

THE DISSIDENT

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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Other books by James Bishop:

A Way in the Wilderness (Continuum Publishing)
Rocket Man

*To Jeffrey,
in whose eyes I saw truth.*

Contents

One.....	1
Two.....	5
Three.....	15
Four.....	19
Five.....	23
Six.....	33
Seven.....	41
Eight.....	51
Nine.....	59
Ten.....	69
Eleven.....	77
Twelve.....	85
Thirteen.....	97
Fourteen.....	103
Fifteen.....	125
Sixteen.....	135
Seventeen.....	143
Eighteen.....	149
Colophon.....	151

“Ché non pur ne’ miei occhi è paradiso.”
(Not in mine eyes alone is Paradise)

Dante Alighieri, *La Divina Commedia di Dante*,
Paradiso, XVIII:21

One

The wind whistled through the oaks and pines and moved down the slopes west of Pinehurst. It pushed the trees, and their flockings of snow fell to the ground.

Jack Ringman stood in the school bus parking lot on the west end of town surrounded by young scouts eager to go on their winter camping trip. He wore his scoutmaster uniform underneath his jacket. The wind had invisible ice in it, and it bit Jack's cheeks red. *It's warmer than yesterday*, he thought to himself.

“Jeremiah, you're in charge of checking the supplies. And make sure the butane tanks are full.” Jack held a clipboard in his hand and made his third attempt at counting the boys.

Some parents gathered nearby, mostly mothers watching their young men prepare for the trip. They thought about the rare and precious time alone from their kids, and they made plans in their heads. Some would finish their Christmas shopping while the kids were gone.

The sun fought the cold air, and the people of Pinehurst squinted in the light as the wind buffeted past their heads.

Sheriff Joe “Buzz” Buzanski stood near the scoutmaster. He wasn't as tall as Jack, and was perhaps a little thicker around the waist. Were his last name different, he might still be called “Buzz” for his perpetual flat top haircut. “Jack, you be careful up there. They got a severe winter storm watch over eastern Kentucky.”

THE DISSIDENT

“We packed for it, Buzz. Thanks.”

The mothers smiled and waived, watching their sons in their uniforms, and they spoke of how their kids had grown.

Little Tiffany Bolt, only four and looking snug in her pink winter jacket, turned around and saw a flash of light in the woods across the river. Her mother, pregnant with her third child, had her hair tied back and wore a hooded jacket. She waived to Frank, her seven-year-old. Tiffany saw the flash of light again, and she walked away from her mother toward the partly frozen North Fork River. No one noticed.

A minute later the ice broke, and the smiles and waves stopped. Little Tiffany's scream was followed by her mother's scream. Frances ran toward her child in the icy water, but her friends held the pregnant mother back. She would certainly have fallen in as well.

“Sheriff!” one of the mothers yelled, but he was already running toward the shore of the river.

Buzz yelled back, “Jack, use my radio and call for rescue.”

The little girl clawed at the edge of the ice and screamed, “Mommy!” but she only broke more ice and made the hole bigger. Sheriff Buzz removed his belt, preparing to crawl out on the ice, when a young man suddenly emerged from the woods on the other side of the river. He was in his thirties and wore black rimmed, very

THE DISSIDENT

dark sunglasses. He appeared to be invulnerable to the cold, wearing only a white t-shirt and jeans. The young man walked along the ice toward the little girl, seemingly oblivious to all that was happening. His walk was determined but relaxed, as if he knew exactly where he was going, but didn't really care how long it took to get there.

Sheriff Buzz yelled out, "Hey! Stop!" The young man kept walking. Cracks appeared in the ice from the hole where little Tiffany struggled to stay afloat, but there were no cracks where the young man was walking. Buzz waived both hands in the air and yelled again, "Hey, you stupid son of a bitch! You're gonna fall in!"

The young man walked to the edge of the hole in the ice and stopped. Impossibly, the ice did not crack beneath him. He bent forward and grabbed Tiffany, pulling her up into his arms. He wrapped her in a blanket that came from nowhere, then carried her toward the crowd of mothers. Everyone watched in silent astonishment.

As the man and child approached, Frances Bolt ran forward. "My baby! Thank you!" The young man handed Tiffany to her gibbous mother. As he touched her, the unborn infant inside her kicked and startled her. The man then walked into the crowd of mothers, and when they turned around, he was gone.

Sheriff Buzz said, "What the hell...?" and no one else said a word.

Two

JoBeth tilted her head to one side, then the other. She held the small branch up with her gloved hand and brought her head lower so that her face was no longer in the sun, and then she confirmed what she thought she saw. “Well, I see the neighbor’s cat has left me another little present,” she said to the plants. JoBeth loved her garden, but she did not love cleaning up poop from a neighbor’s cat.

JoBeth was a small woman, and had the fortune of appearing much younger than she was. She put one hand on the old wooden railing for support, and stood up. She glanced over at the neighbor’s house, but as usual, no one was in sight. JoBeth walked up the three steps to her porch, then went into her house. As she opened up the kitchen cabinet to get a bag for the cat poop, she heard a knock on the front door. “Be right there.”

She hoped it was the neighbor, but she had lived in this house her entire life and the neighbor had never come over. She rounded the corner from the kitchen and looked through the screen door. She stopped suddenly and dropped her bag. “Wally?”

“I’m inquiring about the room?”

JoBeth took a few cautious steps forward, then opened the door. Seeing that the man on her porch was not a ghost, she sighed in relief. “Oh, I’m so sorry. I thought you were someone else.”

The slender man was in his thirties and wore a white t-shirt and bluejeans. On his face he wore a black-rimmed

THE DISSIDENT

pair of dark sunglasses. His face was silhouetted, and the sunlight made an aura about him. He smiled at JoBeth. “I *am* someone else.” He extended his hand. “Name’s Josh. I’m inquiring about the room. Is it still available?”

“The room? How did you know about the room? I just put the ad in the paper this morning.”

JoBeth watched Josh walk past her into her house. “Someone told me about it. Maybe they work at the paper.” He looked around the living room. A large white sofa faced away from the front door, and two matching chairs sat opposite. A fireplace was on the right, and the mantle above it decorated with Christmas ornaments and holiday pictures. A Christmas tree was in the nearby corner to the right, strung with red and green lights and visible through the front window. On the left, stairs led to the second floor.

Josh said, “It’s upstairs?”

JoBeth finally shut the door. “Yeah. Let me show you.”

Josh stopped at the foot of the stairs, and JoBeth stepped in front of him. “You always wear your sunglasses indoors?”

“Eye problems.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean...”

“No problem.”

THE DISSIDENT

JoBeth took another long gaze at Josh. He seemed to have a perpetual smile, just like Wally did. “You could be my late husband's brother.”

“I could be *anyone's* brother. Is that who you thought I was at the door? Your late husband?”

“Yes.” She wanted to see his eyes through the sunglasses, but she turned away. “Let me show you the room.”

They walked upstairs and turned left to the first room. “This is it,” JoBeth said, her hand making a sweeping motion into the room.

“It's a front room. That's nice. Shared bathroom?”

“No, you have your own up here. I sleep downstairs.”

Josh walked into the room, and JoBeth stayed in the doorway. She watched him walk, and even his walk reminded her of Wally. “You new in town?” It was a silly question. JoBeth knew just about everybody in Pinehurst.

“Huh? Oh, yeah.” Josh spoke while he looked out the front window, then into the closet. “Pinehurst seems like a nice town. You live here long?”

“My whole life. I love it here.”

Josh walked toward her. “Four hundred a month?”

JoBeth said, “Um... no. The ad says three fifty.”

THE DISSIDENT

“How about four hundred, and the extra fifty is for the privilege of helping you with your project out back?”

JoBeth blushed. “Oh, you saw that? I'm just trying to build a little shed out there. I don't know much about carpentry. Shouldn't I be giving you a *discount* if you help with the work?”

Josh said, “I used to work with wood. I'd be happy to help. I'll take the room.” He smiled at her and walked out of the room, starting down the stairs. “Is there a place nearby where I can grab a quick bite? It's been a while since I last ate.”

JoBeth followed him down the stairs. “Try the Corner Café. It's just up the street here.”

“Thanks.” Josh walked out the door and down the walkway toward the street, and JoBeth watched him.

Francis Bolt rushed her daughter home and put her in a warm bath. Little Tiffany did not seem affected in any way by the near-drowning. She suffered no symptoms of hypothermia, but rather was energetic, happy, and playful in the bathtub. Francis watched her cautiously.

“Tiff, why did you walk away from mommy?”

She played with a yellow plastic duck in the water. “I saw him in the forest.”

THE DISSIDENT

“Who did you see in the forest?”

“I saw the man that took me out of the cold water.”

“What was he doing in the forest?”

“He came here from a long trip.”

Certainly she's imagining that, Francis thought.

Tiffany lifted her duck out of the water and squeezed it. Water shot out the bottom of the duck into the tub. “Mommy, what are you going to name my new sister?”

“Mommy told you, she doesn't know if you're going to have a little sister or a little brother.”

“The man from the forest said I'm going to have a little sister, and she's going to be very special.”

Most small towns along the North Fork River have a café on Main Street where everyone in town, including the mayor and the sheriff, gather on weekend mornings to chat. Eating becomes a secondary thing, something that simply must be done to avoid being thrown out of the café. The talk is the main thing. It is an old tradition, and the residents of Pinehurst remember their own parents coming to the Corner Café for social networking before social networking had anything to do with computers and cell phones.

THE DISSIDENT

The Corner Café sat at the west end of Main Street, right next to the barber shop and across the street from the Baptist Church. From the front window, you can look west and see the mayor's office. The sheriff's office was a block in the other direction.

Did you hear that the Ringmans were buying a boat? Jack is going to take the kids out on the lake. Did you know that the man killed in the motorcycle accident on Quicksand Road was from out-of-town? Who do you think is going to win the senate race? Did you hear that Mary Ellen is working at Hardee's now? All this and more you could learn on any typical Saturday morning at the Corner Café.

This, however, was not a typical Saturday. There was only one topic on everyone's lips: Tiffany Bolt had fallen in the North Fork, and a mysterious man, walking on ice that should have broken under him, rescued her. And then he disappeared.

Every booth was occupied, and the café was full of chatter. The waitresses were busy taking orders and delivering food as fast as Mel could cook it. A large map of the river hung on the wall above Mel's little rectangular window into the café. The map had various places along the river marked, places known to be good fishing spots. Today, no one spoke of fishing.

Josh stood just outside the front glass door, which was painted in Christmas snow and a snowman. The smile on the snowman was wrong. He didn't look happy, but rather

THE DISSIDENT

nervous, as if a blow-dryer-wielding grinch was headed his way, hell-bent on melting him to death.

Josh opened the door and the Corner Café, filled to near capacity, was engulfed in thick silence. All eyes turned to Josh as the door closed behind him. Josh walked down the aisle, and his steps on the carpeting were loud among the quiet. They almost echoed. He stopped at the vacant counter seat next to Sheriff Buzz and sat down.

“That’s the guy I told you about,” one of the ladies whispered, but a whisper was pointless in a place so quiet. Josh faced forward and waited for the waitress. Buzz stopped chewing the food that was in his mouth, and just stared at the young man.

An older woman with a name tag “Margie” on a pink and white striped apron hesitated, then approached behind the counter, limping slightly from an arthritic knee. Margie looked older than she was, and the cigarettes probably kept her that way. “Can I take your order?” There was no smile. The edges of her mouth were wrinkled from perpetual frowning.

Josh smiled. “I’d like a side of biscuits, no gravy, and a large orange juice, Margie.”

She wrote on her tablet, nodded to him coldly, then turned around and placed the ticket on the stainless steel ticket wheel. Mel watched through his portal, then took the ticket off the wheel.

THE DISSIDENT

Finally, Sheriff Buzz chewed the last bit of food in his mouth and swallowed, then spoke. "Ain't you the guy that pulled Tiffany Bolt outta the river?"

Everyone in the café watched as Josh slowly turned his head to the sheriff. He said, "I am." Margie felt a shiver and dropped a bottle of ketchup.

Buzz hesitated, then said, "You just high-tailed it outta there, didn't ya? We turned around to thank you, and you were gone."

Josh turned to face the front again. "I was never gone. You just didn't see me."

Buzz nodded. "Well, when folks get to hidin' from me, I get a little suspicious. It's my job." Buzz used one of his partly sopped napkins to dry the sweat from his forehead. "Where you from?" Buzz knew he was from out of town.

Josh turned back to the sheriff. "Just passing through. Beautiful town you have here. Very peaceful. On the outside, anyway." Josh turned to the sheriff. "Name's Josh." He extended his hand, but the sheriff didn't take it.

The sheriff said, "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Josh?"

"No, the part about the town being peaceful *on the outside.*"

THE DISSIDENT

“Oh, you know. People have their problems anywhere you go. But on the outside, everything seems okay. I suppose it's like that everywhere.”

Buzz took a sip of his coffee. “It is a peaceful town. And we'd like to keep it that way.”

“That's a very good thing, Buzz. More towns should be that way.”

Buzz put his cup down. “Did you just call me Buzz?”

Josh's order arrived. He smiled at Buzz and said, “Everyone here calls you Buzz. Or should I call you Sheriff Buzanski?”

“That'll be fine.”

They both ate, and the chatter grew again, though not to the level it had been before. Everyone seemed to have an eye on Josh as they spoke about him in hushed tones that combined to a collective babble.

Josh finished his biscuits and juice, then stood. “Sheriff, it's been a pleasure. Enjoy your breakfast.” Josh walked toward the door.

Buzz said, “Josh?” He stopped. Again, the Corner Café fell into silence. “You forgot to pay.”

Josh turned around. “I didn't forget.”

THE DISSIDENT

Margie picked up his ticket that was still on the counter and showed it to him.

Josh said, "Margie, don't you remember? You put the money in your apron pocket." She reached into her apron and pulled out a twenty dollar bill. Josh smiled and said, "Keep the change." And as the door shut behind him, a roar of chatter ensued.

Buzz handed his bill and money to Margie. "Margie, that is one strange fella."

She said, "Buzz, he never gave me no money. I don't know how that money got into my pocket. Maybe he's some kind of pick pocket, only the other way, you know? Like he puts money *into* pockets instead of taking it out? I'll tell you what: he gives me the creeps, he does."

Buzz left the café, walked down the block, crossed Court Street, and stormed into the sheriff's office. His deputy, Buddy, was leaning back in his chair at his desk. He was startled when Buzz stormed in, and his chair suddenly slung forward onto all four legs. Buzz commanded, "Buddy, I seen that kid somewhere before. Get me the wanted lists, the lineup book, the parole lists... everything that's got pictures in it. I know I seen that kid somewhere before."

Three

JoBeth was in the upstairs bedroom making sure everything was in good order for her new boarder. When she looked out the window, she saw Josh walking up the street.

Josh knocked on the front door, and JoBeth came downstairs to open it. "Josh, you don't have to knock. You're a renter."

"Alright. No more knocking."

He came in, and JoBeth said, "I was just straightening up your room and making sure the bathroom has everything it needs. Do you have any bags or anything you need help moving into the room?"

Josh sat in one of the chairs in JoBeth's living room. "No bags."

JoBeth sat down across from him, then started to get up. "You want something to drink?"

"No, I'm fine."

She sat back down.

Josh caught her staring at him. "You seem uneasy when you look at me."

JoBeth looked down. The memories were of good times, but remembering them was painful. "Yes, I'm sorry."

THE DISSIDENT

He said, "Is it because I remind you of Wally?"

JoBeth sighed, then said, "I met Wally in college, and I brought him back here to meet my folks." She chuckled. "Mom thought he was very nice, but dad didn't like him at all. Said he was a laborer. I guess he was hoping I'd land a doctor or a lawyer. Still, Wally was better than any doctor or lawyer, and mom saw that."

She glanced at one of the pictures on the fireplace mantle. Mom and dad, Josh, and JoBeth in the front. She remembers the picture, taken up at the lake on the Fourth of July.

JoBeth continued, "So we got married here, and lived here with them. Then mom and dad passed away, so it was just us. Until..." Her voice faltered, and she caught it.

Josh said, "I'm sorry. If you don't want to talk about it..."

