhead, black clouds of smoke occasionally drift, blocking vision. General panic as many soldiers sing in formation, dance almost:

*We had the hummer doin' muckas it was ruckas  
We were shootin' at the shieks and they were  
Shootin' back at us  
We got the order not to shoot  
And to dispatch with the chemical suits  
While Scud was preachin' to the choir  
When a round of Friendly Fire  
Came across the dunes,  
It was from our own platoon*

Now the soldiers gather around Scud, who is shot and down after his big finish.

*The chaplain told us all to pray  
And Scud told us what to say  
He didn't mind, he didn't mind it that way  
He didn't mind, he didn't mind it that way*

As the craziness dies down, Scud is covered and slowly

picked up by a group of soldiers and taken off into the distance as the back up singers sing the chorus again:

*We're so sad. We're so sad  
We're so sorry. We're so sorry  
Not a lot we can say,  
Friendly fire that's the story  
Black smoke. Stop Scud!  
Couldn't see. Burning tires,*

And *boom*, it's over. Blackout, except for a single spot which illuminates the Beans as they cling together, crying, wailing, only Joe turns to meet eyes with the two soldier boys who back humbly away, out on the street and onto the bus that will return them to the base.

\* \* \*

Later, after the funeral Joe cannot grieve. *How could he possibly?* There is too much work to do. He can't fold up and escape. Just not possible.

Sara, on the other hand, seems to be doing nothing but grieving. Wailing, moaning, praying, feeling. Joe feels miles away from her.

Joe is working two jobs now. One at the office of a friend, managing, filing, basic busywork, while he “finds something worthy of his talents”, but Joe himself isn’t sure what those talents are now.

And the second job is at a carpet warehouse, with his friend Richard, cleaning the place at night. The job consists of using a forklift, which has a joisting pole-like appendage on the front, to move big carpet remnants around.

The two friend blast the tunes, and for Joe, it’s the only enjoyable six hours of his day. Each day the two finish around midnight and go down to Richard’s hang out dive, which also doubles by day as a thrift store. It was called “The Poverty Barn,” and makes no pretense to be anything other than a hole for has-beens, washouts, lonely travelers, alcoholics, wasteoids, and serious actors and musicians. Joe loves it. Somehow he feels he deserves to spend time in a place like this.

“Dude, ya gotta let this go. It’s really, really not your fault. Scud was an adult. He chose his destiny, just like I choose mine. We get what we pay for.”

“You think Scud had any idea what was going to happen to him? Do you think for a minute that he, Sun Joseph Tom Bean, would take a bullet? No. He thought it was gonna be a video game. I know he did. I should have forced him not to do it. Could have. Shot him in the kneecaps, right after the wedding. *Anything* to have kept him out. What’s it for? What did he die for? So Halliburton could make billion of dollars, that’s why. So the people in power, stay in power.”

“Ya got that right, Brother.”

Meanwhile, God is studying Joe Bean through a peephole and Joe doesn't know, can't feel it. In fact all the paintings in the bar have eyes looking through eyeholes. But they will never know.

Richard suddenly says, “Hey Joe! Woman at the other end of the bar. Seems to be lookin' at you.”

Joe avoids turning for the requisite seconds, and then, as if both stretching and absently scanning the room, turns around to see. It's her. She's sipping through a straw. Smiling at him.

Next to her is a heavy black down coat and a backpack. She looks very young.

“Richard, I think I need to talk to this person. ‘Scuse me for a moment, won't you?”

“You watch your ass, friend. That's all I can say. Don't do anything stupid, and I'll wait right here...” but Joe is already out of earshot.

Toward her, he moves, self-consciously, floating. He stands there for a while, while she looks at him. Big eyes. Sobriquet. He sits down.

“Why do I keep seeing you? What are you doing?” he implores.

Her answer is a sigh.

And in that sigh is everything Joe Bean needs to hear, but can't bear.

He feels the tears come to his eyes and, for some reason, he wants to tell her everything. The complexity of his feelings.

The pain of losing Scud. How beautiful she is. How awful and awesome is life, but instead, the tears roll down his cheeks, and she puts her hand on top of his and sends a current into him that grabs his soul and caresses it. Joe feels, at that moment, closer to her than he has ever felt to any person.

He stares at her desperately, afraid she will move, and time passes, and Richard, who watches out of the corner of his eye, waits patiently, finally giving up and goes home, saying to no one but himself, "Buddy, you make it, you lie in it..." Joe doesn't even see him go.

At some point during the night Joe Bean realizes that he has made love with the woman.

His worst moment is not the *awareness* that Sara will need to know, but that this woman will let go of his hand, and once again, he will return to his life, alone, without her.

Joe walks with his head down through the December wind. Home to the small apartment he rents week to week now. When he gets to the front door, he takes off his coat and hangs it next to the girl's coats.

There is Rez's red umbrella also, with the wooden handle. He touches the umbrella for a moment before heading slowly toward his bedroom. When he slides in bed, Sara stirs briefly, barely waking from her own nightmare, to cuddle against him. And Joe closes his eyes and is asleep.

\* \* \*

## ❧ CHAPTER 19 ❧

God is sweeping the little theater, when the Devil arrives, smiling and cocky. She plops her backpack into one of the theater seats, slumps herself down, and gloats as she puts her feet up on a theater cube, clicking her toes together absently.

Eventually God says, “Things going the way you planned, I bet?”

“I wouldn’t bet again if I were you, Old Woman.” she says.

“I have to tell you,” God Almighty says, “I just don’t know if I have the heart for this sort of stuff anymore. I don’t feel vengeful. I don’t feel wrath, I don’t feel competitive and frankly, I’ve forgotten the point of all this nonsense. Let’s just end it now. We’ll call it a draw.” She looked at Eve, and waits with raised eyebrow.

Eve bites her lip. Nodding and holding back a slight smirk. “I see.”

“Scuse me?” God says.

“You’re pathetic. You’re pathetic.”

God turns suddenly.

“Madame, how can *you* judge me?”

The Devil listens then, each second loosing a bit of her grin.

God Almighty continues.

“A long time ago you were my life, you were my companion, and we were equals. Now your soul is frozen.”

She flinches.

“You’re stuck.”

Eve can feel deep scars beginning to ache.

“*The eternal trickster* you think you are, but frankly you have no real motivation for what you do. You do it because you can.”

Then God softens, seeing how her words are affecting the young woman, but also not able to resist. God, too, had been hurt in the split.

“You do it because you’re bored and want me to love you, don’t you?” God says.

“Do you?” Eve asks.

God Almighty looks up, and their eyes meet.

“Once you were personable. Once you had purpose. I did love you. Now, Baby, you just a bad egg. Nobody love you. Not even God.”

The words fell in the room like tranquilized elephants. The Old Woman stands looking at her old friend for a long while, then softly says:

“Someday they will say. A long time ago, the Devil thought she was a person.”

Eve sniffs, weak for just a moment, then hardens. “The damn bet’s still on,” she says, and she leaves the theater quickly.

\* \* \*

## ❧ CHAPTER 20 ❧

“You know,” Richard says, at work the next day, “Every single culture known to man has a character like you. In the Constantinian bible it’s Job, In Hindu bible, it’s Elwi, in the Quran it’s J’ba, and on and on and on.

“How do you know this stuff, Richard? Aren’t you supposed to be ‘uneducated’?”

“Oh, sorry, how about them Mariners? Hey, let’s fork some carpet here!”

Thankfully, Richard doesn’t ask about the previous night, so Joe is spared having to give up the details. But still, he knows Richard know, and it irks him to his soul.

“How’s Sara, Joe?” Richard asks an hour or two later.

“She’s OK. The doctor’s got her on Paxel, or Zolof, or some stuff like that. I wouldn’t take that kinda crap if you shoved it down my throat, but she’s not coping too well these days, so I guess it’s the right thing. I don’t know, though.”

“And how *you* doin’, Man?” Richard is finally starting to dig for dirt.

“I’m good, Man. Hangin’ in there.”

Richard laughs. “That’s good, hangin’ in there, like the little kitty from the poster. ‘*Hang in there, Baby!*’”

Joe passes on the beers tonight and goes straight home in

hopes of catching Sara up.

She is.