"No, that's okay. It's about time I talk to someone about it. I'm sorry, maybe you don't want to hear it."

Josh said, "I'd like to hear about it."

"Well, he was working on a job up in Lexington. He worked construction. One morning, he left here for work and never showed up there. Him and one of the guys he worked with just didn't show up. About a month later, they find the other worker in Lynchburg, Virginia, just over the mountains here. They figured he was heading toward Richmond. Anyway, he's got Wally's driver's license on him,

THE DISSIDENT

and he's been telling everybody that he's Wally MacIntosh. The cops say he looked a little like Wally, so people just thought it was a bad license picture, you know. So they got him in the jail and they're going to drive him back here."

"Extradite him?"

"Yeah, but there's an accident on the highway, and he escapes. No one ever found him."

"You don't think...?" he asked, pointing to himself.

JoBeth said, "Oh gosh, no. They figure this guy got on a boat or something there near D.C. and took off. I saw pictures of the guy, and he had tattoos on his arms. You don't."

"And they never found Wally?"

"They never found him. That guy probably killed him, but they don't even know where to look. There's a lot of mountains around here, you know. He could be anywhere."

Josh touched his glasses, and JoBeth thought he was going to remove them, but he didn't. Josh said, "I'm so sorry. It would be nice to have closure on something like that."

"Yes it would."

Josh nodded, then stood. "If you'll excuse me, I've had a rather busy morning and I have some things to do."

THE DISSIDENT

Josh walked up stairs and into his room, shutting the door behind him.

JoBeth heard Josh talking to himself in his room, and she heard him say, "I thought she was ready."

Four

Josh woke early Sunday morning and walked across the main highway. Just on the north side of Pinehurst, he found a lake, mostly frozen. The morning sky was orange, then yellow, and the sun broke the horizon. Josh followed the horseshoe-shaped lake, walking around to the opposite side. He stopped at the cemetery and sat on a bench atop a gentle slope overlooking the lake.

He felt an overwhelming hostility from inside the people of Pinehurst, but he knew they were not alone. It was the same everywhere. He knew that their hostility came from their fear. They feared their own futures. They feared the present. They feared change. They feared each other and they feared the unknown.

Josh watched some geese fly low on the other side of the lake. The bells of the nearby Catholic church rang, and he heard the people singing. He knew it was time to do what he had come to do.

Josh smiled at the geese, empathizing with their plight of migration. These must be late-comers, he thought. In a hurry to do what they had to do. He, on the other hand, had to take his time.

Josh stood and looked around, then started back on the road that loops around the lake. He crossed the highway, and walked by the high school.

“Hey.”

THE DISSIDENT

Josh turned toward the voice. Sitting against the side of the red brick school building was Timothy Ringman. His black t-shirt was faded and worn. It advertised a rock concert tour. His bluejeans were torn, not in the perfect way that they are sold already torn in specifically advantageous places. These jeans were genuinely torn. One shoe was untied, and it seemed destined to stay that way out of sheer apathy. He smelled of marijuana, nauseating and sweet.

Rebellion is often most obvious in those who grow up in controlled environments. Any school counselor will tell you that the “problem” students are, overwhelmingly, the children of either ministers, police officers, or some other kind of authority figure. Timothy's father was Jack Ringman, the scoutmaster. He was also Jack Ringman, the Lions Club President, and Jack Ringman, the city councilman. Jack had two sons, Timothy and Jeremiah, who were complete opposites.

Josh stopped and replied, “Hey.”

Timothy said, “Man, you're the most exciting thing to happen to this town in centuries.”

“Yeah?”

Timothy leaned over onto his elbow. “Hell, yeah. All everybody in town is talking about is that guy who saved the Bolt girl. And they say you're weird.”

Josh smiled and nodded. “What do you think?”

THE DISSIDENT

“Me?” Timothy thought for a moment. “Everybody’s weird, right? I mean, in their own way. So what’s normal? These people, in this town I mean, they get so hung up on life-as-usual, and they’re afraid of change, you know? You come in here and you act different than them, you wear your sunglasses everywhere, and it’s freaking them out. They’re like, all trying to figure you out, when they got so many of their own problems to work out. Ain’t none of them *normal*, but what gives them the right to say you’re weird, right?”

Josh nodded.

Timothy continued. “They don’t like me much around here, ‘cause I’m different. I see through all their crap. I see how they’re fake. I don’t want to be like that. So now I’m the screw-up. I’m the bad kid.”

Josh smiled.

Timothy said, “Anyway, that’s just my opinion.” He sat up again, giving his elbow a rest, then continued. “Hey, not that I care or anything, and if you don’t want to say, I’m cool with that, but why you always wear those sunglasses?”

Josh stepped over toward Timothy. “Sometimes, people get really bothered when they see my eyes.”

“Yeah? That’s cool. You don’t have to show ‘em to me or nothing. I was just wondering.” He removed a small pebble that got embedded into his elbow and he threw it into the grass. “You know, you look a lot like my dad.”

THE DISSIDENT

“I hear I look like a lot of people. I think people see in me what they want to see. Maybe they see who they're looking for the most. Maybe you're looking for your dad.”

Timothy looked down to the concrete, but didn't say anything. Josh sat down. “Maybe you're looking for a father who understands you, Timothy.”

Timothy was drawing on the concrete with his finger, but then looked up. “Hey, how did you know my name?”

Josh reached for the side of his glasses and said, “Wanna see something really cool? Check this out.” He removed his glasses.

Timothy wept.

Five

Ten minutes later, Josh passed the Baptist church. Reverend Billy Thornberg was changing the letters on the sign for next week. He turned around and waived. "Hello."

Josh kept walking, but waived back. "Hello."

"We missed you in church today."

Josh replied, "You'll have to take better aim next time." He turned the corner.

He walked in the door to JoBeth's house. She was eating breakfast at the table. "See? I didn't knock this time."

"I was wondering where you went off to so early. Did you go to church?"

"Something like that."

JoBeth stood with her plate and walked toward the kitchen. "I was going to do a little work on that shed in the back, if you want to help."

"I'd be happy to."

In the back yard, JoBeth showed her plans to Josh. He looked at the almost-shed, then back at the plans.

JoBeth, squinting her eyes in the sun, asked, "What do you think?"

THE DISSIDENT

“You did a great job with these plans.”

“Thanks. What about the shed?”

Josh smiled. “We have some work to do.”

“That bad?”

“No, it's not bad. Let's just say it's not finished.”

Since JoBeth was a self-professed expert with the circular saw, Josh asked her to cut the beam for the roof. She cut the beam and then helped Josh set it in the metal braces. She could clearly see that the beam was about three inches too short.

Josh placed one hand over the end of the beam, and held the beam with the other. JoBeth watched as Josh pulled on the beam. When he released his hand, the beam fit exactly into the brace. JoBeth looked back down at her end to make sure it was still firmly in the brace. She stared at the other end, trying to make sense of what she just saw. Certainly, she thought to herself, wood cannot be stretched.

“Josh?”

“Yeah?”

“I could have sworn that beam didn't fit just a second ago.”

THE DISSIDENT

Another voice from the side gate interrupted her. "Hello? JoBeth?"

"Buzz! Come on back. We're just working on my shed."

Buzz removed his hat. "Ma'am, Josh," he said, nodding to each as he addressed them. "How you two getting along?"

JoBeth looked at Josh, squatting down by the beam, and then she looked back at Buzz. "Oh, just fine."

"Mind if I ask Josh a few questions?"

JoBeth said, "Not at all. Go right ahead. I'll go inside and get some lemonade. You want a glass?"

Buzz looked back as she walked toward the house. "No, thank you kindly."

Josh stood up. "Sheriff, how are things?"

"Well, I just came back from the Ringman house. You know the Ringmans?"

Josh nodded. "Yeah. Scoutmaster."

"Right. Mrs. Ringman phoned me. Said her boy was acting strange, so I stopped by. You know Timothy?"

"I met him. Seems like a bright kid."

THE DISSIDENT

Buzz tilted his head to one side. “You met him, huh? Anything... strange happen?”

“I'm not sure what you mean.”

“Boy comes home in tears, blabbering about love and beauty and everybody being one... something like that. Hugs and kisses his momma, which he probably ain't done since he was born.”

Josh said, “Well, sounds like a pretty good kid to me.”

“Yeah, maybe so, only this is Timothy Ringman. The troublemaker.”

Josh said, “Sheriff, Timothy and I talked this morning, mostly about people and impressions. Doesn't sound to me like he's done anything wrong. Matter of fact, sounds to me like whatever happened to him turned out for the better.”

Buzz shifted his lower jaw back and forth. “What did you do to him?”

Josh laughed. “What did I do to him? What makes you think I did anything to him?”

Buzz was not laughing. “Take your glasses off.”

“I can't do that. I have a problem with my eyes.”

“Maybe we can do it down at the hospital here.”

THE DISSIDENT

“No, it's not really a medical problem. It just bothers some people.”

“Well, I seen a load a crazy shit in my day, son. I don't think it'll bother me. Take 'em off.”

“Sheriff, unless you have a warrant for me to remove my glasses, they're staying on until I decide to remove them.”

Buzz nodded. Then he said, “You ever heard of Little Sandy Prison?”

“Yeah.”

“I need to see your identification.”

Josh reached into his pocket and pulled out his wallet. He handed a Kentucky driver's license to Buzz. In the picture, he was wearing his sunglasses. In bold letters at the bottom, it read, “NEEDS CORRECTIONAL LENSES.”

“Morgan, huh? That your last name?”

Joshua said, “Well, that's what the license says.”

“I can see what the license reads. I asked you a question.”

Josh said, “Sheriff, have I done something wrong?”

“Well, this here is what we call investigation. I don't know if you done anything wrong yet. That's what I'm

THE DISSIDENT

working to find out. You see, I think this here license is a fake. I think you're Joshua *Miller*, not Joshua *Morgan*. You sure as hell look like him. Now, maybe you ain't done nothing wrong here, but if you're walking around with the wrong name on your identification... well, that could be a problem. So you see, now I'm gonna need to verify who you are. Would you like to come on down to the station willingly for a few fingerprints?"

Josh smiled. "I'll be happy to help put this issue at rest, sheriff."

As they walked toward the gate, JoBeth came out from the house. Josh said, "I'll be right back. Just need to settle a little identification confusion."

At the station, Buddy was in his usual position, leaning back in his chair. When Buzz and Josh entered, his chair sprung forward, planting all four feet on the floor again.

"Buddy, run some prints on this fella for me."

Buddy stared at Josh as he got up from his chair. He walked toward him, eyes locked on Josh, and said, "Okay sir, just step right over here. Let me get some blank print sheets. I'll be right back."

Buddy followed Buzz into his office. In a hushed tone, he said, "Buzz, that ain't the guy."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

THE DISSIDENT

"I looked at them pictures you got, you know, just in case I see him on the street, and that ain't the guy. He don't look nothing like the picture."

Buzz reached for a folder on his desk. The front of the folder read, "Kentucky Department of Corrections – Little Sandy Correctional Facility". A tab on the edge of the folder read "Joshua Miller, X-47693." Buzz took a picture out of the folder, then held it up, viewing Josh through the window next to the picture. "The hell it ain't. Look at these two again."

Buddy looked at the picture, then at Josh. He shook his head. "That ain't him at all, Buzz. Look, everything's different. But if you want me to take his prints, I'll take his prints. At least then, we can be sure."

Buddy came back into the front room of the station. "Okay, lemme ink up your fingers here." He pulled out an ink pad. "Gimme your hand. Just relax. I'll roll your fingers for you." Josh relaxed his hand. Buddy took his index finger, rolled it on the ink pad, then carefully rolled it on the white card, over a square that read, "RIGHT INDEX."

Buddy looked closer at the card, studying it. He took his glasses off and held the card right up to his face. "Lemme see your hand." He brought Josh's hand up to his face and studied it as well. "I'll be right back."

Buddy walked into Buzz's office again carrying the fresh fingerprint card. "Sir, I ain't never seen anything like this. Check it out."

THE DISSIDENT

Buzz held up the fingerprint card. “What the hell is that?”

“That's his fingerprint.”

“What about his other fingers?”

“They're all like that.”

The card had a black mark for Josh's finger. At the tip were a set of concentric circles, all perfectly round and even.

Buzz said, “He musta burned 'em off.”

“But how did he get the circles on there?”

“Carved 'em? I dunno. He's screwing with me now. Get the DMV on the phone. And tell that weird son of a bitch to hang tight.”

Buddy came out of the office and said to Josh, “Just another minute or so.”

Josh was sitting on the bench nearby. “No hurry. You can tell your boss the weird son of a bitch is hanging tight.”

Josh looked around the station. It was softly lit, which was odd, he thought, for a sheriff's office. Buddy's desk was olive drab steel. Josh thought Buzz might have gotten

THE DISSIDENT

it at a government auction of office furniture from World War II that had recently been unearthed.

Fifteen minutes later, Buddy got through to the Department of Motor Vehicles and transferred the call to Buzz.

Buzz picked up the phone. "Yes, I'd like to check a driver's license and the prints you have on file. Number's K58-209-749." He waited. "What's the name on it? I see. Can you check the prints?" Again, he waited. Then, "Yeah? Yeah, that's what I got, too. What do you make of that?... uh-huh... Yeah, I never seen it either. Okay. Thanks." Buzz hung up the phone and walked out into the main office.

"Alright, Mr. Morgan. I don't know what the hell is going on, but there's nothing more I can do. Your license checks out. Your prints match the DMV. Ain't nothing more I can do. But know this: I'll be keeping my eye on you. And stay away from that Ringman kid. He's screwed up enough as it is."

Josh stood and said, "He's one of the few people in this town who *isn't* screwed up." And he left.

"Josh, is that you?" JoBeth yelled from her bedroom when Josh came home.

"Yeah. They're done with me."

THE DISSIDENT

JoBeth joined Josh in the living room. She looked worried. “Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, everything's fine. The sheriff thought I was someone else.”

“*I* thought you were someone else when I first saw you.”

“Yes, and I *am* someone else. Just not *that* someone else.”

Six

The wind whistled through the trees west of Pinehurst again. There was less snow on the ground than had been there two days ago, but not much less. And the North Fork river had thawed a bit more. The hole in the ice where Tiffany Bolt had fallen through was still there.

The morning sky was light gray, and colder air moved in. Again, the mothers gathered, this time to see their sons home. Frances Bolt was there with Tiffany, holding her hand so tightly that Tiffany whined, “Mommy, you're hurting me.” Frances did not loosen her grip. Another mother said, “Frances, you look ready to pop. How far along are you?”

“A week or so left.”

As the vans pulled into the school bus parking lot, the boys jumped out and ran to their families. They talked about the fire that went out in the middle of the night because Joey Simonson fell asleep when he should have been watching and did you know that Brian Koppelfield walks in his sleep and I had our tent up before anyone else and we saw a deer but Joey scared it away but it was an accident.... And the mothers wondered how their sons could talk so much without pausing for breath.

Off to one side, Marian Ringman was speaking in a hushed voice to Jack. Timothy was at home, she said. She didn't know exactly what happened to Timothy, but Sheriff Buzz was looking into it. “He said he spoke with Josh, that guy who pulled Tiffany Bolt from the river.”

THE DISSIDENT

Jack's face was turning red. "Did he touch him? What the hell did he do to Timothy?" He was louder than his wife.

Marian spoke quieter, hoping it would calm him down, but it didn't. She said, "It's hard to understand him. A lot of what he says seems like gibberish, but he said Josh didn't touch him."

"Well, what the hell did he do it him?"

"I don't know, Jack."

The parents and the kids started for their respective cars. Jack got into the van and drove it home, and his wife drove their car. The more he thought about his son, the angrier he got.

When Jack got home, he went to Timothy's room with Marian behind him. "Timothy, we missed you."

Timothy's eyes were glazed, but for once in his life, it wasn't because he was stoned. He ran to his dad and hugged him. "Dad, you couldn't miss me because you and I are joined. Physical space means nothing."

Jack turned to Marian. "Where's this Josh guy staying? At the motel?"

"No, he's rooming with JoBeth MacIntosh." Jack turned and started for the door. "Jack, don't."

"I'm just going to find out what happened."

THE DISSIDENT

Josh was reading in his room when he heard a knock on the front door. JoBeth answered it.

She smiled and jokingly said, “Oh, hello Jack. Nice uniform. Are you selling cookies?”

Jack did not smile. “Hello, JoBeth. Is that Josh fella here?”

She called to Josh, then went into the kitchen.

As Josh came down the stairs, he said, “Hello?”

“I’m Jack Ringman, Timothy’s dad.”

“Hi, I’m Josh.” He extended his hand, but Jack didn’t take it.

“What the hell did you do to my boy?”

Josh backed up a half step. “Look, Mr. Ringman, Timothy was sitting over by the school and he called me over. We just talked about the town.”

“Well, talking about the town ain’t what screwed him up like that.”

“I don’t think your son’s screwed up, he’s just...”

THE DISSIDENT

“AIN'T SCREWED UP?! He's at home right now blabbering some crap about physical space and I don't know what all. Look, whoever you are, my son may not have been the best kid in school, perfect grades and all, but he was a good kid. Good at heart.”

“I know. That's why I showed him the truth.”

“You what?”

Josh hesitated. “I showed him the truth. He was ready for it.”

“What truth? What the hell are you talking about?”

“I can't explain it. You have to experience it. You have to see it.”

“Well, show me.” His hands were on his hips as if he was waiting for some great revelation.

“It's not quite that simple.”

“Look, you crazy bastard. I don't know who the hell you think you are, but you just waltz into this town and screw up my kid... you better start showing me what you showed him, or I'm gonna kick your ass back to whatever planet you came from!”

JoBeth was in the kitchen listening. She was getting ready to call Sheriff Buzz, but waited with the phone in her hand.

THE DISSIDENT

Josh said, "I can't just show you..."

Jack pulled his arm back and prepared the punch. Before he could follow through, Josh held up his hand, and a wave of force held Jack's arm back. He fought it, but his arm would not move. Josh took off his sunglasses.

JoBeth saw a bright bluish-white light from Josh reflecting off Jack's face. Jack froze, then slowly fell to his knees and cried, "Oh my God!"

Josh put his glasses back on and turned around. JoBeth was standing in the entrance to the kitchen, mouth wide open, in shock. Josh grabbed Jack and helped him into the living room. Jack was still crying. "It can't be," he sobbed, and repeated it several times.

Josh turned around and faced JoBeth. She was shaking. She took a step back and said, "What... or who... or... I don't even know. What happened? What was that?" Josh started toward her, but she held her hands up. "No, please don't come any closer. Who the hell are you? Or *what* are you?"

Josh said, "He was going to hit me. I had to stop him."

"What did you do?"

Josh hesitated. "Well... I gave him what he asked for."

JoBeth was shaking more. "What did you do to Timothy Ringman?"

THE DISSIDENT

“The same thing. I took off my glasses.”

“That... that glowing thing. Is that what you meant when you said you have eye problems?”

Josh nodded. “Yeah. Some people can handle it. Some can't.”

“What is it? I mean, is it some kind of... ray or something? Are you from...?” She pointed out the window and up. “You know, up there somewhere?”

“We're all from up there somewhere. Some people know that already. Most don't. A few are ready to find out.”

JoBeth's mouth still hung open between sentences. “... And... so that's what that does? When you take off your glasses? They see that they're from...?” She pointed outside again.

“That's part of it, yeah.”

“If you took your glasses off in front of me, would I end up like...?” This time, she pointed to Jack.

They both looked at Jack. He was sobbing now, and saying, “I love you,” to Josh.

“No. Not exactly.”

JoBeth needed to sit down. She walked the few steps to a chair at her dining table. Josh stayed where he was standing, realizing that she was still in shock.

THE DISSIDENT

JoBeth said, "You're not going to take them off in front of me?"

"I promise I'll warn you before I take them off again. That way, you can cover your eyes."

Several years worth of five minutes passed in silence, except for Jack, who was now muttering "none of it exists" over and over.

Josh finally said, "I need to ask you two questions."

"Sure."

"Can I sit down? I'll sit over here at the other end of the table."

"Yeah. What are your two questions?"

"No, asking to sit was one of the questions."

"Oh."

Josh pointed his thumb behind him toward Jack. "What are we going to do with him?"

"Can he drive?"

"Probably, but I'm not sure it would be wise right now."

THE DISSIDENT

Just then, Jack stood up quickly, pointed at Josh, and shouted, "I FORGIVE YOU!" Then he bolted out the door and ran down the street.

JoBeth turned to Josh. "Well, that takes care of him. But Buzz is going to come by in a few minutes and ask what happened."

Josh nodded. "Yeah. Probably."

She smiled. "You gonna take your glasses off for him?"

Josh said, "I'll try not to. He's not ready yet."

"What about me?"

"I already told you I wouldn't take them off."

"No, I mean, am I ready?"

Josh looked at her. She felt him looking *into* her, and then he said, "I think you're close. But you're not ready yet."

"Thank God."

Josh said, "It's not His fault. It's yours."

Seven

“Are you human?” JoBeth still sat at the opposite corner of the dining table. “I mean, were you born here, or did you come down in a space ship, or... what the hell are you?”

“There was no space ship.” Josh said it like it answered all of her questions, but he knew it didn't. “It's hard to explain. It's probably easiest if you think of me as someone who happens to have the answer.”

“What answer? I mean, the answer to what question?”

“All of them. Well, almost all of them. I mean, looking for answers is part of what makes life so interesting, so I wouldn't be helping anyone if I gave them all the answers. Sometimes, people need a few hints to get headed in the right direction.”

She stared at him, trying to see behind the glasses, but she couldn't. “It figures,” she chuckled. “Men always think they have all the answers.” She looked at the cross she had on the wall. It was brass, a wedding gift from her father. Suddenly, she looked over at Josh again. “You're not... oh God.”

“Not in the literal sense.”

“Is there something I should do? Something I should be doing?”

Josh smiled. “You're doing fine. You're so full of questions.” She took deep breaths now, and Josh could see

THE DISSIDENT

that she was beginning to relax a little. “Just try to keep in mind that this life, this reality in which you live, is not all there is.”

“You mean heaven?”

“Not in the way you're thinking.”

She thought of Wally and her parents. How she loved them and missed them. She would give anything to see them again.

“Yes and no.”

She looked up. “What?”

“Yes and no. You won't see them again, but you'll be with them again. And not when you die. Before that.”

JoBeth looked more perplexed. “What do you mean? Like a near-death experience?”

“That's really a bad term for those experiences, but no. Seeing the truth will make you understand it, and once you understand it, you will be free to join it.”

“I don't understand.”

“I know. You're a very patient woman.”

JoBeth looked down at her tablecloth, then back up at Josh. “Well, since you seem to have all the answers, I guess the obvious question is, what's the meaning of life?”

THE DISSIDENT

Josh smiled. “Yeah, that's a little tough to explain. Mostly you're here to learn. Same as everyone else. Even me.”

“*You're* here to learn? I thought you had all the answers.”

“*Almost* all the answers. I'm still learning.”

“What are you learning?”

He smiled at her. “I'm learning that next time, I need to have better control over my eyes. That way there'd be no need for glasses.”

“Next time?”

“It's complicated. Listen, can you do me a favor?”

“What is it?”

“When Buzz arrives, the less said, the better. It would be problematic if he heard everything I just told you.”

“I understand.”

JoBeth slowly stood up from the table, looked into the kitchen, then back at Josh. Josh said, “Go ahead and have a drink. It'll help calm your nerves.”

THE DISSIDENT

A couple hours passed, and a knock came on the door. JoBeth looked at Josh. They both knew who it was. She got up and opened the door. "Sheriff Buzz, how nice to see you again."

"Thank you JoBeth. Is Josh here?"

"Yes he is, right here in the living room." She let Buzz in. Josh was sitting in the recliner. He didn't get up. Buzz sat down on one side of the sofa facing Josh. JoBeth sat down on the other side of the sofa.

Buzz looked at Josh for a few seconds, then, "You want to tell me what happened?"

Josh said, "Jack Ringman came over here. I didn't go over there."

"I know. Marian told me. And his car is still in your driveway. I mean, what happened after that."

Josh said, "Well, he got angry with me, tried to hit me."

Buzz looked over at JoBeth. She nodded. "It's true. I saw that."

Buzz looked back at Josh. "And what did you do to him?"

Josh said, "He fell to his feet and started crying."

"All of a sudden?"

THE DISSIDENT

“Well, no.”

Buzz waited for more, but none came. Finally, Buzz said, “Listen, son. I got two people who are completely freaked out like they ate the wrong kind of mushrooms, and both of them saw you just before it happened. Now, I don't think it's something that *just happened*. I mean, I'm sitting right here with you, and I'm not blabbering like they are. Are you drugging these people or something?”

“No sir.”

“You remember when we were in the Café down the street? And you said this was a peaceful town? Remember that? And I told you that I'd like to keep it that way? Then you said that was a good thing. Now I just can't figure out why you seem to be doing everything in your power to make this a not-so-peaceful town.”

“Sheriff, if there's a problem with Jack or Timothy, I'll be happy to help you sort that out....”

Buzz interrupted, “No, there's no problem as far as breaking the law goes. Nothing like that. You see, my job is not just about enforcing the law. It's also about keeping the peace. Right now, there's a woman at home who's a little disturbed about her husband and child. She doesn't know what happened to them, she doesn't know if it's permanent, and she's not quite sure what to do about it. Now, I'd like to help her out. I really would. Only problem is, I can't answer any of those questions myself. So I'm here looking for some answers. I'm not here to arrest you, son. Frankly, I don't have any reason to. Yet. I just need some

THE DISSIDENT

answers, and I need them right now. Tell me what the hell happened to those two.”

Josh inhaled deeply, then sighed. “Timothy is a good kid. I know the people in this town see him as a troublemaker, and rightfully so. He’s made a lot of trouble in the past. But the reason is that he saw something no one else saw. He saw that the people in this town are constantly defensive. They’re spring-loaded and ready for attack. It’s because they’re so full of fear. It’s not just this town, it’s all over. Deep down, people are afraid. They’re afraid of dying. They’re afraid a loved one will leave them. They’re afraid someone will attack them, verbally or physically. They’re afraid of all the unknowns.”

A few seconds passed. Then Buzz said, “So Timothy and Jack are afraid?”

“No. They *were* afraid. They’re not afraid anymore.”

Buzz nodded. “Why aren’t they afraid anymore?”

“I revealed the truth to them.”

The words hung in the air like a cartoon coyote, waiting for gravity to kick in. It didn’t.

Finally, Buzz asked, “And what truth is that?”

Josh replied, “That there’s nothing to fear.”

Buzz said, “Well, you just told that to me, and I didn’t go all buggy like they did.”

THE DISSIDENT

Josh said, "The difference is, you don't believe it."

"Of course I don't. No one in their right mind would."

Josh smiled. "Which is exactly why you think those two are not in their right minds."

JoBeth said, "Buzz, I was in the kitchen when Jack came over. Josh didn't lay a hand on him."

Buzz said, "Josh, you ain't some kind of cult leader guru or something, are you? 'Cause I'll shut you down real fast."

"No. I don't want anyone to follow me. I just want them to see the truth."

"Do *they* want to see the truth?"

"Timothy did. Jack... not exactly. But he's probably happy right now."

"Oh yeah, he's happy alright! Higher 'n a kite, but happy." Buzz stood. "Josh, I asked you to stay away from those people, and I'm telling you again."

Josh said, "Sheriff, I didn't go near them. Jack came to me."

"I know. Just keep your distance from those people. Marian is very upset, and that don't make for a very peaceful place to live."

THE DISSIDENT

“I could talk to her....”

“No! Hell no! Don't go near her, you understand?”

“Okay, I won't go near her. I promise.”

Buzz walked toward the front door, and JoBeth got up to open it for him. Buzz stopped and turned back to Josh. “How long you planning on being in town?”

“Not too long.”

“Good.”

Buzz stepped out and motioned with his finger for JoBeth to follow. The afternoon was warm, and JoBeth saw the neighbor's cat scurry from her flower beds.

Buzz turned to JoBeth and spoke quietly. “I don't want you to worry, but I need to show this to you.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a copy of the prison photo for Josh Miller. He handed it to JoBeth. “Josh Miller absconded from parole a little while ago. He was up at Little Sandy a few months back.”

“But what does that have to do with Josh?”

“They're dead ringers. I think it's the same guy.”

JoBeth studied the photo again. “Buzz, the only thing in common here is their first names. This guy doesn't look anything like Josh.”

THE DISSIDENT

Buzz took the picture back and looked at it to make sure he had given her the right picture. “Are you kidding me? Buddy said the same thing, but I expect that from him. Look at it again.”

JoBeth said, “Buzz, let me show you a picture.” She walked into the house and came out holding a picture in a frame. She looked at it again. She even remembered the day. She and Wally drove into the mountains and pulled over by a lake. He packed a picnic basket, but she laughed at him because he packed it all wrong, forgetting things. He brought a wheel of cheese, but no knife to cut it. She smiled now, remembering that day.

JoBeth handed the frame to Buzz. “*That* looks like Josh.”

Buzz glanced quickly at the picture and immediately recognized Wally. “JoBeth, he doesn't look anything like Wally.”

“He doesn't look like the picture you showed me.”

Buzz put his picture away and handed the frame back to JoBeth. “Well, his fingerprints and ID match the DMV record for his license, so maybe he's just Josh Morgan.”

“Maybe.”

Eight

Marian felt like bursting into tears and screaming, but she was too busy getting dinner ready. Jeremiah was unpacking the camping equipment because Jack and Timothy were in Timothy's room discussing what sounded like philosophy. *Philosophy!* she thought to herself. *With Timothy!* She never saw that coming.

Buzz had said they didn't seem to pose any risk to anyone, but Marian did not feel comfortable near either one of them. They were different, not themselves. She remembered years ago watching the old black and white movie *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. Maybe this Josh guy was some kind of alien who made a clone of Timothy and Jack. No, she thought, it must be Jack and Timothy. They told her they loved her, and she could see that they meant it. Then again, they also told Buzz that they loved him. It was almost as if they were both drunk.

Jeremiah came into the kitchen. "Mom, I'm done putting the gear away."

"Okay. You want to help me with dinner?"

"Anything to be away from those two loonies."

Marian turned to her son. "I hope this is only temporary."

JoBeth was also preparing dinner, and Josh was in the kitchen helping. "Josh, are all the veggies chopped?"

THE DISSIDENT

“Yeah. How's the rice coming along?”

She combed the rice with a fork. “Fine. What's the recipe say to do with the veggies now? Should I just add them to the rice?”

“No, it says put a quarter cup canola oil in a pan and fry them first.”

JoBeth looked in one of the cabinets below the counter. “Uh-oh. It looks like we only have olive oil, and it looks like it's almost empty. Not even a quarter cup in here.”

“Not a problem. Let me have it. I'll make it work.”

She handed the bottle to him and watched Josh pour over a quarter cup into the pan. When he handed the bottle back to JoBeth, she looked at it again. It now had about a full cup of oil in it. “You did it again.”

“What did I do?”

“You made that beam bigger, and just now you made more oil.”

“Guilty as charged. Can't have a short beam, and these veggies were crying for more oil. I didn't have a choice. It's part of the trinity.”

“The trinity? You mean the holy trinity?”

THE DISSIDENT

“Yes, but not the one you're thinking of. I mean the holy trinity of cooking. Fat, sugar, and salt.”

JoBeth laughed. “I didn't know you were so religious about cooking.”

“I have to be. I'm so bad at it, I must have overwhelming faith that the food I cook won't kill anyone.”

Josh finished the vegetables, and JoBeth's rice was done. The dinner began in silence, and then JoBeth saw Josh staring at her.

JoBeth said, “What is it? Do I have some food on my lip or something?”

“No. You were thinking just now. You want to ask me a question but you're not sure how.”

She hesitated. “I guess I am really wondering who you are. Or *what* you are.”

Josh smiled at her. “No, that's only part of what you want to know. You long for something that's missing. Everybody does. But you almost connected with it once, many years ago, when you were four.” She looked puzzled. “You don't remember, do you?”

JoBeth shook her head.

“Your father was visiting family.”

THE DISSIDENT

She started to remember. "It was in New York. I can't believe I remember this."