They sit across the small kitchen table drinking tea, and the long silence is like a visible fog which stirs and waits as they finger their teacups. Finally, Joe speaks.

“Sara, I’ve got something to say that’s not what you want to hear right now.” Bad start. He breathes deeply.

“Say it,” She says.

“I slept with somebody.” There is an interminable silence.

Joe looks at Sara. She has a stiff lip, but Joe can tell the words have been an immediate, visceral slap to her.

“Who?” she asks quietly, almost choking on the word, her head becoming suddenly cloudy. But she knows who, and feels him saying it before he speaks.

“That girl from the wedding. You asked me about her—“

Sara interrupts, “—No, Joe, you didn’t sleep with *somebody*... You didn’t. You slept with *something*. Something that is going to destroy us.”

He is stunned. Doesn’t know what to say. Has no idea.

Sara licks her lips as and speaks slowly, as someone far, far away, “I suppose you’re going to say now that it will never happen again...”

A long silence. Sara sniffs and takes a drink of Tea, bleary eyed, then she manages a deep breath and says, “I’m a complex person, Joe. More than even *you* know, I’ve got my own problems right now. I’m losing it. Joe, I’m really losing it. My faith, in you and more important than you, in God. And right now I’m just trying to find it again. I don’t feel a lot of love right now. I don’t feel angry or bitter, I don’t even feel

afraid anymore. I barely feel disappointed even, but I know I am. Way more in my God, than in you. The same God that I have prayed to every day since I was a little girl has broken my heart. What you did is just chicken shit compared to that. And you're chicken shit for doing it."

She holds the silence after her as a weapon covered with blood. Joe finds himself staring at nothing for what seems eternity. Finally, Sara puts her hand on Joes saying,

"I can't even cry anymore, so when I can pray again maybe I'll pray for you and our relationship and ask God to have a little damn bit of mercy on us!"

She is suddenly loud and direct in a way Joe has never seen. She softens, again, beaten down, "But for now, I just gotta sleep, OK?"

She gets up. Very wobbly and soft. Joe can't move to help her. He is too stunned and devastated, so he just sits and stares.

The last thing she says is, "The couch is yours should you want it." And Sara disappears into the bedroom, leaving Joe to sleep in the bed he has made.

\* \* \*

The next morning Joe wakes to the sound of the Moon's voice in the kitchen. Sara is pleading, "Where are you going, honey?"

Joe can hear his daughter, slamming around the kitchen. "Tonight's my prom and I can't even afford a fricken' dress! I can't take it any more. I'm tired of you, both of you. I can't stand you. This is miserable here. This shelter sucks. Why does dad have to be so...it's just so stupid!"

"Things will get better." Sara says, weak like she doesn't believe it.

"Dad says a lot of things. But life sucks, and I'm outa here. I'll be at Josh's house until life sucks a little less. How 'bout that?"

"Don't you walk out on me. You think it's easy having a punk for a daughter? ... Moon? Honey, come back. We can talk about it.

Joe stumbles up and sadly watches as Rez puts things in a little pink vinyl suitcase. She'll be gone for a few days as well. He watches her tuck her umbrella in with a toothbrush and a few dolls.

Sara has retreated to another room. When Sara came out of the bedroom, Joe searches her for a look. Anything, but he's denied even the slightest bit of softening. In fact, she seems more distant than ever. She holds 3 pills and pops them with some coffee. The 'eyes you could get lost in' are not for him right now. *I'll make it up to her, somehow*, he thinks to himself with a fierce determination that seems to come from deep within.

When Sara passed him, he can feel the venom and resists the urge to touch her shoulder.

“Bye”, he says. “Have a good day.”

*Sometimes life just plain sucks, I guess*, is what Joe Bean is thinking as he locks the door behind himself and begins the walk to work.

It feels like he has just been evicted from his own home. The paradise that he’s taken for granted is off limits. “Evicted from Eden”. *Good name for a song*. No, not really, kind of stupid.

Eve, that was her name. Eve with the red hair. He wonders if that was the name her parents gave her. Somehow he doubted it. Somehow she didn’t remind him of the archetypal *Eve*—booted, herself, from the garden by a wrathful, very disappoint *Creator*. And where was her Adam now? What had become of that poor fellow?—God rest his—he stops himself, suddenly.

No, it couldn’t be. But, then again, matter only changes form; nothing lost, nothing gained...What would the first man on the planet be doing today?

*Trying to stay out of trouble, that’s what*, Joe thinks, absently pulling on the one or two long eyebrows, that seem always to grow beyond acceptable length, as he waits in the cold for the bus.

Yup, sometimes life just plain sucks.

\* \* \*

## ∞ CHAPTER 22 ∞

God addresses his audience: “This next part of the story is not for the faint of heart. No amount of metaphor can soften tragedy like this.” And he proceeds to remind his loyal patrons that they are watching a play, and that Joe Bean and his family are ‘characters’ serving the purpose of the play, and that the play is put on by them for their own amusement, hopefully to teach them a few things about the *human condition*.

And he reminds them that gods always need to be reminded, because they are sensitive and susceptible to the suggestion that reality is transmutable. Like children, they are engrossed easily.

He suggests that Joe Bean is, and always has been, the eternal guinea pig, and that when they see him next onstage, he will be in costume, and will wear heavy stage makeup, and his wife, Sara, will be with him, and they will quite possibly dance a tango together, a symbolic tarantella.

And then he and the Devil will enter *en mask*, and dance together, as well.

The audience beams with excitement, already forgetting their warning and, again, becoming emotionally involved.

God goes on to tell them not get too sentimental when they see the teenage girl appear with her date. He tells them not to get too close to the action when the Moon Bean is danced over

to her family, and left, staring, as stagehands roll a white roadside cross from one side of the stage to the other.

“And,” he says, “do not take it too seriously when Rez, carrying an unrolled sleeping bag and her umbrella, appears on stage left and is led screaming by one of the gods, a large man wearing a faceless mask through the audience.”

“*This is only a show!*” He says.

“We don’t want any crying in the house” He says, “when it is revealed that the picture on the roadside cross is photographs of Moon Bean.” There is a gasp. A shudder.

“And please, remember, that it is meant to be quietly, and reverently ironic, when Joe Bean’s daughter places a rose on her own cross, and the family stands stoically watching.

You’ll see the older Bean girl receive a white half mask, representing death. That is just the way this story goes.

There is a silence.

He continues again: “Do not be disheartened, when she girl places her mask over her face and dances with me and the Devil, before exiting the stage. And remember, that *at all times* you will be hearing music. Sirens, voices of emergency personnel and news broadcasts, informing you of the tragic death of 4 drunken teenagers in an automobile accident. There is another gasp.

And lastly, we will see Sara and Joe alone, onstage, as an actor, dressed as a police officer, approaches them slowly, carrying a red umbrella. Sara takes it and holds it tightly to herself. And as the music fades, we will see Joe, on one side of the stage and Sara on the other. And Sara will weep silently. And Joe and Sara will sing together in their own separate way:

*A mother's arms can't be there in the end  
Let go your fears and loves you might defend  
No worries for the life you may intend  
The worms will be no comfort in the end  
So sleep that long, long sleep  
And dream that long dream.  
And row your boat gently down the stream  
Row your boat gently down the stream.*

And a slow sad chorus of "Alleluias" will ring out 3 times, and Joe will sing in the smallest and saddest voice, little Rez's song:

*Last summer's flowers have gone to seed  
The winds from the north on a day in Fall  
I play in the leaves like a ghost from spring.  
Kiss the earth so cold, it sings.*

And do not cry when he trails off as the lights fade, and the theater becomes dark again.

\* \* \*

## ❧ CHAPTER 23 ❧

Four Weeks have passed since the Moon's death and Rez's disappearance.

The reporters have gone away.

The house is empty.

There is very little one could call 'life' left in the Bean family. Sara is a shell and if she wasn't bitter and spiteful before, she is now. "Almost unrecognizable" was a phrase some of her former friends had used to try and describe the devastation she carries with her every waking moment.

Joe, however, refuses to give in to anguish, and is as strong-willed as ever.

Sara can sometimes feel an 'optimism' in him.

It makes her furious.

When the two do talk, which is rarely, the conversation might go something like this:

"Do you miss our kids, Joe?"

"You know I do."