"Yes, it was in New York. Your father went with his brothers upstate to hunt for a couple days."

"My mother stayed in the city and went shopping."

"She went shopping with you."

JoBeth saw glimpses of it, but it was long ago and the memories were foggy. "The stores were so big."

Josh continued. "And then evening came, and she took you somewhere else. Do you remember?"

JoBeth tried to recall, but nothing came to her. "I can't remember anything except the shopping."

"You can't remember because you don't want to. You were still very young, and what you saw reminded you of a great void that is missing in your life."

"Wally?"

"No. Greater."

She struggled to remember, but couldn't.

"I can help you see it if you like."

JoBeth was afraid.

THE DISSIDENT

Josh said, "It's understandable that you will fear it now, because you don't remember it, and because remembering it will bring a sense of guilt. But I assure you, there is no cause for guilt. Everyone forgets because they want to forget, but no harm is done. There is no cause for guilt."

Finally, JoBeth sighed and said, "Yes, help me remember."

"Close your eyes."

She closed her eyes and Josh touched his finger to her forehead.

It was not at all like a vision. It was real. JoBeth was there, and she knew it. She felt the air, smelled the city, and she was truly there. She looked up and saw her mother, so beautiful and young again. She cried, "Oh, mommy!" Her mother smiled back at her and they continued walking.

They approached a great gray building, Gothic and frightening. Her mother held her hand and they walked in. It was a cathedral, so incredibly beautiful on the inside. Little JoBeth took it all in: the colored windows, the paintings on the ceiling, the statues, and the candles. Oh, the magnificent beauty! She gasped in awe. Then, a strange warmth filled her, and she had a sense that this was familiar, that it was....

Suddenly, it all disappeared, and she sat at the table opposite Josh. "Why did you take it away? I wasn't done. It was so beautiful!"

THE DISSIDENT

Josh said, "I'm sorry, but you have to know where you're at in order to know how to get where you're going."

"Are you saying I need to go to church?"

"No. I'm not saying that at all. I'm giving you a shadow of a taste of what the truth is like. When you were in that cathedral so many years ago, experiencing all that beauty, you felt something else, something familiar but long gone. And you've been aching for it ever since. You will experience it again."

"It was so beautiful, I already miss it."

Josh smiled at her. "In time. Patience is a virtue. But right now, there is something amazingly wonderful I'd like to share with you."

JoBeth's eyes shone of wonder and expectation.

"I'll give you a hint. It's fluffy and pink."

"The Easter Bunny?"

Josh laughed. "No. I'll go get it. Wait here."

Josh took the dishes into the kitchen and returned with a carton of strawberry ice cream.

JoBeth laughed. "Ice cream? In December?"

THE DISSIDENT

“There is no better time to enjoy ice cream. Did you know that more ice cream is eaten per capita in Alaska than in any other state in the U.S.?”

“You're kidding.”

“I am not. And since a Kentucky December is as close as we're going to get to Alaska, it's the perfect time for ice cream.”

“I only want a little bit. I have to watch my figure, you know.”

“You can have as many scoops as you like. This is guilt-free and calorie free ice cream. I made it myself.”

JoBeth smiled. “Made it yourself, huh? How come it comes in a big carton like that?”

Josh turned the carton around so that she saw the front. It read, “Josh's Ice Cream” in bold letters, and in smaller letters below, “When a Kentucky December is as close as you'll get to Alaska.”

JoBeth stared at the carton in unbelief. “How did you do that?”

“Secret recipe.”

“I mean, you can't just make ice cream out of nothing.”

THE DISSIDENT

“Oh, so I can stretch wood and multiply olive oil, but I can't make ice cream? Who made you boss of the universe?”

“Okay. I'll just shut up and eat.”

Nine

“Oh, Mommy!” she cried, and her mother smiled down at her. JoBeth’s hand in her mother’s, they walked down the street toward the large gray cathedral. Her mother opened the heavy wood doors, and they creaked. JoBeth entered. She looked in awe at the paintings, the statues, the candles, and the beautiful stained glass windows.

“Mommy, is this where I used to live?”

Her mother shook her head and held her finger to her mouth, shushing little JoBeth. Her mother knelt in a pew at the back, and JoBeth walked quietly to the left of the church. There, at the rear, was a large book on a wrought iron lectern. The iron twisted and looked like black vines. She walked toward the book. As she approached, she felt a hand on her shoulder and turned, startled. It was a robed monk, an old man. His face was wrinkled and white, and his teeth were rotted. He whispered, “You musn’t look in that book! Ever!”

JoBeth awoke as the sun broke through the icy cold morning sky. The dream frightened her, and she lay for a while. She called to Josh, but he was gone.

The Reverend Billy Thornberg liked to work on his sermons in the early morning. Monday was his weekend, and each Tuesday he arrived at the Pinehurst Baptist Church at daybreak to start on next week’s sermon. This week, he would be working on the Christmas sermon.

THE DISSIDENT

He drove his older model Honda toward the church. The car needed some work, but he hesitated to ask the church for more financial help. The car would still last another year, he thought, and perhaps in a year the church would have more money.

He parked in front of the church, unlocked the front doors, and entered. He didn't bother with the sanctuary lights, but just walked up the center aisle toward his office in back.

“Morning.”

Rev. Billy gasped, dropped his briefcase, and turned around. Josh stood behind him, a shaft of light from a side window lighting his face. The Reverend took a deep breath. “Good morning. You startled me. I didn't hear you come in.”

“You weren't here when I came in.”

“But the church was locked. I just unlocked the doors.”

“A church is never locked.”

Billy thought about what he said, then replied, “Unfortunately in these times, one can't be too careful.”

Josh smiled. “That's what I'd like to talk to you about. Being too careful.”

THE DISSIDENT

“You'll have to make an appointment with my secretary.” The Reverend picked up his briefcase and started walking toward his office.

“I'm scheduled for this morning.” Josh followed the Reverend.

The Reverend continued walking, and replied, “Impossible. Tracy knows not to book me for Tuesday mornings.” He paused at his secretary's desk. On top of her desk lay her appointment book, already opened to Tuesday. Written across the whole day in large letters was one word: “Josh.” The Reverend looked at his visitor. “You're Josh?”

“I am.”

“I'll have to talk to Tracy about booking on Tuesdays. Well, come on in and have a seat.”

Reverend Billy's office was comfortable, with thick carpeting on the floor, a large desk, and two recliners facing the desk. A bookshelf, stuffed to capacity, provided a backdrop to his desk, and framed certificates and diplomas peppered the wood paneled walls.

The Reverend set his briefcase on his desk and sat in his chair, then looked up at Josh, who remained standing. “You're the man who saved Tiffany Bolt, aren't you?”

“Yes.”

“How can I help you?”

THE DISSIDENT

“Tell me about last Tuesday.”

“What do you mean?”

Josh sat in one of the recliners. “Last Tuesday, you came here to your office, just as you do every Tuesday.”

“Yes, that's right.”

“And you were prepared to start on last Sunday's sermon.”

The Reverend nodded.

Josh continued. “And then, you were overcome by a feeling of... futility I think is the best word to describe it.”

“How do you....”

Josh held up his hand quickly, and a wave of energy thrust into the Reverend. He stopped suddenly, unable to speak.

Josh continued. “I like you, Billy. You're the kind of guy who likes to get right to the point in your sermons. So that's what we need to do right now. No beating around the bush. Let's get right to the point. Agreed?”

The Reverend's face was fearful now. He nodded his assent, mostly out of fear. He tried to speak again, but still couldn't.

THE DISSIDENT

Josh continued. "Futility... yes. You thought to yourself, 'Why do we have to try so hard to get people to see the truth?' Isn't that what you thought?"

Reverend Thornberg could barely speak now, and he whispered, "Yes, but...."

Josh thrust his hand up again, and another wave of energy hit the Reverend. "Yes, that's what you thought. And then you realized that it would be easier to help people see the truth if *you* saw the truth. Sort of like old Doubting Thomas, yes Billy?"

The Reverend started to cry, and his head fell forward onto his desk.

"Yes, your greatest fear in your life is doubting. 'What if I doubt?' you've said to yourself. You fear eternal punishment for asking to see the truth. Is that right?"

The Reverend lifted his head, his face full of tears. "Who are you?"

Josh said, "Billy, it's okay. How can you be faulted for being human? How can you be faulted for doubting, for wanting to see the truth? That would hardly be fair."

Reverend Billy said, "But the Bible..."

Josh interrupted, "Yeah, I've read that, too. The problem is, you're reading something into it that you've been told to read into it. Someone tells you what it means, and you teach what they told you, but is that what's really being

THE DISSIDENT

said? How can it possibly be fair for a Supreme Entity to create a being, then fault that being for doing what it does by design? By that Supreme Entity's design? Does that sound fair to you?"

Reverend Billy came out from behind his desk and dropped to the floor in front of Josh. With both hands raised as if he were praying, he said, "How do I know the truth?"

Josh responded, "First, get up off the floor. You don't need my mercy." Josh helped the Reverend into the other chair and continued. "You seem to think that sacrifice will get you closer to the truth. Try sacrificing close-mindedness. Try sacrificing bigotry. Try sacrificing judgments on others based on what someone else told you that an old book says."

Reverend Billy nodded. "Yes, you're right."

"Let me ask you something, Billy. Where do you want to go when your body dies?"

"Heaven," he blubbered.

"Then why are you here?"

Billy stopped crying and looked perplexed. "I don't understand what you're asking."

"Would you like to go to heaven right now?"

Billy hesitated.

THE DISSIDENT

Josh continued. “Exactly. If you stand up there every Sunday and Wednesday night and tell people how wonderful heaven is, why don't you want to go there right now? Is it because you love life?”

“Yes, that's it.”

“No, that's not it. It can't be it, because you also stand up there and tell them that you have eternal life. You might think it's for fear of going the other direction, but according to your beliefs, eternity is granted either way, my friend. Eternal damnation and everlasting life: either way, you go on forever. So that can't be it. Ask yourself, why don't you want to go right now?”

The Reverend shook his head in confusion and tears. “I don't know! I don't know!”

“Because you didn't want to be there in the first place. That, my friend, is why you are here. You chose to be here. You couldn't stand an existence with no separation, so you created the illusion of your own separation. Being expelled from the Garden of Eden? That was your idea. You weren't kicked out, Billy. You left. And now you feel guilty about it. You and everyone else in those pews on Sunday morning. And because of your guilt, you fear your punishment. But you just created an illusion, Billy. You can't really undo what that Supreme Entity did. You *thought* you could, but let's be serious. So how can there be punishment for something you didn't actually do? You, Billy, have nothing to fear. Do you understand me?”

THE DISSIDENT

The Reverend was dumbfounded. “But... that can't be. The Bible is wrong? All I've learned is wrong?”

Josh put his hand on the man's shoulder, then said, “The Bible's not wrong. It's just misunderstood. Look at these diplomas on your wall, Billy. You tried so hard to convince yourself that you were more than what your drunk mother told you. All these diplomas on the wall only mean one thing. They mean you paid someone a lot of money to believe what they told you. That's all. You need to start asking questions. Question everything you hear. You asked for the truth, Billy. You sat here one week ago this morning and asked for the truth. Were you serious? Do you want to know the truth?”

“Yes, please. Yes.”

“Fasten your seatbelt, brother Billy. You're about to go on a little trip.”

Ten minutes later, Josh opened the door to Reverend Billy Thornberg's office and stepped out. The Reverend's secretary was just coming in. Josh nodded to her and said, “Morning, Tracy. You're forgiven.”

She looked surprised. “Oh. What am I forgiven for?”

“For scheduling me this morning.”

“But I didn't schedule *anyone* this morning. Who are you?”

THE DISSIDENT

And Josh left.

Ten

The evening twilight was pink on a deep purple sky, and the chilly air made JoBeth's cheeks rosy. She and Josh walked toward Main Street.

“Will there be a parade?” Josh asked.

“No. The shops are all open, and the town has special lights on the light poles. It's very festive. They do it every year.” JoBeth smiled, remembering the Christmas Festival days from her childhood.

They rounded the corner onto Main Street, and the town was alive, everything lit, twinkling, and Christmassy. Colored lights swirled up the light poles, and all the stores were decorated. Some of the stores had hot cider stands in front.

On the corner, JoBeth read aloud the sign for the Baptist church: “Christmas Day – Guest Sermon To Be Announced.”

Josh replied, “Yeah, I feel kinda bad about that.”

“About what?”

“Oh, it's nothing.”

They crossed the street to the Corner Café. Margie and Mel were handing out sugar cookies shaped like snowmen and Christmas trees. Margie rubbed her arthritic knee. The cold air made the pain worse.

THE DISSIDENT

Josh stopped at their counter. “Margie, nice to see you again.” She smiled a civil smile, not heartfelt.

JoBeth asked, “Would you like a cookie?”

“Yes. Margie, I'd like the one there shaped like a tree. And one for JoBeth. How much are they?”

Margie said flatly, “They're free, for the Christmas Festival.”

“Oh, well that makes them twice as delicious! Can I offer a tip?”

Margie said, “Sure. Can you put it in my hand this time?”

Josh laughed. “Ha, Margie, you have a sense of humor! Here's a couple bucks.” Josh handed over the dollar bills, and Margie looked surprised.

As JoBeth and Josh walked away, Margie turned to Mel. “Mel, you won't believe it.”

“It's okay Margie. I saw him give you the money this time. No tricks.”

“That's not what I mean. You know the pain in my knee?”

“Yeah, what about it?”

THE DISSIDENT

“When he touched my hand to give me the money, the pain left.” Mel looked down at her knee. She said, “It's gone. Completely gone.”

Josh and JoBeth continued walking down Main Street, pausing in front of a toy store to look at the model train in the window. The night air was crisp and hinted with cinnamon. They crossed Court Street, and heard a voice from the other side of the street.

“Mr... um... Josh?”

Francis Bolt and her two children walked across the street from the sheriff's office. Sheriff Buzz stood on the opposite side with Deputy Buddy, keeping an eye on the festivities. Little Tiffany and a boy of about seven, her brother, trailed along. Buzz kept his eyes on all of them.

Francis said, “I'm sorry, I don't know your last name.”

“Josh is fine.”

“I wanted to thank you for saving my little girl. When I turned to thank you, you were gone.” Her boy tugged at her shirt, but Francis whispered, “Not now.”

Josh replied, “It's no problem.” He looked down at Tiffany. “How is Tiffany doing?”

Tiffany answered before her mother could. “Fine.”

“Glad to hear it.”

THE DISSIDENT

The boy continued tugging on his mother's shirt, and finally she said to him, "What is it?"

The boy looked at Josh, then looked back at his mother and whispered, "It's Santa Claus."

"No, Frankie, it's not Santa Claus."

"Yes it is, mom. Look at him."

Josh knelt down in front of the boy. "Frankie, do you believe in Santa Claus?"

Frankie shyly looked away for a minute, then back at Josh. "I didn't used to."

"Well, that's okay. We all doubt sometimes. We hear other people say there is no such thing as Santa Claus, and we start to wonder how all those things about him can be true, right?"

Frankie nodded.

"Well Frankie, it's okay to wonder about those things. But what if... what if Santa Claus was actually someone who lived in here." He pointed to his heart. "Santa Claus was born many years ago, even before your mom, but he lives in you and in me. He lives in there to remind us of the true meaning of Christmas."

Frankie nodded again. "Did you come here in a sleigh?"

THE DISSIDENT

Josh laughed. “No, it was more something like... kind of like the Christmas star. Do you know what that is?”

“Not exactly.”

“Do you remember hearing the story about the star that the wise men followed?”

“Yes. The star guided them.”

“Right. Look, Frankie. Look up there.”

Josh stood slowly and pointed his finger up into the sky. In disbelief, JoBeth and Francis Bolt also looked up, as did little Tiffany. As Josh pointed into the sky, a bright star appeared, brighter than any other star. Suddenly, the lights along Main Street went out, and everyone looked up at the bright star. It lit the town like moonlight, and all was quiet.

A few seconds later, the street lights came back on, and JoBeth and Francis stared at Josh in disbelief. He lowered his hand, then knelt beside Frankie again.

“Frankie, I have a very special gift for you.”

Francis said, “You don't have to do that.”

Frankie's eyes lit up and he smiled. “What is it?”

“You have to promise me that you will share this gift with your sister Tiffany.”

THE DISSIDENT

He looked at his sister. It was going to be a struggle, but he supposed he could share with her. “Okay. I’ll share it with her. What is it?”

“You can’t have your gift until Christmas. I’ll give it to your mother, and she’ll give it to you on Christmas, okay?”

The boy smiled in delightful anticipation and nodded. “Okay.”

As Josh stood, Francis repeated, “You don’t have to get them a gift.”

“Already done.”

Josh started to walk away, and Francis said to JoBeth, “How am I going to get the present for them?”

Josh turned and said, “You already have it.”

JoBeth caught up with Josh, who was still walking. She said, “Josh, that star was beautiful. Did you do that?”

“I didn’t make the star. I just helped people notice it.”

They stopped, then turned around and headed back the other way on Main Street. JoBeth said, “Are you really going to be leaving soon?”

“What?”

“You told Buzz that you wouldn’t be here long.”

THE DISSIDENT

“Yeah. Things will change. They always do. And I'll have to leave.” He looked up into the sky. “Smells like rain,” he said, hoping to change the subject.

“Yes, it does.”

They walked in silence some more, then JoBeth said, “Josh? That's very nice of you to get the Bolt children a present. Did you get me a present, too?”

Josh smiled. “Yes, I did.”

“Well, I hope you didn't spend too much on it, 'cause I didn't get you anything yet. I didn't see anything under the tree. You know, you're supposed to put presents under the tree.”

“So you can shake the box and guess what's in it?”

“Maybe,” she said, smiling.

Josh said, “Well, this one wouldn't fit under the tree.”

“Oh my God. What is it?”

“That would be telling! I might have to give it to you early. Maybe I'll get you something else for the tree.”

Eleven

The wind blew and a thunderstorm played its timpani in the distance. JoBeth had trouble sleeping.

She made a cup of tea and, as she walked into the living room, the lights went out in the house. She noticed a light coming from Josh's door. She thought he might be awake, and she could use the company. She walked up the stairs and lightly knocked on the door.

“Just a minute,” Josh said, and the light from the room went dark. Then he said, “Okay, come on in.”

JoBeth opened the door, and the room was dark except for a glow coming from around Josh's glasses. “I'm so sorry. I thought you were up. I saw the light....”

“I didn't have my glasses on.”

“Oh. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to wake you.”

A lit candle suddenly appeared in Josh's hand. “It's okay. Thunder keeping you awake?”

“Yeah.”

“Would you like me to go fix it?”

“You can do...? Never mind. That was a stupid question.”

THE DISSIDENT

Josh laughed. "Are you sure it's the thunder that's keeping you awake?" JoBeth hesitated, and Josh said, "Let's go downstairs."

They walked into the living room and sat down. JoBeth said, "I really miss him."

"And them," Josh said.

She looked perplexed. "What?"

"You miss them, also. Your parents."

"Yes, I do. I feel so alone sometimes. I never had a chance to say goodbye to Wally."

Josh said, "You said it to him many times. And he heard you. He misses you, too. And your parents miss you as well."

JoBeth sipped more of her tea. "Sometimes, I feel like they're watching over me, you know? Have you ever gotten that feeling?"

"They have communicated to you many times, and sometimes you've wondered if it was them, and other times you didn't get it. That happens."

"Well, why can't it be more... you know..."

"Obvious?"

"Yeah."

THE DISSIDENT

Josh said, "What would you like, a phone call from the hereafter?"

"That would be nice."

The phone in the kitchen rang, and JoBeth looked at Josh. "That's not funny."

"Answer it."

"Really?"

She got up, and walked to the phone. She raised the handset. "Hello?"

"Hello dear. It's your father."

JoBeth started to cry. "Daddy? Is it really you?"

"Yes, dear. Thank your friend Josh for arranging this. That was very kind of him."

"Daddy, I miss you and mom so much."

"I know, dear. I know. But you don't have to. Just because you can't see us doesn't mean we're not there, watching over you. That's our job, you know. You'll always be our daughter."

"Daddy, I wish I could just have one more chance to see you and mom, to be there with you."

THE DISSIDENT

“It's hard when you're stuck in the physical, but just remember what Josh told you, that there's more to reality than your life there.”

“I'll try, daddy. It's so hard being alone. Is Wally there?”

“We're all here, dear. All. You just finish what you need to do there, okay?”

“What do I need to do here?”

“You'll know when you've done it. Listen to your friend Josh. He's a wise one, that boy. He'll help you along. We have to be going now. Take care. We're never gone, just know that. Goodbye.”

“Daddy, wait!” The phone went dead.

She cried, and returned to the living room. “The phone just went dead.”

“It went dead when the lights went out. I just thought it would be easier for you.”

JoBeth wiped her tears. “It would have been easier to be there with them.”

“You need to get some rest now.”

“How can I sleep now?”

THE DISSIDENT

Josh stood up with the candle, helped her up, and walked her slowly to her room. He stopped just outside her bedroom door.

“JoBeth, do you believe that love can be stopped by death?”

“What do you mean?”

“When we say someone dies, they don't really die. Their body dies. They're still alive. And when you fall in love, do you fall in love with the person, or with their body?”

“With the person.”

“Right. So can love be stopped by death?”

She thought for a moment. “No. Because there is no death, right?”

“You're a quick learner. Now, try this on for size. Do you believe you were made in the image of your creator?”

“Yes.”

“So you can create also, right?”

JoBeth said, “Well, people have babies.”

“Not what I mean. Your mind is a very powerful thing. The reason you are in a body now is because you *wanted* it. It helps you believe in the illusion of separation. But it's

THE DISSIDENT

possible to use it for good as well. Do you think it's possible for someone who is no longer in a body but still alive to have the same power of imagination that he had when he was in a body?"

"I don't know. I suppose."

Josh continued. "And if he wants a body temporarily, not for separation, but to help someone who believes they are separated, do you think he can do it?"

JoBeth shook her head. "I'm really not getting what you're saying."

"Your love for Wally never died."

She nodded.

"His love for you never died. Because *he* never died."

She nodded again.

Josh asked, "How do you feel about him right now?"

"I would give anything to be with him again."

"Even for only a short time?"

"Yes."

"Don't you think he feels the same way?"

"I suppose."

THE DISSIDENT

“Good night, JoBeth.” He handed the candle to her and walked down the hall.

JoBeth watched him walk away, then turned and opened her door. She sat at the side of her bed and closed her eyes. *I love you and miss you so much, Wally*, she thought. And she whispered, “One more night with you, Wally. I wish I could have just one more night.”

Her father said that they were always there, and she tried with her eyes closed to imagine Wally there, next to her. *What would he say*, she thought to herself.

She opened her eyes, and Wally sat beside her, staring into her eyes. It was definitely Wally, and she cried and threw her arms around him. He was real! She could feel every bit of him, warm and alive. “Oh, Wally! I love you! I miss you!” She kissed his neck and his face, then his lips. “Wally, say something.”

Wally smiled and said, “I owe Josh big-time.”

Twelve

Jack Ringman stepped out of the shower and looked into the bedroom. His wife sat on the edge of their bed, staring out the window at the morning sunrise. The retreating clouds spread the fire of the sunrise, and the fresh snow reflected orange, yellow, and red.

“Marian?”

She turned her head slowly toward her husband. Her eyes were focused somewhere else, somewhere beyond.

“Marian? What's wrong?”

Her focus moved to the present. “Jack, I don't know what happened to you.”

Jack dried off with the towel. “I saw the truth, Marian. It's amazing. It's like...”

“No, I don't mean that, Jack. Or maybe I do. It's different now with us. *You're* different, and so is Timothy. I'm glad you two are getting along so well. Really. I think that's wonderful. But now there's... a wall or something. Between us, Jack. *We're* not the same because *you're* not the same.”

Jack finished drying, stepped into his pants, and walked into the bedroom. “Marian, we're so very connected, you and I. And everyone else. Your fears are keeping you away. And, to be honest, I've been fearful of allowing us to experience our oneness.”

THE DISSIDENT

As far as Marian was concerned, Jack was still speaking nonsense. "What do you mean?"

"Our intimacy before was just two people joining in purpose for a brief time. Now, it would be what seems like two people becoming one, with no more boundaries."

"I don't understand."

"I know. And that's why I've been reluctant to be intimate with you since... all this happened. I don't think you could handle it."

Marian smiled. "Are you telling me, if we were to become intimate right now, you would... blow my mind?"

"Something like that."

Marian stood and unbuttoned her robe. "Well, what are you waiting for? Blow my mind!"

Doctor Higgs had a habit of making "Hmph" noises when he was puzzled. He looked over the x-rays of Margie's knee, moving from one to the next, as if he were critiquing paintings at an art exhibition. "Hmph." He said it again.

Dr. Higgs turned around and faced Margie, who was sitting on the examination table. "Did you change anything in your diet, Ms. Platter?"

THE DISSIDENT

“No. I tell you, doc, it feels like I'm a kid again. There's no pain at all. Not even through the storm last night.”

Dr. Higgs studied the x-rays some more, then turned back to Margie again. “Well, I'm completely baffled. When we see something that helps tackle this kind of arthritis, we usually see some kind of reduction in calcification around the joint. Right now, there's no calcification there at all. But what's puzzling me even more is the regeneration.”

“Regeneration?”

Dr. Higgs pulled out a ring-bound set of diagrams from one of the drawers in the examination room. He flipped through it, sat down opposite Margie, then showed her a diagram with several cut-away images of knees. “You see this one here? This is the knee of a twenty-year-old. All that cartilage there, keeping your joints from rubbing together.

“As we age, that cartilage naturally wears down a little, like this one here. Yours was almost completely worn down the last time I took x-rays of your knee.” He stood up and walked to the x-ray light on the wall. “You see all this cartilage? This is your knee now. You've got the knee of a twenty-year-old. Better, actually. I've never seen anything like it. Nothing in medical science can do that. Nothing.”

They both stared at the bluish-black-and-white image. Finally, Margie said, “You're sure it's no trick?”

“Trick? That's a hellofa trick. That's a damn miracle.” He pointed to the x-ray. “That's what that is. A damn miracle.”

THE DISSIDENT

JoBeth was sitting at the dining table when Josh came down the stairs. Her eyes were red and wet from crying. She sipped her coffee.

Josh said, “Good morning.”

JoBeth suddenly noticed him. “Oh, Josh.” Her mouth hung open, waiting for the words that she could not find, for her thoughts were beyond language.

“You're welcome.”

She began to cry again. “It was so beautiful.”

Josh sat down at the table and waited for JoBeth to catch her voice. He saw the joy inside her, and the return of the loneliness, though not as severe as before.

JoBeth wiped her eyes and breathed deep. “That was real?”

Josh smiled. “As real as you sitting in that chair.”

She chuckled. “I'm not even sure I'm sitting in this chair.”

“Funny you should say that.”

JoBeth looked up at him, sitting across the table from her. “What do you mean?”

THE DISSIDENT

“The feeling you're having right now is something like a disconnection, what psychologists call dissociation.”

“Yes, exactly.”

“It's what lovers mean when they say their feet don't touch the ground. It's cloud nine. All of those things are what you're feeling right now.”

JoBeth nodded, but she wasn't sure if Josh had a point.

He continued. “We typically think of those moments as being unreal, removed from the present in some way.”

“That's what it feels like.”

Josh smiled again. “It only feels like that because you're so used to not being there. In fact, *that* feeling, that disconnected feeling, is reality. You sitting there in your chair? Not reality.”

“How do you mean this isn't reality. I mean, I'm right here, sitting in this chair.”

Josh said, “You see the chair, you hear me talking to you, you smell and taste the coffee in your cup, and you feel its warmth. That's all five senses. Those senses you've come to trust so completely. All five of them are telling you that you're here right now. That this is reality.”

She nodded, waiting for the answer she knew could not be.

THE DISSIDENT

“They're lying to you.”

There it was. “All of my senses are lying to me?”

Josh leaned back in his chair. “You don't think they can lie to you? You've had dreams when you tasted something that seemed so real, or smelled something. Perhaps felt something. You thought they were real until you woke up.”

JoBeth stood and walked to the kitchen with her empty coffee cup. “Yes, but like you say, I woke up, and then I knew it was a dream. I know I already woke up this morning, so this can't be a dream.”

“Did you ever wake up, thinking you were awake, and then wake up again?”

She had. She supposed everyone had. She stopped at the sink and turned to Josh, who was still sitting at the table. “Like a dream within a dream? Are you saying I'm dreaming right now?”

“Not exactly, but something like that.”

She washed her cup, running her finger over the inside slowly, thinking about what Josh had said. “How long have I been asleep?”

“Not asleep. Not exactly. And it's been a very long time.”

“But you're in color.”

THE DISSIDENT

“Don't believe the old wive's tale that you only dream in black and white. Your mind is much more powerful than that. There is nothing beyond its power.”

JoBeth turned the water off and set the cup in the drainboard. “You're telling me that all of this,” she motioned around the kitchen, “the sink, the cupboards... it's all illusion?”

“You didn't think I really made ice cream out of nothing, did you?”

“Yes! I did!”

Josh looked down. “Oh. Well, sorry about that. It does appear that way, but that's not the exact mechanics of it.”

“If this is all illusion, how come I can't put my hand through the cupboard here?” She pushed her hand into the cupboard door, and it stopped at the door, as hands have stopped on cabinet doors for thousands of years.

“Because you believe the cupboard is there.”

“Well, what if I just put it out of my mind?”

“Then you would know it's not there. But I don't think you can do that right now. I don't think you can put it out of your mind. You've got many, many years of experience convincing yourself otherwise, as do all the other people here.”

THE DISSIDENT

JoBeth stared at Josh, trying to believe what he was saying. It wasn't coming through. Not at all.

Josh saw the confused look on her face and continued. "Look, it's nothing to be upset about. Some people are perfectly content living the illusion of separation. You're not one of those people. Neither was Timothy Ringman. And there are a few others here. Some people want to remain separated from others. But that's illusion. It has to be, because you and I and everyone else, we were all created connected."

JoBeth came back to the table and sat down. "I'm not sure I want to be connected to everyone else."

"You didn't. That's why you created the illusion of separateness."

"*Me?* I created all this?"

"Well, it's a collaborative effort. But now you feel an emptiness."

"I thought God created everything."

Josh smiled. "You're right. Sort of. The Supreme Entity, who you call God, created everything that exists. All that exists came into being by the Supreme Entity. But this...," he knocked on the table, "this does not exist. Only in your mind."

"I'm not sure I can go for any of this. It's still kind of early in the morning, you know."

THE DISSIDENT

“Part of you is resisting it strongly, but the other part of you wants to remember it so very badly.”

JoBeth looked out the window at the snow. “When did it all start?”

“Do you remember the old story about God putting Adam to sleep?”

“When he takes the rib?”

“Exactly. Go read it. You'll notice something is missing from the story.”

“What's missing.”

“It never mentions Adam waking up.”

JoBeth stared at Josh, thinking that surely some scholars somewhere must have noticed that before.

Her thought was interrupted by a knock on the door.

JoBeth fiddled with her hair. “Josh, I'm not exactly...”

“I'll get it.” He walked to the door. JoBeth went into the hallway, hoping to avoid whoever it was.

Josh opened the door. Marian Ringman stood outside, frost coming from her breath, and her cheeks looking remarkably red from the cold.

THE DISSIDENT

“You're Josh?”

“Yes.”

“Show it to me.”

Josh opened the door wider and Marian stepped in. He shut the door and walked to the living room sofa. Marian sat in one of the chairs.

“Show me what you showed him.”

Josh said, “Do you mind if I call you Marian?”

“How did you know my name?”

“The sheriff told me not to come near you, and I'm almost positive he doesn't want me to show you what I showed Jack.”

JoBeth came from the hallway, rapidly fixing her hair with her hands. “Good morning!”

Marian turned around. “Hello, JoBeth.” She turned right back to Josh. “I need to feel that again. Please, Josh, show me what you showed Jack. What you showed Timothy.”

JoBeth sat down in the other chair and said, “Josh, do you remember what Sheriff Buzz said?”

Josh thought for a moment. “Marian, why do you want to see it?”