"Then why haven't you done anything about it!"

"What am I supposed to do?"

Sara will be silent, then she'll pick her self up, trembling, and begin to fall apart.

"You're supposed to SCREAM YOUR HEAD OFF!! You're supposed to say, 'GOD DAMN YOU, GOD!!!"

She chokes back a sob and sit down, shaken. Quietly now.

"How could you kill my hole family?" She asks the sky.

"It's not God's fault, Sara".

"Then whose fault is it? Who can we blame? Her? That's her

job. I'd rather blame the bastard who could have intervened!"

"I don't blame."

"You don't feel."

"You don't know how I feel."

"I sure don't. I don't have a clue!

She grabs his hand, suddenly.

"What's it gonna take for you to get angry and show me something? Huh?"

\* \* \*

~ CHAPTER 24 ~

"What's it gonna take?" Or better yet, "How much can he take?" God is thinking it too. But he also knows that this is the good stuff. This is what they've all paid to see. Conflict is the backbone of drama. And the drama is getting good. This is how we learn. And why do we come if not to learn?

So, God comes before them as the Showman, and, egging them on, begs, "Why can't we just end it here?"

"No! No! More! More! They scream!

"But you know how the story goes!"

“No! No! More! More!”

“Look at how strong he is. His faith in life is an example for all of us.” The Almighty bellows theatrically.

And with a flash, Joe appears before them in a new diorama, and he’s half-sized and cannot see them.

They watch him throughout his day, meditating, going diligently to teach his yoga class, drumming, singing, eyes clear and determined. Looking forward.

The Devil, at one time, steps to the stage, turns and faces the audience, saying: “It’s one thing to deprive the fool of his money. And quite another to take away his loved ones, but we’ll never know the character of a man until he loses control of his body. You’ll see the temple crumble before you as he sees it crumble, and his faith will fail.”

\* \* \*

And so, the stage hands pull ropes, raising and lowering set pieces around Joe, until he is surrounded by, what appears to be a church alter. He kneels in prayer, and the gods sing as a congregation,

*Skin for skin, yea, all a man hath,  
He will give for his life, but put forth a hand now  
And touch his bone and his flesh,  
He will curse thee to thy face.*

And as they sing, a host of angels decorate Joe with sores the size of silver dollars. Like a strange communion they touch

him and lay a sickness into each of his cells.

\* \* \*

And sure enough, Joe can feel his temple weakening and falling around him. Sometimes, he wakes for moments and sees Sara's face, and the "eyes you could get lost in" searching for signs of pain and grief, of guilt, of remorse.

And her eyes say, *give up, please, give up your stubborn belief in goodness*. Life is horrible. Give up. Give up.

\* \* \*

One day Sara comes to him and speaks amidst the hospital sounds, breathing apparatus, monitor beeps and clanking metal ware.

She says, "I can't stay, Joe. I can't live with you, anymore."

Joe's eyes are open. He's lying back in the hospital bed, and his entire body is swaddled. He can't speak, because of the arthritis in his jaw, not even to say, "you have me at a slight disadvantage, My Dear."

"Did you hear me, Joe?" Sara begs him. "I'm leaving.

And the heart monitor sounds like a drum in Joe's ears, and Sara's words become a chant.

*It's time to go,  
It's time to go now, Joe.  
It's time to go,*

*It's time to go now, Joe.*

And the chant continues and above him, Joe sees the faces of all the people he has ever loved and they are chanting as well.

*It's time to go,  
It's time to go now, Joe.  
It's time to go,  
It's time to go now, Joe.*

And Sara's eyes look into his, and she says,

*My soul is broken, and my chest is tight,  
And I'm alone,  
Adrift with no desire.  
My heart's a lonely house, that's been set on fire.*

And as the chant grows louder, the faces around him grow fiercer, and Sara become angry, her face a mask of rage:

*I have tried and tried, and tried  
I've shed my blood and tears  
You know I've cried  
But there is nothing left for you  
A mother's arms must let her children go*

And the drums beat even louder, Joe feels impossibly small and meek, and the number of faces grow to a thousand or more.

Even Richard is there, shouting

*It's time to go, It's time to go now, Joe!"*

And Sara's voice rises above it all:

*Now my man won't cry or scream  
Where are your tears, My love?  
Where is your dream?  
I can't love a man  
Who lets the world walk on him.*

And finally deafening sound and the angry voices and faces begin to dissolve, leaving only Sara, who leans forward and whispers in Joe's ear very quietly, so that only he will hear it,

*"It's your fault." Heavy sigh.  
It's your fault.*

Then, with as much bitterness as she can restrain herself from betraying, she says softly,

*I think our children were betrayed by you.  
Betrayed by your strong, silent dirge.  
Man of faith?  
Faith in what?*

\* \* \*

When Sara leaves Joe wants to die, but he knows he won't. It's not him. No Joe Bean ever gave up the ghost.

"Give up," a young red headed nurse named Eve whispers in his ear day after day.

One day, through a morphine haze, Joe formulates a song which he sings to the spectators watching.

*I heard upon his head of dung  
A man cry out of crusted lung  
If man is God, and God is good  
Then everything is as it should be  
Take the good and take the bad  
He who is happy must be sad  
And take the world for what it is and  
Love the Gentle breezes blowing, blowing.*

\* \* \*

## CHAPTER 25

That's how the story goes. That's how the story goes. And Dear Readers, believe it or not, our hero is in the center of the worst of it. Our Joe Bean is dangling over the frying pan directly in the middle of his story, in the middle of history, and you must have faith that there are many adventures yet to

come. Many things sad and many things beautiful.

There now, Susanna, don't you cry, let's just take a deep breath for a moment; stretch a bit, talk to your neighbors, go to the lobby, relieve yourself, buy some Joe Bean <sup>TM</sup> merchandise, (how about a t-shirt?) check your messages, schmooze, have a drink or a smoke yourself to death, but above all else:

*Just remember it's only a show  
With any number of directions it might go  
The 2<sup>nd</sup> act is shorter, as it ought to be  
So we can all go home soon to watch TV!!*

## INTERMISSION

## ACT III

## ❧ CHAPTER 26 ❧

As Joe's health condition change, the extremes of his sickness allow him certain remissions, during which time he is released from hospital for short periods of time.

By night he stays at the mission or the Millionaire's Club. During the day, he wanders the market until he finds the Apostles, who are always happy to have the semi-famous Joe Bean front them for a few numbers.

Thanks to the press, Joe is widely known as the "Millionaire's Club Messiah," and is attaining a sort of *anti-*

celebrity across the country.

“The unluckiest man in the world” Gene Godden of the Seattle Post Intelligencer calls him at one point in her socio-political gossip column. And the story goes out on the A.P. wire is picked up all over the world. “Ex-millionaire Preaches Faith on Street”, one headline reads, “and you can find him right here in our very own Pike Market” preaching “optimism in the face of incredible hardship.”

Stomp! Clap! Stomp! Clap! Go the Apostles,

*Praise the Whales!*

*Praise the Universe.*

*Praise all God’s incredible suffering creatures!*

Joe Belts to crowds of gawkers. Stomp! Clap! Stomp! Clap!  
“Amen! Tell it like it is, Brotha!”

*I do not know where this wind will take me*

*Or if it will break me,*

*But I go on...*

*Like a battered boat on an insane sea*

*The only choice: to be, to be...*

“C’mon now, Joe! Listen to this fella!”

*I don’t have health (Don’t despair!)*

*I don’t have wealth (Don’t despair!)*

*Don’t have my family (Don’t despair!)*

*I barely have myself (Don’t despair!)*

*But I have hope (Ahhhh!)*

*And I still care (Don't despair!)*  
*Oh, Hallelujah*  
*This old world seems so unfair*  
*But I just got two words to tell you, Brother*  
*Don't despair!*  
*They all talk about the worms*  
*The worms just waiting there*  
*But still my brothers and sisters*  
*Don't despair!*

Tourists stop, mouths agape, watching intently, a man covered head to toe in sores, wearing hospital clothes under his heavy ragged coat, singing about hope and faith. What a sad, and human spectacle.