THE DISSIDENT

“Jack and I... we...”

“I know.”

“...and the feeling! Of connection! Wholeness! One! Josh, I have to have that.”

JoBeth tried to interrupt, “Josh?”

Josh said, “Marian, do you care who that feeling is with?”

Marian replied, “No, it's not just with one person. I mean, the connection with Jack, that was wonderful. But at the same time, it was like it was everyone. Not just everyone, but everyone at every *time*. Like everyone *ever*. You know what I mean?”

JoBeth tried again. “Um, Josh? I don't think this is a good idea.”

Josh ignored her and continued speaking with Marilyn. “And what did Jack tell you about that feeling?”

“That he felt that with everyone all the time now.”

“And that's what you want.”

“Yes. Please.”

Josh turned to JoBeth, and she knew what he was going to do. She said, “Josh, he'll lock you up.”

THE DISSIDENT

Josh said, “JoBeth, were you paying attention to what I said earlier? He can't lock me up unless I allow him. Those bars are not really there.”

“Josh, don't. Please.”

Josh continued, “But I think I'll let him for a short time anyway.” He turned to Marian, whose face was that of a dog waiting for her treat, and said, “JoBeth, cover your eyes.”

JoBeth said, “Oh, God,” and ran into the hall.

Thirteen

JoBeth stood in the hall, watching the reflection of the bluish light. The reflection didn't have any effect on her. She thought about what Buzz would do. He'd probably take Josh into custody, she thought. She felt sick, and realized she had grown close to Josh. And she realized that she was afraid she would never see him again if Buzz took him into custody.

From the living room she could hear Marian Ringman. "It's so beautiful!" JoBeth noticed that the light had stopped and she returned to the living room.

Josh looked up at JoBeth as she entered. "Please understand, it was for the best."

"I know," she said. "Josh, I'm afraid of what Buzz will do when he gets here."

Marian stayed in her chair, staring off into space. Josh stood. "JoBeth, I told you there's nothing to worry about."

"I'm afraid I'll never see you again."

Josh smiled. "Ah. You're afraid you'll lose me." JoBeth nodded, and Josh continued. "You've been listening to me, but you don't believe it yet. There is no separation, JoBeth. Only in your mind."

"I want to know it."

Josh said, "I know you do."

THE DISSIDENT

“No, I mean I want you to show it to me.”

Josh looked at JoBeth for a moment. “You're asking me to...”

“Yes. I want to see it. I want to know that Wally is here, that mom and dad are here, and that you will always be here.”

“Your view of reality will drastically change.”

“Do you think I'm ready for it?”

Josh looked into JoBeth again. This time, she felt it more than before. Finally, he said, “Yes, I think you're ready. But you may want to sit down.”

JoBeth sat in the chair next to Marian, who had a seemingly permanent silly grin on her face. She took a deep breath, then looked up at Josh. “Okay. I'm ready.”

JoBeth gasped. It was blue hypnotic electric neon other-world, other people, other planets, galaxies, universes, holding eternal truths and beauty itself. She was at the other end of the galaxy, then the universe, and still right there in her chair. There was no limit to her, or anyone else. All seemed to be expansions of a Supreme Entity that simply was.

She was propelled across all of it and saw that it was all like a giant movie in twelve-dimensions with dodecaphonic stereo. It was simply projected, like light,

THE DISSIDENT

completely without substance. And yet, it was completely full of infinite energy.

It dissolved, and she was in the great cathedral, small again. She looked at the pew in the back, and there her mother knelt. She looked around again, and it was real. It was not projection like the others. This was a different cathedral, and the statues and paintings, and even the scent of the incense, was stronger, more lucid, because she knew it was real. More real than the one she had seen as a child.

The seats were different, too. These were not the patinaed wood pews, burnished dark from years of sitting. These were white plush seats in semi-circles, like restaurant booths. There were names on them, and she saw one on the left side that said, "JoBeth McIntosh."

As she looked at the seat, an old monk put his arm on her shoulder. This monk was different, too. He had a kindly face, and his teeth were not rotted. His robe was white, not brown, and tied at the waist with a thick rope. He spoke in a soft voice, and said, "That's your place, JoBeth."

She whispered, "That seat is reserved for me?"

The monk laughed. "*Reserved* for you? It's always been your seat. It was your seat before you left."

Suddenly, it felt more familiar. Yes, she remembered! This *was* her home. She used to live here. She sat in that very seat. She whispered again to the old monk, "I remember being here, but there were others here. Where are they?"

THE DISSIDENT

The old monk knelt down beside her and looked into her eyes. "They're all here, but they chose to believe they're not. They're dreaming of being away from here."

"Why wouldn't they want to be here? It's so lovely?"

"The same reason you chose to leave. You wanted to believe you were separate. But you're always here. You've always been here, and you will always be here. There is nothing you can do to change that, because only here exists."

She looked behind the monk and saw the wrought iron lectern with the great book.

"Is that the forbidden book?"

The monk laughed again. "*Forbidden?* There is nothing forbidden here."

"But the other monk..."

"JoBeth, your mind has two parts to it right now. One was created, and the other you made. I am the created mind. The other monk was your ego. He doesn't want you to see the book because it threatens his existence. He doesn't actually exist, except as your fantasy, and as soon as you know the full truth, he will cease to be."

She looked at the book in great wonder. "Can I read it?"

"You may."

THE DISSIDENT

JoBeth walked toward the book slowly. It was so large, and so beautiful. The pages were written in gold. There were great truths written in it, and she read in awe about space, time, and all that was.

After what seemed like an eternity, the monk approached her and set his hand on her shoulder again. She looked up at him. "It's time for you to return."

"But I thought this was all that exists."

"That's true, but you have been shown only some of the truths for now. The rest will come in time, as you discover them on your own."

"Will I ever return here?"

"Oh yes. You are always here, but your mind will return here when it's time. And I'll be here waiting for you to awaken."

She looked around at the cathedral again, not wanting to forget any of it. At last, she turned back to the monk. He looked into her eyes, and they became blue hypnotic electric neon other-world, other people, other planets, galaxies, universes, holding eternal truths and beauty itself. Peripherally, she saw universes and galaxies, and she was swiftly shot back into her living room, where the monk's eyes became Josh's eyes.

He put his glasses back on and tears fell from JoBeth's eyes.

Fourteen

JoBeth struggled to express the ineffable things she experienced. She and Marian Ringman were speaking to each other in short fragments, then nodding because they both understood.

The late morning became the afternoon, and Marian felt a yearning to share with her husband. “I know that now we both understand so much more, and that the separation I felt earlier was only my *wanting* to feel separate.”

Josh said, “Marian, it might be better for you to go to your family now and be with Jack. Things are going to get a little ugly around here very soon.”

The Reverend Billy Thornberg spoke with great conviction. He spoke of love, our relationships to each other and our responsibilities for each other. He appealed to the growing group of listeners that they examine their feelings about separation, but most of all, he exhorted the crowd to love. He shouted it, and he would have pounded his fist if he had somewhere to pound it, but Reverend Billy was not in the church. He was on the front lawn of the church, and his listeners were mostly trying to figure out what had happened to him.

Buzz heard the noise from his office a block away, and stepped outside to see the soap-box sermon. Even Margie and Mel were standing outside the café looking across the street at the preacher. “What the hell's gotten into him?” Buzz asked himself.

THE DISSIDENT

He walked down the street, and could just make out what Rev. Billy was saying.

“Forgiveness is the key! You, each of you,” the Reverend was pointing into the crowd, “has a choice. You can love those around you, or you can ask them to love you. But if you hate them, you are really just asking them to love you. If you are scared, lonely, or afraid, you are really asking for love. Your choice is to either love, or ask for love.”

As Buzz walked down the street toward the makeshift tent meeting, he could see some of the people in the crowd shaking their heads at him. “This could get ugly,” Buzz said to himself.

He walked up onto the lawn and approached Reverend Billy. “Reverend, what's going on here?”

The Reverend looked back into the crowd. “Buzz, our dear sheriff, feels threatened, so he is asking for my love.”

Buzz got closer to Reverend Billy and spoke softly, “Reverend, could you take this inside the church? It's causing a little bit of a disturbance out here on the sidewalk.”

Reverend Billy looked Buzz in the eyes and said, “I love you, Sheriff Buzz. We are all one.”

Bill Kliener, a tall and thin local farmer, yelled from the crowd, “What happened to him, Buzz? Who done this to him? Is he drunk?”

THE DISSIDENT

Before Buzz could answer, Reverend Billy said, “My friend Josh has shown me the light!”

Another in the crowd yelled, “That's the same guy that messed up Timothy Ringman!”

And a third, “He's over at JoBeth MacIntosh's place.”

Another, “I say we stop him before he gets to our kids.”

Buzz yelled, “Now hold on, all of ya! Let me handle this.”

Still, the crowd moved around the corner, headed up the street to JoBeth's house.

Buzz told the Reverend, “Get inside and wait a little while. I'm gonna go stop that crowd. And please, keep the preaching to the pulpit, pastor.”

“What's that noise?” JoBeth looked up at Josh.

Josh said, “It's best if you stay back. They're here for me.”

“Why?”

“They're afraid. And, of course, that makes them angry, so it's best if you stay back.”

THE DISSIDENT

JoBeth heard them getting louder, getting closer, then right outside the house. “Josh, what will they do to you?”

“Nothing. I'm not here, remember? Besides, Buzz will show up in a little bit.”

Josh stood and went to the front door. As he opened it, he saw the crowd and felt their anger and fear.

“There he is! That's him!” one of them shouted.

Josh spoke, and the crowd got quiet. “Why are you all so angry? I've done nothing but bring the truth to those who wanted it. Does the truth scare you that much? I'll answer that for you. Yes, it does. The truth scares you because you've spent lifetimes building up this façade of separation. Everything that you've convinced yourself you are, all that you think you are, it all fights against the truth because it knows that when you know the truth, it will cease to exist. Your cover will be blown. The emperor has no clothes, my friends, because the emperor never had any.”

One of the women in the crowd yelled out, “What did you do to the Ringman kid?”

“I showed him the truth.”

A man yelled, “You screwed him up!”

“No, you people, you yourselves said he was screwed up before I ever got here. He's happier now than he's ever been.”

THE DISSIDENT

“What about the preacher?” another one asked.

“The same.”

In the front, a younger man said, “You’re not gonna take our town away from us, you freak.” He stepped forward, and the others followed.

Josh held his hand up, and a wave shot out of him, stopping the crowd right where they were. He saw Buzz approaching from the right.

Buzz saw the crowd suddenly stop. He continued walking. When Josh looked at him, Buzz said, “Boy, what the hell did you just do to these people?”

Josh smiled. “Well now, Buzz, if you’ve got a job opening for crowd control officer, I’m available.”

Buzz walked up to Josh. “Josh, I’m gonna need to take you in, son. For your own safety.”

“I’ve got no problem with that, but let’s be clear on something. Despite what you think, these people pose no risk to my safety.”

The crowd stayed frozen and watched as Josh and Buzz walked toward the sidewalk. Buzz said, “Boy, you sure as hell rattled this *quiet little town*.”

“I just like to make a difference, that’s all.”

THE DISSIDENT

Buzz laughed. The crowd regained their movements, and headed toward the sheriff's office.

Again, as the door opened to the sheriff's office, Buddy's chair lurched forward onto all fours. "Buddy, go ahead and put Josh in cell two, and fill out a one-fourteen personal safety lockup on him. Then call Reverend Billy down here. I want to talk to him about what happened. I'll be in my office."

Buddy walked over to Josh. "I guess there's no point in fingerprinting you since we already have one, and they're all the same."

Buddy walked over to the cells. There were five cells in all, rather large, with bars in the front. "Here you go. Number two."

Josh walked in and Buddy locked the door behind him. "Let me know if you need anything."

Josh said, "A key?"

Buddy responded, "There's one in every crowd," and walked back to his desk.

Josh sat on the edge of the bed and looked around. The sink looked functional but dirty. The toilet... he didn't want to think about it. There were no walls between the cells, just bars separating one from the other. There was a man in the next cell with long black hair and an Akubra-style

THE DISSIDENT

hat. He was leaning back against the rear wall, and his hat was pulled over his eyes. He appeared to be Cherokee.

The Cherokee spoke without moving. "Welcome to paradise."

Josh replied, "Paradise is wherever you want it to be."

The Cherokee lifted his hat and looked at Josh, then sat up slowly. "Another brother." He walked toward the bars and put his arm through. They grasped each other's forearms, and the Cherokee said, "Osiyo."

Then the Cherokee said, "I'm Henson Blackfox. What's your name, brother?"

"Josh."

"Josh? What kind of name is that?"

"It's a very old name."

Blackfox turned to Buddy, who was at his desk filling out paperwork. "Hey Buddy, is today 'lock up the Indians' day?"

Buddy got up and walked over to the cells. "What are you talking about Blackfox?"

"You got two people locked up today, both Indians. How come you don't lock up some white people?"

THE DISSIDENT

Buddy turned and started to walk back to his desk. "You're still drunk, Blackfox. That ain't no Indian."

Blackfox continued, "You're blind, Buddy. Look at him. Long hair, brown like me, not pinkish white like you."

Buddy stopped and walked back to the cell. "Long hair and brown? You better stop drinking that strong stuff. Look, short hair and white. Like me."

Blackfox turned to Josh. "Don't mind him. He's got too much of that white man crazy in his blood." He sat back down on his bunk and pulled his hat over his eyes.

Josh sat on his bed again and leaned back against the back wall like Blackfox.

Reverend Billy came into the station, and Buddy stood to greet him at the main desk. "Reverend, Buzz wants to see you in his office. Follow me."

They walked into Buzz's office, and the door remained open. Buzz stood. "Reverend, so nice to see you." He sat back down at his desk. Reverend Billy sat in one of the other chairs. Buzz waited for him to speak, but he didn't say a word. Finally, Buzz asked, "Reverend, how are things?"

"Beautiful. So incredibly beautiful."

"Tell me what happened earlier today at the church."

THE DISSIDENT

Reverend Billy looked confused for a moment, then said, "Buzz, you were there."

"Yes, I know I was there. I'm interested in what happened before that. Why were you preaching out on the front lawn?"

"I had to tell them, Buzz. I had to tell everyone about the truth."

"You know a fella named Josh?"

"Yes, with the long hair. He's the one who brought the truth to me."

"Long hair?" Buzz stood again. "If I showed him to you, could you identify him?"

Reverend Billy nodded. They walked out of the office and turned toward the cells. Suddenly, Reverend Billy pointed at Josh and said, "That's the one, on the right."

Buzz said, "I thought you said he had long hair."

"Yes, the guy on the right with the long hair."

Again without moving, Blackfox said, "Told you, Buddy." Then, under his breath, "Blind cop."

Buzz shook his head. "Thanks, Reverend. You can go on back. I may call you later."

THE DISSIDENT

The Reverend walked out of the office without saying another word.

Buzz approached Josh's cell. "Son, how come everyone who sees you sees someone different? Are the people in this town blind?"

Blackfox said, "Just the cops."

Buzz said, "Shut up, Blackfox. Go back to sleep."

Josh stood and walked to the front of the cell. "Buzz, when Timothy looked at me, he saw his father. When JoBeth looked at me, she saw her husband. But why, sheriff, did you see Josh Miller and none of the others saw him when they looked at me?"

"I'm trained in looking at profile pictures and line-ups."

"No. There are two kinds of people in your world, sheriff: your friends, and criminals. And your friends are only your friends because they don't challenge your belief. You chose to see Josh Miller because I challenge everything you believe. You chose to see me as a criminal. The Reverend sees who he wants to see just like you."

Buddy was looking out the front window, and turned to Buzz. "Hey Buzz, there's a crowd outside."

"Oh, shit." Buzz walked toward the front door. "Buddy, stay in here and keep an eye on those two. Let me see if I can get rid of these people."

THE DISSIDENT

Gathered in the street in front of the sheriff's office were two groups. On one side stood JoBeth, the Ringmans, and Reverend Billy. On the other side stood most of the rest of the town.

Buzz walked out the front doors and addressed the crowd. "Listen up, everyone. There's no need for all of you to be hanging around here."

Someone from the crowd yelled, "What are you gonna do about that freak?"

"Mr. Morgan is being held for his own safety right now. Technically, he hasn't broken any laws as far as I'm aware."

The crowd murmured. Again from the crowd, "What about keeping the peace?"

Buzz held his hands up to quiet the crowd. "Okay, Mr. Morgan has interfered with the peace of this town. I need to determine whether he's done that intentionally or unintentionally. If he's intentionally interfering with our peace, then he's a dissident and a trouble maker, and I'll see what I can do to get rid of him. Still, he hasn't broken any laws yet."

Jack Ringman spoke. "Listen, most of you know me. I've led your kids into the woods, taught them survival skills. John," he pointed to one of the townspeople, "You know I'm president of the Lions Club and have been a member for over twenty years. I'm on the city council, you know that, Buzz. Listen, I judged Josh harshly when I heard what had happened with Timothy."

THE DISSIDENT

The crowd got noisy. Jack continued, "Please, listen. I went to confront Josh, and what I learned was... incredible. He's not harming anyone. What he's doing is a good thing. He's helped me... and Marian," he turned to her and she nodded, "and he can help you, too. If you'll let him."

Another from the crowd yelled, "Buzz is right. He's a dissident!"

The yelling ensued, and Buzz held his hands up again, "People. People, Please! Let's just keep cool here. I'm looking into this, and I will do my best to make sure this problem is resolved and that our town remains peaceful. Now please, go back to your homes."

The crowd slowly dispersed. JoBeth approached Buzz and said, "Buzz, can I see Josh?"

"Certainly. Come on in."

They walked into the station. Buddy was holding one of the rifles in his hand and peeking out the window. Buzz said, "Buddy, put the damn gun away. We got a visitor."

"But Buzz, it ain't visiting hours."

"Buddy, do we even *have* visiting hours?"

Buddy pointed to a sign on the wall that read "Visiting Hours."

THE DISSIDENT

Buzz said, "Never mind that. Just take JoBeth to see Josh."

Buddy brought a folding chair for JoBeth and set it outside the cell. She walked to the front of the cell. "Josh, are you okay?"

He smiled. "Of course. I'm fine. This is just a necessary thing. Have patience and trust me. It will all be fine."

"I miss you. I miss your ice cream." She smiled.

"There's more in your freezer."

"Thanks. Is there anything you need?"

Blackfox spoke up, again without moving. "Got any cake? Maybe with a file in it?"

Josh said, "JoBeth, meet my friend Blackfox."

"Oh, I didn't even see him in there."

Blackfox lifted his hat. "Yeah, us Indians are always sneaking around, you know."

She continued with Josh. "I was hoping to spend Christmas with you. Looks like that might not happen."

"Well, that's okay. I have another engagement anyway."

"I want to thank you for everything. That was a wonderful Christmas present. Best I've ever had."

THE DISSIDENT

“Well, you're welcome JoBeth. You've got another Christmas present. You'll get it on Christmas. Two more days.”

“Will you be here?”

“You should already know the answer to that. I am always where you are. Always. Whether you see me or not.”

“It seems a shame that there is only one person with your tremendous gift.”

“Oh, there's more than one.”

JoBeth was surprised. “Really? There are more people like you?”

“JoBeth, what you saw in my eyes is in everyone's eyes. It's just harder to see it in most people, but it's there.”

“Everyone?”

“From Ghandi to Hitler. They all had it. Remember, we're all joined. And that light, that's straight from the source. It's not mine, it's not Ghandi's, or Buddha's, or anyone else's. It's a reflection of our true nature, all of us. We choose whether to go along with it or fight it. Those who are living their illusions are fighting it. It's not necessarily bad. It's just false.”

THE DISSIDENT

She nodded. "I think I get it. Certainly more than I could have before. So what now? What are you going to do?"

Josh thought for a moment. "I think I'll start over."

"Move to a different area?"

"I don't know. I kinda like Pinehurst. Maybe I can make a new start here."

"Do you think the people here will let you?"

"Only if they don't recognize me. And trust me, it's easy to hide among the delusional. Next time around, though, I think I'll make sure I have better control of it. Fewer problems that way."

"So you won't need the sunglasses."

"Exactly. You should go now. That ice cream is waiting for you. Come by tomorrow."

JoBeth left.

Blackfox got up from his bed and walked to the bars connecting Josh's cell. "Hey Josh. You mean all that stuff you said to her?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"You're deep. You a medicine man or something?"

THE DISSIDENT

“Something like that.”

“I got a cousin like that. He ain't a medicine man, but he's real deep sometimes, you know? Name's Unity. It was like a joke from his father.” He thought about his cousin and how he missed his family. “I wish we weren't in this place. I need a blessing.”

“I can give you one.”

“But we can't do it here. Not the right way. We need fire for smoke.”

Josh sat silent for a while, then said, “Tonight, maybe.”

The afternoon passed, Blackfox sleeping, Josh laying down but not sleeping, and Buddy and Buzz doing their paperwork. At five o'clock, Buddy brought the prisoners some microwaved frozen dinners.

The night deputy arrived, a tall and slender man in his twenties with straw colored hair. Once he arrived, Buddy left and Buzz walked over to Josh's cell.

“Josh, I don't want no funny stuff going on here, alright? When I walk through that door in the morning, I don't want to hear my night deputy talking about love and being one. Got it?”

“It won't be a problem,” Josh replied.

Buzz nodded. “As for your Indian friend there, who knows. That stuff just might do him some good.”

THE DISSIDENT

“Buzz, how long are you planning on holding me in here?”

Buzz thought for a moment, then said, “I need to make sure nothing wrong's been done. I don't think it has, but it's just procedure. I gotta go through the motions. Tomorrow's Christmas Eve. If you'll leave town willingly, I can give you a safe transport probably by Christmas morning. In the meantime, our night deputy Stan here will keep an eye on you two.”

“Thanks, sheriff.”

Blackfox said, “Hey Buzz, what about me?”

“Well Blackfox, I gotta charge you for public drunkenness, especially since this is a dry county. Owsley County wants you next, so I'm waiting on extradition papers.”

Blackfox replied, “That ain't right, making me spend Christmas in jail.”

Buzz laughed. “You don't believe in Christmas anyway. What difference does it make?”

Blackfox yelled at him as he walked away, “Hey, maybe I'm a reformed Christian Indian!”

“Maybe so, but you've been stealing the sacramental wine, old boy.”

THE DISSIDENT

Blackfox looked over at Josh. "He's joking. I didn't steal no church wine."

Josh said, "I don't think it's possible to steal something they give away for free."

"Hey, you're smart. I wish you were my judge."

Buzz left, and Stan, the night deputy, walked to the cells. He said, "Boys, I'm gonna make a deal with you. I'm gonna just sit there and be nice and quiet for you if you'll both be nice and quiet for me. How's that sound?"

Josh said, "You won't even know we're here."

Stan went back to his chair and the jail grew quiet. Soon the sounds of cars outside were replaced by crickets stridulating to their lovers.

Blackfox slouched and eventually became mostly horizontal on his bed. Josh sat on his bed, waiting.

It was all quiet when Josh stood, walked to the bars at the front of his cell, and extended his hand between the bars facing Stan. The deputy's head leaned forward and fell on the desk. He turned to Blackfox, extended his hand toward the snoring Indian, and Blackfox woke up. They both walked to the bars.

"Be careful he doesn't hear you," Blackfox whispered, pointing to Stan.

THE DISSIDENT

Josh spoke in normal tones. "He won't be a problem. He's out cold. Sit on the floor and I'll start the blessing."

"But we don't have fire."

Josh ignored Blackfox and sat down on the cell floor facing Blackfox, and finally Blackfox sat as well. Josh extended both hands toward the bars between them. The bars disappeared in an arc over the floor, and the concrete turned orange where the bars had once been. Blackfox stared in disbelief at the floor. Josh made a humming noise, softly at first and slowly rising. Suddenly, the orange spot became a fire.

In disbelief, Blackfox whispered, "Holy cow."

Josh said, "Close your eyes." Blackfox complied. Josh began to sing a Cherokee song. He held his hands out a few times, then put them back down. He sang a cleansing song and a protection song. And deputy Stan still sat slumped forward at his desk, oblivious to all that was happening.

The song ended about a half hour later, and they both stayed seated on the floor. The fire disappeared and the bars reappeared.

Blackfox said, "How did you do that?"

"It's not really there. It's all in the mind."

"I imagined that?"

THE DISSIDENT

“Do you remember when you were about eight years old and your father was telling you about visions?”

“How do you...? Yeah, I remember.”

“You wondered if our whole lives were just one long vision. Well, that's pretty close to being right. You believe in seven levels of heaven. Can you imagine what it would be like to be on the seventh level?”

Blackfox looked up in thought. “It must be amazing. But that's not the abode for us.”

Josh continued. “That *is* the abode of all that truly exists. And that includes you, my friend. And me. And even Buzz and...” he looked at Stan, still slumped at his desk, “...even him.”

“Are you saying I came from the seventh heaven?”

“I'm saying you are there now.”

Blackfox said, “Whoa. Brother, you've been drinking something way heavier than whiskey. If I'm there, how can I be here?”

“Because you want to be. You want to believe that you can be separate, so you're experiencing something like a vision, like a dream. That's what your whole life has been. Yours and everyone else's.”

“So how do we wake up?”

THE DISSIDENT

Josh stood now. “Well, that's the million dollar question. Listen. You remember your cousin Unity? You remember the night he told you that he was dating the girl you wanted to date, and you told him you would never speak to him again?”

“Yeah. That's heavy. How do you know these things?”

“Well, what if I told you to forgive Unity? How would you feel?”

Blackfox thought for a moment. “You know, I could tell him I forgive him, but I can't forget what he did, you know? He broke my trust.”

“But if this is all illusion, then forgiving him would mean believing in your heart that it actually never happened. It would never come up again, because you would truly believe it never happened. It's wiped away. Completely gone. It's like having a dream that he did it, and then you wake up. You can't blame him for what he did in your dream, right?”

“So that's what I would have to do to wake up?”

“That's the first step. Anyone who has ever wronged you, just set in your mind that they never did what they did.”

Blackfox laughed. “That would make me look like an idiot. That's asking for people to take advantage of me.”

THE DISSIDENT

Josh smiled. "I'm not asking you to be stupid. But our failure to forgive, by which I mean to truly wipe away all memory of it, our failure to do that is what keeps us believing that this illusion is real. And that, brother, is why we do not wake from it."

They sat in silence for a while, Blackfox thinking about Josh's words. What if he's right, he thought.

Finally, Blackfox said, "How do I know what you're telling me is the truth?"

Josh walked back to the bars and sat down opposite Blackfox. "Henson Blackfox, do you remember the seventh heaven? Do you remember being there?"

"How can I remember that?"

"Look."

As Josh removed his sunglasses, a great bluish light filled the sheriff's office.

A few minutes later, Josh put his glasses back on.

Blackfox said, "You are of the great mystery, the upper world. You are from the seventh heaven."

"As are you, brother. As are you."

Fifteen

Charlie Decker checked his makeup in the mirror. He smiled a wide smile a couple times, looking for cracks in his foundation. He opened his eyes wide, checking the crow's feet. He looked fine. His sandy blond hair was perfect, his smile was perfect, and Charlie Decker was ready for Lexington. He wore a tissue in his collar to protect his shirt and tie from the makeup.

A young man knocked on his door and said, "Mr. Decker, five minutes."

He stood and checked his tie again. His bluejeans looked comical with the suit blazer, but no one would see him below his waist anyway, so it didn't matter. Charlie left his dressing room and started down the hall.

A man popped his head out of an adjoining door. He wore a headset with a microphone dangling off to one side. "Charlie, we're gonna run the human interest first."

"Human interests don't go first. Put the Governor story first."

"Can't. We just got the tape from editing. It's not cued yet. We'll run it second."

"You *can't* run human interest first. It never goes first. Put something else there. Have anything national?"

"No. Besides, it's already in the teleprompter." The man touched his headset to hold it closer to his ear, then said, "Three minutes, Charlie."

THE DISSIDENT

Charlie shook his head. “Dammit.” He continued walking down the hallway, squinting at the harsh fluorescent lights.

He walked into the news studio and took his seat. A woman wearing a headset and holding a clipboard walked up to him and removed the tissue from his shirt. “Looking good, Charlie.”

“Thanks. How are we starting?”

“Tag on two, then switch to three, then the feed.”

“We always start with tag on two. If we're always going to start with two, why don't they renumber the cameras and call that one number one?”

His question was ignored. A voice from an intercom announced, “One minute.”

Charlie looked at each camera. “Hey, telecine on three is off.” The camera man to his left flipped a switch on the side of the camera.

Again, the intercom: “Intro in fifteen.”

Charlie sat still, waiting. Then, the audio played in the studio. “...Lexington's first news, with Charlie Decker...” An image of a smiling Charlie slid into the screen from one side, then slid off to the other side. “... Hal Jeffries on Sports...” Another picture slid across the screen. “... And Bill Kramer with the weather. And now, here's Charlie Decker.”

THE DISSIDENT

“Good morning. Is he a Christmas miracle, or a yuletide ya-hoo?” He looked to his left and the camera light there switched on. “Some residents in Pinehurst have reported on a miracle-working Christmas visitor to their town, but others seem to think he's just bearing gifts of trouble. Lisa Denham is live in Pinehurst with the story. Lisa?”

A blond woman appeared on the screen holding a microphone and standing in front of Sheriff Buzz's office. “Good morning, Charlie. Local residents in Pinehurst say that Josh Morgan suddenly appeared in Pinehurst less than a week ago. He reportedly rescued a little girl who had fallen in the ice of the North Fork River.”

Another woman was on the screen now, and at the top of the screen, a small banner read, “Recorded earlier.” The other woman said, “He just came out of the woods over there. Just like it was out of nowhere. And he walked right along the cracking ice and pulled that girl out.”

The blond reporter appeared again. “Charlie, I'm here with local Pinehurst resident Margie Platter. Margie, tell us about your experience with Josh Morgan.”

Margie appeared, dressed in her work apron of striped pink. She looked first at the reporter, then at the camera. “Well, we was having our annual Christmas Festival, and Mel and me, that's my boss, we was handing out cookies. And this fella come up and have a couple cookies, then he hands me a tip, and as soon as he touched my hand, my arthritis is gone. Doctor says it's a miracle.”

THE DISSIDENT

The camera panned back to Lisa Denham, holding the microphone. “Charlie, others here in Pinehurst say that Mr. Morgan has caused nothing but trouble, even somehow affecting the local Baptist minister and making him crazy, according to some. We haven't been able to locate the minister for comment.”

“Holy shit!” Buzz yelled at the TV. He shut it off, grabbed his coat, and headed to the sheriff's office, leaving his coffee behind.

The crowd in front of the sheriff's office was larger than yesterday's crowd, now including people from out of town. Buzz got out of his car, and was immediately surrounded by people, including the reporter Lisa Denham. Buzz stood up and said, “No comment, no comment, no comment! I made a statement yesterday. If I have new information, I'll let everyone know.” He held his hands up to ward off the crowd and walked into the station.

Stan, the night deputy, jumped up from his slumped position. “Buzz! Good morning.”

Buzz said, “I don't know how in the hell you can sleep through all that.”

“What's going on?”

“There's a crowd out there, including a TV crew.”

THE DISSIDENT

Buzz walked back to the cells, and both Josh and Blackfox were already awake. “Josh, we got us a little problem. I might not be able to get you out of here today. There's a crowd out there, and I'm not sure whether they want to lynch you or worship you. They probably don't even know themselves. I'm gonna have to figure something out. Just hang tight.”

“Not a problem, Sheriff. Take your time.”

Buzz walked to his office, mumbling, “Hell of a way to spend Christmas Eve.”

JoBeth arrived at the station just after Buddy. Buddy called out to her, “JoBeth! Follow me. I'll get you in.”

They walked around the back of the station, and Buddy used his key to open a windowless steel door. They walked into a hallway, turned, then entered the rear of the station. Buddy said, “You can go ahead and visit with Josh. Just grab a chair over there.”

She found a chair and carried it toward the cells.

When Josh saw her, he said, “JoBeth! I was wondering how you'd get in here.”

“Buddy let me come in the back door. It's crazy out there. I thought the crowd from yesterday would all leave.”