*Like Jesus, Buddha, and Mohammed too*  
*This is the message*  
*They gave to you.*  
*Don't...*  
*That's what I'm telling you,*  
*Don't*  
*Despair*

\* \* \*

As we pull away from the scene, and realize it is a diorama like most events in this story. God and the Devil look on from above. The music changes as we see their faces turn toward each other, and with a wink they begin dancing a crazy tango.

Their discussion goes something like this:

*Faith leads to faith*

*This Bean Bug's going to give it all he's got  
That's why we put him on the spot  
Bean bug is born with will  
He flaps his mothy little wings  
And smacks into the window sill  
He smack, smack, smacks  
Sucked in by the light  
Wacks himself against the pane  
He smacks with all his might*

\* \* \*

All day Joe preaches. Whenever he has the strength he is out there. With manic abandon, staring into the eyes of passers by he begs them to appreciate life with all its pain and beauty.

And the diorama spins throughout time and space like a craft and ghosts and demons come from the universe to inspect the character who would not die.

Mesmerized crowds continue to gather to witness the spectacle, horrible and sublime, putting money in a hat.

And the Apostles sing a glorious backup refrain: *It's gonna rain, yeah, it's gonna rain, Oh Jesus knows, he give me a rainbow sign...*" While Joe, stomps and dances a whirling dervish jive to the hunger pains of his stomach and heart. Spinning them off into the universe like neutrons of a bomb.

Joe, is a wild-man, a crazed prophet, a cantor, a witness, a soap-box orator, a praiser of the universe. And he does it with every last ounce of his energy

Until one day, dehydration and exhaustion throw a wet

blanket of stillness over him.

Red and blue lights reflect in the eyes of cautious onlookers. Thank God they're here and I don't have to touch him, they think. An ambulance carts our Joe Bean away, as paramedics monitor expensive equipment, and they can't help but comment:

*I think I saw him on TV.  
This guy's had a bad year  
I hear he used to be a dad, Man.  
That's one hell of a sad man.  
His whole family, his wife, money,  
All of it gone.  
That's a bad year.*

Then, the interns wheeling him down the hospital corridor:

*He's Joe, that's Joe Bean  
I think I saw him in a magazine.  
No way!  
That's not the guy is it!*

And later, cleaning staff changing sheets and pans:

*What's going on behind those eyes?  
Behind those empty eyes?  
Who's he? Just a bum, right?  
Just a bum off the street, right?"  
Don't be dumb.  
Nobody's just a bum...  
Everybody's got to be from somewhere!*

*Everybody's got somewhere they come from!*

If Joe opens his eyes slightly he sees four or five kids doing a very funky street dance in his hospital room, as they rap in perfect sync. So he tries to keep the shut.

It's always like that. It's a perfectly surreal descant to his day, and if he could he would smile through the pain and agony at their enthusiasm.

*Hey, Joe! He's sufferin'!  
He's sufferin' Joe, Hey Bro'  
What'd you do to deserve this, Bro'?  
Sufferin' Joe, Hey Joe!  
He's sufferin'  
He's sufferin' Joe, Hey Bro? Hey Joe!*

Then a few days later, when he is able to stand again, he is waiting in a the cafeteria chicken soup brigade line, and teenage blond girls from the well-intentioned youth group can't help but ladle out some opinion as well, and Joe listens, grateful for their concern:

*You're like a frog climbin' up a log  
One jump, two slips back, hey, Jack!  
Have a bowl of chicken split pea soup for your soul,  
Doesn't really seem like enough,  
For someone who's had it this rough!*

And then, nurses, putting him to bed, like when he was a little boy. Soothing. Giving the attention he needs, for a moment, just a moment.

*Just let it go Joe. Just let it go.*

But he won't. The pain is too deep within him now, and for every hurt and ounce of guilt, a sore appears, and for every sore, Joe makes a wish, and for every wish, the whales swim faster and faster, turning the world into being for another day.

\* \* \*

• CHAPTER 27 

Sara's room is right off the highway known by Seattleites as Aurora. \$75 a week gets a pretty decent bed.

On the rare day, when she's neither drunk nor incapacitated by a dizzying mixture of prescription and street drugs, Sara takes the bus in to see what was "showing" at the little theater on the hill.

Occasionally, she will see herself in the dioramas, but mostly she'll watch the homeless man.

In his miniature glass case she sees him sit quietly, on a busy street, while busy people bustled around him. She eavesdrops with a combination of pleasure, pain, grief, irony, and sublime concentration as pedestrians stop to explore their unique reaction to him. Some will carefully avert their eyes and pretend the bum isn't not there. Sara can almost feel their

every muscle straining away from Joe.

Others will look for a cup in which to throw a few cents, and not finding any such receptacle, will feel a brief moment of resentment, as if they've been cheated out of a basic human right. Occasionally, there will be the person who can continue his or her cell phone conversation, and literally, step right over Joe, truly not aware of the homeless man's presence.

A few recognize him from newspaper articles and try not to stare immediately. These folks will usually proceed some distance away and then stop and look back, fishing for a camera if they're are lucky enough to have one tucked away.

The "angle" of the installation, (for Sara had realized by now that there is always an artistic purpose to them,) is that about 60 feet past Joe the pedestrians will find themselves in the theater for a moment. Shocked, almost into complete stillness for a time, they will have a brief opportunity to watch a projection of themselves. They see replayed the moment they encounter Joe on the street.

Most will walk quickly through the "zone" that was the theater, and find themselves on the street again, mystified. But others stay to see the other dioramas, which featur the tiny Shiva woman again. She sings, this time with a tiny man, dressed like a bum.

*Joe Bean's been seen  
Peering through wind  
Riding the weightless air of aware  
Scaling the avatar past hopes, past dreams  
Joe Bean's been seen peering down a chasm  
So steep it cannot lean*

*To a seem so small and sharp  
It can cut and slice an angel's heart.*

*You may have seen him  
Just at the edge of your eye  
And turning to look, you surprised the shape  
That wreckage takes*

*Breathe one, breathe twice,  
And praise the night that bears the weight  
Of the coming day, and stars that score  
Our stumbled way!*

\* \* \*

At times Sara feels the need to talk to Joe and longs for him. She stares at the phone and wishes for a simple, simple conversation. Maybe just listening to breath will be enough.

One day she wanders across a lonely set of train tracks to the pay phone and dials the hospice house where Joe has been staying.

The nurse wheels him to the phone, and he answers, his tongue thick.

“Hello?”

“Joe, it's me.”

Sara and Joe are upstage, opposite each other. Their backs are turned inward, and they face the wings. We see now that Sara really isn't at the waterfront. We see also, that the grey sky behind her is really just a projection on a sheet, and that the brick building, to which the payphone is attached, is only a

small decorated set piece, connected to nothing.

Joe, on the other side stands in front of a window, which we now see is really just a projection of cars passing. The hospice lobby is of course a set, as well.

Between them, is a small proscenium stage, the same one we have seen many times in the little theater.

Eve appears in shadow, as a dazzling torch singer in sequin dress. A spotlight clicks on her.

As she sings, and silent words fall from Joe and Sara's mouths, fall and drop on the stage, piling up, meaningless words, confusing words. Hurtful words. And yet, through all this, there is a feeling quiet stillness. The Devil's lament goes something like this:

### There's A Wide Space Between Words

*There's a wide space between words  
Where the world can rise and fall.  
A time when the tongue fails and the throat clenches  
There's a space so immense between sighs that...  
There's an instant before danger so quick that...  
There's a millisecond before love so brief that...  
Only eyes can stop us, like anchors  
Slam us to silence, stun our hearts, close to break  
Or billow like a seagoing sail...*

By now the lights have faded almost to black and the spot, as well, is barely lit.

The stage is so, so quiet for the briefest moment, and then —WHAM!—the lights come up full force!

Flames are projected in Joe's little window, and Sara's drippy, grey sky, is projected on the back wall of the Devil's little proscenium stage.

A full band ROCKS behind Eve, electric guitars thundering, and drums pounding, and we see that Joe and Sara are gone, only two telephones dangle from phone booths.