“Some of them did. This is a new crowd.”

THE DISSIDENT

JoBeth reached in through the bars to touch his hand. "You were on the news this morning."

"I know. That's what brought the rest of the crowd here. People who have great hope, but they don't see that the answer is right inside themselves."

"I'd love to tell them."

"They won't listen. Not unless they're shown. And most of them aren't ready."

JoBeth smiled at Josh, missing him already. "How am I going to finish the shed?"

"Don't worry about the shed. Listen, I'm glad you came by. I need to say goodbye."

JoBeth looked worried. "Why? What's going to happen?"

"It's time for me to leave here. I think I've shaken this town up a little too much, and I've done all the help I can. It's time for me to move on."

"Where will you go?"

"I think you know the answer to that."

JoBeth thought for a moment, then said, "You won't go anywhere, because you'll always be here."

THE DISSIDENT

“That's my best student! Listen, always look into people's eyes. Look deep. You'll see more than just their eyes. It's true, the eyes are the window to our souls. Look deep, and you'll find me. You'll find everyone.”

“I will look.”

“And look with the eyes of forgiveness.”

“Yes, I will.”

She smiled at him, and she knew she would not see him again, not like this. And she marveled at how she had grown so close to him in such short time. But then she remembered that, in fact, she had always known him.

“I will miss you, Josh. I will miss you, but I will know that you will always be here. And I'll see you in the eyes of others. Take care, and don't do anything stupid.” She smiled.

Josh smiled back, “Life is boring unless we do stupid things. Take care. I'll see you later. Really.”

“I know.”

She turned and left.

Blackfox broke the silence. “She's a keeper.”

Josh looked over at Blackfox, laying on his bed. “Don't get sappy on me, Henson.”

THE DISSIDENT

Josh sat on the floor, closed his eyes, and meditated.

An hour later, Buddy walked up to the cells. “You guys want peanut butter and jelly for lunch?”

Josh didn't move. He hadn't moved for the last hour.

Blackfox said, “That's fine for me. I don't think Josh eats. Make him one, and if he don't eat it, I will.”

Buddy looked at Josh, but Josh remained still. “Morgan? Hey Josh? You okay?” Still, nothing.

Buddy took out his key and approached the cell door. Just before he reached the door, a bright light shot out in all directions, and Josh's cell became a ball of light. Buddy fell backwards.

The ball of light slowly grew in diameter, engulfing Blackfox's cell. Now it could be seen from the outside. Some in the crowd began to worship the light, bowing down toward the sheriff's office. Others chanted that the end of the world had come. And still others were too stunned to speak.

Buddy backed up along the floor with his feet, then was finally able to stand. “What the hell is going on?” His voice shook with fear.

Buzz ran out of his office toward the cells and stopped cold, staring at the luminescence. “Son of a bitch. What did he do?”

THE DISSIDENT

Buddy turned to Buzz, sweating and shaking. "He was just sitting there on the floor, I swear. Like he is right now, inside that... that light ball thing. I swear, I didn't touch him."

Blackfox was chanting an Indian song now.

Buzz said, "Buddy, move that crowd back from the station. I don't know what's gonna happen, but I'd rather there not be a crowd too close when it does happen."

Buddy stood frozen, staring at Josh, who was now pulsing a bluish light.

"Buddy!"

Buzz finally broke his attention. "Get out there and back the crowd away from the building."

Buddy nodded, and walked to the front of the office, looking behind him at the light.

The crowd had backed up on their own to get a better view of the dome of light coming from the top of the sheriff's office. Buddy felt out of place with nothing to do, so he went back into the building.

Buddy saw that Buzz was still staring at the light ball. "Buzz, the crowd's backed up."

Buzz turned to his deputy. "Good. Now what the hell are we going to do about this?"

THE DISSIDENT

Buddy shrugged his shoulders.

Sixteen

The morning became the afternoon so slowly that no one seemed to notice, and the ball of light persisted. Blackfox had finished his song, got bored, and was laying down on his bed, still inside the ball of light. Josh remained seated on the floor with his eyes closed.

At three o'clock, the light suddenly stopped. Josh opened his eyes, then stood.

Buddy ran over to the cells, and Buzz followed.

Josh smiled at them and said, "Well gentlemen, it's time."

Buzz said, "Time for what? What the hell was that all about?"

"It's time for me to leave. I promised you I would leave town, and now's the time."

Buzz said, "You can't leave here. There's a crowd outside ready to tear you to shreds if you step out that door. I'm waiting on a transport...."

Josh cut off Buzz. "I don't need a transport. I just need to leave."

"I ain't opening that cage until I have a safe transport for you."

THE DISSIDENT

Josh walked forward and stepped through the bars of the cell. “That’s okay, Buzz. I don’t need you to open the cage. Thanks, anyway.”

Buzz stared at him, unable to grasp what he had just seen. “Son, what the hell are you? You some kinda alien or something?”

“I’m the real deal, Buzz. One hundred percent. I’m as alien to this world as you are. And trust me, you *are* alien to this world. I’m just trying to help you all find your way home.”

“Look, Josh. I don’t know about all that, but one thing I do know is that those people outside are going to crush you as soon as you step out that door.”

“I’ll be fine, Buzz. But if you’d like to escort me out of town, you’re welcome to.”

Buzz said, “I think that would be a good idea.”

Buzz walked next to Josh, and Buzz opened the front door to the station.

“There he is!” someone shouted, and the crowd ran forward. “Touch me!” “Heal my cancer!” “Take me back to your planet!”

Buzz reached for his belt, but Josh stopped him. “There’s no need.” He held his hands out, and the crowd stopped.

THE DISSIDENT

Buzz looked over at Josh. "How long does that last?"

"As long as they believe it does. Which pretty much amounts to forever unless I stop it."

Buzz nodded. "I could really use something like that."

"Radio Shack. Twelve dollars."

Buzz looked at Josh. "Really?"

"Just kidding."

They walked forward and stopped at the sidewalk. Buzz said, "Where to?"

"Left. Down to the river."

"You'll be boxed in, son. Not a good idea. Why don't I take you up to the highway."

"The river will work."

"You got a boat or something?"

"You've seen the ball of light. You've seen me walk through walls. Now do you honestly believe I need a boat to get down a river?"

Buzz laughed. "I can't wait to see this."

THE DISSIDENT

The crowd followed, but kept about a hundred feet behind. Buzz and Josh turned right down Court Street, and the crowd followed.

Buzz said, "So what are you, son? Seriously, are you an alien?"

"Do you believe in aliens?"

"No, not really."

Josh smiled. "You believe in Josh Miller, the missing parolee from Little Sandy prison."

Buzz nodded. "Yep. I believe in him."

"And you believe I look like him."

"Yeah, you do."

"And part of you still believes I *am* him."

Buzz nodded again.

"So it wouldn't do any good to tell you who I am, because at the end of the day, you'll still believe I'm Josh Miller."

Buzz thought, then nodded. "Yeah, I guess so."

"Even if I have perfectly round circles for fingerprints."

Buzz laughed. "How the hell did you do that, anyway?"

THE DISSIDENT

Josh smiled. “To be honest, I didn't actually have any fingerprints at all until you took me to the station to be fingerprinted. I thought the circles would amuse you.”

“So you're an illusionist.”

“No, Buzz. I'm the opposite. In a world of illusions, I'm the realist.”

They arrived at the end of the street, with the bus parking lot on the right and the river to the left. Josh stopped. “Well, here's where I entered, and here's where I leave.”

“You'll be okay with this crowd?”

“Yeah. Not a problem.”

“Stay out of trouble.”

“That's a tough thing to do when you're surrounded by delusional people.”

Buzz laughed again.

The North Fork River was cold, but it flowed now, and the snow melt made it almost roar. The clear, cold water moved swiftly, and the rocks below churned it so that there was white foam on the surface.

THE DISSIDENT

Josh walked to the shore of the river, then turned around and faced the crowd. They walked closer to him now, and they stopped about twenty feet away from him.

Josh said, "Listen, all of you. I know that you think I can heal you, or help you. That's not why I came here. I came here to help you understand that you can do these things yourselves.

"Each of you has the same capacity I have. Each of you can do what I have done and more. Don't look at me as some kind of savior. I'm not. I'm just here to point you in the right direction.

"And the things that I do, I don't perform miracles. Yes, some people have had miraculous things happen in their lives. Yes, I can make things happen that look miraculous. But if you realize that all of this is just illusion that you have made in your own mind, then when you're dissatisfied with what you've imagined, imagine something different. It's that simple.

"You people, all of you, have a tendency to divide things. You categorize by dividing. You don't like something, you split yourself away from it and create a new division. It's kinda funny that you all hate fractions in school, but you're so fond of making fractions in your life.

"Stop looking at other people as other people. You have made those divisions. You have placed yourself in separate containers so that you can believe you are separate from them. You're not.

THE DISSIDENT

“Forgive those who have wronged you. Listen to me. The past is gone. It no longer exists. The future, it hasn't happened yet. So it doesn't exist either. So you see, if neither the past nor the future exist, then all that exists is the present. You can't see that because you've squeezed out the present, sandwiched it between a past that doesn't exist and a future that hasn't happened yet. It's all illusion.

“Let go of your expectations. Will the sun rise tomorrow? You say it will because it has for billions of years. But one day, it won't. What if tomorrow is that day?

“Tomorrow is Christmas. Whatever you believe about it, make tomorrow a special day in your life, and see all of life in a new way, connected, without past or future, completely in the present. Do that every day. Have Christmas every day. Give gifts to each other every time that sun comes up. Because when you give something to someone else, you don't lose it. It's like an idea. It gets stronger in you when you give it away.

“And finally, stop looking for your savior beyond your own eyes. You won't find a savior in someone who comes to town and does tricks. That's not saving anyone. Look inside. Part of you knows how to guide you. Listen to it, and stop listening to your ego. When you hear that guide, it will sound as beautiful as this river.”

Josh looked to his right, and Buzz stood at the edge of the crowd. Buzz smiled at Josh, and Josh smiled back. He said, “Well Buzz, here's the part you wanted to see. I guess I have a weakness for dramatic exits.”

THE DISSIDENT

Josh turned toward the North Fork River. He spread his hands out over the waters, and the waters turned calm, no longer churning. The water flowed swiftly but silently.

Josh stepped onto the river, and was above the water as if it were still the shore. The crowd stood motionless in awe. Buzz smiled and said, "Well, I'll be."

Josh walked to the other side of the river. He turned back toward the water, set his hands over it, and it churned again. He looked up at Buzz, and Buzz waived to him. Josh waived, then turned around.

He walked into the green forest, and was under the canopy of trees. A burst of light flashed from the trees.

And Josh was gone.

Seventeen

JoBeth felt him leave. She sat on her sofa and cried. She cried tears of joy, for she knew that Josh was still there, and Wally, and her parents. And she no longer had anxiety about being alone. Josh had helped her to see past her anxiety, and so she was happy.

Buzz walked slowly back to his office. Somehow, he also knew that Josh was still around. Something of Josh would always be with Buzz. Maybe he was really Josh Miller, the missing parolee. But even if he was, Josh grew on Buzz, and Buzz missed him. He imagined seeing him in a bar some time in the future, and the imaginary Buzz of the future bought Josh a beer, and he imagined they had a good time talking about the old days of balls of light and walking on water. "You really had that town going," Buzz said in his mind to the imaginary Josh. And because he imagined it, it was real.

As it had done for billions of years, the sun set over the green pines of Kentucky. The sky turned bright pink, then purple. And the sun set. And there was no guarantee that it would rise the next morning. But no one worried about it.

Children scurried to bed, and grown-ups crept around the house, taking gifts from hidden crevices and placing them under their trees. The presents were wrapped in green and red and white and gold, and their tags said that they were from Santa.

Eventually, the grown-ups slept as well, knowing they'd be awakened by their children in the early hours of the

THE DISSIDENT

morning. And the night was peaceful in all the homes. All except one.

At three o'clock in the morning on Christmas morning, Frances Bolt felt a pain. Another a few minutes later. And then again. She picked up the phone and called the hospital. "I'm on my way. I'm having contractions."

And just like it did for billions of years before, the sun rose again. Before it appeared on the horizon, the sky brightened enough to wake the children in their beds. They ran down the halls and yelled for mommy and daddy to wake up. They ran down stairs and down hallways and into living rooms. They oohed and aahed in wonder at the beautiful presents that were not there the night before, the presents that Santa had left.

JoBeth walked into the living room and saw a box, decorated and wrapped with a bow, under her tree. She smiled, feeling the same joy that the children felt. She knew it must be from Josh.

She took the box from under the tree, and it was so heavy! She sat on the sofa and opened it. There was a telephone inside and a note. "From: Santa. To: JoBeth, for being a good girl. When you feel like talking, just pick up the phone and call. Press "0" - I'm the operator! And now, for your second present. Look out your back window. Merry Christmas."

THE DISSIDENT

She stood and ran to the window behind the dining table. There in her back yard was her shed, completed and painted.

Buzz walked into the station, and Stan, the night deputy, was asleep at his desk, this time on his own volition. Buzz let him sleep and walked past him into his office. As he sat down, the message light on his telephone flashed. He pressed the voice mail button. "Hello, this is Bill Tarman, warden out here at Little Sandy. You asked me to let you know if we found anything on Josh Miller. Well, we found him. He apparently ran down to Mexico a while ago. They found his body down there. Looks like he was killed by some drug gangs. Anyway, he's been dead about a month. Doesn't sound like he's your guy."

Buzz leaned back in his chair, smiled, and said, "Son of a bitch."

Margie woke early in the morning. She got out of bed and walked into her kitchen to make some coffee. She sat at her small dining table and looked out her window at the tree in her front yard. It would be big enough to shade the house this next summer, she thought. She closed her eyes and thought about how she used to have trouble even getting out of bed. "You're a weird one, Josh, but thank you for fixing my knee."

THE DISSIDENT

Jeremiah Ringman waited in bed. He wasn't sure what his family would do for Christmas. Now that his mom, dad, and brother were all so completely different than they had been, he didn't even know if they would be celebrating Christmas. He tried to forget it. He lay in bed, just waiting.

Finally, he heard a knock on his door. "Come in."

His brother Timothy came in. He looked so different now, no longer the stoner who was always so negative. "What are you doing up here?"

"I don't know. I guess I wasn't sure if you guys still celebrate Christmas."

"Come downstairs with me."

Jeremiah got out of bed, put his slippers on, and followed Timothy downstairs. When he walked into the living room, his parents were sitting together, each with an arm around the other.

Jack said, "Jeremiah, we don't have the same dependence on *things*, you know, physical things, that we used to."

Jeremiah looked down. "Yeah, I figured."

His dad continued. "On the other hand, I can't let a good credit card go to waste." He reached down and pulled back the cottony snow around the tree, revealing several wrapped gifts. Jeremiah's face brightened to a smile, and

THE DISSIDENT

his brother Timothy sat next to him, and they each opened their presents.

Eighteen

Frank sat in the hospital waiting room with his younger sister, Tiffany. They watched cartoons on the TV, waiting to hear news on their mother.

Frances sat reclined in the hospital bed. When the nurse entered her room, Frances said, "That was the quickest and easiest delivery I've ever had. How long was I in labor?"

The nurse set a pitcher of water on her night table and replied, "About four hours."

"Can my children come in and see?"

"I'll call them in."

A moment later, Frank came into the hospital room holding Tiffany's hand. "Mom, where's the baby?"

"The doctor is cleaning her up."

Tiffany said, "I told you it would be a girl."

Frances smiled. "Yes, you did. And you also said she would be special. And she is. She was born on Christmas."

Another nurse entered holding the newborn girl wrapped in cloth diapers. She handed the infant to Frances.

"Come here, kids. I want you to meet your new sister."

They looked in wonder at the small child. She had blue eyes and hardly any hair on her head.

THE DISSIDENT

Frances pulled the infant toward her and looked into her eyes. “She has the most beautiful eyes.”

The infant made a little sound, like a grunt. Her blue eyes turned to the side. As they did, a bluish light came from them. It was blue hypnotic electric neon other-world, other people, other planets, galaxies, universes, holding eternal truths and beauty itself. Frances saw the light, and she wept.

Fin

Colophon

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