The Devil's voice jumps an octave and she screams,

*On Seas, yellow, crazed and stung by salt  
Plowed with foam  
And the wind takes us like toys into the future  
Even on our knees,  
Away from ourselves  
Into eternal seed*

Onstage now, there are two stunningly dressed backup singers flanking Eve,

*Even the air is enough,  
Even the heart that beats  
The flowers that we throw away  
The lions that we tame*

In a last futile breath, Eve sings,

*I want to be  
An arrow that flies through disaster!*

And then, quietly, like a whisper in your ear,

*Seeing without sight  
Hearing without sound  
When we cannot stand  
We must fall down  
When we cannot speak  
Our words melt the air*

Eve is alone, now. The lights are all gone, except a single spot. singing quietly, very quietly.

*There's a wide...  
Space...  
Between words.*

\* \* \*

❧ CHAPTER 28 ❧

A week later, Sara is out and about, desperate to visit Joe. She wants to look good, so she finds herself wandering through the isles at The Poverty Barn, trying to find a dress.

The truth is, she looks absolutely awful.

As Sara catches herself in the mirror, she stares, horrified. The puffy cheeks, glazed, red eyes, almost yellow color to her skin, and hair that hasn't been cut or combed in weeks.

"What would Daddy say?" she mutters to herself.

Sara is just rounding a corner when she sees her.

Eve, The Devil in a blue dress.

Stunned, Sara whispers, badly slurred, "Please, get out of my life, Devil."

The young woman can't help but smile.

"The thing about you 'Born-agains is that you wouldn't know a metaphor if it clubbed you on the head."

Sara was suddenly and fully overcome with a deep, deep rage, which her poor, drug addled brain, just doesn't know how to handle. The adrenaline blasts her suddenly, and manifests as a high pitched scream, and she launches herself full speed at Eve.

Sara has never been pepper sprayed before, but it hurts like hell, burning for a good hour.

\* \* \*

When Sara can finally see straight, Eve is gone, and Sara finds herself in the presence of two Seattle police officers. They drive her to the downtown station and hold her for a few hours, before letting her go with a stern warning and a mandate to get herself into rehab.

"Lady you are a case." One of the officers scolds in the car.

"At the rate you're going," the other one adds, "you'll be in a body bag next time we see you. Get it together."

Sara, get immediate help from a doctor "friend" who sells her healthy supply of morphine. This, combined with her stash of prescription anti-depressants, make for a wicked cocktail.

Sara is holed up for a week.

\* \* \*

When she comes out of the morphine fog, she takes all the money she has left over, and buys herself a bus ticket to a place she and Joe had rented every year on their honeymoon/anniversary. It's a rundown B & B on the cold Oregon beach.

With the ocean right outside her door, and the February wind and rain slamming against the little house she begins a daily pattern of withdrawal. sleeping, waking and sleeping again as she tries desperately to rise out of her darkness.

\* \* \*

Joe's physical condition is often better, and all those who had literally seen him on his deathbed are amazed when he can sit up, and eventually walk again.

Unfortunately, his psyche is laying in pieces and like the Marilyn Monroe puzzle he works on day in and day out it is not coming together well at all. The doctors begin to talk daily to him about depression. For weeks now, Joe has not been making eye contact, and he sleeps like someone in a coma. So, he is transferred from the hospice to an asylum of sorts. A *funny farm* where patients are, by and large, pretty disturbed. It's called Comfort House.

The place is run by "The Comforters" as they are called, a number of volunteers who spend time nursing, reading to, and

conversing with the inmates.

There, Joe is “encouraged” to attend various self-help groups, and, when he is physically able to, Joe gets himself to his first meeting of the local Sufferers Anonymous Group.

The group has been meeting for 2 years, 4 days a week, in a downtown apartment.

Apartment 333, is small and cluttered. African, Latin, Asian, and Polynesian masks stare down at the “sufferers” who cough and fidget nervously as the group leader lights candles, smudges them all, and hums quietly. She speaks slowly and clearly, as if they are toddlers, and by the time the afflicted actually get going and talking, the room has a grey and looming cloud of sage wafting through it.

The leader’s husband, who introduces himself as “Driftwood” says his real name is Dale Patchouli. Dale has a small conga drum, and the leader, who calls herself Morning Dawn Patchouli, introduces herself as a “spiritual guidance counselor”.

“We are here today to take the suffering out of your pain...” she says, breathing deeply, her jewelry clinking.

M.D. Patchouli and the group begin their opening chant, which to Joe sounds oddly familiar:

*Mantra Manta Kundalini Ya Ya  
Yoga Mat Gucci do a chakra cha cha  
Llama, llama, pizza rama,  
This little piggy went to market, mamma.  
Nam Mioho Renge Kio, Yo!  
Shivananda, hopscotch vegananda  
Feng shui dada, soul, Oy! Lambada.*

*Etc..*

This continues on, with Morning Dawn vocalizing in a wonderfully airy new-age goddess sort of way, complete with half-assed trills, mortems, and failed attempts at harmonic minor scales.

*Welcome to the meeting of Sufferers An-o-o-o-o-o-on-nymous  
We're so glad you're he-e-e-e-e-re.*

She directs her chi toward a shivering, bug-eyed woman named Jaundice,

*Jaundice, would you like to begi-i-i-i-in?*

The word “Begin” seems to hang indefinitely in the air as Morning Dawn milks every last drop of music out of the syllable. And gives an expectant nod to Jaundice.

Jaundice seems desperately out of place. Her white-gloved hands clutch a handbag and flit nervously around the collar of an expensive fur coat as she speaks. Jaundice sets the tone for the session as she dutifully attempts to imitate the leader’s sing-song singing style. Though she seems incredibly anxious, one can see her trying hard to rise the occasion.

*Hi, I'm Jaundice*

“Hi, Jaundice,” the group echoes back. She continues, feeling the warmth and encouragement of the group.

*Well, I've been free of suffering for six weeks  
And everything was going well, and...*

The woman falters. Choking back anguish.  
“It’s OK, Jaundice,” Morning Dawn coaxes. Jaundice takes  
a deep breath before breaking down completely.

*My daughter...  
Just joined a...  
Rock band!  
I just don't know if I can take it anymore!!*

Then suddenly her body convulses into tortured sobs of  
utter despair, as Morning Dawn tries desperately to help her  
regain control, and the group looks on uncomfortably.

“Om, Jaundice. Om.”

They hug for a long, long time. Until Jaundice’s tears are  
tears of relief and happiness, and the poor woman feels whole  
again.

Then, Morning Dawn turns her energy to the group, and  
smudges them all, saying “om nama shivaya”.

In the same singing voice, to the slightly uneven lilt of the  
bongos, she introduces the next sufferer, a very prim and  
proper black man in his 30’s. He is dressed in a very nice dark  
suit and has excellent posture. The only thing that seems  
remotely “off” about him are his eyes, which peer worriedly,  
and undeniably at everything and nothing. Crazy eyes. No  
doubt about it.

“Edward, would you like to go next?” M.D. asks, carefully.

“Hi, I’m Edward. (Hi, Edward”, the group sings back.)

*Well, lately, Man,  
Work has been hard.  
See, there’s this guy in the cube next to me,  
Who’s really got me on the edge—*

Edward is doing well. His voice calm and quiet.  
Then it starts to rise and break tragically

*—and I think I’m going to go postal real soon,  
If he doesn’t quit clickin’ that thing  
HE’S ALWAYS CLICKIN!!’—*

By this point Edward has completely lost any verbal ability, and has begun making a strange hyperventilating, honking, gasping sort of sound.

The poor sufferers can feel his agitation. The *shear, absolute, stabbing, heart-wrenching agony* which is Edward’s life, and they feel for him, deeply and spiritually. But more than that, they feel their own discomfort and fear of conflict.

Morning Dawn comforts Edward, saying,

“There, there. Edward. It’s OK. You’re OK now. You’re with us and we love you, and we know what it feels like. Breathe, Baby. *Om*, Edward. *Om*.”

The clean, clear, wave of angst, which has swept through the group passes, and all is calm again.

The leader, holding Edward’s head on her lap, rocks him back and forth, as he sucks his thumb, tense, but calmer now.

She says, “And now someone new. Joe Bean, would you like to go now?”

The group turns their focus to the emaciated, scab-faced, wreck of a man who is Joe Bean.

“Hi I’m Joe,” he says, croaking the words.

“Hi Joe,” they echo back.

Then Joe Bean sings them his story, doing his best to imitate the Middle Eastern cantor style.

*Well, my children are dead,  
and my wife left me,  
I lost millions in a bombing incident.  
My son was killed in the first day of the war  
By Friendly Fire  
My littlest girl is missing,  
And presumed dead.  
And I guess I have a horrible skin disease,  
But I still have hope,  
Yes, I’m doing much better.  
Really...I guess,  
I’m really...really...sad.*

Joe’s head hangs down, his eyes staring at the floor.

If was looking up, however, he would see a group of people—stunned, ashen, barely breathing, mortified. If there was such a thing as a collective nervous breakdown, this is the moment right before.

Morning Dawn and Driftwood feel themselves both, sinking into a sympathetic pit of despair.

It takes a whole minute for Morning Dawn to regain her

composure and cue her pale husband to play again.

“O....K....” she says,

*“This may be more than we are equipped to handle  
Here in our little group.  
He needs some heavy healing.  
Some good holistic healing.*

And suddenly, Joe is transported through the magic of theater to a comfortable office, something between Baron Von Munchausen and Madame Curie, with a touch of Henry Higgins. A small plaque reads

### **“The Herbalist is in!”**

Joe can't help but notice boiling beakers, hanging strands of garlic, and rows and rows of Jars and Vials.

He sits with glazed expression, staring at the Devil, who has suddenly appeared, wearing a powdered wig, and a “Heidi” dress with exposed breasts, and salmon colored painted nipples.

The world Joe find himself in is pure slapstick surrealism. Cut rapidly together the scene is like a Bugs Bunny cartoon. We hear squeaks and bonks as the Devil pokes and prods him. And Through it all Joe maintains an absolutely stoical expression.

The song is in the style of a Mozart chamber opera:

### The Herbalist's Song

*I have treated many patients like you in my time,  
It's Certainly a conflict of the body and the mind.  
How's your spleen?  
How's your Colon?  
--Sphincter?  
I'm going to snap right here and here  
What do you think of when I say the word "peeeeenut?"  
Did you ever try on your mother's panties?  
I've made a tea of foxglove, chamomiley, Calla Lilly, Penny  
Royal and Molasses.  
It'll kick your ass.  
Pain... seems to me an insufficient reason  
Not to be content.  
Being dead is quite painless but we don't want that,  
Now do we?  
The whole person.  
Quick, turn him on his side,  
Whilst I draw a sample of his life  
Force!.*

\* \* \*

Then, in a flash, Joe is somewhere else.

Sitting with that same stoical expression, he finds himself in a sort of messy apartment/dorm room. We hear the strains of pokey Western music--genuine plastic cactus stuff.

The "Acupuncturist" is the Devil again, but this time she is dressed like a frenzied and nervous, hippy chick, and she sings very sincerely, with just the tinge of a southern accent.

## The Acupuncturist's Song

*This ancient Chinese healin'  
Has been passed around for years.  
Unfortunately, in the States it's quite new  
But I've taken two semesters  
At the tech school, here in town  
And I can't wait to get acupunturin' you.  
Most people haven't heard yet of the acupuncture  
Rolf combination  
It's sort of East meets West  
With some Tai Chi thrown in the stew  
Big needle--yes--but I know that you'll suffer less  
You see  
Because the smaller needles are less familiar to me*

Joe stays strait-faced as the Acupuncturist takes out her "Acupuncture Learner Kit". Of course the needles are very, very big. Joe, who is on a massage table now, patiently waits while she sticks some huge needles in him.

--Cut to her riding him like a pony, jabbing more big, scary needles.

--Then cut to her slamming his back with extreme Karate chops.

--Then extreme Rolfing, as sweat beads form and drip down his forehead. Finished now, Joe stands in her hallway. She peeks at him from her cracked front door, proclaiming sincerely,

*You'll be in agony for a few weeks*

*And throwing up in a hundred different ways,  
But that's normal when you've been studying  
Ancient Chinese medicine for only fourteen days.*

The camera cascades quickly downward from the theater loft into Joe's screaming mouth as a final needle penetrates, and blackout.

\* \* \*

## ~ CHAPTER 29 ~

Sara has been sicker than she'd ever been during the past week. Quitting 'cold turkey' has send her down a long road of darkness, and at times, she has found herself paused between the heartbeats of life and death.

The truth is that she cannot be entirely sure that she is really alive.

Each day she walks, slowly up and down the beach and then to the little market in town, where she buys enough food to save herself from starvation.

When the drugs have really dried up, the grief comes ferociously, as real and as frequently as the waves, smashing fifty feet from her weather-beaten porch.

The waves. The beautiful and terrible waves are her saving grace.

Sara sits on the beach for hours, staring, reliving. It takes a months for her life to flash before her eyes. So she watches

and waits patiently.

One day, Sara feels herself craving Joe's presence again. And in no time she is missing him and longing for him obsessively. He is all she can think about, as the seagulls fight on the surf, and soft rain falls from the thick grey backdrop of sky.

\* \* \*

Of course, Sara doesn't see that it is a painted backdrop, and she walks across the an empty stage. Behind her, upstage, lackeys wheel on large fake waves and move them in contrary motions, to get the "ocean" effect. From the rafters above a puppet seagull is suspended, and the piped squawk of a sound effect bird drills through the tinny recording of breaking surf.

The scene itself is very tranquil and the music is mind-numbingly beautiful and serene. And Sara's voice is like waves of peace washing over the audience. Her sound is deep and filled with longing, and at some point in the song, long after the "hallelujahs" have died away, the children and Joe appear dressed in old fashioned bathing suits for a family portrait on the beach, before they disappear again.

The song begins with Sara, downstage in an old fur coat, which she wraps tightly around herself as if it is cold and grey on the beach.

## Everything

*Everything, Everything speaks of you.*

*Everything smells like you.  
Everything turns me to you  
Dark birds streak through cancelled skies  
Like a lost girl. Lost as my young girl's eyes.  
My children gone like straws to the wind  
Whisper the wind. Whispers believe.  
Never... again.  
In this dream at the end of a stream  
I see us all on a beach in June  
Where herons stand like statues of doom  
What do I do now?  
Just tell me how, now  
What do I do?*

When the family has finished their portrait, they swim into the sea moving further and further from her. Sara calls after them, quietly and desperately. Eventually, she is alone. Downstage with only a spotlight to envelope her, until even that flickers out with a clunk.

*What do I do now?  
Just tell me how now.  
What do I do?*

\* \* \*

At the asylum, Joe sits by himself, watching TV. It is late night and quiet. Deep in himself, Joe pays no attention, as the TV station flicks from infomercial to a final “Star Spangled Banner,” then static and infinite grey dots, hypnotically lull him deeper into a catatonic state.

Joe is not aware when one of the inmates rolls his very old and squeaky mechanical wheelchair right up beside him, and then jogs the joystick which brings it around to face him.

Suicide waits patiently, smoking a cigarette through the hole in his throat, while Joe slowly become aware of his presence. He does not recognize yet, the strange, almost awful looking fellow, who inspires fear and revulsion in everyone who had ever known him, and who looks deeply into Joe’s sad, sad eyes. When Suicide’s cigarette is finally finished, the crippled little man replaces the electronic voice box in his throat, and says very kindly, and with great empathy:

### Take it to the End

*Hello, Joe.  
I was wondering if I'd get a chance  
To have this little chat  
You seem depressed. I often feel like that.  
Sometimes it's hard to know where to begin  
But why not take it to the end,  
and do yourself in.*

Joe’s eyes are beginning to focus, and his head begins to clear. *Can this be an opportunity?* he wonders. *A way out of this*

*pain...He is listening now.*

*You know, sometimes  
How do I put this...  
Life just ain't worth livin'. Uh huh.  
And as hard as you try,  
Well sometimes your tryin' it ain't hard enough.  
Makes you feel like dyin'  
I know you think it's a sin  
But maybe it's time to do yourself in*

Suicide, The God of Self Destruction, uses all his might to lift himself out of his chair, and standing right in front of Joe, with his spindly little knock kneed legs, he dances a crazy dance of jubilation and euphoria.

He is then joined by a host of demons wearing beautiful, sparkly dresses with headwear, designed like famous instruments of self destruction: a gun, a razor, and a noose. They boogey unmercifully.

*You know maybe, they've all been a foolin' you  
Joe, Foolin' you into thinking you got to stick it out  
--That there's something wrong with goin' your own way.  
Well don't pout. We got it figured it out.  
No one really knows, where you've been  
No one really knows, where you've been  
So take it to the end buddy,  
And do yourself in.*

\* \* \*

God watches the scene, with the sinking feeling that all things will soon come to an end. But She knows it isn't Her place to actively participate, so She stands back, observing from a distance.

Soon the Devil enters the theater, carrying a silver tray, as a waiter would. The tray has the dome covering that hides something tantalizing and special. Gracefully, she makes her way to Joe, and joins in the chorus,

*How hard have you tried?  
It's been a while since you thought of suicide  
It's only a suggestion  
But maybe all them people lied  
To be or not to be, what was the question?  
Was it meant for me?  
You know I know you think it's a sin  
But maybe it's time to do yourself in?*

There is a feeling of denouement. Like it will be all over soon. The Devil is grinning ear to ear. And her energy is an electric scream. Now, the room erupts in Dionysian debauchery as interns and nurses, appear as acrobats, belly dancers and drummers, and pound out a furious rhythm.

Sex and death go hand in hand, and this scene is no exception. It has the heat of a hundred sizzling conspiratorial fires all licking their lips and saying, "Do it, Joe. Do it!"

Joe feels sweat streaming down his back, and he wonders if this is what purgatory is. The temptation to be somewhere else played over and over again. They're too close to him. Get

away! Right in his face with their pills, pills and blades, and—  
A gun... a perfect loaded gun, underneath a lid that she lifts,  
just for me to see.

And Eve seems to be saying with her eyes, *Yes, continue on. Go forward. Take action. Be somewhere. Anywhere but here.*

And he feels himself picking up the gun, and she smiles at him, so sweetly. And he really feels her love for him and believes that he's doing the right thing. This isn't defeat, it is a chance to start again! That's all he wants: a chance to start again!

The trigger is against his finger now and the barrel is against his head. Joe looks deep into Eve's eyes and begins to squeeze, and then suddenly She flinches, and Joe thinks for just one moment about Sara, and he knows that she has seen it, and suddenly all this is not real. Not real at all.

The gun is not real. The room is not real. He sees around him faces. Faces everywhere staring at him, waiting. Waiting in darkness. It is theater in the round and he is at an epicenter of scrutiny. He can feel them all.

He has realized it. Realized it all. That the play is his now. That he was and is Joe Bean and always will be.

He lowers the gun slowly, and begins to breathe. He stares eye to eye with the Devil and sees her smile fading away. The mischief in her gaze is becoming hatred, and finally, disappointment, and then real, real tears drip down her cheeks.

Joe Bean feels sadness for her. Genuine compassion for

this woman, who, on some level, he is very much in love with.

And God breathes a sigh of relief.

Joe, whose body is still covered with scabs and scars of all sorts, drops the gun on the stage floor, and breaks his gaze with the Devil. Then, he moves slowly backward downstage and turns, facing the front.

We hear his heartbeat.

*Boom. Boom-boom!*

Like a drum, ancient. Joe kneels.

*Boom. Boom-boom!*

The sound of his heart resonates throughout the theater, commanding and strong, and Joe Bean begins to sing to the universe a song that has been building in him.

It erupts from him. Finally, demanding--no, *begging*--the Eternal Question: the Only Question.

### Why?

*Everyone walk me hand in hand  
To a place you think I might crack  
Everyone push me into the well of despair.  
And take the shirt off my back.  
And leave me there  
Take the shirt off my back.  
Want the ending to begin.  
Send down an angel.  
Send down a God.*

*A burning bush to welcome  
Why? Is all I wonder*

Lifting himself off the floor Joe begins to climb up the set, higher and higher, into the rafters until he discovers that there is no ceiling and that there is only sky. Night sky and stars above.

And with all the breath left in him, Joe Bean wails his grand and eternal question to the universe!

*Why, why, why, why me!?  
Why, why, why, why me!?*

Then he, Joe Bean, descends to the wood floor and collapses on a heap downstage, exhausted.

*Should I not try to forget what I had?  
We all know good things can happen to the bad.  
Cheers, Here's to them, cheers  
If all things are equal,  
Equal is equal in tears  
Cheers, Here's to them  
All things equal  
Cheers  
Equal is equal in tears.*

Summoning the god from his childhood, the one who runs as deeply in him as his own blood, who beats like his own heart, and who waits like his own soul, he pleads,

*Just tell me why.  
Send me a message. From the sky  
Send me a message. From the sky*

Then he stands, energized.

*Feel the pain burn through me.  
Feel the sadness on my skin.  
Feel the whisper in my ears.  
Want the ending to begin.  
Send down an angel. Send down a God.  
A burning bush to welcome  
Just give me a nod.*

*This is my darkest hour.  
There's no more defense.  
All the sweet and sour  
In some ways this makes perfect sense.*

*This is my darkest hour.  
There's no more defense.  
All the sweet and sour  
In some ways this makes good sense.*

*Take the good with the bad.  
Forget everything I had*

Now, hypnotically, methodically driving forward into his soul. Into the recesses of his anger it floods out of him like venom and blood. Like sweat and will.

*I swim like a fish, through all my memories,  
 Bloated I float on the sea of pain.  
 Bloated I float on the sea of pain.  
 I look past the stars and see your face again.  
 I look past the stars and see your face again.*

Faster, faster. Building like snow. Like danger.

*I skate like a spider through your tall grass.  
 Take your sweet truth and all things that pass  
 Take the heartbeat from my heart  
 Or tell me it was a dream.  
 A pleasant kiss, a time remembered,  
 Gone from fall into this.*

*Everyone walk me hand in hand  
 To a place you think I might crack  
 Everyone push me into the well of despair.  
 Take the shirt off my back.*

Meanwhile, God has been watching from stage left, and has slowly walked to Joe. She places her hand on Joe's shoulder.

Slowly, Joe begins to whisper the word, "why?" Then the whisper grows, as he turns toward Almighty God, standing, and he recognizes Her,

*Why?*

And the word "Why" sounds like a breath.

\* \* \*

The stage becomes a whirlwind of sound and light. It's as if the mind of God is building and merging with the memories of Joe's life. It is the tornado from the Wizard of Oz. It is the boat ride from Willy Wonka. It is Charlton Heston in the Ten Commandments, it is awesome and sublime.

Through it all, God stands stock still while Joe Bean curls himself into a ball like a turtle. The sound of the wind is the white noise created by combining every sound Joe has ever heard, and the visuals are a crazed pastiche collage of his life.

"Whirlwind" is the only way to describe it at all.

The sound eventually dissolves into a saxophone solo, as the stage fills with musicians.

God is no longer dressed as a bum. She now wears a Vegas-beautiful, shiny and very Pimpin' soul suit. Bootsy Collins, Elvis, Parliament—none of them could compare to this. Her shades are so shiny and Her teeth so sparkly, and Her rings and *bling* reflect a thousand spotlights.

Behind God is a Gospel Choir, dressed in magnificent golden robes.

Next to them, we see the band dressed to the nines like the glitteriest Vegas band. They mug and shake hands with the audience. We recognize some of the musicians from Joe's life, the asylum, the homeless shelter, the ferry. The hand drummer from the sufferers anonymous meeting is there. The bassist and piano player from the homeless shelter are there. The

horn players we've seen many times as well from the street. The Apostles appear on stage and greet the audience, as well. It is like a homecoming. Like *It's a Wonderful Life*.

It is The Grand Conspiracy of Benevolence. This is the name of the band.

This transition happens during a ripping sax solo, and God gives the sax player props, wailing, "Yeah, Baby-that's-what-I'm-talkin'-about-a-cha-cha-cha!"

The Devil appears, using the sax solo for her entrance, oh-so-sexy, her short red hair in tiny pony tails on the top of her head like horns, a crazy fuzzy, slinky, fishnet get-up.

She and God make eye contact and Eve bows slightly acknowledging God's big finish.

Then God Almighty cues a big huge chord and lets it die out completely.

Then She sings to a rapt audience,

### Where Were You?

*"Why? He wonders, why?"*

The Devil, nonchalantly:

*Well tell him. Tell them all!*

*Even you!*

*Who watch this play*

*Are thinking as we play it*

*In darker moments everybody wants to say it*

She takes the word 'say' and hangs it in the air for an

extremely long time, bringing the audience with her. They start to whoop and holler.

God cuts her off with a wave of the hand.

“Here’s a clue... I give to you” She says, then silence. A few cat calls in the back of the house.

Then a beat and “Where...Were...You?”

The Almighty raises her arms majestically, directing the choir in a sublime and huge,

*Where....Were....You?”*

On the word ‘you’ the band kick into the beat.

During this number the Devil functions, sarcastically, as a sort of *Vanna White*, game show hostess, with cheesy smile. She exhibits the objects God is talking about before tossing them aside. A plastic dinosaur, a big plastic DNA strand, huge posters of famous scientists, The helix double, etc. Tossing each object over her shoulder after a few seconds.

There’s a great bit in the middle where she rides a big blow-up killer whale onstage.

God sings,

### Where Were You?

*Remember Mendel and Aristotle,*

*Tell me who was at the throttle?*

*Where were you? Where were you?*

*Kepler and Einstein, boy,*

*Lifted my beer stein, Oy!*

*Where were you? Where were you?*

*The universe is simply mind unraveled  
 You know the helix double but don't see it's a bubble baby!  
 Of all that I've created lately, still it goes,  
 goes undated, bated breath, All related  
 'Till the end of time...  
 'Till I lose my mind...  
 Ha, Ha, Ha, Ha, Ha!*

*Seeds and spores, sex galore  
 Exponentially divide, multiply...collide!  
 Here's a clue, here's a clue I give to you:  
 Where were you?  
 When hell and earth met for the great divide!  
 Were you inside?  
 That's where I abide!  
 Where sea snails glide and tides elide!  
 That's where I abide!  
 Sea of green, sky of blue, wild blue  
 Where were you?  
 Stone and matrix, womb and pod.  
 That's God...That's God, That's God.*

*In my trillion days, the only truth  
 Is itch when you've been scratched  
 You've met your match; more than your match  
 The great unknown, eternity, the trumpet of theocracy,  
 The architect of leaf, the carpenter of belief.*

*Or to put it a little more simply  
 While you grovel there limply,  
 The earth is a pebble I flicked from my thumb,  
 It's chained to a star and you're indelibly dumb.*

*Yeeaaaaanannannannanna!*  
*And now you come to rest and ask me "Why?"*  
*And says I.. Where were you? Where*  
*Everybody's asking me, where they come from.*  
*Everybody's asking me, what to do.*  
*Think about me, think about you-hoo*

At this point Joe stands and has a bit of a duel with God. They are trading licks using "Where were you" when, suddenly, the song is interrupted by the entrance of Sara. She appears stage left.

The band stops. The music dies. God looks perplexed. This was not part of the script...

Joe goes immediately to her.

God, more than a little piqued at being suddenly upstaged, confers briefly with the Devil. "Did you know about this?"

Then he stands back, 'adaptable' till the end. After all, She's God! The idea that She too, can be surprised is always a welcome joy. She smiles warmly and deflects the focus back to Joe and Sara,

"Where were you?" Joe asks her.

"I've been walking to and fro on the earth," Sara answers.

\* \* \*

As Sara sings to Joe, she slowly peels the plastic spirit-gummed sores off his face.

## ❧ CHAPTER 31 ❧

It was not hard for Sara to find Joe's little rental in South Seattle. Richard had helped, once she tracked him down.

When she knocks on the door she feels a surge of hope and excitement. When he is actually there in front of her, tears spill from her eyes immediately. He is very thin, and seems almost transparent. And, though his face is still covered with sores, she realizes right away that they are not real. Slowly, she raises her hand and begins to peel the rubber spirit-gummed stage props and drop them on the cement stairs behind her.

"Where were you?" Joe asks as he looks at her and feels his heart pounding.

### Sara Returns

*I've been wandering to and fro on the earth.  
I've washed with the ashes,  
And I've slept in grime and muck.  
I've considered the weeds and I've counted all our luck.  
I heard you down in the silence of my grief  
And I felt your hope wrap around me in the dark  
And my heart opened, and I saw you  
As you reached for me  
Through this maze of despair*

*And the dream we made still lives  
There's a coal in my heart that will not die.  
There's a coal in the heart that's for you.*

*There's a coal in the heart that's for you.  
Just blow on the coals of my heart and we'll get by,*

As Joe holds Sara, he weeps and feels his t-shirt wet as well. Real tears. And the world spins, and for moments he feels he is holding a doll, and so he looks at her again to see if she's real.

And Sara looks at Joe and cries, and all is well, until she feels a harness on him and a carabineer and it is connected to a rope, and she says,

“What's this, Joe?” and suddenly, he looks up and his house, which had always been stuffed into a lonely industrial district, between a motorcycle repair shop and a fish warehouse, is sitting on a stage.

Sara holds on to him tightly, not wanting to give him up again, but he pushes her away. Looking up, toward a single source of light, Joe pulls the rigging with him as he walks to the side of the stage. There is a big switch which says.

## Master House Lights

He flips it. *K'chunk*.

The faces of the gods, who peer back at Joe and Sara, are suddenly illuminated. They bite their nails, and twitch uncomfortably—guiltily—feeling like they've been discovered. Which—of course—they have.

Sara bends down to pick up an abandoned script from the stage. She opens it to the end and reads to herself. Simultaneously, the text is projected behind Joe and her on

the scrim:

“The stage is empty, with only a single spot on Sara and Joe. As the two embrace, stagehands pull them upward as a scrim painted with clouds is lowered downstage front...”

He looks back at the text and begins busily unhooking himself from the Peter Pan-style rigging. He has the fastener undone quickly, and throws the rope aside. The carabineer clanks on the stage and echoes through the silent theater.

Unsure of what to do next, God comes out from the wings, as do a number of cast and they shield themselves with masks, frightened, now that the “\*fifth wall” has been broken down. (\*the wall between the actor and God)

Joe, in humble gratitude, approaches them. As he sings the following. He gently pulls down a god’s mask, revealing a person he has known, Richard. Then another, and another.

*Spirits, Gods, and Devils. You are everything!  
I never imagined on the outside of myself  
Collected, collected into madness now  
I can see clearly,  
I can see clearly  
The curtain is lifted high  
The backstage teamsters pulling wires  
Have all been exposed  
What has always been with me,  
Cannot be taken.  
Is my love of life.*

*Can't be taken from me:  
My love of life!*

Joe begins to chant:

*The universe takes care of me  
The universe takes care of me*

Gradually the chant is taken up by the people onstage.

Four masked characters approach Joe Bean, standing in One at a time, they remove their masks.

The first to remove his mask is Scud. Then Dweezil and Moon and finally Rez.

As the music builds and begins to recede into a softer, more clam sound, the family and spirits, gods, and devils, turn their backs to the audience and God waves a hand and the backdrop becomes a thousand stars, and a quasar, and a galactic vision of universal complexity.

As the music fades away, one by one, the actors disappear and Joe is left alone.

He is at the market. Just exactly as he was at another time, so long ago, before his life changed. A time before he lived through all this.

He cannot hear the thunderous clapping as the story finishes and the audience takes to their feet. "Bravo, Joe Bean."

\* \* \*

## The End

### ∞ THE CURTAIN CALL ∞

The Devil is sitting up high on a set piece. God is below her looking up. She sings to The Almighty with just a hint of irony.

*OK. I lost this round.  
But we've only heard questions  
To answer questions we've found  
And I'm not really sure  
What to take away from this show  
But there's one thing I know:  
And you know it too,  
And you know that it's true...*

*You got to get down to get up.  
You got to get up to get down!*

The audience sings along with an anthem of hope then. The kind of hope that only human beings can truly inspire in gods. And not one of them is unchanged.

*What do we do when the whirlwinds swirl?  
Calamity strikes and nerves unfurl.  
Existence mixes heaven and hell  
Wind and Stars to mirror our cells*

*Balancing blood of doubt and trust  
The universe takes care of us  
Balancing blood of doubt and trust  
The universe takes care of us.*

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Bob is currently working on a “poetry novel” of *Joe Bean*, which will accompany this story should it ever get published. It is my hope that the two will be bound together under the title: “*Joe Bean, Two Modern Stories of Job.*”

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